

Guidelines for Representation of the Voluntary and Community Sector

Introduction

These guidelines have been drawn up by the Community and Voluntary Sector Network Co-ordinating Group (which represents the sector on the overarching local strategic partnership, the Southampton Partnership) in order to provide a sustainable and clear basis for representation of the sector in strategic and interagency partnerships.

The Community and Voluntary Sector Network has, since its inception, operated under the auspices of Southampton Voluntary Services and has aimed to build on established forums and networks within the city as the means to inform its representation by cascading information. This has been funded through the Community Empowerment Fund, which is due to end in March 2006.

The Network Co-ordinating Group is keen to ensure that appropriate mechanisms for future involvement are agreed by the sector and its partners. These guidelines take account of our sector's commitment to the principles contained in the Southampton Compact and its associated guidelines. They are intended to strengthen and clarify existing arrangements as well as provide a clear framework for future representation by defining the appropriate routes and remit upon which voluntary and community sector representation should be based. A number of simple principles underpin this as follows:

Underpinning Principles

1. The voluntary and community sector itself must determine how and by whom it should be represented in any strategic or multi-sector partnership and the scope of that representation
2. Representation should not be tokenistic and should therefore be proportionate to the size of our sector and other partners' membership if it is to make a reasonable and useful contribution. Sole representatives should be avoided where possible (as they can become very marginalised and isolated) but in small partnerships this may be appropriate. For all partnerships the use of deputies should usually be permitted.
3. Our representatives should be drawn from relevant 'constituencies', either of the whole sector or relevant sections of it reflecting communities of interest, identity or neighbourhood. Representatives should link through SVS to established forums, networks or other appropriate umbrella groups where they exist in the city.
4. Those networks, forums or constituencies should be open to and inclusive of all relevant voluntary and community groups with a particular interest in that area of work. They should also have agreed terms of reference or mechanisms for decision-making and accountability, based on democratic principles, which would enable a representative and other partners to be clear about their role and remit to reflect that constituency's interests.
5. Methods of selecting or electing representatives will vary according to circumstances and will be determined by the relevant constituency as appropriate to its existing operation and capacity.

6. Representatives should have the opportunity to draw views from and report back to their constituency's networks through agreed feed-in and feedback mechanisms which take account of the level of resourcing available to support these processes.
7. Representatives act, speak or are present on behalf of all the voluntary and community organisations involved in that network. Therefore, they should reflect a broad cross-section of views and be bound by any collective decisions taken, rather than representing their own organisation's perspective or interests.
8. When articulating an independent voice on behalf of their network, representatives should be acknowledged and respected and not have to fear that sanctions or repercussions for their organisation might follow as a result of speaking up for others.
9. Representatives should conduct themselves in a responsible manner with due regard to probity, accountability, normal conduct of meetings and standards of behaviour, including publicly declaring potential conflicts of interest and withdrawing from any such decision-making.

Role of Southampton Voluntary Services

SVS is the overall umbrella group for the community and voluntary sector locally and has liaison and representation within the voluntary sector and between sectors as two of its core roles. This is fulfilled both by directly convening and servicing specific interest groups, forums, networks and one-off meetings, as well as through linking to other established networks and providing regular information and mailings to the sector.

Where SVS represents the sector as a whole it aims to provide an independent voice for the sector, reflecting a broad overview of the wide-ranging interests and concerns expressed by voluntary and community groups as well as by offering those organisations individual and collective opportunities to make their views known directly.

Membership is open to all voluntary and community groups active in the city which support its broad charitable aims. Support and development is offered to all groups, whether members or not. Members elect the Executive Committee which oversees SVS' work and are regularly consulted on specific issues, whether on a one-off basis or through regular forum meetings. Satisfaction through SVS' services is surveyed regularly and feeds into the development of SVS' Forward Plan.

Requests for voluntary and community sector representation in formal partnerships should initially be made to SVS which will then liaise with relevant established networks or groups in the city to secure appropriate representation including, if necessary, convening a specific constituency meeting or consultation to do so. In doing so, SVS will take into account the good practice toolkit on representation published by RAISE (the south-east regional voluntary sector network) in June 2005.

SVS will maintain a register of who is acting as a voluntary sector representative on various partnerships and publicise this to other interested groups, along with the scope and remit for each role. Within its available resources, SVS will assist those representatives in their role by providing support and training as well as input and feedback opportunities through mailings and meetings where appropriate to specific constituencies and links to the wider voluntary and community sector.

Where there are substantive issues likely to impact on the whole of the community and voluntary sector this is likely to include convening a network of all established forums as a Voluntary Sector Reference Group as SVS has done previously. Such a group will be convened twice annually by SVS to review these arrangements and to discuss mechanisms for ongoing input and representation to the Southampton Partnership.

Role of individuals as voluntary and community sector representatives

This role description is for people involved in multi-sector partnerships. This may be as a representative of the whole voluntary and community sector, of a section of the sector (e.g. older people, residents of a certain area, sufferers of a particular medical condition) or as an individual with no brief to represent a wider constituency.

A: Represent the voluntary and community sector

- If the member is representing the whole voluntary and community sector or a segment of it:
 - Represent the interests and work on behalf of the whole community and voluntary sector or relevant segment, including disadvantaged groups and excluded communities. This includes articulating divergent views where they exist
 - Consult with the wider voluntary and community sector, or the relevant segment of the sector
 - Be bound by collective decision-making where the representative's constituency has agreed a collective position
- Report back to their constituency on a regular basis
- Keep Southampton Voluntary Services informed of key issues and current members of the partnership so that other agencies can access this information

Note: Further information and advice on representing the community and voluntary sector can be found in 'Representation – a RAISE Toolkit, June 2005, pp47-61

B: Participate in the partnership

- Attend meetings regularly and other events as required or arrange for an agreed deputy to do so
- Help to plan and co-ordinate the development and work of the partnership
- Participate in conferences, seminars and training – both local and occasionally regional or national events
- Develop a greater knowledge of the issues, plans and agencies which affect the work of the partnership
- Take long-term and strategic views into account
- Declare any conflicts of interest and act with probity and integrity

C: Support the partnership

- Represent the partnership locally and at regional and national events
- Support and work to the policies (including Equal Opportunities), procedures and priorities of the partnership, even when these do not coincide with those of the representative's own organisation
- Be bound by collective decision-making of the partnership
- Be prepared not to support the partnership's actions or to vote against a proposal which is clearly against the interests of the community and voluntary organisations you represent

Role of voluntary and community groups in supporting their representatives

Where voluntary and community groups are part of a forum, network or other agreed constituency which is responsible for selecting or electing its representative they should be willing to participate fully in those networks and undertake to keep their representative informed of key issues or views and respond promptly to requests for information or views.

They should be willing to back up their representative where she or he has articulated those views reasonably and responsibly on their collective behalf.

Organisations should recognise that sector representation required shared ownership and collective responsibility if it is to be effective, and that there is a mutual responsibility to other organisations within the network. They should acknowledge that their representative's capacity to undertake the role may be limited and should be willing to offer some support themselves rather than criticise others for not being able to do everything on their behalf.

These proposals were produced by Southampton's Community and Voluntary Sector Network Co-ordinating Group and unanimously agreed at its meeting of 20th September 2005. The proposals are recommended to the Community and Voluntary Sector Network conference of 1st October 2005.