



UrbanForum

RESEARCH REPORT

JUNE 2006

Urban Forum's snapshot research: Partnership working between the Voluntary and Community Sector and Local Authorities

In April, Urban Forum conducted research into the relationship between the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and Local Authorities (LA). The aim the short survey was to find out about the extent of partnership working to date and how it could be further developed and improved. It was also hoped that the results would guide Urban Forum's future work in this area. We received over 100 responses and would like to thank those who took time out to fill in the questionnaire for their contribution.

Q1 and 2: Are you currently working with your local authority and if yes how?

The majority (68%) of respondents are working with their LA. The areas of work they are involved in include:

- 45% are involved in the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)
- 34% in the Local Area Agreement (LAA)
- 17% in the Local Development Framework (LDF)
- 16% in the Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS)
- 31% were involved in other projects, for example; faith based projects, environmental projects, lottery funded schemes, Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) and Compacts.

Q3: What are the main obstacles to working with their LA?

The main difficulties that were identified included:

a) Funding

The majority of the respondents cited lack of funding as one of the main obstacles in partnership working with the LA. This is regardless of whether the organisation has a good relationship with the LA. Several respondents pointed

out that with the introduction of LAAs there is less money available for frontline organisations like Community Empowerment Networks (CENs). Emphasising this point, a few said that the biggest obstacle to working in partnership is that less funding is available for LAs. Also, short term funding causes insecurity and hinders an organisation's ability to make long term plans.

b) Power

Power was frequently mentioned as an issue. LAs are often in control of budgets and are therefore in a more powerful position than VCS organisations. This can lead to an imbalance in the relationship between the two, and undermine partnership working.

c) Service Delivery

It was felt that some LAs are pushing the VCS into service delivery and viewing the services provided by the sector as an extension of their services, as opposed to the sector being a provider in their own right. A few respondents also highlighted that LAs tend to favour large organisation with a long and good payment history. It was also pointed out that the VCS often enter contracting and procurement on the LA's terms. These terms do not properly take into account the benefits that VCS organisations bring, and may not be in line with an organisation's core roles and vision.

d) Understanding of the VCS

Many respondents felt that LAs do not understand the expertise and skills of the sector, nor its values and vision. In addition, LAs do not always take the sector seriously. It was felt that LAs sometimes enter partnership working with the sector to fulfil Central Government's agenda without fully understanding it. For example, it was felt that many LAs are not aware of Firm Foundations. However, it was recognised that it is hard to keep up with the constantly changing agenda of Central Government.

e) Trust

Other issues mentioned were lack of continuity and trust. Many respondents felt it was difficult to build up relationships with the LA, and that this is compounded by structural reorganisations and high staff turnover with associated loss of 'historical memory'.

Q4: How well the VCS think the LA respond to pressure from them?

Only a small number of organisations feel that their LA takes their views into account. However, many respondents consider that the LA often tried to do this, but that a great push was needed for something to actually happen. Quite a few respondents believe that the LA does not respond to their suggestions at all.

Conclusion

The majority of the respondents are working with their LA. The main obstacles identified in working with the LA are lack of funding and power imbalance. Other obstacles mentioned are lack of understanding of the role of the VCS and the

push for service delivery and procurement. It is clear that LAs and Central Government would benefit from an improved understanding of the value and role of the VCS.

The findings of this survey will help to inform Urban Forum's work. Urban Forum is part of a small group looking at improving partnership working between the VCS and LAs. The group includes the Local Government Association, the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) and NACVS. The research will be fed back to the group at the next meeting. There will be further discussion around the relationship between the VCS and LAs at Urban Forum's LSP Conference in York in 13th-14th July.