



## **Children England response to question 9 of the Supporting a Stronger Civil Society Consultation**

### **Introduction to Children England**

Children England is the leading membership organisation for the children, young people and families' voluntary sector. With member organisations working in all parts of the country ranging from small local groups to the largest household names in children's charities, Children England is in a unique position to use the collective voice of the voluntary sector to achieve positive change for children. Children England provides capacity building, support and information to its members and the wide range of voluntary sector organisations working with children, young people and families. It does this by building active networks, promoting good practice, stimulating policy debate and ensuring that the issues that matter most to its members are taken up with decision makers.

Children England currently receives strategic grants from the Cabinet Office and the Department for Education. The Cabinet Office grant pays for the Speaking Out project which we deliver jointly with the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS). This aims to provide a credible voice for the children, young people and families voluntary and community sector and ensure that this is included in policy making across departments who do not regularly engage with organisations working with children and young people. The project concentrates particularly on policy agendas emerging from the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice, the Department of Health, Communities and Local Government, the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury. The Speaking Out programme has received excellent feedback both from the voluntary organisations it has supported and the Cabinet Office which has praised it as an effective way of communicating with the sector and involving practitioners in the policy making process.

The strategic grant from the Department for Education has allowed Children England to upscale the support it provides to members, principally through the VCS Engage project. This has involved the delivery of engagement, capacity building and influencing work in each of the eight English regions. An independent evaluation of the programme concluded that it had –

- Created stronger local and regional VCS networks
- Developed better relationships between the statutory and voluntary sector
- Increased the profile of the VCS regionally and locally
- Built the status and potential influence of the VCS
- Grown the capacity of the VCS to successfully deliver public services
- Enabled local authorities to improve their engagement with VCS

## **The National Infrastructure Environment**

We are pleased to offer a response to question 9 of the Supporting a Stronger Civil Society consultation. We will be submitting a full response to the remaining consultation questions before the final deadline.

We recognise that there are a large number and wide variety of infrastructure organisations operating at a national level and appreciate the Government's concern that this can lead to duplication and inefficient use of limited resources. However, it is important to highlight that the vast majority of these organisations are not self-appointed champions but rather have emerged organically from the needs of their members. For example, Children England's predecessor, The Constituent Societies of the National Council of Associated Children's Homes, was formed in 1942 by seven organisations working with looked after children to provide a single voice for the sector. As such, although in some cases infrastructure bodies will overlap, in the main they will provide resources and representation for organisations who would otherwise be without support. Where there is overlap, infrastructure organisations have a history of working collaboratively. For example, Children England currently collaborates with NCVYS delivering the Speaking Out project, with NSPCC on safeguarding support to the VCS and with NAVCA and the Racial Equality Foundation on workforce development. In this way we can still retain our distinctive identity whilst also using funding more efficiently in areas where we share common ground.

We recognise that we have a responsibility to be much clearer about the relationship between generalist and specialist infrastructure organisations, both for our respective memberships and for funders. We believe that strong generalist services on governance, financial management, volunteering and fundraising for example, are best provided by generalist bodies. We have used and adapted excellent general products for children and young people's groups in the past, in cost-effective partnerships with colleagues at NAVCA, Community Matters and NCVO. They have in turn drawn on our specialist expertise to ensure their representation and advice work was up to date and accurate on children and young people's issues.

It is also the case that local level generalist infrastructure has much to offer smaller community groups working with children and families, and we encourage all our smaller members to join their local infrastructure body to gain the links and intelligence we can not provide with their wider local VCS community. Children England has also invested in training and ongoing support for local infrastructure workers, to increase their knowledge and understanding of issues facing the children, young people and families VCS, and their capacity to support grass roots groups. This is a far more cost effective way of using our joint resources and expertise to get the help where it's needed.

Like other national infrastructure bodies we stay connected and responsive to the needs of our members through a variety of means, not least of which is the strategic guidance we receive from our trustee board which is comprised of Chief Executives from a cross-section of our membership. This ensures that we retain a representative and distinctive voice. Indeed, one of the great advantages of having a well

populated national infrastructure environment is that the Government is able to call on a wide variety of opinions when formulating policy. A reduced number of infrastructure bodies would necessarily mean that some organisations would cease to be heard, particularly smaller civil society groups and those working in more niche areas.

## **The Role of National Infrastructure**

National infrastructure performs three key roles that are vital for the realisation of the Big Society agenda; influencing, building capacity and increasing engagement and collaboration.

### 1) Influencing

By acting as the voice of local civil society practitioners, we ensure that our members have a conduit to Whitehall and that national policy is informed by grassroots expertise. The majority of our members have an annual turnover of less than £250,000. Without national infrastructure these small community organisations, which will be increasingly expected to deliver public services and support volunteer action, would be unable to influence national debate, leaving government ignorant of the realities for front line delivery at the local level. Instead, only those larger charities with the necessary resources to engage with national government will be able to have their say.

National infrastructure organisations also have a vital role to play at a local and regional level. Children England has eight Regional Development Managers (RDMs), paid for by the VCS Engage programme, who bring together our members and the wider sector at a more local level. Through the RDMs we have helped local authorities to increase the input of voluntary and community organisations into their decision making process. One local authority we have worked with said –

“ [Children England] have helped us with the openness of our structure e.g. we make sure that there are transparent processes for people chairing groups, becoming reps on wider bodies etc. This is much better than picking people randomly according to who they know”  
*Children England VCS Engage Programme Evaluation Report, October 2010*

Providing a voice at a local level will become increasingly important now that local authorities have greater autonomy over their budgets and the statutory basis for consultation with the voluntary and community sector through Children’s Trusts has been removed. While in some cases this is a role that can be carried out by local generic infrastructure bodies, often they lack the expertise to effectively represent the interests of specialist providers. It can be isolating to represent the VCS on statutory decision making structures. The regional networks of representatives on Children’s trusts and Local Safeguarding Children Boards, coordinated by Children England, have played an important role in sharing best practice and increasing the confidence and skills of representatives to speak out on behalf of the sector and their service users.

Similarly, national infrastructure organisations are far better placed to influence multiple local authorities who chose to share back office and commissioning functions on a regional or sub regional

level. We are currently supporting the development of consortia in the North East and South West to enable smaller local and specialist groups to bid for service contracts on both a regional and sub regional basis.

It is this combination of local focus with national reach that our members most value in us as a national infrastructure organisation. One commented -

“The whole chain is important: the grassroots engagement feeds into Children England for national lobbying and we couldn’t do that without the [the Regional Development Manager] as the link in that chain. The more the networks are linked together, the more there’s ‘one voice’, the more influential that voice is.”  
*Children England VCS Engage Programme Evaluation Report, October 2010*

## 2) Building Capacity

Through the provision of specialist training we are empowering people to play a greater role in their local communities and increasing the number of civil society organisations able to deliver public services for children and young people. For generic topics, such as commissioning, we often work closely with local organisations in order to tailor our support. For example, in one region we collaborated with Jobcentre Plus and Tendering for Care to prepare material on tendering and commissioning in that area and run a number of well attended training sessions. For more specialist issues, such as child protection, we are able to base training courses and information materials on our detailed understanding of the latest national policy developments, and bring in the support of national expert members such as NSPCC and Family Action to support smaller groups, in a way that local generic infrastructure organisations are unable to. Through our Regional Development Managers and the VCS Engage programme, we work with these organisations to support voluntary and community organisation beyond our membership. Voluntary Action North Lincolnshire have said -

“We use Children England and VCS Engage’s safeguarding packages, information etc. on a daily basis to help our member groups to provide services to children and young people, many of whom in the rural areas have no access to mainstream service provision. Because what they provide is fit for purpose we don’t have to spend our time sourcing and checking the quality, suitability and effectiveness of alternative development tools. Without this provision there would be fewer resources readily accessible to the small voluntary groups, leading to a reduction in the support we can offer, and as a result of this, fewer new groups would be able to access start up support, and others could be unsustainable.”

Our work building local capacity has been recognised by a regional lead at the Commissioning Support Programme who said -

“The aim of broadening the provider base in children’s services will be pretty difficult for all concerned without you”

Building capacity also means bringing our members together so that they can learn from each other. This is hugely beneficial for large and small organisations alike. Barnardo's London, East Anglia and South East Region have commented –

“Whilst all member organizations will be “expert” within a specific area or areas (examples would include safeguarding, play, under 5’s, etc.), none will be competent and confident across all aspects of work with children, young people and families. Children England allows and encourages wisdom, learning and practice experience to be shared across the sector. Large and smaller organizations are valued equally, with each learning from and supporting each other. Barnardo’s has certainly learned a great deal from work with others under the aegis of Children England.”

This will be particularly important at a time when all charities are making difficult decisions about how to adapt to the new funding environment. The fora and platforms provided by Children England will be key to ensuring that children’s voluntary sector survival strategies are tested and shared and that organisations are enabled to take full advantage of the new funding opportunities arising from the Big Society Bank and social impact bonds.

### 3) Increasing Engagement and Collaboration

On a local, regional and national basis we provide fora for our members to come together to share ideas, learn from each other and develop relationships that will enable them to work in partnership on future projects. For our smaller members this opens up commissioning and influence opportunities that would otherwise be out of their reach. One said –

“Without infrastructure, organisations will be back in silos, not sharing, not identifying opportunities to work together, less primed to know who to talk to in their local area, less informed about money and policy changes. There will be a dropping off of influence over time and the big voluntary organisations will take over relationships with the statutory sector because they will still have the capacity to do so while smaller ones are shut out”  
*Children England VCS Engage Programme Evaluation Report, October 2010*

Through the VCS Engage programme we also facilitate regional peer support, best practice sharing and access to training for local infrastructure organisations. Voluntary Action Sheffield said -

“The support that the networking meetings provide really do enable myself and my colleagues in the other regional areas come together to share good practice, new ideas and formulate ideas to tackle issues that we all face in our work supporting organisations that work with children and young people. Although we have very local networks, the regional networking provides me with the missing part of the jigsaw. All the events that have been held have been extremely well delivered, being of a very high quality. I have come away from them informed, armed with additional tools, ideas and feeling well supported in a job that can be very isolating at times.”

Most organisations have to concentrate the majority of their resources on the “day job”. This means that without infrastructure and membership bodies making links and providing information about wider opportunities and policy streams, organisations would struggle to recognise the wider contribution they can make. Children England has provided knowledge and practical help to enable groups to engage with local area agreements, housing and homelessness, physical regeneration projects and the environmental agenda for the benefit of the children young people and families they serve. Local organisations working with children young people and families have also welcomed our role as an expert, independent broker and facilitator of consortia and new local partnership arrangements. Unlike local infrastructure bodies we have been able to sit very clearly outside of the local funding environment and have therefore found it easier to build the trust required, with no conflict of interest.

### **Adapting for the Future**

Whilst excited about the new era of civil society engagement in the delivery of public services and the building of community action, we recognise that infrastructure organisations will need to adapt to stay relevant. In particular, greater devolution of budgetary responsibility to local authorities will mean that national organisations like Children England will need to be aware of the decisions being made in all 353 English local authorities and the health service structures within them, rather than just a handful of central government departments. In such an environment, the work that we already do to share best practice, build consortia and develop capacity at local and regional levels will become increasingly important.

Powerful mechanisms to get community, consumer voices heard at a local level and trends identified for national consideration will become more important as centralised programmes, standards and inspection regimes reduce. Local organisations will need greater access to intelligence from other areas to benchmark, challenge and support best practice on commissioning and community engagement, as well as to develop new and more cost effective delivery packages for vulnerable children, young people and families. National specialist infrastructure bodies such as Children England will need to play an even greater role in supporting VCS run Children’s Centres and facilitating the sector to play a full part in community based budgeting initiatives.

### **Realising the Big Society Vision**

The Office for Civil Society has set out three strategic objectives –

- 1) Making it easier to run a voluntary or community sector organisation
- 2) Getting more resources into the sector to underpin its resilience and independence
- 3) Making it easier to do business with the state

As set out above, national infrastructure organisations are well placed to deliver each of these objectives. We make it easier to run voluntary and community sector organisations by providing information, advice and training for trustees, staff and volunteers, as well as facilitating local, regional and national events for networking and the sharing of best practice. Our existing networks and relationships mean we are able to efficiently channel additional resources to the sector. And we make it easier for our members to do business with the state by providing commissioning training sessions, helping coordinate consortiums and providing a voice for those involved in the process.

We are confident about the role we can play in delivering the Big Society vision but also understand the need to become less dependent on the state and to diversify our income. To this end we are developing social enterprise products that can supplement the non-statutory income that we already receive through our membership fees. Whilst this will be sufficient to sustain our core policy and influencing work, it will not allow us to continue running more extensive capacity building and engagement programmes. Indeed, it is important to recognise that, aside from government, there are very few other paying customers for this kind of coordinating work. However, we believe that the success of programmes such as Speaking Out and VCS Engage show how cost savings are generated when government works with national infrastructure organisations. Although projects will necessarily change to better reflect new policy priorities and economic realities, they are excellent examples of what can be efficiently delivered by utilising existing networks and expertise.

### **Contact**

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