

Do *you* know your LAAs from your elbow?

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

Voice, Representation and Accountability

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Voice, Representation and Accountability: Why does it matter?

The introduction of Local Area Agreements (LAAs) marks an important development in the governance, planning and delivery of local services; the strengthened role of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) in the strategic delivery of LAAs highlights the **importance of the contribution of VCS representatives in what is a complex and fast moving environment**. LSPs are reviewing structures, roles and representation in response to LAAs and the **role of VCS representatives on Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) is evolving alongside the role of the LSPs**.

LAAs are of significance to the VCS because they impact on the role of the sector in supporting community empowerment and in influencing and delivering services. This changing context produces both opportunities and challenges for the VCS – in **understanding and articulating the potential of the VCS role** and in making an **effective and strategic contribution to the LSP decision making process**.

Challenges for VCS voice and representation include:

- The distinctive nature of the sector - making best use of having a 'voice' by developing a joint strategic approach whilst reflecting the diversity of the sector;
- Representation and role - defining representation and what is expected from sector representatives; clarifying where responsibilities for community engagement lie;
- Legitimacy and accountability - processes for 2-way communication between VCS reps, the VCS sector and the wider community;
- Capacity building - differences across the region in the development of representational structures and VCS infrastructure and the need to build capacity through personal, organisational and infrastructure development;
- Changing structures - the introduction of LAAs may mean the introduction of smaller executive LSP structures in some areas with an increased emphasis on the delivery of public services.

Reflections from the workshops:

The LAA process, with the focus on outcomes, is introducing a move from models of consultation to forms of local and joint decision making and service delivery – from process to delivery. Requirements of VCS reps are shifting:

"It's not just about power and influence – but getting something out of it." (Voice workshop, Hull)

A lot is expected of reps and some are becoming disillusioned. There is still a need for clarification of the role and some quality assurance. 'Representation' is a flawed concept and representatives need to see themselves more clearly as sector advocates. Should paid workers be taking up more negotiation and representative roles, and if so, how will they be accountable?

There is a need to distinguish between the VCS as the voice of service providers and the voice of users.

Communication is key – more needs to be done to reach marginalised groups and the grassroots at neighbourhood level and to strengthen accountability through 2-way dialogue.

More work needs to be done to develop a collective view from the sector where possible – it's about putting in the necessary work behind the scenes. Some areas are moving towards developing a VCS strategy.

In North Yorkshire the concerns were less about the performance and accountability of individual reps and more about the 2 tier structure and the fear of a loss of the voice that has been gained through district level LSPs.

In Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, the Community Empowerment Networks have built up a track record and a body of experience in addressing some of the challenges around representation and accountability.

Workshop discussion illustrated that there is a clear recognition within the sector that there is more to be done to improve representation and accountability:

"Finding the bottom line is complex and hard." (Voice workshop, Sheffield)

"Be realistic and learn to live with the contradictions – let's change what we can and not beat ourselves up over what we can't!" (Voice workshop, York)

The following examples of practice from across the region illustrate how much is already being done.

- **Who are the VCS representatives and how are they chosen?**

The challenge is to harness the expertise held within the VCS while engaging and developing new representatives in order to become more inclusive and to share the work and responsibility.

There are two main approaches to choosing VCS reps – election or selection. Elections from within the VCS networks and organisations can ensure that reps are closely linked to and accountable to the VCS; it may also encourage reps to feel they are 'representing' others which can be a barrier to partnership working.

Selection is usually undertaken by recruitment processes that include applications forms, shortlisting and interview by cross-sectoral panel. Reps selected in this way may not be so clear on their accountability to the VCS but it can result in a good skills mix for the role and the process helps to clarify the partnership nature of the role.

A number of areas are moving away from election and towards selection as a way of widening the pool of reps, increasing the effectiveness of the LSP reps in participating in strategic discussions and contributing from a wider sector perspective.

Leeds Voice works through five locally based District Partnerships alongside city-wide thematic partnerships; community reps are **elected** by the relevant community forum for the district supported by Leeds Voice. Leeds Voice runs forums on Health, the Environment and Learning and is currently developing more. From these forums, Strategic Representatives are **elected** to feed into the LSP.

In **Rotherham**, the CEN runs a **selection** process for LSP reps. Potential reps complete an application form; if the essential criteria are met they are then invited to make a presentation to the Network where they are scored and selected against the desirable criteria. Reps report back to a Network meeting every other month which focuses on LSP business, going through the papers etc.

OFFER, the Community Empowerment Network in **Sheffield**, participates in a cross-partnership **selection** procedure. Board vacancies are advertised, followed by shortlisting and interviews. An information pack is prepared which includes a job description, person specification and

behaviour rules.
In Hull , the recruitment of reps has changed as part of the re-structuring on the LSP. 3 VCS places on the Delivery Board are filled by a selection process while the 10 VCS places on the City Partnership Board are elected from within Hull Community Network and linked into the Network's accountability framework.
CNet in Bradford have moved from an election drawn from network membership via postal vote to a s/election process starting with an expression of interest from the wider community, shortlisting by a panel and then selection by interview panel.
Doncaster CEN are preparing to move from election to selection of reps.
Wakefield VOX holds elections for representatives on external partnerships and the VOX Strategy and Management Group. Voting is organised on the principle of two votes per organisation, regardless of size, and is conducted by postal ballot.

- **What is the role of a VCS representative and who do they represent?**

VCS reps are neither fully democratically elected representatives nor are they isolated individual voices. Reps can bring a range of perspectives – as a member of the community about which decisions are being made, as champions of the diversity of community views or as a point of entry into a web of networks.

The important thing is to be clear in defining the role and what is expected. Reps need the opportunity to reflect on their role and the definition should be shared and understood across the partnership. Tensions and concerns from elected members regarding the legitimacy of VCS reps are evident in a number of areas.

Bradford Vision Board – Community Representative Job Description:

Role Title - Bradford Vision Board Member

Role and Purpose - Represent the communities of Bradford in an inclusive way on the Bradford Vision Board.

Criteria

- ❖ Resident of Bradford
- ❖ Member of voluntary organisation in the district
- ❖ Accept the values and principals of partnership working
- ❖ Commitment to equal opportunities

Responsibilities

CNet Representatives are responsible to the CNet Delegate Body

As Directors of Bradford Vision, they also have the role of Board Member

- ❖ Read the Bradford Vision board papers
- ❖ Attend LSP board meetings and briefing meetings (minimum - 75% attendance over a 12 month period)
- ❖ Consult and obtain the views of the organisations or sectors CNet represents and reflect or communicate these at meetings. Community Representatives are required to represent the views of the sector at large and not only/exclusively the views of their own organisation
- ❖ Attend CNet Delegate meetings and provide feedback to the Community Network through various means, including providing information, articles, for production in publicity material including BaD News and web site
- ❖ Undertake induction and further training as appropriate

- ❖ Help to identify good practice and participate in joint decision-making
- ❖ Complete CNet feedback report after attendance at Strategic meetings
- ❖ Give two months notice of in the event of resignation (unless exceptional circumstances)

Skills

- ❖ The ability to listen and read reports, minutes and strategy documents effectively
- ❖ The ability to communicate with a wide range of people including community members and officers
- ❖ The ability to work as a member of a group
- ❖ The ability to speak confidently at a range of meetings and discussions

A Partnership Role

All members, staff and representatives associated with CNet are asked to observe a number of common rights and responsibilities:

Individuals are treated as equal and their contributions are respected and valued at meetings. Individuals will demonstrate consistency and honesty to achieve consensus through debate.

- ❖ A commitment to working with local communities to identify needs and propose solutions
- ❖ A commitment to confidentiality

Wakefield VOX are developing **Neighbourhood Networks** as a way of supporting dialogue on local issues and feeding these in to the LSP. VOX has engaged with **local councillors** when setting up networks and encourages them to attend the network meetings as an additional way of engaging with local concerns. VOX also have representatives on the Local Area Partnerships.

Doncaster are exploring neighbourhood working as a way of strengthening accountability and have elected a neighbourhood level representative onto the network steering group to increase the diversity of voices.

- **How are representatives supported to be informed and effective?**

Reps need a range of support in their role from induction and training to briefings and preparation for meetings. Communicating the views of a diverse sector is challenging; reps need to use and recognise the skills and behaviours that support partnership working and to contribute from a perspective that is wider than their individual or organisational concerns. Reps need to feel valued and that their contribution is making a difference. More experienced reps can support incoming reps.

Support to reps can include:

Induction meetings	Out-of pocket expenses
Individual training plans	Dedicated support worker (Hull, Doncaster)
Pre-meetings and briefing papers	Training needs analysis (Rotherham, Sheffield)
Access to web site and library	Mentoring (Bradford)
One to one meetings	Awaydays (Rotherham)
Telephone support (Kirklees)	Representatives Handbook (Hull)
Information alerts (Barnsley)	
Attendance at regional and national conferences	

The 'How Your City Works' course was established by **Hull** Community Network in partnership with the University of Hull and has involved over 50 participants. The course provides an opportunity to explore different decision-making structures in the City and understand how they work. The course has also spawned a network of 'Graduates' who meet monthly to consider

how the learning from the programme can be used to influence service provision.
In Rotherham , 'Old' and 'new' reps are encouraged to work together and support each other through awayday events. A Training Needs Analysis has been undertaken and will lead to the development of individual learning plans for reps.
OFFER, Sheffield , is working with individual Boards to provide "shadowing" opportunities for potential reps. A Training Needs Analysis of current reps has been undertaken to inform the development of a training and learning strategy. A ' <i>How Your City Works</i> ' course has been developed in order to encourage and support potential future reps.
Leeds Voice delivers the pREParation training programme designed to provide the information needed to become involved effectively in Leeds decision making.
York CVS has delivered the Stronger Voices training package developed by the National Consumer Council leading to Open College accreditation.
CNet, Bradford , have commissioned a learning strategy which is currently under development; this is intended to support reps and encourage potential reps. The training programme will be based on mapping of what is currently available, identifying what is needed and filling the gaps. CNet are currently running introductory and follow on workshop sessions aimed at Community Reps, potential reps and other interested people called <i>Getting Heard – how your group can have a say – local public services: who is responsible and how do you influence them.</i>

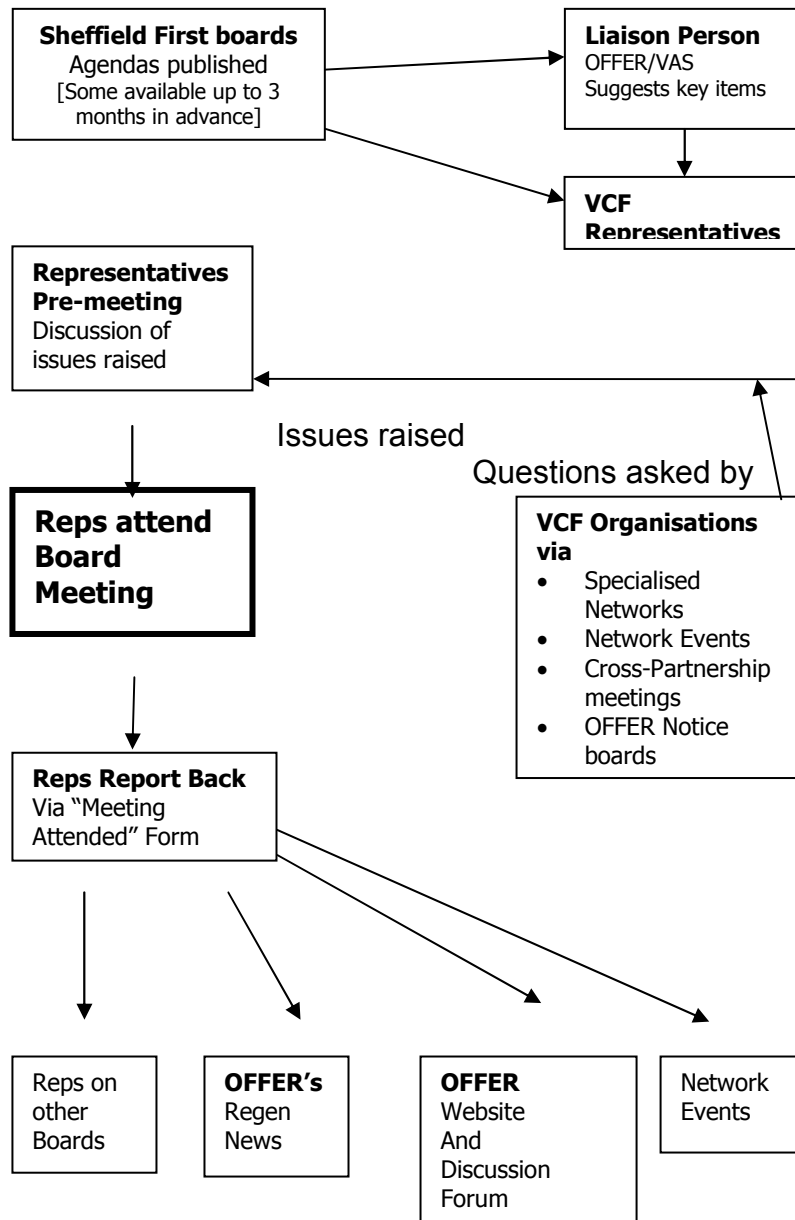
- **How are representatives supported to be accountable and to reportback to the sector?**

A consensus view from the sector can support stronger focused representation. Partners can challenge the legitimacy of VCS representation and the views put forward when they are not supported by clear accountability and feedback structures. Existing networks can be used to draw together a structured response to policy.

<p>The VOX Nominees Handbook explains how the election process works, sets out how VOX works and how VOX representatives are supported to represent the views of other VOX members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consultation with VOX membership; • open briefing meetings prior to partnership meetings; • policy development through theme workshops at the VOX convention which is held every 3 months. The results of these workshops are drawn up into policy statements and VOX representatives are expected to contribute these ideas to partnership meetings. <p>The Handbook states what representatives are expected to do in terms of communication, attendance, contributing and reporting back. It also sets out what support representatives can expect from VOX.</p>

In **Sheffield**, The requirements of reps and the support available to them are set out in the protocol agreed with Sheffield First (LSP). The protocol also includes the structure of how OFFER supports representatives to reflect sector views and be accountable. Expenses payment is linked to the completion of a feedback proforma by the representative.

How OFFER will support Representatives to reflect sector views and be accountable



Leeds Voice produce a digest three times a year which shares the experiences of the reps with the wider sector. Reps are asked to complete a feedback pro forma following attendance at a meeting. Reps are also expected to attend the quarterly VCS forum meetings linked to the theme area or District Partnership. Information can also be shared by the Leeds Voice newsletter, e-mail network and website.

Kirklees Voluntary Action Network asks reps to sign an agreement to confirm that they have read the description of the roles and abilities and that they will adhere to the expectation of representatives.

Extract from roles and abilities required for VCF position:	
Description of tasks	Approx Time Commitment
To attend and participate in <u>monthly board meetings</u> and possible other associated meetings and events.	2 hrs/month
To <u>read relevant briefings</u> and policy documents, relevant to the boards work. <i>As this is a new way of working, this may be a heavy workload to start with, but should reduce as things settle down.</i>	2 hours per month
To <u>write and present reports</u> to the board on voluntary sector issues when required (likely to be 2/3 times a year – with support available)	Up to 3 hours per report
To <u>keep others in the sector informed through regular communication.</u> e.g. through writing short reports about the board for VAN, alerting Community Empowerment Team staff about key issues	Up to 1 hour per month
To report to the following meetings in order to share information with others in the voluntary sector and receive their views: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ VAN themed forum meetings – twice a year. This forum is the main group to which you are accountable. ○ The Kirklees Voluntary Action Network (VAN) Steering Group – monthly. This group will include voluntary sector members of other Local Public Service Boards, and will send representatives to the Local Strategic Partnership. 	6hrs/year 2hrs/month
<p>Bradford CNet hold an open pre-briefing meeting is held prior to LSP meetings to which all members of the network are invited. LSP reps complete a feedback form after meetings. CNet are currently reviewing their constitution and structures in order to strengthen the flow of information to network members. Working with Bradford CVS, four VCS forums are being established, supported by paid coordinators, to shadow the LAA four-block structure.</p>	

Ingredients for success:

- Provide opportunities for people to get on the ladder towards becoming more involved, or becoming reps eg training workshops.
- Make sure people are aware of the opportunities by publicising through community resource centres, libraries etc.
- Have an up to date 'live' database of local groups and organisations and use it! Use other sources of contact such as community libraries database.
- Build on the contacts developed through small grants.
- Work towards continuous improvement but be realistic as to what can be achieved
- Think about cross sector working and training
- Invite elected members to briefing sessions
- Communication – plain English; reaching the grass roots
- Value in having rep support officers within infrastructure organisations
- Going far into the community – going to networks and working at neighbourhood level
- Sense of vision – direction
- Being realistic about politics – choosing battles
- Skills – need people who have skills, experience, confidence
- Accountability – groundswell fed through reps
- Regular, and open, pre-meeting briefings where the VCS can feed in
- Regular meetings of the Network membership where representatives meet each other and the wider network and share ideas (Wakefield, Leeds)
- Hold preliminary LAA awareness briefings across the sector – strategic change management

- Support group/rapid response team to back up those from the VCS leading on the LAA – critical friends
- “Demanded spaces” – development of community for its own sake

Signposts:

Listening to Community Representatives: A Model of Experience in Community Involvement. Brian Batson and Susie Gridley. Leeds Voice, April 2003. www.leedsvoice.org.uk

Positively perceived: A snapshot of voluntary and community sector involvement in Local Strategic Partnerships. prepared by Peg Alexander (Smile Consultancy). Regional Forum July 2005.
www.regionalforum.org.uk

A Picture of Performance: A review of Community Empowerment Network Progress across Yorkshire and the Humber. Prepared by Alison Crouch for the Regional Forum, July 2005.
www.regionalforum.org.uk

Voluntary and Community Sector engagement in Local Strategic Partnerships. National evaluation of Local Strategic Partnerships issues paper.
www.renewal.net/Documents/RNET/Research/Voluntarycommunitysector.pdf

Usual suspects or Community Leaders – What’s the difference? Summary of pilot online discussion forum, November 2004. Bradford University Centre for Participation Studies and YH Regional Forum Active Partner’s Unit.
www.regionalforum.org.uk/activepartners/other.php?id=28

Value added by community involvement in governance in local strategic partnerships – a community activists perspective
A script created using the experiences and words of community representatives on local strategic Partnerships
Download from www.futureprespectives.org