

Response to the Third Sector Strategy for Communities and Local Government

Introduction

1. Speaking Out is a partnership between the National Council of Voluntary Child Care Organisations (NCVCCO) and the National Council of Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS) to build a voice for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector across Government. The project will develop closer links between a range of Government departments (Home Office, Ministry of Justice, Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, The Treasury, Cabinet Office, Department for Communities and Local Government) and the voluntary and community sector in delivering cross departmental plans such as *Every Child Matters* and in the direct implementation of initiatives which affect children and young people.
2. The project aims to support the children and young people's voluntary and community sector to better understand the aims and impact on their users of a wider range of government policies and provide routes to influence them. We are funded by the Office of the Third Sector part of the Cabinet Office.
3. The views and comments below reflect our common child/young person centred approach to issues of welfare, and our commitment to the articles and principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, where the best interests of the child are paramount.



Structure of the response

4. We first give our general views on the document, and then, in more detail, discuss some of the issues which are of particular concern to us in the children and young peoples sector.
5. We are limiting our response to three questions raised in the consultation paper, question 1, exploring the Compact; question 2, on the relationship between voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations and different levels of local and regional government; and question 6, on any major gaps in the proposals for improving our strategic engagement with the sector.

General comments

6. As a partnership representing children's services and youth organisations Speaking Out is well placed to voice the concerns of organisations working in the voluntary sector. We are limiting our response to the issues affecting the ability of voluntary and community sector organisations in offering services to children and young people.

Responses to Consultation Questions

How effectively do we implement Compact principles?

7. The Compact has been generally viewed as an ineffective tool against the uncertain funding climate for many VCS groups generated by the shift away from grants. In the experiences of many of our joint membership the biggest barrier they face in working with local authority partners is the redefining of the relationship with local authorities as funding moves away from grants to a contract basis and as more services are open to commissioning process.
8. Common comments include an observation that there is an increasing sense of short-termism amongst local service commissioners reflected in the length of contracts, where 12 month contracts are not uncommon. One implication of this has been the uncertainty that VCS organisations have in their ability to plan ahead in developing solutions to the problems affecting the marginalised groups of children and young people they work with. This also needs to be viewed in the context of Government's commitment in the Third Sector CSR report to making three year funding arrangements the norm for VCS contracts.
9. Knowledge about the Compact and the obligations the principles impose on commissioners within local government is significantly less complete when compared to organisations operating in the VCS sector. Respondents to our internal consultation have told us that they perceive the VCS to be far more informed about the Compact than the statutory organisations that are signed up to them. A significant contributor to the problem is that whilst strategic commissioners are aware of their compact obligations this knowledge is not applied as a reference point in the procurement and commissioning processes.
10. An implication of the reluctance to apply the Compact in practice is that statutory bodies often go ahead with a particular decision without any reference to their Compact commitments and cause unnecessary difficulties with the sector. Examples include occasions when statutory bodies have been unaware of their obligation to give sufficient notice regarding funding/changes to contract and failure to consult. The Compact has been used retrospectively to support improvements in statutory sector practice which would have been far better avoided had they had an awareness of Compact compliance. As a result it is often difficult for statutory bodies to repair their relationship with the sector once such a breach has occurred.
11. For the Compact to be effective at both a national and local level greater emphasis has to be placed on using it a mechanism to improve partnership working across both sectors.

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?

12. Members have informed us that whilst there are regional and sub-regional partners who genuinely want work with the sector, engagement is at best patchy.

13. Where VCS organisations can engage, for instance through Strategic Partnerships, there is concern that a lack of the necessary infrastructure to support an effective representational role that engagement is all too tokenistic. Despite our best efforts to make the case for sustained investment into infrastructure, our networks, and in particular sector specific networks such as local councils for voluntary youth services (CVYSs), report that their funding comes from short term sources. The move of the Connexions service into local authorities has meant that funding for sector specific infrastructure has again been reduced, posing a real threat to the existence of already patchy infrastructure.
14. The experience of members would indicate that there may be a disconnect between the strategic planning role of partnerships and the local authority delivery agenda which may not be to the benefit of the VCS and as a result may lead to active disengagement.
15. A particular issue for the sector we represent is the way in which Local Strategic Partnerships relate to Children's Trusts. In many local areas organisations find it difficult to navigate their way between the different partnership bodies on which they are asked to play a part. Often there are different representatives on Children's Trusts who are charged with producing local children's and young people's strategic plans and on Local Strategic Partnerships who are responsible for Local Area Agreements and therefore the funding of the strategic plans. The situation is made more complex by the fact that VCS representation on Children's Trusts is frequently organised in different ways (for example through local councils for voluntary youth services) to representation on Local Strategic Partnerships (through community empowerment networks). The effect of this is frequently that VCS representatives on either partnership board are not effectively supported, do not hold a mandate and feel overburdened. We would urge Government to ensure that the structures set up are as simple as possible, correspond with each other and take account of the various demands that are put on VCS representatives.
16. One positive is that Regional Strategic Partners tend to be far more switched on and realistic about genuinely engaging the sector. However, even here members have informed us that there remain difficulties due to the problem of how to engage over vast geographical and subject areas. When they do commit to engagement experiences have been positive, particularly when done in conjunction with the regional VCS infrastructure.

Are there major gaps in our proposals for improving our strategic engagement with the sector?

17. We are in the main content that the proposals for improving CLG's strategic engagement with the third sector are the right ones. We would like make two points, however:
18. Firstly, the proposed Third Sector Partnership Board should not limit its membership to generic voluntary sector bodies. We think it is vital that CLG engages with a wider range of organisations, including those representing sub-sectors, such as the children's, young people and families sector. Only if CLG is aware of the specific experiences of sub-sectors can it understand the

full range of complex issues that voluntary and community organisations face locally as they make sense of different policy agendas.

19. Secondly, and following on from the point above, we would urge CLG to enter into strategic partnerships with organisations that may already have strategic partnerships with other government departments. NCVYS and NCVCCO have therefore submitted an expression of interest to enter into strategic partnership with the Department in the hope that we can work together to ensure that all voluntary and community organisations can play their full part locally.

Conclusions

20. CLG needs to be aware of these tensions in developing its strategies particularly in relation to engaging smaller local VCS groups - many of whom may not have had positive experiences of local engagement in partnership arrangements.
21. A general theme that emerges from engagement with our members is that there needs to be a greater effort by Government to ensure that local authorities and service commissioners are made aware of the operational and policy issues facing children and young people's VCS organisations. Until a greater understanding is reached about the barriers that face VCS organisations in taking on a greater role in both strategic planning and service delivery especially in terms of the capacity and sustainable funding, their contribution to the creation of sustainable communities will be significantly curtailed to the disadvantage of both.