

Small / Non-Commissioned Groups Voice and Influence Workshop

Date: 30th September 2021

Time: 16:00-18:00

Location: Zoom

Workshop Facilitators:

- Peter Okali (PO) - Tower Hamlets Council for Voluntary Service
- Gilles Cabon (GC) - Greenwich Inclusion Project
- Pauline O'Hare (PO'H) - METRO GAVS
- Roy Gopaul (RO) - METRO GAVS
- Mutmahim Roaf (MR) - METRO GAVS

Groups in Attendance:

- Abbey Wood Tennis Club
- Ana Huna
- ARC and You
- Association of Panel Members
- B Young Stars
- Blessed Generation
- Champions 4 Change LTD
- Derrick and Atlas Gardens Residents Association
- Greenwich Street Pastors
- Greenwich Vietnamese Women
- Marvellous Girls Club Ltd
- More2Childcare
- Seniors in Touch SIT (Previously GSP Adult Day Centre)
- South Greenwich Forum
- Yeshua's Arm

Workshop Aim and Approach

The Small / Non-Commissioned Groups Voice and Influence Workshop aimed to provide a safe space for Greenwich-based small and/or non-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-eight people registered to attend the event, with sixteen attending on the day, two cancellations and ten no-shows.

The structure of the workshop was designed and developed by an external facilitator from Tower Hamlets Council for Voluntary Service 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, some attendees reported that they had some experience and/or opportunity to influence policy and practice through their groups and organisations, although some attendees noted that they personally have had little-to-no experience and/or opportunity. Although some of this influence occurred because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact of this engagement is yet to be fully realised, it was a positive step.

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

- Before the COVID-19 pandemic, begun to influence policies with regards to progressing young people out of the criminal justice system (which was supported by METRO GAVS)
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, influenced the Royal Borough of Greenwich's Children's Services department with regards to grant provision for early years services due to little-to-no income from registered families
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, instrumental in establishing a testing provision in schools which cater to children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, including associated information, advice and guidance for the families of said children
- Successful in numerous planning application decisions against and enquiries regarding the construction of high-rise apartments within the borough
- Raised awareness of the information required when navigating the immigration system within the UK, specifically migrants of African descent trying to resettle in the UK with dependent children

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

Although only two attendees reported that they had some experience and/or opportunity to influence policy and practice through their groups and organisations, it was clear this was due to individual perseverance. These groups and organisations reported that they were able to influence due to their passion for their group / organisation's focus(es). They also reported that persistence in reaching out was also important (i.e. regular presence on social media, as well as individual group / organisation research completion and report publication). However, at times, the experience and/or opportunity to influence policy and practice was due to individuals being introduced to the relevant officers within the system.

With the numerous attempts to influence policy and practice through their groups and organisations, individuals who had little-to-no experience and/or opportunity to do so represents a great loss within the system. However, this lack of experience / opportunity shows the considerable barriers which are faced by small and non-commissioned groups who often navigate a complex system alone. From a practical perspective, what would help groups and organisations is knowing

when and where influencing opportunities arise and who the decision-makers are at any point in time, to engage with across a range of policy areas.

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

Some groups and organisations reported that they have not been able to influence public policy or practice. In these incidents the reasons given were varied and ranged from complex governance structures within the statutory sector (including being overly bureaucratic) to inclusion in influencing opportunities appearing to be tokenistic.

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

- Significant delays in processes property leases (circa four years) which prevented the group from applying for and being awarded grant funding
- Income from new property developments via Section 106 Agreements and the Community Infrastructure Levy are not being distributed to help tackle local social issues, such as health and education, but instead are being disproportionately allocated to transport initiatives
- Inclusion on decision-making panels being tokenistic and, as such, services developed, are culturally insensitive - although feedback from groups and organisations is taken, it does not appear to be implemented, and there can be additional scrutiny of groups / organisations involved which can limit their engagement and influence
- Small groups and organisations are only periodically awarded funding from the statutory sector to delivery community participation, engagement, and development work despite their opinion on such work being sought and provided on numerous occasions
- Some ethnic minority communities are not provided with a voice or the opportunity to have influence within the system due to them not using 'normal' channels
- Faith focused groups and organisations not appearing to have influence within the system due to an observation that they are 'further down the pecking order'

Discussion 4: What Were the Barriers to Effective Influence?

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

- Access to decision-makers within the statutory sector
- Length of time the decision-making processes takes within the statutory sectors, which impacts the success of voluntary sector initiatives
- Although there are many good and dedicated staff within the Royal Borough of Greenwich, including councillors and officers, there is an issue with siloes working which leads to poor cross-departmental cooperation and presents difficulties for the voluntary and community sector to engage with and obtain effective and meaningful outcomes
- It was also noted that there was a tension between large and small groups and organisations, with large groups and organisations appearing to have a monopoly on commissioned projects, programmes and services delivered within the borough. Small groups and organisations often provide feedback during these processes but are not necessarily rewarded for doing as they are overlooked for local funding opportunities

Discussion 5: What Methods and Approaches Should be Adopted in Greenwich to Improve Small / Non-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:
 - Provision for both online as well as offline participation and engagement
 - A commitment to building meaningful working relationships across the system
 - A 'feedback loop' so groups and organisations are able to understand their contribution to public policy and practice
- Commitment from all levels of leadership within the system needs to occur in order to facilitate small groups and organisations to have influence, including clarity regarding which forums exist 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
- It was noted that investment in engagement with relevant groups and organisations at the early stages of a consultation process would maximise resources, avoid potentially costly mistakes such as the cost of defending decisions in court, and help meet urgent local needs
- Voluntary and community groups and organisations should have more opportunities to influence the broad areas where public money should be allocated – for example, it was felt more investment is needed to address the mental health needs of young people and equip them for the transition into adulthood
- There was also an observation if we have less resources coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, there should be renewed effort on working together on the best way of allocating funds
- If appropriate, the use of national bodies within the system to make introduction between small organisations and the statutory sector
- Statutory sector institutions need to do more to recognise and value the work carried out by and the lived experiences of small and non-commissioned groups and organisations within the borough, including projects, programme, and services they are already delivering on a non-commissioned basis – this can be partially achieved by designing tenders which allow small groups and organisations to bid and can potentially prevent an observed overreliance on large groups and organisations

Questions

Throughout the discussions regarding the five questions above, groups and organisations asked several questions which, although important, were not directly linked to the workshop. METRO GAVS will seek answer to these questions, which are as follows:

- What support can the Royal Borough of Greenwich offer to local nurseries?
- Currently the Royal Borough of Greenwich retains an additional £5.00 per child from National Government funding related to early years services – what is this money used for?

- With regards to property developer contributions within the Royal Borough of Greenwich (i.e Section 106 Agreements and the Community Infrastructure Levy) could there be transparency regarding how these monies are spent, including a new shared understanding of 'regeneration'?

NB: While the Royal Borough of Greenwich's 123 Regulation List was praised, it was recommended that more of this funding should be redirected towards investing in social infrastructure

- It is anticipated that as the UK transitions into the post-pandemic phase that resources are going to be limited – in light of this, what is the Royal Borough of Greenwich's policy regarding Social Value?
- How is the 'system' developing methodologies for digital inclusion for communities within the borough, including older people?
- How can groups and organisations have more say regarding how funding is allocated and distributed?

Next Steps

The Small / Non-Commissioned Groups Voice and Influence Workshop was the second 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 15th July 2021, with a third event for large organisations either commissioned by the Council and/or NHS with a turnover of more than £200,000 will take place on 11th November 2021. A report will follow all three events, which will culminate in a Conference on 9th 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:

- Andrew Kerr – Programme Manager (Andrew.Kerr@metrocharity.org.uk)
- Pauline O'Hare – Voice and Infrastructure Manager (Pauline.OHare@metrocharity.org.uk)