

Introduction

Public sector agencies are increasingly being required to engage third sector organisations in the planning and delivery of local services.

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 mutual.” – *Creating Strong and Prosperous Communities, Draft Statutory Guidance*, Department of Communities and Local Government (November 2007).

This document aims to assist public sector agencies address how they might engage with the third sector by outlining:

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

Background and policy context

The public sector has often been challenged to find effective and accountable ways of engaging with the third sector, especially as this sector is made up of a diverse range of organisations which do not always have effective ways of communicating or co-ordinating themselves. Engagement with the third sector is certainly made easier when the sector has agreed structures for representation and co-ordination.

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 areas where such structures and co-ordination have been established or are in the process of development (often with public sector support and investment), it is important that the public sector is equipped and prepared to work with these structures.

Public sector commitment

Public sector recognition of the value of the third sector, the value of its diversity and the structures and processes by which it seeks to organise and co-ordinate itself is vital. The national Compact states that:

“An independent and diverse voluntary sector is fundamental to the well-being of society.”

It also contains the following undertaking for public sector agencies:

“To recognise and support the independence of the VCS, including its right within the law, to campaign, to comment on government policy, and to challenge that policy, irrespective of any funding relationship that might exist, and to determine and manage its own affairs.”

Knowledge and awareness of the third sector

In order to engage effectively with the third sector at both operational and strategic level, public sector agencies will need to ensure that their staff have access to up-to-date knowledge about the sector. This might be achieved through a combination of the following:

- Developing an ‘in-house’ third sector unit of expertise or co-ordination in the form of a staff member, a team or a working group responsible for holding and disseminating information and developing awareness about the third sector.
- Regular briefings from third sector representatives.
- Information on the third sector might be disseminated to public sector staff through:
 - staff induction and training
 - a standing item on team meeting agendas
 - access to existing relevant databases of third sector contacts and resources
 - active staff participation in multi sector forums.
- Briefings, information and resources from existing programmes that support the third sector in different areas: equality and diversity, human rights, performance management etc.

Key considerations

- How is intelligence on the third sector stored and kept updated within your agency?
- How is this information disseminated within the agency?
- What staff development strategies are in place to include knowledge of the diversity and value of the third sector?

Example

Ealing Community Network co-ordinates tours to familiarise public sector executive level directors and councillors with the local voluntary and community sector. They also providing regular briefings on the VCS at LSP meetings and involve public sector staff in ChangeUp plans. For further information see: www.ealingnetwork.org.uk

Strategic co-ordination of engagement with sector

In order to ensure consistency and accountability, each agency will need to have a clear strategy for how it will engage with the third sector and its representative structures, and will need to provide appropriate guidance to staff.

For example, a staff member co-ordinating a multi-sector strategic partnership would need to know who to contact regarding third sector representation on that structure and provide the information needed by the sector to identify appropriate representatives.

This information is likely to include:

- terms of reference for partnership
- details of membership
- knowledge, skills and experience required of members
- time commitment/meeting schedule.

Public sector staff would also need to be clear about when they require a third sector representative (someone who could represent the range of views held by the third sector on a particular issue) and when what is needed is

a third sector expert (someone with experience of a particular aspect of the third sector service delivery). For example, a domestic violence partnership might require a VCS representative to bring the views of a number of third sector domestic abuse projects to the partnership or an expert to advise on a particular aspect of addressing domestic abuse or relevant equality sectors, for example the women's sector.

Key considerations

- How are staff advised/trained regarding engagement with the sector?
- How is any engagement strategy developed and monitored?
- What mechanisms are in place to regularly revise the relevance and breadth of the learning activities?
- What mechanisms are in place to ensure proactive engagement with different equality sectors?

Example

OFFER is the city-wide network for all voluntary, community and faith organisations in Sheffield. They support VCS reps on Sheffield First, the local strategic partnership, and have developed a protocol between the VCS and the partnership, outlining respective roles and responsibilities. It includes expectations of partnership members, plus support available to VCS reps. For more information see: www.offer.org.uk

Resources

The public sector needs to be aware of the costs of co-ordinating third sector engagement and representation. It will need to invest in structures and processes which enable effective co-ordination within the sector. For example, the process of nominating and supporting third sector representatives will have a cost.

The costs of engaging with the third sector can be considerably reduced through joint investment in infrastructure by several public sectors.

Key considerations

- What possibilities are there for joint investment in third sector infrastructure?
- What provisions have been made to invest in relevant third sector networks, for example sector-specific and pan-equality networks?

Example

Gloucestershire County Council funded the initial development of the Gloucestershire Assembly and its networks which has over time attracted investment from other public sector partners including the Primary Care Trust and Learning and Skills Council. For more information see: www.gloshub.org.uk/assembly.html

This document was developed by Hasnah Sheriff on behalf of NAVCA.
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