



EVCP
Every Voice Counts
Partnership

Community empowerment and the **Local Area** **Agreement process**

A report mapping the extent and current position of community involvement and empowerment in the developing Local Area Agreement process

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**GOVERNMENT OFFICE
FOR THE WEST MIDLANDS**

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The third sector and the voluntary and community sector

The third sector is a diverse, active and passionate sector. Organisations in the sector share common characteristics. They are non-governmental; value-driven; principally reinvest any financial surpluses to further social, environmental or cultural objectives. The term encompasses voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals both large and small. (Office of the Third Sector)

This report is based on research with the voluntary and community sector. Where appropriate, reference has been made to the voluntary and community sector, as distinct from the wider third sector.



Foreword

This report is the culmination of two studies undertaken into community involvement and empowerment in the developing Local Area Agreement (LAA) process.

One study, commissioned by Government Office West Midlands (GOWM), provides a strategic overview of where the voluntary and community sector (VCS) adds value to the LAA process and where it will need to position itself in order to be able to play a full and strategic role in this new agenda.

The other, commissioned by Regional Action West Midlands (RAWM) on behalf of the National Empowerment Programme in the West Midlands, collates and presents the extent to which the VCS has perceived itself to be engaged with and contributing toward the development of the recent government policy on devolving local decision-making between statutory and voluntary partnerships as a series of case studies.

The study represents a groundbreaking partnership between the National Empowerment Programme in the West Midlands, GOWM and RAWM in terms of the coordination and access to documents and individuals relevant to the creation of LAAs within the West Midlands. It provides a central and common agenda for developing and delivering a regional co-ordinated, cohesive and targeted response to the empowerment agenda across sectors.

Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements

A lack of joint partnership working between interested groups has been identified as a key reason for a failure to deliver effective change within local regeneration, public services and sustainable economic initiatives which benefit local communities.

The Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) are non-statutory, multi-agency partnerships matching local authority boundaries. They are designed to bring together at local level the public, private, and community and voluntary sectors, allowing different perspectives and initiatives to support each other and to work more effectively for the building of cohesive social and economic infrastructure.

The primary conduit for the operation of the LSP's will be through the context of the LAAs. The LAA includes a series of mandatory aims and proposed outcomes derived from a multi-agency

assessment of priorities within each area; the LSP will have responsibility for identifying the progress of its proposals through the identification of key issues for the LAA and their delivery.

The voluntary and community sector has been identified by government as a key player in the effective delivery of local priorities.

Defining empowerment

The Department for Communities and Local Government gives its definition of community empowerment criteria using the following indicators (An Action Plan for Community Empowerment: Building on Success: CLG 2007):

- Public bodies recognise the value of empowerment both as a process, and in delivering more effective decisions;
- Public bodies have the skills, support and local knowledge to include empowerment in their everyday work;
- Local people are equipped with the tools and confidence to come together and find their own solutions to shared challenges;
- Local communities have opportunities to take more control over the services that make a difference to their lives;
- A framework is created to enable service providers and local people to work together to improve the lives of everyone, and;
- Active citizenship is fostered through greater rights for people to participate, matched by well understood responsibilities towards their community.

Government seeks through the LSP model to enact partnerships for delivery which offer a choice agenda and the effective personal tailoring of services. The aim is to contribute toward a number of outcomes including increased perceptions of the ability to influence behaviour in local areas.

Throughout this case study the attempt has been made to address what are perceived to be the fundamental matters arising from the potential for effective networks allowing empowerment to flourish. Through analysing the role of voluntary and community representation within partnership working we hope to assess ways in which the application of empowerment rhetoric can become a practical reality for people, advancing the creation of a genuine spirit of civic involvement and democratic vigour.



REPORT ONE

An assessment of the value added to the LAA process through the involvement of the voluntary and community sector

Summary

The Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM) has commissioned this research into the scope of voluntary and community sector (VCS) involvement in the LAA process. The context of this research is national government's agenda for change, as seen through the 2006 Local Government White Paper and, most recently, the review of sub-national economic development and regeneration (SNR).

These indicate major structural changes at regional and local level, and bring a more enhanced role for the wider third sector.

To rise to the challenges that the changes bring, the VCS and the wider third sector will need to position itself within the new regional arrangements. This research has found there are three distinct areas where value is added, and the VCS will need to position itself carefully during the transition period (of the new regional arrangements) to be able to play a key role:

- **Strategy**

Helping to shape regional strategies and policies to ensure regional arrangements fully engage the third sector.

- **Advocacy**

The VCS and wider third sector have important voices in discussions with government nationally and with local authorities and public bodies within the region on a range of issues that affect different groups within the region.

- **Delivery**

The VCS and wider third sector have expertise and linkages formed through constituencies to deliver a range of activities and outcomes (some of which may be income generating). Both could also challenge delivery in order to improve outcomes for particular groups.

This report is the result of 'conversations' with twelve LSPs and LAA co-ordinators across the West Midlands. The overall conclusion from findings is that there is involvement and inclusion within the detailed LAA process, and all places had strengthened this involvement as core to their Sustainable Community Strategies (SCS) and to their LAAs which will form the delivery end of the SCS.

To play a full role within both regional and local arrangements, regional partners will need to provide support which will further empower the VCS by helping to strengthen its focus as a strategist, to play this sharper role effectively.

The 12 conversations came up with the following headings for a framework for regional partner support:

a. Strategy

- Support to influence decision-making, strategy and policy, developments.
- Support to provide a role in regional accountability.
- Support for partners to understand the diversity of the VCS and the unique perspective it brings which needs to be harvested and recognised by the region and at local level.

b. Commissioning

Support to increase the ability of VCS to compete in the opening-up of commissioning processes.

c. Information/Briefings on 'what works'

Regional support to share practice and provide help lines and clinics across the region to encourage better practice, particularly in complex areas, e.g. drugs and alcohol abuse. Additional areas such as helpful practice in general inclusion and engagement and developing strong neighbourhood level approaches would be helpful.

Discussions with GOWM and RAWM have distilled the broad recommendations into specific actions set within a clear framework.

The full framework and details of the recommendations and action plan, summarised opposite, are on page 18.



Summary of recommendations

Recommendation A	BUILDING CAPACITY
Capacity-building programme to strengthen and improve the effectiveness of the VCS and wider third sector, public sector and elected members in the knowledge, skills and expertise needed to improve partnership engagement and working to encourage more robust LAA delivery.	
Recommendation B	STRENGTHENING GOVERNANCE
Improve and increase understanding of accountability, scrutiny and governance arrangements, to ensure clarity of the VCS and wider third sector roles and responsibilities within the LAA context.	
Recommendation C	CHANGING THE ROLE
For regional lead agencies to strengthen their message to other regional bodies and local partners on the changing role of the VCS at national, regional and local level – the perception of a more traditional VCS role has moved on!	
Recommendation D	WHAT WORKS
Sharing and disseminating good practice between partners and the imperative for partnerships to strengthen cross-sector work, brings opportunities to use existing exemplars and develop new areas such as commissioning. Beacon Councils could be used as local demonstrators in specific themes.	
Recommendation E	CHALLENGE
Challenge and critique are ways to trigger development and innovation. The VCS and wider third sector needs support to improve and further ‘grow’ skills in this area, in line with national government policy.	
Recommendation F	DIVERSITY
The VCS and wider third sector is not homogenous but a community of diverse organisations, from national charities to small community groups. Support should reflect the need to maintain this diversity (which makes the sector unique), but also recognise the different starting points.	

Overall, support needs to be accessible to all localities across the region, whether large metropolitan or smaller districts or two tier authorities. It may be that the diverse geography of the West Midlands region will mean that localities with similar, particular issues have more specific support as a group. The report summarises the twelve conversations and provides a clear forward agenda for regional partners which will strengthen and support the VCS and wider third sector’s involvement in the new regional and local landscape.

1. Introduction

This report provides a snapshot of the scope of current involvement of the VCS within the LAA process in this period leading up to its completion at the end of June 2008. The work focused on conversations with twelve LSP managers and LAA co-ordinators in twelve localities across the West Midlands. These localities provided a broad sample of large metropolitan, urban, rural, unitary and two-tier districts.

What came out of these conversations gives an indication of the potential for future involvement as the role of the VCS and wider third sector increases and develops, driven by the LAA and the wider infrastructure changes brought by the SNR (2007).

This work also indicates specific areas where more structured support could form a regional agenda which would add to building greater VCS and wider third sector capacity and a more influential strategic role within the changing landscape; where the roles of the Regional Development Agency (RDA) and local authorities will be key to regional decision-making, but stakeholders such as the wider third sector should also play a role in shaping those decisions.

2. Context

2.1 The national perspective

The 2007 Pre-Budget Report and Comprehensive Review, the Local Government White Paper 2006, the September 2007 guidance on negotiating LAAs, and the November 2007 Development of the New LAA Framework Operational Guidance indicate a new relationship between government and the wider third sector. This has been further developed in the Empowerment White Paper, published in July 2008.

The Local Government White Paper stated the government's ambition to create strong, safe and prosperous communities, and that this ambition would be at the core of the improvement agenda.

Local Area Agreements (LAAs) form the heart of the new 'contract' between Government and local authorities and partners, forming the delivery vehicle for Local Strategic Partnerships. What government (and local partners) seek as part of the new contractual relationship is improved delivery with increased focus on what should be delivered, how this should be delivered and who might deliver.

The government sees the role of the wider third sector as integral to each stage of the LAA process, from agreeing the 'up to 35' indicators¹ to target-setting and potentially being commissioned to deliver services. This demands a fundamental shift in the culture of wider third sector involvement and in some localities needs to include support to enable more increased involvement.

The LAA process provides the opportunity to accelerate third sector involvement. This report looks at what is already happening in the twelve LAAs contacted, in relation to involvement and the change culture process.

2.2 Regional perspective

The publication in 2007 of the SNR and subsequent consultation document indicates changes to the regional landscape, with an enhanced role for RDAs and increased devolvement of powers to local authorities. As part of these (developing) changes Advantage West Midlands, the Regional Development



Agency for the region, is already considering how best to focus funding support to the wider third sector, and the regional VCS infrastructure agency Regional Action West Midlands is considering the most effective way for them to support the wider third sector to increase regional involvement.

2.3 Local perspective

This report provides an overview of the role of the VCS within the 12 LSPs contacted, in terms of the LAA. The current position for LAAs is that they had agreed their indicators and were concentrating on target-setting. The next stage of disaggregating targets and moving towards delivery planning had begun in some localities, but in most was further down the line. Overall, every locality was clear about the fundamental shift in approach that would need to be worked to fully include, involve and build the capacity of the VCS, and some localities are further down the line than others, for example: Wolverhampton, Herefordshire, Coventry, Staffordshire and Dudley have a history of strong relationships with the VCS. In other localities, e.g. two tier areas like Staffordshire, they are piloting new approaches. All are basing their work on the voluntary sector COMPACT, existing infrastructure arrangements, but the LAA process has been the driving force for change. The LAA has opened up the possibilities of involvement and every locality contacted had used the third sector as part of the LAA process.

3. Methodology

The method used for this work was a series of ‘conversations’ with LSP managers – and where they were not available, the LAA co-ordinators or performance officers. These were structured conversations based on four headline questions, each with a sub-set of more probing queries. The conversations were conducted by telephone rather than face-to-face due to the tight timescale. It should be noted that everyone was keen to be part of this work and enthusiastic about the changes that bring the VCS and wider third sector more closely into the LAA process. The headline questions were used to provide structure to a ‘conversation’ about involvement. Some of the conversation areas were ambitious and due to the timing of this work many localities had not yet started target-setting in any depth.

4. Findings

The conversations aimed to find out which of the stronger indicators¹ were chosen and the level of involvement the VCS has in target-setting, delivery, planning, commissioning and whether the VCS sits at the decision-making table as an equal partner. The final question was a 'wish list' of support that could be provided by regional partners.

The following detail from the conversations provides a summary of the conversations and gives clarity to potential future regional support.

4.1 Birmingham

Indicators and involvement

Indicators, including NIs 1, 4 and 5, and in addition local indicators where NI 7 is likely to feature as a local priority. VCS involvement in the process has included preparing a business case for the local indicator (NI 7), and involvement at executive board level. Birmingham's voluntary and community sector has played a strong role, have ownership and will lead on target-setting and developing delivery plans for the stronger NIs. Performance will be measured through the LSP's performance management framework. Under-performance will be scrutinised and accountability will be to the executive board.

Much is dependant on the success of the incoming 'neighbourhood board', due to be in place by June. This approach will measure performance across the indicators at constituency level. The board will oversee neighbourhood management at local level, where priorities are currently being set.

Birmingham's voluntary and community sector will lead in ensuring local neighbourhood involvement and overseeing performance of stronger NIs at local level.

Delivery

The 'how' of delivery is currently under discussion. Birmingham has an ambition to improve the role of the VCS and wider third sector as a deliverers, the changing local neighbourhood approach aims to increase local delivery, and consideration of this will be improvement in

development of the refreshed Sustainable Community Strategy. It is recognised that more work must be done to build on the historical VCS links with the 'safer' theme towards a more strategic cross-thematic involvement. A refreshed COMPACT will increase this ambition and improve the profile of the VCS and wider third sector as a strategic and delivery body.

Agreement on how targets will be delivered will include commissioning generally and VCS and wider third sector delivery in particular – goodwill exists amongst LSP/LAA partners to bring in more sector delivery at local/neighbourhood level.

Capacity

A successful lottery bid enables Birmingham's voluntary and community sector to increase its capacity and its evidence base as well as its ability to manage performance. A mapping exercise will determine the width and depth of the sector and help to create measures for stronger indicators.

Potential regional support

- Additional finance to build capacity.
- Work at regional level with named partners to encourage greater recognition of the VCS and wider third sector as a key player, both at strategic and delivery end.
- Regional support to help the sector itself understand scrutiny and accountability.

4.2 Coventry

Indicators and involvement

The process of choosing indicators has involved the VCS, particularly within discussion on cohesion and involvement issues, such as NI 35 (extremism) and NI 4 (influencing decisions). Through the LSP Coventry has a strong history of partnership cross-cutting work and equality which is seen as a core principle.

Target-setting (at this point) was not fully started, but the intention is to involve the VCS. Because they use a cross-cutting approach, themes include the VCS and wider third sector at a strategic level (e.g. economy theme chaired by

Director of Coventry Voluntary Action). Specific involvement will follow a process of action-planning based on theme-action-target-delivery planning. VCS involvement will be focused in specific thematic areas, e.g. worklessness.

Delivery and commissioning

Coventry will build on its existing commissioning process in the community safety theme. They are currently looking at a local public service model and will include VCS involvement but this is still in its early days. The aim is to move to commission-based LAA delivery plans.

Capacity

There is extensive VCS involvement because of the LAA and work on the sustainable community strategy and commissioning, so more capacity support is needed. Currently consultation on participatory budgeting could provide increase input at neighbourhood level.

Potential regional support

- The demand on the VCS is increasing and regional support could help in addressing issues of efficiency and value for money – provide help for the VCS to become more business like.
- Regional level support is needed to drive an understanding of new and changed roles for all named partners and of how a duty to involve the VCS will play out.

4.3 Dudley

Indicators and involvement

NI 7 – increasing environment for a thriving third sector has been included as a specific request from the VCS. Strong VCS involvement in the LSP has resulted in them having the largest number of seats on the board (four plus chair).

Developing stronger communities is seen to be the core of LSP work and also the LAA where they have agreed principles about increasing engagement further. Dudley's ambition is to strengthen VCS and wider third sector involvement; they intend to

raise their game by increasing the opportunities for them to compete for commissions.

Dudley wants to build on the current involvement of VCS and wider third sector members across all theme groups, which will increase their cross-cutting approach.

Delivery

They are currently working on action-planning as they progress to the 'how' stage of delivery. To ensure sector involvement, Dudley has secured funds to support maximum involvement of previous support to the sector in earlier LAAs.

They see the route to commissioning larger numbers of VCS and wider third sector bodies as a major process. Consultancy work has been commissioned to look at accessing, influencing and enabling the decision-making processes of fund holders. This is to determine how more can be commissioned out to other organisations, e.g. the vcs. The report and its recommendations will be considered by the LSP Board and a community engagement plan will result which will align commissioning plans of all partners, e.g. police and the Primary Care Trusts (PCT). Partners will be required to formally sign-up. This will become the core of Dudley's change process, the aim of which is to deliver LAA targets in a different way.

Potential regional support

- Regional support for smaller voluntary and community bodies (not the larger, well-established ones) to help them become more 'fit for purpose' in terms of LAA involvement.
- Work with regional partners to enable them to understand the diversity of the VCS and wider third sector.
- Regional support programme for partners in supporting VCS in the decision-making processes.

4.4 Herefordshire

Indicators and involvement

Chosen NIs: 1, 4, 6, 9. Hereford is currently developing its story of place. The chosen activity was a series of open workshops on NIs to explain how the process works.

Work on choosing their 35 indicators has been the focus of strong debate, particularly in the 'stronger' block. They have identified the need for strengthening leadership of this block, greater cultural consensus and partnership.

Their overall LSP model does not have a thematic approach, instead it is cross-cutting, using task and finish groups where and when necessary.

The LSP has a project manager to work with the VCS and wider third sector, where increased capacity has come through the Change Up programme and work at their infrastructure group.

Work with the VCS is evolving. The LAA has provided an opportunity for the sector to be central to the process, for example in decisions on funding but there needs to be different ways of working which should include an understanding of scrutiny and challenge.

Delivery

A commissioning model through existing partners and partnerships is already established. Guidance for commissioning is being set up via the COMPACT, and an 'alliance' with the wider third sector has been set up by the PCT to look at specific commissioning around health and well-being. If this works it will be used as a model.

Potential regional support

- Regional VCS and wider third sector managers and networks to share local good practice/what works to develop a more upbeat image of the sector.
- Regional support must ensure it has a truly regional reach and is not just about reaching into metropolitan districts.

4.5 Sandwell

Indicators and involvement

The LSP board has representation for the VCS and wider third sector in each thematic area and particularly strong representation in 'safer and stronger' theme which other areas could be modelled upon. Sandwell CVO is the 'named partner' for the LAA, and Sandwell Council is supporting the development of capacity within the organisation to enable specific input to the process (and beyond). They have designated a council officer to support this work with the aim of increasing third sector influence and empowerment and ensuring ownership of stronger targets, together with performance management.

Delivery

Enabling the VCS to compete in commissioning is seen as a key part of driving the delivery of the LAA. A commissioning model was established and funded through the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. 20% of commissions were delivered by the VCS and, building on this work, a group has been tasked with encouraging greater third sector involvement through commissioning.

A senior officer from the 'children and young people's' (C&YP) theme is champion for the third sector and the model specific to C&YP is one that is being considered for application in other areas.

Internally the LSP is looking at its priorities and, together with the VCS, is considering how funding and resources can be provided. The existing model of community empowerment, used through their network, is seen as a major asset together with their locality model of 'town teams' through which local VCS bodies can play an increasingly strong role.

Potential regional support

- Developing powerful regional case studies which demonstrate to partners the contribution the VCS makes to the quality of life across the region.
- Regional funding contracts with enough funding to skill the VCS to employ the best people.
- Regional training to upskill the VCS in the LAA and wider challenge process.

4.6 Staffordshire

Indicators and involvement

NIs: 4, 6, 7, 10, 21. The VCS has been involved in choosing indicators through the Staffordshire infrastructure body. The LSP thematic boards each ran workshops where all partners, including the VCS, participated. This two tier locality has five county-wide partnerships who all participated, together with the county council equalities advisor.

The VCS infrastructure body worked with the county performance/data officer in developing the targets under the 'stronger' theme. From 1 April, a 'safer and stronger communities' theme has been set up to include the county council and the district community safety teams with secondees from the fire and police services. They will jointly support work on the indicators associated with the 'stronger' theme.

Last year, Staffordshire County Council gave resources to the VCS infrastructure body to enable greater participation. Subsequently, a programme called *Bridging Third Sector Capacity* has been developed as a county-wide flagship programme.

Delivery

Stafford County Council aims to change the culture of delivery through the development of the VCS, encouraging them to compete to deliver LAA activity and enabling a more sustainable approach and move them away from short-term grant dependency. Neighbourhood management work is being rolled out and builds on their 'excellent' rated neighbourhood management pathfinder work. The new 'stronger communities' team will be responsible for driving forward this activity as part of the LAA. Their approach to commissioning is based on developing more innovative knowledgeable deliverers (such as in the VCS).

Potential regional support

- Run workshops and events to communicate a clear message about importance of the VCS to the new government agenda.

4.7 Stoke

Indicators and involvement

NI 4, plus anti-social behaviour indicators. The choices made reflect the need for the LSP to concentrate on vulnerable people. Stoke identified the need to improve the delivery and co-ordination of services to focus on vulnerable groups. The process of choosing the 35 NIs included four working sessions with the Community Empowerment Network (CEN) and four with the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) network.

The VCS is represented across all themes and there is a history of involvement.

Delivery

Stoke has five neighbourhoods and delivery planning will focus on vulnerable people within these neighbourhoods. Indicators will be used to focus on different vulnerable groups such as young people, older people, the disabled and the BME communities. The VCS will be involved in the process of identifying which targets (priorities and plans) should be agreed and how (and by whom) these will be delivered. From this they envisage a new shape to neighbourhood management.

Stoke is exploring a consortia-based delivery process, where several bodies jointly bid to be commissioned. A commissioning model, developed through the neighbourhood renewal initiative, briefed VCS bodies on amounts of earnings (VCS earnings pro-rata doubled through the delivery of activity associated with the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund).

Currently the process of what needs to be done to achieve LAA targets and who should deliver it is being considered. Discussions have taken place with the primary care trust and the police to consider their arrangements in the light of delivery of LAA targets.

Potential regional support

- A regional 'what works' programme offering help and advice to do things differently.
- Support for the VCS to learn how to challenge.

4.8 Solihull

Indicators, involvement and delivery

NIs: 7 and 6. Solihull is undergoing a change process with the establishment of an infrastructure organisation to provide support to the LAA and the development of a new sustainable community strategy.

The VCS body is new and needs to increase its strength. Building greater sector capacity is important as commissioning the delivery of the LAA is being considered, with joint commissioning across all partners providing potential opportunities for the sector. Greater rigour will be needed to develop a new integrated commissioning process. In particular, strong business cases will be necessary for consideration as a deliverer. The overall focus on outcomes will demand a different approach which will be more focused on achieving results, and the VCS will have to compete on merit.

Cohesion and VCS involvement are at the core of the LAA. The LSP is committed to supporting the increase in sector capacity and using commissioning as a way of accelerating change.

Potential regional support

- A regional programme to work with LSP/named partners to understand the diversity of the sector and to see this diversity as a major strength.
- A regional programme to support back office functions so voluntary and community organisations are not bogged down with paperwork. This will increase their effectiveness.

4.9 Shropshire

Indicators and involvement

Shropshire, as it changes to a unitary authority, has had a major 'push' on its work with the VCS. The recent establishment of a voluntary sector assembly and the appointment of an officer to support the sector is beginning to result in increased sector engagement. Work to map sector organisations is currently underway.

An event is planned to progress further the engagement of the VCS and equality partners in the LAA which will focus on the key areas of:

- Vulnerable communities;
- Affordable housing;
- Prosperous economy;
- The uniqueness of Shropshire and its environment.

The new organisational structure of the LSP will include the VCS in each thematic block. Further changes under unitary arrangements will include a director of neighbourhood services to oversee area-based working. This will create greater opportunity for increased VCS involvement.

Delivery

Although it is early days the LSP recognises it will be necessary for partners to learn to let go and deliver differently. The LAA is being developed in the context of Shropshire's new unitary status. The sector is developing, and this is being driven by an LAA need for involvement; this is a major task for the new assembly.

Potential regional support

- Information about what works in terms of involvement and empowerment.
- Support to encourage partners to let go in areas such as commissioning.

4.10 Walsall

Indicators and involvement

Indicators NIs: 7, 35, 36, 87, 15, 14. Decisions on the choice of NIs are based on an overall partnership approach; Walsall is looking to implement joint delivery. Negotiations with Government Office on NI 35 which have yet to be resolved have raised concerns about potential non-cooperation from the Muslim community – a major issue as sector involvement in the choice of indicators and levels of involvement has been high through the use of workshops, thematic sessions and consultations.

Delivery

The LSP has agreed to support the VCS by creating a single co-ordinating point through which to work together. Walsall Voluntary Action will take on an overarching role, the result being a more streamlined point of contact. Reorganisation of the LSP board will include the voluntary action body being at the board table. To enable maximum effectiveness, further support to build capacity will be needed; however, as yet there is no clarity on the specifics of this and how it will be resourced.

Potential regional support

- Support for good practice in commissioning.

4.11 Warwickshire

Indicators and involvement

NIs: 11, 14, 16, 33. The VCS is involved across the LSP in all themes and commissioning has been established as the key interest area of the VCS.

Delivery

Lottery funds have been secured to build the capacity of the sector. An infrastructure body has been formed which will lead on involvement and empowerment. The county gives a £500,000 grant to run the assembly so the body is able to support members to become involved. The county is anticipating that this body will become the key VCS structure to feed into the LSP/LAA process.

Neighbourhood level arrangements vary across the county. Locality arrangements are about to be approved but greater opportunities exist for sector involvement in local decision-making and potential delivery.

The county is mapping the impact of current commissioning and delivery by the VCS. The largest area of commissioning is adult social care. It is envisaged that the LAA will open up more such opportunities.

The sector will be partners on identifying and achieving actions/targets within the 'stronger communities' action plan.

Potential regional support

- Support on how to ensure effective sector involvement at neighbourhood level.
- Support to streamline and simplify working relationships with the VCS, keeping transparency and rigour and ensuring no duplication.
- Support to understand the location of different voluntary and community groups and who needs what support.

4.12 Wolverhampton

Indicators and involvement

The choice of NI 7 reflects the council's commitment to supporting the development of the VCS as core to their delivery. The sector was involved in this choice of indicator.

The LAA process has been developed by building on the neighbourhood-based approach where local plans could shape the choice of indicators and targets. Local data and local views have challenged the LSP across themes. The third sector forum has been as the centre of this process and as such has been the focus for consultation.

Delivery

The sector has secured lottery funds to further build capacity. It has additional resources through its role as lead on European action plans under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Lottery money will seek to replace this.

The commissioning through the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) is likely to be further adapted as the LSP looks at commissioning across all partners, the aim being to align partner processes and procedures.

A primary concern surrounding third sector commissioning is that only large voluntary and community bodies will have the capacity necessary to tender for work and small organisations will get left behind. This is perceived as a challenge to the LSP and the sector.

The LSP is keen to see how the sector could be commissioned in the working neighbourhoods

fund, progressing the LSP's ambition of the VCS becoming a major deliverer.

Potential regional support

- Regional partners need to develop support that translates to all localities (not just large metropolitan areas).
- Recognise the challenge for strategic partners in how and what they deliver.
- Support for better understanding of procurement and how to balance the delivery requirements of major strategic bodies with competences and abilities of small voluntary and community sector bodies.

5. Forward regional agenda

Government's review of sub-national economic development and regeneration (SNR) contains an ambition to maximise prosperity in all parts of England. It is about places developing their economies and working together to deliver a sustainable economic vision.

SNR brings with it a number of structural changes and reforms which will result in wider roles for RDAs and increased devolvement to local authorities. Within this changing landscape the VCS has the potential to increase its role as a regional stakeholder, having a say in the shaping of regional decision-making, and in the development of the regional strategy and its implementation plan.

Part of these changes will be to streamline funding arrangements to ensure clarity and to avoid duplication. The sector has an opportunity to play a strong role within these new arrangements, and the consultation on the SNR should provide an opportunity to respond with ideas of how it can add value to the new regional arrangements in both decision-making and delivery.

There are three distinct areas where value is added (listed below), and the VCS, and wider third sector, will need to position itself during the transition period of the new regional arrangements to be able to play a key role:

- **Strategy**

Helping to shape regional strategies and policies to ensure regional arrangements fully engage the sector.

- **Advocacy**

The sector has an important voice in discussions with government nationally and with local authorities and public bodies within the region on a range of issues that affect different groups within the region.

- **Delivery**

The sector has expertise and linkages formed through its constituency to deliver a range of activities and outcomes, some of which may be income generating. It could also challenge delivery processes in order to improve outcomes for particular groups.

Added value within the three areas of strategy, advocacy and delivery at regional level is reflected at a local level through LSP work and the LAA. The overall conclusion from findings is that there is involvement and inclusion within the detailed LAA process, and all places had strengthened this involvement as part of their sustainable community strategies (SCS).

In order to play a full role within both regional and local arrangements, regional partners will need to provide support which will further empower the VCS by helping to strengthen its focus and ability as a strategist.

The twelve conversations came up with the following potential agenda for regional partner support:

a. Strategy

Support to influence decision-making, strategy and policy developments.

- Partners need to be clear of the added value that the VCS brings at local and regional levels. Support should focus on work with partners at a regional level to clarify the specifics of this added value, particularly around issues such as the sector's role as a vehicle for representation. This might be done using a series of sector-led workshops, briefings or seminars.
- There is a need for a visible focal point to share issues on key regional issues which are reflected at local level, for example space needs to be created for VCS managers and chief executives to meet to debate regional policy and feed in to regional and local structures as a single coherent voice.
- There needs to be support to provide a role in regional accountability.
- There is a need to provide training or tools which would help the VCS develop the skills and confidence to critique and challenge strategy and policy decisions at regional and local levels.
- Support to enable partners to understand the diversity of the VCS and the unique perspective it brings which needs to be harvested and recognised at regional and local levels.
- Different groups make up the VCS and these need to be better understood by partners. This could be done using task and finish groups to

bring the voices of different communities of interest to the table, or support for regional 'task forces' using these groups to help shape policy and to be involved in delivery.

b. Commissioning

Support to increase the ability of the VCS to compete in the opening-up of commissioning processes.

- Support through a training programme on the specifics of joint commissioning.
- Facilitated support or clinics to work through developing business cases for specific areas of delivery.
- Facilitated support with regional and local partners to work through 'opening up' commissioning through integration, joining up and aligning processes; understanding what can be delivered and what is really needed to deliver differently.
- Regional 'back-office' support to help the VCS deliver services with less administrative burden. This would increase the focus on delivery, helping small third sector bodies to compete as a more equal partner.

c. Information/Briefings on what works

- Regional support, via help lines and clinics across the region, to encourage better practice, particularly in complex areas such as drugs and alcohol abuse. Additional support such as helpful practice in general inclusion and engagement and developing a strong neighbourhood level approach would be helpful.

Discussions with GOWM and RAWM have resulted in developing the main elements of the 'broad framework' into an immediate action plan, which will be woven into and broaden existing regional arrangements.

RECOMMENDATION	Action
<p>Building capacity a. There is a need for capacity building for the VCS, public sector, and elected members on engagement and effective working in partnerships to improve understanding, knowledge, skills and competencies in partnership working and LAA delivery.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Input to regional commissioning event; • Peer mentoring, skill transfer between and within sector; • Leadership in partnerships programme; • Strategic Health Authority and PCT commissioning event and commissioning framework; • Mapping of the sector; • Voluntary sector research centre (based in Birmingham, but this is a national initiative).
<p>Strengthening governance b. There is a need to improve VCS understanding of accountability and scrutiny functions in an LSP, both what is expected of them and what their role could be in scrutiny.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RAWM chair on Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership Board; • Communication and guidance on Comprehensive Area Assessment/Performance Management Framework and partnership governance; • Plans for a third sector skills council.
<p>Changing the role c. There is a need to explain the new role of the VCS in national policy, social enterprise and empowerment at regional, local and neighbourhood levels; moving appropriate organisations out of 'traditional' VCS roles.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership programme (see 'a' above); • Link to locality improvement plans.
<p>What works d. Identification and dissemination of good practice between partnerships; potential for action learning sets/peer support/etc. prospectus and guide to working across sectors in partnership.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bridges programme; • Action learning sets; • Learning 2 Deliver (L2D) papers; • Empowerment champions forum (see a above).
<p>Challenge e. Developing the 'challenge' role of the sector in line with the Community Empowerment White Paper and Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act at regional and local level.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of leadership partnerships.
<p>Diversity f. How is the diversity of the sector in partnerships at regional and local to maintained, expanded and promoted?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing the 'Routes 2 Opportunity' (R2O)2 emerging network and linking to regional networks; • Linking social enterprise into partnerships; • Developing a regional commissioning framework.

Support needs to be accessible to all localities across the region, whether large metropolitan areas, smaller districts or two tier authorities. It may be that the diverse geography of the West Midlands will mean that localities with similar issues have more specific support as a group.

The fast-paced changing agenda which demands greater sector involvement will need a programme that is itself fact-paced and highly focused on

both regional and local agendas. From this work, there is no doubt that, although progress has been made, there is still a long journey to be travelled. The support programme identified in this report will help to accelerate the pace and raise the game of the VCS and wider third sector as key regional and local players, recognised as such by wider partners and stakeholders, thus creating stronger communities across the region.





REPORT TWO

The voluntary and community sector perception of involvement in the development of government policy on devolving local decision-making between statutory and voluntary partnerships

Summary

The voluntary and community sector has been identified by the government as a key player in the effective delivery of local priorities.

A lack of joint partnership working between interested groups has been highlighted as a key reason for a failure to deliver effective change within local regeneration, public services and sustainable economic initiatives which benefit local communities.

The LSPs are non-statutory, multi-agency partnerships matching local authority boundaries. They are designed to bring together at local level the public, private and voluntary and community sectors, enabling those with different perspectives and initiatives to support each other and to work more effectively to build a cohesive social and economic infrastructure.

The primary conduit for the operation of the LSP's will be through the LAAs. LAAs include a series of mandatory aims and proposed outcomes derived from a multi-agency assessment of priorities within each area; the LSP will have responsibility for identifying the progress of its proposals through the identification of key issues for the LAA and their delivery.

1. Methodology

The methodology for the case studies was as follows:

- Desk based review of LAAs for the 14 areas covered by GOWM;
- Concentration on nine localities with a view to carrying out a more extensive study based on the size, urban or rural make up and nature (unitary, two-tier, metropolitan) of the Local Authority. Interviews took place with government office locality managers in order to ascertain an overview of the strength of VCS involvement in the development of the LAA in each of the nine areas.
- Based on the perception, held by GOWM, of the levels of influence by the VCS on LSPs and the LAA process it was decided that five areas would be covered by a case study approach; these are Stoke-on-Trent, Sandwell, Walsall, Wolverhampton and Worcestershire. Further interviews were convened with representatives of the LSPs in the areas selected in order to ascertain their feelings of satisfaction with the level of influence they feel they have had within the partnership and with the development of the LAA, and the general sense they had of their influence within the burgeoning strategic coalitions.

The authors hope that this methodology allows for the most comprehensive view possible, given the sample used, of recurring themes of interest at this early stage in the LAA process.

The study focused on two specific areas of research:

- a. The desk based research of LAAs in the 14 localities covered by GOWM, and
- b. Interviews with the locality managers in areas targeted for more intensive study to ascertain the potential for case study development in the subsequent stages.

As part of the initial desk based research a review was carried out of the 14 current and upcoming LAA's, which evidenced a commitment toward VCS engagement that was reinforced at all levels. Under the protocol issued for the

provision of the 'duty to involve' within the previous round of LAAs, a policy decision was made to commit to supporting VCS engagement. However, this mandatory provision has been excluded from the current round. All 14 areas have made a commitment toward the involvement of the sector in the language of their LAA; however, whether a local authority is unitary, metropolitan, urban or rural appears to influence the perception of the value of the contribution of the VCS to the production of local services.

Due to time constraints, further study in all areas that showed similarities in size, urban, rural, two-tier or metropolitan arrangements was not duplicated. Therefore, of the 14 areas covered by GOWM, 9 were selected for further study.

The next phase involved interviews with the locality managers responsible for GOWM's negotiations within each locality. The nine localities chosen were Walsall, Wolverhampton, Coventry, Worcestershire, Telford and Wrekin, Sandwell, Stoke on Trent, Staffordshire, and Birmingham. The focus of the interviews was the perception of Government Office of the sector's ability to negotiate and to lobby effectively within the LSP.

2. Objectives of the case study

The case study maps empowerment across the region in order to better understand the level of influence the VCS has in decision-making and pro-active partnership. The conclusions of the case study are based on locality leaders' perceptions of the effectiveness of VCS networking. These are supported by experiential accounts of VCS members in LSPs of their ability to deliver an effective programme for influence with public and private sector partners.

The case study has concentrated on the upcoming round of LAA's due to come into effect in all localities later this year. In particular, there has been a focus on the negotiations relating to those national indicators involving the promotion of the third sector and voluntary and community initiatives. The measurement for many of these indicators is a perception-based survey of communities, making the success or failure of their inclusion difficult to ascertain; nonetheless the success of the VCS in lobbying their partners for influence can be seen as an important representation of the status of the sector in their respective areas.

Gauging the strength of communication between different sections of the VCS in different areas was another consideration of the case study. Recognition of the strength of the VCS lobby within the LSP framework is critical to enabling influence. Although the LSP is a partnership, it was recognised in stage one of the study that weak communication and poor understanding of policy had hindered the ability of the VCS to articulate effectively their role within partnerships. Therefore the objectives of the case study were identified as follows:

- Through qualitative research explore perceptions of the VCS's level of influence on developing the upcoming round of LAA's from a statutory perspective and from first hand accounts of sector representatives on the LSP;
- Gain a perspective on the strength of networking and communication between the VCS in the each of the areas by understanding current approaches toward the promotion of the sector within localities;

- Assess the confidence of the VCS in its negotiations with other sectors and its understanding of the purpose of the LAA.

The overarching aim has been to understand the ‘map’ of VCS involvement using the parameters listed above, specifically to gain an insight into what was working or not prior to current negotiation, what is working or not within the current negotiations, and what possibilities are seen to be emerging for the future role of the sector within the LSP.

3. Sandwell case study

3.1 Introduction to Sandwell

Sandwell is a metropolitan borough made up of six towns: Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Tipton, Wednesbury and West Bromwich. It has a population of 287,600 (ONS 2005) and is culturally diverse (approximately 24.5% of the population is from black or minority ethnic groups). It is an old industrial area, which has been significantly affected by the decline of manufacturing jobs from the 1970s onwards.

Through the Sandwell Partnership, all public agencies are working with voluntary, community and business sector partners to maintain the pace of improvement in Sandwell. The new Local Area Agreement (LAA) is a means to further improve the quality of life and success of Sandwell people.

A key focus of Sandwell’s current LAA is:

“...establishing stronger relationships with local communities, communities of interest and the extensive networks that have been created in all our communities. Our Town Teams, our Community Empowerment Network and our LSP, networking with local communities and organisations, are creating a new potential to engage local networks and local citizens in the transformation of the borough.” (page 7: current LAA round)

There appears to have been a recent restructuring of the ‘town team’ model which was established in six towns with neighbourhood renewal funding; however, the demise of NRF has promoted the local authority and LSP to reduce the resources available to the town teams. The Sandwell Strategic Partnership (SSP) is still focusing on the town team model for the progression of its aims within the current LAA, although the withdrawal of the NRF and the weakness of the existing VCS network has influenced the extent to which VCS capacity can be increased.

Two representatives of the VCS on the LSP were interviewed to ascertain a sector perspective on the borough. These were Dot Gospel, former chair of Sandwell Community Empowerment Network, and Sandwell Council of Voluntary Organisations.

3.2 Dot Gospel

Members of the SCEN network continue to meet on an informal basis, but the SCEN as a formal entity no longer exists. However, Dot insists that the networks and initiatives they were part of continue to flourish. Aside from her work within CEN, Dot is an active tenants and residents campaigner as part of SCIPS (Sandwell Communication Information & Participation Service – formerly Sandwell Tenants & Residents Federation) and a trained tenant inspector for the award-winning Sandwell Homes. She sits on the LSP board.

3.3 Sandwell Council for Voluntary Organisations

SCVO aims to bring together local voluntary and community groups to promote and develop the effectiveness of local voluntary action. SCVO provides a wide range of services, information, advice and support to the VCS and acts as a channel for local groups to voice their opinions on local, regional and national policy issues. Its wider remit involves affecting policy debates and attempting to bring about positive change in Sandwell to achieve sustainable economic regeneration. It is represented on the LSP by two members.

3.4 Government Office perspective

Sandwell is maintaining a strong commitment toward the language of community empowerment within the borough in its current LAA ambitions. The upcoming LAA (due to be signed off later this year) includes a community strategy focus. The VCS has been consulted on the new sustainable community strategy which is built around eight priorities. For each priority a combination of public, private and VCS negotiations have defined a set of criteria for success which will be judged over a three year period and will be set against the following themes:

- Engaging communities, listening to them and responding accordingly;
- Promoting equality;
- Promoting cohesion;
- Promoting sustainable development.

The upcoming LAA has adopted the sustainable community strategy focus, and consultation

with the VCS has resulted in a three year strategy to improve the eight priorities for the area. These priorities will be integrated into a series of 'qualitative tests' for the success of community engagement within the LAA.

Sandwell's locality manager acknowledges the relatively weak VCS and CEN. There has been a focus on funding individual projects and initiatives with little regard for building wider capacity and a structure which could support potential for engagement, influence and service delivery.

The locality manager points to the strength of the town team model as a structure that can play a significant role in Sandwell.

Upcoming provisional indicator priorities include NI 1 (the percentage of people who believe people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area). The current round of indicator negotiations has implied that the LSP would like NI 4 (the percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality) to be included. In addition, GOWM is asking for the inclusion of NI5 (overall/general satisfaction with the area) but, while the LSP acknowledges a weakness in overall satisfaction with the area, it believes it would detract from NI4 to include both.

The Community Engagement Strategy was approved by the LSP board in February 2008. GOWM has engaged a neighbourhood renewal advisor to review the current engagement structure and recommend how improved working based on the town team model can be implemented.

A community cohesion strategy has also been endorsed by the LSP. This follows work undertaken by the Institute of Community Cohesion in 2006 and aims to engage all aspects of the partnership (including the VCS) in identifying and addressing cohesion issues.

3.5 VCS representation within the LSP

The VCS is reported as being well represented on the LSP board in Sandwell. However, there is evidence that a unified sector voice has yet to be found. The breakdown of the CEN in the borough has led to a restructuring of vehicles for the delivery of objectives with variable results.

All five representatives for the sector on the partnership board reported feeling that the sector had suffered from lacking a combined vision of a VCS agenda, although all reported that this had improved in recent meetings.

The failure of the CEN to effectively represent the concerns of the VCS is seen as leaving a legacy of ineffectiveness. Dot Gospel perceives the failures in communication in Sandwell to be exacerbated by a lack of engagement opportunities after the closure of the CEN. Dot makes the point that information-sharing is poor between members of the partnership, and the VCS is undermined by a historical lack of accountability over financial spending within the sector.

SCVO representatives highlighted encouragement from the LSP for further engagement, recognising the potential for the sector. Sandwell is said to have good databases and has achieved success in some thematic areas; however, this is in contrast to a general frustration from the partnership at the lack of organisation of the sector. The mechanism for constructive engagement with the partnership in Sandwell is accepted by SCVO as currently not fit-for-purpose.

The LAA in Sandwell is considered to be led by the statutory sector; it has been implied that proposals put forward at partnership meetings have not considered the VCS and that there has been a strained relationship with the local authority. This is understood to relate to the lack of inter-sector communication leading to an ambiguous perception of the potential of the VCS amongst local authority representatives. Organisations are reported by SCVO as giving anecdotal evidence at meetings rather than solid evidence, leading to mistrust of the effectiveness of the sector.

There is a feeling that the LAA is generally favourable toward the VCS, although it is acknowledged that without constructive dialogue within the LSP the sector will be sidelined in terms of delivery.

There is a feeling that Sandwell's national indicators were selected for their focus on community safety rather than community development. This is viewed as an example of the difference in delivery expectations of the statutory and the voluntary and community sectors.

3.6 Summary

Recurring themes amongst the interviews were a lack of communication between different arms of the VCS in Sandwell, and the fractiousness of the sector as a whole. The failure of the CEN and the subsequent focus on the town team model has contributed to an apparent lack of focus on the wider coordination of the sector which is likely to have repercussions for the delivery of VCS priorities within the LAA.

Although the VCS is well represented in number within the LSP framework the apparent lack of communication and accountability are undermining the potential for a reputable VCS within the borough. If the dominance of the public and private sectors perceived by interviewees is a reflection of a disparate VCS unable to communicate with credibility a programme for sustainable delivery, this is unlikely to be amended without significant improvement in networking. However, the signs that recent meetings have seen an improvement in coordinating the agendas of the sector are positive.

4. Stoke-on-Trent case study

4.1 Introduction

At the time of the 2001 Census the population of the city of Stoke was recorded as 240,636 making the city the 44th largest local authority area in England and Wales. With 25.8 persons per hectare the city was the 63rd most densely populated area in England and Wales.

Stoke on Trent's LAA contains the following aim:

“To build a strong community with equal opportunities for all, where diversity is recognised and celebrated providing the opportunity for people to take part in community life and influence the regeneration of their neighbourhoods and the city.”

A 'mini LAA' has been set up to encourage local people to have a greater voice over the local delivery of services and decision making. The CEN was influential with regard to this process, aiming to ensure the voice of local people was heard. This was prior to its closure on 31 March 2008.

4.2 Interviews with voluntary and community sector representatives

Semi-structured interviews were held with three people from the VCS including one with a representative from the CEN which was held the day before it closed. It is worth noting that it was an emotive time for the people within the CEN as they felt they had achieved a considerable amount of good will from local organisations and they were concerned about the effects of its closure. Representatives from the faith forum and the BME forum were also interviewed as part of the process.

4.3 Government Office perspective

Stoke is currently drafting an LAA which will be ratified later this year. Early discussions place priority on aspects of cohesion such as highlighting the perceptions of BME communities and socially excluded groups. This is reflected in the decision of Stoke to provisionally include NI 4 (percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions within their community) as an indicator.

The influence of a variety of VCS representatives including neighbourhood management units, BME fora and Stoke Consortium of Infrastructure Organisations (SCIO) appears to be having an impact upon LAA negotiations as NI 2 (percentage of people who feel they belong to their neighbourhood) is also primed for inclusion.

The capacity of the community organisations in Stoke is variable and the slow progress of the CEN establishing itself as the principle representative of the VCS is contrasted by a strong presence of neighbourhood management units and the BME network organisations (especially the BME Forum).

- The BME forum has a significant impact in an area with a BME population lower than the national average. However, there is a risk that these single issue organisations are unrepresentative of the wider VCS and this is being considered.
- The locality manager estimates that the CEN has contact with 200 groups out of approximately 2000 in the area.
- The BME fora have been seen to 'punch above their weight' in local discussions.
- SCIO has been given a £1,000,000 annual budget and has begun a number of capacity building projects in Stoke and it is hoped that these will impact on the wider VCS. It is also hoped that SCIO will procure greater project funding for the VCS.

4.4 VCS representation within the LSP

All interviewees spoke of massive changes taking place within the VCS. This was not just linked to the closure of the CEN but encompassed the sector as a whole having to adapt ways of working in light of changes to funding criteria, processes which are clearly linked to the negotiations around the LAA.

The CEN ceased to operate in its present form on 31st March 2008 and funding (through the NRF) was no longer available. EPIC (a Residential Social Landlord) had been contracted to lead the CEN for two years.

The CEN had 407 members and worked alongside Voluntary Action Stoke on Trent,

representatives from the faith and BME fora to hold four events with the VCS around the LAA process. A key event was held looking at the 'safe and stronger communities' pillar of the LAA; this was a useful forum for people to express their views on particular issues. As well as NI 4 being chosen a number of targets around anti social behaviour were being considered.

There appear to be some tensions around the CEN's relationship with SCIO. The CEN was not a member of SCIO; they explained that they had tried to join but did not meet the criteria for membership. The aim of SCIO is 'to create an effective and influential third sector in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent'. There appears to be some duplication of roles within the various organisations and after 31 March the CEN will be adopted by the local authority whilst its future role and direction are explored.

Discussions are being held with the PCT about lessons learnt around their commissioning model and whether this could be used as a model for the future. The commissioning model used by the Supporting People programme will also be assessed for its potential to support the VCS. There appears to be a move towards a consortia approach to the work of the CEN.

The other two groups which have had a major influence in shaping the LAA are the BME forum and the faith forum. One criticism emerging from the CEN was that certain fora were not inclusive of all members within a community. This was highlighted by CEN work to support groups with lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender (LGBT) members. A consortia approach may be preferable as organisations could choose to join a number of groups depending upon their beliefs and in doing so increase their opportunities to be heard. Potentially this could involve SCIO, the BME forum and the faith forum. Another group for consideration is the Voluntary Sector Chief Officers Group (VSCOG) where many of the chief officers meet regularly.

There were democratically elected LSP representatives on all pillars. The CEN introduced a feedback form to enable good free flow of information. Information was also posted on the website.

There are four places held by the VCS on the executive board of the LSP; these are held by the chair of the CEN, a voluntary sector representative, and a representative from the faith and BME fora. The CEN and the fora have been involved in empowerment activities such as the administration of a small grants scheme where application forms were designed by people from communities. There appears to have been fragmented VCS representation on the theme groups.

The BME forum representative spoke of a real commitment to the consultation and involvement of the sector in the LAA process. The LSP has been particularly supportive of the development of a strong and influential BME forum.

The development of neighborhood management units has the potential to be a really positive model of empowering people within communities.

The area implementation teams (AIT) have democratically elected community representatives, a process facilitated by the CEN. They expressed concern around supporting and enabling community members to have a meaningful voice in negotiations and decision making.

This is an area where the VCS will need support to gain and enhance its skills around its involvement in decision-making fora and partnerships. Many people have experience of influencing within their own organisations but find their influence within large bureaucratic partnerships unclear and sometimes outweighed by statutory representation.

5. Walsall case study

5.1 Introduction

Walsall is a metropolitan borough encompassing a population of 254,500 (ONS, 2006).

Following a period of decline, the population has gradually increased since 2001 which the local authority attributes toward a rise in the prosperity of the region.

Walsall's upcoming LAA maintains a strong commitment to multi-agency working. The focus on the sustainable communities strategy (SCS) and the vision for its achievement through a range of partners (including the VCS) are a key part of establishing the vision over the next three years.

The upcoming LAA also focuses on community involvement in the success of the SCS and the need for consultation with key players in different sectors of Walsall.

Walsall Voluntary Action (WVA) and Walsall Community Empowerment Network (CEN) are both present on the LSP and assist with the success of the Walsall Local Neighbourhood Partnership, a 'mini LSP' designed to sit under the umbrella of the Strategic Partnership Board. However, both appear to lack influence.

The nine local neighbourhood partnerships (LNPs) promised in the current LAA are in operation and are growing stronger in terms of influence. The LNP's have also established community action sub-groups in order to create a forum for local concerns.

At present, LAA block groups and theme groups are represented by a single VCS representative within the LSP.

There is currently discussion regarding the inclusion of indicator NI 7 (environment for a thriving third sector) although, with little evidence of successful engagement with the sector at executive level, GOWM is doubtful of the potential for improvement. Indicators on influencing decisions in the local area and participation in sport are also being discussed.

5.2 Walsall Community Empowerment Network (CEN)

The CEN has traditionally had a primary role in promoting community cohesion and capacity-building. Walsall CEN underwent a process of change during the latter part of 2005 which included changing its accountable body from Walsall Voluntary Action to Age Concern. The CEN held an action planning event in May 2006 to redefine their priorities and produced a revised plan, outlining the contribution they could make to LAA outcomes and the development areas for the board and its members. A review of associated activity is due in 2008.

The morning on which interviews for this case study were scheduled to take place it was announced that Walsall CEN had failed to secure local partnership funding and consequently would have an uncertain position within Walsall's community engagement processes. These circumstances should be considered when reading this section of the report; however, it should also be noted that many of the concerns raised by the CEN reflected those raised elsewhere.

Walsall CEN has acknowledged that it had little input into the LAA process and felt that the VCS in general had only a minor role in the development of indicators and priorities.

5.3 Walsall Voluntary Action (WVA)

Walsall VA is set to become the main focus for the VCS within Walsall in light of the events taking place in the CEN. They currently contribute to the outcomes of the community plan and LAA by supporting the sector with start-up and developmental assistance, training and research, fundraising and legal advice, and constitutional services. There is a perceived new mood amongst the LSP and a proposal to invite Walsall VA to be represented at board level within the partnership. A desire has also been expressed within the LSP for Walsall VA to become the key agency for the sector.

5.4 Government Office perspective

Walsall locality team is concerned with the lack of influence of the VCS within the LSP. The influence of both the Walsall VA and the CEN is undermined

by poor networking and a lack of clear leadership from the LSP over the direction of the sector.

The locality team recently appointed a neighbourhood renewal advisor to assess VCS and CEN influence. The advisor put in place an action plan, based on the successful Wolverhampton model, which it appears has not been followed since the commissioning has ended.

The locality team stresses the involvement of a single representative (Walsall VA) for the VCS within block groups and theme groups negotiating the LAA.

A community champion was identified by the local authority but has been absent with long term sickness.

The locality team has highlighted the recent attempt from a multi-sector forum to give direction to the CEN, but with no positive responses.

Current negotiations over the LAA by the LSP are felt not to be systematic by the locality team and the poor structuring of the VCS mechanism means it is unable to contribute anything positive to the process.

5.5 VCS representation within the LSP

Interviews were conducted with leading members of both Walsall VA and the Walsall CEN. There was consensus that the VCS has historically been poorly represented within the partnership. This has resulted in a lack of influence over sections of neighbourhood renewal and the lack of coordination of the sector to effectively lobby for greater influence.

Both the CEN and Walsall VA acknowledge a credibility gap between the VCS and other partners on the strategic board, although Walsall VA is more optimistic about the future, believing that the partnership is increasingly ready to devolve aspects of the LAA delivery to a broader range of agencies.

The LSP is currently negotiating a process, instigated by Walsall VA to improve networking and infrastructure within the area. This will include a debate over the allocation of resources and strategic priorities for the partnership.

There is consensus on Walsall local authority's traditionally poor level of engagement with the VCS. Criticism about this still exists; for example, the view that local fora were created without any real understanding of the principles of engagement. The overly bureaucratic nature of the local authority has been a common criticism at all stages of research in this locality.

Walsall VA has expressed a desire to improve the quality of networking at all levels and suggests that, more out of desperation than will, the local authority is accepting of this principle. Walsall CEN disputed this, claiming that the local authority offered little more than lip-service toward the sector and saw no evidence of a desire to change the status quo.

The CEN confirmed that the neighbourhood renewal advisor appointed by Government Office to suggest improvements to existing arrangements had given good advice which was not implemented. It should be noted that, in spite of Walsall VA's optimism about the local authority's change of attitude, they acknowledged there was a lack of internal coherence leading to a feeling that they developed priorities without having considered how to measure outcomes and impact in a coordinated way.

The funding from CEN is to be redirected toward the LNP. The view of the CEN is that it placed itself in conflict with the LNP by virtue of its support for community fora. The CEN is critical of the LNP process, expressing a wish to make a greater contribution, but feeling restrained by too many meetings. The opinion of both the CEN and Walsall VA is that a dominant culture of bureaucracy within Walsall has been endemic at this point in the partnership.

5.6 Summary

Although gaining a qualitative assessment of Walsall is made difficult by the contrast in perspectives of the ascendant Walsall VA and the soon to be defunct Walsall CEN, there are a number of recurrent themes which concur with the inferences of Government Office locality leaders.

LAA rhetoric appears to encourage the VCS to take an active role in the delivery of activity and

outcomes. Despite an apparent change in attitude towards an increased commitment to involving the VCS, a recognition by Walsall VA that this is more out of desperation than a genuine will to devolve responsibility shows that the spectre of past failures inspired by an overreaching bureaucracy at statutory level should remain a matter of concern.

Walsall is reported at all stages of the case study as showing a consistently below average performance in harnessing, or even understanding, the potential benefits of a successful and thriving third sector. The lack of willingness by local authority to devolve responsibility for the delivery of the LAA has affected the performance of the VCS in the area and has adversely affected the potential for the renewal of ideas and accountability through the local neighbourhood partnership system.

Any potential for improvement in Walsall can only be judged by the success of the upcoming stages of the partnership's development. The increasingly prominent role given to Walsall VA combined with the redirection of funding from the CEN toward the LNP has created a sense of optimism within the sector; the next stage must be for the sector to promote a structure of effective networking and sustainable delivery for the partnership's programme.

6. Wolverhampton case study

6.1 Introduction

Wolverhampton achieved city status in 2001 and the LSP in the city believes that since then it has improved substantially as a place to live.

In 2006-07 the Audit Commission placed Wolverhampton 19th out of 388 areas in terms of improvement in all performance indicators. The LSP believes that local public service organisations with partners in the voluntary, community and private sectors have worked hard to address many of the social and economic concerns raised by the decline of industry across the Black Country as a whole. It sees its LAA as forming part of a wider focus to address the major challenges still faced within Wolverhampton.

Wolverhampton's current population stands at 236,600, a fall of almost 5% (12,000 residents) since 1991. This was the highest decrease in the West Midlands region. Despite the reduction in population, the city remains one of the most densely populated places in the country, with nearly 9,000 residents per square mile.

6.2 Upcoming LAA negotiations

Wolverhampton's upcoming LAA is due to come into effect later this year and appears to maintain its commitment to the involvement of the community sector and plans to continue to create strong networks for engagement through the upcoming LAA process.

The partnership board has agreed what it calls a 'focused casual approach' towards its LAA; its priority is to ensure that the agreement is developed using the current framework of community engagement with additional one off events to consolidate stronger relationships with the wider third sector.

The delivery of the LAA through partnership with the community sector is a key aspect of delivery as well as a route to establishing measures of success.

NLPs in Wolverhampton have drawn up action plans in order to underpin the

sustainable communities strategy for the region; in turn these will guide the LAA process on representation from the sector.

The VCS currently has four members on the LSP and one member on the executive board. Under the current agreement for indicators for the upcoming round of LAA's NI 7 (creating an environment for a thriving third sector) is included.

Interviews in Wolverhampton revolved around three representatives from Wolverhampton's VCS, all of whom are members of the partnership board: Wolverhampton Network Consortium, Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council and The Haven, an umbrella organisation supporting women's issues in the city.

6.3 Wolverhampton Network Consortium

Wolverhampton Network Consortium (WNC) is a company set up and run by the people within Wolverhampton to provide community engagement and accountability for local voluntary and community organisations. Its primary objective is to support the development of geographic networks across Wolverhampton. It has a seat within the local partnership as well as on the VCS Strategy Group, an organisation designed to consolidate the ability and coordination of the VCS in Wolverhampton.

6.4 Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council

Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council is a support mechanism for voluntary and community groups within the city. It has played an important part in the development of the Wolverhampton Compact and sits on the LSP where it has asked for greater infrastructure support between the VCS members in order to allay fears over commissioning models for the sector.

6.5 The Haven and Women Organising in Wolverhampton

The Haven is an organisation supporting women and children who suffer domestic violence. The Haven engages with local organisations on policies and strategies for countering the rise in domestic violence, as well as a person-centred

approach toward the rehabilitation of those who have suffered abuse at the hands of others. Also in attendance was a representative of Women Organising in Wolverhampton (WOW), a city-wide women's network that supports women's involvement in decision-making processes and disseminates information relating to the promotion of women's issues. Although WOW had lost its representative on the LSP, the issues raised by the decision to reduce the influence of specialist groups within partnerships became a key issue in analysing Wolverhampton VCS's position.

6.6 Government Office perspective

The locality manager feels that the VCS in Wolverhampton is strong in all areas and sees its representation on the LSP as positive and influential with good communications networks.

The locality manager reports that the VCS in Wolverhampton has utilised the higher education forums, theme groups and neighbourhood networks very well, that unlike many urban areas the fractiousness of community networks is not evident.

BME representation is strong amongst community networks.

The locality manager's opinion is that Wolverhampton is an exemplar in terms of VCS and wider third sector involvement in its programme.

6.7 VCS representation within the LSP

The differing perspectives offered in the case study of Wolverhampton represent the differing approaches toward the partnership by the groups interviewed. The three organisations interviewed were critical of aspects of the process within the partnership structure and were surprised with the suggestion that their area was seen as an exemplar by Government Office.

The ability of Wolverhampton's VCS to network effectively and to lobby for an advanced role for the sector is strong. The reform of the CEN into a more effective multi-agency programme and the high representation in comparison with other areas is a testament to the success of the VCS in the city.

The skill of the VCS to articulate its concerns within the partnership has been questioned. It has been suggested that the sector's knowledge of complex policy and thematic issues in order to influence is inadequate in comparison with the ability of other sectors and that this leads to a reduction of sector influence across the partnership agenda.

Wolverhampton local authority is said by the Wolverhampton Network Consortium to have a good relationship with the sector, taking on board a partnership role where funding proposals for the sector have been considered and communication is generally good.

There is a need to promote the potential of the VCS as a delivery vehicle for the LAA; interviews with both Wolverhampton Network Consortium and the Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council suggest a conflict between the local authority and the VCS over the designation of the LAA responsibilities and the corresponding administration of funds.

The local authority has expressed the view that, as elected representatives they have greater authority than the VCS. This suggests a continued imbalance in the relationship between the local authority and the VCS is inevitable.

The role of special interest groups is a particular point of conflict within Wolverhampton. As a special interest group, The Haven felt that their strategic position had been undermined by the current structure, pointing to the fact that they had lost a representative for women's issues on the LSP board. Their concern is for the future of BME, gender minorities and faith groups whose interests may be swallowed up in the desire to create a more streamlined representation of the sector.

While acknowledging this concern, Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council proposes that the collective view of the VCS is geared towards a wider equalities base and suggests effective lobbying of marginalised groups is better represented by groups who did not assume a singular role for their representation within the partnership.

6.8 Summary

Wolverhampton is advancing a structure and a network which promotes an increasingly influential VCS within its LSP. Innovative and progressive ideas for strengthening of the sector include the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy Group, which utilises executive representation for members of the LSP sitting on its board, and being held to account by an extensive network of voluntary and community organisations. It is this type of tangible recognition of the value of self-reflection, combined with an attempt to coordinate delivery in a way which is accountable to the strategy of the LSP and the wider third sector that places Wolverhampton ahead of other areas included in this case study.

However there are concerns raised from within the sector particularly around the potential marginalisation of special interest groups. A clearer definition of what 'empowerment' means for specific rather than generic groupings may be required if future partnerships are to be rewarding for all involved.

There are also criticisms of the local authority's perception of the sector and a concern that non VCS partners had more powerful voices within most blocks of the LAA. However, the infrastructure that exists within Wolverhampton has the greatest potential to enable success for LAA provision compared with any other area covered within this case study. Concerns raised should be seen in the context of a functioning model of engagement, where the peripheries of policy matters can be concentrated on without the consideration of the fundamental differences in approach and organisation that are the hallmark of several of the other case studies shown.

7. Worcestershire

7.1 Introduction to Worcestershire

The County of Worcestershire is located in the heart of England. It comprises six districts: Bromsgrove, Malvern Hills, Redditch, Worcester City, Wychavon and Wyre Forest. There are 161 town and parish councils and parish meetings in the county, although the urban areas of Bromsgrove, Kidderminster, Redditch and Worcester are largely unparished.

The population of Worcestershire is expected to increase by about 38,000 (or 7%) by 2026 (ONS, 2004-based projections) to approximately 590,000. This compares with an estimated increase of about 10% in England over the same time period. As is the case nationally, the most significant population growth in Worcestershire will be in the older age groups.

7.2 Interviews with voluntary and community sector representatives

A number of conversations and a semi structured interview were held with a variety of people who are involved in the consultations and negotiations around the LAA. This included local authority staff at county and district level, infrastructure organisations including Worcester Volunteer Bureau and Bromsgrove and Redditch Network (BARN). It was not possible to interview several stakeholders due to their workload at this time.

7.3 Government Office perspective

The upcoming LAA maintains the commitment to partnership arrangements with the VCS and states that the sector will have the opportunity to influence every one of the new LAA priorities. It describes the VCS in Worcestershire as “a golden thread, which will run through the delivery of the new LAA”.

The upcoming LAA states over 2,700 voluntary and community organisations operate in Worcestershire, with an annual income of £365 million and assets worth in the region of £2.3 billion. The sector employs over 4,500 people and utilises in excess of 54,000 volunteers.

The upcoming LAA will place an emphasis upon the VCS in achieving of public service agreement

indicators relating to the strengthening of community initiatives and policies which directly affect the development of the third sector.

The LAA also contains a section on community cohesion with a statement of intent as follows: ‘the active involvement of communities of place or interest, in improving the quality of life is critical to achieving the best outcomes in civil renewal and neighbourhood regeneration. Community cohesion can help tackle both social exclusion and the deprivation faced by marginalised groups. The VCS in Worcestershire has a key role in promoting and developing this involvement’.

The LAA contains a commitment towards community engagement. It highlights a particular role for the VCS in offering a voice toward minority communities and warns of potential marginalisation without effective partnership between public agencies and the third sector. The consolidation of the Worcestershire Compact is cited as the principle motor for this part of the agreement.

The proposition is for Community First, a VCS infrastructure organisation that supports voluntary and community groups in Hereford and Worcester, to represent the sector in promoting a cohesive approach towards building an empowerment network.

The locality manager’s assessment of empowerment networks within Worcestershire is positive but highlights the proposed review of grant funding for the VCS in Worcestershire as a potential catalyst for variable results in the satisfaction of the VCS. Also highlighted is Worcestershire’s strategic funding review and a potentially strong focus for the role of the VCS within the LSP.

Criticism of the capacity of perception surveys to assess indicator priorities which promote the expansion of the third sector has been a theme in negotiations between GOWM and Worcestershire LSP. The LSP is unwilling to allocate potential reward targets to indicators which are subjective, in spite of suggestions from Government Office and the VCS.

The ‘stronger, safer communities’ element of the LAA was prioritised at partnership group

meetings and the inclusion of a strong statement of intent for the involvement of the VCS in the delivery of the LAA has been agreed as a cross-cutting priority for the GO and the LSP.

The locality manager's opinion of the VCS in Worcestershire is positive, stating that its representation on the executive branch of the LSP is testament to its strength of organisation and influence.

7.4 VCS representation within the LSP

As with many other areas across the West Midlands, there is a huge amount of change and uncertainty within the sector around future funding and sustainability. The infrastructure organisations are facing their own funding uncertainties which in turn will affect the level of support they can offer to other voluntary and community organisations.

There are four seats for the VCS on the Worcestershire partnership board. These are currently held by a representative of Worcestershire Association of Voluntary Organisations in Community Care (WAVOCC), a representative from the Race Equality Council (REC), a representative from the Bishop of Worcester, and a representative from CALC (Parish Councils). The board is a very large partnership group (upwards of forty members) and mainly comprises members of statutory organisations.

Although the environment can appear somewhat intimidating, one member did comment that they had made a direct request that the board look at the VCS representation on the various LSP thematic groups across the county. This was embraced as an action to be reported at the following meeting.

There does appear to be a rather fragmented approach to VCS representation at theme group level. Ensuring a sector voice is heard is a key concern as it is the county LSP theme groups who will set the indicators.

Within Bromsgrove LSP the 'children and young people' theme group is chaired by a voluntary sector representative from a charity working with youth homelessness. The chief executive of Community First

is the representative of the VCS on the 'engaging Worcestershire' steering group of the Worcestershire partnership. This person was selected by the chair. As this steering group is the main driver for the LAA process there is tremendous pressure to ensure there is a free flow of information from the sector both to and from this group.

There have been numerous discussions on setting targets for the LAA; the sector has felt frustrated by the LSP's reluctance to include indicators which are subjective. NI 4 has not been included.

The 'engaging Worcestershire' steering group has achieved a considerable amount of work around the development of the Compact. Work on dispute resolution has been carried out and also work to assess the impact of the Compact.

Funding has been given to the Worcestershire Infrastructure Consortium for three years to look at 'engagement and representation' across the sector as a whole. This will include some initial mapping of current practice within the sector around engagement and representation.

A potential stumbling block could be the county's expectation for the VCS to work more closely in partnerships and consortia. This is a process which takes time to develop and mature. Whilst there has been an active approach by the VCS to the new round of grants, there are many voluntary and community organisations who would have benefitted from more time to develop stronger partnerships particularly to support strategic grants. This has the potential to alienate smaller organisations and puts additional pressure on infrastructure organisations that are themselves facing potential funding cuts.

Appendix 1

Places contacted:

Birmingham
Coventry
Dudley
Herefordshire
Sandwell
Solihull
Staffordshire
Stoke
Shropshire
Walsall
Warwickshire
Wolverhampton
Worcestershire

Appendix 2

Summary of the National Indicators referenced throughout the report

NI 1: % of people who believe people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area.

NI 2: % of people who feel that they belong to their neighbourhood.

NI 4: % of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality.

NI 5: Overall/general satisfaction with local area.

NI 6: Participation in regular volunteering.

NI 7: Environment for a thriving third sector.

NI 9: Use of public libraries.

NI 10: Visits to museums and galleries.

NI 11: Engagement in the arts.

NI 14: Avoidable contact: the average number of customer contacts per resolved request.

NI 15: Serious violent crime rate.

NI 16: Serious acquisitive crime rate.

NI 21: Dealing with local concerns about anti-social behaviour and crime by the local council and Police.

NI 33: Arson incidents.

NI 35: Building resilience to violent extremism.

NI 36: Protection against terrorist attack.

NI 87: Secondary school persistent absence rate.





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