

Assembly Conference - The Way Forward

Wednesday 11 May 2011

Draft Summary Report

54 people attended the conference from a wide range of VCS groups and organisations.

35 evaluation sheets were returned. All of these were positive - attendees felt that the event was well organised, that the information packs were useful and informative, that people had the chance to express themselves regardless of their options, that the food was good the facilitation was excellent. Comments included: *'it felt everyone in the room had an equal voice'*; *'good opportunity ...to help reflect the positive work of the ASG and to plan for future priorities'*; *'extremely good...loved the passion in the room'*; *'all very productive'*; *'workshops were creative and informative'*; *'interesting debate'*. Someone felt it would have been useful for ASG members, forum reps / chairs and Assembly workers to identify themselves at the start so people could talk to them in the breaks. Unfortunately there was some noise from the café outside the room and the accessible parking / toilet facilities were reported as being satisfactory to poor (these issues will be fed back to the venue).

First session - key points

- In what areas do we work with public sector and where do we draw the red line
- VCS as an advocate for active citizens (issues with representation of active citizens NOT involved in VCS structures / groups)
- Too much focus on structure
- Service user voice - how to best represent this
- VCS reps are fighting red lines
- Concern about VCS being used a cheap alternative
- Collaboration within VCS - working together not against each other
- Not just here to represent voice also to stop poor policies being developed / implemented by statutory sector

Workshops - key priorities identified

1. Forums are key - evaluate their effectiveness, strengthen them, improve communication in and out of them
2. Evidence collation, research, case studies - through the forums do work to quantify the added value the VCS brings through case studies and output based evidence. Also collect evidence of the impact of cuts.
3. Better communication - in and out of forums / how forum members communicate out to their wider communities / ensure communication reaches grassroots. Also improve communication by the Assembly to the wider population of Bradford. Get better at communicating the role and purpose of the Assembly and forums to the VCS groups and the statutory sector.
4. Encourage cooperation, working together and pulling together for collective benefit of VCS, regardless of the size or the organisation / group. Better collaboration between VCS groups to influence commissioning and the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment
5. Big policy agendas - work out how the VCS can contribute to, provision of examples to show the effectiveness of the sector
6. Develop a response to NHS reform - take the positives but resist privatisation
7. The Assembly needs to voice the concerns of sections of the VCS so that individuals and services do not feel that they can be targeted / picked on and suffer repercussions - they must speak out for the sector so groups are not labelled as troublemakers.
8. Stronger structures that link what is taken to the council by Assembly reps as the voice of the communities they represent via the forums
9. Translating national policies into messages that make sense to local communities
10. Advise, persuade and educate the decision makers, policy makers, commissioners to enable the VCS (prioritise those making decisions now). Use persuasion not confrontation but be clear that we represent and reflect the range of VCS partners including lobbying and campaigning.
11. Recognition of the Assembly's influence eg around commissioning decisions and open and transparent decision making
12. Partnership relationships - crediting and acknowledging partners contributions

Other Points Raised

General

- Set priorities for one year and three years
- Have confidence that the VCS have the right to a voice / influence / input
- Set out values, statement of who we are and how we will work - our bottom line
- How do we strengthen the sector? - through the forums
- Competition vs collaboration - very contradictory pressures - should funding be devolved from the local authority and NHS to the VCS to decide how to spend it? Using consortia to strengthen VCS
- Issues with large VCS organisations working with smaller VCS groups

Representation

- The Assembly Steering Group needs to reflect views of forums - do we need more forum representation on the steering group (ASG to self - evaluate)?
- How do wider voices come through?
- The Assembly can't be everything to everyone - advocate for all groups but can't take single issues forward.
- They will be times when the Assembly does not have one consensual voice but will have many positions on an issue
- What are our responsibilities around representation of service users - getting concerns to places they wouldn't normally get to?

Working with Statutory Partners / Commissioning

- The role of the assembly is to find the ways to make the pathways open up between the VCS / forums and the policy makers and to fit together the information and issues from the forums with the policy makers' agendas
- The Assembly needs to work with other statutory partners not just the council. How do we do this? Eg - Health & Wellbeing Forum - relationship to PCT - needs to be proactive
- Relationship to state sector - be engaged but independent (no collusion), not an agent of the state. Be careful of confrontation - not the best way to work - working through negotiation and persuasion.
- Speaking out does not mean not working in partnership with the council and other partners - can still work with them.
- If you are commissioned by the Council how can we maintain the independence to campaign?
- Calm fears the VCS is not a high risk sector - we are a good investment, added value, quality services
- Avoid being the cheap option - rather the appropriate option, different
- Commissioning - not what you know, who you know
- Need transparent commissioning process

The Cuts and their Impact

- The Assembly needs to state publicly how disastrous the impact of the cuts will be and how bad the Big Society agenda is, as it is set out. The Assembly should disseminate information around this with clear examples. Also we must show that people on the frontline and at grassroots level are worried by and affected by the cuts. Eg Forums should produce a picture of the impact of cuts.
- Need to use the Compact to fight the cuts
- The council can use our oppositional statements as leverage with central government
- Impact of benefit changes
- Job losses in the sector - how the VCS is supporting its organisations to cope with these

Information and communication

- Increase understanding of the Compact amongst VCS groups
- Clearer message about Infrastructure Support Organisations and their role