

Introduction

The term ‘third sector forum’ is used to describe the structure by which the third sector co-ordinates and ensures its involvement in the strategic planning, development and delivery of local services. Third sector forums may take a number of different forms and be referred to by different names such as ‘third sector assembly’ or ‘voluntary and community sector network’. However, what these forums have in common is their potential to provide a strategic voice for the sector, particularly in the arena of multi-sector strategic partnership work.

This document aims to assist the third sector address the issues in establishing and developing a terms of reference for a forum by outlining:

- background and policy context
- key issues to consider in their development
- examples of practice in different local areas.

Background and policy context

In recent years, there has been a strong drive from Government for more joined up thinking in the planning and delivery of public services and the involvement of the third sector in partnership working has been a key part of this.

Effective third sector engagement requires a well networked and co-ordinated sector which is able to make its voice heard and public sector partners who invest in the necessary infrastructure and networks. They should recognise the value and diversity of this voice and the different equality sectors that need to be highlighted and actively included in representative structures, while supporting institutional and policy developments with respect to equality, diversity and human rights.

In the Local Government White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities* (October 2006), the Government set out its intention to “*work with national third sector umbrella bodies to establish a standard by which local third sector bodies should organise themselves to be effectively represented on LSPs*”. In response to this paper and a belief that it was impossible to produce a generic template, a working group was convened by the Department of

Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to establish draft principles by which the sector will organise itself. The discussion document, *Principles of representation: A framework for effective third sector participation in Local Strategic Partnerships*, was issued by DCLG in November 2007. Many local areas have already set up some kind of forum, network or assembly to co-ordinate third sector representation reflecting these principles.

Aims and objectives of the forum

To enable the third sector to engage in the planning and delivery of local services, a third sector forum will need to facilitate both internal co-ordination and communication within the sector, as well as external partnership working with public sector agencies.

In order to meet these aims, a forum's objectives/functions may include:

- Supporting information sharing and communication within the sector and between equality and generalist third sector organisations.
- Facilitating networking and collaboration within the sector, and liaising with existing and developing networks of equality organisations.
- Identifying third sector capacity-building needs and ways in which they can be addressed.
- Holding data on the sector and raising its profile, and taking into account the diversity of the sector and the different dimensions of inequality and discrimination.
- Facilitating consultations with the sector appropriate to the diverse needs and requirements of the sector.
- All evaluation and monitoring procedures developed by the forum will take account of the inclusiveness of the forum, and promote active outreach to marginalised communities with regular monitoring.
- All processes and actions developed by the forum will be transparent and open to scrutiny.
- The forum will monitor the impact of its activity in relation to the equality and diversity of the sector.
- Co-ordinating third sector representation on multi-agency strategic partnership bodies.
- Promoting Compact development and compliance.

Key considerations

- What is the purpose of your forum?
- How will its objectives help it fulfil its purpose?
- How will it secure a balance between internal co-ordination of the sector and external partnership working with the public sector?
- How will it ensure the commitment to the promotion of equality and diversity within the third sector and its engagement of the most marginalised sectors?

Example

Leeds Voice was set up in 1999 as a response to Voluntary Action Leeds being asked to represent the voluntary, community and faith sectors in developing the 10-year plan, a Vision for Leeds. The enormity of this task made it clear that a representative body for the voluntary, community and faith sector would be needed. For more information see: www.leedsvoice.org.uk

Membership

In order to provide a strong collective voice for the third sector, forums will benefit from being as inclusive as possible. Historically, there have been different understandings and definitions of what is meant by the term third sector.

The Government defines the third sector as “*non-governmental organisations that are value driven and which principally reinvest their surpluses to further social, environmental or cultural objectives. It includes voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, co-operatives and mutuals.*” – *Creating Strong and Prosperous Communities, Draft Statutory Guidance*, DCLG (November 2007)

Key considerations

- How does your area define the third sector?
- Which groups would a forum seek to include?
- How does the name of your forum reflect its membership and aim?
- What mechanisms are in place to ensure diversity and active engagement of marginalised groups and organisations?

Example

The Shropshire VCS Assembly has a terms of reference which, in its appendix, defines what is meant by the term voluntary and community organisation, and thus who is eligible for membership of the Assembly. For more information, see www.shropvcsassembly.org.uk

Structure

Third sector forums will need to develop a structure which is able to effectively engage with its defined membership. Frequently, forums will build on, and bring together, pre-existing third sector networks (either geographical or interest-based networks) and effectively become a network of networks. Forums may therefore be composed of representatives from existing third sector networks. In other areas, any third sector organisation is considered to be a member of the forum and a two-tier structure is established, i.e. a wider membership forum with an executive body.

Key considerations

- What structure would best engage with your range of member groups?
- How will your structure relate to, or incorporate, existing networks, interest groups and equality organisations?
- How will the structure ensure that socially excluded groups are given a voice?

Example

Sefton Community Empowerment Network (CEN) is a network of networks. Sefton CVS became the accountable body for the original CEN funding (the Community Empowerment Fund), which led to the creation of a number of new networks, including networks for traditionally under-represented or marginalised communities (including networks for disability, black and minority ethnic communities, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities and faith communities). For more information see: www.seftoncvvs.org.uk/cen

Governance

The role of the executive group would be to make decisions and steer the direction of the forum on behalf of the wider sector. Therefore an executive group should reflect the diverse make-up and interests of the wider forum membership. There needs to be a clear process for the selection of this body. The group might be composed of one or more of the following:

- Elected individuals from third sector groups and equality third sector organisations and networks.
- Representatives from existing geographical or theme-based networks.
- Nominated infrastructure organisations within the sector.

In order to ensure representation from minority or marginalised groups, it may be necessary to co-opt members to this executive group.

Key considerations

- How will the executive group reflect and respond to the views and experiences of the wider sector?
- What procedures will the forum develop which promote a culture of equality and diversity with an inclusive management style?
- What mechanisms will the forum develop which promote ownership of an equality and diversity ethos within the forum?
- What mechanisms will the forum develop so that representatives reflect the diversity of the third sector?
- How will the executive group involve marginalised groups?
- How will its members be elected or selected?

Example

Voscur in Bristol was originally set up to represent the interests of the voluntary and community sector at Bristol's Strategic Partnerships. There is a section on its website devoted to representation, including an introduction to the process of representation and elections. For more information see www.voscur.org/representation

Operation, decision making and accountability

The forum will need to agree the frequency of meetings at which issues will be considered and decisions made. If the forum is operating a two-tier structure, i.e. it has an executive body plus wider membership, it will also be important to hold meetings to enable the wider forum to come together and ratify decisions/representation on the governing body, and be informed and consulted.

Agendas and paperwork for meetings should be sent out at least a week in advance. This will take into account the different accessibility needs of the membership e.g. information, languages, formats and ICT.

All the paperwork for meetings (including the minutes and agendas) should be made publicly available in relevant formats and through all appropriate outlets, to ensure outreach to all organisations.

There will also need to be agreement on the decision-making process and the level of quorum required.

Key considerations

- How often does your forum or executive body need to meet?
- If using a two-tier structure, how does the executive group relate to, and communicate with, the wider forum membership?
- What mechanisms will the forum develop to ensure the inclusiveness and access to decision-making of the different equality organisations, taking into account their different needs and requirements e.g. venues, appropriate timings, cultural/faith norms of meetings and discussions?

Example

Herefordshire Voluntary Sector Assembly is open to all voluntary and community organisations in Herefordshire, but the work of the Assembly is governed by a Steering Group. For more information see: www.thevsa.org.uk/how_we_operate

Values

A third sector forum will be driven by the values that underpin the work of its members. The drive to include the third sector at the partnership table is, in part, due to the desire to develop more responsive public services, and the recognition that the third sector is good at hearing the voice of service users. Some of the values which commonly underpin the work of the third sector include:

- equality and diversity
- inclusion
- accountability
- partnership working.

Key considerations

- What actions have the third sector forum developed and/or adopted which make explicit, promote and monitor its commitment to the above values in its policies and processes?
- What values underpin the work of the third sector in your area?
- What mechanisms are developed that will ensure that the diversity of values is captured and streamlined into the work of the third sector forum?

Example

Tameside Voice is the Tameside-wide voluntary and community sector (VCS) forum. They have outlined their commitment to diversity and equal opportunities in their Values Statement. For more information see: www.t3sc.org/diversity_values.htm

Secretariat

Secretariat support will be vital to the effective operation of the forum and may include the following.

- Maintaining up-to-date records and contact details for forum members
- Organising and publicising meetings and forum events
- Liaison with chairperson and/or vice chairperson
- Producing and collating paperwork for meetings, including minutes
- Ensuring actions agreed are carried out
- Being the main point of contact for the forum
- Liaison with external agencies
- Identifying resources to support the work of the forum

Key consideration

- How will these functions be undertaken and resourced?
- What additional support might be required to ensure that the different needs and requirements of the different equality sectors are met?

Example

The Gloucestershire Assembly for the Voluntary and Community Sector was formed in 2003. It has a section in its terms of reference on how the Assembly will be supported to do its work. For more information see: www.gloshub.org.uk/assembly.html

Monitoring and review

Forum activity and operation will need to be reviewed against a terms of reference. A terms of reference will provide clarity with regard to decision-making processes and membership, and will support and guide the operation and governance of the third sector forum.

Key consideration

- How and when will your forum review its operation?
- What mechanisms are put in place to ensure that all relevant stakeholders are involved in the monitoring and evaluation of the work of the forum?
- What mechanisms are in place to ensure that the revised implementation plans that stem from the review capture the diverse voices and concerns within the sector, and that the concrete actions are taken to remove barriers to participation of the different equality groups?

Example

Birmingham launched its Third Sector Assembly in July 2007. Its terms of reference outlines how the work of the Assembly will be evaluated against its objectives. For more information see: www.bvsc.org/assembly

This document was developed by Hasnah Sheriff on behalf of NAVCA. It has been equality proofed by the National Equality Partnership www.improvingsupport.org.uk/equality; email equality@wrc.org.uk.

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