



**Regional Forum
Development Paper No. 1**

Positively Perceived

A 'snap-shot' of voluntary and community sector involvement in
Local Strategic Partnerships

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1 ~ Executive Summary

This report aims to provide a 'snap-shot' of how Local Strategic Partnerships in Yorkshire and the Humber perceive the input and involvement of the voluntary and community sector in their Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). As part of its ongoing commitment to supporting voluntary and community sector engagement, the Yorkshire and the Humber Regional Forum (Regional Forum) commissioned this report to gain an independent view of how this involvement is perceived.

This report outlines the views and comments of six different LSPs from around the region. It also aims to provide some examples of good practice or particularly effective examples of voluntary and community sector input, or where new ways of working with the sector have added value to the LSP.

In general, the input of the sector is extremely positively received with all partnerships saying that it has brought a different perspective, more closely aligned to what local people want and need. The voluntary and community sector has added breadth, created a different dynamic and ensured that the LSP and Community Strategy is more grounded in the reality of the local area. In all areas, voluntary and community sector involvement has influenced the local Community Strategy, including supporting direct input from local people.

The relationship between the LSP and voluntary and community sector representatives is good, with joint activities taking place across the region. Key to the relationship, however, are the individuals involved. Relationships between other public agencies and the local voluntary and community sector have also improved due to their membership of Local Strategic Partnerships.

Although perceptions of voluntary and community sector input are very positive, potential for improvement exists. This includes ensuring there are engagement structures and resources in all geographical areas, recognising the role of all partnerships in an area – not just the main board of the LSP, the need for voluntary and community sector representatives to be strategic on behalf of the

whole sector, and a need to ensure representatives have a positive and pro-active approach to partnership.

A number of changes and challenges for the sector were highlighted, particularly in relation to new activities which may bring the public sector more closely together but may not require current levels of voluntary and community sector involvement. The challenge for the sector to be able to evidence the necessity of its involvement is highlighted.

A number of suggestions were made for actions the Regional Forum could take to continue to enhance the input made by voluntary and community sector representatives. These are:

- ◆ To build on current activities - spreading good practice (including training) and sharing information about what activities other areas are undertaking; helping representatives to understand their role beyond their own organisation and assisting positive approaches to partnership working; supporting local voluntary and community sector infrastructure development; and production of information and communications about new Government guidance aimed at local voluntary and community sectors.
- ◆ To develop new areas of work – a ‘health check’ process about engagement for LSPs; a ‘mistakes’ and ‘things that didn’t work’ information exchange; ‘honest broker’ work with emerging voluntary and community sector fora and the sector more generally in areas that do not have Neighbourhood Renewal status.

The report also includes a number of conclusions for both LSPs and voluntary and community sector representatives to take on board:

- ◆ The key message is that the contribution made to date by the voluntary and community sector has had a real impact, has added value to the work of LPS, and is positively received. However the sector must move onto the next stage which will include ensuring strategic involvement and input.

- Capacity building of the sector is needed to ensure full engagement.
- The voluntary and community sector needs to show why its engagement and involvement will lead to improved public services.
- The sector needs to ensure its ongoing work and activities link to key local strategies and policies, in particular Community Strategies.
- Voluntary and community sector representatives need to be actively involved in the early stages of strategy development.
- Representatives need to be supported and encouraged to be involved at the appropriate LSP level where they can make the most difference.
- Voluntary and community sector representatives need to be able to think strategically and also ensure they are able to represent the sector and not just their own individual organisations and interests.
- The voluntary and community sector needs to acknowledge the importance of the role of individuals on LSPs.
- The voluntary and community sector also needs to acknowledge the role of community leaders and 'usual suspects' whilst supporting new representatives to come forward. Emphasis could be given to developing the message rather than the messenger.
- Processes need to be in place to enable the voluntary and community sectors to be honest when things are not working and to share these experiences.
- More work needs to be undertaken by Local Strategic Partnerships and public sector agencies around developing the potential service delivery role of the voluntary and community sector.

2 ~ Introduction

The Regional Forum is the strategic organisation for the voluntary and community sector in Yorkshire and the Humber. One of its key work areas is a project to support the voluntary and community sector to contribute to Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) throughout the region. The project combines practical support and regional representation at strategic policy level. It convenes a regional network for Community Empowerment Networks, offers training and events and facilitates sharing practice.

The Forum has become increasingly aware of the need to gain an independent view so that it can give feedback to Community Empowerment Networks and voluntary and community sector representatives on LSPs about how their contributions are perceived by LSPs themselves. The Forum commissioned a study to gauge the views and perceptions of LSP staff of voluntary and community sector engagement in their partnership.

How the study was conducted

Officers from six LSPs in the Yorkshire and Humber region were interviewed for the research:

Local Strategic Partnership	Participant
Barnsley One	John Woodside
Sheffield First	Nick Rousseau
Richmondshire Local Strategic Partnership	Rachel Bowles and Judith Bromfield (Voluntary and Community Sector Representative)
Kirklees Partnership	Alan Bruce and Sarah Laidlow-Moor

North East Lincolnshire Partnership

Jill Hetherington

East Riding Partnership

Pam Jackson

The LSPs were chosen to reflect the diversity of partnerships in the region – including urban and rural, Neighbourhood Renewal¹ and non Neighbourhood Renewal areas, and to ensure representation from all four sub regions.

The interviews were conducted on the basis that no comments would be attributed to any individual participant or LSP, except where examples of good practice were provided.

Each participant was asked about:

- The difference the involvement of the voluntary and community sector has made to the working of the LSP / delivery of the Community Strategy.
- The impact of voluntary and community sector engagement in the LSP.
- The relationship between the LSP support team and the voluntary and community sector representatives and ways the work of the LSP / support team could be better assisted.
- Changes to the way that voluntary and community sector representatives work or contribute to the LSP.
- Action the Regional Forum could take to develop the contribution that voluntary and community sector representatives can make to the LSP.
- Examples of good practice or contributions.
- Comments and views about what the future may hold in terms of voluntary and community sector engagement in LSPs.

¹ Neighbourhood Renewal is a Government strategy to reduce the disparity between deprived neighbourhoods and other neighbourhoods in the 88 most deprived local authority areas in England. There are 9 Neighbourhood Renewal Areas in the Yorkshire and Humber region; Barnsley, Bradford, Doncaster, Hull, Kirklees, Leeds, Rotherham, Sheffield, Wakefield.

- The relationship with voluntary and community sector representatives and other members of the LSP.
- Key messages that this report should contain.

3 ~ Apples and pears – A brief impression of the LSPs that took part in the research

This section aims to give an overview of the LSPs that took part in this ‘snap-shot’ research.

Each LSP was very different and the individual characteristics of each partnership were reflected in the details of their relationship with the local voluntary and community sector.

The structure or membership of the partnerships provides the clearest example of difference. Some partnerships have a small overall membership; with others it is larger. The number of voluntary and community sector representatives on the main board or committee also differs greatly, from one representative on one of the partnership boards through to 13 on another. Some representatives were members due to their employment within the sector, mainly the senior employee of the local Council for Voluntary Service. Others represented networks – for example the Community Empowerment Network² or geographically based community partnerships. Two LSPs had held recruitment processes for voluntary and community sector representatives.

The other areas of major difference are in the priorities, work or developmental stage of the LSP itself. For example:

- Two of the interviewed LSPs, Barnsley and Sheffield, are involved in Government appointed pilot Local Area Agreements³.

² Locally based networks of voluntary and community groups which provide formal routes for voluntary and community sector input into, and representation on, Local Strategic Partnerships.

³ Government initiative with respect to planning of local services and use of a number of central government funds. For more information:

http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_localgov/documents/page/odpm_locgov_029989.hcsp

- Most of the partnerships in this study are about to or are in the process of reviewing their Community Strategies and for some this will include reviewing the purpose, function and membership of the LSP.
- Some partnerships are looking at the Local Public Service Board⁴ notion.
- Although not the case with all, generally, developing the service delivery role of the voluntary and community sector was not something that the partnerships had looked at in detail or as a central aspect of their work.
- Some LSPs have been in existence for longer than others.

⁴ System for integration of public service planning. For more information:

http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_localgov/documents/page/odpm_localgov_025727.html

4 ~ The LSP perceptions

This section of the report outlines the views and comments of the LSP representatives interviewed.

The difference made by voluntary and community sector involvement and its impact

All those interviewed were asked to comment on the impact on their LSP and its membership of the voluntary and community sector representatives. All of the LSPs interviewed talked about the fact that the partnerships would be very different and not as effective if they did not have voluntary and community sector involvement. This included specific activities that had taken place because the sector made them happen, or activities that had been organised in partnership with the voluntary and community sector.

A major contribution of the voluntary and community sector has been that it has influenced the debate within LSPs. One LSP manager talked about voluntary and community sector representatives being able to emphasise the need for the various partners to take collective action and to ensure a holistic approach to the work of the partnership. Another LSP manager felt that having this input really helped the public sector to think beyond their own agendas, particularly in relation to the Community Strategy. One LSP said that it is felt that the voluntary and community sector does not have an axe to grind and that not having them there would give a totally different dynamic on the board. “It would have just been public agencies talking to each other.” When asked if this would be a problem, the partnership manager responded by saying that at times voluntary and community sector representatives had been able to focus on the real issues by avoiding jargon and by asking questions that might not otherwise be asked, particularly in relation to developing understanding of the services provided by public sector agencies. Another LSP commented that its function is “joining up so everyone is walking down the same road. The voluntary and community sector has views on how that joining up can take place”.

Bringing a new and different perspective was sighted by most of those interviewed. Voluntary and community sector representation “adds breadth” and has “played an essential role in linking the LSP back to the community”. One LSP expressed concern that there would have been a danger that the LSP or Community Strategy would have had too narrow a focus if only owned by the public sector; both the voluntary and community sector and the private sector give a balance to this. They went on to say that they also felt that their involvement gives more credibility with the public and provides a reality check. “Their involvement keeps the LSP and Community Strategy grounded in the local reality of the area.” This local grounding has also resulted in LSP agendas being different with issues being discussed that might not have otherwise reached the table. Moreover, more than one LSP spoke about the fact that some of the key values of the voluntary and community sector – for example local environmental values or social justice values – had been given a higher profile in the actual work of the LSP itself than might have otherwise been the case.

East Riding Local Strategic Partnership - Voluntary and community sector taking the policy lead

A new Cultural Strategy Task Group, led by the voluntary and community sector, has been established in the East Riding. The LSP realised that as there were no cultural organisations on the LSP, partners would need to be brought together for the purpose of developing a strategy and action plan.

An event was organised by the LSP and any organisation with an interest in culture was invited. Voluntary and community groups were offered stalls and space to showcase their work. This generated a huge amount of interest in the work of the individual groups. A Cultural Task Group was set up from people at this event and the group was facilitated and led by a voluntary and community sector representative. The strategy and its action plan would not have happened without this voluntary and community sector input.

One LSP has recognised the importance of voluntary and community sector input to the extent that it recently discussed the sector and its involvement at a Board meeting. The notes of this discussion show a high level of understanding about the

sector. The meeting made a number of specific recommendations to the Board, aimed at continuing to assist engagement of the sector.

The perseverance of representatives combined with an ability to put their view strongly and clearly, but not confrontationally or aggressively, was appreciated by more than one LSP.

When asked what key messages this report should contain, one said that the role of the voluntary and community sector is really valued. “We’re working to do what we can to make sure that they are at the right tables and can make a contribution.”

Impact on Community Strategies

Many of those interviewed talked about the impact that voluntary and community sector representatives have had on their Community Strategies. For example, major consultation exercises with local communities have been conducted either by voluntary and community sector organisations themselves, or by the sector in partnership with the LSP and have fed directly into the Community Strategy development process.

Voluntary and community sector representatives have also been able to have an impact themselves, for example in ensuring that the strategies do not just address economic agendas, but also address issues of social inclusion. In most areas the representatives have been vocal about what they felt should have been / should be included in the Community Strategy.

One Barnsley and the Community Empowerment Network– Jointly consulting the community

In Barnsley, the LSP and the Community Empowerment Network have delivered an annual programme of 'Community Summits'. Viewed as the LSP working in the community, a summit is organised in each of the 9 Forum Areas.

The format of each Summit can be different - for example, some events are galas, others can be more meeting based; the issues discussed can also differ from area to area. Regardless of this, however, each summit will include workshops where local people can express their views. In addition, local service providers are always invited to come along. As a result, not only can local

people talk directly to the service providers but also the service providers get a chance to talk to each other.

They have proved to be very popular events, with outcomes brought directly into the community planning process or leading to new activities. For example, a concern at one Community Summit was about three new business parks being opened near the M1. No local public transport is available for people to get to the business parks. From the Summit, a working group has been established with the Passenger Transport Executive to look at whether transport can be provided.

The key to the success of the Community Summits is that they are jointly organised and that community links are used to ensure they are widely publicised.

One LSP manager said that although the council had “held the pen” when developing a revised strategy, voluntary and community sector representatives had been involved in reference groups looking at drafts of the document and this has been a really important role.

The Kirklees Partnership – Revising the Community Strategy

The Kirklees Partnership is currently reviewing its Community Strategy. A number of public consultation events were organised jointly with the voluntary and community sector. The events were important in raising priority issues for inclusion in the new Community Strategy. They have been formally written up in a way that can be understood and can be taken on board by the partnership members. One interesting point raised in the consultations was that local people felt a lot of good and positive activity is taking place in the District and this should be better publicised.

As a result of the events a number of people have expressed an interest in being more involved in the Community Plan revision. A Panel is being set up to comment on the drafts of the revised plan.

Delivery of Community Strategies

In most cases, involvement in Community Strategies related to development of content rather than delivery of the proposals contained within. One LSP manager was not aware of any part of the local Community Strategy that had been delivered by voluntary and community organisations. LSPs have, however, recognised that the sector can be vital in delivering activities and services related to citizenship, social inclusion, reaching people and communities who have not

traditionally been engaged, and activities related to the social economy. There was recognition that looking at potential service delivery roles should become part of the agenda in the future. One LSP reported that this is likely to be highlighted through a review of their planning processes currently being undertaken. Another felt that voluntary and community sector representatives involved in the Community Strategy revision were now more aware of the service delivery aspect but was not sure whether the public sector were as aware of this delivery role beyond externally funded projects.⁵

One LSP talked about the difference between areas where the local council is large and employs a high number of staff delivering public services, in contrast to those areas where this is not the case. They wondered whether having this 'big' local government had led to such areas being slower to see how the voluntary and community sector could contribute more to delivery. This was borne out by another rural area where local voluntary and community organisations currently deliver many local services and where LSP projects have to be delivered in partnership. This LSP is not in a Neighbourhood Renewal area and therefore the work is more about strategy and using new or additional resources rather than looking at how existing mainstream services are delivered. However, this LSP has prioritised looking at joined up service delivery in its action plan next year.

One LSP commented that individual voluntary and community sector organisations do not give sufficient attention to how their work contributes to the local Community Strategy. "There is nothing like enough recognition of the Community Strategy amongst the [voluntary and community] sector".

Links to community partnerships

Links with community or neighbourhood partnerships have been important in contributing to the impact of the sector where these partnerships have formed part of the strategic planning process. Partnerships established for other funding

⁵ Externally funded projects are those where the income has come into a local area from, for example, central Government or Europe.

purposes – for example the Single Regeneration Budget or European finance – have contributed to some LSPs by:

- Using their local planning and consultation exercises to feed into Community Strategies. One LSP called the work already undertaken as the ‘tool used for developing their plan’.
- Using existing neighbourhood networks to feed into the LSP on an ongoing basis.
- Providing a forum or route for community representation on LSPs, especially where there is no Community Empowerment Network.

Private sector involvement

Many LSPs highlighted a number of parallels with engagement and input from the private sector, specifically around the difficulties of engaging people in the process and the importance of the different perspective that private sector representatives also bring to partnerships.

Government guidance for LSPs

One LSP was extremely concerned about the impact Government actions can potentially have on the involvement of voluntary and community sector representatives. They were concerned about the number of dictats or instructions that come down from the central tier to LSPs, and whether this can make voluntary and community sector representatives feel disempowered. They were also concerned about Government understanding of community engagement and the length of time it takes to develop, and whether the rules about how things should be done go against enabling local discussions appropriate to local circumstances. “It’s not about being either top down or bottom up but about how you get both to have the conversation”.

The relationship between LSP staff, LSP members and the voluntary and community sector representatives

The LSP managers interviewed were asked about their team's relationship with voluntary and community sector representatives on their LSP.

A key issue coming through the discussions was that the people involved and individual relationships are vital to the success and working of LSPs. One LSP pointed out that a level of trust has been developed between the players at the current time, and this has been really important in taking forward specific activities and changes. Another partnership manager commented that the strategic abilities and previous work history of one voluntary and community sector representative has been a key element of success.

The Kirklees Partnership - Sharing office space

The offices of the Kirklees Partnership are shared with the Neighbourhood Renewal team and the Community Empowerment Network team. The partners respect each other's different values and ways of working. It is felt that being in the same office has helped improve understanding and communication and has helped to ensure a focus on Neighbourhood Renewal.

Many of the LSPs responded that the relationship generally between the LSP support team and the voluntary and community sector representatives is a developing and improving one. At the start, in some areas, relationships had not always been easy but this was changing. The structures and development of the voluntary and community sector was important in this. For example, as voluntary and community sector representative structures have become clearer, so has the relationship with the LSP. Where events or activities have been planned or organised jointly between the voluntary and community sector and the LSP, not only have there been important outcomes, but added value has been gained in terms of developing individual relationships.

Richmondshire Local Strategic Partnership – Addressing local issues jointly

Richmondshire Local Strategic Partnership is made up of a small Steering Group and a larger Forum. Richmondshire is a large rural district with a small population. The district council employs

approximately 330 staff. As a result, many local services are provided by voluntary and community groups, which make up around one half of the Forum membership.

The Forum has a number of Task Groups. One of these is a Social Policy Group which identified that debt is a major issue in the area. Previously, attempts to raise awareness of the issue had not been successful. It was therefore decided to address the issue through the LSP. One of the quarterly Forum meetings looked solely at the issue of debt. All Forum members and other relevant and interested parties were invited. Multi-sector workshops were held looking at what debt issues exist, what services are currently provided, and what further needs to be done to address the issue. Four key actions were agreed, and a multi-sector working group set up on the day to look at how to implement the actions.

Leadership for this activity came from the voluntary and community sector (the Citizens Advice Bureau); the added value came from the LSP being the vehicle to take it forward which, it can be argued, meant that the public and private sectors felt more engaged in the activities.

The lack of a specific voluntary and community sector representative structure was mentioned as being a problem by LSPs in non neighbourhood renewal areas. One LSP also wondered whether they could use the voluntary and community sector representatives more as a sounding board outside of formal meetings.

More than one LSP talked about how specific activities have helped to improve relationships between LSPs and voluntary and community sector representatives. For example, one LSP described how the process of developing a Compact had opened up new communication channels with the sector, which has been important as the area does not have a Community Empowerment Network. In another area, a voluntary and community sector organisation represented on the LSP had invited the Partnership manager to join its board and this had greatly assisted the relationship.

North East Lincolnshire Local Strategic Partnership – Evidencing the impact of involvement

Two key activities have been developed in North East Lincolnshire, which provide hard evidence of the impact of voluntary and community sector involvement in the LSP.

The first is that as a result of representatives' input on the partnership, the Community Strategy includes some indicators regarding the level of involvement of volunteers within the area, and also

an indicator about how residents are involved in community development and active citizenship. As a result of their inclusion in the Community Strategy, funding was secured by the local council for voluntary service - VANEL - to undertake research looking into the "extent and influence" (including the economic contribution) of the voluntary and community sector to the area. The results have been impressive showing a major contribution. They have been reported to the LSP and will be used as key information in the forthcoming review of the Community Strategy and LSP workplan. The research can be downloaded from the LSP website on www.nelincs.gov.uk/council/council/localstrategicpartnership .

The second key initiative has been the development of a local Compact. This is a Compact between the public sector LSP members and the voluntary and community sector, not just the Council and the sector. Agreed and published in March 2005, the Compact is fully endorsed by the LSP but the work has been led by VANEL as a core LSP partner.

Many spoke about the fact that a high level of respect has been developed between individuals on partnerships. "The most important thing is that the voluntary and community sector has the opportunity, space and respect to be able to put forward a different perspective. If this wasn't the case we would lose an awful lot."

Relationships with other LSP members

In terms of the relationship between the voluntary and community sector and other LSP partners, most of those interviewed felt that membership of the LSP had improved these relationships. One commented that the whole LSP process has "enhanced those relationships enormously as people really do feel they are round the table as equals". Moreover, the fact that people actually know each other has meant that some ignorance about the different agencies that may initially have existed is fading away. Another commented that links have been developed between voluntary and community sector representatives which would not have happened without the LSP. This had included developing respect between individuals as well as links. One LSP said it seemed that other partners had realised their own agencies can benefit from these links; "It's to everyone's benefit if local people can have a real say about how money is spent". Another commented that awareness and understanding of the voluntary and community sector by other partners had significantly increased through LSP membership.

Assisting the LSP and its support team better, and improving the contribution of the sector

As well as being asked about the relationship, those interviewed were asked if there are any actions that voluntary and community sector representatives could take to better support the LSP team. They were also asked what changes they would like to see to the way that representatives work and their contribution to the partnerships. Many were clear that any suggestions for improvement in this report should be viewed alongside the very positive messages about sector involvement.

Not just the main partnership

An issue raised early on in the research is that the voluntary and community sector can sometimes give too much emphasis to the main board or committee of the LSP, and not pay sufficient attention to sub or theme partnerships. It was commented more than once that as the actual detail is covered at the sub partnership level, these partnerships are of equal, if not more importance. One LSP commented that the “voluntary and community sector representatives all want to be on the main board and this is not always the best way to get involved”. Another commented that the sector still has “its focus on the main board rather than at partnership level. Many discussions relating to the Community Strategy actually take place at delivery partnership level”. One LSP manager talked about trying to persuade the sector of the importance of sub partnerships. When asked if this had succeeded, the response was that “the sector has partially got the message but not totally”. The interviews, however, highlighted that in most areas there were no set rules about or quotas for voluntary and community sector representation on theme or sub partnerships, and generally even within the same LSP area membership and involvement could differ vastly from sub partnership to partnership. “Generally the approach to partnerships is positive, but some partnerships have more voluntary and community sector representation than others.”

The issue of being able to find enough representatives was also raised. One LSP commented that the Community Empowerment Network had reached people they could never have contacted. However despite the existence of networks, a number of LSPs felt that finding enough people could be a struggle for the sector. One

LSP commented that when they ask for representatives, the sector does respond and is getting better all the time. They also were concerned about asking mainly volunteers to undertake more and more work.

East Riding Local Strategic Partnership – Funding costs of voluntary and community involvement

During the development of the cultural strategy, it became clear that some voluntary and community groups could not be involved if they were not able to claim travel expenses (partly due to large area and cost of travelling around). In response, the LSP has agreed that a small pocket of the Safer and Stronger Communities Fund will be used from 1st April 2005 as a pilot scheme to fund voluntary and community sector representatives' travel expenses.

The benefits of engagement structures

When asked what would improve voluntary and community involvement, three LSPs commented that a lack of representative structures or low level capacity of the voluntary and community sector is a real issue. One described the lack of a formal structure initially creating “an uphill struggle to engage the sector”. In another area, a funding application had been supported by the LSP for an engagement worker to establish a voluntary and community sector forum, but the bid had not been successful.

The legitimacy given to representatives who arrive at the LSP through a recognised structure was raised. One LSP had recently established a new structure for a network of community organisations which had elected a representative to sit on the LSP board. It was felt that gaining this representation on the LSP had really helped this network recognise its own importance and legitimacy.

Key areas to improve contributions

Whilst considering how the contribution of the voluntary and community sector to the working of the LSP could be improved, three key issues emerge from the interviews:

- ◆ The need for representatives to be able to be strategic;

- Whether representatives are there for their own group or the whole sector;
- The need for a positive and pro-active approach to the work of the LSP.

Being strategic

Once representation has been secured, there can be issues about the way that representatives undertake their role. A number of LSPs were concerned about the level of strategic thinking needed for active and effective LSP membership. Whilst all those interviewed felt that some voluntary and community sector representatives can be very strategic, it was recognised that this is not always the case. One interviewee suggested that having voluntary and community sector representatives who are able to think strategically was the key challenge for the sector.

Another talked about the fact that sometimes it can be really hard for community representatives to develop the strategic outlook needed. In one case, the LSP is reviewing its structure which may result in a smaller executive with strengthened links into community based planning processes; the key criteria for being a board member should be the ability to speak strategically and control of resources. However they were aware that any executive would still have to be inclusive of all sectors and therefore the criteria might have to be reviewed.

This concern had also manifested itself through some representatives or organisations, which do not take a strategic approach not engaging if they think that the LSP is just about talking and no action. It was commented that this view can come about due to a lack of understanding of the strategic nature of the partnership, especially where there is a misconception that LSPs are about giving out funding to voluntary and community groups. Interestingly, the concern about LSPs being seen as funding bodies was not confined to Neighbourhood Renewal areas.

Representing the sector not individual interests

Another issue raised was whether representatives always understood that they were there not for the benefit of their individual group but to represent the sector

as a whole. In some areas the LSP feels that this is the case; in others this was not the case. One LSP commented that the sector itself does not always recognise the people who sit on the LSP and may not feel they are always the best representatives for the whole sector. Another talked about “leaving your own hat at the door”.

One LSP has made a distinction in its membership make-up between organisational representatives and partnership representatives (regardless of sector) and felt this was important to people understanding their role at the LSP and whether they have a remit at the LSP around their own organisation's concerns.

North East Lincolnshire Local Strategic Partnership Membership

The membership of North East Lincolnshire Local Strategic Partnership is separated between those who represent partnerships which are made up of many organisations (eg. the local Safer Communities and Learning partnerships) and those who represent an individual organisation (eg. Primary Care Trust or Yorkshire Forward). The membership list on the website - <http://www.nelincs.gov.uk/council/council/localstrategicpartnership/lsp-current-membership-150304.htm> - also clearly states which sector each member is from. This enables them to provide totals of how many are partnership or organisational representatives, plus give an overview of sector representation.

Another LSP spoke about the diversity of the sector and what this means for acting as representatives of a whole sector, rather than individual organisations. They worried that when you get a number of different voluntary and community sector voices around the table there will be a range of views which may still not be representative of what local people actually feel. A key challenge is to get this representation without losing the real community voice. Another concern expressed referred to the involvement of community leaders, who by their nature have a power relationship within their own communities. Therefore, how representative are their views?

A positive and pro-active approach

The need for voluntary and community sector representatives to have a positive approach to partnership was raised. Concern was expressed that there can be times when the voluntary and community sector feels that there is a ‘conspiracy’ against them. It was commented that there can be a suspicion that somehow complex decisions about the sector are being made in secret by other partnership members, when in fact the issue is not even on the agenda. At times, it can feel as if the sector is saying ‘come on, engage me’, rather than ‘how can I help you to engage me?’

More than one LSP expressed a frustration that at times the voluntary and community sector can wait for LSP decisions before it comments on them, rather than being involved in developing the decisions in the first place. Indeed, in one area, a survey was undertaken in which the reps themselves stated that they felt their role was to scrutinise. One LSP wondered whether there is a way to help voluntary and community sector representatives to set the strategic direction more at the start of the process. Another LSP said that sometimes the voluntary and community sector can appear to have negative assumptions, such as ‘they don’t listen anyway’. They went on to comment that the voluntary and community sector representatives who are more outward looking can see the solutions better than those who are not. One other LSP commented that the sector needs to ensure that it sees itself as part of the solution rather than just seeking more resources or generating a feeling that they have to be constantly placated.

As one LSP said if the voluntary and community sector expects the public and private sectors to take on board and respect their values and ways of working, this has to be mutual. Another LSP commented that if the sector is surprised by the positive view of their engagement expressed by LSPs in this research then perhaps the cynicism is more on the voluntary and community sector side.

Communication

Many of those interviewed highlighted the need for good communication. One LSP spoke about a possible need for increased communication budgets both within the sector and the LSP.

Sheffield First – Thinking about meeting formats

The way that its meetings are conducted has been considered by the Local Strategic Partnership in Sheffield, Sheffield First.

Firstly, briefings are held for the private sector and voluntary and community sector representatives prior to Board meetings. Although the voluntary and community sector briefings are organised by Offer – the Community Empowerment Network - Sheffield One senior staff now offer to attend and help with the briefing. The LSP feels that ensuring members are well briefed helps people to speak with confidence when subjects are being discussed at the actual meeting.

The meetings are held from 9am to 12pm. Time for networking over refreshments is built in. Generally there will be one main issue on the agenda and the meeting may break up into three groups to discuss issues. The group discussions are then fed back collectively to the main group. Lunch is also provided after the meeting, giving additional networking opportunities between members.

The future for voluntary and community sector involvement in LSPs

All those interviewed were asked their personal views about what the future holds for voluntary and community sector involvement in LSPs, with particular reference to Local Area Agreements.

Some of the LSPs interviewed were either undertaking reviews of their structure or were about to embark on such reviews. They were all aware of the need to review their role and remit in respect of Local Area Agreements and Community Strategy revision processes. A number of those interviewed are looking at the Local Public Service Board concept through which public sector agencies work more closely together at strategic level. However, there was a high level of awareness that one impact of this could be a loss of involvement from the voluntary and community sector in decisions relating to delivery of key services included in Community Strategies. Two LSPs have already made the decision that if they go down the Local Public Service Board route they will ensure voluntary and community sector membership and involvement.

One LSP described Local Public Service Boards as ‘LSPs with teeth’, with the teeth being new money. They raised an important issue about legal structure. If Local Public Service Boards incorporate, and the members become company directors rather than members of an unincorporated body, their role and responsibility in relation to the company has to change. It was commented that Local Public Service Boards may lead to a smaller number of people representing more organisations and people, resulting in feedback and communication within those organisations becoming even more important.

Concern was also raised about the fact that Local Area Agreements are about “re-branding of existing money”, and whether voluntary and community sector representatives might be “turned off” by these initiatives if they do not bring any new potential funding.

One LSP manager expressed concerns that the changes could be slightly more problematic because the new structures do not require inclusion of all sectors. This LSP has recently undertaken a review of the impact of Local Area Agreements and Local Public Service Agreements; the result being a new lead agency body established which is not totally, but mainly public sector. This new body is supposed to sit alongside the LSP but there will clearly be a question around duplication. Both this group and the LSP are aware of potential disengagement and have agreed that they will alter the membership to create new places if necessary to ensure that both the private and voluntary and community sectors are represented.

Another LSP talked about how Local Area Agreements bring similar challenges and possibly threats for all sectors – for example the merging of Government funding sources⁶. As a result, the voluntary and community sector needs to be able to coherently promote its vision for the future in a way that is evidence based (with the proviso that LSPs need to ensure that networks are funded to do the above). Another LSP commented that some voluntary and community sector organisations have already been asking how the Local Area Agreement commissioning process will work so they can prepare but there is no answer to this. The LSP felt it was positive that the sector is preparing itself.

Using existing LSP structures for development and delivery of Local Area Agreements could impact negatively on voluntary and community sector engagement. However, one LSP which has recently published its Local Area Agreement used its existing LSP partnerships to develop the agreement, plus a steering group which had specific voluntary and community sector membership. This steering group is now to become an Implementation Board which will have the status of the other partnerships within the family.

Development of Local Area Agreements has not just started in the Government approved pilot areas. Those asked about Local Area Agreements did not feel that they have bought additional voluntary and community sector service delivery; one responding that it ought to have been but has not been the direction of travel to date, another commenting that this needs to happen more in future. The second generation of Local Public Service Agreements was suggested as possibly presenting more opportunities for delivery of services by the voluntary and community sector.

⁶ The Government has decided to bring a number of national funding streams together. For example, the Safer and Stronger Communities Fund bringing together funding streams administered through the Home Office and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The funding streams are designed to reduce crime, tackle anti-social behaviour, improve public spaces, and ensure services are more responsive to local needs in deprived communities and include the funding for Community Empowerment Networks in the 88 Neighbourhood Renewal areas.

5 ~ How the Regional Forum could help further

The interview process included asking the 6 LSPs what further actions the Regional Forum could take to enhance or improve the input of the voluntary and community sector into their partnership.

At the present time, the Regional Forum undertakes a range of activities which support voluntary and community sector engagement in Local Strategic Partnerships. These include:

- ◆ The Regional Forum has a key role in working with the voluntary and community sector and key partners at local, regional and national level to influence policies and programmes, including the new Local Area Agreements. Recently the Forum met with the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit to share voluntary and community sector views and concerns about these new arrangements.
- ◆ The Regional Forum makes links between practice on the ground and emerging or developing policy on Neighbourhood Renewal. A key focus is to share good practice across the region. The Forum is producing a 'Good Practice' publication to demonstrate the contribution of the voluntary and community sector to regional plans and strategies.
- ◆ The Regional Forum convenes the Regional Community Empowerment Network six times a year. These joint meetings with Community Empowerment Networks (CENs) and Government Office Yorkshire and the Humber aim to build relations and improve dialogue between partners on key issues. The Regional Forum supports the voluntary and community sector to influence Neighbourhood Renewal by working with the nine CENs across the region to deliver the Single Community Programme and develop active relationships with LSPs.

- The Regional Forum has run a pilot regional training programme for voluntary and community representatives on LSPs. In addition, a regional conference in March 2005 brought together VCS representatives from Local Strategic Partnerships, Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder and New Deal for Community Programmes. This event combined skills workshops, beginner's guides and policy discussion sessions, and provided opportunities for sharing across boundaries.
- The Regional Forum provides regular information and policy updates that are disseminated via the website and e-groups in order to keep the voluntary and community sector informed and up-to-date.

Suggestions made by those interviewed, which would extend or build on current activities were:

- Spreading good practice (including training) and sharing information about what activities other areas are undertaking.
- Activities which help representatives to understand their role wider than their own organisation and promote a positive approach to partnership working.
- Continuing to support local voluntary and community sector infrastructure development. The Regional Forum is currently supporting the process to implement the Government Strategy – ChangeUp.
- Production of information and communications about new Government guidance aimed at local voluntary and community sectors.

There were additionally a number of suggestions which would be new areas of work for the Regional Forum:

- An independently reviewed/audited health check process for LSPs regarding voluntary and community sector engagement in their own partnership.

- Developing a 'mistakes' and 'things that didn't work' information exchange.

- 'Honest broker' work with the emerging voluntary and community sector fora and the sector more generally in areas that do not have Neighbourhood Renewal status.

6 ~ Conclusions and moving forward - how does this research help us?

This research only captured a snapshot of a small number of LSPs. However a number of conclusions or lessons can be surmised from the interviews. Primarily, the key message from the research is that the contribution made to date by the voluntary and community sector has had a real impact, has added value to the work of LSPs, and is positively received. However, policy sands are now shifting, and the sector must move onto the next stage. This will include ensuring strategic involvement and input. Engagement is not an end in itself, and the current policy drivers are that engagement is about improving public services. The sector therefore needs to ensure that its input does not stop with securing a place at the table but also looks at how the sector can contribute more to delivery of services to meet identified strategic priorities. A number of new challenges lie ahead, including Local Area Agreements and Local Public Service Boards, and the sector will have to ensure that LSPs feel it is engaging with this direction of travel. In short, the voluntary and community sector needs to acknowledge the positive response to its input and to look at how it can build on work to date to respond to these new opportunities in a positive, pro-active and evidence based way.

To support this development, this report highlights the following additional points:

- Where the voluntary and community sector is under-developed, ensuring engagement in strategic planning is harder. Capacity building of the sector generally, development of representational structures and voluntary and community sector infrastructure therefore should be an issue for all LSPs. Voluntary and community sector involvement needs to be resourced and cannot simply be expected from existing infrastructure budgets.
- The voluntary and community sector needs to ensure it is doing everything it can within its available resources to show why its engagement and involvement will lead to improved public services delivered by Local Public Service Agreements, Local Area Agreements and Public Service Boards.

These arguments need to be made not just in relation to funding of representational structures, but with the end delivery of public services in mind.

- The sector needs to ensure that it continually shows how its ongoing work and activities contribute to key local strategies and policies, in particular Community Strategies.
- Voluntary and community sector representatives need to think about how they manage being actively involved in the early stages of strategy development, rather than at times seeing their role as to scrutinise strategy developed by others. This includes finding ways to ensure that the sector can articulate concerns where they exist whilst also developing and finding solutions to strategic problems.
- The voluntary and community sector needs to make sure that its representatives are supported and encouraged to be involved where they can make the most difference, for example at theme or sub partnership levels which is often where the real work is undertaken. Sufficient emphasis and priority needs to be given to theme or sub partnerships as well as main LSP boards.
- Voluntary and community sector representatives need to be able to think strategically and also ensure they are able to represent the sector not just their own individual interests. This will become increasingly important as the number of representatives on partnership bodies reduces. However, this does present a difficulty for the sector given how diverse it is and the culture of the sector being one that sees that diversity as a major strength. The sector needs therefore to find ways to balance up this potential dichotomy.
- The voluntary and community sector needs to acknowledge the importance of the role of individuals on LSPs. Should the individual representatives change this could mean a totally different dynamic on the partnership, and

the individual, not the place, may bring the value. Consideration therefore needs to be given to this when developing representational processes.

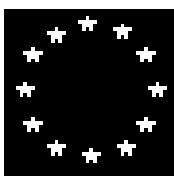
- ◆ The voluntary and community sector also needs to acknowledge that there are issues about leadership, who its representatives are, including the need to balance having involvement from 'usual suspects' versus emerging new community representatives. There is arguably a case for the sector to acknowledge that its accepted leaders are sometimes best placed to act as its representatives. However, this means having structures so that these representatives hear the voices of others. Where this is the case can the sector put the emphasis on developing the message rather than the messenger?

- ◆ Failure is the new success! Processes need to be in place to enable the voluntary and community sector to be honest when things are not working and to share these experiences.

- ◆ More work needs to be undertaken by LSPs and public sector agencies around developing the potential service delivery role of the voluntary and community sector and helping the sector to 'translate' its work into emerging policy themes.

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