

Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy 2006-2011

Consultation Responses

The draft strategy was launched at the Warwickshire Compact annual meeting on 7 November 2005. This was well attended by both public sector and voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations. In order to comply with Compact guidelines, consultation responses were invited until the end of January 2006. The draft strategy was sent to all Compact signatories and, via the Councils for Voluntary Service, it was made available to all community groups. It was also posted on the County Council's website.

Respondents were invited to reply direct, or via their local CVS, who organised a series of workshops around the County, open to all their affiliated groups. These workshops were attended by myself and Tim Willis (Social Services) to recognise the link between the Strategy and the Social Services review of contracting.

Only two individual responses were received, but summaries of the comments made at the workshops were collated and comments were also received from Warwick and Nuneaton and Bedworth district councils. Respondents were asked to comment on six questions. For the purposes of this report, I have attempted to summarise and synthesise the comments received to the questions in the following sections. These are mainly individual comments, but some were made by more than one respondent. I have tried to make it clear where there were a number of comments of a similar kind or where there was particular strength of feeling.

1. The basis of the Strategy and the principles suggested for underpinning the relationship between the Council and the VCS (Sections 4 and 5)

Respondents were generally supportive of the draft strategy. They thought its production was timely and covered a range of areas that were in need of addressing

It was felt that the Council's modernisation process should address the need to clarify the type of services it requires at a corporate level, given the different requirements of directorates, and their new configuration. Also, it was felt that Local Area Agreements would provide new opportunities to work with the VCS and involve LSPs more effectively.

There was a general acknowledgement that we need to get other public sector bodies on board if this strategy is to be effective, particularly district councils and health trusts. The difficulty in doing this at a time when many public services were going through a process of organisational change was recognised. There is very strong support from Warwick DC to be fully involved in taking forward the strategy and its action plan and using it as a framework for all Councils to meet their obligations under the Warwickshire Compact

2. Contracting for service delivery (Section 6.1)

There was general support that a fundamental review of contracting/funding is necessary, as this would provide more clarity and more opportunities for the whole sector and allow new providers to come forward. The sector accepts that it cannot be treated as special case but the rules need to be clear. We should make clear statements on issues such as - our market strategy; the issue of full cost recovery of overheads; inflation proofing; provision for set-up costs and appropriate phasing of payments; and a commitment for regular review and monitoring of contracts.

The main point here was a widespread concern that our tendering and contracting processes should recognise the value that locally delivered services add to community capacity and cohesion. There is a concern that the need to achieve best value and the expertise and economies of scale enjoyed by large national providers will drive out local ones and destroy this capacity. This relates particularly to the social care market and whilst most of this (e.g. home care and residential care) has mostly not been provided by local groups, there are areas of the market where we need to consider these concerns carefully.

Various suggestions were made about how we could help local providers compete successfully including – the provision of training on how to tender effectively; allowing scope for natural evolution of a service so there is time to adjust; ensuring that full costs are identified and budgeted for; that documentation is kept as simple as possible; review tendering limits so they are not too high; that continuity of care and the need for choice from a mixed market are part of the selection criteria.

The move towards 3-5 year contracts/service level agreements was widely supported as offering more stability for VCS organisations and better continuity of provision. There was strong support for the move to more standard documentation and that this should be kept as simple as possible. There were concerns about possible increases in bureaucracy, but it was thought there was scope to reduce it in some areas, e.g. unnecessary invoicing requirements and standardised payment periods

It was felt that there should be better but not more contract monitoring. There should be consistency in monitoring standards, which needs to be agreed with the VCS and be appropriate. Where contracts/projects are multi-funded it is suggested that monitoring should be undertaken only once, on behalf of all the funders. Suggestions were also made about involving the user perspective more in monitoring, so it is not just between the commissioner and the service provider.

A comment was made that the draft strategy focuses too much on contracting and not enough on partnership working. Collaboration and partnership takes time to develop and if the environment is too competitive this might not be possible. Another comment was that we should ensure that our focus is not just on those (minority of) VCS organisations that contract with the Council – we need to develop our relationship with the sector as a whole.

There was support for the provision of small one-off grants such as the Community Development Fund to continue and that these should remain accessible and simple. It was thought that more could be done to standardise forms and make connections with funding available from others such as District Councils [which is already].

3. Proposals for supporting the infrastructure of the VCS (Section 6.2)

Respondents were mainly smaller community organisations affiliated to Council's for Voluntary Service, who are the key infrastructure organisations. It was acknowledged that the VCS is very diverse and wide-ranging and that the needs of national VCS organisations, or nationally supported organisations are very different from those of stand-alone local organisations and that even locally groups involved in delivering services have greater support needs than grass roots community groups

There was general agreement with the proposal in the draft strategy for the County Council and the Coventry and Warwickshire Infrastructure Consortium to work together to review the concept of core funding and the shape of the infrastructure in accordance with the ChangeUp principles adopted by Government.

The community organisations were keen to ensure that this process would not result in a loss of local focus, or that the work of organisations like CVS and volunteer centres would refocus on the needs of a few larger organisations at the cost of grass-roots groups

One suggestion was that as many VCS organisations struggle with a lack of infrastructure, there could be economies of scale in establishing a single back office infrastructure provider to support the sector as a whole

There were lots of comments about core funding, which as suggested above is to be reviewed. Some of the smaller organisations see this as something that should be extended more widely to give them greater security and sustainability. Others acknowledged that it did not serve anyone well and that such funding needed to relate more clearly to an agreed level of service.

4. How we might improve communications and consultation with the sector (Section 6.3)

There was good support for the concept of streamlining communication by reducing the duplication of newsletters and making stronger links between what the Council and the VCS publish.

The development of the Community Information database held by the County Council and the County Council website was strongly supported, although there were concerns about one big database being too remote and inflexible. It was suggested that whatever we do all the public agencies need to buy into it or things will continue to develop separately

Similar alternatives were suggested such as an e-mail register of interested groups linked to a specific VCS website and there was support for the County Council's customer call centre being trained up to guide callers to VCS infrastructure organisations and services

The continuing role of CVS as a communication conduit was supported as was the development of community forums of various kinds, but it was felt we need better ways of communicating with small organisations to bring them in the loop. Nearly all organisations attending the meetings were able to confirm that they now have their own access, or access through members of their group, to the internet and e-mail.

This now becomes a realistic option for fast and effective communication with the sector. However there were some concerns about us becoming over-reliant on web-based communication – mainly older people’s representatives

It was felt that good consultation with the VCS was vital and at present we do not always involve those who need to be involved, either direct or through intermediaries such as the CVS. It was felt that we should do more to give feedback on consultation, with more detail and explanation on whether ideas were accepted or not and why. Other points included the need to resource consultation meetings and the need to develop strong relationships through individuals – high staff turnover in some areas was a real problem for the sector.

5. How we can work more effectively with the sector to ensure good governance (Section 6.4)

The need to review the role of councillors nominated to serve on VCS management bodies was supported. Suggestions included - whether they might become observers rather than members; whether the council needed to be involved in the governance of the voluntary organisations it supports; whether CVS could take on this role and; it would be helpful if councillors have experience of working in the voluntary sector

We need to look beyond our relationships with groups and look more at how we can promote volunteering. We should start this in the schools and nurture it as a lifetime activity. “Younger” volunteers are needed and it would be a positive step for the Council to develop its employee volunteering approach – can we promote the opportunity for skilled Council staff to support the governance of voluntary organisations in a private capacity

6. General comments not covered by the above

The action plan is too good but is too ambitious and needs to be adjusted

There was support for setting up a standing joint forum with the VCS. The involvement of VCS representatives in partnerships requires the rethinking of organisational arrangements due to time constraints with less traditional committee type arrangements; if there is to be true partnership the VCS needs to be more involved in internal management - e.g. SIN and O&S committees

We should do more to encourage the development of user-led services and the involvement of the VCS in the design of service specifications from the start

As well as respecting the independence of the sector we should recognise its different character – its resources, organisation, pace and cohesion are different.

We should explore the scope for providing facilities without charge if there is no cost involved

John Lyons
2 February 2006