



**University of Brighton**

**Community  
University  
Partnership  
Programme**

# THE CUPP HELPPDESK

This Briefing Paper describes the work of the Community University Partnership Programme's (Cupp) Helpdesk. The Helpdesk provides a bridging role between the university and its communities to promote research and other partnerships; enhance the skills and knowledge of both community and university partners; and strengthen the evidence base for community services.

The Cupp Helpdesk is a user-friendly point of entry to the University of Brighton for local community, voluntary and statutory organisations enquiring about research and other possible collaborative opportunities (*Rodriguez and Millican, 2007*). It also acts as a key point of contact for university staff and students wanting access to, or information on, specific community and voluntary organisations for research and teaching purposes. Increasingly, it facilitates enquiries from external institutions and individuals, many from overseas, and assists in the setting up of exchanges of information for visitors. A Helpdesk Manager supports this work and the Helpdesk is promoted via the university web pages as well as through local publicity, newsletters, and conferences. The Helpdesk now has two locations, in Brighton and in the University Centre Hastings. It also serves the Eastbourne campus.

## THE CUPP HELPDESK

The aim of Cupp is to tackle disadvantage and promote sustainable development through partnership working. Focussed on creating enduring partnerships that provide a long-term benefit to communities and to universities, Cupp helps develop ideas into projects, provides start-up funding, and helps networks and communities of practice to develop. Its work spans the community and voluntary, social enterprise and public sectors in Brighton & Hove and across Sussex. Increasingly Cupp advises on community engagement nationally and internationally.

### The helpdesk in context

The Cupp Helpdesk setting is a university with 21,000 students and staff, set in the county of East Sussex, which has a population of 506,000. A recent audit estimated 1,600 third sector organisations in the city of Brighton and Hove, employing approximately 8,000 people and contributing £96 million to the Brighton and Hove economy each year. Over two-thirds of respondents considered their organisation to be a community organisation, a voluntary organisation or both (*Taking Account, 2008*). There are a wide range of statutory sector services across various government agencies.

The city of Brighton sits on the south coast of England, and the University of Brighton has several other campus sites, including at Eastbourne and Hastings, both of which are also seaside towns. Brighton is home to both the University of Brighton and the University of Sussex, and with increasing collaboration in the area of health and social capacity building, the Helpdesk increasingly acts as a single gateway for the community into the two universities.

### A brief history

The original idea for a Helpdesk was included in the proposal to establish Cupp, when the University of Brighton successfully attracted seed money from Atlantic Philanthropies in 2003, and was developed through a needs assessment with community partners. The university's then Vice Chancellor, David Watson, set out the rationale through which a Helpdesk would assist the process of change in community engagement:

The helpdesk will be available to support members of the community and community groups carry out their own research and/or access University expertise. This is likely to be a '*virtual*' desk in terms of the connections to the range of University expertise, but will have a human face in the form of a helpdesk officer who can navigate and negotiate within the University in support of community contacts. A community research fund will accompany the helpdesk and enable University staff time and other expertise and resources to be made available in response to proposals from community groups (*University of Brighton, 2002*).

This needs-led approach was supported by community partners, and in spite of the shift in emphasis away from being a specifically '*research-centred*' facility, the core services and aims of the Helpdesk have not changed since its launch in 2004.



## Core services and aims

These are:

- To promote research partnerships between academics, students, voluntary and community organisations, social enterprise and public sector organisations and the communities that they serve, for mutual benefit;
- To act as a point of contact for university personnel and students wanting information on specific community and voluntary organisations for research and teaching purposes;
- To support the development of an evidence base for the services provided by voluntary, community and public sector organisations;
- To enhance the capacity and skills of voluntary and community organisations to undertake research activity;
- To address social exclusion through enhancing the research capacity of voluntary and community sector partners.

## HOW IT WORKS

### Senior Researchers' Group

Enquiries to the Helpdesk are facilitated through the Senior Researchers' Group (SRG); senior academics from different disciplines across the university, including colleagues from the University of Sussex, who support the aims and principles of Cupp and who wish to pursue research interests with their local community. The SRG holds regular referral meetings (usually every 6 weeks) to discuss requests for support, and assigns projects to the most suitable researcher. An enquiry, once assessed, is allocated a specific amount of one-to-one support from a senior researcher (anything from one to five sessions). Since 2007, the SRG has broadened to include a senior community practitioner in family welfare (the Director of a local charity) who brings a wealth of applied experience and increasingly research experience through involvement with Cupp. SRG members are all willing to put aside time to be involved in partnership research and the Helpdesk reimburses their time – normally 1.5 days per month. Most referrals to them are collated by the Helpdesk Manager. Some examples of the kinds of work the Helpdesk facilitates include:

- Supporting different organisations to carry out detailed evaluations of the impact of their own work to a level requested by their funders;
- Compiling evidence of residents' priorities in a community needs survey;
- Developing an evaluation questionnaire for use at a range of different events, which helped build links with other interest groups.

### Community Research Forum

Established at the request of community members via the Helpdesk, the Community Research Forum (CRF) provides the opportunity to discuss common research themes and to develop communities of common interest. Sessions are often co-chaired by a key person from an interest group and an academic. The Helpdesk also provides support for interest groups to meet outside the CRF structure.

### The Helpdesk as an 'enabler'

Alter (2005) emphasises the importance of creating '*enabling platforms*' that can bring together community-based experience and academic study in a deep mutual understanding. In examining the barriers to accessing the university for local community groups there seem to be three key areas where the Cupp

Helpdesk, as an '*enabling platform*', plays a crucial role in capacity building, both within the university and between the university and the local community:

- 1 In building trust, commitment and understanding;
- 2 In providing recognition and resources;
- 3 In sustaining community partners.

Firstly, much time has been invested in building up trust, commitment and mutual understanding. The Helpdesk has worked hard to balance the needs and perceptions of academic professional advancement with those of community partners, and of the community as a whole. While Cupp's university and community members acknowledge the existence of tensions arising from power sharing, the Helpdesk has played a part in enabling partners to learn from each other in reciprocal arrangements, and has emphasised communicating research results so that those who are implicated in them can gain access to research outcomes. It works closely with community members in setting the research agenda, for example by having a community member on the Senior Researchers Group and in supporting a Community Research Forum.

Secondly, while University of Brighton staff have been brought into Cupp's work from different Faculties and Schools on the basis of their experience and enthusiasm, the establishment of the Senior Researchers' Group formalises the university's recognition of their contribution and the Helpdesk can provide modest financial support both for the time of academic staff and the project costs of community partners.

Thirdly, the Helpdesk has been mindful of the different operating contexts in partner organisations and the need for the service to respond flexibly. For example, because of high turnover in parts of the voluntary and community sector, the Helpdesk has offered in-house training to groups of staff, to make its impact more effective in the longer term by ensuring skills can be nurtured within organisations (*Rodriguez, 2005*). It also maintains an active involvement in community-led events and activities.

## CONCLUSION

### Building bridges

Reflecting on the changing nature of the university, Watson (2007) argues that for community-university interaction to work well there will need to be greater dialogue on the increasingly permeable boundary between modern universities and their communities.

The Cupp Helpdesk is a practical example of the way in which bridges can be created between universities and local communities. It is a key part of the university's support to community partners to ensure that they, and not solely university academics, are taking a significant leading role in the development of partnership projects. Increasingly, Cupp is expanding its activities to include national and international work and it will be extending its Helpdesk function over the next few years to reflect these developments.



What  
community  
partners say

*"There's a huge amount of specialist knowledge there [the university] and it's great to be able, to tap into it to help our work."*

*"I could have spent ages and ages hunting for the right statistical methods, but being referred to the relevant academic within the Uni meant I could get hold of the information I was after and gain some useful tips."*

*"...sometimes it's painful, but it has helped to have someone ask us difficult questions. Our work is better as a result."*

*"To be able to say we that we have been working with the university has been a great bonus for funding bids and monitoring returns, it shows we are taking a serious approach and hopefully undertaking effective monitoring and evaluation work."*

Example of  
a Helpdesk  
enquiry

A local charity requests assistance via the Helpdesk with evaluating their service. The Helpdesk manager discusses the request in detail, including its relative urgency. She logs it as an enquiry on her database which is distributed to Senior Researchers' Group members.

At the next SRG meeting, the referral is discussed and the group pools its knowledge to explore how best to help. The referral is allocated to a member of the group who has expertise in the area. Three days later she makes an arrangement to meet colleagues from the charity and assess their request in more depth. Following this meeting, the charity is offered two days of one to one support to develop a framework for their evaluation drawing on materials developed by members of the SRG. They are also referred to the research training programme.

Six months later the charity returns with a further helpdesk request. With the help they were given previously they raised £20,000 for further evaluation. An appropriate researcher to undertake the evaluation is identified within the university and a partnership develops. This leads to the establishment of an evidence base demonstrating the worth of the charity's work on social exclusion, three joint grant applications, a publication and two conference papers.

For more  
information

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Local MP Michael Foster (left) with  
member of the Senior Researchers'  
Group Prof. Peter Ambrose visiting  
the Helpdesk at the University  
Centre Hastings.



## References

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