

How voluntary  
and community  
organisations  
can help

**TRANSFORM**

the local  
relationship



Dhara Vyas

# How voluntary and community organisations can help transform the local relationship

Dhara Vyas

## Foreword

The LGA welcomes this publication and the contribution it will make to the important issues around the relationship between local government and the third sector. In our vision for local government, 'Closer to People and Places', the LGA set out three objectives:

- To secure more fundamental improvements in public services; and to make better use of public money
- To improve the quality of life in and economic performance of cities, towns and villages
- To give people greater power and influence over their lives, their services, and the future of the places where they live.

I am clear from this publication that we share these objectives. Achieving them requires a close partnership. For its part, local authorities need to set out, and implement, effective strategies for engaging local organisations in decisions about the future of their place, and public services. This should include engaging the third sector meaningfully in the LAA and LSP decision-making process; as well as in overview and scrutiny; and in neighbourhood arrangements.

Similarly, the voluntary and community sector need to have effective strategies to develop the ability of local people to participate in society, local democracy, decision making and shaping of public services. This paper sets out some of the challenges that we in local government and in the voluntary and community sector, must tackle together in order to achieve our shared ambitions. We believe it right to work jointly and honestly through these challenges for the voluntary and community sector; this publication should help steer that debate.



**Lord Bruce-Lockhart,**  
*Chairman of the Local Government Association*

## Summary

Voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) and local government share many values and objectives; both work in the interests of local people and local communities. The relationship that local authorities have with their local voluntary and community sector (VCS) is fundamental if we are to properly tackle the challenges that our communities are facing today.

We believe that the two sectors both contribute to creating strong local communities. This report suggests what needs to be done to ensure that local government and the VCS can work together more effectively to achieve the best outcomes for local people. Local communities are strongest when all partners, statutory and non-statutory, come together at different stages and in different ways to meet shared objectives and increase the social, economic and environmental well being of an area. The respective skills, strengths, knowledge and mandates of all organisations in an area must be cultivated, supported and encouraged by one another.

The forthcoming Local Government White Paper and the final report of the Lyons Inquiry into Local Government, due this December, make this an opportune time to comprehensively address the relationship between the VCS and local government. The areas of reform that recent discussions have focused on complement those areas where the sector too would like to see modernisation and change, including in community leadership and engagement, service reform and performance improvement. Changes in these areas will only be effective if there is proper engagement of the local VCS and a real focus on encouraging and enabling participation at the most local levels of our society.

Relationships with local government are significant for all VCOs, irrespective of size: around 70% of the relationships that VCOs have with government are at the local level, rather than with national statutory bodies. Now is the time to develop a more robust and constructive dialogue about transforming this relationship, for the benefit of all of our communities.

## What is a community?

The agenda for local government<sup>1</sup> is focused firmly on better engagement with local communities, but in order to do this it is important to recognise the different ways in which a community can be understood. There has recently been much focus on geographic-based communities – that is, a group of people who live in the same area. However, people will define their geographic understanding of their community in different ways, and the natural neighbourhoods with which people identify are rarely coterminous with ward or district boundaries. This flexibility needs to be understood as a strength and encouraged. In order for this to happen, statutory bodies need to become more effective at working across boundaries, with neighbouring organisations – both statutory and non-statutory.

A community may also be defined by a shared interest and hence be geographically dispersed. Communities of interest can include recreational activities, arts or sports for example, or they might equally be issues of health or disability or associated needs, such as support for carers. Even where these communities are dispersed, there are benefits of association alongside the creation of relevant services, support or information. These organisations, particularly where they work across geographical or institutional boundaries, can help reduce isolation and give people the reassurance that they are a part of something bigger, and allegiances can be just as strong, if not stronger than for geographically based groups.

### *How do you access communities?*

One of the sector's great strengths is its ability to bring people together from both geographic based communities of locality and communities of interest. The VCS can be an important partner in engaging with diverse groups of people, and it is important to bear in mind that VCOs with an interest-based mission are just as integral to any devolved local or neighbourhood level structures as area-based organisations.

Engaging with citizens is not something that a local authority can do on its own. A local authority will need to develop a variety of approaches and work with a range of partners who bring different skills and the ability to access

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<sup>1</sup> Annex 1 summarises the issue of local government reform, the role of local government and the role of VCOs.

different parts of the community. Proper citizen engagement should be an integral part of the process for local authorities. Communities should:

- be involved from the outset;
- have the opportunity to identify their concerns and priorities; and
- be enabled to help to design solutions.

In short, there should be more opportunity for “bottom up” policy making.

A successful programme of inclusion requires close working with representatives of VCOs. The Joseph Rowntree report *Devolving governance: area committees and neighbourhood management* recommends using innovative participatory models to engage traditionally hard-to-reach groups, wherever possible designed in partnership with representatives of those groups. The local VCS can work extensively with local statutory bodies, businesses and other VCOs in determining and influencing many of the different strands that make up successful place shaping.

## How do we work together to transform the local relationship?

### *Place-shaping*

Place-shaping is a phrase coined by Sir Michael Lyons in his interim report of May 2006. He defines it as:

*“...a way of describing my view that the ultimate purpose of local government should not be solely to manage a collection of public services that take place within an area, but rather to take responsibility for the well-being of an area and the people who live there, and to promote their interests and their future. Place-shaping should both reflect the distinctive identity and aspirations of the people and area, and function as a means of safeguarding and promoting their well-being and prosperity.”*

In other words, place shaping is primarily about civil society and community, not about the formal structures of local government.

Place shaping is an intrinsic part of the work of the VCS: VCOs have a crucial role in enhancing the social, economic and environmental well being of an area.

Indeed, it is often through engagement with a VCO, and the social interaction it provides, that people develop or express their sense of community.

Voluntary activity plays an important role in fostering social cohesion and creating a sense of community. But in addition to this, there is evidence to suggest that voluntary action, and strong civil society, in turn supports and promotes civic engagement, and that those involved in volunteering and voluntary action are more likely to be involved in local governance and democratic processes.<sup>2</sup> VCOs can often be the drivers of civil renewal, and can act as catalysts for positive change at the local level. They also provide a crucial space in society between the market and the state where people can come together, get involved in local activities and explore mutual needs and interests.

There is no doubt that VCOs contribute to both the enhancement of social capital and the reduction of isolation and exclusion in numerous ways (outlined in annex 1). It is often through these types of self-help or community activities that people gain the confidence, awareness and skills they find useful in other spheres of their lives, including their willingness and ability to engage in more formal structures which contribute to local governance, which will be vital for any new devolved neighbourhood structures.

### *Devolving power to neighbourhoods*

Increasing devolved decision-making powers to local government should transfer greater choice and decision-making power to local people. The Local Government Association, in its recent report *Closer to People and Places*, has argued for increased freedom to local authorities so that they can respond better to local needs and build stronger local communities. As local authorities gain increasingly greater freedoms over budgetary decisions and more stability in their funding settlements, they should engage with local partners to share these gains and negotiate change. VCOs can play an important role in helping local people and communities to participate fully and therefore any new local governance structures must be actively encouraged to work with the VCS.

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<sup>2</sup> Putnam, R. (1993) 'The prosperous community: social capital and public life', *The American Prospect*, Volume 4, Number 13.

All partners will need to have access to the skills, capacity and knowledge to engage. And both central and local government must also recognise that greater localism and more participative processes could throw up opinions, needs and wants which are different from, or even in opposition to, those that government might wish for. The local authority's community leadership role is essential here, in order to listen to the various views and representations from communities, from other organisations, from advocates (including local councillors) and to balance these in the best interests of people across the locality as a whole.

Partnership working between all public bodies, VCOs and businesses at the local level should also continue to be seen as an intrinsic part of any new arrangements for devolving power to the neighbourhood level. Any new arrangements should complement the LSP and LAA frameworks in an area, working alongside and feeding into them, and it is essential that statutory bodies at the local level develop and maintain close working relationships with one another, and with their non-statutory partners.

## Community leadership

Local authorities are democratically elected bodies. As such, they have a clear role to play in providing leadership for a local area. Local government has a responsibility towards the whole local community; it must listen to all voices and then negotiate and mediate between competing interests and claims. It has to meet, and where necessary reconcile, the needs of an increasingly diverse citizenry. In many cases local government must make hard decisions and choices between competing views.

The POWER Inquiry, set up by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust in 2004, aimed to understand why the decline in popular participation and involvement in formal politics has occurred and to provide concrete and innovative proposals to reverse the trend. The inquiry was based on a belief that the sector (and government) share: that a healthy democracy requires the active participation of its citizens. The final report, *Power to the People*, has been described as a 'devastating critique of the state of formal democracy in Britain'. It found that millions take part in charity or community work, but political parties and elections have been a growing turn-off for years. The cause is not apathy; the problem is that not

enough people feel that they have any real influence over the decisions made by elected bodies.

In his paper *New Localism and the future of local governance: Implications for the voluntary sector*<sup>3</sup>, Gerry Stoker also suggested that with the decline in political party membership, and the apparent rise in single issue groups and campaigning activity, the VCS may have a much bigger role to play in non-partisan forms of political involvement and mobilisation in future. In fact the evidence is already there. The question is: how do we reach the right balance between representative and participative forms of democracy at a local level?

### *Balancing representative and participatory democracy*

The current discussions on empowering local neighbourhoods and communities (double devolution) recognise the need to strengthen local democracy and representation and engage more widely with local communities. Enabling greater participation through devolved decision-making is an important step towards reducing the local democratic deficit, and truly engaging with people.

It is not sufficient to depend entirely on the legitimacy afforded by electoral democracy, particularly when turnout at local elections is poor. A good local authority will make effective use of a variety of different forms of representative and participatory democracy, and will work with others in the community who are perceived to perform a community leadership role. The LGA report *Closer to People and Places* provides some examples as to the two can work together.

Many local VCOs, particularly community groups or residents groups, are perceived to have, or do have, a different form of legitimacy amongst local communities than councillors do. It is therefore essential that the democratic mandate that the local authority has is supplemented with other local and community interests: a local authority cannot assume that it has the support of all parts of the local community, that it alone is best able to identify issues or solutions, or that it is able to access all parts of the community. Both local authorities and the VCS have vital strengths that are needed for a strong and healthy society.

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<sup>3</sup> Published in *Voluntary Action: Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century*, NCVO 2005

## The role of the Councillor and the role of the Community Activist

Both local representation and local accountability must be effective in order to enable people and groups to inform and shape services, as well as to hold decision-makers to account. Locally elected councillors play an important role in local communities, providing representation, information and advocacy for their communities. The Local Government Act 2000 introduced new executive models of governance and the overview and scrutiny function for non-executive councillors, and the role of both executive and backbench councillors is now evolving as local authorities take on greater responsibilities for partnerships in an area and new forms of neighbourhood governance emerge.

But it is also important that community activists are valued, and the contribution they make to local communities recognised. A recent Joseph Rowntree publication, *Whose town is it anyway? The state of local democracy in two northern towns*, discusses the contributions made by a small minority of what it terms instead “super-activists”. These “super-activists” work at the most local level, and can often provide a crucial link between local residents, their ward councillors and local public officials. NCVO’s recent research into parish councils and community governance<sup>4</sup> also suggested that community activism, both elected and representative, is undertaken by a limited pool of individuals.

This dependency on a limited number of individuals raises a number of issues that will need to be addressed if government policy is to promise greater direct involvement of communities and individuals in governance and service delivery. We need to understand more clearly whether there are barriers that prevent greater numbers of people being active that can be readily removed, or is there a more fundamental problem that there will only ever be a limited number of individuals who are willing and able to take on these roles? Certainly, the tendency to denigrate these people as “the usual suspects” should be overcome. It may be that we should follow the recommendations of the Joseph Rowntree Trust and instead start to think of these people as community champions.

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<sup>4</sup> NCVO report, *A Broader Parish – Working together, improving rural communities*, due to be published autumn 2006

NCVO's recent parish council research also showed that most parish councillors were directly involved with local voluntary groups, often as trustees. However, whilst the majority of councillors had experience of the VCS, the reverse was not true: whilst some VCS community activists were also engaged in local politics, very many preferred to direct all of their efforts through the VCS. It is therefore important that ward councillors are encouraged to build up relationships with all of the VCOs in their area, and not just those with whom effective working relationships have already been established.

Care needs to be taken to extend the reach of the council, and councillors, to VCOs who may not have such direct links, who either do not want to, or perhaps do not know how to engage with the local authority. Further developing, clarifying and strengthening the role of the councillor is one way in which this can be done; for example both the London borough of Brent and Surrey County Council have schemes in place which include a devolved budget to councillors for ward or area based initiatives. Councillors can be supported in their role by local VCOs, who can provide knowledge, experience and expertise of local issues and a link into and out of communities. It is important that elected councillors and other community activists, whose roles do complement each other, are encouraged to work together. The local VCS is able to enhance the role of the local authority, but cannot and should not be a replacement for democratically elected representation.

## The provision of local services

Returning to the government's vision of a sustainable community, the third aspect of the role of local authorities is to ensure that the local community has access to a wide range of local services. This goes beyond the statutory duty to provide certain specific services: as part of their responsibility to promote the well being of their area, a good local authority will work to facilitate the provision of as broad a range of services as possible, from the public, private and voluntary sectors. Some of these will be publicly funded services, but equally an authority has a role to play in encouraging and supporting those in other sectors to make services available.

VCOs play an important role at the local level both in the provision of publicly funded services, but also through the wide range of services they make available to local communities as part of their core work, be that advocacy or advice work, activities, or clubs.

## Public service reform and co-production

Public services inevitably remain a major issue for local government. The government remains committed to reforming public services and to enabling the VCS to take on a greater role in public service delivery. NCVO has consistently argued that, where VCOs want to do so, they should be encouraged, supported and enabled to deliver public services. Our position has always been, however, that delivery is only one aspect of the public service reform agenda<sup>5</sup>. VCOs play an equally important role in helping citizens and communities have a voice in debates about what services are needed and how they should be provided, and in ensuring that citizens and communities have access to the right information to help them access the services they need and are entitled to. Indeed we believe a radical new approach to public services is needed if the experience of service users is to be transformed.

In his interim report, Sir Michael Lyons discusses the concept of co-production at the local level:

*“...local authorities can help to influence such lifestyle decisions by enabling local people to co-produce services, letting them have their say about what they want and need from public services. By involving local people in their design and delivery, local services are also likely to be more efficient and effective.”*

This reflects closely our view that real transformation must be focused around the needs of citizens, as set out in our recent report *How voluntary and community organisations can help transform public services*. In order to achieve transformation the approach taken must:

- place the agenda of citizens and communities, not just individual consumers, at the heart of the reform process;
- ensure public services are designed and delivered in a way that enables the voice of citizens and communities to be heard and acted upon, as well as providing them with a market choice;
- recognise the need for a holistic approach, which provides effective, joined up services to citizens; and
- apply more sophisticated understanding of the efficiency agenda, which gives as much weight to effectiveness as it does to cost savings.

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<sup>5</sup> Our position on the sectors role in public service reform is set out in our 2005 report, *The reform of public services: the role of the voluntary sector* and the 2006 essay, *How voluntary and community organisations can help transform public services*.

Local authorities are of course facing some enormous challenges here. Achieving sustainability, efficiency and choice simultaneously is no simple task. There is an inherent tension in government policy directives between greater local control and decision-making and the requirement for efficiency savings. Whilst efficiency targets can potentially incentivise larger contracts, local needs may dictate a subtler and more complex range of provision to effectively meet the needs of the whole community. The sector is able to work with local authorities at all stages of the designing and commissioning process, and must be encouraged and enabled to do so.

### *Priorities and Performance*

Local services and local decision-making should be directed by local people and local communities. If local government is to be more locally accountable, and better able to meet local needs and concerns, then priorities must be locally agreed, monitored and managed, within a nationally agreed framework. A local authority's performance against targets should be largely monitored and held to account by local people – it is essential that the processes of both priority-setting and monitoring are robust if they are to have credibility with the local community. The VCS can play a key role in helping to identify and set priorities, and in monitoring the performance of local services. It must be enabled to do so, with greater use of peer-led and citizen review.

LSPs are a key mechanism through which this can be achieved; and VCOs are important partners on LSPs. It is essential that VCOs are fully engaged in the LAA process from the outset, including setting targets and discussing funding. However, it is important to recognise that for many VCOs there are risks inherent in the LAA approach: whilst good local authorities make use of freedoms and flexibilities to determine their own priorities in partnership with a broad range of local stakeholders, there are others who will take the opportunity to pull back all control to themselves. If local partnerships are to benefit from the sector's expertise and insight on these issues there must be support, including some financial support, to facilitate the sector's engagement.

The VCS has a great deal to offer in terms of identifying and addressing local needs and priorities, especially the needs of those who are potentially disadvantaged or where there are complex needs cutting across traditional

service boundaries. Building up strong relations with the sector will benefit local authorities and other statutory partners. The sector can provide a channel through which statutory organisations are able to access those who are often the most marginalized in society, and by working closely with VCOs local government may also give a greater opportunity for bottom up pressures to be heard, which can highlight issues or problems and act as a catalyst for change.

## What do we need to improve the relationship?

### *Local leadership*

Stronger local communities and better outcomes for people depend on effective local leadership. In order to achieve real change, it is essential that local government and the VCS work together. The proposals being put forward by the government and also by the Lyons Inquiry offer important opportunities to strengthen this relationship: indeed it will be imperative that local government works with local VCOs if the desired improvements to local democracy and local services are to be achieved. However, the quality of relationships between VCOs and local government vary. We need to ensure that some core principles need to be agreed if this relationship is to develop effectively.

For local government, part of realising the full potential of local and neighbourhood level relationships with the VCS requires knowledge of what is out there. The sector's demographic make-up in every local area is different, and it is essential that local authorities understand and support the invaluable contribution VCOs make to their communities. Through best value reviews, or alongside Local Compact negotiation, local authorities should lead in identifying the extent and value of the sector in their locality. Where this has been done there is a tendency for substantial progress to be made in terms of understanding, trust and collaboration between sectors. The range of groups and organisations operating in the area should influence the way in which a more localised democracy is enacted.

An explicit part of a local authority's community leadership role should also include working with other public sector agencies in their locality to secure the necessary resources to support local VCS infrastructure, which provides skills development, strategic level networking, planning and engagement for

the sector. Well-supported local infrastructure can greatly enhance the sector's ability to engage at the strategic level, network between VCOs and facilitate community engagement. As we move towards greater localism, the negotiation of LAAs, and less prescribed funding streams, the sector's ability to fulfil these representative, facilitative and networking functions becomes ever more important.

## Local Compacts

Local Compacts have the potential to be an invaluable tool in building and sustaining the relationship between local authorities and the VCS. A Compact way of working should underpin local relationships, and the principles of recognition, respect and partnership must be upheld in these relationships.

There is still much to be done to promote an understanding of the benefits of Local Compacts, and to encourage more effective use of these tools. Local Compacts agreed between each local authority and the local VCS should set out agreed ways of working, including how partnerships will operate and how VCOs will be engaged in and contribute to local decision making.

## *Partnership working*

Partnership working between local government and the VCS has the ability to bring benefits for all partners. More importantly, partnerships are an essential way in which all organisations in an area can come together to improve local communities.

Placing a statutory duty on public sector partners to cooperate with one another is important. All too frequently, VCOs find that the various statutory agencies they work with in an area seem unable to operate in a joined up way, and such a duty would help address this problem.

In addition to this, a wider statutory duty on local authorities to engage effectively with other stakeholders and potential partners from the voluntary and community sector and the private sector is also needed. There are legislative precedents for this type of involvement in the Local Government Act 1999 (Best Value) and the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. It is crucial that

local authorities engage with their non-statutory partners, not only on their LSP but also within the LAA thematic partnerships. Non-statutory partners can bring a different perspective, expertise and knowledge to discussions and must not be excluded from the decision-making process.

With the growth in partnership working, further thought must be given to the issues of governance and accountability, both within partnerships and also to local people. This growth has also resulted in increasing demands on the time of VCOs. Many front line VCOs will, quite rightly, take the view that their primary responsibility is to their users and stakeholders, not to local statutory partnerships. Even where a VCO sees a clear value to engaging with a partnership, it may lack the capacity (in terms of skills or time) to play an effective role. Therefore, if there is to be a greater emphasis on community engagement and partnership working, support must be given to enable VCOs at the local level to develop the necessary capacity and skills.

### *Building capacity*

If the government is serious about engaging communities more directly, then community capacity building, engagement and representation will need to be encouraged, championed and supported by local authorities. This can be difficult and time consuming and will require commitment and support from all local partners. Such support may vary from direct financial support (grants or contracts) to providing resources such as training, providing free meeting spaces or the provision of advice and operational support.

There is significant scope to utilise and encourage more joint training where local government and voluntary organisations work together in partnership. This kind of training not only transmits knowledge but also enhances trust and understanding between individuals. Greater trust and understanding can vastly improve the way in which individuals communicate and, as a consequence, how partnerships operate and the outcomes they achieve. Similarly, involving partners from other sectors in delivering internal training can greatly aid levels of understanding. The VCS, for example, could play a very valuable role in councillor inductions. The value of this is not just in raising awareness of the sector amongst local councillors, but also providing the local councillors with the insight they need of the specific services available in their area.

One area in which the VCS could certainly improve is in how it works with, and influences local government politically. Many VCOs have day-to-day dealings with their local authority but are unclear about the division of roles and responsibilities between staff and councillors, and unsure about how and when to approach them. Nor do they necessarily understand the decision-making structures involved. The role that the sector can play in supporting local authorities needs to be better understood.

Incentives should be available to encourage joint training and other opportunities for knowledge-sharing, such as secondments and shadowing arrangements between public and voluntary sector staff at the local level. This kind of knowledge exchange can be invaluable in building sound relationships between sectors and ensuring that councillors have the knowledge they need to be able to refer people on appropriately, for example, where they bring enquiries to local surgeries.

## Conclusion

The vital relationship between the VCS and local government must be strengthened; any new arrangements for local areas must build upon and respect this relationship and the differing roles that organisations play in a local area. The VCS can play a role in providing information, advice, support, voice and services to an area – part of a local authority's role is that it must make hard decisions and choices between competing views; we believe that both of these roles have vital strengths and are both needed for a strong and healthy society. By working together we can achieve healthier, stronger and more integrated communities.

## Annex 1

### The issue of local government reform

Connecting both services and institutions more closely to those that they exist to serve requires greater devolution of power to the local level, and is now seen as key to the modernisation agenda. A consensus seems to have formed around the idea of ‘new localism’, which combines more directly accountable public institutions with a vital role for local government in bringing key local players together, identifying needs and service requirements and engaging in, and managing markets for provision.

In July 2004, the then ODPM published *The Future of Local Government: Developing a 10-year Vision*, which reaffirmed this central role:

*Councils have a clear local democratic leadership role as the only body elected by and accountable to the whole community... There is a role in leading local partnerships and bringing stakeholders together to help meet local needs and priorities, providing a focal point for local decisions. And there is a leadership role in enabling communities to lead themselves, developing social capital, fostering greater engagement in local decisions and taking action to promote inclusion.*

We have certainly seen what appears to be a shift in the balance of the central/local relationship in recent years. Central government moving towards a position whereby it is less willing to dictate requirements to local government, and more in favour of increasing local freedoms and flexibilities. Statutory public sector bodies in an area cannot transform local services and local institutions alone, and the extent to which these greater freedoms have resulted in the sharing of power between local authorities and other local agencies and communities varies considerably from one area to the next.

#### *What is the role of local government?*

Sustainability is an overarching theme for local government, and in response to the Egan review – *skills for sustainable communities*, commissioned by the ODPM and led by Sir John Egan, the government set out their vision of what a sustainable community should look like. They describe sustainable communities as:

- **Active, inclusive and safe** fair, tolerant and cohesive with a strong local culture and other shared activities.
- **Well run** with effective and inclusive participation, representation and leadership.
- **Well Served** with public, private, community and voluntary services that are appropriate to people's needs and accessible to all.
- **Fair for everyone** including those in other communities now and in the future.

In order to achieve this, local authorities also have the power to do anything that they consider is likely to promote the economic, social and/or environmental well-being of their areas, in order to respond to the needs of their local communities. As part of this role, local authorities are ultimately the body responsible, and accountable, for the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), Sustainable Community Strategy and the delivery of the Local Area Agreements (LAAs). In carrying out its role, it is essential that local authorities work with organisations from both the private and voluntary sectors, as well as with other local public bodies, in order to take all points of view into account when decision making and planning for the future.

## What is the role of local voluntary and community organisations?

VCOs enable individuals to contribute to public life and the development of their communities by providing opportunities for voluntary action. They also make a major contribution to the social, cultural and political fabric of our society. At a time where localism, responsiveness to need, community cohesion and civil renewal are high on the agenda there is clearly a role for the sector in bringing people together, supporting, building and representing communities.

VCOs interact with local authorities and other local statutory organisations in numerous ways and at numerous levels, playing three very important roles in society:

- they provide information and give advice to individuals or communities;

- they enable peoples voices to be heard, by supporting and encouraging people and communities or by acting as advocates (very often for marginalised groups who may not have any other way of being heard); and
- they provide activities or services. Some of these activities and services may be publicly funded, or delivered under contract for a public body, but many more are independently provided as their core purpose, for example social clubs, sports clubs and community groups.

In undertaking these roles, VCOs make up an essential part of society, and are widely recognised as playing a key part in:

- generating and mobilising social capital;<sup>6</sup>
- strengthening associational life;
- building bridges within and between communities; and
- linking people into decision-making structures.

Local authorities need to take a holistic view of the sector's potential role in society and an understanding of the inter-relation between different aspects of this role is an important first step on the road to better working relationships and better outcomes. The sector too needs to work hard to better articulate its role and its potential to local partners; ensure that it is robust and effective in the way it conducts its business; and that it works towards its own and shared objectives.

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<sup>6</sup> Social capital refers to the social networks between groups and people as well as the outcome of those relationships – behaviours, attitudes and trust.



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