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NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR VOLUNTARY YOUTH SERVICES

Talking Systems

Management information for the voluntary and community based youth sector



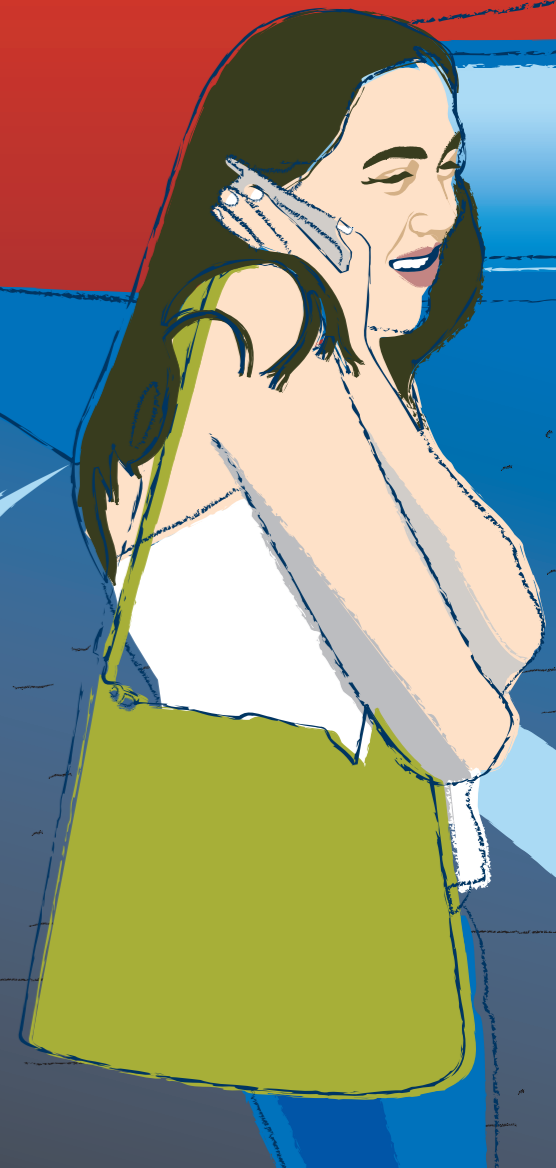
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About Us

NCVYS is the independent voice of the voluntary youth sector in England. A diverse network of over 160 voluntary and community organisations and local and regional networks, NCVYS has been working since 1936 to inform and influence public policy, support members to improve the quality of their work, and raise the profile of the voluntary and community sector's work with young people.

NCVYS membership comprises household names like the Scout Association and the Prince's Trust to small specialised projects working within local communities; NCVYS brings together a range of organisations involved in the development of young people.

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Bradford Youth Development Partnership

British Red Cross

Campaigners (The)

Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Council for Voluntary Youth Services

Cheshire Council for Voluntary Youth Services

Church Lads' and Church Girls' Brigade

Clubs For Young People

Devon Youth Association

Duke of Edinburgh's Award

Fairbridge

Gateshead Youth Council

Gloucestershire Council for Voluntary Youth Services

Kidsout

Leap Confronting Conflict

Lubavitch Foundation

National Youth Agency (The)

National Youth Theatre of Great Britain

North Yorkshire Forum Voluntary Organisation

Oxfordshire Council for Voluntary Youth Services

Prince's Trust

Rural Youth Network

Scout Association (The)

Staffordshire Council for Voluntary Youth Services

Tall Ships Youth Trust

UK Youth

Youth Access

Youth Focus (Buckinghamshire Council for Voluntary Youth Services)

YouthNet UK

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Executive summary

In autumn 2004 the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS) to research and make recommendations on the management information needs of the voluntary and community youth sector (henceforth: the sector). This was to inform the development of a national management information strategy for the sector.

The research was conducted using a range of methods including detailed questionnaires, interviews, site visits and discussion workshops. A steering group drawn from the NCVYS membership met regularly to advise the project.

A full report detailing the current position of management information systems (MIS) within the sector and recommendations for a way forward was presented to the DfES and is available from NCVYS on request. This document summarises the key findings of the report.

Main recommendations

1 A national strategy

- A national management information strategy should be put in place to allow the sector to monitor, evaluate and evidence its work, and thus strengthen its capacity and effectiveness.
- This strategy should be developed in collaboration with a consortium of larger organisations that could inform future developments.

2 Investment of resources

- The strategy will be applicable to large and medium-sized organisations initially. As the project matures and strategy frameworks and resources are in place, it may be rolled-out to smaller organisations.
- Implementation of the strategy will involve significant up-front investment of resources, however, once it is operational the costs will reduce whilst the benefits accumulate.

3 A common data set

- The development of a common data set (CDS) will be the most important prerequisite to implementation of the management information strategy. This is essential to ensure a common language for reporting and recording information.
- Information must flow both ways – users must be able to harvest usable information as well as input information.

4 A web-based data warehouse

- Once tested the CDS would provide the basis of a web-based data warehouse.
- To ensure access to the required software, effort should be made centrally (through the DfES) to facilitate Internet access in rural areas.

Introduction

The DfES commissioned NCVYS to develop strategic recommendations to inform the development of a national management information strategy for the voluntary and community youth sector (henceforth: the sector). This report details key findings of the research into current management information systems (MIS) within the sector and recommendations for a way forward.

MIS for the sector are a relatively recent development. For the most part the larger organisations have developed highly sophisticated MIS. However smaller to medium-sized organisations are now realising the benefits of having more detailed information available to inform their work. Intelligence acquired by MIS can lead to efficiency gains, less waste, better targeting, costs reduction, income generation and most importantly enhanced fulfilment of mission.

MIS

Essentially MIS refers to the systems that provide all the information needed to run an organisation. The design of MIS that are appropriate to the sector is highly specialised and requires specialist knowledge. The systems do not need to be complicated but need to take into account the specific business models that apply to the voluntary sector.

In general, a MIS:

- is comprised of all the components that collect, manipulate and disseminate data or information relating to the management of the organisation;
- usually includes information technology (IT) hardware, software, contact details, communications systems and data; and
- involves activities such as inputting data, processing of data into information, storage of data and information, and the production of outputs such as management reports.

Golden rules for MIS

- Any MIS must be specifically tailored to the organisation in question.
- Information should be relevant to the needs of the organisation itself, rather than the demands of funders.
- Staff, volunteers and where possible members should be involved at all stages, especially when developing the specification of what exactly is needed.
- The MIS supplier or designer should be asked to demonstrate the system at every stage to ensure they are keeping to the original specifications.

Methodology

The research was carried out using a range of methods including detailed questionnaires, in-depth interviews, site visits and discussion workshops. In addition a steering group drawn from the NCVYS membership met to guide and support the project.

The research was undertaken in two phases. Phase I produced an audit report of current systems used by the sector and the sector's capacity and support needs. Phase II led to strategic recommendations for the development of a management information strategy and annual audit, taking account of and developing existing voluntary sector practice and systems currently in use by local authorities.

1. The voluntary and community youth sector and current management information systems

The sector and current MIS

NCVYS approached phase I of the study by focusing on the NCVYS membership as a microcosm of the sector. A combination of 32 questionnaires and 22 site visits including extensive deskwork and group meetings were used to get the benefit of the resources and experience of the people involved.

The overall finding is that the sector is very fragmented in a number of ways, all of which have implications for the coordinated development of a management information strategy:

- The size of organisations, measured by income ranges from over £45 million (for example, Prince's Trust) to a few £100.
- The structures range from centralised national bodies to loose local networks of a cluster of like-minded independents to single units concentrating on one area.
- The type of work ranges from infrastructure support for member organisations (for example, Councils for Voluntary Youth Services) to direct service delivery to young people (for example, Allsorts).
- The type of direct service delivery includes social and recreational activities, faith-based spiritual interactions, targeted provision to disadvantaged and vulnerable individuals, and many other forms of work.

- Disparate data is collected on individuals, groups, episodes, events or issues.
- Funding ranges from multiple funding streams of significant amounts, to a few dedicated sponsors and includes private, voluntary and statutory bodies.
- Computer resources and literacy also vary from huge comprehensive networks of users, to individuals who may only have paper and post at their disposal.

The stage of MIS development tends to cluster according to the size and scope of the organisation:

- Large organisations with incomes of £1 million and over, for example, Duke of Edinburgh Award, Prince's Trust and The Scout Association, tend to have comprehensive bespoke computerised databases. Their systems have versatile report writing tools and web-based interactive facilities, which can liaise with members and other young people.
- Medium-sized organisations are reaching a critical point in their internal administration systems and their early databases are struggling to keep up with growth. These organisations are often finding it difficult to rationalise a collection of separate databases and systems in order to facilitate the generation of the information about their performance and operation.
- Small organisations with incomes of below £100,000, for example, many of the Councils for Voluntary Youth Services (CVYS) are often beginning to work with Microsoft (MS) office-based systems.

Existing systems include:

- databases from bespoke software;
- packages, some heavily customised;
- MS Office-based systems (typically Access and Excel) written by a range of skill levels including IT technicians as well as self-taught (paid and volunteer) staff who have written systems for their own use;
- Youthbase;
- quality systems for example PQASSO (the practical quality assurance system for small organisations), Quality Management (QM) and Investors in People (IIP);
- fundraising software for example, Raisers' Edge and FunderFinder; and
- report-writing tools, for example, Crystal.

When asked, the objectives of current MIS tend to split into two contrasting definitions:

- To facilitate management of their own organisations.
- To satisfy funders, especially with regard to the project reports required.

2. Capabilities and support needs

There is a wide range of capabilities and resources, these can again be characterised by the three-tier segmentation of MIS:

- Large organisations have sufficient IT resources and skills or if not they can afford to buy them in.
- Medium-sized organisations tend to have better IT resources than the smaller groups, although local and regional branches of national organisations are not always networked into the head office systems and so can be as isolated as some of the smaller organisations.
- Small organisations have difficulties across the board. They frequently lack IT skills; human resources for training and to administer systems; and up-to-date IT equipment. In some cases, communications are restricted to handwritten paper and the post.

Hence, at the smaller end the capacity of the sector to develop MIS would appear to be very dependent on a critical need for IT support of some kind.

3. Site visits

In order to discuss MIS in more detail, site visits were made to a selection of NCVYS members and organisations within the NCVYS network. The selection of sites was as far as possible a representative spread of organisations. Sites were chosen on the basis of geographical location, scope and type of work, for example, infrastructure or direct service delivery. The national organisations tend to cluster in London and the south east of England, so effort was made to include sites in the midlands and north of England.

The site visits clarified the environment within which the sector operates. In contrast to the larger organisations' with networked computers, the smaller organisations were typically managing on one or two computers with correspondingly low staff levels. The impact of low staff levels on the sector capacity and support needs was very evident from the site visits.

It is easier for larger organisations to hire staff when new skills are required. For the typical small voluntary organisation with the equivalent of one to two full-time paid staff, this is often not an option.

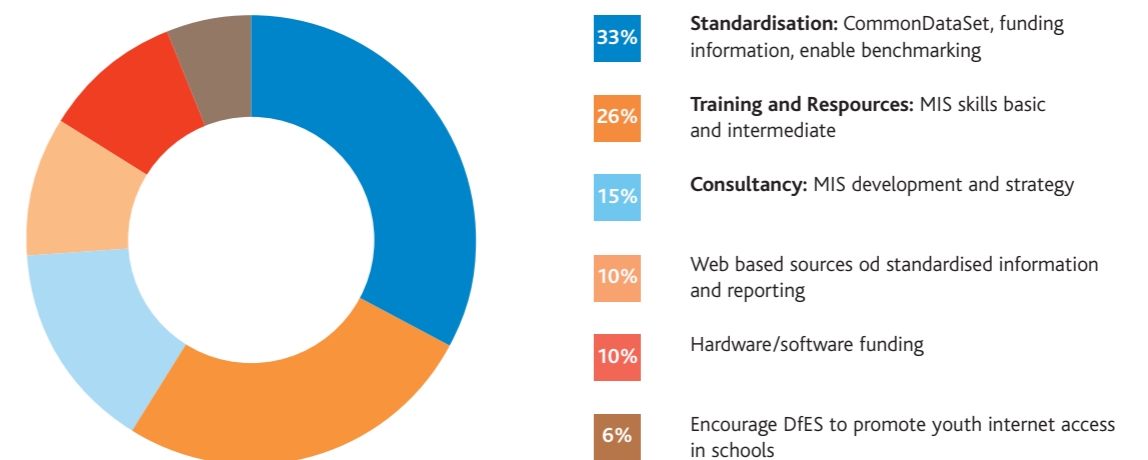
Very low staff numbers can lead to the following problems:

- High staff turnover, which can often leave the organisation without staff in between job appointments and lead to loss of skills.
- Fully stretched staff will be unable to cope with increased workload, for example, to fulfil funders' report requirements.
- Staff will not have time to develop in new areas, such as IT, as this will have to compete with other priorities.

From visits to the more rural sites it was also evident that access to electronic communications by youth workers or young people could not be taken for granted. Transport was an issue and facilities such as Internet cafes are often not accessible.

4. IT pilots

The project included an examination of how data collected by the sector could be fed into systems used by the statutory sector, in particular YouthBase, which is used by around half of the local authority youth services in England.



Research showed a variety of developments:

- Several organisations had specifically looked at YouthBase and found that the input options were too narrow to accommodate their work.
- The sector prioritised the benefits of MIS and the individual requirements of their own organisation over compatibility with external systems or requirements.
- The organisations in the microcosm of the NCVYS membership demonstrated an exceedingly wide spectrum of services and hence data.
- It appeared that it would be beneficial to all concerned to establish a data warehouse for sharing data in the public domain. Hence, the importance of an agreed CDS which would allow for inter-operability between individual MIS and a shared database.

5. The strategic recommendations

Phase II of the research employed a more strategic approach. NCVYS engaged the larger national organisations in discussions about the possibility of sharing and comparing data in the public domain, which would be available to Government and statutory bodies.

For smaller national, regional and local organisations, the project looked at offering pilot trials and general consultancy in order to progress the improvements in their systems. In addition, the project began to prepare the groundwork for participation in the shared public database.

The six strategic recommendations were based on the following research:

- the accumulated findings from Phase I of the project;
- a standards panel which reviewed the accumulated MIS skills and knowledge within the NCVYS membership.
- three CDS meetings open to the whole NCVYS membership held in London, Birmingham and York; and
- a questionnaire, sent to the NCVYS membership and other associated organisations which provided 90 responses, accounting for 50% of the membership.

Relative importance of the six strategic areas of recommendations, as voted by the NCVYS membership:

5.1 Standardisation: Common data set (CDS)

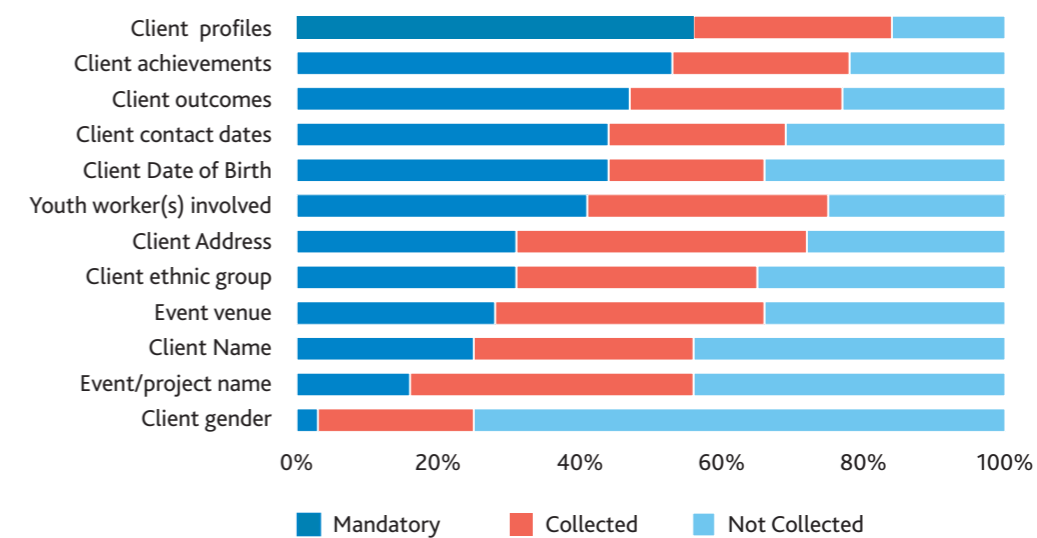
Throughout the project the greatest need expressed by the sector has been for standardisation of information and reporting. There is a firm understanding of the value in sharing information and a clear recognition of the accompanying need for a common language to enable this. Specifically concerning primary data collection, the sector wishes to enable the greatest synergy through the development of a CDS and standardised reporting for funders.

A CDS would need to be applicable to all organisations in the sector regardless of size, and type. It should also capitalise on existing investments in MIS wherever possible.

However, two initial issues were found to complicate the development of a CDS:

- There is little or no overlap between the basic data collected by infrastructure organisations (usually a contact database for member organisations) and that collected by workers at the point of service delivery (which typically includes young people's details and information on interventions and outcomes).
- There is little standardisation of definitions, such as the descriptions and numbers of categories for ethnicity or disability.

The table below shows the type of information organisations collected:



In view of the importance of a CDS and the difficulty in standardising definitions, three CDS discussion meetings were held with the NCVYS membership. The meetings provided a concentrated focus on the issues and opportunities surrounding CDS development and implementation.

These meetings demonstrated that CDS development was possible, practical and productive. The CDS meetings also highlighted that two-way flow of information is integral to the sharing of information. If organisations do not derive some valuable information from providing data they will not continue to support the scheme.

Draft initial CDS

Below is an illustration of the initial draft of a CDS, as derived from our meetings, represented as a simple form. (Please note that many fields would be drop-down boxes, and lists, such as activity type, have been shortened for convenience)

Organisation					
Central Government	<input type="checkbox"/>	Profit	<input type="checkbox"/>	Access	<input type="checkbox"/>
Local Authority	<input type="checkbox"/>	Not for profit	<input type="checkbox"/>	Stand alone	<input type="checkbox"/>
Target group	<input type="checkbox"/>	Infrastructure	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Coverage	<input type="checkbox"/>	Address	<input type="text"/>		
Size	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="text"/>		
Target groups	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="text"/>		
Target groups	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="text"/>		
Target groups	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="text"/>		
Individual					
Transient	<input type="checkbox"/>	Member	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sponsor	<input type="checkbox"/>
Service user	<input type="checkbox"/>	Worker	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Disability	<input type="checkbox"/>	Date of birth	<input type="checkbox"/>	Paid/Unpaid	<input type="checkbox"/>
Language	<input type="checkbox"/>	Carers/Parents	<input type="checkbox"/>	Level/stage	<input type="checkbox"/>
Education	<input type="checkbox"/>	Location	<input type="checkbox"/>	Qualification	<input type="checkbox"/>
Relationship	<input type="checkbox"/>	Employment	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethnicity	<input type="checkbox"/>
Activities					
Training	<input type="checkbox"/>	Meeting	<input type="checkbox"/>	Funding	<input type="checkbox"/>
Signposting	<input type="checkbox"/>	'Business'	<input type="checkbox"/>	Political	<input type="checkbox"/>
Events	<input type="checkbox"/>	Grant allocation	<input type="checkbox"/>	Research	<input type="checkbox"/>
Networking	<input type="checkbox"/>	Counselling	<input type="checkbox"/>	Monitoring and	<input type="checkbox"/>
Structured Programme	<input type="checkbox"/>	Capacity development	<input type="checkbox"/>	Evaluation	<input type="checkbox"/>
			<input type="checkbox"/>	Conference	<input type="checkbox"/>
Activity Type					
Substance misuse	<input type="checkbox"/>	Asylum/Immigration	<input type="checkbox"/>	Housing	<input type="checkbox"/>
Education	<input type="checkbox"/>	Faith	<input type="checkbox"/>	Justice	<input type="checkbox"/>
Employment	<input type="checkbox"/>	Self-development	<input type="checkbox"/>	Social	<input type="checkbox"/>
PSHE	<input type="checkbox"/>	Active citizenship	<input type="checkbox"/>	Transport	<input type="checkbox"/>
Inclusion	<input type="checkbox"/>	Support	<input type="checkbox"/>	Leisure	<input type="checkbox"/>
Activity/Type Factors					
Location	<input type="checkbox"/>	Qualification	<input type="checkbox"/>	Residential	<input type="checkbox"/>
Duration	<input type="checkbox"/>	Paid/non-paid	<input type="checkbox"/>	E-delivered	<input type="checkbox"/>
Level/ stage	<input type="checkbox"/>	FTE/sessional	<input type="checkbox"/>		

For such a CDS to be optimally functional, a dictionary of definitions and standards would need to be developed by participating organisations. Once operational this CDS would allow an impressive level of interrogation. It would be possible to determine the correlation between the ethnicity of staff and service users, or report the number of projects that focused on both justice and self-development by locality.

5.2 MIS and IT training

Information and advice on management information and associated systems was requested throughout the project. Whilst the need for MIS is increasingly accepted at an organisational level, there is a need to develop understanding of management information concepts, issues and benefits among the sector workers. A range of training services would improve understanding, inform current development and serve as a catalyst for cultural change regarding management information.

The delivery method for this training could encompass:

- consultancy – for many member organisations already moving down the MIS road the greatest need is for individual support. This support can focus on specific areas of need ranging from top-level strategy, down to basic information identification and principles for collection methods. Such support may be best delivered by the infrastructure organisation;
- multimedia resource kit – on paper, disc and/or the website; and
- group training sessions throughout England.

5.3 Consultancy

Questionnaire responses consistently showed that members wanted the opportunity to access individual management information consultancy. This would help organisations identify their own MIS requirements. NCVYS would recommend two levels of consultancy – for organisations to access when they are at the development stage and at a more strategic level.

5.4 Web-based sources of standardised information and reporting

Once a CDS has been developed, the Internet would provide the best place for the data to be located. A web-based data pool would provide immediate 24-hour access to the aggregated data, built in reporting options, communications management and enhanced security. This functionality would serve to increase buy-in and ensure maximum use of the resource by the stakeholder base.

There are two critical masses that must be achieved for this system to work successfully:

- sufficient volume of returns of appropriate quality; and
- acceptance of standardisation by sufficient funders.

The proposal for a web-based system received relatively little support in the questionnaire responses. This was surprising in view of the high scores for the CDS, which the researchers had assumed would be implemented online. However, on consideration it was decided that the role of the Internet here was not clearly understood by questionnaire respondents

and would require further clarification. The idea of a web-based system received great support where organisations were consulted face-to-face and had the opportunity to clearly understand how it would work.

5.5 Hardware and software funding

The sector's problems in attracting funding for IT have recently been well documented in journals, such as *Third Sector*.

It may also be difficult for organisations or individuals with little direct experience in MIS to assess software without some central guidance.

Standards panel: IT systems

A working group of NCVYS members investigated whether to develop a standards body for MIS software. The conclusions of the first meeting of this group were as follows:

- The group was keen not to get into detailed assessments of rival computer software systems.
- It was felt organisations should spend time on identifying what they wanted in terms of management and information, before considering the details of different computer systems.
- The purpose of this project is to provide services to young people. Hence it should be about service and quality improvement.

As a result of this discussion and other feedback, it was decided to focus on the production of a multi-media resource kit as mentioned in the section on MIS training. This would emphasise the primary stage of specifying the management information needs in as much detail as possible. It could also identify relevant MIS standards.

Quality systems

The standards panel felt that MIS are an essential tool to provide information for the quality self-assessment process; but not the means of imposing quality – if the data is no good then the quality will suffer.

Good quality systems should be:

- Self-assessing;
- genuine;
- non-judgemental; and
- developmental.

5.6 DfES to promote youth Internet access in rural areas

The questionnaires showed a clear demarcation between urban and rural responses regarding access to the Internet and other e-services. For many in rural areas this was an important issue.

In rural areas access to Internet cafes, home computers and Libraries can be far from the universal provision found in urban settings. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the more sparsely populated the area, the more important it is that e-resources are made accessible to young people.

NCVYS would recommend the DfES to promote Internet access in rural areas for young people, both in school and out.

6. National strategy and possible future developments

A national strategy by definition needs to include the national providers of voluntary services to the sector; the buy-in of the largest 30 or so of these organisations will be key to its success.

NCVYS's research found national organisations have the most advanced MIS in the sector. These should therefore act as a consortium for future developments, and where applicable the best practice and systems should be replicated in other organisations.

The key elements of the national strategy are as follows:

- Stage 1:** Establish a CDS to provide clear definitions of terms used in the voluntary sector.
- Stage 2:** Work with a representative sample from the sector to test the robustness and usability of the CDS.
- Stage 3:** Facilitate sharing of data on members, projects, and activities through the establishment and population of a web-based data warehouse.

The key benefits of this strategy will be as follows:

- Better management and performance management information will provide a more precise focus for investments in the sector.
- Stakeholders and funders will be able to access transparent and visible data on the sector's use of funds.
- Efficiency will be improved through better co-ordination and reduced duplication.
- Common and consistent definitions will reduce confusion and enable more co-ordinated working.
- Investment in this strategy could work alongside central government initiatives to improve the sectors IT infrastructure, for example ChangeUp and the information and communication technology (ICT) consortium.

In terms of the sector's engagement with the strategy, NCVYS recommends a three-tier approach:

- Tier 1:** Organisations with a turnover of over £1 million and are predominantly operating at national level.
- Tier 2:** Organisations with a turnover of £100,000 to £1million and are predominantly operating at a regional level.
- Tier 3:** Organisations with a turnover of up to £100,000 and are predominantly operating at a local level.

NCVYS would work primarily with tier 1 and upper tier 2 organisations in the first instance. As the project matures and strategy frameworks are in place, NCVYS would work with lower tier 2 and tier 3 organisations.

Smaller regional and local organisations should be included in the dissemination of IT resources envisaged in stage 3 of the national strategy.

In addition to this national strategy, NCVYS recommends that the DfES promotes youth Internet access in schools in sparsely populated rural areas. For the full benefit of the national strategy to be realised, client access to Internet services will be essential for both data capture and service provision.

This specific recommendation recognises that access to Internet provision is not equitable between rural and urban young people. Those working within a rural setting have repeatedly expressed the importance of overcoming barriers to Internet access faced by rural youth due to distance, financial hardship and lack of public transport.

Funding model

The national strategy requires comprehensive investment and clearly structured project management to maximise efficiency. The timescales need to be fully accepted and understood. It is envisaged that the establishment of a CDS (Stage 1) and the testing of a CDS (Stage 2) will require an investment of £250,000 over two years. The data integration and data-warehouse set-up (Stage 3) will require an investment of around £2.5 million to £4 million over 5 years. Stage 3 will involve working with leading specialist IT companies, such as Informatica and IBM, to deliver a quality system that will act as a data repository and serve all types of organisation within the sector.

The report recommends a pricing structure that covers common data collection, storage and administration. Payment should be based purely on delivery of data, it envisages:

- an initial upfront payment with further funding based on production volumes; and
- a funding structure which could lead to a small revenue and skill base for CVYS's as facilitators of data collection from their member organisations.

Any such investment will be predominantly upfront; once operations commence the total costs will reduce whilst the benefit will accumulate. Additional energy will be needed to keep momentum through slow patches. Of the recommendations the CDS (Stages 1 and 2) will deliver value in isolation, but the true potential of the CDS will not be realised without the development of a web-based aggregation, storage, and reporting facility (Stage 3).

7. Conclusion

This research has come at an opportune moment in the development of the relationship between the sector and its funders. Increased expectations from stakeholders and more sophisticated ICT leave the sector at a watershed in terms of management information. Robust systems built around the practices and culture of the sector have the capacity to deliver an unprecedented level of practical information and intelligence.

New contracting models mean the sector needs to evidence its effectiveness more tangibly. The sectors' response to these demands has been clear: we have found organisations are eager to demonstrate the level of excellence in service delivery, and this is driven by the desire to make genuine and positive change in lives of young people.

Once the sector develops the tools to efficiently manage itself, the workforce will be motivated to realise new levels of effectiveness in service delivery.

