

Developing 'local compacts' between local government and the voluntary sector

Government has recently announced a 'national compact' with the voluntary and community sectors. But for many organisations, the crucial relationship is with local government. Is there general support for 'rolling out' the national compact to a local level? And if so, what can we learn from local policies and agreements already in existence? A joint research team from the University of Brighton and the University of Lincolnshire and Humberside has carried out a six-month feasibility study to investigate these questions. The study finds that:

f There is widespread interest in developing 'local compacts' within both local authorities and the voluntary and community sectors.

f Many local authorities already have policies and agreements with their local voluntary and community sectors which could provide the basis for a local compact.

f Local agreements and policies are less common between other public bodies and the voluntary and community sectors, but there is an interest in developing them.

f Existing experience of drawing up agreements and policies at local level provides a number of lessons for the development of compacts. The key lessons are:

- the development of a national framework is a valuable asset in the development of local policies and agreements but should not be used to constrain them;
- the most successful policies and agreements are emerging in areas where there is a history of dialogue between the voluntary and community sectors and the local authority;
- the successful development of a policy or agreement requires a well-supported voluntary/community sector infrastructure, which can reflect the views of different parts of the voluntary and community sectors, including smaller, unfunded organisations, and the black voluntary sector;
- the process of developing a policy or agreement is as important as the product;
- the success of a policy or agreement depends on an ongoing structure for dialogue and review if it is to work.

The policy context: why have a compact

The language of local governance is coming to be dominated by concepts of partnership. Since the election of the Labour government in 1997, a range of new initiatives - such as Best Value, New Start, Health Action Zones, Better Government for Older People and the New Deal for Communities - has emphasised the need for inter-agency partnerships as a basis for tackling important social and economic issues at a local level. The delivery of effective, efficient and equitable services in any area will increasingly depend on strong and appropriately defined relationships between different sets of local actors, as will the development of a healthy local democracy. Against this canvas, the nature of the relationships between local authorities, other locally focused public agencies, and the voluntary and community sectors is increasingly important.

You don't stand a chance of getting this money unless you can demonstrate that you are working in partnership with the health authority, the voluntary sector, the community itself.

Local authority policy officer

The significance of the changing relationship between government and the voluntary and community sectors has recently been recognised at national level in the announcement of a national 'compact' between them. At the launch of the national compact for England, Minister of State at the Home Office, Paul Boateng, made reference to the need to 'roll out' the national compact to local level. This process has already started in Scotland and Wales, where comprehensive local government reorganisation in 1996 forced a reassessment of relationships with the voluntary and community sectors, which was led by the intermediary bodies for the two sectors. Many in the voluntary and community sectors believe that it is essential to develop compact-style agreements at local level as it is at this level that most of the relationships between government and the voluntary or community sectors are played out.

For the black voluntary sector, the critical issue is local government. That's where the majority of our relationships lie.

Black agency representative

The current picture

In order to establish the potential for the development of local compacts, the researchers carried out a survey to establish, first, the extent to which agreements and policies governing relationships between government bodies and the voluntary/community sector already existed and, secondly, the level of support for establishing such agreements. They found that:

- Over half the local authorities which responded to the study had developed, or were developing, some sort of agreement with their local voluntary and community sectors and a further third were interested in doing so.
- Local agreements had been most systematically developed in Scotland and Wales – where all local authorities either had some kind of agreement or were developing one. This was the result of initiatives taken by intermediary bodies from both sectors at the time of the comprehensive local government reorganisations which took place there in 1996.
- Agreements or policies governing relations with the voluntary and community sectors were much less common amongst health authorities/boards and Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) or their Scottish counterparts, Local Enterprise Companies (LECs). Some preferred not to formalise existing informal understandings. However, there was evidence of growing interest amongst health authorities, with a third of those responding having some kind of policy or agreement (often as part of joint planning or commissioning) and another third expressing an interest in developing such an agreement or policy.
- External policies often acted as a catalyst. Local government reorganisation had been an important trigger to the development of local agreements and policies in England as well as Scotland and Wales. Central government policies to encourage partnership and consultation had also been influential – from joint planning in community care and regeneration policies to the more recent wave of policies around Health Action Zones, Education Action Zones, Best Value, Sure Start and so on.
- Many current policies and agreements are dominated by funding and service delivery issues, with other aspects of the relationship taking a back seat. This can create an imbalance of power, with local authorities as funders in the driving seat.

- There is some way to go before agreements and policies could be genuinely described as jointly owned. Local authorities were generally more positive about existing agreements and the consultations leading up to them than were their voluntary and community sector partners. However, respondents from both public and voluntary and community sectors agreed that the 'process' of developing an agreement or policy has been as important as the 'product' in many localities.

The lessons for the development of local compacts

What needs to be in place?

If a local compact is to have legitimacy and to be jointly owned, experience so far suggests that this depends on:

- The right person in the right place at the right time within the public authority. This requires:
 - effective champions within the authority to drive the agreement forward and 'sell' it within the authority.
- Commitment throughout the authority, from officers and members. This requires:
 - a programme of education and awareness-raising for both officers and members within authorities, and opportunities for face-to-face contact with voluntary and community organisations;
 - a recognition of the diversity of the voluntary and community sectors.
- A well-resourced voluntary and community sector infrastructure; this must be capable of reaching, and must be accountable to, smaller, more marginalised groups as well as established organisations.
- Good communications *within* the local authority (or other public body).
- Time to develop a mutual understanding.
- A history of dialogue with, and investment in, the voluntary and community sectors.

It wouldn't have happened were it not for what was already in place.

CVS chief officer

Getting beyond a paper exercise

If local compacts are to be worth the paper they're written on, experience so far suggests that this requires:

- An action plan to translate statements of principles into actions that can be monitored against a timetable.
- An ongoing forum to allow the public authority and the voluntary and community sectors to monitor the agreement, with sanctions where necessary.
- Incentives to encourage good practice and sanctions where intentions are not implemented.
- A process of periodic review which can take into account both what has been learnt from putting the agreement into practice and national policy changes.
- Responsibility clearly and centrally located within the local authority.

In good local government style, the initial drafts included words like 'where resources are available' and 'where reasonably possible' ... Now I think the final version is actually much tighter and much better, because it says how we are going to do things, rather than hedge things around with phrases such as 'as appropriate' and so forth.

Local authority voluntary sector officer

Tensions to be resolved

There are inevitable tensions within partnership, however great the commitment from both sides. Public bodies and voluntary and community organisations are guided by different imperatives and their distinctive needs and lines of accountability must be respected if partnership is to work. Handling these tensions will require:

- Recognition from the public authority of the right of voluntary and community organisations to have an independent voice – and to be critical.
- A willingness **on both sides** to compromise, and
- A clearer view than currently exists of the role of elected members.

It's not only about the more powerful understanding where the less powerful are coming from. It's also about understanding the real barriers that people have ... and a realisation that for some things, the powerlessness is on both sides and that we can form an alliance.

Voluntary sector co-ordinator

The future

Ultimately, it is not the proliferation of compacts that is important. It is clarity of roles and relationships, and greater understanding between different sectors and policies which reflect this, allowing each partner to operate effectively to meet the needs in their areas for services, for jobs, for political expression and quality of life.

The most successful policies and agreements have been part of an ongoing learning process, based on contacts between the sectors at different levels of decision-making and practice. They offer an opportunity for increased understanding on both sides. This research suggests that, if such policies and agreements are to be successful in the future, the concept of a local compact will need to embrace the following:

- A definition of partnership which goes beyond funding and includes the whole range of voluntary and community organisations, not just those funded by public bodies.
- The range of public bodies and departments within them.
- Regional government.

The development of national policy guidance or compacts provides an important context for the development of local compacts. Local compacts will need to reflect the key elements of these national frameworks. But this research suggests that local compacts will also need to reflect local conditions and to be built through the development of local relationships, and not simply follow a national 'formula'.

About this study

The study covered England, Scotland and Wales and was carried out between February and August 1998 by a research team from the Universities of Brighton

and of Lincolnshire and Humberside. Interviews with national intermediary bodies in the statutory and voluntary/community sectors were followed by postal surveys of local authorities, health authorities, TECs (in Scotland, health boards and Local Enterprise Companies), local intermediary bodies in the voluntary and community sectors and community health councils. Twelve case study areas were then selected for more detailed enquiry and interviews carried out with statutory and voluntary/community sector respondents. A consultative feedback workshop provided an opportunity to check and refine emerging findings. The same joint research team is now evaluating the development of local pilot compacts.

How to get further information

The full report, **Developing local compacts: Relationships between local public sector bodies and the voluntary and community sectors** by Gary Craig, Marilyn Taylor, Clare Szanto and Mick Wilkinson, is published for the Foundation by YPS.