

THIRD SECTOR STRATEGY FOR COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

This discussion paper was published by (the department of) Communities and Local Government (CLG) in June 2007. The full document is downloadable from:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1511102>

The discussion paper, which is inviting feedback from voluntary and community organisations and other interested parties, seeks to improve Communities and Local Government's relationship with the sector by:

1. Improving the way they work with the sector.
2. Enabling third sector organisations to be more effective local partners.
3. Moving to a more effective strategic partnership and funding relationship.
4. Supporting more sustainable investment.

The document poses a series of questions. South West Forum intends to respond to these and would value the input of members and others.

If you have any comments it would be very helpful if you could let us have them by 10th September. If your organisation is responding directly to CLG we would be very grateful if we could have a copy of your submission. The consultation ends on 20th September.

Here are the questions and our draft responses:

Question 1. How effectively do we implement Compact principles?

Answer: It is not productive to look at CLG's effectiveness in implementing Compact principles in isolation from the rest of central government, government agencies and local government.

In order for voluntary and community organisations to achieve their full potential in contributing towards the achievement of prosperous and cohesive communities offering a safe, healthy and sustainable environment for all it is necessary for all public sector bodies nationally, regionally and locally to subscribe to and seek to implement Compact principles.

If we may give two examples from here in the South West:

1. Local Jobcentre Plus, part of the Department of Work and Pensions, claims that Jobcentre Plus has not signed up to the Compact and is not bound by its principles or codes of good practice. Jobcentre Plus recently failed to give an adequate period of consultation prior to a decision regarding the closure of local Job Centres, an issue of considerable concern to local VCOs working around equalities issues.
2. Some district councils within the region are not signatories to their county Compact nor do they have their own local Compact despite the efforts of their local voluntary and community organisations to sign them up to a Compact. One such district council recently cut the funding of two important local voluntary organisations without consultation - in total contravention of Compact principles and codes of good practice.

CLG needs to make it clear to non-departmental public bodies, executive agencies and local authorities that they too are governed by the Compact.

Compact work at a regional and local level is poorly resourced and it would be highly beneficial if CLG could provide dedicated support for compact development and implementation at these levels.

Question 2. In what other ways could we help to improve the effectiveness of engagement with the third sector at the:

- i) regional and sub-regional levels; and
- ii) local level?

Answer: In order for voluntary and community organisations to be effective at regional, sub regional and local levels it is necessary for all public sector bodies dealing with them to engage effectively and work in partnership with them and with other public sector bodies.

The proposal to set out your commitment to three year minimum terms of grant funding in statutory guidance to local authorities is welcomed however this needs to be extended to other public sector funders such as regional development agencies, learning and skills councils, NHS trusts and so on. This will require you to work with other Government Departments.

Too often national, regional, sub-regional and local public sector funders are working in a way that undermine each others' efforts to develop the capacity of voluntary and community organisations. For example the current centrally funded initiatives by Capacitybuilders to strengthen VCS infrastructure bodies to enable them to support front line VCOs delivering public services are being undermined by simultaneous cutbacks by local funders in grants and contracts to those same front line VCOs. This does not represent good value for money or a good way to deliver services to disadvantaged people [see South West Forum policy journal Forum Focus, issue 5: 'A cut too deep?' available to download at <http://www.southwestforum.org.uk/index.php?content=ff>]

CLG should require and resource Regional Improvement Partnerships to ensure local authority / voluntary and community sector engagement.

There should be a statutory requirement on local authorities to resource voluntary and community sector engagement in LSPs and LAAs.

Question 3. Would your organisation wish to be considered to become a strategic partner?

Answer: We support your concept to develop your departmental network of strategic partners to advise you and provide effective links between national and local action on your priorities. We welcome the proposed establishment of a strategic partners grant providing core 3 year funding for strategic partners.

South West Forum together with the other 8 regional voluntary and community sector networks working as a national partnership (the Regional Voluntary Sector Networks Forum, RVSNF) would wish to be considered as a strategic partner. We believe that the RVSNF is in a unique position to advise you on a national basis about regional variations in VCS needs, aspirations and capacities.

Question 4. Do you agree with our focus on community anchors?

Answer: By “community anchors” we understand you to mean well resourced multi purpose community based organisations providing both services to a local area and providing a base for and support to other smaller and less well resourced community organisations. This model is well tried and tested and is exemplified by the “Settlements” which were established in many inner cities in the 1920s.

Supporting existing and assisting in the formation of new organisations of this kind would be welcomed and would in our view contribute significantly to stimulating local community initiatives and services.

The Community Asset Transfer Fund of £30m to be used to refurbish former local authority buildings for community use sits well with the aim of strengthening existing and facilitating the creation of new community anchor organisations.

There should be a robust mechanism for monitoring local authority investment in the voluntary and community sector. Local authorities should be required to publish information on investment in and engagement with the voluntary and community sector.

Question 5. Are there good models of regional and sub-regional bodies, local authorities, or LSPs working strategically to support community anchor organisations in conjunction with the local third sector?

Answer: No, not in the South West Region.

Question 6. Are there major gaps in our proposals for improving our strategic engagement with the third sector?

Answer: The strategy as it stands makes little mention of the particular problems faced by VCOs working with and supporting people from the equality strands. We believe that the strategy should include specific proposals for CLG to engage with and to seek to strengthen these organisations.

Research carried out within the South West Region has identified that infrastructural support for organisations working with and composed of people from equality strands is particularly weak. It can be inferred from this that local front line community organisations working around equalities issues are also lacking in capacity and reach.

CLG might consider working with Capacitybuilders to seek to address this issue.

We think that further work needs to be done by CLG to devise a strategy whereby it can engage with and strengthen organisations supporting people from equality strands. Here in the South West we have an organisation championing equality issues called Equality South West. Engagement by CLG with this organisation might be a starting point.

In conclusion: We welcome the overall approach taken in the strategy. The test of its effectiveness will be in the implementation.

South West Forum, August 2007.