

Executive summary

Skilling up for LSPs

Research on leadership skills for effective strategic representation

A report for the Improving Local Partnerships project at NAVCA



Linda Mitchell and Steve Skinner
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Introduction

Effective voluntary and community sector representation on local strategic partnerships (LSPs) is becoming increasingly important. As LSPs have become more established and more widespread over the last few years, there have been increased opportunities and the need for involvement from the sector in the local area agreement (LAA) framework. The Local Government White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, published in October 2006, outlines a strengthened role for LAAs in the future.

Executive boards of LSPs are complex environments where voluntary and community sector representatives face a variety of challenges and opportunities. Representatives are under increasing pressure to perform well and there are many conflicting demands being made of them. Yet nationally there is little support on offer and very few skills development opportunities for voluntary and community sector representatives.

In April/May 2007 NAVCA commissioned research to define the competencies needed for effective participation by voluntary and community sector representatives on the executive boards of local strategic partnerships. The Improving Local Partnerships (ILP) programme's initial pilots had already highlighted the need for strategic representatives to have strong leadership skills in negotiation, brokerage, assertiveness, conflict management, making an impact and having influence on the LAA process and structure.

This summary describes the main findings of the research and outlines recommendations and proposals for a national learning programme. The full research report can be downloaded from NAVCA's website www.navca.org.uk.

Aims and objectives of the research

- Identify a list of competencies that are needed to effectively undertake the strategic partnership/representation role on the executive boards of LSPs.
- Map the current provision of learning programmes that address these competencies and identify any gaps in provision.
- Develop proposals, options and models for the provision of a future programme to meet learning needs.

Methodology

The research methods used included a literature search; structured telephone interviews with 21 practitioners drawn from community empowerment networks (CENs) and local infrastructure organisations (LIOs), i.e. the people who actually undertake the strategic representation role on their LSP executive board; telephone interviews with a number of key stakeholders; an analysis of job descriptions and person specifications; and a short search for examples of existing training, learning and development opportunities to support representation.

Definition of the set of competencies was based on the core purpose, tasks, skills and abilities identified through the research, with reference to existing national occupational standards (NOS). Please see the full research report for more details on methodology.

Literature on skills and abilities for strategic representation

The brief literature search carried out as part of the research indicated there is a lack of literature on the specific *skills and abilities* needed in this

arena. Most existing material is knowledge based and addresses policy or organisational issues. It is focussed on understanding structure and purpose of representation and identifying good practice, rather than referring to behaviour or skill areas. The research could identify no published or web-based material about the specific set of skills and abilities needed to act as a VCS representative at *executive board* level in LSPs.

Desk research into the appropriate national occupational standards (NOS) also found that there is little description of competencies needed for effective strategic representation. New standards on representation, currently being developed by NAVCA and Communities and Local Government (DCLG), and a new assessment tool for third sector leaders being developed by the Centre for Third Sector Leadership, may assist with further identifying development needs and better supporting representatives in their roles.

In summary, the initial desk research unearthed a picture where, while there is a growing demand for high performance in strategic representational roles in the public services arena, there is little dedicated literature to describe what is needed, nor any national occupational framework that directly addresses these issues. This lack of discussion and critical review of the specific set of skills and abilities required highlights the need for this issue to be addressed.

The competencies

A key aim of the research was to produce a set of competencies that described the behaviours needed for effective performance.

1. Core purpose and key tasks

The research demonstrated that the core purpose

of VCS representatives on the executive boards of LSPs falls broadly into four functions:

- *Being a 'voice'* – taking issues of concern forward and feeding back
- *Influencing thinking and decisions* – challenging and supporting proposals
- *Involvement in the wider partnership* – collaborative partnership working
- *Education* – essentially developing a deeper understanding and knowledge among partner organisations of the value and contribution of the VCS.

The research also indicated that there is agreement on a definable list of tasks and an identifiable set of five tasks most crucial for *effective* representation.

- Feeding back information to voluntary and community groups
- Standing up for the sector whilst maintaining good relationships
- Building relationships within the partnership
- Reading papers and analysing complex documents
- Influencing decisions

2. Skills and abilities

The research found that 12 core skills and abilities can be identified that directly reflect the practice involved in strategic representation. The top three skills and abilities identified as the most crucial for *effective* strategic representation from this list of headings were partnership skills, assertiveness and problem solving.

The list of 12 generated and refined by the

research was directly used as the framework for the competencies.

3. The competencies

Sources used to inform this set of competencies consequently were:

- The definitions of *core purpose* and *key tasks*.
- The research data on the *skills and abilities*.
- A mapping of *job descriptions and personal specifications* from LIO Chief Officer posts, and community representatives.
- *National occupational standards*, either the exact wording where appropriate or an adapted version to suit the identified needs. These are given as examples and for reference purposes and were used in order to place this set of competencies within the wider NOS context.

The following table provides a specific set of competencies based on the research, and is presented alongside the core purpose and key tasks. In some cases the competencies draw on similar ones contained in national occupational standards; either the exact wording where appropriate or an adapted version to suit the identified needs. These are given as examples and for reference purposes in order to place the set of competencies within the wider NOS context.

Core purpose	Tasks	Competencies
Being a 'voice'	Building relationships within the partnership	<p>Partnership working</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeks to understand partner organisation's needs, resources and motivations (Management and Leadership NOS D1)
Influencing thinking and decisions	Developing a view	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keeps promises and delivers on commitments (ML D1) Develops an overview across sectors to achieve common goals
Wider partnership development	Standing up for the sector whilst maintaining good relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constructively challenges proposals and seeks better alternatives (M and L B12) Builds trust and credibility in relationships with partners and the VCS Develops understanding of the partnership's aims, structures and processes
Education about the sector development	Influencing discussions	<p>Representing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keeps up to date with VCS issues, drawing information and resources from a range of national and local sources (Skill framework for elected member IDEa) Builds understanding of the role, diversity and value of the VCS across the partnership
	Arguing your case	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports VCS to identify infrastructure development needs and interests
	Feeding back information to voluntary and community groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports communities to develop plans for collective action and capacity building (CDW NOS C3)
	Reading papers and analysing complex documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintains clarity on the scope and accountability of own role as representative Promotes the interests of stronger communities and the whole VCS
	Bridging differences in cultures between communities and organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensures systematic feedback to VCS networks and groups Maintains close contact and links with grass roots VCS groups and networks
		<p>Negotiation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops productive working relationships with partners Identifies desired outcomes in negotiating processes Uses planning and tactics effectively Achieves objectives and desired outcomes
		<p>Mediation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeks understanding of opposing positions Reduces tensions between parties

Tasks	Competencies
<p>Enabling and facilitating others to be involved in the process</p> <p>Promoting the LSP and being accountable for collective decisions</p> <p>Influencing the agenda</p> <p>Making decisions about funding and resources</p> <p>Reflecting on your ways of doing things</p> <p>Collecting information on needs</p> <p>Taking part in negotiations (contract or otherwise)</p> <p>Writing and presenting information and reports</p>	<p>Facilitates fairly and constructively between people with conflicting needs (Skill framework for elected member IDEa)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourages win-win solutions <p>Political skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognises and works with the power bases within the LSP Displays awareness of political structures and personal agendas Anticipates the impact of own views and actions on others Employs tact and diplomacy while maintaining integrity and honesty Maintains balance between challenging and co-operating to achieve goals Chooses right approach for the right moment <p>Communicating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presents information clearly, concisely, accurately and in ways that promote understanding (ML D1) Ensures own advice and views are supported by reasoned argument and appropriate evidence (Unit D4 Management NVQ Level 4) Ensures formal and informal presentations are informed and creative Relates effectively to people from diverse backgrounds and sectors Uses listening skills to develop effective relationships <p>Using values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensures diversity and equality of opportunity are addressed in policies and programmes Ensures social inclusion in the development of the LSP (CD NOS A3) Models behaviour that shows respect, assertiveness, openness and co-operation Promotes inclusive and empowering ways of working within communities (CD NOS B2) <p>Being strategic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops understanding of partnership's vision, aims and resources Balances long-term goals with short-term deliverables to achieve aims Promotes use of resources and joint working to achieve long-term objectives Displays understanding of the big picture and long term

Tasks	Competencies
Resolving conflict	<p>Assertiveness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presents self and own views confidently and directly in ways that maintain effective relationships • Displays calmness, courage and persistence in standing up for VCS interests • Proposes and challenges in ways that persuades and inspires others • Says no to unreasonable requests • Encourages assertiveness in others and as part of the partnership culture • Displays belief in own role and contributions <p>Self awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands impact of personal communication style on others (M and L D1) • Reviews own practice • Seeks opportunities for personal and professional development • Maintains openness and ability to change • Aware of when out of depth on issues • Displays honesty about not being informed on all issues <p>Problem solving</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies and works around blocks to achieve progress • Learns quickly in new situations • Uses creative approaches to generate new ideas and solutions • Adopts a positive attitude to change • Translates theory into practice
Engaging with officers, relationship building outside the meeting, sounding out opinions and views	<p>Accessing and using knowledge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manages and uses different forms of information and data • Scans and selects from large amounts of information • Analyses information to identify useful points and key findings • Applies knowledge and analysis to different situations and contexts • Uses opportunities appropriately to share own knowledge with others
Representing the LSP on other strategic partnerships and boards, chairing and attending related meetings	
Developing a particular piece of follow up work	
Bringing the strands together	
Coming up with other ways of doing the work	

Current provision

The research indicated there seems to be a range of training and learning available but it is limited in the extent to which it directly addresses the competencies for VCS strategic representation. Some of the self-awareness and personal development competencies, for example assertiveness or partnership working, may well be addressed by generic training providers. However this is not usually within the context of strategic representation of the VCS.

Much of the relevant training and support material uncovered in the research was aimed at community representatives, rather than strategic representation. With many community empowerment networks struggling to operate due to recent funding cuts, there is very little training or support for community representatives currently running.

Much of the existing training material on representation is based on acquiring the knowledge and understanding of structures and policy or the local political context within which representation takes place. However, the competencies identified in this research are concerned with personal and professional *skills and abilities*, rather than the acquisition of *knowledge* of particular issues or policies.

55% of the respondents said they had received absolutely no support, induction or learning opportunities at all that *directly* addressed the skills and abilities needed to undertake strategic representation. Where they had, the cross-sectoral nature of it was thought to be particularly of value. 60% of respondents identified other opportunities that had *indirectly* fed into their skills development. NAVCA workshops at conferences, informal support networks and other more formal university-based learning programmes were all mentioned.

The research uncovered some examples of good practice and innovative approaches that may be useful to draw on in the design of any future learning programme. Please see the full research report for further details of these.

Future models

Some diversity and flexibility will be required in order to support a wide variety of learning needs. However the research indicated a strong preference for locally held short courses, ideally regionally based, with strong interest in one-day or half-day meetings as a preferred model.

Mentoring or shadowing opportunities between the public sector and the voluntary sector would be a useful skills exchange. Cross-sectoral working generally seemed favourable. There was little enthusiasm for action learning or e-learning.

Recommendations

- That this set of competencies is further tested and consulted on within the sector. Whilst the findings are clear, the sample size was small, further refinements may need to be made and VCS strategic representatives need to 'own' the competencies.
- That NAVCA organises a new learning programme in close liaison with the Third Sector Leadership Centre and the Leadership Centre for Local Government. This linkage will ensure connection with leadership development, both within the VCS and within local government.
- The new learning programme is based on the set of competencies described under the 12 headings. In each region the VCS regional forums are invited to act as the vehicles to commission the delivery of aspects of the learning programme.

- In practice the organisations commissioned to deliver the learning may vary, depending on which combination of options will be most effective from the wide range described in the full research report.
- For many of the competencies there will be learning and training organisations available to provide learning that directly addresses the identified needs. A good example is assertiveness training which many effective trainers could adapt to the setting of LSP partnership working.
- However some of the competencies, for example political skills, using values, representing and partnership working at the skill level identified may require the development of new material within the specialist context of working in LSPs. In this case delivery should be commissioned with a specialist organisation at national level which then rolls out provision across each region.
- Multi-sector participation in the learning provision needs to be considered as a useful option that receives strong support from the research findings.
- The research report is forwarded to the Open College Network to support their development work in developing the new VCS management course. This will be a useful accredited complement to the ongoing learning programme.
- A short course using learning objectives based on the set of competencies is piloted in one region in autumn 2007. The aim of this is to develop and test out training materials that specifically address the competencies. This will ensure that material is developed that specifically addresses the partnership setting the competencies refer to.
- The results of this pilot would then inform the

regional commissioning process. Consequently this could begin in spring 2008.

Conclusions

The research project has produced a definable set of competencies based on credible research evidence, focussed on the specific demands of strategic representation and the setting of the voluntary and community sector. This proposed set now needs feedback more widely from the field.

In terms of their wider use the competencies could now also:

- be tested for wider applicability to the needs of community representatives and VCS officers involved in other partnership bodies within LSPs and in regeneration programmes.
- be tested for applicability to the needs of representatives on LSP executive boards from other sectors. It may well be that they address the majority of the skills and abilities, obviously with some adaptation where appropriate, for example particularly under the *Representing* heading.

There is much potential in the use of this competency set for the design of a new learning programme and to inform the field of effective representation in partnerships.

This research was carried out by two consultants:

Steve Skinner and Linda Joy Mitchell
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www.steveskinnerassociates.org.uk
www.lindajoymitchell.org.uk

NAVCA
The Tower
2 Furnival Square
Sheffield
S1 4QL

Tel 0114 278 6636
Fax 0114 278 7004
Textphone 0114 278 7025
Email navca@navca.org.uk
www.navca.org.uk

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