

Chairman's Address

The period since the last AGM has been a time of both consolidation and improvement in our services and also a time of reaching out into new areas to provide leadership in bidding for new services in partnership with other infrastructure organisations.

Internally we have welcomed a number of new staff and said farewell to a roughly equal number who have moved on to pursue careers elsewhere, in some cases because their project came to a natural conclusion. Restructuring of individual roles seems to be an ongoing necessity due to meet changes in funding requirements.

We have continued to promote volunteering, placing nearly 2000 volunteers in the last year. Our own services have concentrated efforts on hard to place individuals and to support organisations with specific volunteering requirements, so matching people with opportunities. Finding funding to support our volunteering service is particularly difficult.

Facilitation of the Third Sector network has progressed with both the 'Congress' work and also by setting up a number of common interest networks. Some of these have taken off whilst others have struggled to create interest. The Trustee network is an example of the latter which I find unfortunate as more informed trustees/Board members/ management committee members etc leads to better governance. This is an area of concern as we hear of many examples where Boards create problems for their organisations rather than solve problems for them. Referring back to the Congress, I am delighted to report that reps to many statutory meetings are now better trained and are increasingly being able to represent their members. There have also been several examples of where the sector's voice has been more effectively heard by local authorities.

Several successful events have been held during the year, most notably the annual conference for our members and a celebration of volunteering. I especially want to thank our staff for organising these with such enthusiasm.

We also attempted to strengthen the CVS Board by further recruitment of Trustees to provide missing skills and to broaden our diversity. We will be appointing one new trustee today and the Board has also co-opted 3 potential trustees.

The last year has been exciting in other ways too as we successfully led a consortium bid for £400,000 of Central Government funding with which we had committed to introduce collaborative working with 9 partner infrastructure organisations. This programme had three major aims. First: to develop a common hub, thus providing a single access point for volunteers, V & C organisations and social enterprises and providing signposting and common approaches and information. Second; to create a common leadership and development programme for infrastructure organisations. [Some member organisations also benefited directly from this]. And third: to explore the potential for sharing some common back office processes. A joint meeting of the Boards of all partner organisations was held last autumn and there was much enthusiasm to see progress but also recognition that partnership will continue to be difficult to achieve when we are also in competition for the same ever diminishing funding pot.

We have also led a consortium bid for Healthwatch, the purpose of which is to act as consumer champion for patients, service users , carers and the wider public in the area of health and social care. This bid required considerable analysis of both the risks and benefits for us as an infrastructure organisation but also for our partners who would provide much of the customer facing service. The contract has been successfully won and much work lies ahead to create and structure the service so as to meet Central and Local Council requirements. I must mention Caroline our Chief Officer, who without her leadership and huge personal efforts neither of these bids would have materialised.

Like many of our member organisations, funding is a major driver of change and, in the last few months, the CVS Board has met to critically examine the role of the CVS for the next few years. We consider that we will no longer have the resources to provide a full range of services to whichever Community, Voluntary and Faith group in Cheshire East requests it and we will need to ensure that every pound of public money spent to support our members provides best value to meet the needs of the Cheshire East community. We will also need to find ways to generate income to support our work rather than to rely solely on public funding.

I cannot conclude this report to you all without making some mention of Big Society. The principles on which this concept was built and communicated was like music to our ears as we believed strongly in community involvement and the benefit of local groups available to serve the wider community. We saw this as an opportunity to do even more with, albeit, a necessary drive for efficiency and effectiveness.

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However we all have costs even with the welcome contribution that our volunteers so willingly offer. Many of our members have seen funding shrink and the national move towards larger contracts and payment by results. Big Society now seems a tainted brand linked to spending cuts rather than an exciting opportunity for a better society.

We need to hang on in there as to quote a recent article in the Guardian “civil society has quietly kept British Society intact for hundreds of years”.

Finally my thanks go to:

- the CVS staff who worked so hard to provide your services
- our Board members and the other volunteers who support us so generously
- our funders who have entrusted us to deliver
- our members. We appreciate your feedback, positive or otherwise, which has made us a stronger and more confident organisation. Together we will continue to provide Cheshire East with a vibrant set of V & C services and make it as great place to live and work.

