

The 'State' and voluntary sector collaboration

Introduction:

As Communities 1st and our member organisations, we are dedicated to fostering vibrant, inclusive communities. This briefing paper represents a tangible expression of that commitment, focusing our collective efforts on a pivotal aspect of our shared mission: the empowerment and support of local communities through the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector. The challenges faced by this sector are complex and significant, encompassing more than just service provision – they involve navigating the intricacies of partnerships, funding dynamics, and legislative landscapes.

Building upon the rich insights gleaned from our previous discussions, this paper ventures into the intricacies of the VCSE sector, examining its pivotal role and the challenges it faces. Our goal is to draw upon the collective wisdom and experience of our member organisations, deepening our understanding of the VCSE sector's challenges and opportunities. Through this collaborative endeavour, we aspire to develop comprehensive strategies and policy recommendations that enhance the sector's ability to support the diverse and dynamic communities we are dedicated to serving.

Discussion Point: The VCSE Sector in Supporting Local Communities

The VCSE sector is instrumental in nurturing and supporting local communities. Our sector, encompasses a diverse range of organisations, who are central to delivering crucial public services and addressing the varied needs of the community. However, the sector navigates a landscape rife with challenges that hamper its effectiveness and outreach.

A significant portion of local VCSE organisations actively engage in partnerships with other voluntary bodies, adopting a mix of informal, semi-formal, and formal collaboration methods. The varied approaches to partnership underscore the sector's flexible and adaptive nature in pursuing cooperative efforts.

Despite the challenges posed by austerity policies and reduced budgets, many local VCSE organisations have continued to feel valued and supported by local public sector entities. The COVID-19 pandemic notably accentuated the sector's responsiveness and capability, with numerous VCSE organisations stepping up to assist local authorities in managing the crisis. This collaborative spirit highlighted the sector's critical role in public service delivery during times of emergency.

The local VCSE sector is at the forefront in sectors such as mental health, social care, and youth services, where its ability to reach marginalised communities, focus on prevention, and adapt to changing needs is highly valued. Despite this, the sector faces significant challenges in securing grants and contracts for public services, often resulting in underfunded initiatives and an underappreciation of its contributions. This funding gap

adversely impacts the sector's capacity to deliver services efficiently and provide valuable insights for public service enhancements.

Government funding for charities has seen a decline since the financial crisis, intensifying the need for robust and collaborative partnerships between the government and VCSE organisations. These partnerships are pivotal in amplifying the effectiveness of policy and service delivery, particularly in a landscape where resources are increasingly scarce.

The anticipated Procurement Bill is a legislative initiative aimed at simplifying and enhancing access to public procurement for the VCSE sector. While this bill holds promise in addressing some of the procurement-related challenges, its effectiveness in transforming public procurement to be more inclusive of VCSE organisations remains to be evaluated. The bill also brings into focus the need for improved bidding processes and contract management within the sector.

Key Questions:

1. How does your organisation currently engage in partnerships within the VCSE sector, and what are the key factors that influence your choice between informal, semi-formal, and formal collaborations?
2. In what ways do you feel supported or challenged by local public sector entities, and how have these relationships evolved, particularly in light of recent crises like the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What are the primary obstacles your organisation faces in securing grants and contracts, and what strategies have you found effective in overcoming these challenges?
4. With the upcoming Procurement Bill, what changes or improvements do you anticipate in the public procurement process?
5. What are the most pressing capacity-building needs within your organisation, such as bid-writing skills or systems development?

Conclusion:

The journey towards strengthening and empowering the VCSE sector is multifaceted, requiring a nuanced understanding of its diverse challenges and opportunities. It calls for a commitment to ongoing learning, adaptation, and proactive action from all involved. This commitment is crucial for fostering a culture of collective engagement and deepening our understanding of the sector's pivotal role in community support and public service delivery. As Communities 1st and its associated organisations, we are committed to actively engaging with these challenges.

This document represents a significant step forward in our ongoing discourse on critical community issues, particularly focusing on the complexities and needs of the VCSE sector. Through collaborative efforts and insightful discussions, we aim to amplify the influence of the local VCSE in shaping policies and practices that significantly improve service delivery, funding access, and partnership dynamics within our communities.