

THIRD SECTOR ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

1. Context

Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) recognises that the Third Sector is an important element of a strong society. The Third Sector has a clear role in providing services as well as helping to shape policy and contributing to the development of stronger communities.

“We want to be a County that supports individuals and communities to develop their own solutions to achieving their goals, proactively helps in the delivery of community services (for example through volunteering and co-production...”¹

This strategy supports the County Council’s vision:

‘Proud to make Northamptonshire a great place to live and work’.

NCC recognised as a community leader, responsible for ensuring more vibrant, safer and stronger communities as well as securing effective outcomes that lead to an improvement in people’s quality of life. NCC recognises that it cannot fulfil this role without support from a thriving local Third Sector.

NCC recognises the role of the Third Sector in representing the voices of different groups and in campaigning to achieve change for individuals and communities. This role includes encouraging and supporting local people and service users to get involved in decision making. This makes it relevant to achieving NCC’s priorities.

The benefits of effective engagement with the Third Sector include:

1. Improved service delivery;
2. Safer, stronger communities,
3. Increased social capital and community cohesion; and
4. Increased opportunities for people to be involved in decision-making.

2. Scope of this strategy

It is important that NCC provides clarity about the scope of Third Sector engagement activity. This will enable the Third Sector to understand what they can expect and how they will be involved. NCC makes a clear distinction between operational and strategic engagement with the Third Sector. This strategy is concerned with how NCC will engage with the Third Sector at a strategic level.

¹ Northamptonshire County Council Plan 2010 – 2014 ‘Helping you to help yourself’

The engagement with Third Sector organisations in their capacity as service providers is defined within other strategies such as the Third Sector Commissioning Strategy and Procurement guidelines.

3. Definition of the Third Sector

The Third Sector is the term used to describe the range of organisations which are neither state nor the private sector.

Although the term 'Third Sector' is widely used it lacks precision when trying to determine criteria to confirm the status of individual organisations.

The Government defines the Third Sector as non-governmental organisations that are value driven and which principally reinvest their surpluses to further social, environmental or cultural objectives. It includes voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutual. They also include housing associations in this definition.

The key criteria are that Third Sector organisations are:

- independent of government
- 'value-driven' – that is, they pursue social, environmental or cultural objectives rather than primarily aiming to make a profit
- Principally reinvest any surpluses in the pursuit of their objectives.

For the purposes of this strategy, NCC has adopted the above definition.

4. Aim of the strategy

Our objective is for NCC and the Third Sector to have an effective and ongoing relationship that adds value and helps achieve our common objectives by:

- Developing a clear approach to engaging with the Third Sector that is understood across NCC and the Third Sector;
- Improving how we work with the Sector;
- Enabling the sector to be an effective local partner in place shaping; and
- Moving to a more strategic partnership with the Sector.

We will deliver this strategy by:

- Building on NCC and the Third Sector's current engagement activities;
- Implementing the strategy in partnership with the Third Sector; and
- Where possible, developing synergies with other NCC engagement Strategies.

5. Where we are we now

NCC has had a system of Thematic Partnerships since 2003. The purpose of this system was to provide a framework for NCC to work in partnership with the Third Sector in support of its priorities and to inform the planning and delivery of NCC's investment in the Third Sector

A review of the current arrangements for engagement with the Third Sector concluded that Thematic Partnerships arrangements achieved a great deal in fostering effective partnership working between NCC and the Third Sector. The review found good examples of working together, communication and information-sharing. It also highlighted a number of areas for improvement. In particular:

- Some of the thematic partnership arrangements link membership with the receipt of NCC Strategic Funding, thereby excluding Third Sector organisations that are not in receipt of NCC Strategic Funding
- There is significant amount of duplication of time and effort arising from attending meetings of Thematic Partnerships on the part of both the Third Sector and NCC, in addition to attending wider partnership meetings on the same theme that are more inclusive of all relevant stakeholders (such as District and Borough Councils and NHS Northamptonshire);
- the level of support required to maintain the current arrangements is not proportionate to its benefit and is therefore no longer sustainable; and
- It does not provide the Third Sector with the required level of engagement with NCC at a strategic level.

In light of the above, it is proposed that NCC dissolves the current Thematic Partnership arrangements as part of NCC's formal engagement mechanisms with the Third Sector. However, it is recognised that some of these partnerships may continue to operate, albeit outside of NCC's formal structures.

Additionally, NCC officers occasionally attend meetings of Northamptonshire Infrastructure Forum (NIC) and also meet with Local Infrastructure Organisations Northamptonshire (LION) representatives. However, there is no mechanism by which NCC can engage with the Third Sector (or its representatives) as a whole.

6. When to engage with the Third Sector

With regard to strategic engagement, it is envisaged that this will take place in the following ways:

- Representation on Partnership Boards;
- Identification of service priorities and outcomes as part of commissioning cycle;
- Consultation on strategies relevant to community involvement;
- Third Sector specific engagement – NCC support, Renewal of Compact etc.

7. Improving how we work with the Third Sector

We already have meaningful relationships with the Sector in many areas of our work. However this approach is not consistently applied across NCC.

If we are to develop long term meaningful engagement with the sector, we must be more strategic and coherent in our approach – without losing the value of reaching out to a diverse network or organisations.

In order to improve our relationship with the Third Sector; we propose to:

- Recognise and support the role that the Third Sector can play in contributing to our priorities
- Support the Third Sector in developing its representation structures that can provide a strategic voice for the Sector;
- Take into account the impact of our policies on the Third Sector and the potential role the sector has to playing supporting better outcomes from those policies.
- Ensure that our engagement with the sector is timely and meaningful;
- Create an internal Corporate Third Sector Group which will provide strategic leadership by bringing together those with responsibility for key areas of Third Sector engagement from across NCC.

7.1 Recognising the role the Third Sector can play

NCC recognises that the Third Sector can help us to achieve our priorities in a number of ways including:

- Informing our policy, providing independent or expert advice, and advocating needs
- Delivering effective services
- Mobilising individuals and communities in support of our priorities

7.2 Supporting the Third Sector in developing its representation structures that can provide a strategic voice

NCC recognises that the one of the challenges for engaging with the Third Sector is its diversity. The Sector includes registered charities, voluntary and community based organisations, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals with varying degrees of capacity and resources to be involved in meetings. . NCC's engagement mechanisms will be, in line with its Public participation Strategy and its equality duties, reflective of all the equality strands. A skilled and inclusive Third Sector infrastructure is essential for coherent and effective engagement between the NCC and the Third Sector

NCC is currently resourcing this by tendering for the provision of a Countywide Infrastructure service. The key challenge relates to how the Third Sector organises itself in a way that is inclusive of the diversity of the Sector. A key gap in the engagement structure is for a body to which all Third Sector organisations could belong.

There is a further development that is relevant to this point: the proposed Countywide Forum which is currently the subject of consultation. NCC welcomes this development, as if it is implemented, it will provide an inclusive Third Sector structure with which NCC can engage.

7.3 Taking into account the impact of our policies on the Third Sector

We will build the capacity of our staff to work with the Third Sector. In particular, training will be developed to ensure they understand how to take into account the impact of specific policies or strategies on the Third Sector and are able to identify where the Third Sector has a potential role to play in supporting better outcomes. The effectiveness of the training will be continually assessed and feedback from the Third Sector will be sought to evaluate it.

7.4 Timely and meaningful engagement

By incorporating Third Sector engagement into the commissioning cycle, we can ensure that engagement with the Third Sector is embedded in our consultation processes. By doing this we can ensure that this engagement is properly planned and takes into account the resources available to undertake engagement

7.5 Create an internal Corporate Third Sector Group

NCC will establish a Corporate Third Sector Group that provides this leadership, with membership at Head of Service level from relevant directorates – building on the approach used to develop this framework. This group will be responsible for ensuring that all investment in the Third Sector takes place within a corporate framework. A standardised, clear and consistent approach and one message to the Third Sector will create efficiencies within the Council and improve communications between NCC and the Third Sector.

8. Local Partnerships in Place-Shaping

The Sector has a role in to play alongside other partners transforming the County, improving the quality of life and tackling difficult, cross-cutting issues. Northamptonshire Partnership is the main vehicle for this. Further opportunities for NCC to engage with the Third Sector have developed through the representation of the Third Sector on the following:

- The Public Service Board (1 member)
- The Communities Board (2 members)
- The Health and Wellbeing Board (2 members)
- The Regeneration and Growth Board 1 member)
- The Economic Development Board (2 members)
- The Children and Young People’s Partnership (2 members)

- Northamptonshire Enterprise Limited (1 member)

A key challenge will be for the Third Sector's representation on these structures to be effectively co-ordinated to enable appropriate accountability to the Sector. The Countywide Infrastructure Organisation should play a lead role in supporting this process.

8.1 Monitoring and Evaluation

We will judge this strategy to be successful if it:

- Enhances the relationship between the Third Sector and NCC
- Improves service delivery and achieves best value;
- Develops communities,
- Increases social capital and community cohesion; and
- Increases opportunities for people to be involved in decision-making.

Each year we will publish an Action Plan setting out what we will do and include specific and measurable objectives.

Akin Adepoju
June 2010

A copy of this Strategy is available on NCC's website at
www.northamptonshire.gov.uk

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