

ACTCOSS Community Sector Viability Project
Finding Solutions

Paper 1

**Shared Services:
Issues and Options**

A discussion paper
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About ACTCOSS

ACTCOSS acknowledges that Canberra has been built on the traditional lands of the Ngunnawal people. We pay our respects to their elders and recognise the displacement and disadvantage traditional owners have suffered since European settlement. ACTCOSS celebrates the Ngunnawal's living culture and valuable contribution to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) is the peak representative body for not-for-profit community organisations, people living with disadvantage and low-income citizens of the Territory. ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS network, made up of each of the state and territory Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS' objectives are representation of people living with disadvantage, the promotion of equitable social policy, and the development of a professional, cohesive and effective community sector.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

ACTCOSS receives funding from the Community Services Program (CSP) which is funded by the ACT Government.

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Acknowledgement

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Introduction

The ACT community sector faces a challenging future. We are under increasing pressure to deliver more services at a higher quality despite limited financial resources, skills and labour shortages, ageing infrastructure, and a noticeable direction from government towards detailed cost management, increasing regulatory clauses in funding agreements, and sensitivity to external criticism.

It is now nearly 5 years since ACTCOSS, in collaboration with community sector peak bodies, produced the publication *“Community Sector Viability: An Issues Paper”* in 2003. In that document, ACTCOSS outlined the problems community sector organisations faced in maintaining their viability. In looking back at those issues, many remain familiar, while new concerns have also become more pressing in the intervening years.

It is important to acknowledge that some advances have been made since then. In particular, the commitment by the ACT Government to indexation of community sector funding by linking funding to general rises in wages and prices has helped many community organisations avoid collapse. In addition, the ACT Government has made commitments to the community sector in its revised edition of *“The Social Compact”*, and the *“Community Sector Funding Policy”*. At the time of writing, the Joint Community Government Reference Group has commenced consultations on the development pricing principles for community services. There have also been a range of capacity building and sector development initiatives that have sought to strengthen the capabilities of community organisations.

Yet if the goal of these initiatives was to secure the long-term sustainability for community organisations in the ACT, there is still some way to go. While ACTCOSS and other community sector peak organisations have continued to raise these issues with government for many years, progress in addressing them is slow and tangible solutions are not abundant. In an election year, and with a healthy budget surplus, there is some prospect that the ACT Government will make some spending commitments to improving community sector viability in its May 2008 Budget. Looking beyond the electoral cycle, however, it has become increasingly clear to ACTCOSS that the community sector needs to develop a strategic direction for its own development in the long term.

The ACTCOSS Community Sector Viability Project aims to begin this process as comprehensively as possible with our limited resources.

The Community Sector Viability Project – *Finding Solutions*

The ACTCOSS community sector viability project aims to explore options for securing the long term viability of the community sector in the ACT. Discussion of issues and options is a first step towards developing a strategic direction for the future of the sector. The focus of the project is on finding solutions to key issues of concern to the sector.

Community Sector Viability is a phrase used to describe the ability of community organisations to attract and utilise resources in a sustainable way, ensuring that they have the capacity to deliver services in a cohesive, effective and efficient manner over the long term. This project seeks to find and develop possible solutions that will help community sector organisations achieve this goal, and ultimately ensure that vulnerable people in Canberra get the services and support they require to reach their potential and participate in the life of the community.

Issues Papers

A series of short issues papers will be produced on different aspects of community sector viability to promote discussion and dialogue among community sector organisations in the ACT. We are interested in looking at a variety of solutions, for the short- and long-term, that can be implemented individually by organisations, collectively by the community sector, or collaboratively with government.

- ***Shared services: Issues and Options*** is the first in this series. It looks at the idea of combining certain functions from a number of organisations in order to build the economies of scale that could reduce the cost or improve the quality of some functions of community organisation.
- ***Funding: Issues and Options*** is the second paper in the series. This paper discusses pricing principles, full cost recovery, contracts and funding agreements, partnerships and philanthropy.
- ***Workforce development: Issues and Options*** is the third in the series. It discusses issues of staff recruitment, retention, training, management, wages and conditions. The paper canvasses agency level as well as sector wide options for addressing these issues.

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There are a number of other priority issues that have been raised previously including quality, structure and governance and infrastructure and information technology. However due to resource constraints ACTCOSS is unable to address these issues at this time.

This paper sets out some definitions, issues and options for the future. We hope to get a range of input and feedback on this paper.

Consultation process

Community sector workshops are proposed as follows:

Financial Viability	20 May 2008 9.30-12.30
Workforce Development	3 June 2008 9.30-12.30

Individual consultations will be held during May.

Issues papers will be circulated for written and verbal feedback. Written feedback can be emailed to suzanne.lawson@actcoss.org.au Or phone Suzanne with comments on 6202 7277 (Mondays and Tuesdays).

Deadline for feedback is 9 June 2008.

Shared services: an overview

There are many ways that organisations might jointly buy, manage or deliver services, where they can use the economies of scale generated to reduce the cost or improve the quality of those services. These models can focus on the consolidation of “administrative functions” from a number of organisations; collectively combining purchasing power to achieve cheaper input costs; or collaborating to manage services.

In models that focus on administrative costs, shared services are often defined as the consolidation of separate business units or functions into a single unit. The stand alone unit can then focus on providing services to multiple partners at lower costs with higher standards. The intention is to achieve economies of scale through common systems and standards as well as freeing up organisations to focus on their core business. Administrative functions might include financial services, information technology and human resources including payroll.

Other shared services models focus on equipment and infrastructure, particularly forms of “group buying schemes” that seek to purchase equipment or other goods in bulk, lowering the costs. Finally, there are mechanisms by which services can work together to deliver human services, making use of the special talents of a variety of separate specialist organisations to deliver services that none of them could achieve individually.

This paper focuses mainly on administrative models of sharing services, particularly as these have increasingly come to the attention of government and have been floated as a potential model for community organisations. However, we also look beyond these models to other mechanisms for collaborating and sharing costs.

Issues

The effectiveness of sharing services

The pressures on the community sector to reduce costs, streamline functions and focus on outputs have been well documented. The concept of shared services has particularly arisen in the context of restricted funding for administration. For community organisations, the increasing complexity of funding arrangements and reporting requirements can often mean that a significant amount of time and energy is focussed on administrative functions. It is argued that shared services may be one way that organisations can reduce costs and the time expended on administrative functions. However, based on the available evidence there are few details on the amount that might actually be saved by generating these efficiencies. The appropriateness of the various models and the expected outcomes also need to be assessed.

Across the sector, organisations have a variety of arrangements to undertake administrative services. Many organisations do this work in-house, from the employment of a part-time bookkeeper in small organisations, to administrative units comprising a number of staff in larger organisations. Other models include auspicing arrangements for very small organisations, contracting of private firms to provide these services, and use of not-for-profit 'enabling' organisations. As far we are aware, there has been no comprehensive documentation of the range of mechanisms in use.

Similarly, there is use of other collaborative mechanisms, such as: collective schemes for purchasing insurance and banking services; joint contracting for service delivery; volunteer services provided by pro-bono workers and community-business partnerships; and some mergers between organisations to yield efficiencies. A number of networks, committees and projects are also in place to provide opportunities for sharing information, collaborative service system design and joint professional development.

As part of this project ACTCOSS is seeking feedback on whether organisations are interested in developing shared services arrangements. It is important to recognise that without broad participation, any arrangement is unlikely to achieve significant results. We are also interested in documenting the requirements organisations might have that would make these arrangements effective, and the extent that services feel that participation would reduce their costs or improve their service quality.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you feel that sharing services with other organisations would reduce the cost or increase the quality of your service?
2. What concerns do you have about sharing services with other organisations?

The scope for sharing services

There are a whole range of areas where shared services arrangements might be applicable. These could include:

- Financial services (sometimes referred to as 'back office' functions) such as:
 - Bookkeeping, payroll and accounts;
 - Insurance;
 - Tax compliance;
 - Financial reporting;
 - Budgeting;
 - Financial planning;
 - Grant acquittals; and
 - Audits.¹
- Human Resources, such as
 - Employment advertising and recruitment;
 - Sharing workers or labour hire;
 - Induction, training and professional development;
 - Occupational Health and Safety;
 - Certified Agreements and Industrial Relations;
 - Policy and procedures development; and
 - Employee assistance.
- Infrastructure, such as
 - Information and communications technologies;
 - Equipment; and
 - Community facilities and spaces.
- Service delivery, such as
 - Joint contracting through partnerships and consortia; and
 - Mergers and amalgamations.

There is an increasing trend towards funding larger organisations that have standardised professional administrative services. This is based on a perception that larger organisations are more cost effective than smaller organisations. In this environment it is argued that shared services are a means of achieving efficiencies in administrative costs. The question of what efficiencies can be gained in practice, needs to be quantified. The implicit assumption that current practices are not cost effective needs further research.

In order to assess the potential for shared services to achieve efficiencies, ACTCOSS is canvassing a range of options and potential models in consultation with the community sector.

¹ NCOSS 2007

Models

There are a range of different models for shared service arrangements. NCOS research into shared services found that the successful implementation of a shared services arrangement is dependent on:

- Establishing sound relationships and trust;
- Developing an approach that is appropriate to the organisations involved – there is no one-size-fits all model;
- Appropriate resourcing of the set up phase; and
- Information and expertise for NGOs to implement new arrangements.²

Accordingly any discussion of shared services must have the support of the organisations involved. Further there are a number of models that can be considered and adapted by organisations interested in shared services.

1. Shared services within organisation

This 'classical business' model involves establishing a single unit in an organisation that brings together functions previously performed by separate business units within the organisation³. The model is not common in the NGO sector as it is generally applicable to large organisations.

Benefits

- For larger organisations the standardisation of systems and consolidation of purchasing capacity.

Risks

- Possible loss of autonomy and responsiveness.

Example

- A large community based healthcare organisation formed a financial services department in 2000 to bring together the financial services functions of 5 hospitals.

2. Outsourcing to a specialist provider

Organisations outsource payroll, bookkeeping, accounts, tax compliance, financial reporting and audits to a specialist provider of financial administration services. Outsourcing can be done either onsite or offsite. Functions can be outsourced to one provider or a number depending on the nature of the function eg payroll to HR provider, bookkeeping to financial service. Alternatively a group of NGOs can form a consortium to purchase services in bulk.

² ibid

³ Walsh et al (2006)

Benefits

- Staff are relieved of non core duties; freeing up time to focus on service provision.
- Allows access to professional expertise and eases burden of responsibility for keeping up with legislative changes.
- Removes dependency on a particular individual or part-time employee.

Risks

- Finding an appropriately qualified service provider. The provider needs to have/or to develop specialised knowledge of the NFP, in particular the legislative and reporting requirements to which NGOs are subject.
- The costs of setting up and the time required can be a potential barrier.
- Control, confidentiality and security of information require guidelines and procedures for transfer of records particularly if services are provided offsite.

Example

- The National Disability Services (NDS) ACT *Strengthening the Sector Report* recommends that disability services in the ACT consider outsourcing infrastructure services to another organisation – called a bureau model.⁴
- The ACT government has provided pilot funding to a large organisation to pilot a bureau model for shared services with smaller NGOs.

3. Large/small NGO Partnership

A large organisation with staff employed to carry out administrative functions can offer to perform those functions for a smaller organisation on a fee for service basis. Another variation is the example of a small NGO partnering with Local government for the provision of administrative functions.

Benefits

- Smaller organisations do not have to find or employ specialised services and/or may free up a worker to focus on service delivery.
- Small organisations may also benefit from access to the systems, policies and resources of the larger organisation.
- For the larger organisations benefits include collaboration and closer connections with other local services.
- Payment of fees for service may boost the capacity of the larger organisations financial administration unit.

⁴ Bennett 2007

Risks

- The larger organisation may have access to information that will be of advantage to them in a competitive environment.
- Potential domination of smaller organisations and erosion of their culture.
- Diversion of the larger organisation from its primary purpose.
- Equitable sharing of the efficiency gains.

4. Management service organisations (MSOs) / shared service centre

In the US the MSO model is usually not for profit (NFP) and is created by a group of NGOs to provide management services to all the organisations in the group. Usually the MSO sets up a board with staff involvement from each of the participating NGOs. The growth in MSOs in the not for profit sector has been fuelled by the trend towards professionalisation and standardised approaches that reflect expert knowledge gained through specialised training.⁵

A variation of this model is the formation of a NFP association that provides one or more services to NFP member organisations. Organisations access services that are appropriate and cost effective.

Benefits

- Staff are relieved of non core duties; freeing up time to focus on service provision.
- There is access to professional expertise that eases the burden of responsibility for keeping up with legislative changes.
- Removes dependency on a particular individual or part-time employee.

Risks

- The costs of setting up and the time required can be a potential barrier.
- Although staff time is saved on administrative functions there are additional responsibilities associated with the new association.
- Control, confidentiality and security of information require guidelines and procedures for transfer of records particularly if services are provided offsite.

Examples

- A non-profit organisation was formed in the ACT to assist member organisations in making better use of information technology. The organisation operates as a cooperative and provides education, advocacy and technical support services relevant to the specific needs of the community sector.
- Community Sector Services (CSS) was established in 1999 as a not-for-profit incorporated association to provide a range of financial and administrative services to the community sector in WA.⁶

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ WACOSS 2006

5. Peak body support

A peak body can establish an NGO business centre that provides a range of services for its members in return for a membership and/or subscription fee.

Benefits

- Peaks already have access to a range of contacts and connections with organisations.

Risks

- Some organisations may not be linked into peaks.
- Peaks may be diverted from their core purpose.
- Issues of confidentiality and security of information.

Examples

- Local government associations in Australia.
- Peak bodies in the UK and US often have both advocacy and sector infrastructure functions.

6. Co-location / company

A number of organisations share common premises, resources and facilities such as secretarial services, photocopying, joint insurance etc. Co-location can be restricted to sharing premises or can include a broader range of administrative functions. Collaborating organisations can also form a company that manages the premises and engages a range of staff to perform administrative functions relating to the management of the facility. This can be extended to provide additional functions to participating organisations and to sharing of administrative staff.

Benefits

- Cost saving through equipment and sharing specialised staff resources.
- Small NGOs retain autonomy; builds collaboration between agencies and can potentially provide streamlined access to services for clients.

Risks

- High risk for the company leasing the premises as it is dependent on ongoing funding of participating organisations.
- Services collocating must be compatible and appropriate ensuring the safety of clients.
- Premises must be accessible.
- Boundaries and responsibilities of organisations and the company must be clearly articulated and agreed.
- Dispute resolution procedures need to be available.

Examples

- Ross House in Melbourne provides a base for 85 community organisations.
- Regional Outreach Support Program in North Queensland whereby four family services organisations collaborated to form a shared services group.⁷

7. Umbrella organisations / quasi amalgamation

Umbrella or auspicing organisations can be formed by organisations that are similar and run distinct but complementary services. The umbrella organisation handles governance and 'back office' functions while retaining the distinct 'front of house' identities of their respective services. The participating organisations form a joint management committee that oversees the administrative functions. The coordinators of each agency also report to the joint management committee. Funding flows through the umbrella which purchases the services from the agencies.

Benefits

- Increased stability and viability provided to smaller NGOs by joining together.
- Agencies retain their identity but reap the benefits of larger purchasing power and shared resources.

Risks

- Organisations may feel a loss of local focus and autonomy as a result of shared management committee and administrative functions.
- Risk management responsibilities must also be clearly articulated and agreed.
- Partner organisations may also be vulnerable if an organisation loses funding.
- Confidentiality and security of information must be assured through appropriate procedures.

8. Consortium / Partnership Models

This is a variation of the above model whereby a group of agencies develop formal documented agreements about the role of each agency, without amalgamation or the creation of another legal entity⁸. A lead agency hires administrative staff and contracts them to partner agents. Joint funding and other shared arrangements could be trialled without threatening the autonomy of individual agencies.

⁷ Walsh et al (2006)

⁸ NCOSS (2007) p17

Benefits

- Less of a threat to autonomy
- Builds closer relationships gradually.

Risks

- Efficiency gains are not as great as more comprehensive arrangements.

9. Amalgamation / merger

Organisations in a similar field of service amalgamate with each other to form a single larger organisation, consolidating their administrative and governance functions.

There are potentially a number of benefits particularly for smaller organisations in an amalgamation but it is clearly an option that requires considerable commitment and trust.

Benefits

- Sharing resources, skills and expertise can provide a range of efficiencies as well as potentially a more supportive work environment.

Risks

- Loss of individual identity and autonomy.
- Agreeing on a shared set of values is essential.
- Accessibility and responsiveness of the service need to be considered in proposals for amalgamation.

Examples

- Partnership established between Home Help Service and ACT Community Care in 1996/97 Partnership with Northside Community Service established in 2002.
- The merger of two respite care services into a new organisation in April 2008.

10. Group buying schemes

Group buying schemes involve the purchase of goods and services by a group of businesses or a collective. The objective is to save costs and improve staff effectiveness. By purchasing in bulk, the buying power of the collective is substantially increased, often resulting in significant cost savings. Examples of products or services which could be purchased on a group basis include utilities, aged care supplies, telecommunications, office or cleaning supplies, or vehicles.⁹

⁹ Aged & Community Services Australia (2007) pp2-3

Joint purchasing can occur in a couple of ways:

- Providers in a common locality make arrangements with each other to purchase products and services jointly. This includes determining what products are required and negotiating with suppliers on price.
- Engaging a third party business that specifically conducts joint purchasing for other organisations. A number of businesses around Australia have set up schemes that do the joint purchasing for organisations.

Benefits

- Lower prices due to bulk purchases.
- Cheaper transport costs
- Reducing the amount of time spent by staff on finding and ordering products.

Risks

- Price creep (the arrangement needs to be reviewed regularly to ensure prices are still competitive).
- The nature and quality of the goods may change over time.
- Impacts on local businesses, which may affect community wellbeing.
- Possible implications under the Trade Practices Act requiring Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) immunity against anti-competitive provisions.

Examples

- *Church Resources* bulk buys for church and not-for-profit organisations. Products include: office supplies, laundry supplies, bed and furniture supplies, gas and electricity.¹⁰
- *Our Community* has arrangements in place with a range of companies for supplies to the not-for-profit and community sectors. Products and services include banking, computers and IT products.¹¹
- Whole of Government or Common Use Contracts - some public benevolent, government funded and not-for-profit organisations may be able to obtain access to government discounts through whole of government or common use contracts. Each state has different eligibility and procedural rules.¹²

¹⁰ Church Resources (2008)

¹¹ Our Community (2008)

¹² Aged & Community Services Australia (2007)

Table 1.1 Summary of Shared Services Models

<p>1. Shared services within organisation</p> <p>Establishing a single unit in an organisation that brings together functions previously performed by separate business units within the organisation. The model is not common in the NGO sector as it is generally applicable to large organisations.</p>
<p>2. Outsourcing to a specialist provider</p> <p>Organisations outsource payroll, bookkeeping, accounts, tax compliance, financial reporting and audits to a specialist provider of financial administration services. Alternatively a group of NGOs can form a consortium to purchase services in bulk.</p>
<p>3. Large/small NGO Partnership</p> <p>A large organisation with staff employed to carry out administrative functions can offer to perform those functions for a smaller organisation on a fee for service basis. Another variation is the example of a small NGO partnering with Local government for the provision of administrative functions.</p>
<p>4. Management service organisations (MSOs)/shared service centre</p> <p>A group of NGOs set up a not for profit organisation to provide management services to all the organisations in the group. Usually the MSO sets up a board with staff involvement from each of the participating NGOs.</p>
<p>5. Peak body support</p> <p>A peak body can establish an NGO business centre that provides a range of services for its members in return for a membership and/or subscription fee.</p>
<p>6. Co-location / company</p> <p>A number of organisations share common premises, resources and facilities such as secretarial services, photocopying, joint insurance etc. Co-location can be restricted to sharing premises or can include a broader range of administrative functions.</p>
<p>7. Umbrella organisations / quasi amalgamation</p> <p>Umbrella or auspicing organisations can be formed by organisations that are similar and run distinct but complementary services. The umbrella organisation handles governance and 'back office' functions while retaining the distinct 'front of house' identities of their respective services. The participating organisations form a joint management committee that oversees the administrative functions.</p>
<p>8. Consortium/Partnership Models</p> <p>A group of agencies develop formal documented agreements about the role of each agency, without amalgamation or the creation of another legal entity. A lead agency hires administrative staff and contracts them to partner agents. Joint funding and other shared arrangements could be trialled without threatening the autonomy of individual agencies.</p>
<p>9. Amalgamation / merger</p> <p>Organisations in a similar field of service amalgamate with each other to form a single larger organisation, consolidating their administrative and governance functions.</p>
<p>10. Group buying schemes</p> <p>Group buying schemes involve the purchase of goods and services by a group of businesses or a collective. The objective is to save costs and improve staff effectiveness. By purchasing in bulk, the buying power of the collective is substantially increased, often resulting in significant cost savings.</p>

Options

The following options could be considered for addressing the issues outlined above.

1. Documenting Current Practice

Information is needed on what models are currently used within the community sector for carrying out administrative functions. This includes the percentage of resources (human and financial) used in administration. Options for finding this out include: a general survey/ questionnaire; or using a few case study sites across a range of organisations types and sizes to demonstrate costs.

2. Practice examples

The NCOSS research identified the need for information and expertise in changing current practice. There are a number of examples in the ACT of shared service models. The experience of setting up these models could provide valuable 'how to' information.

3. Demonstration projects

Using action research a number of organisations could trial particular models and document the process of implementing shared service arrangements. The NCOSS research found that the implementation of successful shared service arrangements requires intensive resourcing in the initial stages. Demonstration projects would require resources to provide organisations with support to change their systems. This would give the sector and government information on how appropriate alternative models can be adopted and the learnings from the process.

4. Strategic direction paper

There are indications that the ACT Government is interested in this issue. ACTCOSS is keen to begin discussion with the sector before a course of action has been decided. It is important the expected benefits and costs of any models are analysed on the basis of sound quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Table 1.2 – Summary of issues and options

Issue	Options
Identifying potential efficiencies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No clear picture on range of models currently used for administrative and financial arrangements in the sector 	1. Survey to identify current practice and models and quantify % expenditure on administration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of quantitative information on actual efficiencies to be gained from shared service models – based on assumptions 	2. Case study analysis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Different models currently in use Review of existing shared service arrangements and cost-benefits analysis
Practice examples on appropriate models	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need to evaluate existing innovative practices 	3. Review of existing shared service arrangements and cost-benefits analysis of different models
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Various options/models for shared services require resources to consider and implement 	4. Demonstration projects – action research working with interested organisations to implement shared service arrangements
Strategic direction based on research	
	5. Review practice examples and survey data to determine effectiveness of shared service arrangements and expected efficiency gains to inform the development of a strategic direction paper.

Questions for Discussion

The issues paper will be discussed at a number of community sector forums to canvass options and priorities of ACT community organisations. The following questions are a starting point for this discussion:

1. Level of interest

Whether the sector considers the issue of shared services is worth pursuing and if so what are the potential benefits to organisations?

2. Scope

If there is interest, to what extent should this issue be considered; what functions could be usefully shared; and what are the administrative priorities for organisations?

3. How

What are the mechanisms for proceeding on this issue? What are the priority areas and what needs to happen? What role should peaks play?

Next Steps

Feedback from the community sector will be incorporated into a final report. The report will include priority issues and options discussed by the sector at workshops and provided through comments on the issues papers.

ACTCOSS will circulate the report to community organisations, government, peaks and the Joint Community Government Reference Group. Follow up action will be dependent on the level of interest and resources available to address priority actions identified through this project.

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