



Women's Resource Centre

Response to
The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's
**Local Strategic Partnerships:
Shaping their future**
March 2006

To: The LSP Consultation, The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister,
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INTRODUCTION

About the Women's Resource Centre

Women's Resource Centre (WRC) is a membership based second-tier, umbrella body providing infrastructure support, information and capacity building to voluntary and community organisations working to improve the status of women. The WRC is the only pan-London organisation providing infrastructure services specifically for the women's voluntary and community sector (VCS).

We currently have 250 members. The majority of members operate in Greater London, often working with some of the most marginalised communities in the capital. WRC members work within and across many fields including anti-racism, arts, sport, employment, health, violence against women, education, justice and human rights. Our members and the women they work with are diverse, spanning large to very small groups; disabled people; Turkish, Iranian, Latin American, African and Caribbean women; lesbians and bisexuals; survivors of rape, incest and domestic violence; women entrepreneurs, and many more. All our member groups are working to improve gender equality.

Comments on these proposals:

- There is nothing about how to implement the government's commitment to equalities in this proposal. We know that issues impacting upon women are not always recognised, at national or local level.
- The government wants a diverse representation from the voluntary and community sector (VCS) on LSPs - yet there is nothing in the proposals about resourcing the VCS to get involved.

- The move to commissioning could potentially mean the loss of incredible expertise held by the VCS, if the only local funding available changes the focus of what the organisations are working on from being needs-led to government priority driven.

KEY PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE

Role of LSPs

Does it make sense to cluster partnerships around these four areas? (See above)

- Safer and stronger communities;
- Children and young people;
- Healthier communities, and older people; and
- Economic development and enterprise.

What key issue do you work on? Does it fit neatly into one of those four blocks, or would it be generally accepted as a 'cross-cutting issue' for the community strategy? Do you have any ideas for how to make sustainable community strategies more inclusive to the diverse needs of a local area?

While we support the idea that LSPs become the 'partnership of partnerships', in order to stem the current confusion in many local areas of which partnership is responsible for what, we have some concerns about how local government will ensure that sustainable community strategies are inclusive enough to cover the diverse needs of a local area.

In particular, we are aware of a range of barriers to ensuring all women's voices are heard. We know from the experiences of some of our members about the barriers women's organisations face, in getting involved with their LSP. These barriers include not being listened to; huge amount of time commitment to participate; not having the issues they work with taken on board the community strategy, or even understood; and no understanding on the board of why a gendered analysis is important to ensure all needs are met, etc.

We would support an overarching equalities framework to be built into the Compact, and over LSP/LAA guidance, to ensure that VCS specialists working on equalities issues are able to participate in LSPs, are able to raise the issues they see facing local people, and are able to have these issues heard, and addressed within the sustainable community strategy. It is crucial that LSPs/LAAs are compact compliant in their work with the VCS.

“Local VCS organisations have a crucial role to play in the agenda for neighbourhood engagement and the empowerment of local people. The knowledge and expertise that local organisations and groups have should be built upon, in accordance with the Local Compact principles” (taken from NCVO response to this consultation).

The creation of thematic partnerships may opens up many opportunities for more VCS organisations to get involved in the strategic planning of the local area. Local VCOs very often have specialist knowledge on specific themes, as well as on local areas. Thematic partnerships, must allow for greater participation by more VCOs (NCVO response).

What model would you like to see your LSP develop into? What do you think are the implications of your LSP moving to a commissioning role? What safeguards

would it need to have in place, to ensure small, specialist VCS working on politically unpopular issues will continue to be funded?

We have some grave concerns about the main objective of the LSP being to 'set out the vision of an area and drive delivery of local services.' As stated, "LSPs are now moving towards a delivery co-ordination role (commissioning) through the development and delivery of their Local Area Agreements."

We have a number of concerns about the current government move towards a commissioning or buying services model of funding the VCS. This will significantly change the relationship between the government and the voluntary and community sector.

The move by government to commission or 'buy' services from the voluntary and community sector to then deliver public services, means a few different things. It means that the work available will now be decided by the government priorities, not based upon need. It means that small and specialist organisations are very likely to lose out on getting commissioning contracts, because, so far, the government is favouring large organisations that can take on big pieces of work. And it means that generic organisations, either government or voluntary and community sector organisations, will most likely end up delivering services for women, even though they do not have the expertise, experience and skills in delivering services tailored to meet women's needs.

We would argue that commissioning contracts should require those tendering to show how they meet their obligations under the disability, race and gender equality duties. (While the gender duty is not in place yet, it will be very soon, by 2007, so this will be a good opportunity for the government to start developing best practice now). This would go some way to ensuring that the needs of different equalities groups will still be met by those who are delivering public services on behalf of the government.

We would also argue that for the VCS to continue doing the valuable work it does, particularly in identifying and meeting need, and working from a needs-led perspective, that local government and LSPs/LAAs ensure that funding continue to be made available to the local VCS for needs-led projects, as well as commissioning. This is supported by LVSC research into VCS involvement in LAAs, which highlights that "considerable uncertainty remains for many over the continuation of small-grants funding and support for local VCS infrastructure which is particularly important for sustaining community-based organisations...As a matter of principle, even if additional resources for the VCS cannot be guaranteed, the introduction of a LAA should not result in a net loss of resources allocated to a borough's VCS. In particular, resources should be made available to support a small grants programme as part of future L:AA capacity-building initiatives" (LVSC, March 2006. *Voluntary Sector Involvement in the Development of Round 2 Local Area Agreements in London*)

Do you think inspectorate bodies collecting data for public bodies (like the Audit Commission and the Office for National Statistics) should disaggregate their data?

The consultation states that sustainable community strategies must be founded on a solid evidence base, such as Area Profiles (from the Audit Commission) and Neighbourhood Statistics (from the Office for National Statistics). "Where possible, surveys and area data should

disaggregate demographic and socio economic information into race, gender, disability, faith, age and sexual orientation."

We very much support an obligation on public bodies to disaggregate their data. As the gender duty will soon place an obligation on public bodies to meet the needs of women and men, they should be disaggregating data to see what those needs are. Disaggregating all equalities data will give a local area a true picture of whose needs are and are not being met.

What do you think would need to happen, to ensure local communities can actually be heard, and influence policies and decision making? How would you like to influence service delivery, and the allocation of resources? Is this your experience at present of working with your local authority / LSP?

"It is essential that mechanisms and activities at a neighbourhood level are linked effectively with decision-making and planning at the strategic local level... and ensuring that neighbourhoods can influence wider priorities in service delivery and the allocation of resources."

Governance of LSPs

One model proposed is the single delivery vehicle / service delivery partnership. This would then commission all the service delivery for one issue or area, like all housing services being delivered under one umbrella.

Is a single delivery vehicle something you would want to see?

The proposals say "LSP partners could choose to pull together some of their budgets and assets and contract with a single delivery vehicle to ensure joint delivery arrangements for particular issues."

How do you think specialist women's organisations delivering housing service, for example, would fare under this model? What would need to be in place, to ensure smaller, specialist voluntary organisations would not lose out in the commissioning process? We believe the government needs to ensure that those with specialist expertise, such as equalities VCS organisations, are able to apply on a level playing field for commissioning contracts. LSPs are the ideal place to ensure that specialist local expertise is not lost.

As stated before, requiring those tendering for commissioning contracts to show how they meet their obligations under the disability, race and gender equality duties would embed equalities into this work. Ensuring LSPs have a clear, embedded and overarching equalities framework would help ensure that the expertise held by specialist VCS groups is valued and listened to, when drawing up the priorities for the sustainable community strategy, and allocating local resources.

What would you need to be able to participate in your LSP? What resources would you need? What would the LSP need to do, to truly achieve community cohesion and tackle social exclusion? And do you see that the voluntary sector, with their expertise in identifying and meeting needs, rather than meeting government-driven

agendas, has a function on the LSP other than that of service deliverer, or representing the local community?

“As local authorities are the accountable bodies for the LAA, they play a vital role. However, turnout at local elections is poor, and it can be the case that many local VCOs have greater legitimacy amongst local communities than councillors do. The democratic mandate that the local authority has must be balanced with other local and community interests: a local authority cannot assume that it has the support of the local community, or that it alone is best able to identify issues or solutions” (NCVO response).

The government wants members of the LSP (ie, public, private and voluntary sector) to see their contribution "as a key way for them to achieve their goals, rather than an addition to their day job". If this is the case, you must resource partners to be able to fully participate. We cannot stress this enough - if you want people from such diverse sectors as public, private and voluntary to have equal footing around the table, then you must resource the VCS to get involved. Those groups that the government most wants representation from, ie, equalities groups and those who work with marginalised communities, are the very groups that will need your financial support to be able to participate as equal partners, in a meaningful way.

The government acknowledges that...

- LSPs need active representation of all different sectors, including the voluntary and community sector - both in their role as service providers and as representatives of the local community.
- "Representatives need to reflect all the community including a diverse range of minority voluntary and community sector interests. Their representation on both the board and the sub-thematic partnerships will be critical to ensuring LSPs can tackle the increasingly important challenge of achieving community cohesion and tackling social exclusion."

We would argue that the VCS plays three key roles – that of service provider, representatives of local community, and also community engagement and advocacy role. Our concern is that this last role, that of community advocate, is not lost in the drive for commissioning.

“It is vital that LSPs engage with the VCS in all of these roles – it is essential to bear in mind that the sector varies widely; that the roles it plays are not necessarily distinct (either within the sector or indeed within an organisation); and that VCS engagement is sought at all levels, both as an identifier and definer of needs, a potential deliverer of services and as a community representative” (NCVO response).

“While we welcome the government’s position regarding the representation of the VCS on LSPs, it is important to note that the VCS is not one homogenous grouping in an area, and thus there will be questions arising about whether the board is truly representative of the sector locally. LSPs must be required to ensure that there are mechanisms in place to allow every organisation in the partnership to be heard, and that all partners are able to hold the board to account; these mechanisms must be clear and well publicised. An LSP that feels ownership of the Local Compact and develops good working relationships with all partners is likely to go some way toward achieving this” (NCVO response).

Accountability of LSPs

What would your LSP need to have in place, to take on board commitment to marginalised issues? How can the voluntary sector be involved most effectively on the LSP on either the executive, or on the individual thematic partnerships?

Should partnership agreements be drawn up?

What role should local councillors and MPs play in LSPs?

How can LSPs promote effective community engagement and involvement, from all sections of the community in shaping local priorities and public services?

We believe that there should be a solid commitment to mainstreaming equalities from central government, which then must be taken up by all local bodies, including LSPs. Only this can ensure that different equalities issues are going to be addressed by all councils, rather than relying on individuals to have the knowledge and skills to address equalities issues effectively.

“WRC welcomes the proposal to place a statutory duty on public sector partners to cooperate with one another. We also believe that LSPs would benefit from a duty placed on the local authority to involve the VCS. This duty should be in accordance with Compact principles and should ensure that the diversity of the sector locally is taken into consideration” (NCVO response).

Capacity of LSPs

- LSPs are focused now on delivery of outcomes. They need more and new skills to do this, including input from private and VCS.
- LSPs need to draw more upon robust evidence of need.

WRC supports the need for LSPs to draw upon robust evidence of need. The VCS are the experts in identifying hidden need, and drawing this to the attention of government.

What learning or development do you feel is required by LSPs in order to deliver sustainable communities? What resources are needed to help LSPs develop?

The proposals highlight the *Firm Foundation* findings, a government report about capacity building, which shows the importance of investing in community development, and for local people to be able to influence policies - but there is no mention here of where the resources would come from, to support this.

We would support an investment of funds into supporting the VCS infrastructure, particularly those groups that have specialist equalities expertise and work with marginalised communities, as in our experience, infrastructure for these groups is not sustainably funded. Resourcing diverse VCO means supporting local people to input into policy development, and having a say at local level.

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