



Active Partners

Evaluation Report – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An Urban Forum Project
supporting the Voluntary
and Community Sector to
participate in England's
Local Strategic
Partnerships
Funded by the Home Office
2001-2005



ACTIVE PARTNERS

Evaluation Report

by Imogen McLean



About the author

Imogen McLean's experience of VCS involvement in Local Strategic Partnerships includes working with the Community Empowerment Network in Barnsley (BCVN) and developing events, training days and exchange programmes for CENs at the Quest Trust. Previously, she completed an MSc in Comparative Politics and Policy (Research) at the University of Southampton, carrying out research into Community-based regeneration Policy.

Executive Summary

Introduction

This report sets out the results of an evaluation assessing the impact of Urban Forum's 'Active Partners' Project. This project supported by the Home Office, has been offering LSP-related support to England's VCS since 2001. The report highlights some of the main messages that have been captured through the project activities and this evaluation. Drawing on these lessons and priorities identified by the VCS, key recommendations are made regarding the LSP-related support that should be provided to the VCS in the future.

The Active Partners Project was developed in response to the role played by the VCS in the LSPs established in England's 88 NRF Areas. The project aimed to:

- provide the VCS with LSP-related information;
- facilitate a national LSP-related support network;
- link the VCS with policy-makers;
- build understanding of community involvement;
- increase the capacity of more marginalised groups to participate in LSPs; and
- enable the VCS in the non-88 NRF Areas to benefit from the project activities.

In response, Urban Forum has provided the VCS with LSP-related policy and information and conferences and networking opportunities. Telephone, email and outreach support has been provided by Urban Forum Staff to offer guidance, signposting and build strong organisational partnerships.

Between October 2004 and March 2005 an independent researcher carried out an evaluation, assessing the impact of the project on the VCS's capacity to participate in LSPs. As well as reviewing feedback and records from the project, perspectives were gathered from project users through questionnaires, telephone conferences, telephone interviews and workshops.

Project Evaluation Findings

Information and Policy Services

The project's explicit role in bridging the local VCS with national policy sets it apart from other sources of support. VCS feedback on the project information services is positive about the relevance and quality of the information provided. The VCS widely perceive that being well informed improves its capacity as partners at the strategic level.

Respondents placed real value in being informed of policy initiatives and funding opportunities through the website, LSP Guide, Clearway magazine and infomail. The Guide has been used as an information resource for the VCS, an induction tool for CEN members and to back up calls for more equitable partnerships in the 88 and non-88 areas. Being well informed has enabled some of the VCS to access funds and respond effectively to policy developments. Suggested improvements included building in more information relating to the non-88 areas, providing more tailored information for people with different levels of expertise and enabling more non-VCS partners to benefit from information support.

Just under 50% of respondents described the impact of the LSP project in ensuring the voice of the VCS has been heard at the national policy level as positive or somewhat positive. For them, Urban Forum has influence at policy-level because messages grounded in local experience are seen as more legitimate by policy-makers. 48% of respondents did not know what impact the project had had at policy-level. Some believed that Government did not view the project as a constructive source of information and that VCS perspectives had little bearing on national decisions. Others did not feel adequately aware of the messages going to government on their behalf. Better mechanisms need to be developed to ensure that the VCS who contribute to Urban Forum consultation activity

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hear how these messages have been used and what the subsequent outcome is. Further suggestions for improving policy activity include developing collective messages with other VCS support bodies and promoting cross-sector participation in consultation work. Again, many felt that more work was needed to champion the needs of the VCS in the non-88 areas at the policy-level.

Conferences

Participant satisfaction is high with an average of 80% of respondents rating LSP conferences a good or excellent overall. Participants responded that conferences provided opportunities for gaining national perspectives, establishing relationships with the VCS and other partners and gaining practical examples of good practice. They reported gaining the confidence and understanding essential to engage effectively in LSPs. For volunteers and workers new to LSPs, the conferences offered a user-friendly and practical 'induction', which equipped them in their role. For the local partners hosting the conferences, it has been an opportunity to raise the profile of their local work on a national stage.

LSP-related workshops, discussions and speakers at Urban Forum's Annual conference have increased considerably over the last few years. This has enabled a wider audience to learn about and exchange experience on LSP-related issues. The mainstreaming of LSP-related work into Urban Forum's wider activities reflects a response to a shift in the priorities of England's VCS and is a significant and positive outcome of the Active Partners Project.

Criticism of conferences echoed the problem of too little focus on the non-88 areas and too generalised activities, which did not make allowance for differing levels of expertise. The perceived tendency towards negativity in discussions was also a source of concern.

Staff Support

63% of respondents involved in the project had received direct LSP-related support from Urban Forum staff who are regarded as a valuable source of information and guidance. 37% reported receiving telephone or email support, remarking on the benefits of access to national perspectives, up to date information, sign-posting and a direct link with policy makers. As well as a resource of advice for the VCS this support has benefited researchers, regeneration press and public sector workers.

47% of evaluation respondents had received face-to-face support from Urban Forum staff. This included speaking at or facilitating workshops at local events or informal visits to their local group. Again, respondents pointed to the value of national perspectives being provided at the local level. For support workers at the regional level, the existence of a national Project officer to exchange ideas and updates on policy and strategy has proved particularly valuable.

Wider Lessons Learned

The evaluation was an opportunity to highlight some of the messages about VCS participation captured through the Active Partners project. Research focused around three areas.

Representation and Impact

Government guidance states that the VCS should be an equal partner on LSPs and that their concerns and perspectives should be of equal value. The perceived effectiveness of VCS representatives varied from area to area and between sectors. Only 17% of VCS respondents described the effectiveness of VCS representatives as good, compared to 50% of public sector respondents who viewed the influence of VCS representatives more positively.

Key examples of success include where the VCS have engaged at the theme group level; have promoted more open and transparent working practices and styles of meetings; and where their engagement has promoted a better public sector understanding of what the VCS has to offer.

VCS respondents identify a number of key factors determining their capacity to make a difference at the strategic level. There are significant barriers at the partnership level. These include prevailing mindsets and practical arrangements which impede the role of VCS representatives. In addition, there are issues regarding the infrastructure and support available to VCS representatives. If there is not enough investment made into wider participation and capacity building for the VCS, then its representative function is effectively undermined.

The VCS expresses a clear ongoing commitment to working towards more accountable representation and equal partnerships. This commitment will need to be maintained in order to adapt effectively to the development of Local Area Agreements. This is because effective partnership demands an investment in building positive cross-sector relationships. In order to make the best use of the contribution that the VCS can make, a focus on representation and governance must be balanced with that on wider participation.

The Use of Special Budgets

Since 2001 England's 88 most deprived areas have received special funds to support community participation in Neighbourhood Renewal. These have been a critical component of the Government's commitment to promoting VCS participation in local decision-making.

The Single Community Programme (SCP)

The evaluation shows that the SCP has been successfully used to develop networks, build capacity and promote partnership. However, the VCS perceived the SCP as being most successful in stimulating community activity. The VCS widely regard the SCP as a successful and valuable programme, which has gone a good way towards meeting the needs of the VCS in the 88 Areas. Several qualities are seen to underpin its success. The fact that these funds came directly from Government to the VCS is viewed as a demonstration of the Government's recognition of and value in the VCS, while the independence of the funds from more traditional local grant-makers set this programme apart. The VCS regards itself as well-placed to understand the pressures faced by local groups and the flexibility of these funds has allowed them to be used creatively to meet local needs and priorities.

Key Challenges to the SCP include:

- a lack of communication between groups administering the chests;
- a lack of support for continuation or core costs;
- too much spend on administration; and
- too complex guidance and processes for the community learning chest.

In addition, when funds are over-subscribed, certain groups feel their needs are not met. In some areas, small groups are not coming forward to express their needs and outreach is not forthcoming. This means small groups are effectively excluded from network activities and LSP processes.

The Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF)

Almost 61% of respondents were aware of how NRF had been spent in their area. Others suggested that there was inadequate information about how this money had been spent and that processes used to determine spend were not transparent. 59% felt that NRF had not been used effectively or only partially effectively to improve local services. Reasons included the fund being too small to make a tangible impact and a Local Authority-dominated LSP using the funds to prop up mainstream public services with little regard for VCS perspectives.

More promising developments show the VCS engaged in grant-making decisions and funds being used to support good projects including VCS activity. Findings highlight the role that NRF has played in encouraging communication, collaboration and links between the VCS and the public sector. Good progress seems to have accelerated in recent years following better partnership arrangements, the development of locally owned targets and proper monitoring systems.

VCS perceptions on the success of NRF are closely connected to their perception of the LSP. Where there is a clear commitment towards working in partnership, it is viewed more favourably. Lessons from NRF must be learnt and appropriate action taken if the VCS and its partners are to work effectively to develop LAAs. This demands real investment in promoting good partnership working, cross-sector understanding and the development of transparent processes and monitoring.

Local Network Relationships

The role of CENs has been to draw together and build the capacity of local community and voluntary groups to participate in LSPs. This has involved bringing together voluntary organisations, community groups and local residents into a single network, sometimes for the first time. It was anticipated that network development would improve relations between these groups and ensuring that they benefit from similar levels of access to, and influence, on LSPs.

The majority of evaluation respondents described the impact of network development on local relationships as positive. Here, CENs have performed both a networking and representation function to the advantage of both voluntary and community groups. Explanations centred on the benefits of

- having the space to share ideas and experience;
- the valuable contribution made by community sector groups and volunteers; and
- the greater potential for organisational partnership and LSP representatives feeling better informed in their role.

Successful networks have worked with what already existed and worked to fill gaps, rather than seeking to duplicate work already taking place.

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13% of respondents felt that CEN development had a negative impact on local relationships. Some believed that there was insufficient quality outreach needed to ensure wider and inclusive membership and that community groups were not receiving the level of support promised. Some felt that providing or enhancing mechanisms for local VCS participation had put unwelcome pressure on volunteers. Problems emerged where CENs were developed without regard for existing forums and networks. In some areas, the push to combine pre-existing separate networks and forums for the voluntary and community groups, undermining their focused activity, was met with resistance. 22% of respondents reported no impact on local relationships. Largely this was because the development of this new infrastructure was seen as duplicating the work of the CVS or a previously existing network.

Conclusions and Recommendations

VCS Challenges and Support Needs

This evaluation placed particular emphasis on reviewing the challenges the VCS have been experiencing and anticipating future support needs in the light of forthcoming changes. Combined with lessons learned from the project, this highlights key areas where support efforts should be targeted at this crucial time for the VCS.

The Nature of Existing Support

The VCS identifies key challenges in the scale and nature of the LSP-related support made available. This includes regional support provided by the Government Offices for the Regions (GOs), and Regional Voluntary Sector Networks (RVSNs) as well as local support from Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS). The support available to the VCS in the non-88 is patchy, inadequate and sometimes non-existent. There has been limited work to explore VCS experiences in the non-88 areas and link people together, leaving many feeling uninformed and isolated. Further criticisms expressed regarding the nature of support, include suggestions that it is not responsive to need, it is too generalised and there is inadequate information on what is available. To some, the support available to the VCS is about helping the VCS to fit in with another sector's priorities, rather than a response to what the VCS needs to be effective.

Sustainable Resources

Recent shifts in legislation and funding arrangements have added to existing concerns about the sustainability of funding for CENs in the 88 areas. 18% of respondents believed that the impact of LAAs would be wholly or partially positive with LAAs reflecting efforts to ensure that strategies continue to be developed in partnership. In areas where effective LSPs have been successfully developed, the VCS are comfortable that there will be a continued role for them under the new arrangements. 38% felt the impact would be negative. There is a genuine concern that Government has backed down on its commitment to support equal partnership through independent funding to the VCS. It is felt that Government guidance stresses how the funding streams will be used to address issues of crime and anti-social behaviour (the safer), but makes little commitment to the 'stronger' (community capacity building) elements, where the VCS has the potential to play a key role. 41% of respondents did not know what the impact would be on the VCS locally and did not feel adequately informed to make an assessment on how these changes will affect their communities. This points to gaps in information and communication. Keeping people aware of such changes should be a priority for Government and VCS support organisations alike.

Representation and Participation

The VCS faces enduring obstacles at the partnership level, as well as the challenge of investing in VCS participation and capacity building. Cross-sector understanding is still poor in many local areas and at different levels. This undermines progress and the potential benefits to local people. Partnership practices need to be given attention and it is unacceptable for the VCS to be at any disadvantage because efforts have not been made to accommodate different needs. Effective VCS representation demands wider VCS participation and capacity building. This is desirable for effective governance and a positive end in itself. However, the VCS identifies key challenges in engaging with local communities and maintaining their input. These include encouraging the participation of excluded groups, supporting volunteer involvement, supporting VCS representatives to be effective, and providing effective mechanisms for gathering local perspectives and keeping people informed.

The place for the VCS in Government Policy

The role of the VCS in the face of ever changing Government policy has been an ongoing concern of the project and regular theme in this evaluation. There are persistent challenges identified in the way policies are developed and communicated, the length of government timescales, the contribution expected to be made by the VCS in local delivery and the extent to which policy is grounded in local experience.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Vague targets and ill-defined measures undermine our ability to assess the impact of policy initiatives. The VCS point to the need for more transparent processes by which all partners can assess how LSPs, strategies and funding programmes are improving local communities. The VCS would also benefit from processes through which they can capture the social and economic contribution they are making. Strategies and programmes require ongoing monitoring, which informs and enhances VCS activity rather than adding another layer of bureaucracy.

Key Recommendations for VCS Support

In response, this evaluation makes recommendations on key steps which should be taken by Government and the VCS towards ensuring a lasting and effective role for the VCS involved in LSPs. They include:

1. The VCS requires more dialogue with GOs. To improve their capacity GO teams should be encouraged to engage with, and learn lessons from, the local VCS through joint networking and learning opportunities.
2. Dedicated regional VCS based LSP support workers should be made available to the VCS in all regions.
3. The respective roles of CENs and CVSs need to be clarified for them to work together more effectively.
4. Targeted support activities should be made available for the VCS in the non-88 areas to be more effective.
5. Networking between the 21 initial LAA pilot areas needs to be facilitated so they can learn from one another and share this with the next 40 pilots, LAA-related support and guidance should be delivered in the context of wider community participation processes.
6. More training should be made available to support effective neighbourhood level and community development practice.
7. Cross-sector networking and information sharing around partnership practices should be facilitated to allow partners to develop solutions that support collaboration.
8. Work should explore how volunteers can play a role without being overburdened and be compensated for their involvement without losing out e.g. equivalent benefit clawback or reduction.
9. Government departments should work together to provide consistent messages with regard to community involvement in decision-making and this consistency should be reflected in strategies and programmes and their timescales.
10. Government should work closely with VCS organisations and use their networks and expertise to inform the policy development process and enrich subsequent policies.
11. There should be support to the VCS to quantify the social and economic impact of their work and establish links between wider capacity building and influence on the LSP.

Key Recommendations for Urban Forum

This evaluation carries a clear message from the VCS that Urban Forum's LSP-related support must continue. Future support must draw on feedback from the project to date and be responsive to the key challenges and priorities identified by the VCS in this evaluation.

VCS Priorities for Support Services

- **Linking Local Experience with Policy:** The first priority identified by the VCS is for Urban Forum to provide an effective link between the VCS and national policy. Urban Forum should continue to build on this role, working to keep the VCS informed and seeking to ensure that policy is grounded in local-level experience.
- **Networking and Information Sharing:** Providing opportunities for networking and the sharing of experiences is also a high priority for the VCS, who see real value in face-to-face exchange at the national level. 70% of respondents rated LSP Conferences, workshops and national networking opportunities as a high priority. Alongside general networking events, Urban Forum should incorporate more tailored networking opportunities for specific groups.
- **Staff Support:** Telephone or email support from Urban Forum staff was rated as a high priority by 41% of respondents. Urban Forum should continue to offer a point of contact for the VCS to seek guidance and clarification of policy developments. Face-to-face support from Urban Forum staff was considered less crucial with only 19% rating it as a high priority. However, a certain level of outreach is crucial in ensuring that the project is informed by local experience.

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Future support needs to incorporate more targeted work to benefit people with different needs, interests and levels of expertise. Support also needs to widen its focus to encourage participation from the non-88 Areas and non-VCS partners. LSP work should be mainstreamed into Urban Forum's wider work. Suggested practical activities include;

1. Providing LSP-support in the context of wider decision-making processes.
2. Facilitating the exchange of practical case studies of successful approaches.
3. Mapping of LSP-related support services for the VCS.
4. Working closely with Government to bring VCS expertise and experience to policy development and championing the needs of the VCS.
5. Capturing lessons learnt through outreach activity to inform policy work.
6. Specialist networking events for VCS LSP representatives, volunteers, VCS chairs of LSPs and the VCS from the non-88 areas.
7. Continued development of cross-sector training allowing lessons to be learned from the project.

References

National Audit Office; Getting Citizens Involved: Community Participation in Neighbourhood Renewal; October 2004

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A decorative graphic at the bottom of the page consisting of two overlapping, wavy shapes. The top shape is a light green color, and the bottom shape is a dark red color. They overlap in the center, creating a darker shade of red.