

August 2010



Building better communities through stronger partnerships

Regional Event series report

Introduction

Since its launch in 1998, the Compact has been at the heart of delivering stronger partnerships and building better communities. The principles it contains have not only led to better understanding, more transparency, and mutual respect, but in many areas have directly led to better services, better engagement, and closer links between government and the voluntary and community sector.

Both the National Compact - refreshed in 2009 - and local Compacts contain principles to ensure that voices are heard, views are considered, and issues which matter most to communities are taken into account when decisions are being made. The events gave Compact Voice the chance to learn about some of these issues.

In embarking on its regional events programme, Compact Voice travelled across England to not only gain insight into how the Compact is working locally, but also to enable those who attended the events to share both good and bad practice, recognise the challenges and opportunities the Compact can provide, to network with key sector representatives engaged with the Compact, and to return with a deeper understanding of what Compact working can mean in practice.

The events were well received by those who attended, and Compact Voice hopes that the attendees enjoyed meeting each other as much as we enjoyed meeting them. The events also gave local groups and public bodies the opportunity to meet their Regional Leader - key figures in the region who champion local Compact issues on behalf of Compact Voice.

The understanding these events has given Compact Voice about local issues

will enable us to provide our members and networks with more effective support, and to better represent the wider voluntary and community sector to government.

West Midlands - 19th May

BVSC, Birmingham
Chaired by Saffi Price

London - 25th May

Resource Centre, Holloway
Chaired by Chris Frost

Yorkshire and Humber - 2nd June

Carriageworks Theatre, Leeds
Chaired by Tom Elkins on behalf of Soo Nevison

North West - 15th June

GMCVO, Manchester
Chaired by Cath Cook

East Midlands - 22nd June

Voluntary Action Leicestershire, Leicester
Chaired by Shamsher Chohan

South East - 6th July

The Centre, Slough
Chaired by Ramesh Kukar

North East - 13th July

Centre for Life, Newcastle
Chaired by Gillian McDonough

East - 20th July

Homerton Conference Centre, Cambridge
Chaired by Tom Elkins on behalf of Dennis Mawson

South West - 27th July

Albermarle Centre, Taunton
Chaired by Dugald McNaughtan on behalf of Trevor Hazelgrove

“The Compact way of working should be the norm ... it gets things done, breaks down the barriers between all sectors, achieves better outcomes and creates a level playing field”

What should the Refreshed Compact mean locally?

"Lets get the Compact off the shelf and refresh and renew its significance in our local area."



Many local areas were in the process of, or had not yet started to refresh their local Compact.

Most of the attendees were still using Compacts which had been developed prior to the Refresh, but which were still proving to be an effective mechanism to deliver good partnerships.

However, many attendees stated that they believed the Refresh was a good opportunity to revisit their existing Compact, to ensure that it reflected changes in the policy landscape, and continued to meet local need.

The message from Compact Voice and many of the attendees was that the refresh of the National Compact did not mean that existing local Compacts were no longer useful, or that prior work should be discarded when aligning them to the new national Compact. Indeed, the principles of the national Compact remain the same in all its iterations.

It was felt that the refresh process could provide an opportunity in some areas to generally raise the profile of the Compact, particularly where partnership working is not as successful as all parties would have hoped.

Key Messages:

- The Refresh does not mean your local Compact is no longer valid
- Compact partners should be encouraged to update their Compact to reflect local priorities and changes to the policy landscape rather than starting from scratch with something new
- Where partnership working has not been successful, updating a local Compact can provide a new opportunity to promote good partnership working

What actions are needed to embed the Refresh in your local Compact?

A range of speakers provided helpful tips and advice for updating local Compacts - their presentations are available to download on Compact Voice's website at www.compactvoice.org.uk/regionalevents.



A common message from attendees was that the Compact needed high-level support in order to be successfully embedded into working practices. In most areas, adequate resourcing for the Compact - whether voluntary or paid - was also seen as essential.

Some felt that refreshing a local Compact can prove to be a challenging proposition, particularly when local groups might have only recently developed one, or the existing Compact is felt to be working well.

However, it was felt by many that a local Compact should be adaptable to the changing policy environment.

Also, refreshing Compacts can enable engagement with groups who might not have been involved with Compact working, and encourage new views when developing or updating Compacts; promoting the process widely was seen as essential.

Key Messages:

- Amending an existing Compact can be challenging
- Advice and support from other people who have refreshed or updated their Compact can provide invaluable expertise
- Promotion is important to reach groups who otherwise might not have been aware of their local Compact
- Building on existing Compact good practice and principles is key
- Shared recognition of the value of updating Compacts will give the process legitimacy for both partners



"Remember that we are partners to a Compact; visit it, refresh it, remember to work with it."

What external support is needed to embed the Refresh into local Compacts?



"We are in it together!"

Discussions on external support changed significantly over the course of the events. Earlier meetings highlighted resources being key to support better Compact working.

However, as government launched new policies and announced budget reductions at both national and local level, the emphasis rapidly changed from seeking additional funds to protecting existing resources.

Announcements of Regional Government offices closing meant that their role in contributing to Compact working was diminished, changing how some of the discussion topics were approached.

In this environment, key issues emerged about the relationship between the sectors, with many areas recognising that issues were affecting both. Mutual understanding, consultation and engagement were seen as key to working together through difficult times. External support changed from working together to refresh local Compacts to ensuring that the Compact was used as cuts were made.

Attendees discussed the contribution Compact Voice makes, with many asking for increased promotion of both good and bad practice across the country, enabling others to learn from what has worked well, and what hasn't.

Key Messages:

- Changes in the funding and policy landscape can affect all Compact partners - open discussions can help both sides
- Clear demonstration of the value of local groups can help local authorities understand their importance within the community
- Compact Voice can promote and share good and bad practice to enable others to benefit, through briefings, attending local events, and other mechanisms.

What achievements are there from working together in your local area?



Throughout the Regional Events series, three things became very clear; the first was that some excellent initiatives were being delivered through the Compact, which improved lives of individuals and communities. Secondly, what some people saw as commonplace and obvious, others considered groundbreaking and innovative. Finally, it was agreed by many that the voluntary and community sector needed to be better at promoting the contribution it makes to the community.

A key achievement for many - although a key challenge for some - has been better engagement with local commissioning processes. Where there were strong relationships with Commissioners, it was widely agreed that the community benefited. However, not all areas enjoyed such good working relationships.

During the events, Compact Voice was made aware of good practice which had enabled local Compact partners to work together and strategically deliver spending cuts in their area. This recognised that the best way to manage them was in partnership. More information on this example can be found on Compact Voice's website.

Other achievements included initiatives to tackle inequality, increased funding for local organisations, successful dispute resolution and many more. Compact Voice will highlight these on its website as part of our ongoing case study work.

Key Messages:

- Good Compact relationships with local Commissioners can lead to better services being delivered
- A partnership approach to spending decisions can lead to better outcomes
- Compact Voice can help promote and share stories of good partnership working

"We need to label good practice as Compact compliant to raise the profile of the Compact."

What would you like to achieve through your local Compact?

"The Compact is more important now than ever, to help manage the cuts programme and minimise damages to services."



People raised some interesting ambitions they hoped to achieve through their local Compact.

Some of those mentioned included:

- adding the Compact to job descriptions for both sectors
- including case study promotion as part of an evaluation process for locally funded projects
- developing effective dispute resolution procedures, but ensuring they are never needed
- developing a process of 'Compact Impact Assessments' before policy or funding decisions are announced

Many of the achievements were about ensuring the legitimacy of the Compact as an effective local tool; compliance and awareness-raising were themes which were discussed at all of the events. With an increasing shift to local determination and accountability, many of the attendees recognised their vital role in promoting and championing the Compact.

Many talked about the importance of investment, of improving the skills and capacity of organisations through training, mutual support, resource allocation, or sharing best practice.

The primary goal for most of the attendees reflected the overarching theme of the Regional Events series; that people want to utilise the Compact as a key mechanism for enabling better communities.

Key messages:

- The Compact is a vital tool which should be used to build better communities - the value of Compact working needs to be recognised by all local partners
- The Compact has achieved many things - but it can achieve more
- Compact partners have the opportunity to share understanding - this can lead to better working

Conclusion

The Compact Voice Regional Events series highlighted that the Compact has a key role to play in building better communities. Attendees described some of the impressive outcomes they were able to achieve through local partnership working.

During the course of the events, a number of new policy announcements made by the coalition government changed the nature of the table discussions. Many felt that the new policies represented a threat to the work they were doing, not least of all because of significant reductions in spending, both locally and nationally.

Others saw the new policy landscape as an opportunity rather than a threat; enabling them to align their work with the emerging 'Big Society' and demonstrate that what they were delivering was closely aligned to the government's philosophy.

Some attendees discussed the seeming contradiction in the potentially major changes to investment in the voluntary and community sector, which undermined the notion that the sector was vital to delivering these new initiatives.

Through engagement with local groups and organisations during these events, and through our continued relationship with our networks and members, Compact Voice has seen clear demonstration of how working together can enable partners to better tackle difficult situations. We have seen where the Compact has worked, and the impact of where it hasn't been used, and we have learnt and shared lessons about both.

This first year of a new government will undoubtedly prove the resilience of the Compact. The Prime Minister and senior Cabinet officials have already

pledged their support for the principles of the Compact, and have announced their intention to renew government's commitment to it.

The increasing decentralisation of power to local government and communities enables the principles of good partnership to be embedded in day-to-day working; arguably where the Compact should be used most effectively.

Most importantly, the clear message emphasised throughout the events was that existing partnerships and established ways of working based on Compact principles should continue to be championed, developed, and promoted.

Much like refreshing local Compacts, there is little value in starting from scratch and not recognising the successes that existing Compact relationships have enabled, particularly in those areas where good partnerships are already flourishing.

The Regional Events series was the first of its kind for Compact Voice, and was initially designed to promote the changes made as a result of the Refreshed Compact being launched in 2009. But the events quickly transformed into something more than that - a chance to learn and share, understand the challenges and rewards people have experienced through using the Compact, and an opportunity for us to refocus our approach and activities to ensure that we are better able to represent the sector, particularly during these challenging times.

The events have been of tremendous value to our work, and we hope that those who attended feel similarly. We would like to thank everybody who contributed to making them such a success.

"Partnership working can make a positive difference and is essential to the community."

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Compact
voice



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- Quotes throughout the document taken from evaluation forms completed by attendees

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