

## Introduction

- 1 The Forum began with a welcome by Richard Harrison, the RAN Chair, and the award of two certificates - the RAN Quality Standard to Berkshire Women's Aid, and RVA's 'Safe and Sound' Governance Standard to Reading Welfare Rights.
- 2 Richard went on to explain that this Forum was experimenting with a new format. There wouldn't be a presentation; the Forum would consist of three sets of group discussions on areas of current challenge highlighted by those attending. These areas were:
  - demand pressures
  - staffing and organisation
  - funding
- 3 In each area the groups were asked to focus on three questions:
  - what are the core strategic issues in this area?
  - what are the specific problems these are causing?
  - how can we solve them, or manage them better?
- 4 After each set of group discussions there was a short plenary session for the groups to share the results of their discussions. The key points from the plenary sessions are set out below.

### **A Demand pressures**

- 5 Three main strategic issues were identified:
  - the combination of austerity, Covid and the cost of living crisis have increased the numbers of families in poverty, and the demand on services
  - because austerity has reduced the capacity of local authorities, they are referring more and more complex cases to voluntary organisations - 'passing the problems' without understanding whether the organisation is equipped to deal with them, and frequently without providing the funding to support them
  - a general difficulty in securing funding - particularly core funding that is not tied to particular projects and specific outcomes.
- 6 The result is that levels of demand for the voluntary organisations' services are at an all time high - well beyond the level that could be met. Staff are overwhelmed, and stressed. Families are upset because neither public bodies - RBC or the NHS - nor the voluntary organisations can meet their need. And both public sector and voluntary organisations resources have been consumed passing clients around the system without giving them any help in dealing with the problems they are facing.
- 7 Possible solutions identified were:
  - refusing to take complex referrals without the necessary funding
  - sticking firmly to the terms of any contract with the public authority concerned, and only accepting referrals that are covered by the contract
  - keeping a detailed tally of the numbers of cases received, and using this evidence of need to support requests for additional funding.

### **B Staffing and organisation**

- 8 Four main strategic issues were identified here:
  - the demand pressures discussed above
  - difficulties in attracting and retaining staff
  - finding and making effective use of volunteers
  - the constraints of the benefits system
- 9 The demand pressures can lead to mental health problems for some staff. Staff have to turn clients away, knowing there is nowhere for them to go, which can be emotionally difficult.

They're also often having to deal with client frustration and hostility. Staff attraction and retention difficulties can generate a series of problems - staff being trained and then leaving for another job, or staff getting bored with repetitive work and leaving. Volunteers can be hard to attract too - especially for some organisations where most potential volunteers are the parents of individuals with the special needs for which the organisation caters. The benefits system places significant restrictions on the amount of time some individuals, such as carers, can work, because if they work beyond the specified limits they lose benefits such as carer's allowance.

- 10 A number of possible solutions were suggested:
- providing access to healthcare or psychological support, to enable staff and volunteers to become emotionally more resilient
  - working formally or informally in partnership with other organisations, where the organisations offer complementary services, and can together provide more holistic support for clients
  - in larger organisations, creating a hierarchy so that staff have promotion opportunities
  - in smaller organisations, giving individuals specific responsibilities that reflect their personal interests
  - paying competitive salaries, and building funding for these into three year budgets
  - training committed volunteers to become caseworkers
  - bringing volunteers in for specific tasks
  - having a volunteer co-ordinator to keep in touch with volunteers even when there is currently no role for them - possibly a task for a trustee
  - organising social events to keep staff and volunteers engaged and feeling part of a team

## **C Funding**

11 The key strategic issues here are the absence of long-term grant funding, and the high level of competition for the amounts of short-term project funding available.

- 12 This generates a series of problems:
- restrictions on turnover: some funders will only fund if a charity is above an income threshold, others will remove funding if a charity passes an income threshold
  - very few funders will provide core funding - the funding that pays for a charity's basic infrastructure
  - securing funding is time consuming, and the work involved in bidding for funds is much the same whether the sum sought is £1000 or £100,000
  - the competition for funding has increased sharply, so that while in the past 1 in 3 bids could expect to be successful, now only 1 in 10 are likely to succeed
  - funders rarely provide feedback on unsuccessful bids, so it is difficult for charities to learn and improve

- 13 A number of possible solutions were suggested:
- recruiting a volunteer fundraiser
  - bidding in partnership with other organisations, to share the work involved and make the bid more attractive
  - only putting in bids for significant amounts of funding
  - working to secure funding from a number of different sources
  - complying with all the bidding conditions laid down by a potential funder, such as the rules on character count in the bidding document
  - once you secure funding, doing everything the contract with the funder requires, to maximise the chances of continuation funding when the term ends.

## **Conclusion**

14 Voluntary organisations are facing a number of very difficult current challenges. But the Forum participants very much welcomed the opportunity to discuss these with others in the same position, and share ideas about how best to tackle them.

Richard Harrison  
Chair, Reading Advice Network