

why?

Fact sheet 3

Why get involved with voluntary and community sector (VCS) representation?

First, what is representation?

Representation is defined as the act of standing in for people or groups and speaking with authority on their behalf; it is the state or condition of serving as an official delegate, agent or spokesperson.

And in the voluntary and community sector...?

Not everybody who has a stake in decisions can be present at meetings about these decisions. A representative can, therefore, be chosen to share the views of those who cannot be present.

When we talk about 'representing the voluntary sector' this implies a whole set of processes, which include:

- Gathering the views of the sector
- Taking the sector's diverse views to strategic or decision making forums
- Feeding any comments or results back to the sector
- Returning any reactions from the sector back to the forums.

Ideally, the process should be on-going, transparent and democratic.

Where does representation happen? What are these forums?

Potentially, the VCS may be represented at any meeting or committee where plans are made or decisions taken, though the degree to which this actually happens will vary from area to area. These forums can include Children's Trust Boards, Local Strategic Partnerships and their sub-groups, neighbourhood forums and commissioning groups, among others (please see the ECM Glossary of Terms at www.childrenengland.org.uk for definitions of these forums).

Why is it important for the VCS to be represented at these forums?

Children, young people and families should be involved in the decisions about services that affect them; often it is a statutory requirement and, more importantly perhaps, it just makes sense. Traditionally, the VCS has been a champion of those who use their services. It also has a strong history of service user involvement that can provide routes to ensure real participation in the development of local services.

It is particularly important to support smaller community groups to be heard in these forums. They are less likely to have the capacity to attend meetings, but they often represent some of the most vulnerable, 'hard to reach' communities. It is important that they are enabled to share their experiences and that of their service users.

Furthermore, children's services are currently being restructured, including developing children's trusts. This means that each local area will have to look at the services that are currently being provided to children and young people to determine where there is duplication or gaps in provision and where services need to be changed or developed.

If VCS organisations want to ensure that the interests of their service users are considered and the unique value of the services they provide is included and funded, they must have a voice in this process in some way.

But how to do it? (please turn over)

Why get involved with VCS representation?

How does it work?

In order for representation to work well, networks of children, young people, and family organisations must be built, developed and supported. Organisations must know who their representatives are, how they were chosen and how they are able to feed into the process. Networks must have well-developed communication and information systems which work both to inform VCS organisations about issues coming from the local area and also serve as an effective route for consultation and lobbying of the local authority, health trust or other decision makers by the VCS.

What makes good representation?

Representatives should reflect the breadth of the sector and be linked to established forums, networks, local VCS support organisations, alliances and umbrella organisations. They need to represent the views of the sector, not just the views of their own organisations, and they need to be bound by any collective decisions taken. There will also be times when organisations do not agree, and representatives will have to present several, differing points of view. Methods of ensuring accountability must be in place and should be reviewed and evaluated regularly.

Equally, local authorities should support good representational processes. When asking for the views of the VCS the local authority needs to build in enough time for representatives to gather the views of the wider sector. They also need to provide proper feedback that representatives can take back to the sector, which demonstrates how the views of the sector have been heard and taken on board.

Are there costs involved?

Yes, there are. There are costs that are directly related to attending meetings, such as travel and childcare expenses and backfill (money to cover time away from the day job). There are also costs involved in gathering views of, and feeding back to, the sector, such as administration, mailings, venue hire, etc.

So, who should pay?

Local authorities need to consult with the VCS and its constituents. A case can be made for their facilitating the process through direct support to networks, local infrastructure organisations or representatives' own organisations.

Finally...

Research shows that in areas where good representation is happening strong networks of the voluntary and community sector have been built and these networks involve a large number of organisations, including a mix of larger and smaller groups.

Southwark Children and Families

Alliance (SCFA) is the umbrella body for VCS organisations working with Southwark's children and families.

SCFA has five networks (disability, early years, young people, play and faith) that provide voluntary groups with forums to come together and discuss issues and concerns. There are nine representatives sitting in various partnerships around the borough, which enable the sector to take part in shaping local programmes and policies. An all-members meeting is held every two months to keep the sector well informed of what is happening in children's services. SCFA is funded by Southwark Council, with costs split between the Primary Care Trust, education and social services.

But what is it? (please turn over)