

## Have voluntary sector infrastructure support providers failed micro organisations?

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This paper examines the role of infrastructure organisations in relation to micro organisations with no or few paid staff. It discusses the distinctive features of micro organisations, their 'comparative advantages' and their limitations before discussing their needs for support and advice and the failure of infrastructure support organisations to meet them. It concludes by arguing for a new approach to the provision of infrastructure support.

### Introduction

This paper is based on the author's experience of working with the staff, volunteers and governing bodies of more than 200 very small voluntary organisations in the United Kingdom (UK), particularly in London between 2004 and 2010. This has provided an opportunity to examine the support role that infrastructure organisations play in the emergence and development of micro organisations with no or very few paid staff. The paper argues that these organisations have unique characteristics and needs and have not been served well by infrastructure support providers. It further suggests that the voluntary sector as a whole must develop a wider range of alternative models of organisational development.

'Infrastructure' has been described by others (Compass Partnership & OPM, 2004) as the physical facilities, structures, systems, relationships, people, knowledge and skills that exist to support and develop, coordinate, represent and promote frontline voluntary sector organisations to help them deliver their aims more effectively. Organisations that provide infrastructure support providers include councils for voluntary service (CVSs), volunteer centres and national and regional umbrella bodies.

For the purposes of this paper, 'micro' refers to organisations with no more than one full-time equivalent paid employee that rely on substantial input from volunteers. They do not necessarily organise themselves under the leadership of one designated chief executive or director and operate in an informal manner. They include organisations that have been recently formed as well as groups that have been in existence for many years. Their annual income is usually less than £50,000.

It has been suggested by others previously that micro organisations have poor access to second-tier support and that the support they do receive is patchy and of questionable quality (Harker and Burkeman, 2007). Others have noted that micro organisations have unique needs and would benefit from a more tailored approach to capacity building (Kumar and Nunan, 2002).

**Key words** micro organisations • BAME • infrastructure

