

# Do you know your LAAs from your elbow?

## Stronger Communities - LAAs and the voluntary and community sector

Playing to our strengths and  
working with power holders

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## Starting from strengths

### 1 Coherence, collaboration and co-ordination within the VCS

If there is one common lesson from the VCS experience in the pilot LAAs, it is that it's hard to keep pace and nigh on impossible to keep the sector up to speed and individuals and infrastructure organisations comfortably accountable. This is compounded where there isn't a history of collaboration and networking between VCS infrastructure bodies.

It is important to:

- Involve all infrastructure organisations and VCS networks (generic, specialist and sub-sector) in LAA planning.
- Clearly spell out the different roles of VCS infrastructure bodies so that they work together effectively to support VCS involvement in the LAA development, and can help partners understand who does what.
- Clarify the role, status and leadership roles of different forums and networks so that the VCS understands where to participate to inform LAAs and raise their constituents' issues (this is particularly significant for CVS and CENs).
- Ensure that information is fed in and back to the VCS so that the LAA reflects people's priorities.

What you can do:

- Build up your knowledge about LAAs - the outcomes, indicators and targets - and ensure your LSP reps are up to speed (not just senior VCS officers).
- Hold VCS workshops to involve as many people as possible in considering what the sector can contribute to the LAA (both in service delivery but also in relation to governance, social capital, community cohesion and community engagement).
- Agree within the sector which organisation will take the lead on what within LAA negotiations, and how you will support individual VCS negotiators e.g. form small support project groups, appoint 'critical friends' as mentors.
- Map who does what in the sector so that all those delivering services to, for example, older people, can be involved in promoting priorities and work streams.
- Identify all the baseline information available within the VCS that may be useful to shaping the design of LAAs, e.g. community strengths assessments in neighbourhoods, household liveability surveys etc.
- Demonstrate that you know what you are talking about and build relationships through providing opportunities to partners. For example, offer to host 'getting to grips with LAAs' workshops for all partners (you may be surprised that they are no more informed than you), invite Government Office staff to forums and consultations.
- 'Sell' the role of the VCS through showcases of projects delivering valuable services in neighbourhoods.

### 2 The community involvement statement

The LAA should include a statement of the involvement of the VCS in the shape, design and delivery of the LAA. This *Statement of Involvement* should not be a one-liner saying nice bland things about the VCS.

Work towards inclusion of:

- A description of the processes by which you have been involved in shaping LAA priorities.
- A description of the processes by which you have been involved in designing and negotiating the LAA.
- The scope of your role in contributing to delivery of the LAA and assessing its progress.

- The benefits to the sector through investment, effective partnership working and direct funding rewards (pump priming grants and stretch target rewards).
- Links and relationship to other strategies that have a direct relationship to the VCS.

In Nottingham, the CEN drafted the initial Statement and it then went through an iterative process of redrafting following input from the VCS and other partners.

### **Extracts form Nottingham's Statement of Community and Voluntary Sector Involvement**

One Nottingham is committed to ensuring that a diverse range of voluntary and community groups are involved in decision making, resource allocation, neighbourhood renewal and service delivery across the city and in neighbourhoods. ....The Nottingham LAA is based on a shared understanding that all partners are responsible for achieving this.

#### ***Listening to residents***

We are committed to ensuring that local people's priorities shape the strategic direction of Nottingham. The Community Empowerment Network, other voluntary and community sector groups, the City Council and other public sector services use a variety of approaches to consult, involve and empower local people.

In Nottingham this range of engagement is being brought together by the Community Empowerment Task Group under the joint lead of the CEN and Nottingham City Council. This is identifying best practice and will develop the One Nottingham Community Empowerment Strategy. The Strategy will be instrumental in delivering SSC targets on residents' perception that they can influence decisions and service provision.

#### ***Building on existing partnership working***

Nottingham's LAA is built on a broad base of existing partnership working with the voluntary and community sector.

The Community Empowerment Network has worked with One Nottingham to ensure that at each level of the partnership appropriate voluntary and community sector members are recruited and supported to play an active role.

This year the City Council has had a Partnerships Task and Finish Panel including a review of how the authority works with the voluntary sector and adherence to the Compact. This recognises that the potential of the Compact has not been realised and there are plans to review and strengthen the Compact in 2006/7.

Keeping the VCS informed about the developing LAA has been a key focus.

- Over 100 individuals are kept informed of key developments in the LAA through the Community Network's targeted email lists.
- Consultation events have been held during working hours and also evenings / weekends, so that the needs of different organisations are met: reaching an estimated 50 VCS organisations.
- Around 800 voluntary organisations have received Community Network newsletters offering opportunities to get involved, and a simple explanation of why the LAA matters to VCS organisations in the city.
- Nottingham VCS infrastructure organisations are consulted and informed at regular intervals through monthly Community Network meetings.

Concerns raised during stakeholder events have influenced the developing LAA.

#### ***Implementing the LAA for Nottingham***

The LAA will increase opportunities for the voluntary and community sector organisations to be delivery agents. In the Safer and Stronger Communities Block we have incorporated an indicator on the strength of the voluntary and community sector. In the Economic Development and Enterprise block we have incorporated an indicator on the VCS as service providers

To achieve this across all four blocks we will build on work begun in 2005/6 to:

- support commissioning agencies to develop models that enable VCS organisations to hold contracts
- promote the contribution the VCS can make in public service delivery
- build the capacity of VCS organisations to become 'fit for purpose', bidding for and potentially winning contracts for service delivery

### 3 Selling the value of the VCS

The case for community involvement has been around for a long time. It is always worth reiterating, however, that engagement with local people and the VCS can benefit the quality of public services themselves, as well as wider society through:

- the involvement of local people in design, commissioning and evaluation
- the way in which a public service is delivered, e.g. by increasing community participation, building the skills and experience of volunteers and by strengthening trust within the community
- capitalising on how the VCS puts people at the heart of what it does and engages the local community.

In theory, this argument has been won; a recent policy statement around neighbourhood development talks of the policy gap, and we have 'places at the table' of the LSP etc. But the VCS still finds it hard to find the evidence, mainly because it doesn't have the time or resources to systematically gather, record and analyse the necessary information, especially as much of it is qualitative and attitudinal.

This a major challenge for the VCS with regard to LAAs because outcomes and stretch targets have to be evidenced, and you need to have some idea of where you are starting from, a baseline from which to assess progress. Unfortunately, in most cases but not all, the VCS is afforded a lower element of risk than statutory partners.

In Bradford District, the LAA Stronger Communities action plan is based on a clarity of understanding of what the VCS can contribute:

"Whilst not exclusively about the voluntary and community sector, this action plan does put a high value on what can be achieved by a **well resourced VCS that** can support the achievement of outcomes from different blocks. VCS groups and organisations can be used to develop well run services through a combination of strengths:

- proximity to local communities
- able to identify gaps and develop innovative solutions
- well developed expertise in **developing services that meet complex needs**
- often more able to **engage hard – to reach communities**
- experience and expertise in providing, holistic, **preventative services**
- experience and expertise in encouraging the **active participation** of service users
- skills and experience in collaborative and **partnership working**"

".... There are many reasons why some voluntary organisations fail to perform and an important role of this Action Plan is to redirect investment into supporting the organisational development of groups to maximise their effectiveness".

### So what's the answer?

LAAs should provide the opportunity for local authorities to create the same kind of relationship with the VCS that central government is developing with local authorities, i.e. a certain amount of trust, based on an evidenced-based strategic plan which affords certain freedoms and flexibilities.

This shift in relationships and dialogue is the key – and making linkages with other blocks, e.g.

- do any of the neighbourhood service improvement or community engagement targets sit more comfortably in the other blocks?
- does it make more sense to apply the community engagement outcome as a cross-cutting theme? What is the best means of embedding community engagement in the LAA?

The following statement is just as relevant to LAA negotiation as it is to neighbourhood management:

*“My advice to others embarking on a neighbourhood management initiative would be fourfold: build on community strengths, focus on two to three key priorities, get to know more about the local situation than service providers and help them to improve the quality of delivery” (Vince Roberts, Kendray Neighbourhood Manager)*

## **Pointers to success based on the wisdom of experience**

### **From Nottingham .....**

Nottingham LAA negotiations are built on a broad base of existing partnership working with the voluntary and community sector. A VCS core group communicated through meetings and emails. There is a VCS LAA project group including three voluntary sector members, each with distinct roles:

- Nottinghamshire Black Partnership - has an equalities brief
- Nottingham Community Network - joint lead negotiator on the Safer and Stronger block
- Nottingham CVS - attends as a critical friend to the process.

In addition, lead negotiators for each block have ensured that the VCS are involved in and inform the emerging priorities targets and actions.

‘Are you local’ events have been held for the VCS and BME, and the network newsletter carries accessible information about how to get involved (see the Community Empowerment Special Edition at [www.ngcn.org.uk](http://www.ngcn.org.uk)).

The LAA is now a standing agenda item for monthly Community Network meetings so that the infrastructure organisations are consulted and informed at regular intervals. A range of activities are planned to keep all stakeholders informed of the development of the LAA and to shape its direction at critical points. In response to demand, events will be held during working hours and also evenings and weekends so that the needs of smaller community organisations and Board members are met. Concerns raised during stakeholder events have already influenced the developing LAA, e.g. there is a more strategic approach towards funding the voluntary sector, moving away from short term project based funding. There is a clear expectation that one outcome of the LAA will be an increase in opportunities for VCS organisations to be delivery agents.

### **Bradford District .....**

The Community Empowerment Network (CEN) and the chair of the Building Communities Partnership were actively involved in the development of all three blocks and lead on the development of the SSC block. They ensured that the VCS:

- had representation on the district negotiating team and all key LAA partnership events and meetings.
- was commissioned to arrange workshops on each of the three themes, to consider ways of enhancing the role of the VCS in decision-making and service delivery.

As a result, the VCS has been able to develop detailed milestones and targets around VCS involvement in decision-making and measuring the strength and contribution of the VCS. The VCS across the district is now engaged in designing a number of interesting outcomes frameworks for the LAA.

Key messages from the Manager of Nottingham Community Network, the Manager of VOX (Wakefield CEN), the Chief Executive of One Nottingham (LSP) and from the VCS Chair of the Bradford District Building Communities Partnership:

- It is worth it – it is a massive opportunity.
- Have influenced shape and design of LAA.

- It takes a lot of time and deadlines are short.
- Keep reminding partners: you are not an optional extra.
- Build capacity early – identify strengths and weaknesses and explore the capacity of VCS to contribute.
- Don't allow yourself to be restricted to SSC block.
- (Try to) speak with one VCS voice.
- Use the process to shape expectations for future involvement.
- Build on local Compacts.
- CEN led on statement of VCS involvement.
- Understand strategy is the key to sustainability.
- Produce accessible information – newsletters and websites - NCN website 'hits' increased 3-fold since placing of LAA information.
- Be noisy as a sector.
- Beware of larger voluntary organisations dominating.
- Ensure VCS involvement across all 4 blocks.
- Get in early to set the direction of travel (before others do).
- Challenge the public sector's assumptions about the VCS.
- The public sector won't want to leave the table with less money.
- Reward money favours the well established – the VCS needs to push the boundaries, identify where VCS work is already happening and how it can contribute to overcoming some of the more intractable problems.
- Information and knowledge – local authorities are often information rich but knowledge poor – role for VCS. Map your services and experience and collect baseline data.
- The process goes beyond the signing of the LAA.
- Self-awareness – know your strengths/weaknesses.
- It's about what you bring across the piece – not just what you deliver.
- Get in on the Performance Management, refresh and review processes.
- Form consortia – there is strength in numbers.
- Find your allies – found key champions within the local authority and Government Office.
- Partners were grateful for our vision, commitment and time!
- Relationships have been nurtured – built trust.
- Identify / build the necessary technical skills within the sector.
- Build your relationship with Government Office and agree its role vis a vis the VCS.
- Get to grips with commissioning and contracting.
- Need some people from the VCS who can commit the time to making the LAA work for the sector. This can be a very isolating role.
- Restructuring of the CEN to reflect the four LAA themes helped.
- It's about hard core negotiating.
- Don't forget the Neighbourhood Dimension - ensure that LAA reflects Neighbourhood renewal floor targets if in a NR area.
- The LAA is not everything – it's at the heart of everything else but the Community strategy is much broader.
- Don't under-estimate what's involved in moving from one way of working to another (outcomes focus).
- Consider the role of elected members.
- The VCS is now 'threaded' through – it doesn't need to justify itself any more.
- Now the LAA is agreed, it's important to influence the commissioning process.

And remember,

- It's not just about Safer and Stronger, and it's not just what you deliver – think strategy.
- LAA's are a challenge to Partners too, not just the VCS.
- Investment and time is needed.
- Communicate and share information within the VCS.

## Signposts

NACVS, Nov 2005 – Voluntary and community sector involvement in second phase local area agreements.

[www.nacvs.org.uk/resources/la/laaphase2.doc](http://www.nacvs.org.uk/resources/la/laaphase2.doc)

IDeA - 'Making it work' - guidance on VCS involvement in LAAs, including on the content of statements of community involvement. [www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk/idk/aio/1359044](http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk/idk/aio/1359044)

IDeA knowledge base

<http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelid=1174195>

LAA Toolkit, [www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelid=1174268](http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelid=1174268)

ODPM Guidance on LAAs

<http://www.odpm.gov.uk>

Home Office/Office of Deputy Prime Minister – 'Indicators of Strong Communities' - indicators for the capacity building/community empowerment outcome in the SSC block and SSCF agreements.

[www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/publications.asp?did=1567](http://www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/publications.asp?did=1567)

VCS perspective from ACRE, Community Matters, Community Development Foundation, NACVS and Urban Forum

<http://urbanforum.org.uk/new/index.html> (March 2005)

National evaluation of Local Strategic Partnerships: issues paper - voluntary and community sector engagement in Local Strategic Partnerships

[www.renewal.net/Documents/RNET/Research/Voluntarycommunitysector.pdf](http://www.renewal.net/Documents/RNET/Research/Voluntarycommunitysector.pdf)

A process evaluation of the negotiation of pilot Local Area Agreements, June 2005; ODPM

[www.odpm.gov.uk](http://www.odpm.gov.uk).

Also see:

Improving neighbourhoods and supporting active communities, the impact of the Single Community Programme, Mandy Wilson & Jackie Heeney for GOYH [www.cogs.uk.net](http://www.cogs.uk.net)

A 21C VCS 4 Y+H: the future contribution of the voluntary and community sectors to the Yorkshire and Humber Region, G Craig et al, [www.yhregforum.org.uk](http://www.yhregforum.org.uk)