

WORKOUT

When you're drowning in endless consultation meetings the good, the bad and the ugly all start to merge into one. **New Start's** expert adviser explains why you should never surrender

Hang on in there... and prepare for timewasters

Q Every time a new initiative comes on stream we seem to spend more and more time in consultation meetings and less and less on delivery. What can we do?

A How many of us have sat through consultations where the phrase 'foregone conclusion' hangs in the air like tobacco smoke in a cowboy film saloon? How long have people been complaining about the proliferation of initiatives?

If your staff, volunteers and users are asking why you are attending all these meetings you have to take that seriously. The problem with consultation fatigue is that once you're worn down it's hard to distinguish the genuine meetings from the time-wasters.

Sometimes those meetings really are about making sure agencies know what people think. Sometimes they can be about making sure some scheme does not go ahead without finding out whether the community really wants or needs it. And sometimes, when you know in your waters you've been here before, and this is not going to work, it's important somebody has said it so the community does not carry the can when local people fail to take advantage of it.

Ideally, in order to justify the time to your staff,

next month: the usual suspects

Every time a new initiative comes on stream we vow that the money will not go to the 'usual suspects'. And every time we fail. What can we do about this situation?



clients and volunteers, you need to be constructive. Don't just say what is wrong with the existing proposals, develop your own. This is more difficult than it sounds.

Contributing to these discussions relies on knowing more than what's in the papers in front of your nose. It's rather like starting a book on page 50: you need 1-49 however clear page 50 might be. The problem is that 1-49 can be read in a number of different ways.

Some chapters are written from the point of view of the local council, the biggest, most powerful agency in the room and, in a sense, the voice of the people.

Other major players – colleges, job centres and business link advisers – often pay a lot of money for research to tell them what the community needs and so they're convinced they've got the answers.

So there may well be people at any consultation meeting who find your presence problematic or think you are a bit of an irrelevance. On occasion, the discussion can become downright difficult. But if it's an important discussion don't be put off.

Politicians do know and represent their communities, but that does not mean people on the ground don't also know their communities and don't have valuable information about how they work.

Understanding the strengths, weaknesses and starting points of different agencies is part of what every community group needs to learn. Recognising how to deal with an agency that is meant to help but often seems to block you is vital too. These are the realities of political life.

Hang on in there. Be realistic. Choose your field carefully. Don't expect any favours and you will develop the kind of resilience which might actually make the other agencies listen to you and maybe, eventually, work with you.

This column is produced by **Inside Track**, an independent company that serves as a bridge between the voluntary, community, public, private sectors. For more information visit www.insidetrackeuro.com or email mick@sheldon51.freeseve.co.uk

Your answers

Q Our organisation seems to go from one bidding round to the next. How can we get funding to keep us running rather than constantly having to bid for funding for new projects? (*Workout, 7 January*)

A The Community Action Furness experience: Now in its 12th year, Community Action Furness provides a variety of services and activities through social enterprise to young people at risk, people with a mental illness or learning disability, the long-term unemployed and offenders.

The demand was established by the sudden downsizing of the town's major employer and the resultant decline in what just two years previously had been described as a boom town.

In those early days, we seemed to be viewed as a convenient free service while referral sources got paid every time their clients attended our projects.



Perhaps in those early naïve days we were not forceful enough. Eventually, we had to take the bull by the horns and convince those with the money, and clients, that we could not exist on fresh air. We have now secured contracts from various agencies that use our services and activities. This income is combined with money from charitable trusts and trading income from our enterprise activities.

We believe our experience shows that just because funding agencies are reluctant to pay does not mean there is no demand or that they view the service in a negative way; it could mean they can find another use for the money that rightfully is yours. Two lessons for everyone:

- Don't put all your eggs in one basket – we offer services over a range of nine activities. This means a wider choice to clients, a wider range of funding opportunities through contracts and charitable trusts and that we are not reliant on one main source of income.

- Financial health warning: contracts can seriously damage your cash flow. Contracts are a useful source of income and can give some financial stability but sometimes include tortuous record keeping and audit procedures and moving goal posts that mean payments suffer lengthy delays. The amount of work needed to fulfil contractual requirements is sometimes out of all proportion to the income received.

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To respond to the issues in this month's **Workout**, or to submit your own question write to:
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