



CLG An Action Plan for Community Empowerment: Building on success

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

January 2008

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.

General comments

4. NCVYS welcomes Communities and Local Government's (CLG) *An Action Plan for Community Empowerment: Building on success* and the attention this draws to the importance of developing community empowerment and cohesion. The joint publication of the *Action Plan* by CLG and the Local Government Association (LGA) demonstrates effective partnership working and a commitment to a shared vision. NCVYS is encouraged that this may lead to a consistent vision and successful implementation of a national strategy at a local level. NCVYS also welcomes the focus on children and young people and the commitment to linking with *Aiming high for young people: a ten year strategy for positive activities*.
5. The *Action Plan* brings together many different strategies which need to be effective, coordinated and mandated. The mechanisms for true joined up working and how this involves the voluntary and community youth sector (VCYS) need to be considered as currently there is no consistent approach to developing the role of young people within communities. It would be beneficial to community empowerment if the VCYS had a more effective way of influencing community strategies and further thought needs to be given to how this will work in practice at a local level, for example communication between the VCYS and officials, and at a national level looking at the opportunities that communities and infrastructure organisations have to engage with CLG. NCVYS is interested in developing its relationship with CLG and exploring these issues further.
6. Devolution from central to local government is cited within the *Action Plan* with a move away from 'top down' working. The government has placed great emphasis on the role of local government in delivery the *Action Plan* and as the locally elected body there is clearly a strong case around supporting local democracy in doing so. The VCYS is keen to participate in and shape local services to ensure they address the wants and needs of the community. Unfortunately, for many NCVYS members inconsistency in their relationship with Local Authorities (LAs) has prevented effective engagement from taking place. VCYS representation at local strategic partnership meetings is essential to ensuring VCYS participation in the planning and delivery of services for young people. The VCYS recognises the need to be proactive and if necessary develop their links with LAs to help develop community empowerment and cohesion.
7. For VCYS organisations funding is central to their existence and performance. NCVYS welcomes the planned investment in the long term sustainability of the third sector and would like to see support not just for community anchors but also umbrella organisations and networks. The action to transfer more assets to communities is also welcomed as it would provide the VCYS with essential capital and a secure basis from which to deliver its services.
8. LAs must be effective in the role of commissioner and engage with the VCYS at all opportunities. 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. Young people's involvement in

distributing funding through the Youth Opportunity Fund and Youth Capital Fund is supported by the VCYS although it would like to see this taken forward faster and with higher percentage of funding targets.

Action points 1-10: Widening and deepening empowerment opportunities locally

9. As highlighted in Action 1: Securing more citizen focused services, the third sector is a significant partner in creating strong and prosperous communities, with high quality and citizen focused services. Local implementation, and crucially how local government takes this forward in its multiple roles as commissioner, service provider and partnership facilitator, will be a decisive factor in taking forward the *Action Plan*. The commissioning of services is an excellent opportunity for LAs to engage with both large and small VCYS organisations. Commissioning also allows LAs to consider different, innovative ways of providing services to young people. This issue of effective commissioning goes across government departments, e.g. DCSF *Aiming high for young people: a ten year strategy for positive activities* (DCSF, 2007) and the VCYS would like assurances that all government departments are working towards the same goal of achieving an open and inclusive commissioning process.
10. VCYS infrastructure organisations and effective networks need to be in place to develop community empowerment. However, as highlighted in the *Frontline Hopscotch* report produced by the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA, 2007¹), there is concern in the VCYS about the impact of the new commissioning arrangements for children's trusts on youth infrastructure organisations. This has also been raised within NCVYS membership; three Council for Voluntary Youth Services (CVYS) in Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire region are particularly concerned about the following issues:
 - many LAs are looking to develop a locality based system of commissioning which does not necessarily recognise the 'umbrella' role of a CVYS;
 - funding streams are often available for targeted work – e.g. work with BME groups or drugs education and there is little funding available for support and developmental work provided by a CVYS;
 - serious under funding of CVYSs is leading to overstretched and overworked staff; and
 - backfill funding, where available, may be useful as money to the organisation but there is no way it can be used to bring in staff to cover.

¹ *Frontline Hopscotch* (NAVCA, 2007) is available via: <http://www.navca.org.uk/publications/hopscotch/>

11. Local strategic partnerships are an ideal opportunity to bring together stakeholders from all sectors to develop a shared vision for the community, however support and capacity building needs to be in place to enable the VCYS to be fully engaged in these forums. Small local voluntary youth organisations may not have the capacity to attend local meetings and may also be sceptical that their presence is not simply tokenistic.
12. NCVYS welcomes the recognition in Action 5: Embed community empowerment in cohesion activities, of government's recognition that faith communities contribute to social and community cohesion. NCVYS² has produced *Factor in faith*³, a guide for voluntary youth organisations to embed principles of diversity and cultural sensitivity. This has been endorsed by Parmjit Dhanda MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, and NCVYS is meeting CLG to discuss its work and taking this forward. As the *Action Plan* highlights faith based organisations should be represented at Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) as they can play a crucial part in building community cohesion.
13. Action 6: Move toward more community kitties is a positive step towards community involvement and an avenue for the third sector to get more involved in local commissioning. The *Action Plan* recognises that participatory budgeting is a cross government issue and in particular the link with the Ten Year Youth Strategy. The extension of the Youth Opportunity Fund and Youth Capital Fund is welcomed by the VCYS although we would have liked to have seen the involvement of young people taken forward faster and earlier.

Action points 11-20: Supporting and enabling people to take up empowerment opportunities

14. National government has a key role to play in developing policies that will support and enable people to take up empowerment opportunities. National government is also in the position to support LAs through the devolution process and continue to encourage engagement with the VCYS at all opportunities. Effective communication with national infrastructure organisations is another way in which national government can help support empowerment opportunities. The VCYS infrastructure organisations can reach a wide audience and successful communication can lead to greater engagement and empowerment.
15. A good, productive relationship between LAs and VCYS organisations needs to be the norm and LAs need to fulfil their commissioning role effectively. LAs must recognise and utilise the often unique experience and skills of the VCYS, especially with regards to disadvantaged young people whose engagement and

² NCVYS produced *Factor in faith* in partnership with the Development Education Association, Marine Society and Sea Cadets Association, Muslim Youth Helpline, Princess Royal Trust for Carers, Rathbone and the Woodcraft Folk

³ Further information on *Factor in faith* is available via: <http://www.ncvys.org.uk/index.php?page=550>

empowerment could be vital in moving towards a more cohesive community. Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships (RIEPs) are another vehicle at local level to drive forward community empowerment and build relationships with the VCYS. Communication between RIEPs and regional VCYS infrastructure organisations, such as Councils for Voluntary Youth Services (CVYS), would be encouraged to ensure VCYS engagement and empowerment. As previously mentioned the transfer of more assets to communities is fully supported by the VCYS and the development of the Dormant Bank and Building Society Account Bill⁴ is being monitored by the VCYS.

16. The VCYS is part of the wider voluntary and community sector and should be fully recognised by central and local government as an ideal partner for supporting and enabling people to take up community empowerment opportunities. The *Action Plan* highlights volunteering, in particular youth participation, and the VCYS is obviously well placed to encourage and support young people to get involved in their communities. The VCYS can share information and good practice, and help develop local services and provision of opportunities for community engagement. It can also be proactive in developing relationships with the LAs to ensure that the community voice is being heard.
17. Action 18: Invest in the long term sustainability of the third sector through funding to support community anchors is good recognition that short term funding is a problem for many third sector organisations. However, as Milton Keynes CVYS has suggested, it is essential that local infrastructure organisations are strengthened by putting funding directly into them. These organisations have the links and local knowledge to work with existing voluntary groups, and support the development of new ones; this can then facilitate the participation of young people and adult volunteers. Local infrastructure organisations also provide training and development opportunities, networking groups, access to CRB checks and provide representation at local strategic partnerships.

Action points 21-23: Strengthening local representative democracy

18. Young people should be given opportunities to take up leadership roles and positions within communities, for example through youth parliaments and youth councils. This could be developed and extended into different areas of the community, attracting more young people and developing community empowerment. This will also enable the voice of young people to be heard and help to generate more interest in community matters by young people. The VCYS offers numerous opportunities to help strengthen local representative democracy, for example young people can be involved in the governance of charities and VCYS organisations can enable young people to run local campaigns. Through volunteering opportunities young people can gain knowledge and experience which could lead to an interest in the formal political process.

⁴ <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2007-08/dormantbankandbuildingsocietyaccountshl.html>

19. A good relationship between an LA, councillors and VCYS organisations would enable more information to be shared which may lead to greater community empowerment and engagement.
20. Diversity should be encouraged within communities and in particular the VCYS can be a vehicle for engaging disadvantaged groups which could help strengthen community empowerment. For example the Consortium of LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender) Voluntary and Community Organisations supports the development of empowerment programmes which can be created with local LGBT organisations and that can act as a conduit for developing and supporting local area involvement.

Conclusion

21. The *Action Plan* is a positive step towards developing community empowerment and the focus on children and young people recognises the crucial role that they can play in this process. Implementation of the *Action Plan* should include consistent and effective opportunities for the VCYS organisations and young people to influence community strategies at both national and local level. Mechanisms to enable true joined up working need to be in place and consideration needs to be given to how the VCYS can be involved in this and how it will work in practice. LAs need to be supported by central government to implement the *Action Plan* at a local level and engage with the VCYS in planning and decision-making processes. Good relationships between LAs and the VCYS can make a positive difference to the delivery of services for young people and both sides are responsible for developing and maintaining these links. Funding and support for VCYS infrastructure organisations will assist in achieving third sector representation in the shaping of local services and facilitate community empowerment. The VCYS is a prime resource to communities and should be fully utilised at all opportunities.

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