

Making it work

Voluntary and community sector involvement in Local
Area Agreements

*This report was commissioned by the IDeA,
with the support of NACVS and Urban Forum.*

*Many thanks to all those who responded to the survey
and sent information that has formed the basis of this report
and to OPM who undertook the analysis and report drafting.*

June 2005

I&DeA
improvement and development agency

Index

	Page
Introduction	
The scope of this report	3
Key Messages from the first phase of LAAs	6
Part One – The Experience of the first 20 LAAs	7
Gearing Up	7
Consulting the VCS on the content	9
The VCS as contributor and beneficiary	9
Negotiations	11
Delivery	11
Measuring and monitoring	11
Conclusions	13
Part Two – Better practice next time	14
LAAs are a model for the future	14
What can the VCS do?	14
What can Government Offices do?	15
What can councils and LSPs do?	16
Developing the LAA	17
Planning to deliver	17
The Statement of Community Involvement	18
The role of the Compact	19
List of contributors to study	20

The scope of the report

Voluntary and community sector (VCS) involvement in the development and delivery of Local Area Agreements (LAAs) is critically important. This is why the IDeA, in collaboration with NACVS and Urban Forum, has commissioned this assessment of the experience of involving the VCS in the first 20 pilots. This document suggests ways that local councils, LSPs, and local VCS organisations in the next phase of LAAs (announced June 2005) can do it better next time. This will be of interest to both policy staff and practitioners involved in LAAs.

This report is in two parts. The first part summarises the information from a short survey sent to CVS, council lead officers in the Pilot LAA areas, and to each Government Office. In the second part are some 'better ways of doing things', which are informed by the responses to the survey, and should promote dialogue between councils and VCS organisations on how the VCS will be included.

From the survey it is clear that the ODPM's timetable did not allow enough time for effective community involvement – or indeed the involvement of other partners. However, with the more realistic time frame in place for the next round of LAAs, there is a real opportunity and a shared commitment to ensuring that the VCS are fully involved in the design and delivery of the LAA.

Why is the voluntary and community sector an important partner in the LAA?

In July 2004, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) published their prospectus setting out what a Local Area Agreement is. This stated that public sector agencies, together with the Local Authority, had an important responsibility to '*empower and encourage representatives of the voluntary, community and business sectors to be involved*'. The *Local Area Agreement Advice Note 1* (written for the first 20 pilots) highlighted the ODPM's expectation that local authorities would ensure the involvement of the VCS to '*identify, shape and deliver*' the services included in the LAA. Guidance suggested that each LAA should include a 'statement of involvement' showing how the VCS were involved in the design and delivery of the agreement and how this links with, and builds on, other infrastructure or capacity building activities – for example *ChangeUp* and *Firm Foundations*. In developing the agreement, it was also proposed that Compact principles should be applied.

The ODPM's encouragement of VCS involvement in the LAA is consistent with many other current policy initiatives across the public services, and in central and local government, including:

- requirements to involve sector representatives in the LSP;
- to undertake community planning exercises in drawing up Community Strategies;
- efforts to put community participation at the centre of strategies for tackling deprivation and exclusion as part of neighbourhood renewal;
- placing power in the hands of local people as a way of building sustainable communities and sustainable development, and
- strengthening and improving service delivery through consultation and public involvement – e.g. in policing and health.

More than consultation

The VCS has two roles in the LAA. It is a partner to be consulted and involved in the discussion of priorities and desirable outcomes, especially where it represents the views of service users and residents. And it is a potential delivery partner, contributing funded and self help services, involvement in governance and building social capital and networks. Many of the local issues that the LAAs are intended to tackle require the involvement of voluntary organisations, community groups and citizens themselves. But the focus on the more measurable aspects of service delivery and governance should not be at the expense of social capital and capacity building.

Community and VCS involvement has distinctive but interdependent and overlapping elements – each of which needs to be deliberated when considering the contribution of the voluntary and community sector as a whole, or indeed any single voluntary or community organisation, to the development and delivery of an LAA:

- Involvement in governance and decision making structures – such as voluntary sector umbrella organisations sitting on the LSP, tenant representatives participating in neighbourhood forums, specialist organisations as part of specific partnerships, VCS representatives monitoring the implementation of the overall LAA
- Service delivery – for example, voluntary organisations winning contracts to deliver services or to partner with statutory agencies, funding to voluntary projects to deliver specific activities, services provided by self-help groups, user consultation designed to monitor, review, and strengthen services
- Building social capital – through membership of, and involvement in, community activities that helps to build skills, create social inclusion and encourage community cohesion and good relationships between diverse groups

These three elements clearly build on and strengthen each other. Community organisations provide a pool of motivated and networked volunteers to deliver services or sit on governance boards. The opportunity to engage in governance structures helps to encourage community organisations to look outwards towards the whole community. User groups who run their own services not only benefit their own quality of life but also bring that experience to other local activities.

The benefits of VCS involvement for LSPs and Councils

With increased VCS participation in LAAs, councils, LSPs and government bodies will be able to:

- Make use of the experience, knowledge, and skills of the VCS to help design and deliver more effective services
- Use VCS links with communities and users to ensure that services and projects tackle the real issues and will work on the ground
- Strengthen relationships and enhance collaboration between public agencies and voluntary and community groups working on similar issues or themes, or in the same area
- Access community networks that are key to delivering changes in attitude or behaviour for the benefit of the area, for instance to encourage recycling or healthy eating
- Co-ordinate services in the public and voluntary sectors, so they don't duplicate or contradict each other and creative synergies can be found
- Link with the external funding, assets, volunteers and other resources that the VCS bring into the arena.

The benefits to the VCS of involvement in LAAs

LAAs are a new and evolving policy initiative and the real benefits of VCS involvement are likely to become clearer over time, as well as the potential costs. However, at this stage, there are some key potential benefits to the VCS, including the opportunity to:

- Demonstrate the added value that the VCS can bring as a partner – in the spheres of governance, service delivery and social capital
- Contribute to changes in the way services are delivered for the benefit of communities
- Secure new funds and other kinds of support for activities in the community that improve quality of life
- Strengthen infrastructure and clarify and streamline networks to ensure that the VCS can be effectively consulted on the decisions that are important to local people
- Strengthen relationships and enhance collaboration between voluntary and community groups working in the same area, or on the same issue
- Explore how better use can be made of VCS assets such as village halls and community centres

Local Area Agreements are not just important in themselves. The model of partnership working embodied in the LAA – joint agreement on local priorities and outcomes, pooled funding, assessments of which organisation is best placed to deliver services or projects, collective accountability for outcomes and an increased role for Government Office in monitoring progress – is likely to be here to stay. The changes in funding for the Community Empowerment Networks and the single Community Programme show how important it is that the VCS gets involved in LAAs and their reward element (previously LPSAs) and other similar partnership mechanisms.¹

¹ www.nacvs.org.uk - "Community Empowerment – Networks, responsible Bodies and LSPs working together" (NACVS 2005)

Key messages from the first phase of LAAs

- VCS involvement requires a strategic and specific approach. Umbrella bodies are key to the overarching strategic direction of the whole agreement. But for the detailed discussions about each outcome block, and the operational management of each block, it is important to be very specific about which VCS organisations can contribute information or activities.
- The principles of partnership working embodied in the LAA are here to stay – getting involved in the LAA is an opportunity for the VCS and LSP to shape the partnership rules of engagement going forward.
- LAAs offer clear potential benefits for the local authorities, the local VCS and other partners. However, they also raise difficult and challenging questions for partners and partnerships - how to tackle changes in funding allocations, who needs to participate and how, and how to hold partners to account for performance.
- Where existing partnerships are strong and these issues are handled sensitively, LAAs may be an opportunity to strengthen partnership structures – where structures are not robust and levels of trust are low, LAAs are likely to test partnership working.
- Attention needs to be paid to all three main ways in which the VCS can contribute to outcomes – involvement in governance, service delivery and building social capital.
- There can be a mismatch of perceptions. Government Offices and the statutory partners may feel they have consulted through regional, sub regional or other umbrella bodies. However the VCS may not feel that they have been consulted if those bodies have no credibility as representatives, have no systems of accountability or simply lack the resources to engage more widely.
- The VCS needs to organise itself and agree on representation and channels of communication so that the views of sector can be credibly represented and integrated into the LAA.
- Statutory partners have a responsibility to work closely with the VCS to find ways of ensuring that the VCS have the resources and support to get involved as an equal partner, and that there are no other barriers to their involvement.
- It is in the interests of the VCS to proactively engage with LAA lead officers in councils and with relevant people in GO at an early stage in the process of developing an LAA. And public sector partners should make every effort to facilitate this participation.
- LAAs raise complex and wide ranging issues – developing an LAA takes time and may feel painful at times!

PART ONE - The experience of the first 20 LAAs

This is a preliminary analysis of the experience of involving the VCS in the pilot phase of LAAs. It is intended for policy staff and practitioners in local authorities, LSP partners, the voluntary & community sector, Government Offices and central government.

In recognition of the important role that the VCS can play in LAAs, the IDeA, in collaboration with Urban Forum and NACVS, commissioned a short piece of research exploring the experiences of the twenty pilots that drew up their agreements between October and March 2005², and to inform 'good practice' guidance for local VCS and LSP organisations in the future phases of LAAs. Information was gathered using a short survey, which was mailed to LAA leads in local authorities, to the CVS in each LAA area, and to each Government Office for the Region. We had replies from 163 CVS and other VCS bodies, 10 local authorities and 6 Government Offices. It was supplemented by telephone interviews carried out by NACVS and Urban Forum with their members.

Each area is different in terms of which organisations are (or ought to be) involved in the LAA. Since the primary purpose of the research is to inform practice next time round, we asked the council lead officer to respond on behalf of the council, LSP or other partnerships and the local CVS to report on the experience of the whole VCS. This will have obscured local complexities and differing perspectives, but we feel that overall we have a good enough snapshot of 'what happened' to be able to draw conclusions in relation to improved practice in the future. Readers in local areas will have to interpret the recommendations in Part Two and decide which organisations should be implementing them.

Gearing up

Because the LAAs were completely new, there was little prior understanding by the partners as to the principles and processes of the LAA initiative. The first step was therefore to ensure awareness and some basic understanding locally. The majority of councils and/or LSPs provided some kind of briefing for the VCS – although due to time constraints, this was not always tailored to the specific information needs of the VCS. Consultation meetings were held with all partners, for instance through the LSP, or with existing VCS networks. In some areas, the VCS organised its own meetings to ensure that the local sector understood LAAs.

However, it is clear from the first round of pilots that councils faced many difficulties in communicating with the large, diverse and often fragmented voluntary and community sectors. This was further complicated as traditional generic networks were not necessarily the most effective means of communicating with the whole VCS. The LAA process required many VCS partners to make considerable up-front investment of time and resources in order to engage with the process, consult and feedback to colleagues. For some it had highlighted the need for core funding and resources to enable the sector to respond to such demands.

Levels of awareness of the LAA were predictably higher in areas where existing infrastructure and channels of communication were robust and where relationships with the council were stronger. Communication and awareness raising is far more complex in two tier areas – where VCOs may relate in different ways to LSP or council structures at a number of different levels, and where there are both

² The ODPM's national evaluation of LAAs undertaken by the Office for Public Management (OPM), University of the West of England, and the Local Government Centre at Warwick Business School is to be published in June 2005, and will be found on the OPM and ODPM websites. Further information on these issues is likely to arise from work conducted by VCS agencies such as NACVS and the Urban Forum.

district and county VCS bodies. Only in a few areas did the GOs take the initiative to contact the local CVS about LAAs.

In some areas, councils used Compact groups to advise on the process and communications with the sector. However, the very tight timescales for the pilot phase meant that it was not possible for local processes for developing the LAA to be Compact compliant in practice, even where they tried to reflect it 'in spirit'.

Whilst the benefits of VCS involvement were widely recognised, it is clear that the development of the LAA raised challenges and concerns for both statutory and VCS partners, and in some areas had in fact exacerbated tensions rather than contributing to building the LSP as an effective forum for joint working.

Some CVS felt excluded and ignored by those drawing up the LAA, particularly where the Council and the GO relied on communicating with the VCS representatives on the LSP as their way of 'involving and engaging with the sector'. In areas where the CEN, CVS and other umbrella bodies such as the volunteering co-ordinators were not on good terms, then work with one was not necessarily shared with other VCS colleagues. In some areas, service specific networks or partnerships were more deeply involved in specific projects or themes but the local CVS were not aware of this.

In some areas, the LAA appeared to expose tensions between backbench councillors, who are not on the LSP, and VCS representatives, about who had a legitimate claim to represent the community and its needs, and to influence decisions about the local priorities. The question of whether the VCS bodies represent the sector or the community, and how that fits with the role of elected members and unelected nominees who sit on partnership bodies needs consideration.

In many areas, the VCS expressed fears about a potential loss of control over VCS funding streams that were being absorbed into the LAA, jeopardising their access to this money; this seemed to be particularly acute where plans for a Local Public Service Board (LPSB) were underway, and the VCS felt in danger of being excluded.

About half of the respondents to our survey reported that in developing the LAA they had managed to forge some links with the ChangeUp agenda – e.g. by ensuring that those VCS representatives involved in the development of the LAA were part of county/regional infrastructure consortiums. However, in many cases, these links were tentative and in their early stages – as new structures and processes evolve. For instance, GOs reliance on regional or sub-regional consortia is not likely to be satisfactory unless those bodies have credibility and are accountable to the localities. Several respondents commented on the mismatch between the ChangeUp timetable and the LAA. Very few pilots reported they had managed to make the links with Firm Foundations programme, although some were investing in community development activities.

Few LAA lead officers appeared to have taken a strategic and specific approach to involving the VCS locally. They reported that there are too many organisations to involve everyone, and that many will have no interest in the outcomes. There was not time for complex research or consultation exercises. Each agreement covered several different areas of expert knowledge and practice that generic infrastructure bodies cannot be expected to have. And practically, an LAA is an evolving document that has to be negotiated and re-negotiated between the multiple partners, with considerable time pressures.

Consulting the VCS on the content of the LAA

One of the difficulties of involving the VCS in the first 20 LAAs was that many people were not sure what projects or workstreams the LAA would actually include until it evolved. It was difficult to brief partners about what to expect and prepare for, and difficult to know who to involve without a clear idea of how it was going to work, and what activities would be included.

All of the pilots appear to have consulted the VCS in some way in discussions and decisions about priorities. Some areas had taken the view that the LAA would enable the LSP to deliver the Community Strategy priorities, which had already been widely consulted on.

The majority also consulted the VCS in some way as the detailed agreement developed. The arrangements differed, but included: involvement through the VCS presence on the LSP, inviting representatives to sit on the high level strategic group developing the overall LAA, and involving relevant organisations in the groups working on each of the themes or on a single 'block'.

The CVS assessment of the success of that consultation seems to correlate to the strength of the pre-existing networks and structures. Where they were strong and trusting, the VCS felt more involved and understood the constraints of the timetable. In other areas - often with similar consultation arrangements as the successful ones - the VCS were cynical about the council's motives, did not feel they had been properly involved and the LAA process had not contributed to improving working relationships in the LSP.

Several respondents suggested that the LAA process had led to tensions surfacing within the local VCS. This was a particular concern where there were several different umbrella bodies or networks, with no agreed method of allocating different roles and responsibilities, or of being accountable to each other or to the sector as a whole.

The position of the VCS representative(s) on the LSP came under particular scrutiny. Where they were the main or only route of involvement, it would have been desirable if they had been able to demonstrate their accountability to the sector as a whole or to the specialist organisations that would or could be involved in the LAA projects. The timescales, the iterative nature of the negotiating process and in some areas the nature of the VCS networks did not help.

The VCS as contributor and beneficiary

The VCS are not only partners to be consulted. They can also benefit from the LAA through funded projects to increase their capacity, or by making a direct contribution to outcomes for citizens through their activities and skills.

Several areas felt that while there had not been time to do the detailed work on the VCS contribution, as this first phase of LAAs evolve there will be more opportunities for the VCS to be included as delivery partners and in the detailed planning around specific outcomes. However, in several areas, where VCS leadership was clear, they felt they had significantly influenced the LAA process. One GO reported that while VCS involvement had been poor so far, they had looked for specific evidence in the LAA of a firm commitment to improve collaborative working during the early days of the agreement.

The majority of current LAAs feature actions or projects designed to build the capacity of the sector – e.g. encouraging volunteering, neighbourhood partnerships, community development teams, community cohesion, and community involvement in decision-making. Community engagement projects have included encouraging and facilitating community planning in neighbourhoods. One area included an audit of the VCS and development of an infrastructure to facilitate their involvement in public service delivery.

While one area reported that they had included community involvement/capacity building activities against all the themes of their LAA, others felt they had been boxed into the Safer & Stronger block, with statutory partners seeing the purpose of community strengthening linked solely to the community safety outcomes. This may not have been helped by the fact that with the exception of NRF areas, the Safer & Stronger Communities Fund (SSCF) money - now part of the LAA - was already committed to crime reduction and community safety work.

While it seems that the VCS were mainly involved in capacity building or community safety outcomes, there were some good examples of where the VCS were involved in contributing to broader outcomes:

- Barnardo's involved as part of the Children's Trust Board
- supporting local representation on the Drugs Action Team
- service delivery to older people e.g. using Age Concern, Red Cross, Housing Associations
- voluntary sports clubs committed to improving access to fitness, as part of the 'healthier communities and older people' block

Since the LAA does not represent 'new money' there are often no new projects, which could have included the VCS: this appears to have limited involvement to the strategic level. The incorporation of LPSA as the 'reward element' of the LAA should provide the opportunity, both through pump priming and direct reward, to resource improved VCS engagement, in conjunction with ChangeUp investment.

New projects can connect to existing schemes such as those funded through CEN, or activities funded through ChangeUp. In one area, ChangeUp was funding a Local Infrastructure Organisation that was going to be "invaluable" in linking to the LAA. In another area, the principles of Firm Foundations had informed a community development project that was going to contribute to the LAA.

Statement of community involvement (SCI)

There was no guidance on what the ODPM or the Government Offices were expecting to be included in the 'statement of community involvement', or any criteria for an acceptable process. The arrangement most often adopted was the final LAA document contained a short section valuing partnership working with the VCS, and stating that the VCS had been involved in drawing up the agreement.

We asked whether the CVS had been involved in drafting the SCI or in signing it off. This question generated some very worrying findings. While only three councils reported that this part of the agreement was not specifically signed off by the sector; only four said they had involved them and only one had involved the CVS and CEN in drafting the statement. Several of the CVS said they did not know anything about the SCI, or that they had not been involved. One council reported that they had not been asked to do a SCI by their Government Office. Often it appeared the SCI had been 'signed off' as part of the whole LAA document by the VCS representative on the LSP, without it reflecting any local discussion or assessment of the actual involvement that had taken place.

Many SCIs are statements of a broad commitment to partnership working whilst others describe how the VCS have been involved in the LAA process so far. Few of the ones we have seen have set out how the VCS will be involved in delivering the outcomes or how they will be part of the implementation, governance or monitoring.

It would seem that while the 'statement of community involvement' is an important symbolic step, it has not yet triggered real change in the nature of the partnership working between local public services, government and the VCS. Many respondents agreed that clear guidance was needed both on the process of involvement and the contents of the SCI. There is a stark contrast between the

prescriptive nature of the SCI in relation to community consultation and the new Planning Frameworks,³ and the looser approach adopted for the LAA.

Negotiations

Much of the development time for the LAAs was a series of complex and iterative negotiations within and between local partner organisations, with Government Offices and with Government Departments. This was made more difficult by the lack of clarity about what was and was not possible locally. We asked whether the VCS had played a part in these meetings, since much of the final content of the LAA was the product of those meetings.

In the majority of cases, VCS organisations do not appear to have been involved directly in negotiation meetings with the Government Offices. There are a few exceptions where VCS reps were present at meetings with GO staff. One VCS representative had been made 'champion' of one area of 'freedom and flexibility' within the LAA, with responsibility for negotiating with the GO.

We asked whether the GO had raised any questions about VCS involvement during the negotiations. About half reported that GOs had not raised this as an issue, with half reporting that they had been challenged on the proposals in relation to community involvement and to targets. It is not clear from the survey responses whether these were challenges to increase or question the VCS involvement.

One CVS commented that the GO-determined timetable for producing and discussing drafts of the LAA had involved such short timescales that the VCS representative had simply not had time to consult the organisations or interested parties.

The GOs who responded raised several issues about their role and their skills in relation to the VCS. Where the LAA Team did not have the skills, experience or networks, they had sought help from colleagues working on neighbourhood renewal, ChangeUp, CENs, programme funding or communities policy.

Delivery

There was relatively little information on the delivery or implementation plans for the LAA outcomes. All of the pilot authorities reported that the sector would be involved in delivery – though in some cases, the precise actions were not yet clear. This remains an area where the LAA partners and the GOs will need to continue to work on the action plans that underpin the LAA outcomes, in particular at the potential for the involvement of community groups and/or voluntary organisations in service delivery.

One VCS organisation commented that although they had been involved in drafting the LAA document, they had not heard anything since it had been signed off. But they knew from other sources that there was a lot of activity and planning meetings going on that they were not invited to.

Measuring and monitoring

Each LAA requires performance indicators that can show progress as a result of the LAA projects. The existing methodological and practical difficulties of establishing baselines or setting meaningful and realistic targets for community involvement, and for measuring VCS contribution to outcomes have been highlighted by the LPSA and LAA process.

³http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_control/documents/contentservertemplate/odpm_index.hcst?n=5038&l=2

Several of the pilots were still working on generation of indicators to measure community involvement, at the time of the survey. The ones mentioned as being integrated into the LAA were:

- Audit Commission Quality of Life Community Involvement indicators
- ODPM/NRU Toolkit of Indicators for community involvement in neighbourhood renewal
- Surveys of perceptions e.g. feelings of involvement in decision making and other social capital measures
- Survey data on VCS activity, such as numbers of volunteers, numbers of voluntary organisations

That is, they are making use of existing sets of performance indicators, rather than developing new ones. Most areas reported that they needed more help on this issue. In several areas, problems with finding acceptable targets and indicators had had the effect of limiting the potential for VCS involvement. (The NACVS publication "Getting Involved in LAAs: Guidance for local VCOs" includes useful material on outcomes and will be available on their website on 4 July at www.nacvs.org.uk)

The effect of the requirement to define measurable outcomes and the lack of acceptable measures or indicators meant that several respondents felt the LAA activities were limited to those things that can be (or are already) measured, rather than the more innovative or experimental activities that might make a contribution to outcomes.

For instance, there were difficulties in measuring (or valuing) the input of community groups – for instance to such outcomes as 'reducing the number of 0-15 yr olds injured or killed in road accidents', or the role of sports clubs to encourage physical activity and use of sports facilities, as part of a healthier lifestyle. Yet there is no argument that these outcomes require community and citizen engagement, and not just consultation.

There was debate about how to measure the mandatory outcome of the LAA:

"To empower local people to have a greater voice and influence over local decision making and the delivery of services".

While the advice note suggested the use of "perception measures including, for example, community cohesion, numbers of neighbourhood bodies etc", increased community engagement or involvement were not judged to be outcomes, and so did not attract funding. In other areas, they were accepted as outcomes. It will be important that in future rounds of LAAs, community involvement and capacity building are seen as valuable interim outcomes that contribute to such public goods such as democratic renewal, pluralistic governance, social capital and neighborhood networks, self help and partnership working, as well as the prescribed outcomes of better services, improved health or economic regeneration.

Many LAA teams said they were still working on the future performance management arrangements, however all said that the VCS would be involved in some way. There was a variety of methods of including the VCS e.g. through CEN/ CVS representation on LSPs, existing specialist partnerships such as the Crime & Disorder Reduction Partnership, thematic sub groups on Children & Young People, LAA Steering Group, LSP Community Engagement Strategy Group.

Governance and monitoring arrangements were not prominent in the replies we received. From other information, we suspect that these are still relatively under-developed.

Conclusions

The nature of VCS or community involvement in the LAA requires much more than simply consultation, using panels or surveys. The nature of the outcomes and joint working that the LAA is designed to achieve, necessitates a hands-on approach to the involvement and engagement of citizens, and the community groups and voluntary organisations active in the area.

The mixed and even contradictory responses from the admittedly short research that we carried out are striking. CVS and LAA leads had very different perceptions of the effectiveness of the efforts to get VCS involved in their locality. GO perceptions differed again. However, both statutory and VCS responders agree with the principle that the VCS should be involved in LAAs, and that they have a lot to contribute, although for some there is still a narrow view of that involvement.

For councils the LAA requires a new relationship with the sector, moving on from consultation and ad hoc support to particular groups, projects or activities. There is a need for a much more strategic and long-term approach to building community engagement and a sustainable, high quality voluntary and community sector, as part of the quality of life in the area and as key partners in delivering modern and effective services. Likewise, the VCS need to develop a new relationship with the local authority, ensuring that it is equipped to work at a strategic level.

For the VCS, LAAs offer an important opportunity to integrate their interests and concerns into the mainstream agenda of the LSP. One of the objectives of the LAA is to strengthen the LSP as a service delivery body. If the VCS are to take their proper place at the LSP table, then the next round of Agreements must ensure that this is enhanced by the process rather than undermined by it.

A lot of VCS respondents expressed frustration and disappointment with their experience of LAAs. The lack of time, the lack of support for their involvement and a narrow vision of what they could contribute were common issues. Time pressures had highlighted the weak networks within the sector locally and often a lack of trust, if not cynicism, between the sector and the council.

All partners, including those at national level, need to consider how to ensure the LAA process is a positive one and contributes to improved LSPs and partnership working, rather than undermining the progress that has been made. As important, the process must enhance the trust and accountability within the sector locally, so that representation can be meaningful and the full benefits of community and voluntary activities can benefit citizens.

PART TWO – Better practice next time

This section sets out some 'good practice lessons' from the first phase of LAAs and their experience of involving the VCS. The primary audience is practitioners who are interested in the LAA as one way of improving multi-sector partnership delivery and achieving a sustainable voluntary and community sector. We hope this section provides a shared agenda for council and VCS partners to design a locally inclusive LAA.

LAAs are a model for the future

- As the model of partnership working represented by LAAs is likely to become an important feature of locality funding and rewards, both the VCS and LSP need to approach the LAA as an opportunity to build and strengthen relationships and test out processes for future similar initiatives. The LSP should be sponsoring the VCS and the statutory partners to develop a comprehensive community engagement strategy, covering not only initiatives such as LAAs, but also mainstream partnership work such as LSPs and other partnerships, sustainable development and the community strategy, the new planning frameworks, regeneration and renewal, neighbourhood management, area forums etc.
- For the LAA process, Compact principles are a useful place to start, but all partners – including national government – will need to ensure that this is achievable; and that the agreed process of development and negotiation embodies the spirit and principles of the Compact and is not just a 'tick box' exercise. Even had 12 weeks been allowed for, this would not have been enough for such a complex challenge. The suggested content for the "statement of involvement" could usefully be the starting point to design the local process.
- Some practitioners have argued for guidance from the ODPM about the content, process and parameters of LAAs, so that each local area does not have to waste time reinventing the wheel. In relation to VCS involvement, support and advice is needed particularly in relation to targets and measurement requirements. For instance:
 - confirm that community engagement and increased social capital is acceptable as an outcome that attracts funding, because it contributes to improved quality of life, civil renewal and community cohesion.
 - give guidance on allowable targets and performance measures for community group or voluntary organisation activity – not just service delivery - that contributes to specific outcomes such as healthier communities, or reduced crime.

What can the VCS do?

- Early workshops within the sector, involving the LALSP lead staff and councillors and the Government Office lead officers, can explain the LAA process as set out by the ODPM, make proposals for the local process, and agree the arrangements and scope for VCS involvement. These meetings should include all the key players in the sector, both umbrella organisations and those involved directly in relevant policies or outcomes
- Early discussions of the LAA need to focus on all three corners of the 'balanced triangle'⁴ of VCS involvement – governance, service delivery and building social capital; these are not alternatives they are interdependent. What the VCS can contribute and how it can benefit are two sides of the same LAA coin.

⁴ Gabriel Chanan, *Searching for Solid Foundations: Community Involvement in Urban Policy*. ODPM 2003.

- The VCS can do some preparatory thinking. What are the local priorities that the LAA is going to focus on, what roles do they already play in tackling those priorities and what more could they do if they were given financial support and joint working? Who should be involved or consulted? How can VCS priorities such as capacity building and community development be integrated into the LAA?
- In developing the LAA, both VCS and statutory partners need to explore the broader policy context in relation to the sector and look for connections with other policy initiatives – e.g. ChangeUp or Firm Foundations – where helpful synergies can be achieved.
- Infrastructure bodies – e.g. the CVS and CENs – need to agree amongst themselves the role they will each take in offering the sector leadership around the LAA, and how they will be held to account. In the first phase the VCS Local Infrastructure Organisation (LIO) networks often took the initiative.
- The VCS will need to agree their own internal communication and networking arrangements. This could be with their colleagues in the counties and districts, including representatives on partnerships such as the Crime & Disorder Partnership, or with CENs, Volunteer Bureaus, BME forums etc locally. Each of the nine Government Office regions are likely to have 4 or 5 areas in the new phase, as well as some in the first phase, who could share their experiences of what worked and what is needed.
- The infrastructure bodies need to ensure that their databases are comprehensive, so that they have current information on which VCS organisations are already involved in which Community Strategy priorities as well as the four LAA themes or blocks and what do they do: are they on partnership boards or user forums, are they delivering services, are they contributing to social inclusion and community cohesion?⁵
- Early conversations need to anticipate and address any potential anxieties in the VCS – e.g. some voluntary organisation might have concerns about loss of control over particular funding streams.
- How can the VCS infrastructure bodies support those who are working on the LAA? Regional or sub-regional learning sets, buddying between sectors, peer support from those involved in the original pilots can all help VCS staff get to grips with a very complex initiative. Joint training with staff in partner organisations can be constructive, build good relationships, trust and collaboration
- Take the opportunity to talk to councillors, especially backbench councillors, about the VCS' role in representing community needs and developing new projects.

What can the Government Offices do?

- The GO LAA lead staff can be pro-active in seeking out the VCS and introducing themselves to the sector in the LAA locality. This will give them the knowledge and networks and inform their expectations and judgements about the quality of the VCS engagement in the LAA process. And the VCS will have a direct link to the GO, which many pilots valued highly.
- It is very helpful to have some consistency and clarity on the principle of whether community engagement, social capital and a flourishing voluntary and community sector are acceptable outcomes that attract funding in their own right, and then what targets and measures that focus those activities will be acceptable within the LAA.
- The GOs can design a negotiation process and timetable that allows enough time for the VCS and others to consult colleagues and feedback on progress, given the complexity, diversity and nature of the sector e.g. they may have to consult large numbers of organisations, they may not be on email, or have long distances to travel
- The critical meetings between the LAA team and the GO should include the VCS. This will help to ensure the negotiations are transparent and that all partners are signed up to the final agreement. It makes best use of the knowledge of the VCS, which is particularly useful when neither the GO nor LAA/LSP staff have expert knowledge of the sector locally While information giving events may be

⁵ The Audit Commission Area Profiles methodology for profiling the VCS contribution will help here. See www.audit-commission.gov.uk – search for Area Profiles

useful at a regional level, the regional or sub-regional VCS bodies are unlikely to be appropriate methods for consultation or involvement.

- The GOs could sponsor write-ups and dissemination of local case studies 'warts and all'. As one GO commented "*national good practice ...misses the nuances of relationships which can help or hinder, and can present a false sense of security in a cookbook approach*"

What can councils and LSPs do

- In some areas, the lack of knowledge about what the VCS does meant that they were only invited to oversee the process rather than the detailed planning of the contents of the LAA. LSP and council staff need to establish which VCS activities and organisations are already - or could be - contributing to or benefiting from the LAA priorities and funding streams, and therefore which organisations need to be involved for what purpose and at what stage. This is more likely to be effective than relying on a single representative who can never be in a position to make informed contributions, or circulating several thousand organisations in the area in the hope of getting a response from the few that need to be involved.
- Councils and LSPs need to be more strategic and see the LAA in the context of the bigger picture of community engagement and VCS capacity building, which is now a priority for all public services. In one area, the LSP already had an overall community engagement strategy, and the LAA projects fitted within that framework.
- In developing the LAA, both VCS and statutory partners need to explore the broader policy context in relation to the sector and look for connections with other policy initiatives – e.g. ChangeUp or Firm Foundations – where helpful synergies can be achieved.
- Statutory partners have to work with VCS representatives to find ways of ensuring that the VCS has the resources to get engaged in the short term– e.g. by offering financial support for staff time, travel and other expenses, or other resources such as office space and use of website to host discussion forums. In the longer term, the sector has to be properly funded so that it can participate as equal partners.
- A lot is made of the need to build the capacity of the VCS to interact with mainstream public sector bodies. Equally important is the LSP and other partners' capacity and skills to work effectively with voluntary organisations and with community and neighbourhood groups.

Managing the process of writing and agreeing the LAA

- An early meeting between the LSP/council and the VCS to discuss the possible nature of the local agreement, the potential benefits of VCS involvement in the LAA, and ways in which the sector can contribute and benefit, will ensure that the project planning will build in their involvement in the most cost-effective ways.
- Information giving and awareness raising activities need to occur through a number of different channels – e.g. information on VCS and council websites, inclusion in local newsletters, workshops – and in different formats and locations.
- The LSP or council could schedule a regular (weekly) meeting of all LAA partners. This means the time is set aside, and the agenda items can be set at short notice: they can be used for progress chasing, briefings, discussions of strategy and drafts, sharing information and designing new projects. This has several benefits for the VCS managing its own presence and accountability:
 - It enables VCS representatives to plan their time and their internal communications.
 - It enables the VCS organisations working in different themed or block groups to raise issues of concern with the VCS representatives on the strategic group.

VCS representatives on the steering groups and sub groups can help ensure that the overall LAA is credible in relation to the local circumstances of the sector.

Developing the LAA

- The next LAA will prescribe the same three themes or blocks: Safer & Stronger Communities, Healthier Communities, Children and Young People, and it will have an additional theme of Economic Development and Enterprise. This will mean the LSP and VCS umbrella bodies in non-NRU and CEN areas will have to involve a new set of organisations that may not be part of the traditional CVS networks.
- In order to limit the numbers of organisations to be involved and consulted, the local LAA team carry out a simple analysis of the services and activities that contribute to each outcome, and which specific public, private, voluntary and community organisations do – or could – deliver them, or has a view as to how those outcomes should be achieved. This will show who needs to be invited to the LAA thematic groups, and who should be represented at the strategic level.
- Work is needed to pull together examples of the PIs that voluntary and community organisations are using in relation to engagement, volunteering, as well as their contribution to outcomes. There are several useful sources e.g. Audit Commission Quality of Life Community Involvement PIs (<http://www.local-pi-library.gov.uk/testing.html>) and the ODPM/NRU Community Involvement in Neighbourhood Renewal Toolkit of Indicators (ODPM Dec 2004 – www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/publications.asp?did=905) .

Planning to deliver

- Our research was timed to coincide with the signing off of the Agreements and so did not cover implementation. This may account for the tendency for the VCS role to be seen in terms of developing the agreement, rather than their role in delivering and monitoring implementation. Most areas expect the LAA to evolve and change over its lifetime, as different funding streams and possibilities become available or absorbed, so there will need to be ongoing strategic involvement.
- It is good practice for the LAA team to do a risk assessment of all the partners' commitments to the LAA. This may raise the need to consider how to support the VCS, particularly organisations new to meeting agreed PIs and targets. It will be important that these organisations have an opportunity to assess their own capacity needs and to design forms of support or resources that are appropriate and will help them ensure delivery.
- Such support could include:
 - Organisational capacity building: skills, finance and performance systems, IT. Many small VCOs need simple quality management systems to secure delivery and generate monitoring information for the GO and LAA
 - Adequate and secure resources to enable the recruitment and retention of quality staff
 - Budget for the costs of continuing involvement e.g. in governance and monitoring
 - Enhancing the accountability and transparency of VCOs delivering services on behalf of the LSP, by funding and supporting VCS networks and accountability arrangements
 - Invest in community development activities to build the local activities and neighbourhood groups that increase social capital and make it more likely that local people will get engaged with public services and local politics

A key issue will be how the VCS will be involved in the overall monitoring and management of the LAA, over its full lifetime. Will this be through a LAA steering group, or the LSP? If this job is passed to the Local Public Service Board (LPSB), then the VCS will need to be on that Board.

The Statement of Involvement (SCI)

The SCI is an important element of the final LAA document. Its contents should reflect the discussions and practices that have been in place for the development of the LAA, and the commitments to the way in which the LAA will be managed in the future. Below we suggest some broad headings that partners could use to inform both their approach to the LAA and to agreeing what is to be involved in the SCI. This will be overseen by the Government Office in the same way that other parts of the agreement will be.

The VCS should not only be involved in developing the practice that informs the SCI but in signing off the paragraphs in the final document.

What could be in the 'statement of community involvement' in an LAA?

Description of the principles and processes by which residents have been involved in identifying the local priorities for the LAA

The principles could include representativeness, respect for equalities and inclusion, access to full information, and honesty about what choices are available; a commitment to feedback to results of consultation and the content of the first LAA.

The process could include surveys, public meetings, and citizen panels.

Description of the principles and processes by which the voluntary and community sector were involved in the process of drawing up and negotiating the LAA

The principles could include such commitments as access to information, commitment to diversity and inclusion, commitment to involve BME organisations; They could also include respect for the independence of VCS organisations, proper financial arrangements, management support, risk sharing.

The processes could include information meetings, representation on strategic boards, involvement in thematic sub groups, championing key elements of the agreement etc

The scope of the VCS role in the final LAA

Each LAA and each area will have a different vision and perspective on the scope and extent to which the VCS wish – or are invited – to be involved. It may only be a presence on the overall governance arrangements. It may be as a service provider. Or community groups may be willing to co-ordinate their own activities with those of the public partners. It may differ between the four themes, and in different parts of the locality.

How the VCS will benefit from and contribute to the LAA outcomes

This could summarise

- the projects where the VCS will be receiving funds or support to provide activities or services that will improve the quality of life in the area.
- the projects which will benefit the VCS through investment in community development, capacity building, encouraging volunteering, funds for infrastructure bodies.

It could cross-reference to the detailed document.

The links to the local strategy for community engagement and VCS involvement, including investment in capacity building, community development and the VCS infrastructure.

This could refer to any existing LSP or council-wide strategy for improving community engagement. And show how the LAA links with, and builds on, other infrastructure or capacity building activities – for example *ChangeUp* and *Firm Foundations*.

How the VCS will be involved in monitoring LAA activities

The VCS can be involved in monitoring their own performance, but also work alongside other partners in tracking the performance in the four blocks and across the whole LAA. This section might note where the LSP plans to hold resident surveys to measure the success of LAA projects or outcomes.

How the VCS will be involved in the governance of the LAA

In some areas the LSP will remain responsible for the overall LAA, in other areas this may be delegated to a sub-group of the LSP or to the Local Public Services Board. How will the VCS be included?

The role of the Compact

The obvious place to start to design the local process for involving the VCS is the Compact⁶ and the proposed Compact Plus⁷. Partners and stakeholders are already signed up (approximately 70% of local areas have published a Local Compact between the council/LSP and the VCS). The national compact applies to Government at central and regional level and to non-departmental public bodies. So it already stands as a statement of shared principles and undertakings, based on mutual respect, quality services, independence, accountability and joint working. Whilst the effectiveness of the local Compact is still largely untested, the LAA process is an opportunity to embed the approach and demonstrate the value.

⁶ www.thecompact.org.uk

⁷ Strengthening Partnerships; Next Steps for Compact. Home Office/Active Communities, March 2005 (Available at www.activecommunities.homeoffice.gov.uk)

Thanks to the following for generously contributing to this work:

Local Authorities:

Bradford MBC
Brighton and Hove City Council
Derby City Council
Derbyshire County Council
Doncaster MBC
Hammersmith & Fulham LB
Kent County Council
Knowsley District Council
Suffolk County Council
Wigan Council

Government Offices

East Midlands
East
North East
South East
South West
Yorkshire and Humber

Voluntary and Community Sector

Amber Valley CVS
Barnsley Voluntary Action
Bradford CVS
Brighton and Hove Community & Voluntary Sector Forum
Coventry VSC
Derby CVS
Erewash CVS
Dorset Community Action
Gateshead VOC
Greenwich VAC
Ipswich CVS
Knowsley CVS
Wigan & Leigh CVS

For further information contact: Helen Hughes, National Advisor, (VCS) IDeA, Layden House, 76-86 Turnmill Street, London EC1M 5LG email: helen.hughes@idea.gov.uk