

NCVO briefing: Local elections

Introduction

The voluntary sector has a shared interest with local councillors in bringing people together to strengthen their local community. We all want to see public services transformed so that they better suit the needs of a local area.

We also know that the vast majority of the voluntary organisations who make up NCVO's members engage with government at a local level, rather than at a national one. With the transfer of power from Whitehall to town halls likely to continue, this will increasingly be the case.

The local voluntary sector encompasses small community groups, co-operatives and social enterprises, and 'household name' charities delivering local services. Together, these organisations make a significant contribution to local communities and local economies.

It is a challenging time for local government, with sustained pressure on budgets from reductions in the central grant and increased demand for services, predominantly driven by demographic changes. At the same time, greater flexibility and localism give councillors and their officers new opportunities to work innovatively to meet local need.

Working more closely with local voluntary organisations can help local councillors to meet the needs of the local community better.

Our vision for local communities, jointly supported by their elected local representatives and voluntary organisations, is one where:

- local government understands the needs of their community and delivers or commissions support to meet them
- local councillors and commissioners work together with service providers to take a strategic, long-term approach to provision and planning
- councillors lead resilient communities where local people are empowered and engaged.

NCVO envisage three main areas where local government and the voluntary sector could work together to achieve this vision:

1. communities
2. local services
3. volunteering.

About NCVO

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) is the largest membership organisation for the voluntary sector and volunteering in England. With over 10,900 members, NCVO represents all types of organisations, from large 'household name' charities to small voluntary and community groups involved at the local level.

Communities

What issues are local government facing?

There is a long-term trend of residents being disengaged with the local community and weaker local links, particularly in urban areas. This can lead to lower community resilience and, as a result, higher demand for public services.

Many areas are facing multiple challenges, meeting the complex needs of a diverse group of citizens, and have a need for more targeted allocation of resources.

How can the voluntary sector help?

A strong voluntary sector can help to foster community resilience and civic engagement, reducing the reliance on local services. Individuals have greater social capital and control over their local community, decreasing the need for local services.

Local people are empowered to take action in community on issues that matter to them, supported by voluntary organisations and a strong vision from local councillors. Key local assets may be better run by local people, for example The Mill in Walthamstow, where a disused library building has been turned into a community space.

The Mill E17

The Mill opened in September 2011, taking over a closed library building with grant funding from Nesta's Neighbourhood Challenge. The Mill, which relies on the involvement of local people and local groups, brought the library back to life for the community.

Acting as a hub for the local community, there are language classes, parent and baby groups, employment support and exercise classes, as well as an honesty library, allowing local people to borrow donated books without any formalities.

Charities and voluntary organisations can work with local councils to deliver early intervention support which reduces the need for costly crisis intervention in the future. They are also able to advocate on behalf of vulnerable individuals in the community, helping them to navigate services and maintain more independence.

Daffodils Advocacy Project

The Daffodil Advocacy Project in the London Borough of Redbridge primarily supports adults with learning disabilities. Daffodils provides a range of services for local people including one to one advocacy and user involvement to enable service users to navigate local services, articulate their needs and suggest improvements to local services. These services enable users to lead more independent lives and support providers in getting the right services in place.

What can local councillors do?

As a local councillor you can take actions to create the environment for strong communities to flourish by:

- working with local people and their community groups to help them take control of the services that they use and depend upon

- providing a voice for local people and groups to identify solutions for more effective service provision
- chairing local representative boards and committees which include voluntary sector and citizen representatives.

Questions to ask your officers

If you want to find out more about what your local authority is doing to encourage strong communities, you can ask your officers these questions:

1. What services are the council currently outsourcing to private providers that local organisations or community groups might be willing and able to do better?
2. What processes are in place to enable individuals and communities in helping to identify local needs and solutions?

Local services

Issues for local government

Substantial and prolonged reductions in spending power mean councils need to do more with less, at a time when demand for services is increasing. The LGA has envisaged a possible future scenario where local authorities are only able to deliver basic statutory services (*Funding outlook for councils from 2010/11 to 2019/20*, LGA June 2012).

The ability to respond to this difficult funding environment is hampered by a fragmented commissioning process. Commissioners and procurement practitioners often work in silos, preventing the close partnership working needed for effective public services. 'Gold plating' the commissioning process leads to disproportionate tender requirements and the misapplication of EU procurement rules that can exclude many voluntary organisations from bidding for contracts.

A lack of dialogue with service users, the organisations that advocate on their behalf, as well as those that could potentially deliver services can mean that the insights of local people are not taken on board in the design of local services, which reduces access to good ideas and limits the councils' ability to secure best value for money.

How can the voluntary sector help?

Through their close connection and trusted relationships with local communities, voluntary organisations can help commissioners and procurement professionals identify local service needs and co-design more innovative services.

Better use of The Compact can provide a clear set of guidelines which offer a basis for mutual trust and better partnership working between local authorities and the voluntary sector.

Voluntary organisations can help councils do more with less, by delivering public services that provide additional social value beyond the primary intervention. They can work with councils to help them implement the Social Value Act and develop a social value policy.

The Compact

The Compact is an agreement between government and the voluntary sector, which outlines a way of working that improves their relationship for mutual advantage. The Compact offers improved funding processes, clear consultation standards, enforceable rights, and an overall improvement in working relationships.

Thurrock Council used the Compact to approach funding reductions in a different way. By using Compact principles as a foundation for partnership working, the council strengthened its relationship with the voluntary sector and avoided making disproportionately large spending reductions. 80% of grant funding awarded is now on a three-year cycle allowing for longer-term planning, three months' notice is given for any funding reductions and the Compact principles are used to design consultations and new policies.

Some local authorities, such as Knowsley Council, have co-designed their social value strategy with representatives from the voluntary sector. Durham Council's Social Value Taskforce has representation from the voluntary sector. Manchester City Council has used the Social Value Act to focus on increasing local employment opportunities.

The Social Value Act 2012

The Social Value Act requires commissioners to think about how they can secure wider social, economic and environmental benefits when procuring services. Commissioners are also required to consider consulting with local stakeholders.

Community budgets enable local services to work together to better address complex needs in their area. This approach reduces silo-working and fragmentation of budgets, removing barriers to better outcomes. It can be particularly effective where the intervention of one service is known to result in savings and improved outcomes for another.

For example, Essex County Council has achieved a 60% success rate for high risk victims of domestic abuse that previously declined to engage with Essex police prior to service transformation. Greater Manchester is looking to reduce the number of people on out of work benefits by 22%, delivering annual savings of £500 million.

What can local councillors do?

As a local councillor you can take actions to transform the commissioning and delivery of local services through:

- developing an approach to community budgeting
- ensuring commissioners make use of the flexibility of new light-touch EU procurement rules to allow more innovative approaches
- splitting large contracts into smaller lots where possible to allow smaller organisations to participate
- providing the political leadership needed to push the social value agenda in your local area, which improves the social, environmental and economic well-being of your area

- providing transparent access to data on local service delivery so that local residents are able to understand local services and suggest efficient ways to allocate resources.

Questions to ask your officers

If you want to find out more about what your local authority is doing to improve local services you can ask your officers these questions:

1. How is the Social Value Act applied in procurement and contract decisions?
2. Are commissioners using the Social Value Act to create local jobs?
3. What information is available on the size and type of contracts delivered in the area?
4. What changes is the council making to procurement processes to take advantage of the new EU rules, to cut through red tape and increase innovation?
5. What training do commissioners receive on public services and working with the voluntary sector

Volunteering

Issues for local government

Demands on local services are increasing whilst the funding available is reduced, meaning that councils need to innovate and work differently in order to still meet the needs of local people. Demographic change will see further pressure on local services. The King's Fund estimates that the number of over 85s will increase by 106% over a period of 20 years (*Time to Think Differently*). At same time, high youth unemployment has a knock on effect on other local services.

How can the voluntary sector help?

Volunteering can play a role in improving responsiveness and personalisation of public services, whilst also increasing community resilience. Involving volunteers builds links between institutions and the local community and can significantly improve wellbeing for both the volunteer and the people they support.

Volunteering in care homes

The volunteering in care homes project aims to open up care homes to their local communities to enhance quality of life and to build cohesive communities. Volunteers are recruited and supported through their local volunteer centres to share their time and skills with care home residents. This is done through bespoke activities for individuals or groups on the basis of shared interests, such as reading, walking, knitting or playing board games. The project is currently being piloted in five areas. It is managed by NCVO and funded by the Department of Health.

Volunteering has also been shown to deliver valuable employability skills that can support long-term unemployed residents on the pathway into work.

Volunteering for Stronger Communities

Sean found it difficult to find employment. He lives in a rural community with limited employment opportunities and has a young son to care for. Through a support service that offers benefits advice and help with job searches, Sean found out about the Volunteering for Stronger Communities project, managed by NCVO and funded by the Big Lottery. The local volunteer centre arranged for Sean to volunteer at the nearby swimming pool, where he took his son. The project was able to support Sean in preparing for employment and to meet the cost of his CRB check. Through this volunteering opportunity, the skills and experience he gained, and the contacts he made, Sean was able to find a job.

What can local councillors do?

As a local councillor, you can take actions to encourage and support volunteering through:

- building relationships with local volunteer centres, working together to highlight opportunities where volunteering could improve outcomes
- supporting your local volunteer centre to develop best practice in volunteer management through the Volunteer Centre Quality Accreditation Standard
- championing volunteering as way to improve employability skills, and as a step on the pathway to finding or returning to work
- exploring how in commissioning local services you can build in opportunities for volunteers to add value
- celebrating local volunteers through Volunteers' Week, 1-7 June.

Questions to ask your officers

If you want to find out more about what your local authority is doing to encourage and support volunteering you can ask your officers these questions:

1. Does the Council have a volunteering strategy setting out a clear plan for encouraging and developing volunteering in the area and supporting the local volunteer centre?
2. What are the council's plans to mobilise our communities through volunteering to help us meet our major challenges such as adult care and youth unemployment?
3. How is the Council working in tandem with Clinical Commissioning Groups, Police and Crime Commissioners and other public bodies to mobilise volunteers in the local area?

Find out more

- Visit your local volunteer centre. You can find out who they are by looking at the [Volunteer Centre Finder](#).
- See which voluntary organisations are based in your area. Check the [map of members](#) on NCVO's website.
- Volunteers' Week 2014 takes place 1 to 7 June. [Find out how you can get involved](#).