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VOICES - aiming for meaningful representation on the Local Strategic Partnership.

Project outline

In March 2003 an evaluation of the community development network was carried out to identify lessons learned and advise on future development. The issues for VOICES were how to build on work carried out and to gain meaningful representation of the sector on the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). VOICES was concerned about how best to deploy development workers and how to gain acceptance for the proposed model of representation on the LSP.

VOICES was established in 1994 in recognition that the community voluntary sector was not playing an equal part in the formation of decision-making partnerships in the City and wider area. VOICES, then called 'Voluntary Sector Partnership' (VSP), was a network of people who were active in their communities and the voluntary sector as paid workers, management committee members, volunteers and community activists. The VSP successfully negotiated and secured two seats at every main decision-making partnership in Sunderland.

VOICES are now a limited company by guarantee and a registered charity. It has a Voluntary Board of Directors who are active in communities across the City, who run the company and employ the staff.

Sunderland is one the 88 poorest areas of England and therefore eligible for funding from the Community Empowerment Fund. This is aimed specifically at building networks of local representatives to become involved with decision-making in recognition by the government that local people are in the best position to know what their area needs. A Community Empowerment Fund was awarded to VOICES in order to evolve a Community Development Network (CDN). They were contracted Government Office North East to carry out this task.

The purpose of the CDN is twofold; develop links to share good practice and information throughout the voluntary, faith and community sector, and to select representatives for the Local Strategic Partnership from the sector.

The network will provide a means of exchanging information, learning and mutual support amongst a wide range of groups in the voluntary, community and faith sector across Sunderland. To build the Community Development Network workers used their knowledge and established contacts with groups. Contacting these through outreach and outreach work to explain what the CDN aimed to do and what representation on the LSP involved. A number of networking events and residential consolidated this work. The CDN engaged with an e-government project and are aiming to develop their own website to further enhance information exchange between and amongst groups.

Only the people involved in the network can become representatives for their area on the Local Strategic Partnership Known as the City of Sunderland Partnership (COSP). The proposed representation by the sector is to hold a position at each level on the board, the management team, and each subsidiary area, three people from the sector at each position. None of these people may hold more than one position (they can be a shadow for another delegate somewhere else).

The rationale for three people at each position is to ensure full and equal involvement in the decision making process, and to build the capacity of the people being representatives in a meaningful way. The three people at each position will consist of:

- **A Learner.** Someone who does not have previous LSP representation experience, but does have experience of meetings and committees at a community level.
- **A Mentor.** With experience of LSP representation/ or other partnership working.
- **Capacity Builder.** With previous partnership experience, well developed informal and formal meeting skills and knowledge of wider decision-making structures.

By adopting this model people with little experience build their skills and knowledge in a supported and meaningful way in the context of real decision-making processes. A process of self-selection followed by interview was used to allocate representatives to each position.

The City of Sunderland Partnership has a board to direct it, management group who provide information to the board to make decisions and subsidiary partnerships of many geographical and interest areas. At present the geographical areas are Coalfields, Washington, and in Sunderland City the North, South, West and East. These partnerships work out where services and money should be invested. The interest areas at present are health, education, crime, housing, and employment. These partnerships work out ways of addressing the particular problems and inequalities that exist within the area.

The board is made up of members from: City of Sunderland College, Sunderland Council for Voluntary Sector, City of Sunderland Council, Sunderland Health Authority, Employment Service, Tyne and Wear Small Business Service, Learning Skills Council, University of Sunderland, North East Chamber of Commerce, and Northumbria Police. While there is a presence from the voluntary sector this is not as proposed. Current voluntary sector representation on the wider LSP is patchy and uncoordinated as it is emerging from the old structures of COSP and the Voluntary Sector Partnership.

There is also a capacity building sub group to complement the development of the LSP. The group initiated development of the Local Learning Plan with the lead being taken by the voluntary sector (VOICES). The plan is being developed using participatory action research, a method internationally acknowledged as being extremely effective in identifying local needs and

including communities in the development of provisions to address the identified needs. The full development of the plan involves seven stages. At the first stage the partners were involved in participatory research to identify their needs and requirements in order to meet the challenge. The next stage was to hold focus groups and distribute questionnaires at board level. The remainder of the programme is scheduled to take place throughout 2003 and be completed by January 2004 when it is envisaged that the implementation of the plan will begin. The learning plan research is funded by neighbourhood renewal fund, SRB6 and Neighbourhood learning in deprived communities (Learning Skills Council).

VOICES staff are responsible for the development of the Community Development Network. Prior to the evaluation there were six full-time workers involved in this, and two part-time. They consisted of; strategic co-ordinator, project co-ordinator, three community development workers, office manager, community development worker (BME 0.3), and administration support (0.5)

The three full-time community development workers had a mixture of geographic and issue based areas for which they are responsible. These are:

- East, West. Older people, people with disabilities
- Coalfields, South and young people
- Washington, North, women (including asylum seeker and refugee women) and gay, lesbian

BME, Asylum seekers and refugees groups are the responsibility of the part-time (0.3) community development worker.

The evaluation identified a need for some restructuring and redeployment of workers. This is described below.

Changing emphasis and working practices.

The development of the CDN is a huge undertaking and full coverage of each area is a crucial element in moving towards meaningful representation on the LSP. Without full representation from the sector there will be sections of the community without a voice and therefore unable to engage in decision-making. To this end VOICES staff approached the development work with enthusiasm and imagination paying particular attention to excluded and under represented groups. To achieve as wide coverage as possible it became necessary for the work to be carried out strategically. This involved a move from outreach working with individuals and groups to making contact with groups via established fora, organisations, and alliances. For some of the staff this presented problems as not all were able to make this move to strategic working and some felt there was still outreach work needed. To this end a change in roles and emphasis of working practices evolved.

The staff changes at VOICES following the evaluation means that there are now seven full-time workers and four part-time. The full-time posts are: strategic coordinator, programmes manager, office manager, administrator, and three development workers forming a dedicated community

empowerment team. The part-time posts are: a BME worker for 24 hours (this is under review and it is hoped that it will be extended to 37 hours), two posts at 30 hours each dedicated to the pentagon partnership, and one part-time consultant on the partnership project around knowledge systems.

The three full-time community development workers now have their responsibilities arranged thus:

- East, West. Older people, people with disabilities
- Coalfields, South and young people
- Washington, North, work around gender and sexuality

BME, Asylum seekers and refugees groups are the responsibility of the part-time (24 hours) community development worker, under review with the possibility of extending this to 37 hours. The main change for the community development workers is that they are no longer required to manage internal and some external information. This allows them to operate as a fully dedicated community empowerment team. More changes are underway to organise the work of 4 full-time community development workers:

- 3 with 2 geographical areas and 2 themed areas corresponding to each of the 8 thematic partnership of the LSP. Each of these workers will have one issues based theme of Gender, Age and Disability.
- 1 with BME and 2 Thematic areas.

Working towards acceptance of the proposed model.

The other crucial element to meaningful representation is the acceptance of the three representatives at each level of the LSP. At the time of the evaluation (March 2003) the LSP had accepted some representation at board and management level. There was much opposition to the three people from the voluntary sector at each level. The suggestion of two voting representatives and one observer was proposed as a compromise. Some members of the LSP objected to the term 'representative', in response to this the term 'delegate' was substituted in the protocols for representation by the CDN on the LSP. The question of voting rights for delegates is not open for discussion until a definite decision is made on the protocol.

The project encountered a number of difficulties:

- Difficulty in moving to strategic community development by some of the staff.
- A sketchy understanding of what is meant by 'strategic' working by many of the potential sector representatives on the LSP.
- Acceptance of the proposed model of three representatives at each level of the LSP. The implication for community empowerment if this model is not accepted is that the potential for capacity building will be severely hampered.

- Difficulties in partnership working by many representatives on the LSP with a tendency to use the LSP as a platform for their particular sector rather than working towards wider goals. Often this is manifested in comments being made in an indirect or confrontational manner.

The project has achieved a solid start in what is a mammoth undertaking. The proposed model for representation is groundbreaking in that it recognises meaningful representation has two elements:

- The need for a wide cross-section of the community to be represented.
- Representation at the level of strategic decisions is complex and daunting for those without experience of this.

Much ground has been covered in working towards representation by a good cross-section of the community. Frequently reviewing how to reach under represented groups allows the staff at VOICES to ensure that this coverage is maximised. A recent conference held by the CDN was well attended with many new members from a wide range of groups.

One of the aims was to develop a website in conjunction with the e-government project. The members of the CDN who were willing to become involved in this have now been issued with their laptops and are about to embark on the quest of assisting community groups to learn IT skills. A demonstration website has been produced, there has been feedback given by members of the CDN and three have volunteered to become representatives on the steering group for further development of the website. The purpose of the website in conjunction with peer group tuition is to increase accessibility, awareness, information exchange, and encourage more groups to become part of the CDN.

Increasing delegates capacity

The proposed representation by the voluntary sector on the LSP with three delegates at each level is a radical departure from the usual practice of minimal and/or tokenistic involvement of the voluntary and community sector. The three levels of delegate i.e. learner, mentor, capacity builder is crucial to meaningful representation and empowerment.

Meaningful representation can only be achieved if the skills of the representatives are such that they match the task. For many delegates from the voluntary sector the chance to develop the skills and confidence will never have been presented to them. The three levels of delegates addresses the need to develop the necessary skills in a real life situation. Not only are the delegates able to develop their skills but also experienced people from a similar background and sector will support them in this. The proposed model offers the opportunity to tackle some of the difficulties encountered during the early stages of the project in tandem with the capacity building of the sector.

As noted many of the potential sector delegates to the LSP have difficulty in grasping the full meaning of strategic working. Being part of the process and having direct experience of strategic working in action is the best way to fully

develop this understanding. Once understood the knowledge can be shared with others and the mechanism for sharing this is the CDN.

The use of Jargon and acronyms present a problem to anyone who is not familiar with them. When used, jargon can increase the experience of exclusion and be disempowering. The CDN pays much attention to the use of jargon and at their recent conference called on members to challenge the use of jargon whenever they could. By challenging the use of jargon at all levels of decision making the CDN and its delegates to the LSP will begin to increase the ease with which others can participate in the process. As the language becomes more accessible participation in the process becomes more possible for excluded groups.

Effective partnership working requires a balance to be struck between working towards the goals of the partnership and representation of any sector. A tension often exists between partners, the most noticeable being between the local authority and the community. This has been observed and commented on in a number of evaluations. A local authority representative on a Select Committee examining waste options noted that the community appear to think that only their opinion should count while a comment from the community group being referred to noted that the council appear to have made up their mind from the beginning. The model proposed by VOICES requires three delegates at each level thereby presenting the opportunity for all sectors to appreciate the others position more fully. The possibility to further enhance the understanding of the process by the CDN is present in the information sharing mechanism. By fully engaging in the LSP and sharing experiences with others across the sector the CDN members are in a position to learn how to become effective in partnership working. In this way the capacity of the sector will be substantially increased. The effectiveness of the model is dependent on the acceptance by the other partners of three delegates at each level. Discussions over this issue have been long and convoluted.

Finalisation of the protocols was scheduled to take place at a recent LSP meeting. Without prior notice the recently appointed LSP coordinator and the Head of the Policy team who is also the LSP manager did not attend this meeting. It was later revealed that the LSP coordinator had not been briefed about the position and progress of the voluntary sector protocols. With 55 CDN delegates keen to become involved and the expenditure of public funds to enable the senior managers of voluntary sector organisations to attend as CDN delegates it was expected that key LSP personnel would be present. The strategic coordinator of VOICES noted in a letter to the chairperson that 'the apparent lack of priority placed upon this meeting by key LSP personnel undervalues this commitment'.

Building on experiences.

Throughout the development of the CDN and the moves towards the acceptance of the proposed model for community sector delegates on the LSP a number of approaches have been derived and useful lessons learnt.

Empowerment can be hard to achieve as there a number of barriers to overcome. From the perspective of developing the capacity of individuals or groups it is important to recognise the diverse skills present. By providing a supportive atmosphere celebrating these skills whilst working on the selection of delegates and widening the CDN builds confidence. The residential to select delegates used facilitated workshops to explore the issues that may be dealt with by the LSP. Groups presented their findings using artwork, song, drama, and a more traditional report style. Allowing the groups to present in the manner they chose recognised the diversity of skills without reinforcing the hierarchy of written reports i.e. official methods. The CDN conference carried on the theme of valuing diversity by presenting issues using diverse methods and also celebrating different cultures by interspersing presentations with entertainment from different cultures and groups. Often the entertainments carried messages.

Those already in a position of power find it difficult to share the power. Determination and perseverance has so far given a solid start to the acceptance of the proposed model. A degree of compromise over terms of reference has been necessary and it is useful to be able to be able to concede on some points while having the strength to stand firm where this is not acceptable. Active involvement in other strategic areas in partnership with the local authority, such as developing the learning plan, adds gravitas to the sector. Therefore any suggestions that the sector make are more likely to be taken seriously. Despite this, however, the apparent lack of priority given to the finalisation of the protocols indicates that power sharing in a meaningful manner is still far from being realised. This is hard to tackle from the outside and only by persevering is there a chance that the situation will change.

Moving to a strategic approach to development work has been difficult and not all workers were ready to make the transition, or indeed agreed that the project was developed enough to move to a wholly strategic approach. Flexibility and frequent critical review of working practices allowed VOICES to respond imaginatively and appropriately to changing circumstances and needs. A redeployment of work responsibilities coupled with the creation of a new post allowed staff to work more effectively.

The workings of the Local Strategic Partnership and the Community Development Network are complex and difficult to understand. Approaching the explanation of these in a number of ways i.e. residential, conference, outreach development work, and a long-term programme VOICES allows the complexity to be unravelled at a pace determined by those involved. It also allows for the understanding to be developed at different levels while the project progresses. This stems from a good understanding of the sector arising from many years community development work. Without this the appropriate mechanism for developing the project would not have been devised.

As groups engage with the CDN the understanding of the purpose of the network and its operation increases. As the understanding grows existing members encourage more groups to join and the network grows by word of

mouth and informal networking. The open and inclusive nature of the project allows this process to be well utilised.

By approaching the project with perseverance, innovation, and critical reflection has enabled it to develop in such an impressive manner. To gain acceptance of the protocol for delegates from the sector requires the approach to be continued. The enthusiasm of the prospective delegates to the LSP and the commitment of the members of the CDN indicates the readiness of people from the sector to rise to new challenges and become involved. The main task now is for the other members of the LSP to see the sector as a resource not a threat and become part of enabling this innovative model for meaningful representation to make theirs a truly inclusive partnership.