



# Oldham Community Infrastructure Development

a report for Oldham Partnership  
Community Engagement Commissioning Group

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Voluntary Community & Faith Sector already plays a very significant part in the life of Oldham and its communities. This study demonstrates that it is already well engaged in the new Local Area Agreement (LAA) <sup>1</sup> process and its role within the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) has been nationally recognised. However, it became clear in consultations for this study that it has considerable issues holding it back, particularly relating to communicating what it is and what it does, and its relationships, particularly with the local authority. Other significant issues were a perceived difficulty sometimes working collaboratively, and engaging the smaller groups in the Sector in the implementation of work that the larger organisations are able to get. The Sector proved it could move forward when it established the Voluntary Community & Faith Partnership as part of the LSP structure and what it needs now is clear leadership, a shared vision - and a kickstart to once again build up momentum. What is proposed in this study should assist with that.

1. This piece of work was commissioned by Oldham Partnerships' Community Engagement Commissioning Group with the aim of strengthening the 'Community Infrastructure' to enable it to play a more effective role in the delivery of Oldham's LAA. The background is given on page 5.
2. Community Infrastructure is defined (p5) while elsewhere the 'Voluntary Community & Faith Sector' and the 'Third Sector' are defined (p40). To a large degree these are synonymous and in the report the phrase 'The Sector' is used. The 'faith' involvement is explained (p40).
3. The principal author is Robin Henshaw, Groundwork Oldham & Rochdale's former Executive Director who is responsible for the opinions expressed. The basic thesis is that larger organisations in the Sector should be empowered, encouraged and required to involve smaller groups in shaping and delivering LAA activities (p8).
4. Chapter 2 gives a background to the policy context including several recent government reports placing the Sector at the heart of its plans for the modernisation of local services and it is strongly recommended that this is understood and monitored locally as it is expected local authorities and LSPs will be seen to cooperate with government policy and be proactive (pp9-16).
5. Chapter 2 also looks at the local policy context (pp16-20) with the recommendation that this, too, needs to be more clearly understood.
6. Chapter 3 is part of a report by the Centre for Local Economic Studies (CLES –see p7), produced for this study to give an outside perspective. It recognises an eight level spectrum of involvement for organisations in the Sector (p21) and gives examples elsewhere in England of such involvement (pp22-7). It also has a checklist of questions organisations should ask themselves before they become involved in the LAA process (pp27-8).
7. Chapter 4 gives the background to the establishment and development of the Voluntary Community & Faith Partnership (VCFP) from around 2003 showing the considerable progress made by the Sector developing its strategic priorities including linking with the LSP. It is noted that the strength of Sector involvement in the LSP has helped the LSP get excellent assessments. It

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<sup>1</sup> a glossary of abbreviations appears at the very end of this report – Appendix 5

- reviews membership of Partnerships and the experience of the Community Panels (pp33-4)
8. The current position with the LSP, now known as the Oldham Partnership, including the five Blocks and one Commissioning Group, is shown in Diagram 2 (p35) as are proposals to enhance the Sector position within the current structure, including the new Community Councils (pp36-9).
  9. A large part of the commission was to review the existing Community Infrastructure and survey work is brought together in Chapter 5. Information from Charity Commission sources (p41), a previous study by consultants Shared Intelligence (pp41-2) and information on Voluntary Action Oldham (VAO)'s Website (p44) is assessed and it is concluded that there is a good range and quality of local organisations to be harnessed by the proposals in this study. VAO are currently carrying out a 'State of the Sector' review and when this is published it is recommended that it be well reviewed and its findings widely disseminated, inside and out of the Sector (p44)
  10. The effectiveness of local organisations on the ground was tested by Research Assistant Hazel Mayow who mapped networks in Sholver, Greenacres, Alt and Chadderton. (pp44-7). This confirmed the richness of the Community Infrastructure. It is important to note the mapping was illustrative rather than comprehensive but it is recommended as a worthwhile exercise for others to do to look at the infrastructure in particular localities and to assess how best to tap into such communities to get engagement and to deliver services.
  11. 'Umbrella' organisations – infrastructure groups – were recorded (pp47-9) and the strength of VAO as a Council for Voluntary Services (CVS) organisation was noted, as well as the effectiveness of the Interfaith Forum. It is recommended these are invaluable for the Borough and should continue to be resourced.
  12. Specific 'Neighbourhood Facilities' were recognised linking with the Government's 'Community Anchors' thinking and three examples run by the community were felt to be very effective and worth building on, using the VCF organisations currently involved (p50)
  13. An initial assessment was made of the large numbers (116 to date) of Community Representatives on the new Community Councils (pp50-1) and there is a specific recommendation for the Sector to get more involved in this (p83).
  14. The study set out to look across the spectrum of organisations involved in the Community Infrastructure, going beyond the traditional VCF focus. Some relevant Third Sector organisations and parts of statutory agencies are discussed including social housing initiatives and the Oldham Collective. It is recommended that strong relationships are built up with these organisations as partnerships with these will be critical for the successful delivery of many LAA targets (pp51-3).
  15. The role, benefit and threats of regional and national organisations coming into the Borough was considered with the conclusion that some contribute considerably to the Community Infrastructure, both in their efforts and their areas of expertise, but that the principle should be the involvement of local organisations as much as possible in commissioning processes, where appropriate in partnership with 'outside' bodies (pp53-5).

16. A main proposal put forward in the bid for this consultancy was that larger local organisations should be recognised as catalysts for the engagement of smaller ones in the community and that this ought to be facilitated. Such larger organisations themselves fit into the government definition of 'community anchors' but they are thought of here as 'thematic champions'. The final part of Chapter 5 proposes an initial list of 24 larger groups (based largely on research of turnover) over and above the 'umbrella' infrastructure groups like VAO. While some of these may not be appropriate and while there may be others who could fulfil this role it is proposed that out of these come the 'thematic champions' and the commissioning proposals should result in this (list p56).
17. This list is linked with the LAA themes in Diagram 4 (p57) and this is commended for consideration.
18. Chapter 5 looks at how some current funding streams are distributed to organisations in the Sector. This includes Priority Programme Grant (pp59/60) (worth almost £1.4 in 2007-08) and it is recommended that this becomes part of the LAA allocation invested by the Community Engagement Commissioning Group on behalf of the Oldham Partnership and that if so the point made in paragraph 11 above is considered.
19. It is also recommended that Priority Programme Grant has a fund to support organisations large and small become involved in the Oldham Partnership structures – and to improve the effectiveness of representation. Payments would be on demonstration of effective activity, for which training and support will be needed (a role of the proposed VCFP Coordinator but something that should become part of the culture of the Sector – experienced individuals 'buddying' less experienced ones) (p60 and pp80-1).
20. The Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities (NLDC) fund was also considered. The £842k distributed to VCF organisations over the past three years has been analysed by the very competent Skills for Life Coordinator with some useful lessons learned and observations made (pp60-1)
21. The distribution of Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) to the Sector was then considered – almost £3m has gone to VCF organisations in the past three years, and the 2005-06 amount (which will provide the base-line for LAA monitoring of progress) indicated that was 21% of the amount available, which stands up well to other areas, refuting the concern that the Sector is not involved in delivering LAA programmes in Oldham. 21 VCF organisations have received contracts for 42 projects (p64).
22. LAA targets are then examined, assessing actual and potential Sector involvement in their delivery –which is considerable (pp65-9).
23. A report by Julie Dugdale for Government Office North West, looking at good practice in the involvement of VCF organisations in the Children's Trust agenda, is summarised, giving useful guidelines and a 17 point checklist – and this report is recommended for more general consideration (pp69-70).
24. Issues which came from the consultation process are examined in the final chapter (Chapter 7) (pp72-78) and provide the basis for an improvement programme which should be the result of implementation of the recommendations. While there is recognition of the importance and effectiveness of the Sector at its best (with Age Concern, Brook, the Citizen's Advice Bureau, Groundwork and Positive Steps being cited), very real problems have been identified which require serious consideration.

25. The perception of the Sector is not good in general and clearly a major communication programme is needed to put over what the Sector does well. Elsewhere in the report findings suggest the Sector is very well positioned and is active and much of the problem is to do with a lack of understanding, lack of information and poor relationships, particularly with the local authority (p73)
26. Within the Sector itself there are concerns, partly to do with perceived marginalisation. There is a real concern over the dominance of the larger organisations and this needs very careful handling. Many of the recommendations should help alleviate this as things move forward (p73).
27. A series of main Recommendations is made (p79-86).
28. Firstly it is recommended that the Community Empowerment Commissioning Groups be made permanent and formalised within the LSP structure. It should be strengthened, made as prominent as possible - and, most importantly, staffed by a Coordinator, using part of the NRF allocation for this. There are several reasons for this recommendation – see pages 78-9. The role of this group in driving forward the proposed strategy is considerable and the calibre of the Coordinator will be critical to success.
29. A Sectorial Working Group is proposed to drive forward the Sector, probably comprising largely senior paid staff in the Sector, with some representation from smaller and faith organisations, and with representation from Third Sector organisations and relevant statutory bodies. NRF underspend from elsewhere would initially be used to help resource this. It would be a Working Group with deadlines. The Group would have an ambitious programme and could require up to half a day a fortnight (pp78-9).
30. A specific priority recommendation is that a practical Communications Strategy is devised which could have a massive effect on perceptions, on relationships and on the opportunities for better collaborative working (p80).
31. A proposal is made to commission three pieces of work from the NRF allocation to VCF organisations – support for the VCFP (pp81-2), support for organisations in the Sector with evidencing and information (recognising that this is a very significant issue) (p81) and support for Community Representatives on the Community Councils (p82).
32. Proposals for the balance of the available NRF are to develop the links between the Sector and the LAA Blocks, in a practical way involving VCF organisations as ‘Thematic Champions’. Five mini-commissions are proposed to work on the themes of each of the Blocks, developing Panels and networks of interested organisations, helping strengthen the groups, developing ideas for commissioning and above all developing practical plans to engage smaller organisations in the delivery of activity (pp82-3).
33. A Conference for the Sector on its future is proposed to further develop thinking and to engage the ‘grass roots’ of the Sector, with Judy Robinson proposed as an appropriate independent Chair for that (p83)
34. A list of ideas for further development is under a ‘New Approaches’ heading, complementing the agenda for the Sectorial Working Group.
35. Finally, a brief action plan is proposed to ensure the effective use of the £90k available for investment into these ideas should they be accepted. It is recommended that if at all possible that is augmented for this year and that a budget of at least £400k is negotiated for 2008-9 to implement the ideas of the Community Engagement Block Board (p86)

## **Chapter 7 – ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This final Chapter summarised the issues which came out of the consultation which covered a range of people both within the VCF Sector and in statutory agencies, particularly Oldham MBC. In fact the consultation exercise painted a surprisingly negative picture on balance, despite the previous chapters having described the central position of the Sector in national and local government policy, having demonstrated that the Sector had established itself well within the Oldham Partnership structure, having suggested a very widespread and varied Community Infrastructure and having shown the Sector is already well engaged in delivery of the LAA, with a very significant proportion of funding already channelled to it.

Nevertheless there does seem to be a will across the Borough to improve the situation and the relationship of the Sector with the public agencies and this Chapter makes a number of Recommendations to help that process (and to answer the specified requirements of the commission). Finally, a proposal is made for the investment of the remaining NRF to kickstart the process.

### **ISSUES**

#### **Perception of the Sector**

From both within and outside the Sector there is recognition that there are excellent examples of good practice, partnership working, the delivery of cost-effective and innovative solutions to local problems, flexibility and above all the ability to engage the most hard-to-reach members of the community. Age Concern, Brook, Citizens Advice Bureau, Groundwork and Positive Steps were the most frequently cited as frequently cited as effective organisation. It was generally thought that the Sector was well placed to deal with the major issues the Borough faces, with the work of the Interfaith Forum in relation to community linkages recognised as an excellent example. There is a recognition of good examples of collaborative working, where larger organisations have worked with each other or with smaller groups. The newly announced Wellbeing Lottery award (coordinated by Groundwork in the Region and the PCT in Oldham) commits the principal beneficiaries, Age Concern and Groundwork, to work with specified numbers of smaller groups.

Within the Sector much is made of the accountability, accessibility, democratic nature, diversity and variety of membership and the VCFP. It is members elected to the partnership who represent the Sector on the partnerships and groupings associated with the Oldham Partnership (some 40 places) and thus they are accountable to the Sector as a whole.

Inside the Sector there is a clear recognition of the need to change (although there is not necessarily as shared vision of future roles). There is recognition of a range of weaknesses, many explained by the unstructured nature of the Sector (different from the other partnerships), resourcing issues and in some

cases the perception that the local authority is sometimes difficult to work with.

This feeling of marginalisation is widespread. Also regularly repeated was a feeling of disillusionment. There is the feeling the Sector “is not listened to”, that “a few larger players get everything that is going” and that the promise of commissioning was an illusion. There was ill ease expressed at the increasingly competitive nature of the Sector and a frustration at ‘infighting’. There was a frustration within the Sector that difficult ‘day jobs’ or the fact that participants were volunteers made it very difficult keeping up with fast-changing policy and a difficulty doing what was often expected of representatives – being able to contribute to strategic debate and at the same time bring the views of a very disparate sector. It was recognised that a significant number of people active in the Sector were “voting with their feet” because of a perceived lack of progress with involvement in the LSP/LAA process and were disengaging with the formal part of the Sector. Nevertheless, a significant number of people within the Sector, particularly linked to the larger organisations, continue to be committed to work hard to find solutions.

From outside the Sector (mainly from the local authority officers and Members) came a consistent range of criticisms that were mentioned regularly with descriptions and phrases such as “fragmented”, “collectively weak”, “too slow to change”, “does not recognise financial realities”, “sometimes ineffective, inefficient with high running costs and feeling they have a divine right to funding”, “continually whingeing” (a word frequently used), “competitive in a wasteful way with missed opportunities because of a lack of collaborative working”, “poor at partnership working”, “poor on evaluation”, “sentimentality sometimes gets in the way”, “lacks strategic direction and leadership”. The situation was summarised by a senior local authority person: “the Sector is somewhat weak, relationships with the local authority are not good; there is the need for a strong Third Sector and there is Council and Member recognition of this, but it gets lost in funding issues.”

Most people were realistic and tried to be objective – although a lack of real information sometimes hindered this. There did seem to be a genuine and widespread desire to make the Sector work better and to get working relationships between it and the public agencies to be more harmonious. One representative from the Sector made a plea: “let’s get some enthusiasm back into the Sector”.

### **Relationships with the Local Authority**

In all the government policy documentation there is an expectation that the relationship between the Sector and public agencies should be good so there is obviously an issue here, recognised by the Improvement & Development Agency (IDeA) in its recent Local Government Improvement Programme review of aspects of Oldham MBC corporate governance.

Two local authority representatives described the current relationships as “adversarial”. There is a strong feeling that the Sector does not support the

local authority in a partnership sense and can be personally antagonistic to individual officers and councillors, particularly in relation to funding issues. This is a view shared between the two main political parties. There needs to be an understanding of the reality of finite funding and that funding streams do come to an end, and a respecting of the democratic process in decision making.

While an understanding of the VCF Sector by the statutory agencies is an issue, so too is the lack of understanding of the public bodies and their structures. At present there seems to be uncertainty even within the local authority itself (“it is difficult when departments are not joined up – and the role of Councillors is unclear”) with mass changes in organisational structure and responsibilities and this extends to the understanding of links between the authority and the Oldham Partnership, especially related to commissioning. The issue was raised about the plethora of policies which the Council produces and which sometimes seem to dominate relationships with the local authority, often putting other development work on hold (as happened to the Compact) – and that all too often these are soon superseded or are never actually used. Issues as to how the authority produces some such policies – including currently the Community Engagement Strategy – were raised.

There is uncertainty as to how the local authority believes it interfaces with the Sector. The Voluntary Sector Panel was thought to be this interface but it is currently pointless following the introduction of Cabinet working, although it could neatly link back in with the Council and Oldham Partnership through the Overview & Scrutiny process. The Cabinet Member charged with linking with the Sector covers Community Cohesion Localism and Communications. Some VCF groups have local authority Members appointed to their Boards/management committees but (with some exceptions) this does not work with complaints those places are rarely taken up.

Elected Members (as well as officers) feel they receive insufficient information about the Sector and its activities, including Borough-wide and Ward activity. Similarly, there is the perception of lack of accountability, with the results of activity funded by the local authority seldom promoted.

Of course, there are plenty of examples where relationships work well, on a local and Borough-wide basis and where individuals have taken the trouble to understand the situation. Some of the issues are to do with communication and that has to be a main issue. But there is a more fundamental issue, recognised by both main political parties, that the relationship between the Sector and authority needs to be sorted, before the 2008 Corporate Performance Assessment. What is worrying is the comment by a central figure that: “we have such an adversarial situation and it is difficult to see how that can be resolved”. This view has informed some of the recommendations made later in this Chapter.

### **Communications**

Problems relating to communications are a main problem – and opportunity. People we consulted with recognised this is a difficult issue for a fragmented

Sector but one which should be a priority, and not just relating to the relationship between the Sector and the local authority. There is a general need for organisations within the Sector to promote what they do and to communicate better with the community, and for this to have a Sector-wide dimension. This promotion within and outside the Sector needs to be achieved with a variety of media.

The (re)establishment of thematic Panels to mirror the Blocks was commented on by many of the people we consulted. There was a fear about duplication and some scepticism as to whether people would attend these. However, there was a general view that as part of an efficient network facilitating flows of information – and properly serviced, with different methods of communication being used, they could be very beneficial.

Related to this is an important issue in the context of LAA target delivery – and the use of public funding in general – the need to better evidence activity. The Sector believes there is a big opportunity to greatly increase outputs and outcomes of the Sector by better recording by the larger organisations and by the recognition of the results of a considerable number of local VCF organisations which do not collect data but have a considerable impact on the achievement of targets. However, the Sector needs to make sure its evidencing is robust – as was pointed out in the consultation “for years when no one was listening you could get away with generalisation. Not any more.” Such a development would be of considerable interest to the local authority and the Oldham Partnership. Government Office North West has also recognised the issue and has offered help. It was noted that some things important to the Sector may be very difficult or impossible to measure.

### **Understanding of the Sector**

One difficulty we kept coming across was the lack of understanding on what makes up the Sector – what we are talking about. Chapter 5 has looked at the breadth of the VCF and Third Sector and an understanding of the nature and capabilities of the different part of the spectrum is required. The flurry of database information being compiled was noted and many of the people we consulted with were clear that a central, up-to-date and easily accessible data-base was a particular requirement for the Borough.

Two ideas in this study are commended: use of local mapping to get an idea of the dynamics of the local community infrastructure, and secondly the CLES spectrum of involvement. Furthermore the general review of organisations contains a lot of information which should be better understood than it seems to be at present.

There were different views from representatives of the different types of organisation which must be considered:

### **The Smaller Groups**

These (supported by VAO) were consistent in expressing a concern that they saw the larger organisations already a threat to them. The idea of encouraging larger organisations to work with smaller ones was discussed

with them. They felt this would require teeth to make sure it happened although, in principle, most felt it was a good idea.

The smallest groups and some of the larger ones valued practical support, such as that given by the Oldham Community Accountancy Service (OCAS) and VAO's role and urged that funding be continued to keep this resource. Regarding their understanding of the LAA they noted how difficult it was keeping up with developments and they noted the help required with participation in the Oldham Partnership structures, although most were willing to be involved, with support.

### **Outside Groups**

There was a strong concern that without serious strategic intervention in helping local organisations to compete, regional and national organisations would increasingly take over. The issue was expressed that often outside bodies come into the Borough to access funding which may be at the expense of one or more local groups. They then leave when the funding goes and the Borough has not benefited from the 'added value' in which a local organisation can bring, such as involvement in local partnerships and the investment in infrastructure and experience of the organisation itself. It was accepted that outside specialist bodies do have a place, particularly if working in partnership with local organisations.

### **Key Players**

The issue of the over reliance on certain individuals was recognised, with a significant number of 'key players' within the VCF Sector having retired or moved on or late leaving a void. Although there was concern too much emphasis on individuals can cause problems – such as when individuals become 'gatekeepers', lessening the opportunities of others, as can happen in the locality and in a Borough-wide context – it was nevertheless agreed that the relationships between a number of these individuals and individuals within the local authority were crucial and this was an area for improvement. Attention should always be paid to giving opportunities to people wanting to get engaged, with training, support and 'buddying' provided.

### **Funding and Staffing**

These were issues for local organisations but were also seen as important by those in the statutory sector. It was noted (by a local authority consultee) that all the government focus on engagement of local VCF organisations in the local democratic process including the LSP had not brought with it any extra funding. But the principle of doing more with less money was one being applied across public life and the VCF Sector could not be immune to this. Nevertheless ways should be found for legitimate and productive expenditure of staff time which is not covered by grants to be reimbursed.

The time and effort spent chasing funding was felt to be wasteful. The reliance on short-term funding was also considered an inefficiency within the Sector and that tended to be the rule rather than the exception despite so much government rhetoric about sensible resourcing of the Sector and three-year commitments. More focus should be on functions rather than appointments of

new, dedicated staff, which would help get the Sector more flexible and could lead to the Sector retaining more experienced staff. Payment by outputs would help “sharpen” organisations within the Sector.

It was noted that the larger organisations may be able to attract and retain staff better than smaller ones because of having opportunities for more financial stability (particularly if they can build up working capital) and for career/progression opportunities within the organisation. It was agreed across both the statutory and VCF Sector that the retention of competent staff (as well as volunteers) was important and should be a shared goal.

The opportunities within the Sector for engagement and help on the ‘ladder of engagement’ were noted. The Sector already employs significant numbers (the 2005 survey estimated almost 3000) and itself has the opportunity to play a useful role in placements and training opportunities for those people in the community that the LAA targets.

### **Use of Sector for Commissioning**

The comments by the Skills for Life Coordinator regarding experience commissioning the Sector for Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities (NLDC) activity have already been highlighted: “VCF organisations are ideally placed to access targeted client groups but they sometimes need specialist help to them engage and retain”. This is a really useful approach where groups are supported and evaluated. Many in the public agencies would like to commission more work from the Sector but sometimes see obstacles.

These include a clear need to upskill organisations and staff (and volunteers) within them. However, this can include recognising where expertise is elsewhere and working more effectively collaboratively. All organisations involved in the LAA process at least must be able to demonstrate that they are fit for purpose and committed to continuous improvement.

There was recognition that the Sector could be used more effectively to test new approaches. However, there was also concern that the uncertainty in some activity could make it very difficult for some organisations to take part – Incapacity Benefit was cited where payment was by numbers into jobs but numbers being referred to agencies could not be guaranteed. Organisations gearing themselves up for this may make a loss if numbers – totally beyond the control of the organisations – fell short of those planned for. Here an appropriate method of funding is required, perhaps not quite as generous as the NLDC defrayment of all eligible expenditure, but at least not entirely dependent on job outcomes.

Finally, the development within the Sector of a Community Enterprise approach was put forward very strongly by the local authority – the Oldham Collective, being part of the local authority, was better known by Members and officers within the Council as initiatives within the VCF Sector. This area of activity needs to go forward as part of a Borough-wide strategic plan to ensure best use is made of finite opportunities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Community Engagement Block Board.**

It is firstly recommended that the current Community Engagement Commissioning Group be made permanent and change its status to that of a Board, reporting directly (as is the case now) to the LSP Executive. It would take on responsibility for monitoring the progress with LAA targets within the Sustainable Neighbourhoods Block which relate to its area of interest. Ideally the group will be expanded although the current cross—Block membership which seems an excellent starting point. Critically, the Board should get a dedicated Coordinator, clearly identifiable with the Block (see below).

This proposal is pivotal to the other recommendations and is made for several reasons:

- The Group has very quickly got off the ground, is working well and links very effectively all the different parts of the Oldham Partnership structure
- Community engagement, the most important part of Community Cohesion, being so crucial to Oldham, needs a separate focus – the Sustainable Neighbourhoods Board has too full an agenda to effectively consider this area of interest
- From the VCF point of view recognising and staffing this new Board would strengthen the status of the area of interest within the LSP structure
- The identifiable Coordinator would be associated with the Block (in the same way other Coordinators are associated with their Blocks) rather than be seen as being totally local authority yet would link in with the authority (and the LSP Secretariat) where decisions are made. The VCFP has arguably missed out over the last few years because it has not had this link and has felt marginalised.
- The concerns about the state of the relationship between the VCF Sector expressed very strongly from within the Council suggest a 'fresh start' is required and new leadership by the Block Board is suggested as a way forward to activate the community infrastructure.
- The Group already has very competent membership from the VCFP which would be kept centrally involved with developments.
- It would agree to look at the results of its investment and other Sector activity as well as monitoring appropriate output targets and formulating business cases to tackle them

It is proposed the Coordinator be seconded, perhaps from a VCF organisation, to start as soon as possible. Funded by the NRF and placed with the LSP Secretariat for formal line-management purposes tasks would include:

- Servicing the Board and Chair
- Monitoring the programme funded by Community Engagement NRF (and other pieces of NRF work)
- Establishing effective relationships with key individuals in the Oldham Partnership/Oldham MBC and the VCF Sector

- Working closely with VAO
- Facilitate the Sector Working Group
- Chairing a Community Engagement Coordinators' Group (see below – this would link representatives of organisations commissioned to carry out pieces of work under the Community Infrastructure programme)
- Formulate more permanent plans for 2008-09 funding and programme

It is recommended this idea go to the LSP Executive's next meeting

### **Sector Working Group**

There are a number of issues which need to be considered as soon as possible by the Sector and which need to engage the Sector and it is proposed that a Sector Working Group be established by the Board. It is believed that there would be sufficient goodwill to get cooperation and support with this, including from VAO and Oldham MBC Communities Unit, both of whom may consider some of the matters to be their current remit. There could be a resource issue and, although this is not a specific recommendation for the investment of the Community Infrastructure 2007-08 NRF, a fund would be appropriate to be paid to participating organisation (payment on agreed outputs, monitored by the Block Coordinator – possibly using NRF underspend or Oldham MBC Priority Programme Grant underspend).

Members of the Working Group would be selected for what they could contribute to the deliberations and would be most likely to be mainly senior officers from VCF organisations. Representatives from other Third Sector organisations should be included as well as representatives from statutory agencies if appropriate. This would be promoted as a Working Group to deal with a significant agenda with a 'task & finish' approach – and firm deadlines. A commitment of half a day a fortnight would be required. It would be expected organisations and departments of public agencies would cooperate with the provision of information.

The Group would report back to the Block Board and VCFP. Preferably the Block Coordinator would have a coordinating role with this group. Its initial programme could cover:

- The production of an outline Communications Strategy
- A programme to strengthen links with the local authority through a plan for engagement.
- Preparation for the proposed Sector Conference
- Working with VAO to clarify its ambitions and requirements
- Agreeing a plan to work with the Community Councils and the proposed Community Activists' Network in conjunction with the organisation commissioned to carry out this work (see below)
- Developing a Training Strategy in conjunction with VAO and developing ideas for organisational accreditation within the Sector
- Preparing a policy to get larger organisations to work with smaller ones in their delivery of funded work, perhaps through a protocol and within a plan with ambitious targets

- Developing a framework for VCF Sector involvement in Social Enterprise planning and development.
- Information provision – recommending a central data-base of information on organisations in the Sector
- Consider National and local government policy and its impact on the Sector – such as property transfer and the recognition and resourcing of ‘community anchors’.

### **Communications Strategy**

Many of the issues facing the Sector (particularly relating to its outside relationships) relate to communications and this must be an absolute priority. The excellent Communications Officer from the LSP Secretariat could have an advisory role here. The recommendation is that the Sector Working Group set an early target date for this and consider among other things:

- Getting a presentation spot booked for the Oldham Partnership Executive, Steering Group and Blocks. Members of the Sector would be expected to make the presentations
- Agreeing, with support from the Cabinet Member, an early presentation opportunity to Oldham Council’s Cabinet and the staff Senior Management Group (or appropriate equivalent). Other promotional opportunities would be developed by the Sector Working Group in consultation with the local authority within an overall plan for engagement. Groups and groupings should be encouraged to update Members on activities in their area.
- A Sector Open Day was suggested which would have merit
- Support a press/media campaign to highlight the work of the Sector (possibly negotiate and appropriate regular feature). Again it would be expected individual groups would cooperate with this, with some central coordination (see below)
- Produce a digest of projects/achievements on a quarterly basis and a Sector summary for circulation to the Oldham Partnership.
- Develop ideas for ‘Seeing is Believing’, links to other LSPs, inter-community visits etc. Ideas to get support from outside could be of use – IDeA have an appropriate programme which helps identify exchange good practice and Government Office North West have offered help.

### **Voluntary Community & Faith Partnership**

It is recommended that the VCFP remains as is for the time being, although it should be considered by the proposed Conference and Working Group out of which could come a suggestion that it be reconstituted following the January elections to involve a considerably larger group meeting on a 6-monthly basis with an Executive Group meeting bi-monthly or quarterly.

It is proposed that an organisation be appointed to carry out the function of Partnership Coordinator (to be carried out by one individual or shared across the organisation), funded by NRF and having the following tasks:

- To work with VAO on the annual election process for members of the VCFP and carry out appropriate induction for members

- To communicate with the Interfaith Forum regarding nominations to the VCFP and with VAO regarding its representation on the Partnership
- To liaise closely and regularly with VCFP Chair and agree meeting agendas and actions
- To collate papers for VCFP meeting and produce minutes
- To organise meeting of VCF Coordinators' Group (Block Coordinators, Community Council Coordinator, Information/Evidencing Officer, Community Engagement Commissioning Group Coordinator and VCFP representation as decided by the Partnership)
- To be involved in the marketing and communications strategy agreed by the Coordinators' Group and to support other members of the Coordinators' Group as appropriate
- To be the point of contact for coordination and information for VCFP members
- To produce reports for the Oldham Partnership as required and to provide detailed records to claim funding for the role

### **Information and Evidencing**

It is clear from the issues raised in the consultation that more capacity is required for the providing of information and the evidencing of activity. It is proposed an organisation is commissioned to provide this support across the VCF Sector, supporting organisations plan for and demonstrate evidencing of their activities and also collects evidence of what is being achieved elsewhere in the Sector. Again this would be a function for an organisation rather than necessarily a specific officer, and, monitored by the Block Coordinator, payments would be related to activities and results. Tasks would include:

- To work with the VCFP Coordinators' Group and VAO to provide information on the sector and its outputs and the outcomes it helps achieve
- To meet a range of statutory and VCF organisations to assist in evidencing output and outcomes
- To analyse the LAA and other commissioning opportunities and to meet appropriate Target Leads to develop ideas and plans for VCF involvement in delivery
- To work individually with VCFP Block theme Coordinators (see below) to support their work with VCF groups, particularly relating to evidencing work
- To provide information, including reports and formal presentations on current and possible future opportunities for VCF organisations' involvement in the delivery of commissioned activity, including (coordinated) presentations to the various parts of the Oldham Partnership, Community Councils etc.
- To support other members of the VCFP Coordinators' Group with their publicising and promoting the Sector and its work, and to produce periodic press releases
- To assist with the Sector Communication Strategy
- To report to the VCFP, VCFP Coordinators' Group and the Block Board (through its Coordinator).

## **Community Councils**

As noted, a particular challenge has been made to the Sector to engage with the Community Councils. Already there are some 116 community representatives appointed to the Councils representing 55 organisations. There is a massive opportunity to work with the local authority Area Managers' Team to gain full benefit from this membership and to get effective linkages with the VCFP and its structures (including thematic Panels and other networks).

A commissioning opportunity would be given to VCF organisations to deliver the function of VCF Community Councils Coordinator with the following functions:

- Working with the Area Managers, to support the Community Council Community representatives ensuring no duplication of effort
- Making contact with the Community Representatives, including information ascertaining (particularly related to groups they are associated with to determine how accountable they are and what could help dissemination of information on Community Council and VCF activity to the broader group membership)
- Making presentations to the Community Councils on the scope and work of the VCF Sector and the Oldham Partnership in general
- Supporting individual Representatives with training requirements and upskilling where there is an interest to help them engage with other training and representational opportunities, including within the Sector
- To develop a strategy for the Sector on links between Community Council representatives and the VCFP and Panels including opportunities for promoting linkages between representatives of the different Councils.
- Developing ideas for added value for the Sector such as using the Representatives for area mapping and exploring ways VCF groups active in the Borough can link with the Representatives and their groups.
- To report to the VCFP, VCFP Coordinators' Group and the Block Board (through its Coordinator).

## **LAA Thematic Areas**

The Sector, and particularly some of the larger organisations, has made very good progress with involvement in the delivery of LAAs (as evidenced by the involvement in NRF). What is needed is to expand this work and, particularly, to find ways of involving smaller voluntary and community groups in delivery and development of LAA targets.

It is proposed that an exercise take place to see if the Sector can get an integrated Network of Thematic Champions to develop business, ensure links with the VCFP and engage as much as possible in delivery of the LAA. There would be five VCFP Thematic Coordinators covering:

- Sustainable Neighbourhoods – culture, environment and crime
- Housing
- Healthy Communities & Older People

- Children & Young People
- Economy & Enterprise – including employability

Once again, local VCF Sector organisations would be given the opportunity to be commissioned to do this work with the following tasks:

- To represent the VCFP on the Block Board and relevant subgroups (there will be one other representative on each of the Blocks appointed directly by the VCFP)
- To identify local VCF organisations interested in the subject matter of the Block; to organise Panel meetings and regular communication with interested groups
- To research likely opportunities for commissioning, developing relationships with the commissioners and LAA Target Leads (being proactive with ideas emanating from the VCF Sector to produce business cases and promote the ideas).
- To lead on putting in for commissions, through working to be preferred supplier, bidding for such work or by working in appropriate consortia.
- For the organisation contracted to take this coordination role for the Block, to commit itself to engaging VCF groups, including neighbourhood based ones, in the delivery of commissioned work. This is proposed to be a main part of the future strategy for the engagement of VCF groups and the community in general in the delivery of commissioned work. Plans and details of such engagement to be discussed with the VCFP Coordinators' Group, and reported to the VCFP and Community Engagement Block Board.
- To provide informal and formal support to help VCF organisations gear up to be able to play a role in the delivery of commissioned activity, identifying reasons for VCF organisations not being engaged in delivery activity and making recommendations for support and training requirements.
- To produce reports of Block Board and Panel meetings to a template; to report on opportunities for commissioning and experiences; to report on support and training requirements – all these reports to go to the VCFP Coordinators' Group, VCFP and VAO.

### **Sector Conference**

Although the approach recommended (including leadership from the Community Engagement Block Board and its Coordinator) is believed to be the best way to achieve the movement required, the VCF Sector must not be made to feel it has been removed even further from decision-making. With the proposed emphasis on communications this should be alleviated, particularly when people do see progress. Nevertheless, it is proposed that a Sector Conference be held in December to help shape the future of the Sector, including VAO and the VCFP. VAO's Vice Chair Judy Robinson has offered to chair such an event (she ran Greater Manchester Council for Voluntary Services and now runs the equivalent for Yorkshire Forward, the Regional Development Agency).

This will need to have the Block Board prominent and be very positive as to the action plan envisaged for the thematic area.

### **Reinstatement of Panels**

As noted elsewhere this would seem to be well worthwhile and is supported by Government Office North West. Different to the CETO era, the Panels should be more closely linked to the VCFP and to the LAAs and, using a variety of means of engagement (not just formal Panel meetings), it is believed the thematic priorities and the VCF Sector potential within these will be made known to local groups who will have the opportunity to comment and hopefully to influence policy and priorities. Wherever possible, existing networks will be linked into, such as Age Concern's Older People's Forum which regularly attracts up to 40 at meetings. The commissioning process should result in local VCF organisations actively involved in the delivery of Block activity being selected to organise the Panels and ensure communication flows work (or at least linked in if another organisation get the commission).

### **Funding**

While this is a topic in itself, two sets of recommendation are made here. First, regarding Priority Programme Grant, the decision to pool this with the LAA has yet to be taken, despite a 2004 consultancy recommending it go over to the LSP for decision. If that does happen, the fact that Priority Programme Grant is used to support a range of legitimate activities of considerable value to the Borough but with only indirect link with the LAA should be recognised and some of the LAA be ringfenced for these activities, such as VAO's CVS role. In line with central government thinking, grants should be available for smaller groups (as opposed to commissions) – preferably with fewer strings attached than the Global grants which have replaced the Community Chest (which was administered successfully by VAO), but nevertheless contributing in some way to the strengthening of the Community Infrastructure. Secondly, with Priority Programme Grant, it is recommended that a fund (perhaps £10k) be set aside to support groups participating in the VCFP, such as representing the Sector at Block meetings. This should be only payable on evidence of activity, such as the circulation of agenda with notes to interested groups (perhaps Panel members) and a reporting back on an appropriate template.

With NRF and commissioning in general consideration should be given to some up-front payment to assist groups with little working capital and, although full payment should only be on achievement of outputs, it ought to be made promptly and using the full recovery methodology. The idea that commissions ought to be in small 'bite-sized chunks' to make it easier for smaller groups was put forward and received support in the Sector, but it may prove unfeasible.

### **New Approaches**

The consideration of new ideas closely linked to Government policy is proposed as one of the tasks for the Sector Working Group. Some may need to be taken separately because they are on Oldham MBC's agenda, such as

the transfer of community assets, the recognition of premises-based 'community anchors' or thematic community anchors which we have referred to here as 'thematic champions'. The Sector needs to get thoroughly engaged in the debate on a network of community centres including community assets, local 'hubs', extended schools, LIFT community health centres etc. These 'thematic champions' have been suggested in the diagram linking LAA themes and VCF organisations and it is hoped that such an approach will increase dynamism, interest, expertise and effectiveness. Some other issues are rather more long term but further recommendations for consideration are:

- Targets set for collaborative work, to emphasise a new understanding within the Sector and to make it clear that some of the perceived faults of the Sector are being addresses
- Consideration of local Quality systems for the Sector, such as peer group reviews, as well as the fostering of a culture of openness, sharing and collaborative thinking. Examine the effectiveness of governance including boards of directors/management committees
- More fundamental review of aspects of the Sector – for example, the local authority carrying out an audit of the finances of the Sector – from the point of view of the Sector this would show an interest, commitment and subsequently a greater understanding of the Sector by the authority
- Consideration of possible links with the Strategic Services Delivery Partnership (SSDP) with possible opportunities for cost-cutting through the centralised provision of back-room services (linking with a 24 hour call centre, for example), group purchasing and specialist services.
- The revival of the Compact is probably worth trying – but only if it is endorsed and championed by the Community Engagement Block Board because otherwise, like in the past, it will not be taken seriously.
- A checklist approach to the involvement of the VCF Sector is used such as those in the Julie Dugdale study (Chapter 6) which, although specifically for the Children theme seem to be applicable across the Blocks.
- Once the local authority has decided on the future for the new equalities organisation is understood, the relationship between that and the VCF Sector and particularly the formal partnerships needs to be settled or that could reintroduce division back into the Sector.

## **NRF INVESTMENT**

It is proposed that the following is the programme for securing investment of the remaining NRF which is available for the theme of Community Infrastructure:

- £10k from the pot (ideally plus an additional amount of underspend to maximise the budget) for the Block Board to use for a **Coordinator**. LSP Executive to approve. Post seconded – possibly from Voluntary Sector, although such an important role which needs filling as soon as possible should be put out to all partners with help secured from heads of agencies

- the other £80k to be in eight **mini-commissions**, put out to VCF Sector organisations as follows
  - £10k for the VCFP Coordinator
  - £10k for the Information & Evidencing function
  - £10k for the Community Council liaison function
  - £12k for Sustainable Communities theme coordination
  - £8k for the Housing theme
  - £12k for the Health & Older People theme
  - £12k for the Children & Young People theme
  - £8k for the Economy & Enterprise function

This would be in October, with a requirement to start at the beginning of November. It will be tight but the Block Board should have time to review progress in January before going out to commission 2008-09 activity – which it is recommended for that year be based on the similar ideas.

One objective of this is to involve a number of organisations in the Sector in the (funded) support for moving forward on the model proposed. If one organisation, such as VAO, was to win all or a majority of the mini-commissions, it is recommended that the specification be such that there is a requirement to engage larger organisations from within the ‘thematic champions’ list (see Diagram 4).

The Block Board will need to negotiate soon for an allocation from NRF or its replacement, an exercise the Oldham Partnership will need to carry out immediately following the Government’s October Corporate Spending Review. £400,000 is proposed for this Block to drive forward the engagement of the Community Infrastructure in LAA activity and assist it gear up for the challenges ahead.