

## Consultation response to DEFRA's Third Sector Strategy

### 1 Introduction

1.1 Speaking Out is a partnership between the National Council of Voluntary Child Care Organisations (NCVCCO) and the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS), which seeks to build a voice for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector across government<sup>1</sup>. The Rural Youth Network works with partners from the voluntary, community and statutory sectors to make a difference on the issues that affect young people and those who work with them in rural areas. Our collective membership encompasses around 300 organisations working with children and young people, ranging from large national service providers to small community based organisations, and 640 individuals working with children and young people in rural areas.

1.2 Speaking Out and the Rural Youth Network are pleased to jointly respond to this consultation, and welcome Defra's commitment to a third sector strategy. This response has been informed by a joint consultation event we held on 21st February 2008 in London with a range of organisations working in rural areas.

1.3 This response addresses key questions in the consultation document and broader issues related to Defra's work and relationship with the children and young people's voluntary and community sector.

### 2 Summary of key recommendations

2.1 The discussion at the consultation event addressed key areas of the strategy in detail, but there was also agreement on a number of cross-cutting elements which form the basis of our recommendations:

- Defra should consider support for children and young people as part of the commitment to promoting sustainable communities. The outward migration of young people from rural communities is well documented and mechanisms must be put in place to improve access to affordable housing, education and leisure facilities, transport, training, employment and volunteering opportunities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Speaking Out is funded by the Office of the Third Sector in the Cabinet Office and works particularly on policy issues relating to the work of Defra, HM Treasury, Communities and Local Government, Ministry of Justice, Home Office and Cabinet Office.

- Defra should facilitate ‘bottom up’ approaches to working with the third sector, including visiting or seconding staff to organisations working in rural areas.

The work of the rural advocate has generally been well received and this should play a key part in ensuring Defra is aware of live issues in rural communities.

- Defra should explore the potential for a formal agreement with the Department for Children, Schools and Families to ensure that there are clear lines of accountability for children and young people in rural areas, and those organisations working with them. This could follow the ‘dual key’ model that the Government has recently adopted in relation to youth justice, child poverty and other areas.
- Any future funding programmes should seek to complement rather than duplicate other available funding, and should also invest in what has proven to be working well rather than necessarily putting new structures in place.
- Volunteering can be incredibly beneficial to support people into the labour market, to build social capital and to supporting rural communities to seek solutions to rural issues. Defra should take a lead in championing volunteering in rural communities and building understanding across government of the particular challenges of recruiting, developing and retaining volunteers in rural areas.
- In taking forward the strategy, Defra must make clear how it is going to achieve the vision outlined in the consultation document and clarify the role of Defra’s own agencies and public bodies. More explanation is also needed of what is meant by some of the terms used in the consultation document, particularly ‘greener living’.
- In a number of places, the consultation document places an undue emphasis on climate change and environmental sustainability. As a departmental strategy, the final document should also look at support for the third sector in respect of rural affairs.

### **3 Defra’s vision for working with the Third Sector**

3.1 While a third sector strategy from Defra is welcome, a number of elements need to be clarified. In particular, further information is needed on who Defra is going to work with to achieve the vision set out in the consultation document. This is particularly important given the number of non-departmental public bodies and executive agencies that Defra has.

3.2 The vision included in the consultation document places an emphasis on the contribution that the sector can make to encouraging people to live within their environmental means, but there is no mention of the role that Defra plays in supporting strong rural communities. This is at the heart of the work of the children and young people’s voluntary and community sector and, indeed, it is difficult to

envisage how people can be supported to live within their environmental means without strong communities. The third sector strategy should cover all areas of Defra's remit.

3.3 It is unclear why social enterprise is identified separately within the strategy objectives, particularly as the strategy goes on to identify a role for the whole third sector in supporting 'greener living'. It is also important to recognise that the voluntary and community sector often supports enterprise activity and entrepreneurship; this must be reflected in Defra's proposed support for entrepreneurs.

3.4 The ambition to create a level playing field for the third sector is welcome, but further detail is needed on how this will be implemented in practice. In particular, the strategy must recognise the diversity of the third sector and consider the respective needs of smaller organisations, service delivery organisations, campaign organisations, membership organisations and others. While it would not necessarily be appropriate to include commitments to the level and types of support that may be available to the third sector to create a level playing field in the consultation document, this should be clarified as the strategy develops.

3.5 The mainstreaming of the Compact within the Department's way of working is welcome, and should help to ensure that the relationship between Defra and the third sector proceeds on a fair footing. However, it is worth noting that a number of organisations attending the consultation event had little awareness of the Compact and how they could use it to underpin a better relationship with central and local government. There may therefore be a role for Defra in building understanding of what mainstreaming of the Compact will entail, what third sector stakeholders can expect as a consequence, and what action they can take in the event of expectations not being met.

## **4 Working in partnership**

4.1 In seeking to work more effectively with third sector stakeholders, Defra should look to examples of good practice across government. As well as the work of the Office of the Third Sector, a number of other government departments have been reviewing their relationship with the third sector<sup>2</sup>. The Commission for Rural Communities have also built strong relationships with the third sector, and see this as intrinsic to their way of working.

4.2 The proposals to ensure greater consistency across the executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies in the Defra network are welcome, and should help to bring greater stability to the relationship with the children and young people's voluntary and community sector. However, the strategy could benefit from greater clarity in relation to governmental accountability for children and young people in rural areas. While the Department for Children, Schools and Families clearly has responsibility for every child in the country, there would be merit in Defra taking

---

<sup>2</sup> The Speaking Out project recently held a consultation meeting on the Ministry of Justice third sector strategy with the children and young people's voluntary and community sector. Key messages from the event included the need to build on pathfinders and pilots, to facilitate user involvement and to put sustainable funding for preventative work in place.

a joint lead in relation to children and young people in rural areas as part of the responsibility for promoting strong rural communities. This joint lead could take the form of the 'dual key' arrangements that the Government has recently put in place for other areas such as youth justice and child poverty.

4.3 The proposal to create strategic partners is welcome but the model should encompass the whole Defra remit rather than simply focussing on greener living. In particular, the Department needs to support individuals and communities to ensure that they are able to make the culture change needed to support greener living. Clarity is also needed about the support the strategic partners can expect from Defra.

4.4 Defra should explore the potential for a strategic partner representing children and young people to help support the strong rural communities policy stream. In particular, the children and young people's voluntary and community sector has a key role to play in delivering training and other activities to support young people and families to stay in rural areas. The needs of children, young people and families must also be properly considered in education, housing and transport provision.

4.5 It is difficult to envisage how local organisations will be able to participate in the strategic partner model and so mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that their voice is also heard. For example, all of the strategic partners could be charged with consulting in turn and representing the views of different communities of interest at national level. Defra should also consider how it can support strategic relationships between local government, including parish councils, and the children and young people's voluntary and community sector.

## **5 Future grant funding**

5.1 Defra's commitment to providing future grant funding is very welcome as this is an important part of the funding mix for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector. However, it is disappointing that this funding appears to be restricted to 'greener living', and the consultation document does not provide enough clarity about what activities could expect to secure funding. It is important that measures to promote 'greener living' take a broad view of what is needed, including access to services, transport and household income.

5.2 Any future funding programmes should seek to complement rather than duplicate other available funding, and should also invest in what has proven to be working well rather than necessarily putting new structures in place. Historically, the children and young people's voluntary and community sector has found it more difficult to secure on-going funding for existing work than innovation or one-off funding for new projects. Defra should therefore ensure that it has a full understanding of the work that is already being undertaken by the children and young people's voluntary and community sector in support of the Department's objectives.

## **6 Common goals**

### *Third sector stakeholder group*

6.1 A third sector stakeholder group could be an important mechanism for

championing the sector within Defra. However, greater clarity is needed on the purposes of such a group and how membership would be selected. There are mixed views about the existing Compact group, and limited knowledge about how existing members have been identified. The creation of a new group provides an opportunity to rectify this.

6.2 While the creation of a single group to facilitate third sector involvement in the work of Defra is attractive, it is difficult to envisage how one body could encompass the range of third sector interests relating to the Department's work. There may therefore be scope to create sub groups or working groups which take forward particular pieces of work on behalf of the wider stakeholder group.

6.3 In order to be effective, the stakeholder group must be independent and any meetings must include mechanisms to allow the third sector representatives to bring their own issues to the table as well as feeding into the work that Defra is taking forward. There will be a need to spell out the status of the group as it develops including the extent to which it acts as a scrutineer and whether it is an advisory or a steering group.

#### *Creating a level playing field*

6.4 The commitments in the consultation document to three year funding, full cost recovery and supporting third sector infrastructure are very welcome although further detail is needed on what these will mean in practice. It is vital that Defra also facilitates 'bottom up' approaches to working with the third sector, including visiting or seconding staff to organisations working in rural areas. This may be a more realistic option for many smaller organisations working in rural areas than formally engaging with consultation structures. The work of the rural advocate has generally been well received and this should play a key part in ensuring Defra is aware of live issues in rural communities.

#### *Enabling voice and campaigning*

6.5 The strategy is an opportunity for Defra to set out how it sees its role in relation to the third sector. While the consultation document talks about the role of the sector in supporting Defra's day to day business, Defra also plays a role in championing the needs of rural communities across government. The strategy should therefore encompass both the ways that third sector organisations contribute directly to Defra's objectives and the support that Defra can offer to organisations working in rural areas on a host of issues that may also fall under the remit of other government departments.

6.6 Defra must take a realistic view of the extent to which it is able to extend its reach to smaller and more 'hard to reach' groups. While many children and young people's voluntary organisations work at a community level and with marginalised groups, they are unlikely to have the capacity to engage with central government. Defra should therefore work through relevant networks and support organisations as

appropriate. It is also important that small organisations are adequately resourced for their engagement<sup>3</sup>.

### *Sustainable communities*

6.7 Many voluntary and community organisations have been at the forefront of building sustainable communities and tackling climate change in recent years. Defra should seek to build on this work and showcase examples of good practice for other communities to learn from or replicate. The Department should also be seeking to sustain as well as initiate change in relation to environmental sustainability.

6.8 There are multiple and potentially confusing messages about 'greener living' which could be detrimental to efforts to promote sustainable communities and to improve the environmental performance of third sector organisations themselves. Defra should therefore take the lead on providing a definitive set of messages about greener living and work with local partners including the voluntary and community sector to disseminate these messages.

### *Volunteering to strengthen communities*

6.9 Recognition of the value of volunteering is welcome, particularly the emphasis on Defra's own staff volunteering. This could be a very useful way to transfer skills and knowledge between the two sectors, and to build understanding of the role that the children and young people's voluntary and community sector plays in rural communities amongst Defra officials. In terms of support for volunteering by the public, it will be important to ensure that there are appropriate measures in place to support volunteering by young people as well as volunteering by adults.

6.10 Volunteering can be incredibly beneficial to support people into the labour market, to build social capital and to supporting rural communities to seek solutions to rural issues. However, volunteers need to be trained and in more rural or isolated areas, reaching them is more costly. The promotion of volunteering opportunities, travel to training and smaller numbers of people per session mean that there is an increased cost per volunteer trained<sup>4</sup>. This is a key challenge for many children and young people's voluntary and community organisations that rely on skilled volunteers to deliver services and activities, and should therefore form a key plank of Defra's role in championing strong rural communities across government.

### *Encouraging social enterprise*

6.11 There is a need to ensure that mechanisms to support social enterprise and entrepreneurship reach the wider third sector. It is unclear why a separate social enterprise forum is needed, and this may be better addressed by the inclusion of representatives from social enterprise organisations on a wider Defra third sector stakeholder group.

---

3 A recent NCVCCO survey of small organisations found that one in ten is facing closure due to funding uncertainty, and that smaller organisations are less likely to be represented in local influencing structures. The full report is available under the small organisations pages of the NCVCCO website at [www.ncvcco.org](http://www.ncvcco.org)

4 The 'rural premium' for voluntary and community organisations working in rural areas is well documented including at [www.ncvo-vol.org/policy/rural](http://www.ncvo-vol.org/policy/rural)

## 7 Conclusion

7.1 NCVCCO and NCVYS, through the Speaking Out project, and the Rural Youth Network look forward to continuing to work with Defra in developing the third sector strategy, and ensuring that it leads to a strong relationship with the children and young people's voluntary and community sector.

7.2 If you have any queries about this response, or would like further information, please contact Mubeen Bhutta, NCVCCO Policy and Information Manager, at [mubeen@ncvcco.org](mailto:mubeen@ncvcco.org) or 020 7833 3319. If you would like further information about the Rural Youth Network, please contact Sarah Hope, Administration and Finance Manager at [ruralyouth@nya.org.uk](mailto:ruralyouth@nya.org.uk) or 0116 2427441.

February 2008