

Working with the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise Sector

A briefing for Integrated Care System Leaders

At our recent conference on working with Integrated Care Systems (ICSs), which brought together over 310 people from across National Voices' membership and beyond we asked participants for their advice for ICS leaders around building effective working relationships with the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector.

There were four key pieces of advice:

- 1) Partner with us, we can help you
- 2) Put people and communities first
- 3) Value us, and our ways of working
- 4) Communicate clearly, and openly

Partner with us, we can help

The VCSE sector already makes a huge contribution to people's health and wellbeing in communities up and down the country. We have three things to offer:

- **Approaches that work:** We offer services and support - from helplines, to peer support groups, to intensive interventions – that have been developed with people with lived experience, and which work. Some of these services are provided by local organisations, and some by national partners. Some will incur a cost, others are provided free of charge. Wherever you are, we can contribute to the health and wellbeing of people and communities in your area
- **Expertise and insight:** VCSE organisations have a wealth of insight and expertise around the experiences of people living with long term conditions and ill health and excellent understanding of the strengths and assets of the communities in which they work. We know what works for people and what matters to them.
- **Links with community:** We can help you build links directly with people and communities and are well-networked in local areas and nationally. We can help you tap into what's already out there, so you don't have to reinvent the wheel.

To contribute effectively we need to be equal partners in building health in our communities. We need:

- **A seat around the table:** VCSE leaders need to have a seat around your leadership table, backed by a properly funded structures to support collaboration – including a local VCSE Alliance. We need to be in the room as you work to develop new pathways, or change local structures, on an equal basis to other key partners.

- **A commitment to fair funding:** Our delivery is efficient, and effective, but it isn't free. There needs to be a commitment to sustainably resourcing our contributions to building healthier communities – whether we are working as service providers, convenors and capacity builders, or strategic leaders.

Put people and communities first

We want to help you focus your work on making change for people and communities, so that everything you do is in line with their priorities. The National Voices' ["I statements"](#) can provide a guide to how to set priorities and outcomes that matter to people.

It's vital that you commit to a principle of "Nothing about us without us". It is time to go beyond traditional "patient and public involvement" approaches, to see people with lived experience as key partners in designing and delivering better approaches. ICSs should appoint **lived experience leaders** at all levels and involve all aspects of operation.

Tackling **health inequity** must be a guiding principle. VCSE organisations can help you identify and reach those whose voices might otherwise be overlooked.

Making this happen will require:

- **Investment** to remunerate people with lived experience for their time and to create the right structures and support to enable meaningful engagement
- **Commitment** to a **culture** of openness and learning.

The VCSE sector has long experience of supporting coproduction. We can provide advice and guidance around making this happen.

Value us and our ways of working

The VCSE sector works differently to the NHS and to local authorities. Our independence and our distinct ways of working are our strengths. It will be important that these are respected, and valued as we seek to work together.

To make this happens you should:

- **Take time to understand the sector:** The VCSE sector is complex – not all charities share the same ways of working or have the same capacities and strengths. In most areas there will not be one charity that can speak for or represent all perspectives. Make sure you look for expertise wherever it may be found. Our footprints might not match yours – sometimes the help you need will be available in a very small community organisation, sometimes from a national charity.
- **Build on what's strong:** We want to help, but capacity is stretched, so wherever possible meet us where we already are, and join the collaborations that already exist

- **Create funding and commissioning processes that support our unique ways of working:** These processes should enable and encourage collaboration; person-centred and flexible service models; approaches which value a 'human touch'; and community-led approaches
- **Respect our time and expertise** by ensuring that we are paid on the same basis as others around the table

Communicate clearly and openly

The transition to ICSs is a time of uncertainty for all of us, but we all want to develop strong and positive relationships so that we can deliver the best for our communities. Clear and open communication will be vital. We need to know what is going on, how decisions will be made, and what is yet to be decided.

Effective communication will require:

- A commitment to **accessible communications** at all levels – including plain English writing, accessible websites and alternative formats
- **Forums** for people and communities to engage with you, with feedback loops to explain how feedback has been taken on board
- Time and space to develop **trusting relationships** at all levels

Our sector colleagues look forward to working with you. We hope these tips will help!

National Voices would like to thank the University of Birmingham, the Policy Innovation and Research Unit, and NHS England, for their generous support in organising and resourcing our conference on ICSs.

For more detailed guidance on VCSE partnerships and ICSs, please see:

[Integrated care system implementation guidance on partnerships with the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector](#)

During ICS establishment and implementation, NHS England has supported the development of system VCSE alliances or similar groups to work in partnership with ICSs. If you would like more information on these partnerships in your area, please contact: england.voluntarypartnerships@nhs.net