

Speaking Out Briefing No. 13

Communities in control: real people, real power

The Department for Communities and Local Government published a White Paper, *Communities in control: real people, real power*, in July 2008 which sets out how the Government aims to give greater power to local people and their communities. This briefing addresses the main elements of the White Paper and considers the implications for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector.

This briefing is part of the Speaking Out series.

Speaking Out

Speaking Out is a partnership between the National Council of Voluntary Child Care Organisations (NCVCCO) and the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS), which seeks to build a voice for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector across government.

The project aims to develop closer links between a range of government departments (Home Office, Ministry of Justice, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Communities and Local Government, Cabinet Office and HM Treasury) and the voluntary and community sector in delivering cross departmental policies such as Every Child Matters and *The Children's Plan* and the direct implementation of initiatives which affect children and young people.

Speaking Out aims to support children, young people and families voluntary and community organisations to better understand the impact on their users of a wider range of government policies and provide routes to influence them.

The project is funded by the Office of the Third Sector in the Cabinet Office.

Who are these briefings for?

This series of briefings intends to provide members of both NCVYS and NCVCCO and other interested parties with background and analysis on specific policy items affecting the sector.

Other activities

In addition to these briefings the Speaking Out project is developing work streams around the policy themes which include:

- organising a series of seminars and events;
- establishing communities of interest amongst members and other organisations on specific policy themes; and
- making representations to government; and linking with wider NCVYS and NCVCCO campaigns.

To discuss this briefing or any other aspect of the Speaking Out project please contact Sophie Griffiths, Policy and Information Officer at NCVCCO on 020 7833 3319 or email sophie@ncvcco.org or contact Hannah Dobbin, NCVYS's Policy Officer on 020 7278 1041 or email hannah@ncvys.org.uk.

1 Introduction

On 9 July 2008 Hazel Blears, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (CLG), launched the Empowerment White Paper *Communities in control: real people, real power* which intends to pass power into the hands of local communities. It aims to 'generate vibrant local democracy in every part of the country, and to give real control over local decisions and services to a wider pool of active citizens.'

The White Paper looks at who has power, on whose behalf is it exercised, how is it held to account, and how it can be accessed by everyone in local communities. It outlines the main principles underpinning community empowerment, including CLG's commitment to valuing the role of the voluntary and community sector in social and democratic renewal and as a key partner in fostering community engagement.

The Empowerment White Paper was accompanied by two consultations relating to the Paper's proposals on the Third Sector Partnership Board and the Empowerment Fund. These were consulted on until 30 September 2008. The Speaking Out project submitted a response to the Third Sector Partnership Board consultation and supported a joint response on the Empowerment Fund led by the organisation Urban Forum¹.

This briefing paper examines the policy and legal context relating to community empowerment, outlines the main provisions in the White Paper, highlighting areas of particular interest for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector (CYPVCS), as well as considering possible implications and opportunities for the sector.

¹ For further information or to request a copy of these responses please contact Sophie Griffiths at NCVCCO on 020 7833 3319 or sophie@ncvcco.org.

2 Policy context

The proposals in the White Paper build on the Government's intentions over the last decade to reform local government and create the double devolution of power from central government to local government, and from local government to citizens and communities. This intention was signalled as part of the agenda for public service reform in the publication of *Strong and Prosperous Communities: the Local Government White Paper* in October 2006. The creation of local partnership arrangements through Children's Trusts and Local Area Agreements are key examples of such reform and localism.

The democratic system has also been subject to reform since 1997 through the creation of the Welsh Assembly, Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly and a London Mayor and Assembly. Alongside democratic reform, the Government has explored methods of participatory democracy to help shape policy. For example, the *New Deal for Communities*² programme included direct elections of local people to local boards, Downing Street has encouraged on-line petitions, and citizen's juries have been held on issues including children's services and immigration.

The creation of the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) in May 2006, which replaced the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, further affirms the Government's intentions of making communities and local government a priority in terms of investment and policy development. Furthermore, the relationship between both central and local government and the voluntary and community sector has been strengthened over recent years through the development of the Compact - a framework for partnership working established in 1998³.

The *Communities in Control* White Paper also aims to build on challenges outlined in the *Governance of Britain* Green Paper⁴ (July 2007) which identified that power remains too centralised and too concentrated in government hands and that clarity is needed over what power government should and should not have. It also found that disengagement from the political process is increasing.

Young people's disengagement is particularly acute. The most recent *Audit of Political Engagement*⁵ indicates that less than 23% of 18-24-year-olds are absolutely certain to vote, compared with 78% of adults aged 65-74. While voter turnout among young people is comparatively low, the Labour Party's National Policy Forum has recommended votes at 16 be included in the next Labour manifesto⁶. This is a

2 <http://www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/page.asp?id=617>

3 Further information on the Compact is available at www.compact.org.uk. NCVCCO and NCVYS will be responding to a review of the Compact in November 2008.

4 Ministry of Justice (July 2007) *The Governance of Britain* <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm71/7170/7170.pdf>

5 Hansard Society (2008) *An Audit of Political Engagement* 5, London: Hansard Society

6 http://www.labour.org.uk/younglabour/labour_backs_votes_at_16_for_next_election

proposal strongly supported by organisations such as the British Youth Council⁷ and the UK Youth Parliament⁸.

The White Paper seeks to further develop the existing work the Government has initiated on the placeshaping agenda - the process of involving people, including children and young people, directly in things that affect them, such as neighbourhood renewal and regeneration and things to do and places to go for children and young people. The Speaking Out project has published a briefing on placeshaping which is available at www.ncvcco.org or www.ncvys.org.uk.

The Government has developed a programme of work through the national curriculum on citizenship education to foster engagement and empowerment of children and young people in democracy. Initiatives include establishing school councils, conducting mock elections and developing the UK Youth Parliament. The duty for schools to promote community cohesion also focuses efforts to ensure children and young people are fully engaged in their local communities. Furthermore, the Every Child Matters aim for children and young people to make a positive contribution affirms the Government's commitment to promote the delivery of positive activities for all children and young people.

7 http://www.byc.org.uk/view.php?parent_id=212&content_id=214

8 http://www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk/votes_at_16/pages/news.html

3 Legal context

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007⁹ introduced a new legislative power called the Councillor Call for Action. This empowers councillors to require overview and scrutiny committees to consider issues of local concern. The Act also established the right to community government reviews which enable local people to call for a local council to be established in their area.

In May 2008, Prime Minister Gordon Brown signalled that the 2008-09 parliamentary session will include a forthcoming Community Empowerment, Housing and Economic Regeneration Bill, which will take forward a number of the proposals in the Empowerment White Paper.

Statutory guidance¹⁰ was published in conjunction with the Empowerment White Paper detailing the main elements of the relationship between central and local government and between local government and citizens. Key components include:

- Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) - partnerships between local authorities and other local agencies to create a joint vision and priorities for an area. Third sector organisations are considered equal partners in LSPs;
- Local Area Agreements (LAAs), which set out the priorities for local areas and are agreements between central government, local authorities and their partners to improve services and the quality of life for citizens in an area; and
- National Indicators, which form the performance framework for local government. A set of 198 National Indicators exist and cover all the national priorities which local authorities and stakeholders will be responsible for delivering.

9 http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/pabills/200607/local_government_and_public_involvement_in_health.htm

10 Communities and Local Government (2008) *Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities Statutory Guidance* is available at www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/communitiesincontrol

4 Communities in Control summary

This section summarises the seven main themes of the White Paper, highlighting areas that are particularly relevant to the CYPVCS.

4.1 Active citizens and the value of volunteering

This chapter recognises the value of voluntary and community activity and sets out some of the ways the Government plans to support and increase community engagement. Key proposals include:

- piloting a 'community allowance' to allow community organisations to pay people to do work that strengthens their communities without it affecting their benefits;
- investing £2m through the Office of the Third Sector (OTS) to create opportunities for people with disabilities to volunteer;
- extending mentoring and befriending schemes across the UK and developing a strategy for extending one-to-one engagement through the delivery of local services;
- promoting participation and social action through the existing schools citizenship curriculum, and supporting a Take Part local pathfinder programme offering information and training on how to be an active citizen;
- encouraging community leadership programmes, which includes providing funding through a new Empowerment Fund of at least £7.5m to support national third sector organisations to turn empowerment related proposals into practical action;
- working with the Community Development Foundation and other community development networks to ensure that practical guidance is available on community development. CLG also intends to work with the Academy for Sustainable Communities to ensure appropriate training in community development and community empowerment skills is available to relevant public sector officials;
- inviting expressions of interest for a national partner to deliver a £70m Communitybuilders fund to support community-led organisations;
- continuing the OTS Grassroots Grants programme which provides small grants to grassroots groups that have volunteer time as their main resource. Small grants will be dispersed from an £80m pot from 2008-2011. An extra £50m endowment fund will also be invested in longer-term sustainability of the sector;
- working with faith communities to remove the barriers to commissioning services from faith-based groups. The OTS will be carrying out a national survey of third sector organisations, including faith based charities, to better understand the issues that affect the sector. CLG also plans to publish a strategy for increasing dialogue and collaborative social action between people with different religions and beliefs and those with none;

- developing ‘tools’ aimed at helping individuals and communities understand how they can tackle climate change led by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; and
- looking at ways to support local communities in developing events which celebrate and promote social action.

4.2 Access to information

CLG acknowledges that access to information is a prerequisite to community empowerment. This chapter sets out how people can access local information and looks at the ways in which information can be shared. Amongst CLG’s proposals are plans to:

- increase the use of the internet as a means to accessing information. CLG recognises there is a strong correlation between those who are socially excluded and those who are digitally excluded. A forthcoming cross-Government Digital Equality Action Plan will aim look at ways to ensure that local communities and all sections of society are able to benefit from digital technology equally;
- set up an online system for schools to report to parents on their child’s school attendance, behaviour and attainment and special needs. It is intended that all secondary schools will do this by 2010 and all primary schools by 2012;
- ensure that information on services is available at local neighbourhood level through the Local Area Agreement process. CLG has launched a Data Interchange Hub to give local authorities the most up-to-date information on National Indicators, including opportunities for benchmarking and national comparison;
- expanding the Places Database, which is a repository of information about communities, to help people better understand trends and issues in their local area;
- working with the Local Government Associations (LGA) and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) to support local authorities in making information they hold more readily available and pilot new approaches to sharing information with local communities. As part of these pilots CLG intends to explore ways to strengthen information provision for vulnerable and socially excluded people through charters for independent living;
- support innovation through the use of new technology. CLG will work closely with OTS, Cabinet Office, the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills and other partners to explore this; and
- continue supporting a Youth Media Fund, known as Mediabox, to help young people have a positive voice in the media. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) is supporting the fund which offers 13-19-year-olds the chance to develop and produce media projects about issues that are important to them using film, print, television, radio or online platforms.

4.3 Having an influence

This chapter explains how the CLG plans to give people new rights to petition and encourage higher turnouts in election. Key actions include:

- introducing a new duty on local councils to respond to petitions, including electronic petitions, relating to local authority functions or other public services where the council shares delivery responsibilities. CLG acknowledges the use of petitions as an important means by which communities can express a collective view and put pressure on those in power;
- creating an opportunity for petitioners to ask for an issue to be debated in full council if an overview and scrutiny committee decides that the councils' response to the petition is inadequate;
- recognising local councils as community advocates that can assist and represent the views of local people to other statutory bodies and public services. For example, school inspections will be determined by an annual risk assessment informed by a range of evidence including the views of parents obtained through surveys and petitions;
- publishing a National Strategy on Participatory Budgeting to encourage every local authority to establish participatory budget mechanisms by 2012. Participatory budgeting involves the public making decisions about how sections of local public budgets are invested and allocated;
- working with DCSF to develop other ways to encourage participatory budgeting among young people. The Youth Opportunity Fund and the Youth Capital Fund are examples of the DCSF providing funding for young people to control and enabling local authorities to develop new approaches to strategic investment in youth activities and facilities;
- requiring local authorities, as part of a new duty to promote local democracy, to run information campaigns to explain the processes and implications of voting, especially to young people. CLG will also give local authorities the power to provide incentives for voting in local government elections, for example entering voters into a prize draw;
- encouraging the creation of more councils at the most local level where these are needed by people, so that councils do not just exist at district, county or borough level. CLG intend to introduce a right of appeal to the Secretary of State where a community's proposal for a local council is denied by the local authority; and
- working with the third sector to develop principles for its participation in Local Strategic Partnerships, recognising that the third sector is in a unique position to articulate the views of citizens and local communities.

The White Paper recognises that many young people do not vote and are disengaged from formal politics. However, according to the Electoral Commission 67% of 18-24-year-olds say they are interested in local issues and many young people are involved in regular voluntary activity. Several key actions are proposed in the White Paper in relation to engaging young people. These include:

- ensuring local authorities include meaningful engagement with young people as part of their local children and young people's plans;
- expanding initiatives developed through the Youth Opportunities Fund, the Youth Capital Fund and the young advisors scheme, which has trained 250 young people aged 16-21 to help public bodies in their policy making and delivery of services;
- establishing a system for young advisors to have direct access to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in order to give a young person's perspective as policy is being formulated and implemented;
- setting up a programme for young people to 'shadow' government ministers and elected mayors; and
- a £6m investment from DCSF to create a new national institute for youth leadership, which will work with CLG to develop internships for young people to work with local councillors.

4.4 Challenge

This chapter outlines how people can hold officials to account through new powers of petitioning and ways in which CLG will establish more visible and accountable local leadership.

CLG proposes to raise the visibility of the overview and scrutiny function in local government which will strengthen existing powers given to councillors, through the Local Government Act 2000, to challenge officers, executive council members, including council leaders on behalf of their constituents, similar to Select Committees in Parliament. The White Paper includes an intention to increase the transparency of local public officers so that they are open to public scrutiny and questioning from local communities. This chapter also includes proposals to increase the accountability of police and health services.

4.5 Redress

CLG recognises that there are occasions where services do not meet people's expectations. This chapter focuses on how the Government can work to ensure that expectations are made clear, how citizens can seek redress and how redress can be used to improve future performance.

The White Paper sets out expectations for local authorities to have a system of accessible, interactive communication so that citizens can raise concerns. CLG are also keen to extend the use of Community Contracts, which bring together councils, the NHS, police and community groups to agree key priorities. In conjunction with community contracts, CLG are interested in developing pledgebanks, which involve individuals pledging to provide a certain amount of resource, such as their skills or a small sum of money, to a central pot that would be used to further the priorities of a community.

4.6 Standing for office

This section identifies how people can take on a civic role and stand for election, particularly as councillors. The chapter emphasises the need to attract a more diverse range of people standing for election, including young people. According to the 2006 Census of local authority councillors only 0.3% of councillors are aged under 25. Plans to encourage more young people to stand for office include introducing a formal qualification and accreditation scheme to recognise the contributions citizens make and the skills they gain when they take up a civic role; and developing an employer's information pack explaining the benefits for an employer of an employee taking on a civic position.

4.7 Ownership and control

The White Paper recognises that many thousands of people in the UK are active in the running of local community groups and in organising and delivering local services. This chapter details how CLG plans to increase the number of people helping to run or own local services and assets. These assets may include community centres, playgrounds and derelict facilities such as a disused school. An Asset Transfer Unit will be established in CLG to build on existing work to provide information, research and good practice.

CLG also intends to encourage local authorities to ensure social enterprises are able to compete fairly for contracts. Social enterprises are believed to build a fairer society, for example by attracting young entrepreneurs who want to make a difference to society or the environment to start their own businesses.

4.8 Conclusion and next steps

The White Paper recognises that the empowering of citizens and communities is an urgent matter. It states that unless individuals are given similar choices in the democratic system to those they have in everyday life, there will be a further erosion of participation in democracy.

The White Paper contains a wealth of proposals, some of which will be implemented by CLG, in partnership with other key government departments and stakeholders, and others which will require legislative amendments. An implementation annex is included as part of the White Paper which details the actions, timescales, outcomes and lead department for all of the key proposals.

5 Possible implications for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector

The *Communities in Control* White Paper contains a wealth of proposals that create both opportunities and challenges for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector (CYPVCS). The White Paper clearly demonstrates a positive move towards sustained third sector involvement in community empowerment and citizen engagement. However, it remains to be seen how effectively CLG and local authorities who gain an extended role in promoting participation and democracy will work in partnership with third sector organisations and other government departments to deliver its proposals.

Although the White Paper does not specifically identify the CYPVCS, its proposals can be applied to different third sector settings, including organisations working directly with children and young people. For example, the proposals to value and encourage volunteering and support small grass roots organisations to be involved and engaged in the policymaking process are of particular relevance to the CYPVCS.

Funding and capacity development opportunities exist for CYPVCS organisations through the new Empowerment Fund. For example, there is an opportunity for CYPVCS organisations to get the voice of the sector heard by linking to national third sector organisations funded to take on this work. However, the Empowerment Fund in its present form contains an income threshold below which organisations will be excluded from applying¹¹, which will particularly affect smaller CYPVCS organisations that are excluded from the fund simply on the basis of their size.

The White Paper places considerable emphasis on local government to work in partnership with the voluntary and community sector. The challenge for the CYPVCS will be ensuring that the myriad proposals in the White Paper translate into practice at a local level and that the commissioning of services for children and young people by local authorities continues to reflect the significant contribution the CYPVCS makes in engaging with children and young people in local communities, particularly those who are disadvantaged, socially excluded and harder-to-reach.

The CYPVCS has a strategic role to play in holding the CLG to account on the intentions set out in the White Paper. Through its representation on local strategic bodies, including Children's Trusts and Local Strategic Partnerships, the CYPVCS can influence decision-making and ensure that the sector is fully engaged in

¹¹ The thresholds are £1m for Level 1 funding and £400k for Level 2 funding. Further information on the Empowerment Fund is available at: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/empowermentfund>

policymaking involving children and young people. Representation opportunities for the CYPVCS also exist through the enhancement of the CLG Third Sector Partnership Board, which offers the potential for the CYPVCS to get its voice heard by both central and local government and make a meaningful contribution to the design, implementation and evaluation of CLG's activities both nationally and locally. It will be more important than ever before for the CYPVCS to be able to demonstrate not only the contribution it makes but also the extent to which it is able to represent those most in need of representation.

The CYPVCS plays a crucial role in encouraging and maintaining 'bottom up' policymaking, such as involving children and young people in local petitions and placeshaping. Children and young people are entitled to have a stake in how their local communities and services are designed and run and the CYPVCS is well placed to broker and facilitate such engagement. Involving children in designing services and creating opportunities for them to voice their opinions about issues that they care about is at the heart of the work of the CYPVCS.

The CYPVCS can also play an important role in mediating between different groups within local communities and ensuring that the community engagement measures proposed in the White Paper are not used to the detriment of children and young people. This may be especially important in finding solutions to issues such as anti-social behaviour which meet the needs of all community members without stigmatising or disadvantaging children and young people.

It is important that the CYPVCS continues to promote the notion that children and young people are active citizens and ensures that CLG's activities do not simply reflect the views of the voting adult population. There is a danger that political apathy and community disempowerment will remain central to the lives of children and young people growing up in some local communities, especially if their views are not fully heard and represented through the CYPVCS. Furthermore, the CYPVCS is well placed to develop innovative ways of making better use of emerging technologies to engage with children and young people, such as online social networking websites and blogs.

6 Resources

Communities in control: real people, real power is available at:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/communitiesincontrol>

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) website has a range of resources and policy briefings relating to local government:

<http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/policy/index.asp?id=9048>

The Participation Works website contains a range of resources on involving children and young people in decision making:

www.participationworks.org.uk

Local Government Association:

<http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pagelD=1>

The Speaking Out briefing paper on placeshaping is available on the NCVCCO and NCVYS websites: <http://www.ncvcco.org> and <http://www.ncvys.org.uk>

7 Other briefings

- Briefing 1** Knife, gun and gang crime
- Briefing 2** The Government's Social Exclusion Agenda
- Briefing 3** Access to Services in Rural Areas
- Briefing 4** Public Service Delivery
- Briefing 5** Community Cohesion
- Briefing 6** Local Government Reform
- Briefing 7** Placeshaping
- Briefing 8** The Comprehensive Spending Review
- Briefing 9** Rural migrant children, families and young people
- Briefing 10** Gang, Gun and Knife Crime: Seeking Solutions (Part 2)
- Briefing 11** Ministry of Justice Third Sector Strategy
- Briefing 12** HM Government Youth Crime Action Plan

All the briefings are available at www.ncvcco.org or www.ncvys.org.uk

Free hard copies are also available to order. Please contact Ilona Pinter, NCVYS's Information and Website Officer on 020 7278 1041 or email ilona@ncvys.org.uk, or Sophie Griffiths, NCVCCO's Policy and Information Officer on 020 7833 3319 or email sophie@ncvcco.org.

