

Strengthening local democracy - consultation Communities and Local Government

A response from the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS)

September 2009

Introduction

1. The National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS) is the independent voice of the voluntary youth sector in England. A diverse network of over 170 national voluntary youth organisations and regional and local youth networks, NCVYS has been working since 1936 to raise the profile of youth work, share good practice and influence policy that has an impact on young people and the organisations that support them.
2. The NCVYS network reflects the diverse range of voluntary organisations working with young people at community, local, regional and national level. Most of our members offer opportunities to engage in challenging activities or develop creative talents. They also support young people to become active in their communities and offer opportunities for their voice to be heard. Some offer interventions to prevent or tackle specific issues such as homelessness or offending behaviour. Others offer counselling, advice, Guidance and information. All contribute to young people's personal and social development; some also engage with spiritual development.
3. For more information on any element of this paper, please contact NCVYS's Policy Officer, Hannah Dobbin on 020 7278 1041.

Introduction

4. The National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Communities and Local Government (CLG) *Strengthening local democracy consultation*¹. This response focuses on key issues within the consultation that relate to the voluntary and community youth sector (VCYS) and young people.
5. This response is on behalf of the NCVYS membership and is specifically endorsed by The Foyer Federation. In turn NCVYS supports Foyer's response.

Key recommendations

6. Key recommendations emerging from the NCVYS response are:

Recommendation 1: Government should provide training for local councillors and Chairs of scrutiny committees to help them understand the voluntary and community youth sector, thereby facilitating engagement with the sector.

Recommendation 2: Local authorities should ensure that value for money principles in scrutiny arrangements should not compromise quality of service.

Recommendation 3: LAs should provide clear guidance on scrutiny arrangements that is understandable and accessible to communities, including young people and VCYS organisations. This will increase knowledge of scrutiny processes and encourage engagement by communities.

Recommendation 4: A local authority review of local partnership arrangements should be used to identify gaps in voluntary and community youth sector involvement in local service delivery with the view to fill these gaps.

Recommendation 5: Local authorities should share local examples of good practice in tackling climate change across all sectors.

Recommendation 6: Statutory sub-regional bodies should engage with regional and local VCYS infrastructure organisations to ensure that the sector's voice is heard and can contribute to decision-making.

Recommendation 7: LA commissioning arrangements should consider the needs and capacity of the voluntary and community youth sector. Councils should provide long-term, bottom-up funding streams to encourage sector growth.

Local government at the centre of decision-making

7. For local government to be at the centre of decision-making, it needs to fully understand and respond to the needs of local people and communities. To ensure this happens, young people and the VCYS will need more support to access existing routes of influence and communication with statutory services.
8. One form of engagement is participatory budgeting. NCVYS's response² to CLG's 2008 consultation puts forward recommendations including; Government should ensure that participatory budgeting processes are transparent and show that input by young

¹ At the time of writing details of the consultation are available via:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/localdemocracyconsultation>

² NCVYS's response to CLG's participatory budgeting consultation is available via:

<http://www.ncvys.org.uk/index.php?page=273>

people or the VCYS makes a difference to communities and Government should set more ambitious targets for youth-led participatory budgeting.

9. Young people are central to communities and should be given opportunities to take up leadership roles and positions within communities, for example through youth parliaments and youth councils. The continuation and development of these opportunities will provide councils with an avenue to ensure that they are making decisions that respond to the needs of local communities and building opportunities to engage future generations in local democratic processes. Furthermore, wherever possible, the views of children and young people should be sought and included in the planning and implementation of policies and procedures. This will not only that policies respond to the needs and wants of young people and that local authorities comply with Article 3 and 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child³.
10. Government should remember that young people are not restricted to using designated youth facilities and services, they also access wider generic services. For example the local health sector will offer an array of services aimed at the general public but which are also accessed by young people. Therefore, young people should be given the opportunity to be involved in decision-making in all areas of service delivery that affect them.
11. The consultation proposes that councils should have greater scrutiny and oversight of spending on service providers. The inclusion of young people's education and skills issues as a proposed area for enhanced scrutiny is encouraging and recognises that this has become an even more prominent policy priority given the recession, an increasing number of young people not in education, employment or training, and the legislative changes to the age of participation in education.
12. As a key conduit for communities to raise issues for scrutiny, local councillors need to be encouraged and supported to reach out to a diverse representation of the community, including young people and the VCYS. VCYS organisations often work with the most disengaged young people and would be able to offer councillors unique access to this group. If councillors are expected to be more involved in scrutiny arrangements, they also need to be supported in managing their time to ensure that they have the capacity to effectively engage.

Recommendation 1: Government should provide training for local councillors and Chairs of scrutiny committees to help them understand the voluntary and community youth sector, thereby facilitating engagement with the sector.

13. Increasing the scrutiny powers in relation to Local Area Agreement (LAA) partners to cover the range of their activities in an area, not just those limited to specific LAA targets, would be a positive move to enable scrutiny to meet local need. It would also be beneficial to make scrutiny powers more explicit in relation to local councils' role in scrutinizing expenditure on delivery of local public services in an area. Increasing the number of local public services under the LA scrutiny regime would also be a positive step to ensure a wider-range of issues can be tackled.
14. The proposal to introduce a designated scrutiny officer would be welcomed as this would provide a focus for scrutiny arrangements within the council but also within the wider community. VCYS often find it difficult to identify the appropriate contact that they should liaise with in LAs. A named scrutiny officer would solve this problem and therefore make the engagement process more accessible.

³ Further information on the UNCRC is available via: <http://www.crae.org.uk/rights/uncrc.html>

15. The VCYS would look for reassurance that scrutiny arrangements, in their role to ensure value for money, do not compromise quality of service. It is vital that small VCYS organisations are recognised for the high-level, often specialist, services that they provide and that they may require more funding than a larger organisation to deliver these services. It is also important that scrutiny arrangements recognise the range of outcomes, including 'soft' outcomes, delivered by VCYS organisations. For example VCYS services around youth offending often cover a broad range of outcomes including young people's self-esteem and community cohesion.

Recommendation 2: Local authorities should ensure that value for money principles in scrutiny arrangements should not compromise quality of service.

16. Accessible guidance on scrutiny arrangements would be welcomed to make the process more understandable for communities, including young people and VCYS organisations. This should raise awareness of local scrutiny arrangements and encourage communities to engage in every step of the process from instigating a review to calling a decision to account. Local and regional infrastructure organisations, such as Councils for Voluntary Youth Services (CVYSs), can be useful mechanisms for LAs to reach the wider VCYS, especially small local organisations.

Recommendation 3: LAs should provide clear guidance on scrutiny arrangements that is understandable and accessible to communities, including young people and VCYS organisations. This will increase knowledge of scrutiny processes and encourage engagement by communities.

Local government operating in the local interest

17. As devolution from central to local government continues, it is vital that strategic functions are in place to enable councils to meet the needs of local people. Councils should ensure that strategic planning, through arrangements such as Local Area Agreements and Comprehensive Area Assessments (CAA), identify and meet the needs of the VCYS and young people in local communities.
18. It is important that guidance on the new CAA arrangements is accessible to the VCYS. The proposed oneplace website⁴, which will feature results of CAAs, is one way of doing this. However, promotion of this website when launched will be key to reaching the VCYS, particularly small organisations. The democratic process of CAAs should consider VCYS engagement and capacity. In theory, the Collect Once and Use Numerous Times (COUNT) principle - where the same evidence is relevant for an area assessment and organisational assessments it will only be collected once – should help to facilitate engagement. Such moves are welcomed to ease the engagement process.
19. Local structures are often confusing for both local authorities (LAs) and VCYS organisations. A review of local partnerships may help to identify duplication and highlight VCYS involvement, or lack of it. The review should be transparent and its findings shared with local stakeholders with steps implemented to rectify areas where sufficient stakeholder engagement is not part of the process.

Recommendation 4: A local authority review of local partnership arrangements should be used to identify gaps in voluntary and community youth sector involvement in local service delivery with the view to fill these gaps.

⁴ Further information on oneplace is available at the time of writing via:
<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/localgov/audit/CAA/pages/oneplace.aspx>

Local authorities tackling climate change

20. Climate change will be such a key issue for young people as they take their place in the world. LAs must take the issue seriously to ensure that they respond to young people's needs.
21. Giving LAs a greater role in tackling climate change could strengthen a local response to this serious issue which is potentially seen by many as a global, as opposed to local, problem. It could act as a positive way of engaging local citizens in action to fight climate change. Many young people, individually or through schools or voluntary organisations, and VCYS organisations are leading the way, and LAs need to acknowledge that and harness that energy to encourage best practice across their influence.

Recommendation 5: Local authorities should share local examples of good practice in tackling climate change across all sectors.

22. To achieve the carbon reduction targets needed to keep the climate within safe limits, everyone must play a part. LAs, as key providers of services to young people, need not only to act as good examples of low carbon practice but also to expect that from the local citizens and organisations with whom they interact.
23. LAs should be more proactive and encourage low carbon activities in local areas and offer incentives to local businesses, organisations and citizens to help tackle climate change. To do this, LAs will need support and co-ordinated guidance from central Government.
24. LAs need to be trained themselves, and provide training for organisations in their influence, to help reduce carbon reduction and increase energy efficiency.
25. LAs need to be careful that their move to reduce carbon does not disproportionately reduce opportunities and services for young people. By promoting environmental youth work, LAs have an opportunity to encourage low carbon activities, educate young people about climate change and engender wider public benefits such as improved amenity, landscape and nature conservation.

Sub-regional working

26. Sub-regional partnerships should be clearly set out so that the VCYS can effectively engage with the appropriate bodies. Regional and local VCYS infrastructure organisations, e.g. CVYSs, are ideally placed to engage with sub-regional statutory arrangements.

Recommendation 6: Statutory sub-regional bodies should engage with regional and local VCYS infrastructure organisations to ensure that the sector's voice is heard and can contribute to decision-making.

Clear relationships with local authorities

27. The consultation suggests a set of principles underpinning the role of local government. Although the third sector is mentioned in relation to partnership working, a stronger emphasis on engagement with citizens and the voluntary and community sector throughout the principles would be welcomed.
28. Local infrastructure organisations and VCYS organisations should be utilized by local government officers working in the local democratic processes to include hard to reach groups that the local VCYS more readily has contact with through its diverse work.
29. Guidance to accompany the principles would be useful to show how the principles link up with existing duties and legal responsibilities on local authorities. This would help citizens,

and the VCYS to understand how the principles will work in practice. Additional steps need to be made to ensure that local democratic processes are made user-friendly and accessible to young people wherever possible.

Service delivery and commissioning

30. Issues around service delivery and commissioning run throughout the consultation. Councils can make crucial and high impact decisions, such as ensuring that LAs offer long-term, bottom-up funding streams. A reduction in ring-fenced money at a local level should be encouraged to create an environment that allows and encourages the voluntary sector to grow and flourish.
31. NCVYS supports the focus on outcome-based commissioning aiming to reduce the intensive monitoring and micromanagement of process-based contracts and relieving the burden on voluntary organisations. Councils can ensure that this is the basis for local commissioning arrangements.
32. LAs must be effective in the role of commissioner and engage with the VCYS at all opportunities and build positive commissioning arrangements. It is important that the VCYS is recognised by all involved in the commissioning process as a viable provider of services and that all VCYS organisations, no matter how small, are involved.

Recommendation 7: LA commissioning arrangements should consider the needs and capacity of the voluntary and community youth sector. Councils should provide long-term, bottom-up funding streams to encourage sector growth.

Reduction in complexity and bureaucracy

33. Measures that will help public services reduce complexity, bureaucracy and duplication should be encouraged at local, sub-regional and national levels. This will benefit all sectors and facilitate more efficient individual and partnership working.