

Sussex – developing and maintaining a thriving community and voluntary sector

Background

The Sussex Rural Community Council (SRCC), currently operating under the title 'Action in rural Sussex' (AirS), was established in 1931. At that time the National Council for Social Services (now NCVO) helped to set up local Councils of Social Service in most areas and Rural Community Councils in the rural counties of England. In the following twenty years, SRCC helped to create many services, run by volunteers, that we now think of as statutory provision (music education, day care, sports and recreation etc). SRCC also helped to set up a number of voluntary organisations that have since become household names e.g. Citizens Advice Bureaux, Age UK.

In the 1980s and 1990s, SRCC assisted in the development of Councils for Voluntary Service in many Districts and encouraged these to become independent organisations. In subsequent years most of these have changed their names to Voluntary Action e.g. Rother Voluntary Action.

Over the past twenty years, as the VA network has grown, AirS has focused primarily on rural community life and especially initiatives to support informal community care, help to families and young people, management of community run buildings, creation of affordable housing and community led planning.

After almost 90 years serving Sussex, the case for developing new initiatives to support the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and encouraging these to 'float-off' as new charities is coming to an end. Instead, technological trends and economic necessity creates an increasingly strong case for charitable organisations to come together in partnerships, alliances and even to merge. Doing so gives scope to share costs and deliver a more comprehensive service that can be stronger and present an independent voice to local statutory organisations.

The administrative geography of Sussex

The Sussex Rural Community Council's charitable area of benefit is Sussex; all of the two 'ceremonial counties' of Sussex, including its urban areas and the City of Brighton and Hove. In practice the rural focus of most of AirS work has tended over recent years to result in a concentration on the seven more rural District Council areas of Sussex.

Rural communities in Sussex

The nature of the rural population in Sussex has changed a good deal since the Sussex Rural Community Council was founded. Almost universal access to the private car,

Action in rural Sussex

disappearance of a rural bus and rail network and an information service located in most people's pockets are perhaps the most visible changes. The more substantial change, however, is in the make-up of the population of our rural areas. In 1931 rural life was synonymous with poverty and poor living conditions, today it is equated with wealth and, indeed, the cost of housing suggests that only the wealthy can live there. Rural communities' expectations are similar to those of urban communities and service providers – both statutory and commercial – tend to treat both the same. The additional costs of living in a rural area are just as real, but have become less visible now that they are passed onto rural residents. Some people continue to find this cost a burden and this is where local community organisations can play a major part and where AirS has focused its effort.

It is hard not to conclude that there is much in common between the support that communities, urban and rural, now require. The difference is that the services to rural areas are less forthcoming because they are more expensive and difficult to deliver to a more sparse population. Where there are differences, rural communities are often more dependent on informal voluntary activity, can be more defined by geography and there is often a greater necessity to share infrastructure and physical assets such as community buildings.

An invitation to partnership

The gap between the needs of the community and the capacity of the public purse to meet them is, arguably, greater than at any time in the last thirty years. At the same time the trepidation with which many people approach community life has also grown. Anxieties about personal risks, whether financial or reputational, coupled with a reluctance to give open-ended commitments make people nervous about taking on responsibilities in a voluntary capacity.

Now, more than ever, a coherent, well communicated and independent suite of support services are needed by local charities and informal community activities. A great deal is available in Sussex at the moment, but is provided by a wide range of organisations, both statutory and voluntary. It can be confusing to navigate and tends to come and go as a result of short term project funding and changing priorities of public authorities. A comprehensive, long term and ambitious programme of support is urgently needed if the local charity sector is to meet growing community needs. This must come from the voluntary sector, not be dictated by local government's requirements or its commissioning intentions.

This is an area where the VCS should not hold back and wait for the local public sector to take a commissioning initiative. Equally the public sector must neither wrap itself in procurement red tape if the VCS takes the lead, nor seek to deliver services to the VCS that would be better provided within the VCS itself.

The Sussex Rural Community Council / AirS has a small number of rural priorities that we would want to contribute to a comprehensive support service. We are open to the principle of working alongside others if this can ensure that a better, more ambitious and more easily communicated service can be provided to people who wish to be active in their community. We are open to considering long term convergence or merger with other organisations but only if this can create real added value.

We understand the administrative geography of Sussex and are open to discussion about what is best provided in the different parts of Sussex separately, but also what may be more efficiently done across all of Sussex. We understand the risks and invite others to work with us in the same open minded and 'non risk averse' way.

Action in rural Sussex

Our offer

We are willing to contribute into a new, more integrated and ambitious service, the following specialist areas of advice and assistance

- Help for communities with community led planning including Neighbourhood Planning
- Help with securing affordable housing through community led housing schemes and Community Land Trusts.
- Support for Trustees of community owned buildings such as Village Halls and Community Centres, backed up by our links to a national network of expert advice.
- Community support aimed at very local volunteers and activists through our Village Agents programme.

In addition, as a member of the national ACRE network we have a further three years of agreed funding from DEFRA to support our work with rural communities in Sussex. We have a strong balance sheet thanks principally to benefactors in the 1950s. We also have long standing relationships with networks of village organisations across East Sussex and West Sussex to bring into a partnership with other organisations.

In particular we would like to work with others to:

- Support greater social enterprise in communities in order to make community run services less vulnerable to cuts in public spending. This could include developing new models of crowd sourced funding or social investment from the private sector.
- Support local, informal engagement by people in their communities that does not require volunteers to become locked into risk averse, formal ways of thinking and operating.
- Ensure access to low cost advice on charity law and regulation of the kind that small charities used to access from the Charity Commission, but has now largely been discontinued.
- Provide a stronger suite of advice and support to those who manage substantial community assets, especially, but not only, community buildings. Across Sussex these represent over £250m in invested assets and their voluntary Trustees / managers deserve excellent support to help them build on these assets.
- Provide more comprehensive training to Trustees, potential Trustees and personnel of local organisations in order both to widen the pool of talent and expertise available to local organisations but also to ensure that individuals who become engaged find this an enriching experience.
- Create a Sussex-focused campaign to highlight the value that comes from giving to small local charities instead of national 'brand name' organisations.
- Ensure that local public sector organisations, whatever their political colour, understand the value of a strong independent local charity sector that is not dependent on the public purse and see these charities as a means of increasing capacity, not as competitors.

Partners will, no doubt, have their own priorities and we would be delighted to discuss these.

Next steps

We are sending this invitation to a range of local organisations, including the Councils for Voluntary Service and others who fund or provide 'voluntary and community sector (VCS)

Action in rural Sussex

infrastructure' support. We will invite any of these organisations who wish to meet with us, at both Trustee and employee level, to explore how we might all go forward to make the most of all the skills, expertise and resources that we all hold.

This is primarily an invitation to our colleagues within the VCS, however we will also be circulating it to interested parties in the public sector across Sussex. Our intention is to work with organisations that share our aims and, together, to present options for underpinning a more comprehensive suite of support services to the public sector in Sussex at all levels.

Above all, our offer is intended to create an opportunity for VCS support organisations in Sussex to discuss what is needed, in both urban and rural situations, and how this is best delivered and funded. We seek a partnership of the willing and the like-minded.

Jeremy Leggett, CEO AirS

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