



**Briefing on Firm Foundations –  
the Government’s Framework  
for Community Capacity  
Building**

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## 1. Introduction

The Home Office Civil Renewal Unit launched **Firm Foundations** - The Government's Framework for Community Capacity Building at a conference on the 8<sup>th</sup> December 2004. The result of a two year review and consultation process, Firm Foundations sets out a broad framework for pursuing the Government's ambitions for civil renewal. There are no additional resources attached to this initiative, rather it is intended to make better use of existing resources, promote common principles and consistent use of language in relation to capacity building across all sectors and tiers of government.

The document defines community capacity building as: *Activities, resources and support that strengthen the skills, abilities and confidence of people and community groups to take effective action and leading roles in the development of their communities.* The document identifies a range of benefits from investment in community capacity building. These include social capital and cohesion, community self-help, participatory governance and sustainable involvement.

The framework sets out a series of principles and priorities. It also identifies actions to bring about change, most of which build on existing initiatives. These are summarised below. The Firm Foundations document is available on the Civil Renewal section of the Home Office website [www.homeoffice.gov.uk](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk).

If you require any further information about the content of this briefing or NCVO's work in this area please contact Sally Cooke at [sally.cooke@nevo-vol.org.uk](mailto:sally.cooke@nevo-vol.org.uk) or on 020 7520 2412.

## 2. Principles

The Firm Foundations framework builds on six core principles:

- Adopt a community development approach - accepting as a starting point the values on which community development is based.
- Recognise and build on what exists - focusing on the assets and strengths of communities, as well as their needs or deficiencies.
- Take a long view – recognising there are no quick fixes if change is to be sustainable.
- Ensure support is accessible at neighbourhood, parish or community level – the key components of such support are described as a meeting space or base, access to seedcorn funding, workers with community development skills, a forum or network and learning opportunities.
- Accept that learning is a key to success for everyone involved.
- Embrace diversity and recognise solutions are needed which respond to local circumstances, rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach.

## 3. Priorities

Building on these, the framework's four identified priorities for action are to:

- Develop a more comprehensive and coherent menu of **learning opportunities** for community engagement, both for citizens and communities, and for professionals, practitioners and policy-makers.

- Target efforts to build strong, sustainable **community anchor organisations**<sup>1</sup> which provide crucial focus and support for community development and change in their neighbourhood or community, and for building up the community sector.
- Promote **local action planning** as a vital tool for involving citizens and community groups and giving them the confidence to influence their quality of life, shape the services that affect them and contribute to achieving sustainable development in the wider world.
- Stronger **collaboration and co-ordination** at local, regional and national levels, working through the networks and partnerships that already exist, so that we make much more effective use of the effort and resources that are already available to support community capacity building.

#### **4. Actions to bring about change**

The actions to bring about change are grouped under the four priority headings and are summarised as follows:

##### *Learning Opportunities*

- Share learning amongst those involved in citizenship education and address access to learning opportunities via Government's Skills Strategy and the reform of 14-19 education.
- Strengthen links between schools and local communities and build on experience of post-16 active citizenship projects.
- Establish and implement learning programmes for civil servants and local government personnel on community engagement and partnership working (building on recommendations of the Treasury Cross Cutting Review 2002<sup>2</sup>)
- Promote learning for community development workers and their managers (in Government Offices and local authorities) based on National Occupational Standards for Community Development.
- Review access to information on citizenship and community engagement learning opportunities via Connexions Direct and Learndirect.
- Expand the availability of good practice case studies and evidence of what works in citizenship and community engagement via the Active Citizenship Centre [www.active-citizen.org.uk](http://www.active-citizen.org.uk).
- Introduce training initiatives for community workers and other professionals to improve their knowledge of sustainable development. Details to be published in UK Sustainable Development strategy in 2005.

##### *Community Anchor Organisations*

- Promote effective collaboration between national organisations which provide support to particular types of community anchor organisations and the local community sector to streamline support and make it more accessible. There will be a transparent process of commissioning based on expressions of interest as part of ChangeUp<sup>3</sup>. This may include

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<sup>1</sup> The document defines community anchor organisations as having four key features: they are controlled by local residents and/or representatives of local groups; they address the needs of their area in a multi-purpose, holistic way; they are committed to the involvement of all sections of their community, including marginalised groups; they facilitate the development of the communities in their area.

<sup>2</sup> The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Public Service Delivery – A Cross Cutting Review, Treasury 2002

<sup>3</sup> ChangeUp - Capacity Building and Infrastructure Framework for the Voluntary and Community Sector published by the Home Office Active Community Unit in June 2004.

support for the work of the Community Alliance (Development Trust Association, Community Matters, Bassac and the Scarman Trust).

- Encourage funders to explore appropriate investment funding opportunities (eg. patient capital) to enable community anchor organisations to become more sustainable based on learning from Adventure Capital Fund pilots.
- Facilitate transfer of assets to community anchor organisations in line with Government's wider commitment to promoting social enterprise. The National Hub of Expertise on Financing Voluntary and Community Sector Activities is to raise awareness amongst local authorities and build management capacity within the sector as part of their response to the ChangeUp agenda.
- Active Citizenship Centre to publish case studies and highlight research which demonstrates the importance of long term investment in community development and the development of community anchor organisations.
- Develop Guide Neighbourhoods programme where experienced residents from well-developed community anchor organisations share experience with less well-developed organisations and neighbourhoods. Home Office Civil Renewal Unit is funding action research in this area building on ODPM's Residents' Consultancy Pilot Programme.
- Develop a common understanding of the ways that community anchor organisations can work with local authorities/public bodies as they devolve more responsibilities to neighbourhood level and a clearer acceptance of the resources needed to achieve this.

### ***Local Action Planning***

- Publicise the benefits of local action-planning more widely and promote its use. A discussion document will be made available from Active Citizenship Centre.
- Conduct research to assess the benefits of more systematic local action-planning and how the most can be made of this eg by linking into statutory planning processes. Some research has already been undertaken by the Countyside Agency and more may be conducted as part of ODPM's evaluation of Community Strategies.
- Develop good practice guidelines based on existing good practice, particularly with emphasis on linking to community strategies and sustainable development.
- Explore potential links between local action-planning and the spatial planning processes being introduced following the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004.
- Encourage funders to allocate resources to stimulate and support local action-planning as an important component in the funding of regeneration and civil renewal in any area.

### ***Stronger, more effective collaboration at local, regional and national level***

- Disseminate Firm Foundations widely across government at all tiers and amongst the public and voluntary and community sectors to promote consistent language, common principles and collaboration.
- Develop practical guidance for civil servants on the delivery of community capacity building, complementing that already available on community engagement. This will build on material arising from the Community Capacity Building Review.
- Urge Regional Centres of Excellence (being developed by DTI and ODPM) to promote principles and priorities in this report as they develop their work.
- Home Office to explore options for greater collaboration at national level in the provision of information, guidance and learning on community capacity building and community development, as set out in this framework, and implement solutions with full cross-sector support.