

## Supporting a Stronger Civil Society consultation: National Infrastructure November 2010

### Introduction to Speaking Out

Speaking Out is a joint strategic partnership between the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS) and Children England building a voice for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector across Government. It is part of a strategic partnership with the Office for Civil Society within the Cabinet Office funded until 2011. The strategic partnership is pleased to offer a joint response to question 9 of the *Supporting A Stronger Civil Society* consultation as part of the Speaking Out project.

The project aims to develop closer links between a range of Government departments and the voluntary and community sector in delivering cross departmental plans that impact on children and young people. The project concentrates particularly on policy agendas emerging from the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice, the Department of Health, Communities and Local Government, the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury. Speaking Out aims to support the children, young people and families voluntary and community sector to better understand the impact of a wider range of government policies and provide routes to influence them. The Speaking Out programme has received excellent feedback both from the voluntary organisations it has supported and the Cabinet Office, which has praised it as an effective way of communicating with the sector, advising on and sharing government agendas with the sector and involving practitioners in the policy making process.

NCVYS and Children England member organisations work all over England, and range from small local organisations to large national charities working with children, young people and families. The strategic partnership has been in a unique position to use the collective voice of the voluntary sector to achieve positive change for children, young people and families.

NCVYS and Children England provide capacity building, support and information to their members and the wide range of voluntary sector organisations working with children, young people and families. They do this by building active networks, promoting good practice, stimulating policy debate and ensuring that the issues that matter most to their members are taken up with decision makers.

Both NCVYS and Children England currently receive strategic grants from the Cabinet



Charities working for children and families

Registered charity no. 1044239  
Registered company no. 3011053



**CabinetOffice**  
Office for Civil Society



Registered charity no. 1093386  
Registered company no. 4385383

Office and the Department for Education. The strategic grant from the Department for Education has allowed Children England (supported by NCVYS in the youth strand of this work) to upscale the support it provides to members, principally through the VCS Engage project. This has involved the delivery of engagement, capacity building and influencing work in each of the eight English regions. An independent evaluation of the programme concluded that it had:

- Created stronger local and regional VCS networks
- Developed better relationships between the statutory and voluntary sector
- Increased the profile of the VCS regionally and locally
- Built the status and potential influence of the VCS
- Grown the capacity of the VCS to successfully deliver public services
- Enabled local authorities to improve their engagement with VCS

The Department for Education grant has allowed NCVYS to deliver a comprehensive package of support to our network which helps to:

- Inform and influence public policy directly relating to children and young people's policy emerging from the then Department for Children, Schools and Families.
- Develop practice by acting as a development agent for the sector, promoting good practice around safeguarding, workforce development and diversity issues.
- Provide training and development for youth work practitioners, ensuring quality standards and supporting organisations to achieve them.
- Raise the profile of the voluntary and community youth sector's work by strengthening understanding and awareness at local, regional and national level about innovative work with young people across voluntary and community organisations.

As partnership organisations, we have ensured that we together serve our memberships to maximum impact, sharing opportunities across both membership networks to ensure optimum use of resources.

### **The National Infrastructure Environment**

We recognise that there are a large number and wide variety of infrastructure organisations operating at a national level and appreciate the Government's concern that this can lead to duplication and inefficient use of limited resources. However, it is important to highlight that the vast majority of these organisations are not self-appointed champions but rather have emerged organically from the needs of their members. Children England's predecessor, The Constituent Societies of the National Council of Associated Children's Homes, was formed in 1942 by seven organisations working with looked after children to provide a single voice for the sector. Similarly, NCVYS was founded in 1936 by representatives of 11 of England's largest youth organisations including organisations such as the YMCA, Scouts and the Girl Guides, who remain members today.

Although in some cases infrastructure bodies will overlap, in the main they will provide resources and representation for organisations who would otherwise be without support. Where there is overlap, infrastructure organisations have a history of working collaboratively and consolidating functions and resources to ensure strategic reach, influence and value for money. The strategic partnership between Children England and NCVYS, which enables cohesive delivery of the Speaking Out project, is a good example of this. Children England and NCVYS both work in a range of collaborations to ensure joined up infrastructure support which strengthens children and young people's voice across the civil society landscape. For example, Children England partner with NSPCC on safeguarding support to civil society and with NAVCA and the Racial Equality Foundation on workforce development. Similarly, NCVYS work with both the National Youth Agency and the National Children's Bureau to ensure a joined up approach to supporting children, young people and their families across both statutory and non-statutory spheres of public service. In this way we can still retain our distinctive identity whilst also using funding more efficiently in areas where we share common ground.

Both NCVYS and Children England also collaborate with wider sector infrastructure when seeking to address cross-cutting issues such as commissioning. Working closely with NAVCA and Community Matters, we have both influenced development of commissioning support tools through a sector partnership called *Kindle*. Kindle has produced commissioning guidance that has been accessed by over 5,000 individuals working with the children and young people's voluntary and community across both statutory and non-statutory sectors. Collaboration is key to the success of support tools that are joined up and do not waste resource by each sub-sector of civil society seeking to address the same issues alone.

“NCVYS bring key skills, knowledge and experiences from the youth sector, which together with other partners, enables Kindle to have a strong national voice for children and young people in the community sector.”  
David Tyler, Chair of Kindle and Chief Executive of Community Matters,  
September 2010

Like other national infrastructure bodies Children England and NCVYS's governance arrangements ensure we stay connected and responsive to the needs of our membership networks through a variety of means. Principally, this is the strategic guidance we receive from our respective trustee boards, both of which are comprised of Senior Managers from a cross-section of our membership. This ensures that we retain a representative and distinctive voice. Indeed, one of the great advantages of having a well populated national infrastructure environment is that the Government is able to call on a wide variety of opinions when formulating policy. A reduced number of infrastructure bodies would necessarily mean that some organisations would cease to be heard, particularly smaller civil society groups and those working in more niche areas.

To ensure youth voice influences the work of the strategic partnership. NCVYS is one of only 0.5% of organisations involving young people in trustee arrangements. This is supported by a national youth forum, ENVOY (Enthusiastic National Voice of Youth),

which enables referral of young people from member organisations to NCVYS's work at a national level.

## The Role of National Infrastructure

National infrastructure performs three key roles that are vital for the realisation of the Big Society agenda; influencing, building capacity and increasing engagement and collaboration.

### 1) Influencing

By acting as the voice of local civil society practitioners, we ensure that our members have a conduit to Whitehall and that national policy is informed by grassroots expertise. The majority of our members have an annual turnover of less than £250,000. Without national infrastructure these small community organisations, which will be increasingly expected to deliver public services and support volunteer action, would be unable to influence national debate, leaving government ignorant of the realities for front line delivery at the local level. Instead, only those larger charities with the necessary resources to engage with national government will be able to have their say.

National infrastructure organisations also have a vital role to play at a local and regional level. Children England has eight Regional Development Managers (RDMs), paid for by the VCS Engage programme, who bring together members and the wider sector at a more local level. Through the RDMs Children England have helped local authorities to increase the input of voluntary and community organisations into their decision making process. One local authority said:

“[Children England] have helped us with the openness of our structure e.g. we make sure that there are transparent processes for people chairing groups, becoming reps on wider bodies etc. This is much better than picking people randomly according to who they know”

*Children England VCS Engage Programme Evaluation Report, October 2010*

Providing a voice at a local level will become increasingly important now that local authorities have greater autonomy over their budgets and the statutory basis for consultation with the voluntary and community sector through Children's Trusts has been removed. While in some cases this is a role that can be carried out by local generic infrastructure bodies, often they lack the expertise to effectively represent the interests of specialist providers. It can be isolating to represent the voluntary and community sector on statutory decision making structures. The regional networks of representatives on Children's Trusts and Local Safeguarding Children Boards, coordinated by Children England, have played an important role in sharing best practice and increasing the confidence and skills of representatives to speak out on behalf of the sector and their service users.

Similarly, national infrastructure organisations are far better placed to influence multiple local authorities who chose to share back office and commissioning functions on a regional or sub regional level. Children England are currently supporting the development of consortia in the North East and South West to enable smaller local and

specialist groups to bid for service contracts on both a regional and sub regional basis.

It is this combination of local focus with national reach that Children England members most value in us as a national infrastructure organisation. One commented:

“The whole chain is important: the grassroots engagement feeds into Children England for national lobbying and we couldn’t do that without the [the Regional Development Manager] as the link in that chain. The more the networks are linked together, the more there’s ‘one voice’, the more influential that voice is.”

*Children England VCS Engage Programme Evaluation Report, October 2010*

Similarly, NCVYS works across Councils for Voluntary Youth Services and national member organisations to ensure support to frontline organisations across England. Together they work to ensure that local frontline organisations receive the support they need to develop a thriving civil society. NCVYS members value NCVYS’s work to be a trusted source of communication and representation. Access to influence through policy support is particularly valued:

“I can say on behalf of Reading CVYS that we are very grateful for the efforts that NCVYS goes to ensure that our voices are heard at a national level”.

Ben Cross, Reading CVYS, September 2010

“NCVYS provides organisations across the youth sector with invaluable policy updates and information. NCVYS plays an important role in ensuring that voices of the youth sector are heard in policy making”.

Helen Berresford, Parliamentary Officer, YWCA, September 2010.

NCVYS is working to ensure that local young people are directly able to influence policy decisions that affect their experience of public services. This has been facilitated through the All Party Parliamentary Group on Youth Affairs, facilitated in partnership with NCVYS members the British Youth Council and YMCA. This is an important cross party forum where young people can have their say, most recently addressing the Education Select Committee’s review of youth services in November. Funded by the Big Lottery, NCVYS is expanding this voice function through youth participation work which is developing young people’s voice across English regions with the help of young facilitators, who are skilling young people to have a voice in local decision making processes.

## **2) Building Capacity**

Through the provision of specialist training we are empowering people to play a greater role in their local communities and increasing the number of civil society organisations able to deliver public services for children and young people. For generic topics, such as commissioning, we often work closely with local organisations in order to tailor our support. For example, in one region Children England collaborated with Jobcentre Plus and Tendering for Care to prepare material on tendering and commissioning in that area and run a number of well attended training sessions. For

more specialist issues, such as child protection, we are able to base training courses and information materials on our detailed understanding of the latest national policy developments, and bring in the support of national expert members such as NSPCC and Family Action to support smaller groups, in a way that local generic infrastructure organisations are unable to. Through the Regional Development Managers and the VCS Engage programme, Children England work with these organisations to support voluntary and community organisation beyond our membership.

“We use Children England and VCS Engage’s safeguarding packages, information etc. on a daily basis to help our member groups to provide services to children and young people, many of whom in the rural areas have no access to mainstream service provision. Because what they provide is fit for purpose we don’t have to spend our time sourcing and checking the quality, suitability and effectiveness of alternative development tools. Without this provision there would be fewer resources readily accessible to the small voluntary groups, leading to a reduction in the support we can offer, and as a result of this, fewer new groups would be able to access start up support, and others could be unsustainable.”  
Voluntary Action North Lincolnshire

Children England’s work building local capacity has been recognised by a regional lead at the Commissioning Support Programme who said:

“The aim of broadening the provider base in children’s services will be pretty difficult for all concerned without you.”

Building capacity also means bringing Children England’s members together so that they can learn from each other. This is hugely beneficial for large and small organisations alike.

“Whilst all member organizations will be “expert” within a specific area or areas (examples would include safeguarding, play, under 5’s, etc.), none will be competent and confident across all aspects of work with children, young people and families. Children England allows and encourages wisdom, learning and practice experience to be shared across the sector. Large and smaller organizations are valued equally, with each learning from and supporting each other. Barnardo’s has certainly learned a great deal from work with others under the aegis of Children England.”  
Barnardo’s London, East Anglia and South East Region

NCVYS’s Big Society Blueprint projects are also an example of how national infrastructure can share expertise from a large network to the smallest community organisations. This programme of work sees NCVYS providing quality assurance, training and peer mentoring services to small frontline groups working with the hardest to reach young people. These efforts are coupled with specific training on bespoke issues to skill voluntary and community organisations in areas of practice.

“The NCVYS Talking Diversity training has helped to put diversity at the core of what we do by enabling us to fully integrate diversity in all our

planning and activities so that everyone can benefit from our services.”  
Hanna Moore, Chief Executive, West Sussex Council for Voluntary Youth Services, September 2010

Access to tried and tested support tools are also an important way that national infrastructure builds capacity and skill across the sector. Areas of practice such as safeguarding can be challenging for organisations to address alone. Sector specific support tools developed by expert infrastructure are particularly important here to ensure civil society organisations honour their regulatory requirements to keep children and young people safe. This is valued by NCVYS members:

“The Marine Society and Sea Cadets (MSSC) is delighted to achieve full accreditation through the Sound Systems accreditation scheme organised by NCVYS. The process was easy to follow, comprehensive and independently audited and provided an excellent level of assurance for the MSSC’s approach to safeguarding, both at a policy level and how it was implemented on the ground across the UK.”  
John Parker-Jones, Director of Business Management, MSSC, September 2010

These efforts to spread knowledge and skills across the sector are particularly important at a time when all charities are making difficult decisions about how to adapt to the new funding environment. The fora and platforms provided by national infrastructure will be key to ensuring that the children and young people’s voluntary and community sector’s survival strategies are tested and shared and that organisations are enabled to take full advantage of the new funding opportunities arising from the Big Society Bank and social impact bonds.

### 3) Increasing Engagement and Collaboration

On a local, regional and national basis we provide fora for our members to come together to share ideas, learn from each other and develop relationships that will enable them to work in partnership on future projects. For our smaller members this opens up commissioning and influence opportunities that would otherwise be out of their reach. One said:

“Without infrastructure, organisations will be back in silos, not sharing, not identifying opportunities to work together, less primed to know who to talk to in their local area, less informed about money and policy changes. There will be a dropping off of influence over time and the big voluntary organisations will take over relationships with the statutory sector because they will still have the capacity to do so while smaller ones are shut out.”  
*Children England VCS Engage Programme Evaluation Report, October 2010*

Through the VCS Engage programme we also facilitate regional peer support, best practice sharing and access to training for local infrastructure organisations.

“The support that the networking meetings provide really do enable myself

and my colleagues in the other regional areas come together to share good practice, new ideas and formulate ideas to tackle issues that we all face in our work supporting organisations that work with children and young people. Although we have very local networks, the regional networking provides me with the missing part of the jigsaw. All the events that have been held have been extremely well delivered, being of a very high quality. I have come away from them informed, armed with additional tools, ideas and feeling well supported in a job that can be very isolating at times.”  
Voluntary Action Sheffield

Most organisations have to concentrate the majority of their resources on the “day job”. This means that without infrastructure and membership bodies making links and providing information about wider opportunities and policy streams, organisations would struggle to recognise the wider contribution they can make. Children England and NCVYS have together provided knowledge and practical help to enable groups to engage with local area agreements, housing and homelessness, physical regeneration projects, commissioning, safeguarding, diversity and the environmental agenda for the benefit of the children young people and families they serve.

### **Adapting for the Future**

We are excited about the new era of civil society engagement in the delivery of public services and the building of community action, but we recognise that infrastructure organisations will need to adapt to stay relevant. In particular, greater devolution of budgetary responsibility to local authorities will mean that national organisations like Children England and NCVYS will need to be aware of the decisions being made in all 353 English local authorities and the health service structures within them, rather than just a handful of central government departments. In such an environment, the work that we already do to share best practice, build consortia and develop capacity at local and regional levels will become increasingly important.

Powerful mechanisms to get community and consumer voices heard at a local level, and trends identified for national consideration will become more important as there is a reduction in centralised programmes, standards and inspection regimes. Local organisations will need greater access to intelligence from other areas to benchmark, challenge and support best practice on commissioning and community engagement, as well as to develop new and more cost effective delivery packages for vulnerable children, young people and families. National specialist infrastructure bodies will need to play an even greater role in supporting civil society run children’s centres, youth services and community initiatives and facilitating the sector to play a full part in community based budgeting initiatives.

### **Realising the Big Society Vision**

The Office for Civil Society has set out three strategic objectives:

- 1) Making it easier to run a voluntary or community sector organisation
- 2) Getting more resources into the sector to underpin its resilience and independence
- 3) Making it easier to do business with the state

As set out above, national infrastructure organisations are well placed to deliver each of these objectives. We make it easier to run voluntary and community sector organisations by providing information, advice and training for trustees, staff and volunteers, as well as facilitating local, regional and national events for networking and the sharing of best practice. Our existing networks and relationships mean we are able to efficiently channel additional resources to the sector. And we make it easier for our members to do business with the state by providing commissioning training sessions, helping coordinate consortiums and providing a voice for those involved in the process.

We are confident about the role we can play in delivering the Big Society vision but also understand the need to become less dependent on the state and to diversify our income. To this end we are developing social enterprise products that can supplement the non-statutory income that we already receive through our membership fees. In the case of NCVYS, this means establishing a new community interest company to facilitate the effective spreading of knowledge across the sector by granting licenses to members to spread use of their products and intelligence across the network. Whilst this may be sufficient to sustain core policy and influencing work, it will not allow NCVYS to continue running more extensive capacity building and engagement programmes. Indeed, it is important to recognise that, aside from government, there are very few other paying customers for this kind of coordinating work. However, we believe that the success of programmes such as Speaking Out shows how cost savings are generated when government works with national infrastructure organisations. Although projects will necessarily change to better reflect new policy priorities and economic realities, they are excellent examples of what can be efficiently delivered by utilising existing networks and expertise.

### **Recommendation**

Charities working with children and young people account for almost 50% of the charitable sector in England. Continued investment across Whitehall in positive strategic partnership arrangements with organisations that can represent the sector is essential if we are to continue to build a strong civil society and ensure support to the frontline.

### **Note**

Please note that in addition to this joint response, Children England has submitted its own response to question 9 and NCVYS has submitted a full response to the wider consultation. A further joint response to the remaining consultation questions will be submitted by the Speaking Out partnership in January 2011.