

Working with Local Area Agreements

As part of his MSc in Voluntary Sector Management, Stuart Nevill, Head of Offender Services at St Mungo's, has been conducting research into how well the supported housing sector is coping in the new environment of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP) and Local Area Agreements (LAA). He has been working very closely with Sitra on this and now summarises his findings.

Introduction:

This research explored: views on the voluntary sector as partners in LAAs. It looked at levels of understanding; perceptions of risk, opportunity and the resource implications for voluntary organisation navigating the LAA landscape. The research was conducted through an on-line survey and interviews and focus groups with government departments, commissioners, infrastructure organisations and voluntary organisations working with vulnerable adults. The research aimed to:

- a) consolidate 'best practice advice' from commissioners and infrastructure organisations
- b) identify and analyse voluntary organisation responses
- c) make recommendations to voluntary organisations considering how to respond to LAAs

Summary of Findings:

- The majority of voluntary organisations were not confident about their position in the emerging LAA landscape and although they perceived risks they were not confident about how to respond to them.
- A minority of third sector organisations were clear about commissioners' expectations about how they should most effectively engage with LAAs, with few understanding how to become more strategically involved with LSPs and other new stakeholder networks.
- Respondents believed that further individual and collective action is required by voluntary organisations to ensure that the further roll out of LAAs works to the strengths of the sector and the interests of their clients
- Although it can be difficult, it is important for organisations to ensure that staff at all levels have a real and meaningful understanding of LAAs along with other critical policy issues such as personalisation and empowerment.
- The LAA commissioning landscape could favor more localized organisational structures, (rather than popular central governance models well suited to Supporting People requirements).

Voluntary Sector Best Practice:

The research asked for examples of best practice in equipping organisations to be effective in the new environment. Examples included:

- A senior management resource was put in place to lead a strategic review of the impact of the LAA, write a LAA response strategy and action plan and to lead a cross-organisation project implementation group.
- Cross-organisational workshops, briefings, trainings were delivered with the aim of: effecting cultural change; developing strategic competencies; developing toolkits; improving front-line staff understand of the policy and strategic context of LAAs; improving local stakeholder communication and liaison skills amongst front-line staff and project managers
- Restructure and infrastructure changes were implemented to ensure: staff selection and recruitment systems brought in relevant competencies to the organisation; staff learning and development plans supported identified capacity building aims; managers job descriptions and management structures were reviewed to meet the changing environment.

How to Influence Strategy and Planning

From the research I have identified a number of priorities for advocates of housing related support services, whether they be providers, third sector infrastructure organisations or people within the statutory authorities, in seeking to influence LSPs/LAAs. Sitra are currently working on how to put these objectives into practice (please see the Local Strategic Engagement Project [website](#)).

- Map the outcomes of current operations against local priority National Indicators and think about how to best demonstrate impact in each area
- Be fully involved in policy and commissioning consultations, as this raises profile and increases strategic value in the eyes of commissioners
- develop an understanding of how their local LSPs works, by finding out who sits on them, what their roles are, how to influence them and at what level it is best to influence
- consider the goal of getting on the radar of LSP commissioning stakeholders as part of the marketing and fundraising strategy
- appreciate that LSPs and other local commissioners don't necessarily know the best way to deliver services to meet their local priority NI targets, and while a voluntary organisation might know, they need to convince the local commissioners that they do
- demonstrate the full extent of a services' strategic relevance and strategic value by communicating the impact of services to new audiences
- show current and desired commissioning stakeholders that you fully buy-in to the local priorities, (rather than give the impression that you're resistant to change)
- develop an organisational profile that is clearly strategically aligned to major policy drivers
- develop local managers networking and strategic liaison skills

Recommendations to Voluntary Organisations:

From my research I would particularly recommend the following to voluntary and third sector

organisations

1. Strengthen the voluntary sector position in the LAA framework:
 - a. Work with infrastructure organisations (such as Sitra) to scope and address sector-wide threats associated with LAAs
 - b. Lobby CLG and other relevant government bodies to review and improve the role of the voluntary sector in LAAs, (in line with Compact)
 - c. Work with infrastructure organisations and other partners to support research into the impact of LAAs on the provider market
2. Develop effective LAA partnerships:
 - a. Pro-actively support local commissioners to find ways to demonstrate how the voluntary sector offering can be formally linked into the LAA
 - b. Undertake a structured scrutiny of three key areas: policy alignment; stakeholder relations; organisation development, (a suggested Scrutiny Framework is suggested below).

How well are we doing?

I have developed a self assessment tool for organisations to do a health check of how well equipped they are to influence their local LSP/LAA. It is summarised here:

Scrutiny Framework for Effective TSO-LAA Engagement:

Policy Alignment:

- 1) How well are we aligned to key Policy drivers affecting the voluntary sector:
 - a) How well do we represent and facilitate our clients voice in local decision making, (i.e. with reference to the Empowerment white paper)¹
 - b) How well do we deliver services with a strong local focus, (i.e. with reference to LAA policies)².

Stakeholder Relations:

- 2) How are we perceived by our key external stakeholders:
 - a) How attractive is our offering, (to our funders)
 - i) Should we reposition our offering
 - ii) Should we improve our offering
 - b) How well do we score on external perceptions of:

¹ Communities in Control White Paper: Real People, Real Power, July 2008

² Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities Statutory Guidance, HM Government, October 2006

- i) Professionalism
 - ii) Partnership working
 - iii) Strategic competence
- c) Are there discrepancies between external perception and self-perception indicating we should:
- i) Plan organisational change
 - ii) Lobby government or local authorities
 - iii) Review marketing and communications strategies

Organisational Development:

- 3) Do we have the right structures, culture and skill sets, at the right places in our organisation to successfully 'assess, plan, act and review' our way through the emerging landscape of LAAs?
- a) Is it time to consider re-structures, mergers, new partnerships or new operational models
 - b) Do our staff recruitment, competency, performance management, and learning & development frameworks need to be reviewed against our Policy informed, strategic learning
 - c) Do we need to work collaboratively with IOs, other TSOs, local authorities, or other public bodies to work out the detail of how to make the VCS offering work to its best potential in the LAA framework, (through capacity building and lobbying)
 - d) Do we need external support to facilitate organisational development