Communities
and Local Government

Principles of Representation

A framework for effective third sector participation in Local Strategic Partnerships

CabinetOffice
Office of the **Third Sector**

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A framework for effective third sector participation in Local Strategic Partnerships

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Foreword

The Local Government White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, outlined the opportunity to rebalance the relationship between central and local government, between local government and their partners and with citizens. Bringing the White Paper to life will require a new way of working for everyone, including the third sector, in order to strengthen partnership working. We commend these principles to you.

The third sector is key to delivering ambitions to strengthen the involvement of the community in shaping better places. It has an essential role in decision-making and in delivering services which meet the needs and aspirations of those who use them. The Government wants the best local partnership working with the third sector to be the rule not the exception, particularly through Local Strategic Partnerships.

Building on the White Paper commitment to work with the national third sector umbrella bodies, Communities and Local Government convened a working group to establish principles by which the sector can organise itself to be effectively represented on Local Strategic Partnerships and local public life in general.
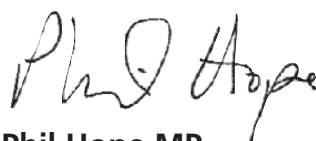
The *Principles of Representation: A framework for effective third sector participation in Local Strategic Partnerships*, is the result of this work. It seeks to set out a series of principles by which the best of partnership working has succeeded. It is intended as a framework to support the development of partnerships locally, rather than a template.

It is not for the Government, nor national umbrella bodies, to seek to mandate how you secure effective involvement. By facilitating the development of these principles we have not sought to produce guidance, which this document is not, but to capture the underlying principles that have worked elsewhere in supporting a growing partnership between the third sector and local government.

Partnership working can be challenging, but we believe that the benefits that can be achieved make the endeavour more than worthwhile. There will be no single solution, but we can all learn from what works elsewhere and these Principles are intended to summarise discussions among the third sector umbrella bodies on the practice behind the best of partnership working.

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Section 1
Who is this document for?

The purpose of this document is threefold. Firstly, it is a framework to assist the third sector[1] determine how best to organise its involvement in the local strategic partnership (LSP) based on the experiences of others. Secondly, to help LSPs decide how they might support effective third sector involvement in the LSP. Finally, it should also enable all parties to reach an understanding of what they might contribute to the development of an inclusive approach that will widen and deepen the involvement of local third sector groups and through them empower local communities to exert appropriate influence over local decision-making.

Whilst this document seeks to address third sector involvement in the LSP it could be more widely applicable. For example, Regional Empowerment Partnerships, ChangeUp Consortia and sub-regional partnerships, particularly Multi-Area Agreements, may all find it useful. It is for each partnership to consider, in light of its own circumstances, the extent to which they might embrace the seven principles.

This document is not legal guidance to local authorities, LSPs, statutory agencies and partners as to how to involve the third sector. Similarly it is not guidance to the third sector. It is, rather, a framework to stimulate local discussion and debate about how best to ensure effective and inclusive third sector engagement in all relevant aspects of an LSP's work. It should be considered as a living document that partners may wish to develop.

It should be noted, however, that it is not possible for any individual or organisation to be fully representative of the very great range of experiences and interests of the entire third sector in an area. Nevertheless, individuals and organisations can play a vital role in connecting different parts of the third sector to those with resources and decision-making power, allowing more voices to be heard, and bringing together a wider range of experience and knowledge to bear. These principles suggest ways to achieve this.

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[1] For the purposes of this document we are using the Government's definition of the third sector: "non-governmental organisations that are value-driven and which principally reinvest their surpluses to further social, environmental or cultural objectives. It includes voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals."

Section 2
Introduction

The third sector makes a vital contribution to strong and cohesive communities and ensuring that the voices of those most excluded are heard. They should be a key and respected partner of every local authority, as well as other local public bodies and the private sector. This document also recognises and respects the independence of the sector; indeed the sector's independence is a major strength that is of particular value to the LSP. This document should not be seen as offering a prescriptive solution that might dilute that independence. Indeed, used in the right spirit it should nourish the sector's independence as a catalyst for change.

In some areas the third sector's engagement with the local authority and its partners is already strong, particularly where the sector has well-developed infrastructure and networks that offer a two-way flow of information between the LSP and the local third sector. If they are working well, such arrangements will result in a fully informed local third sector that is connected with communities and is an integral part of local decision making. This is not the norm and often the level of engagement is inconsistent at best and weak at worst. Sometimes this is because the local third sector is fragmented and unable to make its voice heard[2]. Sometimes it is simply that local partners do not recognise the value of the sector's voice and have not invested in the necessary infrastructure and networks.

It is in everyone's interest for effective partnership working between the sector and local government to be the norm. In *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, the Local Government White Paper, the Government set out a "*clear expectation that the local third sector will be actively involved with all LSPs in helping to shape the local area*"[3].

Meaningful third sector participation is a crucial element of an effective LSP, helping it to agree the local vision, set priorities and deliver services to reflect the needs and aspirations of local communities. The White Paper goes on to set out the Government's intention to "*work with national third sector umbrella bodies to establish a standard by which local third sector bodies should organise themselves to be effectively represented on LSPs.*"[4]

The principles set out here are intended to help fulfil that commitment. The role of the LSP more broadly is set out in Communities and Local Government's statutory guidance.

This paper and the following principles were developed by Communities and Local Government, the Office of the Third Sector and NAVCA with the support of a third sector stakeholder group.

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[2] *Local Area Agreements Research: Round 2 negotiations and early progress in Round 1*, Communities and Local Government, October 2006
[3] *Strong and Prosperous Communities – The Local Government White Paper*, Communities and Local Government volume II, October 2006 p58
[4] *ibid* volume I, October 2006 p98

Section 3
Summary of the principles

The *Principles* are set out in full in section 10 and are summarised below.

1. **Accountability** – clearly defined responsibilities for all decisions and actions

2. **Equality** – place equality, diversity and inclusiveness at the core of what you do

3. **Leadership** – the sector's representatives will need to think and act strategically

4. **Openness** – be as open as possible in all your dealings and relationships

5. **Purpose** – be clear about the local sector's objectives and support them with a strong evidence base

6. **Sustainability** – ensuring the continuation of the collective voice

7. **Values** – identify and build on the values of the local sector

Section 4
How can a set of principles help?

It is not intended to prescribe how the local sector should organise itself. However, a guiding set of principles should help local third sector bodies develop arrangements that strengthen their influence with LSP partners and widen the participation of local groups.

Whilst primarily aimed at the LSP and its network of partnerships, the principles may be useful to those in the sector engaged more directly with other public sector bodies and with the private sector. The aim should be to create an environment that enables those with a legitimate interest in a particular issue to be heard. This could be achieved in a number of ways for example, but not exclusively, through the sector's representation on the LSP and its network of partnerships; through the sector's role in representing collective community voices; through individual statutory bodies on the LSP; through community groups' participation in the various thematic bodies of the LSP; directly to local councillors or, indeed, in a wide variety of other ways. These principles should not be used to restrict the access of individual third sector groups to LSP partners, nor should they be seen as a means of making a single local group act as the sole representative of all the other groups in an area.

Many areas have set up some kind of network, forum or assembly which, if it is to reflect the sector's diversity, is likely to be at the hub for a wide range of specialist networks for smaller groups with shared interests. For example, groups engaged in supporting the elderly, environmental activism or community transport are likely to be involved in themed networks that might themselves form part of a wider third sector network – what might be termed a network of networks. Whatever the local solution, what is important is that there is buy-in from all parts of the local third sector: this is where the principles can help.

The aspiration should be to strengthen the voice of the sector, so that all communities can make the most of opportunities to influence local decision-making, either directly or through a local third sector group that represents their interests. It is important to understand that it is not always easy to represent what are often divergent interests and reaching agreement may sometimes prove difficult. The very process of involving people, canvassing opinion, consensus building and gathering and disseminating information is inevitably time-consuming. Yet it is ultimately worthwhile – when people are involved in decision making they are more likely to understand how and why decisions are made and consequently retain a greater faith in those who make them. It may even motivate them to become more directly involved in the process.

There may be occasions when it is appropriate for people from the third sector to be involved in partnerships or other forums whilst not representing the wider sector, for example:

- where they are invited as a provider with expertise in a particular area of service delivery

- where they have expertise on marginalised or under-represented issues or

- where there is a need to get the views of under-represented groups whose voices often go unheard.

It is vital to involve elected councillors fully when applying these principles locally. There is a clear distinction between their representative role as democratically elected councillors and that of third sector representatives who act as advocates for the sector or a particular community priority. It is essential that the third sector's role is supportive of local democracy and adds value to the work of local councillors.

The principles in this document are not meant to be an exhaustive list and LSP partners should be cautious about simply copying them without careful consideration of how they fit local circumstances. Context is important, so find a solution that works for your area. In doing so it will be important to recognise that, whatever the local approach, support and resources will be required to make it work effectively. The nature and level of support and resources ought to form the basis for an open and honest discussion between local partners.

Section 5
What would a set of principles offer?

The principles offer a framework for effective third sector participation in local partnership arrangements. They will not deliver this on their own and are not obligatory standards but, rather, the basis for a discussion about 'how we might get there together'.

The principles are something to work towards. The reality is that it takes time to build effective structures that enable the wider sector to participate in the work of the LSP. It is likely to be a process of continuous review and improvement by the sector. The initial stages, perhaps the first year or two, might be led by a start-up group, which may need to reflect the concerns of those that do not participate as much as they would like. But the objective will be to strengthen the capacity of the sector and the community to the point where groups are able to articulate their concerns and be confident that their voices will be heard and, where appropriate, acted upon.

Strengthening the sector's voice on the LSP and in the local area should be core aims. This does not mean the sector speaking with a single voice: it is about creating the space for community groups with a legitimate interest to be heard. The principles also attempt to offer a framework that will help the sector build its case more effectively, whether collectively or in support of specific groups or causes. For instance, supporting a proposal with evidence that stands up to scrutiny will enhance the sector's credibility and strengthen its influence with partners. This requires clear and effective methods from the sector for communication and consultation – gathering, assimilating and analysing information from members of the sector to bring clarity and force of argument to the sector's voice.

The intention is not to replace existing good practice, but to build on what already works and address shortcomings. For example, the principles can be seen as supplementary to the local Compact in an area, and can be used to encourage better communication within the sector and between the sector and the LSP and local public bodies.

Section 6
Context and challenges

The Local Government White Paper placed great importance on the role of the third sector, and it was the basis upon which the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 (LGPIH) was developed. Central to the new performance framework is a reinvigorated LSP, which will be the main vehicle for developing the local vision – the Sustainable Community Strategy – for transforming a place and for tackling hard, crosscutting issues. It offers an opportunity for the third sector to make its unique contribution alongside local authorities, businesses and other service providers operating at the local level such as the Primary Care Trust and the local police. The LSP is also the forum for agreeing the targets of local area agreements (LAAs), which should secure better outcomes for each area and become the central delivery agreement between the Government and the local authority and its partners.

The recently introduced Stronger Communities National Indicators (NI1–NI7)[5] are important drivers for adoption of the principles. Strong support for the local third sector's full and effective participation in the LSP would directly influence the development of an environment for a thriving third sector (NI7) and would have a bearing on the area's performance in relation to many of the 198 National Indicators.

Whilst the *Principles* focus primarily upon the third sector's contribution to the work of the LSP, it is important to consider how they might be applied to all aspects of local engagement. The objective should be to avoid duplication and introduce a coherent approach to both third sector and wider community engagement. Similarly, there is a commitment to a more comprehensive approach to community engagement[6], which may lead to improved co-ordination across the LSP and its partners. Where there is already a community empowerment network (CEN) in place it may be the right vehicle to take forward community engagement initiatives. It will certainly be important for the third sector to consider the CEN's role in the context of the principles. Where there is currently no CEN there may be lessons to be drawn from their experiences[7] elsewhere. Whether or not you have a CEN the ring-fenced funding they received in the past will not be available.

In most rural areas, parish planning has generated stronger joint action on identifying and pursuing the priorities of local groups. Good parish plans can deliver the appropriate evidence and information on which to base representation of community sector interests. Lessons learned from using parish plans as the basis for community engagement have also been well documented and researched, although dedicated national funding for parish plans has ended.

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[5] see www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/nationalindicator
[6] Guidance will be published by NEP, NAVCA, IDeA and Urban Forum later this year
[7] see *Research Report 15 Making Connections: An evaluation of the Community Participation Programmes*, Taylor, Wilson et al, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister March 2005; also *Getting Citizens Involved: Community Participation in Neighbourhood Renewal*, National Audit Office October 2004

Effective third sector representation on the LSP requires a well networked and co-ordinated sector that has the skills and capacity to participate. Some areas have invested in the capacity of the third sector, its infrastructure and networks to support and widen its participation. Third sector networks and infrastructure have always considered participating in the local decision-making process to be an important part of their work and, whilst there are no new resources available from government, the current policy climate presents an opportunity for LSPs to have a meaningful discussion about what is needed locally and how it will be resourced. Strong LSPs should encourage discussion in the third sector to review how best they use the resources that are available to support strong participation.

Experience of the third sector has sometimes found that building effective participation in two-tier counties with several districts can be challenging; by their nature there are likely to be differing, but equally legitimate, democratic mandates; there may well be a multiplicity of partnerships at all levels; there are often large, sparsely populated areas that can present a very practical challenge to wider community engagement and participation. Many would argue that the term two-tier is itself misleading and that parish and town councils add an additional layer of complexity. As the government's recent consultation found '*establishing clear roles and responsibilities in two-tier local authority areas can be problematic*'[8]. The third sector needs to be aware of the challenges in this area.

[8]   *Local Strategic Partnerships: Shaping their future - An Analysis of Consultation Responses*, Communities and Local Government, October 2006, p31

Section 7
Benefits for the third sector

In practice, where an area has invested in more effective and inclusive third sector infrastructure and participation mechanisms, there has been deeper and wider involvement for the sector, typically reflected by the nature of the third sector's involvement in the LSP's thematic, policy and sub-groups. Where third sector organisations feel well represented, they believe it has led to a better understanding among statutory bodies of the value that the sector has in the area. An inclusive voice carries more weight; exerts more influence; provides an efficient point of engagement for external stakeholders; and helps to build better relationships and partnerships.

The benefits for the third sector are:

- local groups should find it easier to have their voices heard
- local groups are able to influence services on behalf of their communities
- greater capacity and capability
- access to wider resources and knowledge
- acknowledgement, recognition and appreciation of the third sector and its contribution to wider civil society
- being better placed to make the case for support for community-based activities
- being at the heart of decisions that matter to local people
- joint financing so that the sector can take part fully in participatory activities
- stronger relationships and enhanced collaboration across the sector.

Section 8
Benefits for local authorities and LSP partners

There are benefits for local authorities and LSP partners if the third sector organises itself to provide more effective participation. The local third sector's roots in the community make it well placed to inform LSP partners' service provision, decision-making and priority-setting. It brings knowledge and experience of a wide range of locally-based community action, whether specific community groups, particular neighbourhoods, wider perspectives covering demographic groups or complex issues such as homelessness or youth offending. Third sector representatives carry far more weight with LSP partners when they are accountable to the wider sector, and they have greater legitimacy when they have consulted and communicated widely. With the right structures and resources in place the third sector will be able to contribute information and evidence about local priorities and needs to support statutory bodies' decision making and service planning.

A well organised third sector can provide its representatives with an authoritative voice that will strengthen the sector's participation in LSPs, enabling partners to:

- use the experience, knowledge, and skills of local groups to help design and deliver more effective services

- achieve a better quality debate at a local level on the relative values of giving grants and commissioning services, as well as on the value of transferring local authority assets

- utilise third sector links with communities and users to ensure that services tackle the most deep-rooted and intractable problems in ways that will work on the ground

- create an environment within which third sector organisations can engage in active planning with the statutory sector

- strengthen relationships and enhance collaboration between public agencies and third sector organisations and groups working on similar issues or themes, or in the same geographical area

- explore options for service delivery, including co-production with service users

- access community networks that can help deliver changes in attitude or behaviour for the benefit of the area, for instance to reduce carbon emissions or promote healthy eating

- co-ordinate services in the public and third 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 third sector brings into the area.

Section 9
The role of the Compact

"The Government and the voluntary and community sector have different forms of accountability and are answerable to a different range of stakeholders. But common to both is the need for integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership…

The Voluntary and Community Sector undertakes to ensure that service users, volunteers, members and supporters are informed and consulted, where appropriate, about activities and policy positions when presenting a case to Government or responding to Government consultations, and to communicate accurately the views put to them in the course of such representations."[9]

The national Compact contains a large number of undertakings relevant to these principles, many of which have been incorporated into local Compacts. As well as the main Compact between central government and the voluntary and community sector, the Community Sector and BME Codes are particularly relevant. The Commission for the Compact has welcomed a recommendation from the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007 to aim among other things to reaffirm the principles of good partnership working through any review of the Compact.

The Compact and local compacts have a valuable role in supporting third sector participation. They can frame the boundaries of the relationships that exist between the sector and local authorities and other statutory agencies and help to set the 'terms of engagement'.

Where the Compact has been genuinely embraced by local partnership boards, it has had a positive impact and resulted in an adventurous process that sparked imagination. It has facilitated an impartial, mature approach to problem solving and has modelled new ways of working, challenging and changing personal behaviour and conduct.

[9] *Compact on Relations between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in England*, 1998

Section 10
The Principles

The following principles offer a framework that the third sector might use to organise effective representation on LSPs. They might be used to develop terms of reference or other clear statements that describe the nature of any network or collective body, its participants and what might be expected of them.

The principles should not be seen as exhaustive or prescriptive, but as a reference point from which to start a discussion between third sector organisations about how they might participate and engage more effectively in their own area. Indeed, third sector organisations may decide to develop their own principles with their own headings, understanding of what they mean and how they can best be applied.

1. Accountability

Third sector representatives on LSPs ought to be responsible to the local sector. Clear lines of accountability also allow the sector's participants to speak with real authority. This does not mean that all decisions are subject to a consensus, but representatives should be prepared and able to explain decisions and actions. The third sector should:

a) ensure third sector representatives on LSPs and its theme groups understand their roles and responsibilities

b) ensure the wider third sector understands its responsibilities to its representatives

c) put into place reporting mechanisms that support the flow of information without creating unnecessary burdens

d) make arrangements that enable all third sector groups to participate as fully as is practically possible

e) ensure there is clarity about when third sector representatives on the LSP have a clear role as advocates for the sector (eg, the sector may take a collective view on grant aid or the local commissioning strategy) and when they do not, (eg, when an issue affects a specific group it is for that particular group to be given the 'airtime')

f) clearly define roles for any officers that might support the sector's representation work.

Accountability Principle Case Study: Gloucestershire Assembly for the VCS

This Assembly was set up to strengthen and support the Voluntary and Community Sector in Gloucestershire, by providing a strategic voice for the sector and a forum for action and debate.

The Assembly's 'terms of reference' clearly set out the values that both the Assembly as a whole and individual members will be expected to uphold – 'accountability', 'inclusion' and 'partnership'. The terms of reference go on to clearly state the:

- organisation's objectives
- organisation's structures and membership
- duties and responsibilities of members
- processes and meetings
- procedure for selecting the Chair and Vice Chair
- administration procedures.

2. Equality

Reducing inequality should be at the heart of the third sector's work. The third sector should work to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and empower people to make their voices heard. It is important that the six equality strands – race, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation and religion or belief – are fully incorporated into the sector's work. Under the current (race, gender and disability) and proposed (all strands) equality duties, public bodies and their networks, and any third sector or private body carrying out public services on behalf of a public body, are legally subject to these duties. The third sector should:

a) be open to all communities in the area, regardless of size, that accept the basic principles of equality for other groups

b) engage communities and individuals from under-represented groups directly where they are newly arrived and/or do not have the necessary infrastructure and groups to articulate and promote their interests

c) ensure that the partnership represents and reflects the community it serves, proactively reaching out to engage the most excluded groups. For example, it may be relevant for the partnership to consult in depth those service users who have been failed by public services. It may also be necessary to take 'positive action' to engage those service users

d) work with all faith[10], non-faith and equalities groups, forums and organisations, taking steps to be accessible and in doing so seek to widen participation

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[10] Two reports on faith-based representation have recently been published: *Faithful Representation* (Church Urban Fund - Sept 2006) and *Faith in LSPs?* (Churches Regional Network - Dec 2006). Insofar as they relate to faith communities as a distinctive part of the wider third sector, the recommendations of these reports are incorporated into the generic principles set out in this document.

e) take into account the voices of people who are not able to participate in groups or do not feel as though they belong to one

f) actively support marginalised groups to organise separate mechanisms for representing their interests and concerns on the LSP where they wish to, in acknowledgement that disadvantaged groups need space for self-determination

g) make sure that their involvement aids cohesion and local relations rather than damaging them

h) remember that real progress will take time, particularly in engaging those who are "hard to reach" and disengaged. People need to be given time to develop expertise and relationships, and to find the most appropriate approaches to participation.

Equality Principle Case Study: Women in LSPs

As part of stage two of research carried out by Urban Forum, Oxfam and WRC, women's groups have been commissioned locally in Sunderland and Thurrock to carry out research into women's representation and participation at a local level. This acknowledges the expertise these groups have in issues impacting upon women locally and in gender equality generally, and is a way of supporting local groups to participate in research relevant to their work. The original research, *Where are Women in LSPs?*, found that women's representation on LSPs is low, especially in decision-making areas. Less than 2% of third sector representative on English LSPs are from women's organisations, despite the fact that such organisations comprise 7% of the sector.

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3. Leadership

Local sector representatives will be dealing with experienced senior public officials. This will require strong leadership skills: negotiation; mediation; assertiveness; dispute resolution; political and influencing skills. However, leadership is not about telling others what to do; rather it is the ability to represent the wider sector, looking beyond your own organisation or sectional interests when taking part in the decision-making process. This links strongly to the principles of accountability and openness. The third sector should:

a) be prepared to tackle difficult issues

b) share and celebrate success

c) work within the network's defined structures

d) develop and utilise the skills and experience of its members and consider training where appropriate

e) challenge the network to reflect changing contexts and needs

f) include all its members and conduct wider consultation in assessing needs and priorities and in developing its future direction and purpose

g) recognise and involve its external stakeholders in its development, building inter-dependence and mutual understanding

h) not always take the majority view when trying to resolve conflicting interests. The voices of a legitimate minority deserve to be equally heard.

Leadership Principle Case Study: Birmingham's Voluntary Sector Chief Executives' Forum

Set up in 2004, by Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC), Birmingham's Voluntary Sector Chief Executives' Forum (VSCEF) has met bi-monthly to discuss topics of interest and concern to the local third sector. Membership is 55 strong, and the forum focuses on providing mutual support for members in their roles as chief officers; roles that are often described as "very lonely jobs".

Recently the Forum designed the framework for Birmingham City Council's consultation on the transformation of day services in Birmingham, identifying the key areas that needed to be discussed with the sector in order for them to be a significant partner in service delivery. It has acted as a robust sounding board for the City Council's new commissioning arrangements, by challenging some of the practice whilst continuing to engage with the process. It has previously issued statements on funding arrangements, challenging practice that is detrimental to the third sector. A forerunner of the Third Sector Assembly (Birmingham), the VSCEF is now recognised as an Assembly network, to which it acts as an evaluative body.

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4. Purpose

Establish a clear sense of purpose about what you want to achieve, expressed in whatever terms are appropriate. Do not simply deal with the day to day issues; think ahead beyond the immediate horizon. Be clear about the issues that the network will deal with and what will be dealt with by specific third sector bodies. This could cover issues of resilience to natural/unnatural disaster, such as flooding or terrorist attack. The third sector should:

a) establish a broad consensus of shared values from which to develop common goals and aims. However, the process should be fully democratic with everyone expressing a view and having that view heard and taken into account

b) plan for the long-term as well as the short-term

c) clearly define the stakeholders you wish to work with, including but not limited to LSP and LAA structures

d) reach agreement on who should sit on the decision making bodies in your area, including but not limited to the relevant LSP boards

e) be responsive to change, anticipating the need for developing and supporting new groups that arise from demographic changes, aiding integration

f) embrace demographic and cultural changes that might be required to deliver the wider aims of the network whilst staying true to its values.

Purpose Principle Case Study: Birmingham Third Sector Assembly

The Third Sector Assembly (Birmingham) was launched in July 2007. It is a long-term association of third sector networks, brought together by Birmingham Voluntary Service Council to improve communication across the sector, to increase its ability to influence and to improve relationships with the public sector.

At its launch, Birmingham's Third Sector Assembly (TSA) asked members what they wanted the Assembly to achieve and how it should operate. Ideas were captured at the event and posted on BVSC's website for wider dissemination. As a result it was agreed that the Assembly should be:

- properly sector driven
- inclusive of smaller organisations
- offering something different
- focusing on the needs of service users
- able to influence commissioning to improve service delivery
- avoid creating another layer of bureaucracy.

The Assembly has since run three consultations with public sector partners, working with its members to ensure that the structure of these consultations properly addresses sector concerns. A recent evaluation of the Assembly's progress reported widespread satisfaction (across stakeholders from both sectors) with the work of the Assembly to date and considerable commitment towards investing in its longer-term success.

5. Sustainability

It is important for the third sector and the Local Strategic Partnership to understand fully the costs involved in starting and then maintaining an effective network for third sector groups and organisations in an area. In particular it may be necessary to consider investment in capacity building to ensure that representation is inclusive. Once identified, priorities should be agreed and future resource requirements explored fully as part of the future planning process. The third sector should:

a) build relationships and interdependencies that strengthen the position of the local sector and enhance its capacity to develop and innovate

b) seek and secure resources to support the expression and dissemination of its collective voice

c) look to develop the skills and capacity of network members and examine the potential for sharing costs and capacity that might arise from working more closely together

d) work in ways that make the minimum use of all non-renewable resources, and explore ways of using renewable resources sourced from within the organisation's geographic boundaries wherever possible

e) be flexible enough to take advantage of new opportunities that might arise

f) make the most of the talents already at the network's disposal

g) identify the skills, experience, and competencies required of members and representatives and invest in their development

h) put in place simple and robust arrangements that enable reflection, learning and continuous improvement

i) build the sector's capacity to engage with all stakeholders, in particular LSP partners and local communities.

Sustainability Principle Case Study: Croydon's Community Empowerment Network

Croydon's Community Empowerment Network is at the heart of the community representation in the Local Strategic Partnership structure. The 350 strong network is managed by Croydon Voluntary Action and serves three key functions:

- An open forum for discussion and debate within the community

- An independent, democratic body to elect community representatives to the LSP Board, partnership groups and other bodies within the LSP structure

- A 'network of networks' representing communities of interest such as refugees and asylum seekers, disabled people, older people, neighbourhood partnerships and BME communities.

Adequate financial support for the network is considered crucial to its success by the LSP. Funding has previously been drawn from a variety of sources to provide the annual funding required to resource the network. The Area Based Grant gives the opportunity to provide sustainable funding for the network as part of the LSP/LAA infrastructure. Funding has been agreed for 2008-09 and negotiations are taking place to agree outcomes and further funding over three years for the Community Network to support the delivery of Croydon's LAA and LSP objectives.

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6. Openness

The network should conduct its business as openly as possible. This is vital for its credibility both with its own members but also with its external stakeholders. The third sector should:

a) ensure that discussions and decisions are recorded and open to all as the norm. Only conduct meetings behind closed doors in exceptional circumstances, explaining the reasons for this decision fully, clearly and if possible in advance of the meeting

b) have an agreed and well publicised process for selecting third sector representatives on the LSP and its theme groups

c) communicate clearly and promptly with all stakeholders, using the appropriate mediums

d) welcome challenge as an opportunity to learn and improve

e) deal positively with failings by acknowledging and addressing them

f) ensure that it shares 'credit where credit is due' in its dealings with the media, network members and external stakeholders and ensure the form and content of communications is agreed between the relevant stakeholders

g) establish clear and consistent lines of communication:

- Between network members

- With the wider third sector

- With the wider community

- With the LSP and LAA theme groups

- With any potential stakeholder – locally, regionally and nationally.

Openness Principle Case Study: Regional Action West Midlands and Destination West Midlands VCS Infrastructure Partnership

Regional Action West Midlands (RAWM) is the regional infrastructure agency that champions the voice, influence and engagement of the voluntary and community sector in national and regional policy and strategy decision-making processes. Destination West Midlands (DWM) is a partnership of third sector infrastructure consortia and networks operating in the West Midlands

The need for a memorandum of understanding was born out of confusion around the relationship between DWM and RAWM, in particular the differing role and purpose of each. The memorandum addresses this confusion by defining the core purposes of both DWM and RAWM as well as the aims and benefits of working together. It also includes a set of principles for cooperation and details of how the memorandum will be managed. It also includes a regular review, which means it is part of an evolving process and can be adapted to meet the priorities of the relationship.

As well as enabling a more open working relationship between RAWM and DWM that focuses on commonalities rather than differences, the memorandum of understanding serves as a useful framework for supporting future regional partnerships and facilitating openness in key areas of collaborative work.

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7. Values

In dealing with the practical realities of building and maintaining a network it is essential to keep in mind the valuable traditions and values of the sector. Building a network will mean change and some of the effects might be predictable whilst others might be unexpected and challenging. For many in the sector, working more

closely with the statutory sector might be a culturally difficult task and this should be recognised, as should be the benefits that can result. The third sector should:

a) recognise and preserve the independence of the third sector from statutory bodies, but be pragmatic about building respectful relationships between the sectors

b) recognise and value the diversity of its membership and the different strengths they bring to the wider network

c) recognise and act upon opportunities for mutual development with internal and external stakeholders

d) recognise the mutual inter-dependence of all internal and external relationships, and the benefits that can be enjoyed by all the stakeholders

e) recognise the legitimate roles of members and avoid duplication by building upon their work

f) think about who it involves and be open and honest about the extent of that involvement. Consider how to target those individuals and groups to whom the issue is most relevant. This approach will help to avoid consultation and participation fatigue. It is also more likely to ensure greater diversity and quality of involvement

g) develop the sector's capacity to provide evidence to support its views.

Values Principle Case Study: Lewisham – Stronger Partnerships through Community Democracy

In Lewisham the LSP partners agreed a community development strategy which Lewisham Community Network co-ordinates. A key issue for activists is the need to maintain the independence of the 'community sector' in order to prevent partnership and joint working from becoming 'manipulation' or 'co-option'. An independent community voice is crucial for empowerment because it can:

- legitimate active citizenship – including the right to protest

- provide a safe space from which to 'speak truth to power' – the challenge role

- enable people to come to the partnership table as empowered voices rather than as isolated or disconnected individuals

- enable them to negotiate as equals within the partnership

- prevent 'divide and rule' from undermining communities encourage

- encourage deliberation within local communities

- provide space to resolve differences between communities

- scope for learning, training and development.