National Coalition for Independent Action

The local state and voluntary action in West Sussex
Summary report 2010
Adur Voluntary Action with NCIA

Qualitative research with 16 voluntary organisations found that short-term government policies and commissioning undermined independent action and damaged the local political process, making it more difficult to respond to the needs of local people. Policies which may be appropriate to commission public services are not suitable for strengthening community life, locally-rooted services, and cohesion.

1. The context for and purpose of the research

1.1 This research explores the changing relationship between the state and local voluntary action in West Sussex during 2009/10. This was a time of flux and uncertainty stemming from:

♣ A growing central government focus on the role of voluntary organisations as providers of public services, rather than their wider role in local civil society;

♣ The collective branding of voluntary action organisations and quasi private businesses as the "third sector" and the implications of this labelling;

♣ The extension of competitive tendering and performance management processes across previous, historic relationships and ways of working;

♣ Tensions between exhortations on the voluntary action sector to co-operate and "work in partnership", yet simultaneously to compete aggressively for contracts.

1.2 It was clear early in 2009 that West Sussex was at a turning point in this scenario: decisions, about commissioning in particular, were being made and implemented by the local authorities and other statutory agencies in the area. The policy frameworks behind these decisions were being developed, so it appeared, on the hoof, and largely in response to national or pan-European guidance or requirements. Yet, local statutory bodies had little or no concrete evidence about how voluntary organisations were experiencing the introduction of these cultural changes and the new financial regimes involved. The local 'professional' voluntary sector (let alone community organisations) was not sufficiently well organised to bring unified collective pressure, nor was it clear whether any consensus of viewpoints even existed. Furthermore, during this research, the banking crisis erupted and created a new and grim view of the future: the prospect of huge cutbacks in public expenditure. This landscape makes even more compelling the urgency for a deeper understanding of the changing relationship between the local state and the Voluntary and Community Sector in West Sussex and the implications for independent voluntary action.

1.3 Our findings are derived from in-depth interviews with sixteen charitable organisations,

selected from those who responded to our publicity. They included small and medium-sized local deliverers of services or support, countywide bodies and 'infrastructure' agencies, whose role is to support and represent the sector as a whole. Our respondents also worked across a wide range of topics and population groups. The conclusions drawn from these interviews are reflective of the fascinating, sometimes saddening or angering, dialogues in which we engaged. They also offer too consistent an insight into what is happening, to be ignored.

2. The headline results

Strategic straitjackets

2.1 Many voluntary organisations felt the emphasis, within the statutory sector, on strategic objectives, often designed to meet central Government targets, to be excessive, having the effect of obstructing opportunism, lateral thinking, alternative approaches, and the ability to work holistically to meet community needs. The growing numbers of local health, social care, infrastructure development and "sustainable community" strategies, whilst satisfying the requirements of strategic planning, were creating straitjackets. This was paralleled in the policies of many funders (charitable as well as statutory), to determine their priorities for several years in advance. As localities vary, so do opportunities to secure improvement and development. A finding of this research is that a better balance should be achieved between strategic thinking, operational flexibility and 'demand-led' funding streams. Voluntary agencies do not solely exist to help local statutory agencies achieve their own objectives or meet central Government targets.

Damage from commissioning

2.2 The research found that strategic commissioning is changing fundamentally the equilibrium of the relationship between the local statutory and voluntary action sectors. The emphasis is shifting towards control. It is now for the statutory body to determine the need for a service or activity, the amount of money to be spent on it, the service specification to be adhered to, the characteristics of the agencies deemed 'fit for purpose' to do the work, the outcomes to be achieved, and the performance management to be used to ensure contract compliance.

2.3 The introduction of 'personalisation' (Self Directed Support) was a cause of great concern, and whilst respondents understood the rights of service users to choice, it was felt that the impact of this process (particularly on smaller voluntary service providers) was not recognised: many small self-help groups exist to meet needs, not compete with one another.

2.4 The research conversations picked up on a burgeoning culture of 'big is best', that it is necessary to be big to survive in the new world. Yet, respondents felt that the world and culture of voluntary action should be constructed locally, not in response to oppressive and externally determined sets of conditions that must be met.

2.5 Amongst organisations which had been through the commissioning process, the experience was overwhelmingly negative. Overall, the feedback to us was that these recent changes appear to be designed to fix something that wasn't broken. And the replacement is, in many ways, turning out to be worse. In particular, the prescription involved in service

specification, the time taken away from service delivery by the commissioning processes, and the time demanded from volunteers and Trustees, for tendering, business planning, developing and maintaining monitoring systems, etc. all were causing great concern. Short time scales, seemingly arbitrary requirements and changing demands also led to problems.

2.6 There were, however, a small group of organisations who reported positive, as well as negative, experiences of commissioning. In the main, this appeared to be due to a high degree of convergence between the intentions of the commissioners and the aspirations of the contractors. But there was no guarantee that this would continue into the future.

2.7 The evidence from this study indicates that the changes associated with the move to commissioning, and with statutory/voluntary sector relationships more widely, are damaging for most of the individual groups involved, damaging to the sector as a whole, undermine local political processes, and provide little evidence, certainly no guarantee, that things will be any better as a result. Respondents described huge uncertainty, both in funding matters and in relation to their future in general; the local sector was not regarded as 'thriving'. It seems certain that these damaging effects for the groups and organisations involved will also work to the detriment of local users and communities – a voluntary and community sector in West Sussex less able to focus on, and take its cue from, the needs of those whom it was set up to serve.

The impact on trust and independence

2.8 An important contextual finding was that many respondents were anxious to avoid them or their organisation being identified, an anxiety we scrupulously respected. Yet genuine partnership working lives on a culture of trust, openness, equality and security. The issues under examination do not relate to private individuals or to individual organisations – they are social, economic and political. This underlying lack of security is a latent presence behind this entire policy area. Our research suggests that current Government policies of partnership working, empowerment and involvement increasingly have a rhetorical ring rather than a base in reality.

2.9 At the same time, the moves towards greater prescription and control of voluntary action, especially through funding mechanisms, are beginning to show themselves in a creeping erosion of independence, not yet overwhelming, though the direction of travel is clear.

The need for a collective sector voice

2.10 Many of the groups we talked to have to relate to local statutory sector funders in isolated, individualised ways and there were few well-used mechanisms for exercising collective influence on this relationship. The potential of such mechanisms is also undermined by the secrecy induced by competitive tendering.

2.11 Feedback from some interviewees was critical of the local infrastructure bodies, which were seen as ineffective in addressing the funding difficulties and other changes being faced by the local voluntary sector, though this was not the picture everywhere – some infrastructure bodies were seen as trying to effectively integrate and channel VCS interests to achieve strong and authentic strategic influence, at District and County level. There is an urgent need to improve the means by which intelligence is gathered about what is

happening to the local VCS and the structures and arrangements whereby the sector is robustly represented and defended by the organisations charged with that task.

3. Making it better

3.1 Most of those we talked to had experienced pressure on their activities and independence as a result of changed funding arrangements and that it was now "more difficult to follow their own path". Serious fears were also expressed about the future – both the vulnerability that comes from being in a 'marketplace' and about the extent to which they would be used as a delivery vehicle for statutory sector intentions.

3.2 Nevertheless, the good news appears to be that this process has not yet achieved this end; there may still be time to recover the situation. Most interviewees saw their integrity, autonomy and sustainability as threatened rather than overcome. There is still time to agree a more sensible accommodation with the statutory sector around the terms of engagement and the proper role of an independent voluntary sector.

3.3 Moving forwards positively will, however, be a complex task and one that must involve many agencies and individuals. The VCS needs to have plans of its own for the best ways to resource voluntary action and these should form the basis from which to organise, act and negotiate with statutory agencies and other funders. For this reason, we offer this research as a contribution to the debate that is now needed and the action that needs to follow from this – at the level of individual voluntary agencies, within the sector as a whole and within the statutory bodies that are relevant to the future of voluntary action in the area.

What individual organisations can do

Be self conscious and well organised
3.4 Many of our respondents indicated useful practical ways of relating to statutory funding changes, including being better organised, being sussed about the world of tendering and tender writing, strengthening the involvement and skills of Trustees, diversifying funding, investing in secure bases and in flexible use of space, resisting pressure to expand if this is not appropriate, and building better links and perspectives with other agencies.

Audits of independence
3.5 Individual organisations can usefully revisit their own philosophy and purpose, evaluate their current intentions, activities and resourcing, and take stock. This kind of "independence audit" offers a robust base, rooted in the strengths of voluntary action, from which to negotiate with funders. Statutory funders say that they respect the distinct strengths of the voluntary sector: perhaps it is time to assert these strengths more visibly?

Be true to the results
3.6 The results of such audits are, of course, unpredictable. But we would hope that for many the results will be to restate their community roots and the need to live up to that association, commit to investing in their locality, work to retain and involve staff, volunteers and trustees, and promote interest in 'place' and its culture and community. We want to think also that groups would reject outright competitive relationships and instead commit to investing in one another, sharing ideas and resources, and working collaboratively with colleagues.

What the voluntary sector can do collectively

Establish the structures for working together in the sector
3.7 Individual agencies acting alone fragment the potential for influence over the policy and practice of the statutory sector. Maintaining effective structures for sharing information, hammering out positions and perspectives, and agreeing the ways and means of getting effective results becomes absolutely critical given the threat that exists. It is crucial that these structures (forums, working groups, etc.) are themselves independent of the statutory sector and should be the constituencies from which representation should be drawn to participate in partnerships that bring together the statutory and non-statutory sector.

3.8 People representing the sector on these strategic and partnership bodies should be assertive, accountable to their constituencies and willing to dissent from policy and practice, where this threatens the independence and sustainability of the sector. In this, it is also important to build closer links with local elected Members, as is consistent with proper democratic purpose.

3.9 And through all of these groupings and processes, we make a plea to get back to plain speaking. The language we use is a powerful influence on the ways in which we see the world and shape our experience. Both the world of voluntary action and the public sector are now beset with language that confuses, obfuscates and excludes. We cannot have meaningful debate about issues as important as these, when people simply do not understand the words that are being used.

Improve effective infrastructure support
3.10 Local voluntary sector infrastructure bodies, like CVSs, have a central role in generating a shared culture of co-operation and mutual support. In helping to articulate the views of their members (be they specialist or generic bodies), they are in a position to speak with the voice of many. The capacity to do this depends upon successful negotiation of a degree of independence from the local state, effective internal democratic structures, and space away from the agendas of organisational politics. There is a danger that infrastructure bodies are perceived as a part of the problem particularly by smaller community groups. Effective collective action also implies strengthened communication mechanisms, and development of new channels better suited to more critical dialogue.

What the local statutory sector can do

Be worried – things are going wrong
3.11 We hope that Members and officers at all levels will take seriously the disturbing concerns that this research raises. Statutory agencies have legitimacy and authority, as is proper in a democratic environment, and have duties to pursue in relation to public services, our civil society and the health of our people and communities. But with respect to voluntary and community organisations the message of this research is that public policy and practice is 'killing the goose that lays the golden egg'. Within the statutory sector, there are those who make the effort to listen and understand, avoiding the assumption that the voluntary sector should always follow statutory interests and intentions. This perspective needs to become the norm.

Assess the broad impact of your decisions explicitly

3.12 To help to achieve this, and strengthen on-going debate, statutory bodies should build a voluntary and community action 'impact assessment' into all policy and funding decisions. This would set each issue within the broader context of local community life, volunteer engagement, political accountability and working relationships. Future policies and procedures for procurement, commissioning and grant aid would then fall within this impact assessment.

Make 'real partnership' a practical reality
3.13 The word 'power' requires rehabilitation into the language of partnership. Voluntary action – and local civil society – will be strengthened if partnership structures delegate real power and financial responsibility, even when the results may conflict with the intentions of Government policy.

Recognise the true value of local community action
3.14 This research involved organisations of varying sizes, and has highlighted the diversity of voluntary action. We were struck by the extent to which smaller local organisations have been left out of topical dialogue, partly because of the drive towards 'bigness', and partly because of the pressure towards delivery on state priorities. The very language used in most of our conversations derived from the world of tendering and service delivery.

3.15 Yet, our social cohesion depends in large part upon voluntary action taking place totally outside this frame. Policies which may be appropriate to commission very large-scale services or items are not suitable means for strengthening community life, locally-rooted services, and cohesion. We ignore this at our peril.