

## **Large / Commissioned Groups Voice and Influence Workshop**

**Date:** 11<sup>th</sup> November 2021

**Time:** 14:30-16:30

**Location:** Zoom

### **Workshop Facilitators:**

- Peter Okali (PO) - Tower Hamlets Council for Voluntary Service
- Andrew Kerr (AK) - METRO GAVS
- Pauline O'Hare (PO'H) - METRO GAVS
- Roy Gopaul (RO) - METRO GAVS
- Mutmahim Roaf (MR) - METRO GAVS

### **Groups in Attendance:**

- Advocacy in Greenwich (AIG)
- Greenwich Area Involvement Network (GAIN)
- Greenwich Carers Centre
- Greenwich Co-operative Development Agency (GCDA)
- Greenwich Mencap
- Greenwich Inclusion Project (GrIP)
- Greenwich West Community and Arts Centre
- HER Centre
- METRO Charity
- MumsAid
- St Mary's (Eltham) Community Complex Association
- Tramshed (formerly Greenwich and Lewisham Young People's Theatre (GLYPT))
- Volunteer Centre Greenwich (VCG)
- YMCA Thames Gateway (inclu. YMCA Thamesmead and YMCA Woolwich)

### **Workshop Aim and Approach**

The Large / Commissioned Groups Voice and Influence Workshop aimed to provide a safe space for Greenwich-based large and/or commissioned groups and organisations to explore experiences, barriers, and solutions to engaging with and influencing 'the system' and local decision-making structures about the issues that matter most to them and their service users.

Due to the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, the decision was made to hold the workshop virtually, with attendees registering with METRO GAVS. In total, twenty-three people registered to attend the event, with fifteen attending on the day, one cancellation and seven no-shows.

The structure of the workshop was designed and developed by an external facilitator from Tower Hamlets Council for Voluntary Service and METRO GAVS. The workshop was based around five questions to facilitate discussions on the different aspects of engagement and influence with regards to decision-making within Greenwich. The workshop included two virtual breakout rooms

due to the attendance numbers. Comments outside the discussion were collected via the chat function within Zoom.

### **Discussion 1: Examples of the Ability to Effectively Influence Public Policy and Practice**

In general, most attendees reported that they had some experience and/or opportunity to influence policy and practice through their groups and organisations, although there were differences in the levels of experience and/or influencing opportunities. It was noted that there was an increase in influence, which occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given this continues post-pandemic, this is a positive step for the commissioned section of the voluntary and community sector within Greenwich.

With regards to specific examples of effective influence, groups and groups and organisations provided the following:

- Empowering people with learning disabilities to attend the Learning Disabilities Partnership Board within Greenwich to ensure they have a 'seat at the table' and can ensure there is a collective voice for these communities
- Engaging and influencing the local authority through the projects, programmes and services being delivered, of which some have a health and wellbeing focus based on learning, training, and development
- Working with the local authority to think creatively about ensuring suitable and adequate access to affordable housing within Greenwich
- Working closely with the Public Health Vaccination Programme within Greenwich, although more coordination will be required to maintain this partnership working post-pandemic
- Successful influence via the Domestic Abuse Service User Steering Group which led to inclusion in the Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership Board and to the updating of terminology and the relaunching of the Women's Charter within the local authority as well as the commissioning of a diverse training programme in relation to domestic abuse, including how non-practitioners can support those facing domestic abuse
- Positive influencing has occurred within the health sector, specifically with the local authority and Greenwich Clinical Commissioning Group Patient Reference Group which led to the shaping of commissioned projects, programmes, and services as well as practices relating to community participation and engagement
- Created networking opportunities across projects, programmes, and services within the Cultural Sector which, in turn, has benefitted the corporate culture within the local authority
- Conducted research into Youth Chances which has had an impact on homophobic, bi-phobic and transphobic bullying within schools, several invitations to attend scrutiny panels in relation to the impacts of COVID-19 on LGBTQ+ communities, numerous influences regarding Greenwich sexual health projects, programmes, and services, and co-production between disabled services users and the Royal Borough of Greenwich's Health and Adult services
- Providing a voice for people with a mental health condition to address stigma, discrimination, and prejudice, including mental health and faith, which has led to successful influencing of strategic decisions within Greenwich

- Successfully influenced the local authority to commission projects, programmes and services which do not sit clearly within a service area (i.e. perinatal mental health services span a number of service areas, such as maternity, adults and children's, which are now the commissioning of these services is stand alone, to ensure better services are established)

## **Discussion 2: What Were the Factors that Made that Influence Effective? Can That Experience be Replicated Across Public Institutions?**

A number of attendees reported that their group/organisation had some experience and/or opportunity to influence policy and practice. However, it was clear this was due to their status as commissioned groups/organisations which grants them access to decision-makers within the borough, either in the local authority or other agencies (i.e. Greenwich Clinical Commissioning Group). Groups and organisations reported they were able to influence due to their passion for their group/organisation's focus(es) and that persistence in reaching out to the system is also important (i.e. regular attendance at relevant meetings and continuous building of working relationships with decision-makers).

At times, the experience and/or opportunity to influence was due to individuals having a good working relationship with relevant officers within the system, although this is more difficult with officers as opposed to Councillors, as officers are more likely to change roles on a regular basis.

It was noted that some larger groups and organisations are trying to support, encourage and empower smaller groups and organisations to have voice and influence within the borough. It was suggested all commissioned groups and organisations could have a role in amplifying the voices of those who do not have a 'seat at the table' and this could be achieved and enabled through better partnership working between larger and smaller voluntary and community sector groups and organisations.

One group/organisation, who works across a number of boroughs, described their approach to influencing when approaching a local authority as starting at Cabinet Member level to try and agree some initial principles. If successful, the Cabinet Members often facilitate meetings with Chief Executives and Directors in order to help achieve/ further the group or organisation's objectives. It was, however, agreed that groups/organisations, regardless of their size, need to promote their offer so as to gain influence. This approach is dependent upon the focus of the group/organisation and how closely these align with the ambitions and direction of decision-makers. It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the statutory sector's understanding about the value of volunteering which should continue post-pandemic, although this will require more openness across the system.

## **Discussion 3: Examples of Unsuccessful Attempts to Influence Public Policy and Practice**

Some groups and organisations reported they have struggled to be able to influence public policy or practice. The reasons given ranged from the statutory sector not always understanding some of the feedback provided by voluntary and community groups and organisations, to inclusion in influencing opportunities appearing to be tokenistic and decisions being pre-determined.

Examples of unsuccessful influence provided by groups and organisations are as follows:

- During the Royal Borough of Greenwich 2017-2022 Voluntary Sector Strategy Development Workshop, groups and organisations were reassured that they were being listened to and had the opportunity to influence the development of the strategy, however, there was a view that at least one stakeholder, who was pivotal to creating the strategy, did not understand the feedback provided resulting in the strategy not reflecting the depth of feedback and the outcomes being pre-determined
- As part of the Start Well Greenwich (Health Visiting Service) Consultation a number of groups and organisations of varying sizes expressed concerns about a new operator coming into the borough to deliver the Health Visiting service and, although the local authority insisted it would work, unfortunately the new trust which was established did not work and Bromley Health Care had to be subsequently commissioned to begin delivering the service instead
- At times there has been a perception that issues being raised by voluntary and community sector groups and organisations are out of self-interest instead of the view being that addressing them will benefit the communities being served – this perception is not aided as many discussions with groups and organisations are focused, mainly, on funding and resourcing
- The success of influence by groups and organisations is highly dependent upon the relevant officer who is leading the influencing opportunity

#### **Discussion 4: What Were the Barriers to Effective Influence?**

Examples of barriers to effective influence provided groups and organisations provided are as follows:

- Following unsuccessful attempts to influence public policy and practice (as outline above) it was felt there needs to be a ‘checking process’ as well as an effective ‘feedback loop’ to confirm statutory sector organisations understand the feedback given by voluntary and community sector groups and organisations when making decisions – it was noted that the risk of not doing so may result in solutions that do not address the issue(s) and lead to a wasting of resources
- Groups and organisations and, as a result, local communities, need to understand how their input and feedback is used, which includes a need to be supported in holding decision-makers to account for how projects, programmes and services develop / are delivered, although it is recognised that this challenging to do given high turnover of staff in officer roles but also if there are poor response rates from those in senior positions
- There is a recognition of the pressure officers are under managing their portfolio of groups and organisations, time and resources within statutory organisations is limited and the natural instinct is to look after funded groups organisations in line with their delivery model (i.e. an arts group/organisations is seen as fitting in the ‘arts’ box of groups and organisation), however, an arts group/organisation’s remit can include working with people with learning needs - it was felt that frameworks are needed within the statutory sector to enable groups and organisations working across sectors which could be support through cross-departmental commissioning and a better use of resources
- Although many statutory sector colleagues are very positive about working with voluntary and community sector groups and organisations, there is a perception that some individuals

within the statutory sector do not feel there is legitimacy in what voluntary and community sector groups and organisations have to contribute which creates a barrier to meaningful engagement

- The system uses a high number of acronyms which the voluntary and community centre does not necessarily understand as well as having a culture which is not conducive to innovation
- A lack of trust in the system due to the perception that opportunities to influence are very limited as there are a number of 'fixed agendas' – while the system promotes opportunities to influence, network and develop partnerships, this is dependent upon having the time and resources to do so, which is not helped by operational changes occurring without prior communication, consultation appearing to be a 'tick box' exercise and commissioning within the system not necessarily being joined up (i.e. not all service blocks within the local authority know which groups and organisations are currently commissioned)
- The voluntary and community sector became fragmented during the COVID-19 pandemic with the voice of the sector becoming somewhat diminished as a result of the previous reduction in METRO GAVS voluntary sector forums,
- Opportunities to hold decision-makers, including system leaders, to account have been lost which has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic - for example, although virtual meetings are beneficial for group discussions, they are not conducive to wider system networking between the voluntary and community and statutory sectors, and is something which should be built back into the system

### **Discussion 5: What Methods and Approaches Should be Adopted in Greenwich to Improve Large / Commissioned Organisations' Influence?**

Several methods and approaches were discussed which can be summarised as follows:

- A strategy should be developed regarding communication, consultation and co-production which should include:
  - An increase in the length of the commissioning timeframes to facilitate the development of partnerships between groups and organisations who are interested in bidding
  - A commitment to building meaningful working relationships across the system, including decision-makers within the statutory sector (i.e. Departmental Directors and Councillors) as well as a commitment to try and break down the siloed working within the statutory sector and the culture of suspicion and mistrust
  - A 'feedback loop' so groups and organisations are able to confirm and subsequently understand their contribution to public policy and practice, which could be led by METRO GAVS both online (i.e. quarterly leadership networking sessions) and offline
- Commitment from all levels of leadership within the system needs to occur in order to facilitate large groups and organisations to have influence, including clarity regarding which forums exists to do so, as several individuals questioned the meaningfulness of their influence as, at times, the perception was that decisions had already been made prior to the engagement with them

- Provide decision-makers and relevant officers with a comprehensive list of commissioned voluntary and community sector groups and organisations within the system, including the projects, programmes and services they provide, which would enable engagement as well as demonstrate their added value
- Voluntary and community sector groups and organisations being provided with a list of the key contacts of liaison within the system as several groups and organisations expressed the need for regular, clear published lines of control in terms of staffing, which includes this information being republished if and when they change and/or a reorganisation occurs
- Training sessions for voluntary and community sector groups and organisations on how the different areas of the system are structured
- Voluntary and community sector groups and organisations should have more opportunities to influence the broad areas where public money is to be allocated through co-production and co-design in a step up from simple consultation – if the statutory sector resourced this better more groups and organisations would have meaningful participation and engagement, including smaller groups and organisations, with some larger groups and organisations felt that they should be supporting smaller organisations with regards to influencing the system as they already have more power and agency to influence)

### **Next Steps**

The Large / Commissioned Groups Voice and Influence Workshop was the third of three workshops designed to explore the experiences, barriers, and solutions to engaging and influencing the system about the issues that matter most to voluntary and community sector organisations and their service users within Greenwich. The decision to hold three workshops was taken due to the size and diversity of the sector and to enable a range of voices to be heard. An initial event for BAME-Led groups and organisations was held on the 15<sup>th</sup> July 2021, with a second event for small / non-commissioned organisations with a turnover of less than £200,000 taking place on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021. A report will follow all three events, which will culminate in a Conference on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2021, inviting senior colleagues from across the system to discuss the findings of the workshops. The Conference will aim to establish concrete ways forward for the sector to effectively engage with and influence the system.

For further information, please contact the following:

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