

## **DCA SELF EVALUATION 2009**

As part of a drive to evaluate and improve our services, this year we decided to survey both the users of our services and also to see if we could get some judgment on our performance within those partnerships and forums on which Dorset Community Action is invited to sit as a representative body in its own right. The second category is the subject of a separate report. This report is therefore based on the results of the survey of groups who make use of our services, be they village hall committees, parish plan steering groups, parish councils, community and voluntary organisations, forums, faith groups etc.

### **METHODOLOGY**

DCA members of staff were asked to supply contact details of relevant groups with whom they had worked over the past financial year. The North Dorset team preferred, for data protection reasons, to send out the questionnaires themselves, rather than to provide the contact details to the administration team in Dorchester. However some of our Community Development Workers have been funded for the past three years by the Big Lottery Fund and for these a survey had already been devised and distributed at the end of each year for these three years. It was decided that it would confuse and possibly annoy groups to be asked to complete a similar (but not identical) survey so these groups were not surveyed again. Surveys were sent out mostly by email but also by post with a freepost address where we had no email address. A total of forty-seven replies were received, disappointingly low.

### **WHO REPLIED TO THE SURVEY?**

Geographically fourteen replies were received from West Dorset (30%), twelve each from Purbeck and North Dorset (25% each), six from East Dorset (13%) and two from Weymouth and Portland (4%). One respondent failed to answer this question. No replies were received from Christchurch or from countywide organisations. Given that we have no dedicated community development workers in Christchurch or Weymouth and Portland the lack of response from these areas is perhaps not surprising.

In terms of the kind of organisation that replied, twenty-eight replies were received from Village Halls, eleven from community and voluntary organisations, four from Parish Councils, three from Parish Plan Steering Groups, one from a faith group, one from a forum and one from 'other' which they described as an educational initiative. Sharp-eyed readers will notice that the totals come to more than forty-seven as some respondents evidently were replying on behalf of two organisations eg the Parish Council and the Village Hall.

It is a matter of speculation as to why so many respondents were responding on behalf of Village Halls compared to other groups. Whether this is because they tend to be older and more likely to respond to surveys, whether they had stronger feelings they wished to express (as there had been recent changes in the post of Village Hall Adviser) or whether it was pure chance it is hard to know.

Most of the organisations replying were quite small in financial terms – thirty of them (63%), had an income of less than £10000, twelve of them an income of between £10,000 and £100,000 and only four had an income greater than £100,000 with none having more than £250,000. One respondent, replying on behalf of two organisations, rather confused things by ticking two separate boxes!

Respondents were also asked whether they worked *particularly* with a range of groups. This question sometimes appeared to confuse people as some village halls ticked several boxes in this category such as children / young people and older people. However it is unlikely that their services are specifically geared towards these groups of people, rather they probably took the question to mean that they should tick if the youth club ran in the hall or a luncheon club for older people ran there. Bearing this in mind and that responses included six village halls, many of whom ticked several boxes, it appears that of the twenty-one groups replying fifteen work particularly with children and young people (71%), twelve work particularly with older people (57%), four with women (19%), three with faith groups (14%), three with people with disabilities (14%) and two with BME groups (10%).

### WHAT DID THEY TELL US?

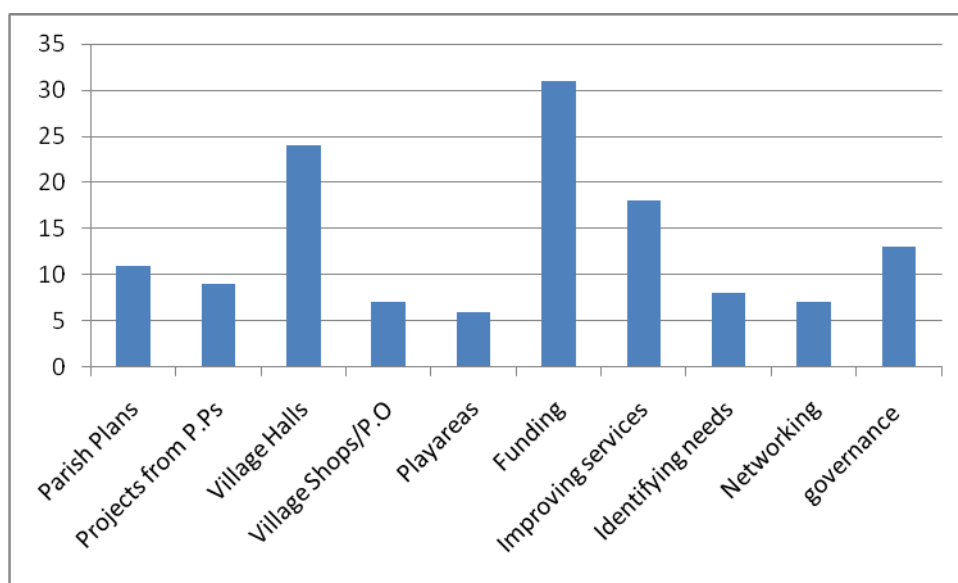
Respondents were asked to answer questions in three sections – support, getting the voice of the voluntary and community sector heard and on DCA more generally.

### SUPPORT

In terms of the support we offer there is no doubt which is the most popular service. Thirty-one groups reported receiving help to obtain funding ie two thirds of respondents. Next most used service – unsurprisingly given the nature of the organisations responding - was help to improve your community building or village hall, with twenty-four receiving help with this. The table below illustrates the responses from different groups on which services they use.

The level of satisfaction with the services is very high. Nobody rated any service as very poor and only one person rated a service as poor. This was for funding and the respondent wrote: ‘DCC assured us that appointing a funding adviser to replace Grants to Vol Orgs would be a benefit to small groups. Sadly this has not happened. We would certainly prefer to have the £3000 in the bank! As a result we face closure.’ So this it appears is really a grievance against a County Council decision around funding small voluntary groups rather than about the quality of advice received.

A total of nine respondents (7%) rated the service they received as average, one for parish plans, one for projects arising from parish plans, one for village halls, one for play areas, two for funding, two for networking and two for advice on governance, charity law etc.



## NUMBERS OF RESPONDENTS RECEIVING SUPPORT / HELP ON EACH AREA

In all other cases the service was considered good or very good. If you give each category a number from 1 to very good down to 5 for very poor you can see the average scores listed below in descending order. It can be seen that even in the 'worst' category we are considered better than good, which is very encouraging!

Parish Plans	Village Halls	PP Projects	Funding	Improving Services	Identifying Needs	Play Areas	Village Shops/POs	Governance	Networking
1.36	1.42	1.44	1.52	1.55	1.62	1.66	1.71	1.85	1.86

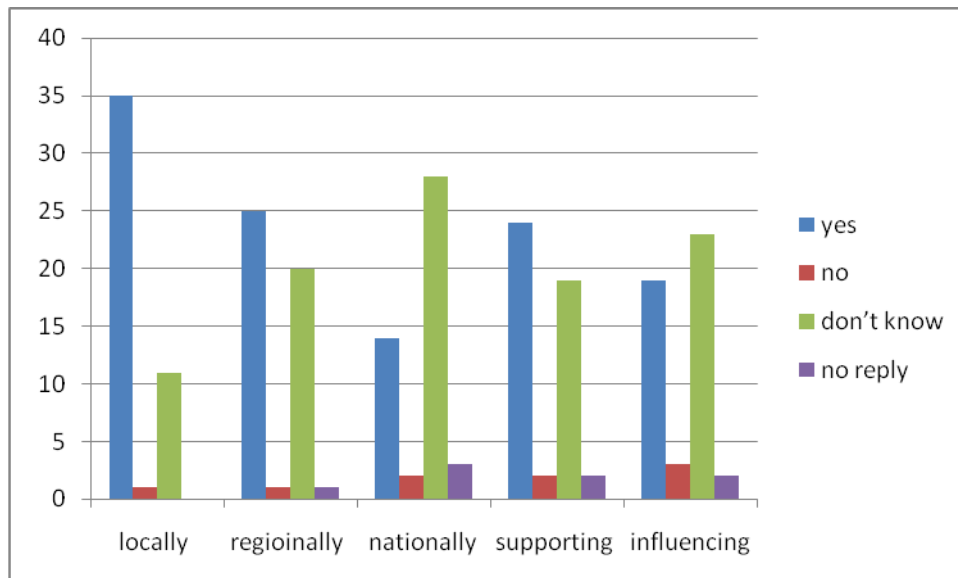
The comments section allowed respondents to suggest where improvements might be made. One suggested the funding adviser needed an assistant and another that a full-time Village Hall Adviser was needed. One of the most critical comments was 'took a while for them to get back to me after leaving countless messages for them to'. On the whole however respondents took this as an opportunity to write complimentary remarks – 'helpful' was a common adjective as was 'appreciated' eg 'DCA's service is greatly appreciated'. Evidently even when the desired result was not achieved DCA's intervention was well-received – 'Our interaction was with respect to attempting to save our village post office - ultimately unsuccessful, but the advice (and advice from contacts enabled by DCA) was invaluable in guiding / focussing what we did. The result is a village drop in centre that is thriving. If we'd tried to be too ambitious we might well have failed'.

There were two specific comments about the Connecting Dorset project. In both cases it was considered a pity that not more halls had got involved. One of the respondents thought advice about how to use the equipment would have been helpful, the other thought 'This has to be one of the most forward thinking schemes DCA has planned in recent years. It's a pity about the lack of vision by the communities that haven't wanted to participate and from our own village perspective that the build up of interest has been slow. However well done, pity that the funding was for a term that is shorter than the time it takes to overcome the inertia by prospective users and the inherent fear in parts of the older and rural communities to modern technology'.

Finally, what must surely count as one of the most glowing endorsements of our work came from a Parish Plan Steering Group in Purbeck - 'Our community worker has given us all her support and knowledge available to her. She has given the group her driving force to enable us to go forward with our project and she put in a lot of time and efforts on our behalf with the local council and authorities. Our community worker, had to endure other professionals' poor attitude towards our project and she has done so with great professionalism and dignity. Without her help, encouragement and knowledge the group's achievements would have been nil'.

## GETTING THE VOICE OF THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR HEARD

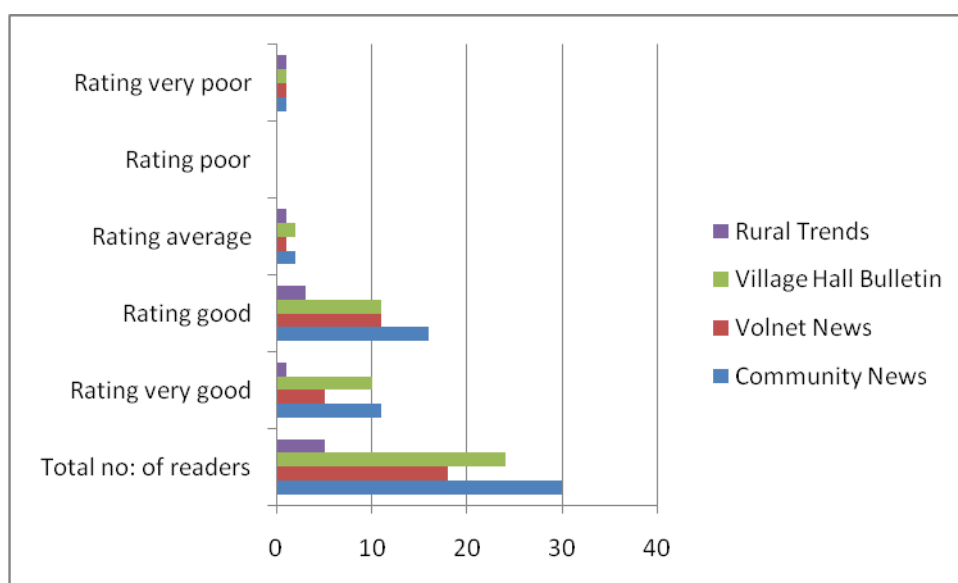
This section asked whether from the respondent's experience they considered DCA spoke up for the sector locally, regionally and nationally, whether we supported the sector to get its views heard and whether we helped them understand how to influence statutory agencies. The results are illustrated below.



From this it can be seen we are judged best at speaking up for the sector locally, perhaps unsurprisingly. The high number of respondents who didn't know, particularly whether we spoke up for the sector nationally, suggests perhaps that this is an area of our work that we should speak about more in public and mention more in our communications. Similarly we should probably raise the profile of our work in supporting the voluntary and community sector to get its voice heard. We are also clearly not quite so good at helping the sector to understand how to influence the decisions of statutory agencies so perhaps need to promote that field of work a little more. There were only two comments made in this section. One was that 'I know that DCA exists and employs a growing number of staff but have little or no contact from them'. The other was solely about the importance of the Village Hall Adviser and how important that it should be a full-time post so possibly in the wrong section!

### DCA GENERALLY

In this section we asked respondents whether they read any of our regular publications or looked at our website and if so what they thought of them. The table below illustrates people's opinions of the various publications.



From this we can see that Community News is the most widely read of all our publications followed by the Village Halls Bulletin (perhaps not surprising given the profile of the respondents!). Unsurprisingly, given that it is a lengthy annual publication not generally distributed Rural Trends is the least read of our publications, indeed it is a surprise to find that over 10% of the sample had read it. One respondent, a Village Hall in Weymouth and Portland, rated all our publications as very poor but added no comments so we have no way of knowing in what way they were considered so.

In fact if we follow the same methodology as outlined in the Support section of giving each category a number from 1 to very good down to 5 for very poor you can see the average scores listed below. Clearly the results for Rural Trends as the number of readers are so low (5) are particularly affected by the respondent mentioned above.

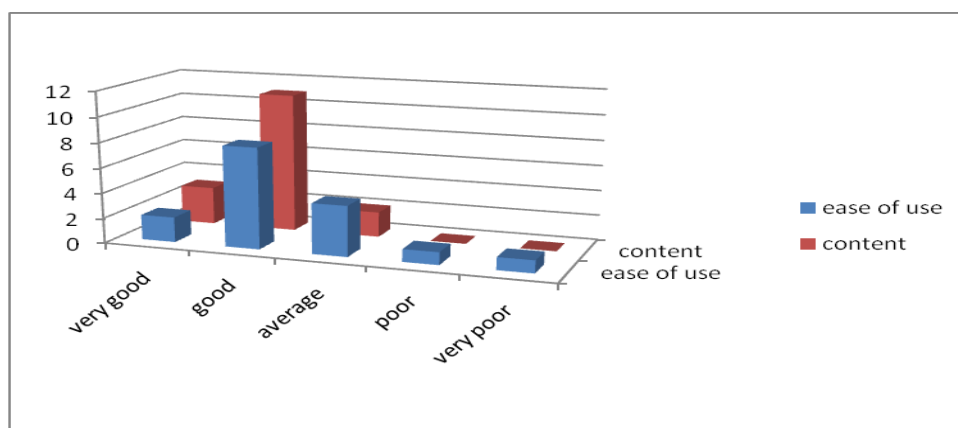
Community News	VOLNET News	Village Halls Bulletin	Rural Trends
1.8	1.9	1.7	3

From this it appears that our publications are generally rated quite highly. This may come as some surprise to ourselves as we are generally very critical of the quality of our own publications!

There are several comments in this section, about half of them remarking that they did not know about these publications. As one put it 'Don't receive them - not aware of existence - which is in itself a comment!'. There are some specific comments about VOLNET News, one saying what a good and useful publication it is and another suggesting 'VOLNET News would benefit from being updated and circulated more regularly'. Another respondent wrote 'VOLNET and the Village Halls Bulletin are always a source of useful information and the Rural Trends Report almost invaluable when putting together bids for external funding' (which is certainly an unexpected use of Rural Trends). Strangely, although it appears highly regarded there are no comments on Community News at all. Finally one person wrote 'I do think that DCA could profile themselves more highly - they are sometimes not credited with work they have done because of this'.

One conclusion we could usefully draw from this is that we need to advertise the availability of our publications more widely as it appears they are not as widely known about as we perhaps thought. This might also cover the point made by the last respondent listed, as a way of raising our profile.

Finally respondents were asked if they looked at our website and if so what they thought of it. Only sixteen people ever looked at the website. The table below illustrates people's views on the website.



From this it can be seen people on the whole appreciated the content but were less complimentary about its ease of navigation. Nevertheless, using the same method as before of giving each category a number, the website gets a score of 1.9 for content (just above good) and 2.2 for ease of navigation. Again these scores are probably higher than we ourselves would give our website which is generally spoken of in highly critical terms by staff!

There were four comments on the website. One said they hadn't looked at it but intended to do so, another that they didn't know we had a website (although adding that they had never sought to find out). The other comments were 'has improved recently - looked a bit amateurish before the revamp - good idea to put past copies of publications on site to refer back to with a search facility' whilst the second, somewhat contradicting the previous comment wrote 'I have found the new website layout less intuitive and thus less easy to navigate than the old site'. However they went on to say: 'I last visited the site around four days ago. The site contains useful information and clearly requires significant maintenance to keep up to date, so well done on content if not on layout'.

The lesson from this seems to be that we need to publicise our website more, perhaps waiting until it is revamped and hopefully both easier to use and full of even more useful content than at present.

## **CONCLUSION**

The results of this survey, taken together with the results of the evaluation of the community capacity workers done over the past three years and of the evaluation of our role on partnerships and forums suggest that the public we serve are more content with our role and our services than we ourselves believed them to be. Partly of course this is a reflection on human behaviour, the discontented and disgruntled are more likely to make their views known than the satisfied. Also most people, certainly in this field, tend to remember the complaints far more than the compliments!

This does not mean of course we should be complacent. Clearly we would like to improve our scores on all the areas on which we give advice and support - even from their already high status. We would like all our readers to judge all our publications as very good and the website as easy to use and full of useful content. We would like all the groups in the voluntary and community sector to consider we speak up for them locally, regionally and nationally, that we help all of them to get their views heard and help all of them to understand how to influence the decisions of public bodies.

This evaluation does give us some useful pointers as to where our weaker points are, as well as showing us our strengths. Since it is a very small sample of our wide range of users however, it should also be widely disseminated and particularly any actions we take as a result of this. This should demonstrate that we do take the views of our users very seriously and encourage a higher response rate in future.

R Smith  
May 09