

Forming the big picture

Adding to the Audit Commission's Area Profiling project, locally-focused profiles of voluntary and community organisations have the potential to provide truly beneficial information to the sector and statutory funders alike. Neil Cleeveley explains the benefits of this ambitious new project, and how local organisations can take part

The voluntary and community sector is being asked to embark upon an ambitious project to profile local group activity, which could lead to the most accurate locality-based perspective of the sector's activities that has yet been produced. We want local voluntary groups to participate in this exercise which requires both time and effort but, we believe, will ultimately produce enormous benefits.

Locally-focused profiles of voluntary sector activity will assist voluntary groups and local public bodies to develop a more coherent approach to service development and delivery, making better use of all the skills held within our sector. At present, groups are often unsure about which other voluntary and community organisations provide similar or complementary services – profiling will show who these are, their range of services and their geographic coverage.

But comprehensive local profiles of the sector could have many other benefits for voluntary and community groups. Despite the government's commitment to support the sector and for greater public service provision through voluntary and community groups, local statutory bodies – particularly local authorities – often fail to put in place the policies and resources required to deliver those commitments. The profiles should make clear in which geographic and policy areas statutory bodies are not providing sufficient support for the sector.

We believe that statutory bodies often understate the real contribution of the voluntary and community sector. Profiling should provide a realistic assessment of that contribution and the added value produced by the sector in each area. This should both assist organisations to protect existing funding sources when these are threatened, and identify where new funding opportunities exist. As a result of this exercise, many groups will be able to illustrate just how much they contribute to the local quality of life and local service delivery, and use this to make the case for greater development support and resources.

For the statutory sector, the benefits of supporting this process are equally clear-cut. The government's move towards Local Area Agreements and policy implementation through partnerships and voluntary sector organisations creates demands on statutory bodies. Yet the statutory sector struggles to fully comprehend the strength of local voluntary organisations, their capacity and activities. At present, bodies such as Safer and Stronger Communities' partnerships are assessed on outcomes that are dependent on the voluntary sector. Yet these outcomes are notoriously difficult to measure to everyone's satisfaction.

The new profiling exercise will help provide the baseline

information for the assessments that are increasingly required by statutory organisations. That is why we advise local groups to work with the statutory sector to build local profiles and to seek the necessary financial resources from local authorities and other public bodies to enable the exercise to take place. For local profiles to be produced it will be necessary for groups to work together. Advice on how to carry out the profiling is included in the guide we are publishing*.

The profiling exercise is led by the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action – NAVCA – (the new name for the National Association of Councils for Voluntary Service – NACVS – from 14 June 2006) and supported by a range of organisations: the Audit Commission, Capacity Builders, the Charities Aid Foundation, the Community Development Foundation, GuideStar UK, the Home Office, the Improvement and Development Agency, the Local Government Association, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and Wales Council for Voluntary Action.

VCS profiling also contributes to a broader Audit Commission project – Area Profiles – that provides a rich and comprehensive view of the quality of life of each English area and the quality of local public services. An understanding of the local service provision by the voluntary and community sector was always seen as central to this project and our profiling exercise will enable this to be realised. Bringing the work to this point has involved two years of piloting in several local areas, supported by local councils for voluntary service and our supporting national organisations.

While Area Profiles provide comprehensive pictures of each locality, they are only able to show part of the total picture without a clear view of the local voluntary sector. We hope that this project will not only provide an even fuller view of localities, but also demonstrate very clearly to the statutory sector that voluntary and community groups play a central role in contributing to the well-being of local areas.

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* *Getting to know your local voluntary and community sector – A Guide to Area Profiles* will be available from 14th June on the NAVCA website, www.navca.org.uk, and on the Audit Commission's Area Profiles website, www.audit-commission.gov.uk/areaprofiles. While Area Profiles are, at present, restricted to England, the VCS profiling can be applied in any part of Britain.