

Who's Listening to the Big Society?

Summary Findings

2011

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How social purpose
organisations in the
South West get their
voices heard



Who's Listening to the Big Society? – summary findings

This document includes summary findings and case studies. The full version of the report including further analysis, survey questions and list of respondents is available to download from www.southwestforum.org.uk/whoslistening

About us

South West Forum is the voice for the 70,000 social purpose organisations in the South West. We support groups to improve their effectiveness, maintain their independence, be collaborative and have real influence.

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Who's listening to the Big Society?

Summary findings

This report is about the relationship between social purpose and public sector organisations. In particular it looks at how social purpose organisations have a voice and are represented on decision-making bodies such as Local Strategic Partnerships. It also explores the participation of often marginalised groups such as equality groups and small volunteer-led organisations. It includes case studies of particularly creative or successful ways of helping social purpose organisations influence decision makers.

South West Forum has carried out this short study to find out how strong and inclusive is the voice of the social purpose sector. It is particularly important at the moment because funding cuts mean that support for social purpose organisations to have a voice is declining. This study presents a snapshot of how the voice and representation of social purpose organisations was organised and resourced in 2010-11, and how that is changing as public spending cuts start to have an impact.

In December 2010 South West Forum sent out a questionnaire to the main infrastructure organisation that co-ordinates voice and representation in each of the 15 upper tier local authorities in the South West of England. In addition, six organisations were contacted further to develop case studies to highlight particularly creative and successful examples in which social purpose organisations have influenced decision-makers.

The surveys were completed during the 2010-2011 financial year and as such echo a period of uncertainty. Indeed, whilst the report was being written the infrastructure partnership for Somerset was facing complete closure due to severe county spending cuts.

Benefits of involvement in decision-making

Our survey and case studies indicated many examples of the positive effects of involving social purpose organisations in public decision-making.

- All organisations questioned said they had social purpose representatives working on their Local Strategic Partnership at both board and thematic level.
- As a direct result of the Gloucestershire VCS Assembly's work with children and young people Gloucestershire County Council has learned more from the sector about good practice in Safeguarding (protecting and promoting children and young people's welfare) and has updated its own procedures and policies.
- Bournemouth CVS challenged approximately £200k of cuts to children and young people's services and as a result the cuts did not take place.
- Poole CVS said it has had successes from developing a culture of dialogue, partnership work and joint decision making with the public sector. He quoted a statutory colleague, Nick Wharam, Strategic Planning and Commissioning Manager of the Borough of Poole, who said: "Representatives of the voluntary sector on key planning forums ... have brought challenge to statutory partners, helped bring a unique perspective of service user and community views and helped the wider network of voluntary organisations understand opportunities."
- Cornwall Voluntary Sector Forum, through the Local Area Agreement, managed to save £1m of cuts to the social purpose sector during the government's initial £6bn spending cuts in 2010.



Creative and effective ways to involve social purpose organisations in decision-making

We found many creative and effective methods used to help social purpose organisations to have a voice and be represented in public decision-making.

- As part of the Dorset Voice project Dorset Community Action initiated a very creative bug postcard campaign to help social purpose organisations to voice their concerns and issues – particularly smaller groups who don't have the time or interest to attend lots of meetings. The success of this campaign has continued with banner postcards and the "Little Book of Influence" to signpost people to decision-makers.
- On a shoestring budget Voluntary Action North Somerset has held hugely successful Voluntary Sector Forum meetings, with many speakers from statutory bodies "queuing up" to speak at them.
- In Wiltshire the Wiltshire Infrastructure Consortium developed a unique way to use a discussion-based

empowerment tool with town and parish councillors – to help build capacity and influence decision-making. After the training one of the councillors said: "It makes us, as a town council, think about community involvement – are we doing as much as we could to reach out and take on board what they say and how we validate what they are saying?"

- Voscur in Bristol has demonstrated how with thought to the process you can achieve a great model of equalities representation. It now supports a truly representative Equalities Action Group to challenge statutory decisions.
- The Gloucestershire Assembly for the VCS has been involved at many levels of public decision making, running as a mirror to the county's Local Strategic Partnership.
- The Care Forum has many social purpose representatives on Health and Social Care boards across Bristol, Bath and North East Somerset, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset who have initiated changes to statutory decisions.



Much more to be done to make representation inclusive

Survey respondents were asked to rate the involvement in voluntary sector forums and assemblies of often marginalised groups including disabled people's organisations, Gypsy and Traveller groups and migrant workers' groups. They were asked to rate the involvement of these groups from 'not involved' to 'very involved' – at executive level or on project boards. The results were quite varied across different groups, and the survey indicated that the groups that have least involvement in voluntary sector forums and assemblies are:

- Asylum seeker and refugee groups – though in some cases they may be represented by Black and Minority Ethnic organisations more generally.
- Gypsies and Travellers' organisations
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender organisations
- Migrant workers' organisations
- Women's organisations

Those groups that were reported to have higher levels of involvement are still often excluded from decision-making, and may themselves report barriers that were not identified in this survey.

...it is the responsibility of voluntary sector forums and assemblies to ensure that they are inclusive of marginalised groups within the sector so that everybody's voice can be heard.

In some cases equality groups may be involved in decision making through separate forums from mainstream social purpose organisations, for example through a public sector equality scrutiny group run by the local authority. Nevertheless it is the responsibility of voluntary sector forums and assemblies to ensure that they are inclusive of marginalised groups within the sector so that everybody's voice can be heard.

Most of the organisations questioned were facing tough decisions, redundancies and even, in the case of Somerset, total closure.

When asked what steps had been taken to make the sector's voice more inclusive to marginalised groups respondents shared many useful ideas for widening participation including:

- using a variety of ways to communicate;
- making meetings and events more accessible;
- supporting or setting up equality networks;
- doing equality impact assessments;
- accessing funding for specific equality projects; and
- tailoring contact with groups to accommodate specific needs.

Uncertain future

This report was compiled during a particularly difficult time of spending cuts and changes to the social purpose sector. Most of the organisations questioned were facing tough decisions, redundancies and even, in the case of Somerset, total closure. It was felt that the voice and representation element of their work was being particularly badly hit.

Although all who replied said they had enjoyed strong representation on their Local Strategic Partnerships, as these partnerships are being changed it is felt that the social purpose sector is not being allowed such a strong involvement in the newly emerging decision-making structures. Health and Wellbeing Boards and Local Enterprise Partnerships are being set up, often with little involvement of social purpose organisations. Involvement on Local Enterprise Partnerships is worryingly low in many areas, as indicated in a

separate forthcoming report by South West Forum and RISE.

Even the Gloucestershire Assembly for the VCS, which is often held up nationally as a good example of engagement, is facing a huge 75% cut in its representation funding. Whereas previously the VCS Assembly ran a mirror system to the county's LSP, the Gloucestershire Conference, now that Conference is being radically slimmed down. Already a new Leadership Group, which excludes the social purpose sector, has been created.

Jess McQuail, Gloucestershire Assembly for the VCS, said: "Reductions in funding and stripping away of formal partnership structures means that voluntary and community sector influence will be less about representation and more about 'specialist advisor' or involvement." Ruth Walls, Plymouth Third Sector Consortium, expressed difficulty in using opportunities to influence when there is so much change happening across all public sectors.

Katy Pascoe, Dorset Community Action, hoped that emerging structures, particularly in health, might provide more opportunities for social purpose representation than the strategic partnerships. She said: "We need a clear message nationally outlining that good practice will be to include voluntary sector representation on these boards – GP consortia, HealthWatch, Local Enterprise Partnerships etc – and that this representation needs infrastructure support behind it."

When questioned on the 'Big Society' many respondents expressed a sense that government or local authorities were using the concept to push through more cuts to the social purpose sector and deliver services more cheaply.

Without support for social purpose organisations to get involved in decisions and have a voice, who will listen to the Big Society?

When we asked respondents to predict the sector's influence in the future they were understandably quite pessimistic about the near future but appear to be much more optimistic for a future five years ahead. Fifty per cent of respondents thought organisations would have less influence in a year's time. But when forecasting five years ahead, 73 % of respondents thought the sector will have more influence.

Conclusion and recommendations

Social purpose reorganisations are rising admirably to current challenges, but there is only so much they can do to mitigate the impact of spending cuts and respond to the pace of changes to legislation, policy and the organisation of the public sector.

Without support for social purpose organisations to get involved in decisions and have a voice, who will listen to the Big Society?

The following are recommendations to address the issues raised in the survey and case studies:

Infrastructure organisations supporting social purpose groups:

- Learn from what others are doing, and consider adopting some of the methods highlighted in this report and case studies, such as Dorset's 'Bug' postcards for engaging small community groups; Bristol's tried and tested selection and accountability mechanisms for its Equality Action Group; or Voluntary Action North Somerset's experience running its voluntary sector forum on a shoestring.

- Continue to make the case for accountability, and social purpose organisations' involvement in public sector decision-making.

- Focus on those groups that are excluded from decision making and target them to make sure they are involved in voluntary sector assemblies and forums.

- Be flexible in changing times – focus on different ways to influence, not just on traditional forms of representation.

Local public bodies, Health and Well Being Boards and Local Enterprise Partnerships:

- Invest in community engagement and involvement of social purpose organisations, or miss out on key expertise and access to the most marginalised in the community.

- Learn from the positive results from engagement in Local Strategic Partnerships when setting up new decision-making bodies such as Local Enterprise Partnerships and Health and Wellbeing Boards.

Ministers and central government:

- Send clear messages on good practice in engagement with social purpose organisations and the independence of the sector.

- Consider incorporating the Duty to Involve into the Localism Bill, to avoid losing the good practice the duty has supported.

- Continue to invest in infrastructure support for social purpose organisations provided at the most appropriate and efficient level.



What's Bugging You?

Creative ways to engage with voluntary and community organisations

An inventive scheme involving bugs and butterflies has enabled organisations in Dorset to gain more of a voice and influence in their communities. Dorset Community Action created user-friendly postcards on which people could write what was “bugging” them. These bugs were then collected, remedied and turned into butterflies.

Background

Katy Pascoe, DCA's Partnership Development Officer, presented the What's Bugging You? postcard campaign at the South West Forum Is Anyone Listening? event. She said the campaign was developed to help voluntary and community groups voice their concerns and issues – particularly smaller groups who don't have the time or interest to attend lots of partnership meetings.

The postcards were initiated as part of DCA's wider Dorset Voice project – the aim of which is to get true voluntary and community sector representation onto the Local Strategic Partnership, by identifying existing opportunities and creating new ways to engage.

Dorset Community Action created user-friendly postcards on which people could write what was “bugging” them. These bugs were then collected, remedied and turned into butterflies.

The Voice project runs themed third sector forums, nominations for representation onto strategic boards, and voice and influence training for voluntary and community organisations.

Dorset Community Action supports the voluntary sector across Dorset as the local Council for Voluntary Service. It currently has regular contact with more than 750 voluntary and community organisations, social enterprises and local authorities.

Structure

For the What's Bugging You? campaign the distinctive bug postcards were presented to voluntary and community organisations by DCA's Community Development Workers. Any issues which arose – such



“The ‘bug’ postcards enabled us to collect an evidence base, which we could present in partnership meetings, such as: x number of groups have this concern.”

as lack of representation and information – were discussed and people were encouraged to write their specific bug on the back of the postcard.

These bugs were then tracked, themes picked up and links made to other groups with the same issues. Individual bugs were either dealt with by DCA’s team or sent as messages to representatives of the Local Strategic Partnership and Dorset’s Third Sector Infrastructure Group. The bugs were then kept until they were solved and turned into butterflies.

Success

Katy said they’d had great feedback from people who were very happy to fill in the postcards and the messages had been well received by the Local Strategic Partnership as a voice of the voluntary sector. She said: “We collected 103 bugs in total and had the potential to collect a lot more.

“Some bugs we were able to signpost people immediately. Others we could group together and find recurring themes. This enabled us to collect an evidence base, which we could present in partnership meetings, such as ‘x number of groups have this concern’.

“Some bugs said they needed more opportunities to demonstrate the value of their work so we included examples of their projects in our infrastructure groups report, The Value of the Third Sector in Dorset, which has been widely circulated to statutory partners in the county.”

Bugs that were turned into butterflies included securing training around safeguarding vulnerable adults and having a representative from DCA’s Voluntary Sector Health and Wellbeing Forum elected onto the Dorset Safeguarding Adults Board.

Katy said that a lot of bugs expressed a need for more information and opportunities for organisations to work together.

She said: “This feedback encouraged us to change the Voice project’s emphasis from delivering messages individually to providing opportunities for organisations to come together and have a united voice.

“We have recently held events on commissioning, the Comprehensive Spending Review and the “Big Society” with speakers who are decision makers – such as the Chief Executive of Dorset County Council – who have been happy to conduct question and answer sessions.

“The voluntary groups say they find it extremely valuable to come together as a sector.”

Meryl Hecquet, Community Development Manager at GROW Wiltshire, contacted Katy after hearing her presentation at the South West Forum event. Meryl was looking for a method to demonstrate an inclusive approach which all groups in Wiltshire could engage with. Wiltshire, as a county, includes a very large rural area – with approximately 2,000 registered charities – and Meryl had heard that the Internet could be prohibitive for some groups.

She said: “The postcard campaign that Katy described really appealed as a way to engage with the sector as it is usable by any voluntary sector group, not just those with Internet access. We spoke to Dorset Community Action who very generously shared all their experiences around the What’s Bugging You? Campaign.”

GROW Wiltshire developed the idea by creating a single prepaid postcard printed with the words “My conversation...” followed by a space for people to write down their issue. They also printed some

“The postcard campaign that Katy described really appealed as a way to engage with the sector as it is usable by any voluntary sector group, not just those with Internet access.”

rules of engagement and responses onto the cards before distributing them across the Wiltshire library service.

The Wiltshire Voluntary Sector Forum Network and the distribution of the postcards have only just begun but, so far, they have responded to a plea for support from an equalities group and the group has been invited to attend the Wiltshire Voluntary Sector Forum.

Meryl said they are now looking at taking the postcards to training and events programmes, for more hands-on distribution.

She added: “We really want to get the cards out there and think there is a role for them. They show people we’re prepared to be innovative and the goodwill and inclusivity of the approach has been welcomed and appreciated. It’s shown a willingness on the part of the GROW service to engage with groups not able to attend our meetings.

“It’s also a very cost effective scheme – just £110 and freepost cost for 1,000 cards.”

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Funding

Dorset Strategic Partnership Board, Dorset County Council and Dorset Primary Care Trust have funded DCA’s Voice project, including the What’s Bugging You? postcard campaign. The project was allocated £50,000 for three years, ending in March 2011.

Georgina Morgan, DCA’s Acting Chief Executive, said that, due to the changes in requirements and funding for strategic partnerships, funding for the Voice project as a whole had been cut, and that they are working towards a new contract from the county council, which may include outcomes relating to representation.

She said: “With the strategic board funding gone we have lost more than half of the money, so don’t have the resource to sustain the Voice project. We are making loud noises higher up at the moment to try and ensure a voice for the sector at whatever strategic meetings occur.

“It has been a challenging project and the work will be even more challenging with less resources.”

Advice for others

After presenting her bug idea at the South West Forum event Katy said she received many phone calls from other organisations interested in the concept. She said: “I think the postcard scheme worked well because they were kept fun, accessible and easy – people could simply write by hand on something already provided.

“There are lots of ways to deliver messages to people making decisions about communities in your area that can take as much or as little of your time, depending on how creative you can be.”



Future plans

As a result of funding cuts the Voice project will be severely restricted after March 2011. Dorset Community Action is presently undergoing a redundancy procedure.

However, they are still building on the success of the postcard campaign. The bug postcards are presently being replaced with a new design – a banner containing the proclamation “I’d like to say...” followed by a space to fill in an issue or concern.

Katy said: “We needed to look at how to continue to influence on a very limited budget. Whereas the bug postcards needed to have a conversation alongside their use, these new ones can be used as a tool on their own.

“We plan to develop the postcards as a stand-alone resource which we hope will be distributed in libraries and through organisations such as the Dorset Village Halls Network, and be available online too.”

At the Is Anyone Listening? event which Katy spoke at Matthew Symonds, from Bristol’s Voscur, presented his organisation’s “A-Z of influence” – a pocket guide on how to influence decision making, including A for Ask Bristol website, B for Blog, C for Citizens Panel etc.

Katy liked this idea and used it as a template for DCA’s “A Little Book of Influence” – a handy guide which will be used in conjunction with the new banner postcards.

She said: “Through the Little Book of Influence people can be signposted to decision makers, such as MPs and councillors, and select who to send their banner postcards to. The new postcard and little book have

developed from the bug campaign and will hopefully have the same success at getting people’s issues heard. After all, that’s what influence is all about – getting your voice heard.”

Find out more

For more information on Dorset Community Action’s Voice Project see <http://www.dorsetcommunityaction.org.uk/voice>

For more information on Dorset Community Action visit <http://www.dorsetcommunityaction.org.uk>

Dorset Community Action can be contacted on 01305 250921

For more information on GROW Wiltshire visit <http://developecs.ning.com>

Contact Meryl Hecquet on 0845 034 5250 or meryl@growwiltshire.org.uk

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Strong and vibrant voluntary sector representation

The Gloucestershire VCS Assembly model

The Gloucestershire Assembly for the VCS is often held up nationally as a good example of voluntary sector representation. For seven years it has been running as a strong and vibrant voice of the sector, working alongside the public sector at a strategic level. However, having just lost 75% of its funding, its future is now uncertain.

Background

The VCS Assembly is run by GAVCA – Gloucestershire Association for Voluntary and Community Action, the support organisation for Gloucestershire’s voluntary and community sector. It was established in 2003 with the aim to strengthen and support the county’s voluntary and community sector – by providing a strategic voice and an arena for action and discussion.

Gloucestershire has a population of 564,559 (2001 census) and more than 2,800 voluntary and community organisations – 50% of which have no paid members of staff.

Gloucestershire Assembly for the VCS is based on the belief that collective action is more influential than

Gloucestershire Assembly for the VCS is based on the belief that collective action is more influential than a series of individual voices

a series of individual voices and that co-operation enables people to share strength through a pooling of energy, ideas and resources.

All voluntary and community organisations in the county are automatically members of the VCS Assembly and entitled to receive information, attend events organised by the assembly team and respond to consultations.

Structure

The VCS Assembly has been running as a mirror to the county’s Local Strategic Partnership – the Gloucestershire Conference. Just like the Conference, it has had an Assembly Board comprised of the chairs and vice-chairs of the four thematic groups – Children and Young People; Health and Wellbeing; Environment; Safer and Stronger Communities. A fifth group, Economic Development, has ceased since its funding from the Economic Partnership was cut in 2009. Running alongside the board and thematic groups has been an Equality and Diversity Advisory Group.

From within the Assembly Board and thematic groups representatives have been elected onto the Gloucestershire Conference – 45 representatives from the voluntary and community sector in total.

The VCS Assembly traditionally meets in full at least once a year. This meeting is open to all voluntary and community organisations in the county.

At the time of writing, a template of a post March 2011 slimmed down Gloucestershire Assembly for the VCS was emerging, in line with a reduced Gloucestershire Conference. This new VCS Assembly would include the Assembly Board, three thematic groups and no Equality and Diversity Advisory Group.



Success

The VCS Assembly has been responsible for many success stories across Gloucestershire's voluntary and community sector.

Jess McQuail, Gloucestershire Assembly for the VCS Team Manager, said: "Without the portal of the VCS Assembly things would take a lot longer and we would be spending a lot more time communicating. There also wouldn't be such a maturity and understanding between sectors – especially with criminal justice and adult and social care, which have seen some really successful working partnerships.

"Some practices and policies would look very different without the VCS Assembly's input. Some strategies have been completely rewritten because of it."

As an example of its success, the VCS Assembly team supported a worker from the County Community Projects organisation to be an elected voluntary and community sector representative on Gloucestershire County Council's Safeguarding Board. As a direct result of this work County Community Projects learned more about safeguarding (protecting and promoting children and young people's welfare),

reviewed and updated their own procedures and are now seen as a model of good practice, supporting other organisations to develop their own practices.

Members of the VCS Assembly team have also persuaded Gloucestershire County Council to put on safeguarding training for the sector, thus recognising that voluntary and community organisations are part of the wider children and young people workforce.

And as a direct result of their strong relationships with criminal agencies and the local police, GAVCA has recently received five months funding of £115,000 from Clinks and the Home Office, to fund a voluntary and community sector consortium to work in partnership with criminal justice organisations. Gloucestershire is one of four areas to take part in a national pilot scheme, to strengthen the role of the voluntary and community sector in Integrated Offender Management arrangements.

Funding

In 2009/10 the VCS Assembly received a total of £210,000 for its work. Most of this funding came from Gloucestershire County Council. Of the rest, Gloucestershire Constabulary funded £10,000 for the Safer and Stronger Communities group and the

Primary Care Trust granted £10,000 for the Health and Wellbeing group.

The total funding has now been reduced to £60,000, with further cuts threatened.

Jess said there have been some glimmers of hope post March 2011. After negotiation with the VCS Assembly Team, the county's Children and Young People Directorate has awarded some local 'transition funding' for local voluntary and community sector groups to help them plan next steps for projects funded by the Directorate as funding decreases or disappears altogether.

Advice for others

Jess said that the key to the VCS Assembly's success has been the team's communication skills and relationships with their members and the public sector.

She said: "You can have the best structure in the world but if you don't have understanding and

communication skills it will fall flat on its face. So much is about individuals investing time, energy and diplomacy into building up relationships.

"One of the most important parts of our job is to develop relationships with the public sector. Once they've understood what you can offer and who to talk to things can really take off."

Recent successful inclusion in the Clinks/ Home Office pilot scheme came about in part as a result of good relationships with Gloucestershire Constabulary and Gloucestershire Probation Trust.

Also key to their success, said Jess, is the emphasis they place on keeping their countywide database of voluntary and community groups up to date and useful, especially as the public sector relies on them to communicate well with its members.

Future plans

With a huge 75% cut in its funding the Gloucestershire Assembly for the VCS is presently

"One of the most important parts of our job is to develop relationships with the public sector. Once they've understood what you can offer and who to talk to things can really take off."





mapping a different course for its future. The Gloucestershire Conference is being radically slimmed down and a new Leadership Group, which excludes the voluntary and community sector, has been created.

Gloucestershire County Council has indicated that it will be less interested in voice and more in the VCS Assembly being a portal to communicate with the voluntary and community sector – providing information, intelligence and advice on particular issues.

Jess said: “We are looking at where we should be prioritising our influence and asking: Do people have the resources now to actually be VCS reps on Local Strategic Partnership boards?”

“The VCS Assembly has been quite a good example and ahead of its game with its structure, funding and partnership working. However, this is now changing. We’re going into a different arena now and we are not going to have the same resource.”

She said that there will probably be less thematic partnerships and more of an emphasis on task and finish groups on particular issues – including the “Big Society”.

“The future is going to be a slimmed down VCS Assembly with the focus on it being a network of

networks. Our priority will be around voluntary and community sector involvement in the broadest sense, in recognition that there is a need to have a diversity of voices and views heard.

“There will be a greater emphasis on the VCS Assembly as a conduit for the voluntary and community sector and we will be concentrating on capacity building – looking at needs and gaps, not just views.”

Find out more

For more information on the VCS Assembly visit www.gloshub.org.uk/Gloucestershire-vcs-assembly

For more information on GAVCA visit www.gavca.org.uk

Contact Jess McQuail on 01452 522600 or jessm@glosassembly.org.uk

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Models of equality representation

What works? Voscur and the Bristol Partnership Equalities Action Group

To manage the process of enabling many voices to be heard it helps to have delegated a spokesperson. But finding the right spokesperson can be a real challenge. Voscur has supported Bristol's Equalities Action Group to succeed in this challenge when appointing representatives to sit on statutory equalities boards.

Ruth Pitter, Voscur's Equalities Manager, described how they found the right people during a presentation at the recent South West Forum/ Equality South West Equal Rights, Equal Voices event. The details of Voscur's equality representation process are outlined below.

Background

Bristol Partnership, the city's Local Strategic Partnership, set up the Equalities Action Group in 2003. For the most part of its existence the chair of the group has also sat on the Partnership's Executive Board.

The group meets quarterly to scrutinise the partnership's decisions and identify issues that

Voscur and other voluntary and community organisations challenged the Bristol Partnership to re-establish it. The group is now fully supported by the partnership.

relate to the collective experiences of people from the different equalities strands. It was disbanded as part of the course of the Bristol Partnership's review in 2008. Voscur and other voluntary and community organisations challenged the Bristol Partnership to re-establish it. The group is now fully supported by the partnership.

Structure

When the Equalities Action Group was first formed a selection panel chose the six representatives from each equality strand – gender, race, faith, sexual orientation, age and disability – to serve as representatives on it. However, this didn't work well because the representatives had no mandate or people to report back to; it was unclear at times whether they were representing themselves as individuals or the wider community.

Three years later, when a new group of representatives was required, a panel system was employed again. This time the emphasis was on recruiting "equalities champions" – people who had expertise in broad equality and diversity issues, rather than just having experience and knowledge of one strand. It was felt that such people could represent all equality groups on the partnership, not just their own equalities perspective. However, it proved difficult to find people who fulfilled this criterion – potential representatives usually had experience of one or two areas of equality, but lacked an overarching knowledge.

This process was abandoned and a new system planned in 2010. Voscur worked with other equalities groups on building a system of true representation. They opted for an open election process whereby members of all equality groups could nominate



people to be a representative within one of six equality strands, and vote for candidates.

Individuals were nominated by representatives of organisations working on behalf of an equalities community or group, and seconded by individuals with experience of equalities work. They stated how they felt the nominee fulfilled the skills and aptitude for the role. These statements were then posted onto the Bristol Partnership and voluntary and community organisations websites for voters to read.

In May 2010 each candidate spoke at a hustings event before a full ballot was taken. Steps were made to ensure large organisations couldn't block vote in their own candidates.

Success

It appears that even in these early stages – the new representatives have had three meetings to date – the new system of electing representation has proved very successful.

“Firstly, have a very clear structure and a good support network for your representatives. And build good relationships with statutory agencies so it doesn't just become a case of ‘them and us’

Ruth said: “The group is feeling very buoyant and confident right now. People are happy with the representatives and feel that they have a mandate to speak on their behalf.

“We spent a lot of time on process to try and get representation right. I think it was worth it as there is a real value to what we do on the partnership – bringing people together to make change happen.”

Confidence in the Equalities Action Group has also been raised by new support from public sector representatives who, Ruth said, are bringing a “sense of impetus” to the meetings.

This support from the public sector came about after Voscur and other groups contacted equality managers from agencies across the public sector including the university, police, fire and NHS.

Ruth said: “The six elected reps from the voluntary and community sector – including the chair and vice chair of the group – and those from the public sector, along with support staff from Voscur and other voluntary groups, now form a very vibrant and democratic group to take on the challenges of the next three years.”

Funding

The Equalities Action Group – which has included the running of networks for a wider equalities strategy – is funded by the Bristol Partnership, and Voscur has contributed its time and resources to it. In the past the Bristol Partnership granted Voscur £2,000 to support the Equalities network for a year.

Voscur committed its own time and resources into co-facilitating the recent representative Equalities Action Group elections.

Advice for others

Ruth said they had learnt a lot from working with the representatives and felt that – although it required a lot of work – the election system was by far the best way to get a true model of representation.

On the day-to-day support of the group she offered this advice: “Firstly, have a very clear structure and a good support network for your representatives. And build good relationships with statutory agencies so it doesn’t just become a case of ‘them and us’ with different approaches to equalities.”

Future plans

Voscur has recently secured a new three-year contract with Bristol Council to manage the support service to Bristol’s voluntary and community sector – including services to facilitate voice and influence. The new government’s plans for Local Strategic Partnerships in this round of spending cuts is still unclear, although many across the country are said to be looking to streamline their groups and sub-groups.

Ruth is very clear that the Equalities Action Group needs to build its strength in these difficult times. To add to the support from the public sector they are now planning to engage a representative from the private sector – to have all three sectors covered.

Ruth said: “Engaging with all three sectors will help build the strength of the group and maintain its survival.”

She added: “There are a lot of strategic bodies for equalities groups to be represented on and people say that if you’re trying to get reps from all the equalities strands onto all these different partnerships, that’s going to take a lot of people’s time.

“While it is time well spent, we need to get a lot smarter and stronger together as equalities communities – it’s so important that voices are heard and we need to collaborate together.”

Find out more

For more information on the Equalities Action Group visit <http://haveyoursay.bristolpartnership.org/the-partnership/equalities-action-group>

For information on Voscur visit <http://www.voscur.org>

And for information on the Bristol Partnership see <http://bristolpartnership.org>

Contact Ruth Pitter on 0117 909 9949 or ruth@voscur.org

March 2011

Voice and Echo in Wiltshire

A new way of working with local councillors

Eighteen Wiltshire town and parish councillors were the very first to use a discussion-based tool to improve both how they listen to – and speak for – their communities. To demonstrate the project’s success facilitator Karen Winchcombe, Voluntary Sector Consortium Manager at Wiltshire Infrastructure Consortium, reported: “The councillors said it really opened their minds to how they represent their communities and asked if it’s the voice which shouts the loudest that gets heard the most.”

Background

The councillor training was part of Wiltshire Infrastructure Consortium’s pilot programme to assist their community in building its capacity and confidence in order to influence decision-making. The Consortium consulted Changes – a national organisation which provides help and training on empowerment and influence. Changes has developed the Voice tool for voluntary and community organisations to map onto a horizontal and vertical “axis of influence” where they are in regard to their degree and capacity to influence outside agencies such as statutory bodies. The Echo tool has been

similarly devised for public agencies and partnerships to assess how open they are to community influence, in relation to their potential to respond to the communities they serve. Many voluntary and community organisations have used the Voice tool to prompt debate, identify factors for improvement and create action plans to increase their influence.

Changes trained 12 facilitators in Wiltshire in the use of the Voice tool, including Katie Fielding, County Secretary to Wiltshire Association of Local Councils.

Karen Winchcombe said: “Katie really liked the Voice tool but felt it had something missing to take to her work with local councillors. Councillors are really all things to all people – they come together as a council but most of their time is spent on their own as active citizens. They play a role in Echo as part of the councils they serve but also represent themselves as individuals, so needed to explore the Voice tool too.”

Because of this need for councillors to both listen and influence it was felt they should undertake both Voice and Echo programmes together. A consultation with Changes resulted in the devising of a new programme to bring together the two distinct tools for the first time.

Structure

The Voice and Echo programme was piloted with three town and parish councils across two evenings. On the first evening 10 town councillors worked with Sue Goring and Sal Hampson from Changes. On the second evening Marion Rayner, of Community First, and Debrah Biggs, of Wessex Community Action – two of the 12 facilitators who had received Changes training and from organisations within the Wiltshire Infrastructure Consortium – delivered the same programme to eight parish councillors. The councillors

“The councillors said it really opened their minds to how they represent their communities and asked if it’s the voice which shouts the loudest that gets heard the most”



worked together to plot on the Voice axis the degree and the capacity which they felt they have influence as a voice for the communities they represent and, on the Echo axis, they plotted how open they are as a local council to community influence, in relation to their potential to respond to community influence.

Karen Winchcombe said: “It was a really good programme that seemed to be very successful in helping the councillors think about both the influence they have and their openness to community influence. The two tools seemed to naturally come together and it all worked really well. On both evenings the councillors said how it really opened their minds to how they respond to their communities. It will be interesting to measure the impact the programme has on the future work of the councillors.”

Success

The immediate success of the programme can be measured by the comments made by some of the councillors immediately after the training:

“It makes us, as a town council, think about community involvement – are we doing as much as we could to reach out and take on board what they say and to validate what they are saying?”

“A really interesting analytical tool to see what I am doing individually and what we as a town council are doing collectively. In particular, it is interesting – this idea of being proactive to support community groups to have a voice rather than wait for them to come to us.”

“It has been very, very useful and I want to take all of it back to all of our meetings and ask if we should be addressing things in a different way.”

Funding

Wiltshire Infrastructure Consortium funded the councillor project at a total cost of £3,000. This covered the costs of Changes devising the programme to deliver the Voice and Echo tools together and delivery to the 18 councillors.



The Consortium has been liaising with Wiltshire Council on the potential of it funding the programme for other councillors across the county.

Unfortunately, as with all Capacitybuilders funded projects, the future of the Consortium – and thus further development of this valuable Voice and Echo work – is very uncertain. Presently the Consortium is struggling for survival, although there are hopes to continue some of its work.

Advice for others

Karen Winchcombe said her and her colleagues found the Voice and Echo tools very powerful. She said: “It looks rigid and is ground in good theory but it can be adapted to anything and used within teams of people for lots of things, including performance management. I would thoroughly recommend its use for other organisations.”

Her advice to getting pilot projects off the ground was: “Just press on and get on with it. Instead of waiting around for your council to verify your project, get on with it and deliver.”

Future plans

Karen said: ‘I would like to see the Voice and Echo project rolled out across Wiltshire, through the town and parish councils and the Community Area Partnerships in Wiltshire. I have contacted Wiltshire Council to see if they would be interested in the training but progress is slow due to their own changing priorities in these difficult times of spending cuts.’

Katie Fielding, County Secretary to Wiltshire Association of Local Councils, is planning to map

“In regard to the government’s new Localism Bill I believe there is even more need for Voice and Echo as a package for our local councillors – people on the ground have a voice which their local councillors can listen to and use to have a greater influence in their communities.”

how many of the other town and parish councillors (there are 253 across Wiltshire) wish to engage in the training that the pilot group received.

Karen added: “In regard to the government’s new Localism Bill I believe there is even more need for Voice and Echo as a package for our local councillors – people on the ground have a voice which their local councillors can listen to and use to have a greater influence in their communities.”

Find out more

For more information on the project visit www.wiltshireinfrastructureconsortium.org.uk

For more information on the Voice and Echo tools see <http://changesuk.net>

And for information on Wiltshire Association of Local Councils town visit www.wiltshire-alc.org.uk

Contact Karen Winchcombe on 01380 722475 or kwinchcombe@communityfirst.org.uk

March 2011

The Care Forum:

Illustrating the Value of Specialist Infrastructure for Health and Social Care

The Care Forum is a voluntary and community sector (VCS) specialist health and social care infrastructure organisation based in Bristol and working primarily across Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire. Its members include voluntary and community organisations, statutory agencies and individuals.

It aims to promote health and social well being by enabling voluntary and community organisations and individuals to participate fully and equally in the planning and improvement of services, empowering individuals and groups to represent themselves and make informed choices, and improving people's access to health and social care services.

For individuals The Care Forum empowers adults and young people to voice issues about local health and social care services, provides an empowerment model of advocacy, and a Well Aware comprehensive directory of national and local groups, services and organisations with a dedicated signposting service and a mental health employment portal.

“The representatives keep everyone up to date with items on meeting agendas and the members feed back any issues to the representatives before and after the meetings.”

For both the statutory agencies and voluntary and community sector organisations, The Care Forum provides channels of communication between commissioners and providers, consultation and networking opportunities, independent facilitation and events management, and specialist advice on policy development and implementation as it impacts on the health and social care voluntary sector. It also promotes good practice in models for meaningful consultation, inclusive patient and public participation, independent reporting at NHS consultations and the organisation of voluntary sector representation in multi-agency forums.

Structure

Four teams work within The Care Forum: two specialist infrastructure support teams, Information and Research and Voluntary Sector Services; and two direct services, Advocacy and LINKs. The Voluntary Sector Services team provides 'voice and influence' specifically for the health and social care voluntary sector. Four co-ordinators, one for each of the four local authority areas in which the team works, run voluntary sector networks for health and social care, older people, mental health and children and young people. These VCS networks meet three times a year, reduced from four owing to spending cuts since March 2011. The networks provide opportunities for organisations to get together and exchange ideas and information. They also give a voice to the voluntary and community sector and a forum for talking with the statutory sector.

Representation

The Care Forum's network members elect VCS representatives on to strategic boards. Presently, there are around 90 VCS representatives across the



Small portions
available
Daily lunch specials
All types of
memberships and junior
packages with various
pillings available
Special history names
by request
Parties raised for
Weekly coffee team.

four local authority areas, sitting on 75 multi-agency health and social care groups. Representatives are accountable to the sector and required to report back to network meetings and through e-bulletins. Representatives follow a full induction programme and undergo exit interviews when they move on. When they are sitting on multi-agency partnerships and PCT boards they are there in the capacity of a VCS representative, not of a particular voluntary sector provider or their own organisation, but as a voice for the whole of the voluntary and community sector in their area.

Kate Oliver, the Voluntary Sector Services Manager, said: “The representatives keep everyone up to date with items on meeting agendas and the members feed back any issues to the representatives before and after the meetings. This creates a circular feedback system that helps to amplify the voice of the sector.”

The Care Forum runs meetings to acknowledge the representatives’ contributions and to make the time for peer and specialist support through the exchange of ideas and experience and developing their strategic skills. A recent issue that arose at these

The case for specialist support to the sector to influence and navigate these changes on behalf of vulnerable service users has never been stronger.”

lunchtime meetings was the frequency with which VCS interventions at meetings were not recorded in meeting minutes. Advice was shared on how representatives could take this up with the chair so that they had their support when they proposed amendments at the next meeting.

Success

Such a solid representation across so many health and social care strategic boards has resulted in many successes.

When sitting on the Maternity and New Born Services Review for the Bristol Health plan, for North Somerset, Bristol and South Gloucestershire, the VCS representatives were able to support the extent to which equalities factors were included in the review and the quality of the information. Initially the planners had not looked at transport access to the new maternity and neonatal services hub. The VCS rep requested that an equalities impact analysis was carried out on transport access and as a result the group became more aware of the transport implications in terms of planning for the future. The rep also encouraged additional focus groups to inform the service planning, for example one with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and transsexual service users.

In Bath and North East Somerset the VCS representatives on the older people network were instrumental in providing service users with more of a voice in the social care procurement process. And on the South Gloucestershire Children and Young People Safeguarding Board the VCS representative successfully proposed the continuation of free safeguarding training for voluntary and community sector organisations.

The planners had not looked at transport access to the new maternity and neonatal services hub. The VCS rep requested that an equalities impact analysis was carried out.

Funding

Across its work streams, The Care Forum is funded by the primary care trusts and local authorities in Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire. Particular projects attract additional grant funding from organisations such as the Department of Health, Children England and the Children's Workforce Development Council.

At present, however, The Care Forum's overall income for infrastructure support this year is one third lower than last year's funding. This 30% reduction in funding for infrastructure support has equated to a loss of 2.5 days work a week, two networks cut and a reduction by a quarter of network meeting frequencies.

After 20 years of supporting specialist infrastructure support, the recent re-commissioning of infrastructure services in Bristol by the city council has resulted in block funding to one generic infrastructure organisation, and the withdrawal of all funding for both The Care Forum's specialist health and social care and children and young people infrastructure support in the city, and for the specialist BME infrastructure organisation.

Future plans

The coalition government's Health and Social Care Bill, if its massive overhaul of the NHS goes ahead, will have a significant impact on the work of The Care Forum. For example, the number of health and social care commissioner and provider agencies will increase which amounts to an additional burden on the voluntary sector. Relations with the newly developing community health social enterprises, the GP reference groups, the GP commissioning boards locally and their

sub regional and regional groups will all need some form of communication channels and partnership or contracted working with the voluntary and community sector.

Kate said: "This bill will have a serious impact on the sector including a hiatus in funding, working relationships, partnership working and communications. If funding is cut, even if temporarily, at the end of this year, we will struggle to find the capacity to make the most of the potential opportunities available to the voluntary sector and The Care Forum. The case for specialist support to the sector to influence and navigate these changes on behalf of vulnerable service users has never been stronger."

Find out more

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May 2011

Voluntary Sector Forum on a shoestring:

Success in North Somerset

North Somerset Voluntary Sector Forum meetings have become so popular that people are queuing up to speak at them. This success has been built on the smallest of budgets and is a great example of what can be achieved with limited resources.

Background

The forum is organised by Voluntary Action North Somerset (VANS) – a support network for the voluntary sector. It was established to strengthen the voice of the sector at a strategic level – working with statutory bodies including North Somerset Council, the Health Service and the police. Membership of the forum, and VANS, is open to all voluntary and community groups and social enterprises in the area. It brings people together to discuss, identify and promote interests and concerns. It also gives members opportunities to work with other sectors through the North Somerset Partnership and other local or regional bodies.

North Somerset is a predominantly rural unitary authority. It has a population of 204,700 - 70% of which live in the main towns of Weston-super-Mare,

“Forums should be made dynamic and useful – rather than just tea and biscuits and a moan. Our forum meetings have been so successful we’ve had people queuing to speak at them.”

Portishead, Clevedon and Nailsea.

More than 120 of the 750 registered charities in North Somerset are members of VANS. There is also a possible additional 250/ 500 voluntary groups not registered as charities.

Structure

The forum usually meets at The Campus community building in Weston-super-Mare three times a year. All members are invited and around 40 to 50 attend each meeting.

Bob Snow, Chief Executive of VANS, said: “We always have good attendance at the meetings. They are not just about internal problems - we usually have speakers and workshops involving public sector agencies discussing their future plans and initiatives. We have recently called an extra event on commissioning services - and how to prepare organisations for commissioning in this present climate.”

A steering group of representatives from forum members – currently Community Action, North Somerset Citizens Advice Bureau, TENONS environmental network, North Somerset Housing and Somerset Racial Equality Council – meets every other month to oversee the organisation and direction of the forum.

Success

Through the forum meetings, members have gained more knowledge and understanding of statutory bodies, and the way decisions impact on their communities. Bob said: “People have come to the forum with little knowledge on the policy making and planning that affects people in North Somerset. Through the forum they are now far more aware of the



priorities of statutory bodies and how it affects them and the organisations they are involved in.

“Every session is evaluated and the meetings are consistently very highly regarded.”

Through their Reaching Out/ Linking In project VANS has identified hard to reach and hard to hear groups who have become forum members.

Funding

The Voluntary Sector Forum has been running at a cost of £5,000 per annum for three years. Funding was granted from the government agency Capacitybuilders, which will cease to exist from the end of March 2011. The funding pays for one member of staff to work four hours a week and covers costs and refreshments for the forum meetings.

Advice for others

Bob believes that the success of the forum lies in the structure of the meetings. He said: “We have made our meetings interesting and as attractive to people as possible. I would advise anyone involved in organising forums such as ours to keep their finger on the pulse to make sure they’re giving people what they require.

“Forums should be made dynamic and useful - rather than just tea and biscuits and a moan. Our forum meetings have been so successful we’ve had people queuing to speak at them.”

Future plans

Funding for the forum finishes in March 2011, although Bob hopes North Somerset Council will continue to finance it.

He said: “It’s a vital link between the voluntary sector and partners and has proved extremely valuable as a communications tool.

“The council sees the validity of the forum but is under extreme pressure with funding cuts of 28% looming. They are in a state of funding purdah at the moment – we will have to wait and see.”

As Chief Executive of VANS Bob will continue to speak for the voluntary and community sector in his position as representative on the North Somerset Partnership, including the sole representative of the sector on the Executive Board.

He said: “The challenge is in persuading public and private partners that there is a need for us to build capacity within the voluntary and community sector. The sector is often seen as a homogenous group – 750 registered charities is not a homogenous group. When people say, “we would like the sector to do this” it makes no sense in terms of delivery. Contact with the sector through the forum has been really useful to help challenge this perception and is another good reason to keep the forum going.”

Find out more

For more information on the forum see www.vansweb.org.uk/cms/index.php?page=voluntary-sector-forum

For information on Voluntary Action North Somerset visit www.vansweb.org.uk

Contact Bob Snow on 01934 410191 or bob.snow@vansmail.org.uk

March 2011

South West Forum is the voice for the 70,000 social purpose organisations in the South West. We support groups to improve their effectiveness, maintain their independence, be collaborative and have real influence.

For a copy of this document in large print or other formats please contact admin@southwestforum.org.uk or 01392 247901



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