

Understanding how local authorities work with the voluntary and community sector



Compact Voice spend and engagement research 2013/14

May 2014

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Overview

In October 2013, Compact Voice developed a research project to examine how local authorities were spending on, and engaging with, their local voluntary and community sector. Similar information was sought in 2011 and 2012, so this research is intended to provide an update on key trends. This briefing provides a short overview of the responses we received. It does not make reference to specific areas, but is intended to provide an overview of how open and transparent local authorities are able to be with regard to sharing of data, and with information regarding their relationships with their local voluntary sector.

We conducted the research by sending questions to every local authority in England. Specifically, we emailed the chief executive and leader of the council of every local authority. The questions we asked are included as a short appendix to this briefing.

We undertook this research to gain an understanding of:

- How transparent local authorities were with their data regarding their spend on the local voluntary and community sector (VCS), particularly in light of the Department for Communities and Local Government investigating issuing statutory guidance about this topic¹;
- How local authorities were engaging in terms of consulting with the sector about policies being developed or changes to funding arrangements;
- Whether local authorities were cutting funding to the voluntary sector disproportionately – i.e., by more than their own settlement was being reduced by central government.

¹ Department for Communities and Local Government: Improving local government transparency consultation: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/improving-local-government-transparency>

1. Responses received

We received significantly fewer responses in 2013/14 than in 2012², when we asked the same questions.

The key difference was that in 2013, we asked people to voluntarily provide the information; whereas we had previously issued Freedom of Information (FOI) Act requests to every local authority. We moved to a different approach in 2013 after feedback that some local areas had found the issuing of FOI Requests to cause difficulties and was perceived as being combative.

Whereas in previous years the requests made under the FOI Act received enough responses to enable a full statistical analysis of the figures (available at www.compactvoice.org.uk/FOI2012), the number of completed responses in 2013 was significantly lower so a similar analysis could not be undertaken robustly. Rather, we have looked at trends emerging from local authorities' ability to respond to the requests.

2. Information received

In the first instance we received a wide range of emails acknowledging our requests. However, in many cases, the acknowledgements were not followed by specific answers to our questions.

A number of areas responded that they were pleased we hadn't issued them with FOI requests. Conversely, despite our email explicitly stating that the questions were not FOI requests, some councils responded informing us that they were going to treat the requests as FOI requests and forwarded the email to their FOI department. Despite treating our requests as being under the FOI Act, many councils then didn't respond within the 20 day timeframe for FOI requests. One response that had been treated as a request under the FOI Act was received six months after the questions were issued. Similarly, several councils which had treated the questions as FOI requests then cited legal reasons as to why they couldn't provide the information (for example, that it would take too long to collate). This clearly indicates that many local authorities aren't able to easily provide information about grants and contracts with the VCS, or how they engage with and hold consultations with the VCS.

Of the responses we did receive, many contained information that was unusable or contained vast amounts of data, despite this being the third consecutive year we had asked these questions. We received a number of responses that contained hyperlinks to PDF spreadsheets. These very often contained vast amounts of complex data with unclear headings and categories, which also usually covered the local authority's entire budget, for example, information on every contract a local authority has issued.

² Compact Voice: Freedom of Information Act reports and responses: www.compactvoice.org.uk/foi2012

We also received information about every consultation the area had run, rather than just information about consultation with the voluntary sector. For example, in order to determine the length of time an authority had consulted with the voluntary sector on a particular policy issue, we would have had to sift through hundreds of consultations the council had issued that year (often including things like planning). Unfortunately, we don't have the resources or capacity for this type of work - therefore the complexity of these datasets meant that we couldn't extract specific information on the VCS from them.

Many of the questions we asked simply required a single figure as an answer. For example, 'Please tell us the number of consultations (including average length of consultation period) issued about changes to funding arrangements with the voluntary and community sector (through grants and contracts) which took place from April 2012 to April 2013'. We received very few responses that answered the question we had asked directly. We received several responses that contained multiple figures, and often were far more detailed than we'd requested. In some cases this was helpful, but in most it was a hindrance as again, we don't have the capacity in the team to sort through lengthy spreadsheets looking for specific data on the VCS.

An example of an answer we received to the question about consultations was simply 'consultations were run by the council', which is reassuring certainly, but not specific enough to be useful.

That's not to say that was the case for every area. We commend those that took the time to respond and did so in a clear, open and accessible way. We received a small number of exemplary responses from areas who replied promptly, clearly, and were able to provide exactly what we had requested. Unfortunately, these were the minority.

Conclusions

Despite the Department of Communities and Local Government's [Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency](#), most authorities are still largely unable, or unwilling, to provide the information we requested.

The Government has consulted on making parts of the code statutory requirements for local authorities. Compact Voice wrote to DCLG in response to this consultation. In our letter, we stated that we were pleased to support the code. Compact Voice shares DCLG's belief that transparency is the foundation of local accountability, and is the key that gives people the tools and information they need to enable them to play a bigger role in society.

However, we also pointed out that we didn't feel that the draft code was clear on the extent of compulsion and consequence of not publishing information. We recommended that further clarity about how the government intends to monitor compliance with the code, and the intended process for responding to non-compliance, is necessary.

Publishing data around spending, and being open and transparent in relationships and engagement is a vital way for councils to communicate better with the communities they are serving. Furthermore, reliable and timely data can help drive better public services and increase confidence and trust that citizens have for their local authority.

Compact Voice believes that government should lead by example and assist local authorities with any adjustments that need to be made to encourage open data sharing, transparency and accountability. This should include:

- a. A requirement to specify the contracts that are awarded to VCS bodies and to include the Charity Number of successful charities on the published accounts.
- b. Accessible format of data to enable use of data for comparative analysis, such as clearly labelled excel spreadsheets.

What we have learnt and next steps

Three consecutive years of undertaking this research has allowed Compact Voice to gather useful knowledge and insights about how councils record their data on spend and engagement with the voluntary sector. This has been useful for our work more widely on encouraging open government and transparency across every level of government – locally and nationally.

We have learnt that issuing Freedom of Information Act requests led to a greater quantity of useful data being provided, but also that taking such an approach could be damaging to relationships - and much of the feedback we received about the process was negative. Asking councils to voluntarily provide the information we wanted received much more positive feedback, but provided us with only a handful of useful responses.

Acknowledgements

Warmest thanks must go to the areas that responded promptly, and helped us with our queries. We would like to thank every local authority who did manage to get back to us with useful information.

Appendix: List of questions asked

Request 1 – Engagement with the VCS

Please send me the following information by email:

- a. The number of consultations (including average length of consultation period) issued concerning changes to local policies which took place from April 2012 to April 2013.
- b. The number of consultations (including average length of consultation period) issued about changes to funding arrangements with the voluntary and community sector (through grants and contracts) which took place from April 2012 to April 2013.
- c. The number of changes to funding arrangements with the voluntary and community sector (through grants and contracts) issued from April 2012 to April 2013 where less than three months' notice was given directly to the affected organisation about the specific changes affecting them.
- d. The number of changes to funding arrangements issued from April 2012 to April 2013 where three months or more notice was given directly to the affected organisation about the specific changes affecting them
- e. The total number of changes to funding arrangements with the voluntary and community sector (through grants and contracts) from April 2012 to April 2013.
- f. The number of impact assessments issued prior to policy or funding decisions being made and/or implemented from April 2012 to April 2013.
- g. Whether your local authority is currently a signatory to a local Compact, and if so, which one.

Request 2 – Grants and contract spend in 2012-13

Please send me the following information by email:

Grants issued to the voluntary and community sector in 2012-13

- a. The total amount of expenditure issued to voluntary and community sector organisations through all your local authority grants programmes for the year 2012-13.
- b. The total number of grants issued to voluntary and community sector organisations during the year 2012-13.
- c. Your total grant budget for the year 2012-13, including all local authority grant fund programmes.

Contracts issued to the voluntary and community sector in 2012-13

- d. The total amount of expenditure through direct contracts (defined as an agreement made directly with a voluntary sector organisation or group of organisations to deliver services on behalf of the council) to voluntary and community sector organisations for the year 2012-13.

- e. The total number of direct contracts issued to voluntary and community sector organisations during the year 2012-13.
- f. Your total contract budget for the year 2012-13, including all local authority contract programmes.

Budget allocation

- g. Your total budget allocation for the year 2012-13, including local revenue, business rates and grant allocation provided by central government.

Request 3 – Expected grants and contract spend in 2013-14

Please send me the following information by email:

Grants issued to the voluntary and community sector in 2013-14

- a. The total amount of your budget allocation anticipated to be issued to voluntary and community sector organisations through all your local authority grants programmes for the year 2013-14.
- b. The total anticipated number of grants issued to voluntary and community sector organisations during the year 2013-14.
- c. Your total grant budget for the year 2013-14, including all local authority grant fund programmes.

Contracts issued to the voluntary and community sector in 2013-14

- d. The total amount of your budget currently allocated to direct contracts (defined as an agreement made directly with a voluntary sector organisation or group of organisations to deliver services on behalf of the council) to voluntary and community sector organisations for the year 2013-14.
- e. The total anticipated number of direct contracts issued to voluntary and community sector organisations during the year 2013-14.
- f. Your total contract budget for the year 2013-14, including all your local authority contract programmes.

Budget allocation

- g. Your total anticipated budget allocation for the year 2013-14, including local revenue, business rates and grant allocation provided by central government.