

Women's Resource Centre

Response

Principles of Representation consultation

12 February 2008

About the Women's Resource Centre

The Women's Resource Centre (WRC) is a charity which supports women's organisations to be more effective and sustainable. We provide training, information, resources and one-to-one support on a range of organisational development issues. We also lobby decision makers on behalf of the women's not-for-profit sector for improved representation and funding.

Our members work in a wide range of fields including violence against women, employment, education, rights and equality, the criminal justice system and the environment. They deliver services to and campaign on behalf of some of the most marginalised communities of women.

There are over ten thousand people working or volunteering for our members who support almost half a million individuals each year.

Women's Resource Centre

General Comments

"The Government wants the best local partnership working with the third sector to be the rule not the exception, particularly through Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs)." (Page 4, consultation document)

This is an admirable goal, which we fully support. However, without adequate financial and other resourcing support, VCS will simply not be able to work effectively in partnership with others on their local LSP. We know from our work with the women's sector, a historically underfunded and undervalued part of the third sector, just how difficult it can be for groups to engage with their LSP. We would support any additional guidance for local authorities from CLG that specifically encourages local bodies and their partners to effectively resource the third sector to be mentioned in these guidance notes, to create stronger arguments for the third sector in their discussions with local authorities about funding for engagement at a local level.

Capacity:

Lack of resources for the VCS is a key factor in lack of representation on LSPs, particularly for small and marginalised groups like women's organisations. While there are many good ideas in this document, the single issue that will make the biggest difference to third sector participation in LSPs is capacity and resourcing. We fully support the need for meaningful discussions to happen locally to ensure greater third sector representation, and how to resource this.

Our good practice recommendation that we make at WRC is to pay for the VCS's time and expertise. This can be for responding to consultations / attending meetings / sitting on forums / filling in questionnaires, or whatever else they do to input their expertise and time into helping develop local priorities and strategies.

Good practice example: Payment for VCS time and expertise

WRC has been running a policy forum for the women's sector for the last 4 years. Women's organisations from different equalities groups and areas of work are invited to join the forum. It is a space where WRC can learn about the key issues and priorities of women's organisations and a chance to find out what is happening 'on the ground', and members can exchange information and learn from us and each other. In acknowledgement of this vital expert input and time (as well as the practicalities of small organisations arranging cover to attend meetings) we offer a payment for participation in meetings, as well as for travel and childcare expenses. As a result women's organisations know that they are valued and have a genuine opportunity to engage and influence at a policy level. We have had feedback from members saying that they really value this contribution. One member said it allowed her to cover the cost of the helpline for one shift, to help enable her to attend.

Payment for the VCS would help to level the playing field with other statutory partners (who are no doubt being paid for contributing), would send a clear message that the expertise,

Women's Resource Centre

experience and time given by the VCS is valued, and support consistent representation. We would recommend any strategies developed for funding include this principle of paying for VCS contribution within its' budget.

The Accountability principle:

While this principle seems fairly straight-forward, there is some unpacking to do, and some further discussion on the points below would be appreciated:

- b) ensure the wider third sector understands its responsibilities to its representatives;
- c) put into place reporting mechanisms that support the flow of information without creating unnecessary burdens;
- d) make arrangements that enable all third sector groups to participate as fully as possible;

For b), there needs to be an explicit acknowledgement of capacity to input.

Some unpacking of c) and d) would be really helpful, perhaps a range of examples of how third sector groups are able to feed in their expertise and experience without having to either read huge amounts of paper, or decipher lots of jargon, or negotiate the layers of an established and bureaucratic network. A commitment to accessible language, a range of ways to input that understand the constraints of the VCS, and a range of accessible entry points into the structure is essential, if the local network is going to achieve a truly diverse range of voices in their local LSP. This work needs to be done with the local authority and their partners to achieve a culture change of accessibility to the VCS.

In addition, engagement with the wider third sector needs to happen at early stages – not just when decisions have already been made.

The Equalities principle:

While we very much support the inclusion of Equalities as a key principle, there needs to be more exploration of what this actually means. In order to ensure any 'collective voice' of the VCS, there needs to be understanding of what real representation of 'voice' for all diverse local communities would look like.

The principle of Equality should specifically name and include a focus on women, disabled people, black and ethnic minority people, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, younger and older people, and people with a faith or religion. There also needs to be an acknowledgement and understanding that equalities are not separate blocks, so there must be some practical understanding of intersectionality. For example, having a representative from a BME group or a disability group does not automatically mean that women from that community are represented or have a voice.

Women's Resource Centre

Specialist equalities VCS are particularly important because they have expert knowledge of the communities they work with. For example, the women's sector have expertise on issues that local women face, on challenging discrimination against women, and are key to providing a voice for women in the local area, particularly the most marginalised and vulnerable women. Umbrella bodies often do not have the specialist knowledge on gender equality or meeting women's needs that women's organisations have, or that disability groups hold on local disabled people's needs, so it is essential that an equalities framework, that acknowledges specialist equalities groups and their expertise, is embedded across both the engagement and representation of the third sector. General community involvement and specialist representation are not the same, and both are not always appropriately mixed. People and groups need to be involved according to the strengths they bring, and there should be recognition of this within the Equalities principle.

We would support greater discussion and input into this section, as we believe that having a clear understanding of and commitment to Equalities in practice is key to ensuring a truly representative third sector.

Equalities monitoring is key, across the LSP and any proposed VCS network, to be able to see what needs to change, and to have a real picture of representation, and also to meet the requirements under the Gender Duty and other equalities duties. The document states that 'building the validity of the voice for the sector should be evidence-based' – this needs to include equalities monitoring, across the LSP and the network, which needs to be disaggregated across the equality strands, and it needs to be built into the framework of the LSP itself.

Good work by CLG has already been done on equalities, for example, in the guidance notes for local authorities in 'Preparing community strategies'.

*"The voluntary and community sectors also have an important role to play in improving the quality of life for local communities. For example, they are often best placed to reach and involve those sections of the community that the mainstream public sector may find hard to reach, and to access funding that is not available to public bodies. As with other partners, voluntary and community sector bodies remain responsible for decisions on how best to deploy their resources. *Specific efforts should be made to involve representatives from under-represented groups such as ethnic minorities, women, faith communities, older people, young people and children, and disabled people. Such groups need to be taken seriously as contributors to both the preparation and delivery of a community strategy.* Partnerships should, therefore, ensure that community and voluntary organisations are in a position to play a full and equal part in multi-agency partnerships on the same basis as statutory authorities and better resourced partners. (Preparing community strategies: government guidance to local authorities, 2001, Page 16, our italics)"*

It would be very useful to refer to this paragraph in these guidance notes for the VCS, as we would like to provide the third sector with stronger arguments for why local authorities and other LSP partners should value and effectively support specialist equalities groups' involvement.

Women's sector engagement with LSPs

WRC did a snapshot audit of LSPs across England found only 19 women's groups on LSPs. We identified 379 LSPs, and found membership data for 275 (72%) of these, in which there were 1064 voluntary and community sector representatives, with just 19 of these (1.8%) from women's organisations. This is despite the fact that the women's sector makes up 7% of the voluntary and community sector. This was part of Urban Forum, Oxfam and WRC's research on women's representation on LSPs, which found appallingly low levels of women on LSPs across England, especially in senior positions.

It's clear that women's organisations are not engaging with LSPs. Anecdotal evidence and findings from our research of why this is include:

- Lack of resources to engage – women's groups and other VCS should be financially supported to engage with LSPs, through this proposed local networking and through local grant funding.
- Lack of understanding by the VCS, including women's groups, of the importance of LSPs/LAAs in determining local priorities and local funding.
- The brick wall syndrome – lack of understanding, expertise or commitment to gender equality meant women's organisations are often struggling to raise issues impacting upon women that are not already identified as government targets. For example, issues from the research show that the women's issues raised and acted upon in LSPs are all government identified – such as DV, teenage pregnancy, etc. Yet women's organisations identify and meet the needs of women that are not currently part of the government agenda as well, and these need to be listened to locally. For example, Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) have only recently and for the first time had sexual violence as an NI target, so this has not picked up or resourced at a local level, despite the huge numbers of women who are sexually assaulted and need to access support services – and despite rape crisis centres attempting to raise this with their local CDRP.

Best practice ideas for local areas to support third sector involvement in their local LSP:

1. Create a local bursary scheme, to provide some payment for groups' expertise and time.
2. Work with funders of local groups to encourage them to provide funding for 'voice' and not just 'service delivery'. It could be written into funding agreements that groups will engage with their LSP, and resources provided for this.
3. Writing equalities into the framework by ensuring there are equalities mechanisms, such as fora, consultations, networks, etc, which feed into the LSP and other partnerships. There are examples of this happening in some parts of the country.

Women's Resource Centre

Good practice examples of inclusion of equalities work

From our research into LSPs with Urban Forum and Oxfam, WRC did an audit of women's organisations representation on LSPs or partnerships. We found a range of examples of how equalities groups were consulted or supported to engage with their LSP across the country:

- Furness community network has specific seats for "issue based representatives" for BME, Faith, LGBT and Disability.
- Bolton Vision, in developing their LAA, held focus groups for 'hard to reach' groups, including women.
- Kirklees Council has established an equalities network
- Lichfield Strategic Partnership has a community Fora, with Forums for youth, older people, disabilities and equalities.

Even though we would say best practice would include looking at all six equalities strands, these are great examples of starting to look creatively at incorporating equality into the work of the LSP.

4. Look at the time it takes to be a VCS representative on the LSP – are there any ways to lighten the load? Any other ways for groups to feed in and be heard, through this network, that is less time consuming?

Best Practice Example of innovative collective VCS work

One NGO group made up of 8 people was set up as a VCS hub, to input their expertise into the LSP and associated partnerships, the CDRP, the Childrens' Trust, the LAA and so on. They were sent papers and the group would respond between them. Also, they would rotate representation from this group across the different meetings, reducing the burden on any one person or service. The downside was having to read and make sense of a huge amount of paper, but this was one feasible model for VCS input and involvement, and an example of a different way of working with the VCS.

5. Commission community research, developed and led by local community groups with their service users, to ascertain a local picture of need.

Best practice example – women's organisations commissioned locally

As part of Stage two of research carried out by Urban Forum, Oxfam and WRC, women's groups have been commissioned locally in Sunderland and Thurrock to carry out research into women's representation and participation at a local level. This acknowledges the expertise these groups have in issues impacting upon women locally and in gender equality generally, and is a way of supporting local groups participate in research relevant to their work.

For more information, please contact:

Darlene Corry (policy officer)

Ph: 020 7324 3036/30

Email: darlene@wrc.org.uk