

Initial responses within the Voluntary and Community Sector to the draft East Midlands ESF Framework

CEFET has been involved in several events (some organised by other Third Sector bodies) discussing the new ESF Framework, and informally discussed the ideas with representatives of many “Grass Roots” (Primarily *Catalyst* and TIGER) ESF-funded projects (now approaching 200 in number). There seems to be broad consensus around the following lines:

- Overwhelmingly concern was focused on the section in Priority 1 discussing:
“A particular challenge is addressing the needs of those who not engaged in the labour market or in those activities close to it. These people are sometimes referred to as “hard to reach” or “excluded”. A community empowerment approach was developed in the region during the 2000-2006 ESF Programme. This approach can be effective in engaging those furthest from the labour market through delivering support at grass roots level by community based organisations. It would consist of 3 strands: local social capital development, community based mobilisation and community based employability projects.” (pp 10-11, § 3.2).

- **There is universal support for this approach** but it is tempered by the following concerns:
 1. **That the meaning of Community Empowerment be clear to all sides in the ESF system**, it is not left to interpretation and is soundly based on the Community Empowerment principles of the last programme, and is literally “Empowering”.
 2. **That the commitment is actually carried in practice**. That specific projects and programmes are designed to fulfil the strategy, that they all clearly embody the principles, and are identifiable in advance.
 3. **That the volume of activity is sufficiently high** to ensure a continued commitment to the excluded comparable with the ring fenced 25% of the last Programme. Concern was also expressed that Community Empowerment should not be a “token” or an “afterthought” but a main strand and method of the whole Priority One approach.

- **There is general endorsement of the established sector position of asking for £28m of Priority One to be marked out for this activity:** £7m; £7m & £14m, respectively for the 3 strands. Soundings among current organisers and practitioners of Strand 1 (Local Social Capital) and Strand 2 (Mobilisation) activity reveal a view that there is a volume threshold below which the activity becomes unviable. The current Local Social Capital ESF Programme (Catalyst) puts this at £5.3m for Strand 1.

- This raises **issues concerning the use of “Community Grants”** (the successor to Global Grants) for Strand 1. Firstly, the finance here is inadequate. Secondly marking the funding off runs the risk of consigning it to a disconnected silo, undermining the 3-strand approach. There is widespread support for an integrated Programme in which once people in a specific community become active; there are vehicles for that community to build on that step forward through mobilisation and then more formal progression paths – still rooted in the community. For that reason it may be best to

ignore Community grants and regard the integrated Community Empowerment Programme a central plank of Priority One action.

- **There is widespread concern that existing CFO tendering and assessment systems are not friendly to small organisations.** This is generally an issue but is sharpest where VERY small organisations will be the main vehicle of delivery, the bodies being empowered. Neither is it suitable for this level of organisation to bind together in formal consortia. It is general felt that an indirect (Intermediary body) approach would work best. In general it is felt that much more in depth work has to be done between the sector and CFOs in preparing tenders and assessment systems to reflect the sector's potential, and to express Community Empowerment principles adequately.
- There is some concern that opportunities for **Transnational work** will be missed, particularly opportunities to learn from other member states, in the role and impact of work on Social Enterprises as a basis for moving excluded communities forward.
- There is also some concern that focus on **cross-cutting themes**, especially equal opportunities while important should not mask the specific work of combating exclusion and engaging with people and communities who are not engaged.
- Similarly there is anxiety that **focus on sustainability of provision should not detract from the issue of sustained intervention to help those that are most excluded** through several stages of development towards the labour market. The 3 strand Community Empowerment approach is designed to solve this problem.
- Many respondents feel that – especially in Priority One – there is an **absence of specifics which derives from an absence of strategy and priorities.** There does not seem the same structure for engaging the inactive as there is for regional skills, for example. The effect of such a long menu of possible actions seems to obscure rather than illuminate what the Programme will actually do. **Community Empowerment is a promising exception.**
- Some respondents have asked that **the economic benefit of Inclusion work be stressed.** Following a study by *kpmg* for TSEN, it appears that 10% employment rate “breaks even”. On it's own the first strand (Local Social Capital) has been achieving 15% in the last programme, and progression through all three strands could achieve an overall rate of up to 27%. This is within a cohort of which two-thirds would not otherwise participate at all, and does not count indirect progression through learning or community activity or any of the other – community cohesion – benefits.

(“The Price of Exclusion” - TSEN - Dec 2006).

Taken all these comments together CEFET has put together an initial draft response which is on the CEFET website www.cefet.org.uk

It is called – Consultation CEFET Draft.doc. Please feel free to cut and paste from it into your own Consultation response.

CEFET's response will be finalised immediately following our conference on July 18th. Please see website for details. At the conference we will be discussing the ESF Framework, the consultation document, CEFET's draft response and views from representatives of many groups who are attending. You will be able to fill out a consultation response at the conference or take one away with you. Completed responses should be emailed or posted to Government Office of the East Midlands – please see our website for links to documents, etc.