

Sunderland Compact: Involvement and Consultation Code of Practice

Introduction

The organisations of the Sunderland Partnership recognise the important role that the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) has to play in involvement and consultation. Consequently, Sunderland Partnership organisations are committed to enabling VCS organisations to make an effective contribution to the development, implementation and monitoring of policy. This Code of Practice should be read in conjunction with the Sunderland Compact document.

Why involve and consult?

The organisations of the Sunderland Partnership recognise that VCS organisations have an important role in helping to deliver the Sunderland Strategy. VCS organisations bring distinctive value to society and fulfil a crucial role that is distinct from that of statutory or private sector organisations. They enable individuals to contribute to public life and the development of active communities by providing opportunities for voluntary action; act as pathfinders for the involvement of users in the design and delivery of services; and, act as advocates for those who otherwise would have no voice. Effective involvement and consultation is an essential part of ensuring that the relationship works and that the VCS is able to fulfil its strategic role.

The organisations of the Sunderland Partnership also recognise the importance of early and continued involvement of VCS organisations in policy design, going above and beyond the need to consult. This Code of Practice reinforces the principle that involvement and consultation with the Voluntary and Community Sector brings additional benefits to wider public involvement and consultation, and does not seek to replace this.

Additionally, the forthcoming Duty to Involve (from the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act) requires authorities to ‘take those steps they consider appropriate to involve representatives of local persons in the exercise of any of their functions, where they consider that it is appropriate to do so’¹, for example through the provision of information, consulting, providing the opportunity to influence or feedback on decisions, services and policies. The draft statutory guidance² on involvement of VCS suggests three ways in which authorities should think about involving the VCS as part of the new duty:

- 1 local VCS organisations might be affected by, or interested in, a particular authority function. As such, an authority might decide that it is appropriate to inform, consult and/or involve the group in some way;

¹ Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007

² www.communities.gov.uk

- 2 VCS organisations might have a role as advocates for local people (particularly marginal and/or otherwise vulnerable groups). Therefore an authority might decide to involve a VCS organisation in addition to individual citizens and groups;
- 3 VCS organisations might be able to provide relevant expertise and specialist knowledge that might help the authority in reaching out to marginalised and vulnerable groups.

Recognising that formal consultation, that is the opportunity to respond formally to draft policies and other documents, is one part of the involvement ladder, partners of the Sunderland Partnership will engage in consultation to ensure that policy development is informed by a wide range of experience and takes into account the impact of its proposals on different sectors of society. For VCS organisations, formal consultation presents an opportunity to bring their knowledge, experience and expertise to bear on policy on behalf of the people and causes they work for.

The VCS should be willing to offer their advice to members of the Sunderland Partnership based on objective experience and appropriate consultation with those they work with.

Effective involvement and consultation:

- enables others to contribute to the policy making process;
- symbolises the Compact signatories commitment to be open and accountable;
- leads to more realistic and robust policy that better reflects people's needs and wishes;
- helps to plan, prioritise and deliver better services;
- helps to create a working partnership and mutual understanding with those consulted;
- helps to identify problems quickly enabling matters to be put right before they escalate; and,
- provides a further means of assessing and evaluating the impact and effectiveness of policy.

Key Principles

- Involvement and consultation should start early, right from the policy design stage;
- The extent of involvement and consultation should be proportionate to the significance of the issue – to all parties concerned – and to the benefits to be gained from involvement;
- There should be clarity from the start of consultation about what areas are open to change and those which are not;
- Information should reach those organisations potentially affected by the policy under consultation. Compact signatories should work to reach communities affected by the policy under consideration or appraisal. In particular, they should endeavour to reach those likely to be excluded;
- Information provided should be clear and be made available in a variety of formats and by various methods of communication;

- Maximum participation should be encouraged through accessible and varied involvement and consultation methods;
- As a starting point Sunderland Community Network and the Consultation Team at Sunderland City Council can provide guidance on consultation and involvement activity, including acting as a sign post to organisations to engage with;
- All feedback should be analysed, communicated and promoted widely, particularly to those who contributed or expressed an interest in the consultation process. Feedback will be specific about anything that has been altered as a result of the consultation;
- The process for deciding what happens as a result of the consultation process should be made clear to all participants;
- There should be a joint commitment to ensuring transparency about the experiences of engaging in involvement or consultation processes and shared learning to improve future delivery.

Sunderland Partnership organisations commit to:

- Early engagement and involvement of the VCS in policy design and development where appropriate;
- Developing a coordinated approach to consultation and involvement across partner organisations to ensure maximum involvement and to avoid duplication;
- Working with the VCS to identify who should be consulted on specific issues;
- Working together to identify and promote existing and emerging involvement and consultation channels; and to develop new channels where appropriate ones do not already exist;
- Identifying, in partnership with the VCS, and ensuring appropriate and proportionate methods of consultation and communication;
- Having a named contact for each consultation who will also have responsibility for communicating progress with all relevant organisations or individuals;
- Producing clear and concise consultation documents;
- Making clear any potential impact on the VCS from the earliest possible point to;
- Giving a minimum period of 12 weeks for VCS organisations to respond to formal consultation (generally a minimum of 12 weeks, except in circumstances where reasons for variance can be demonstrated and communicated to the relevant parties);
- Providing the context of the consultation matter (eg national, regional, local agendas as appropriate to facilitate better understanding of the subject by consultees);
- Ensuring the needs and interest of all people, including minority and socially excluded groups, are included;
- Communicating effectively the findings of the consultation and the reasons for subsequent decisions;
- Evaluating and measuring the quality of organisations consultations to ensure best practice is used and shared.

Voluntary and Community Sector organisations commit to:

- Being proactive in responding to consultation
- Working together to ensure effective co-ordinated responses to consultation
- Consulting their members directly whenever possible
- Providing clear and objective information to consulting bodies and organisations
- Working with Sunderland Partnership organisations to identify and promote existing and emerging involvement and consultation channels; and to develop new channels where appropriate ones do not already exist.
- Ensuring opportunities are available to involve all people including minority and socially excluded groups and are reflected in the variety of delegates engaged in involvement and in responding to formal consultation
- Circulating the results of consultation to their wider membership
- Offer advice and guidance to Sunderland Partnership organisations on appropriate and proportionate methods of consultation and communication with the VCS

Further information on the Sunderland Compact is available at www.sunderlandcompact.org.uk