

# Key Findings Paper



## The changing nature of community activism and infrastructure in Manchester, UK and Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

*C. Milligan, R. Kyle, L. Bondi, N. R. Fyfe, R. Kearns and W. Larnar*

This paper outlines the key findings and recommendations from a comprehensive cross-national analysis of how new sites of local governance, particularly partnerships, act to encourage or discourage voluntary sector activism. It is based upon findings from a two-year comparative research project conducted in Manchester, UK and Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand.

The findings arise from surveys undertaken in both cities and 128 interviews with key figures from voluntary & community organisations (VCOs), local, regional and national statutory sectors and activists working in the fields of mental health and community safety.

### Issues common to Manchester and Auckland

#### Effects of the new landscape of local governance

- Those working in the fields of mental health and community safety indicate that **VCOs are engaging in 'soft', subtle forms of activism involving interaction and collaborations with the state.** Playing the game within 'the system' is a more frequently adopted strategy to effect social change than protesting from 'the outside'. However, demonstrative activism is still seen as a 'rapid response' tactic where specific issues warrant it.

- Though service delivery is a core function of the voluntary and community sector, **engaging in partnership working and networks is also viewed as a key role.**

- The use of partnership to describe a range of relational forms linked to new local governance arrangements has resulted in confusion stemming

from the **lack of a universally accepted definition of partnership.**

- New organisational relationships and individual actors' cross-sectoral mobility between the statutory, voluntary & community and private sectors have resulted in an **increasing porosity of sectoral boundaries** that is encouraging the exchange of knowledge and skills between sectors.

#### Factors that enable and sustain community-based infrastructure and organisations

- Organisational and individual **vision** encourages a willingness to take risks despite, often significant, personal or organisational costs. VCOs are particularly successful when they have won the support of statutory sector champions who can assist in the realisation of their vision by providing knowledge and skills that enable them to reach their goals.

- Partnerships that place **relationship-building** at their core foster an environment of trust and mutual respect resulting in the capacity to embrace and realise a shared agenda.

- The growth of **porous sectoral boundaries** facilitates the inter-sectoral transfer of knowledge and skills.

- A **supportive political climate** that enshrines frameworks guaranteeing independence for VCOs fosters a sense of security as well as recognition that the place and contribution of VCOs is valued by the state.

**Factors that constrain the development of community-based infrastructure and organisations**

- Risk aversion** results in a retreat behind traditional sector boundaries. This inhibits joint-working and the realisation of a *shared* vision.

- Partnerships without relationship-building** at their core breed protectionism. Hierarchical power relationships are reinforced, or emerge, highlighting inequalities within the partnerships (e.g. the power of the statutory sector to select voluntary sector 'representatives').

- A **lack of mutual respect** fosters a culture of control by statutory sector agencies, closing down opportunities for cross-sectoral learning.

- Ignoring or overlooking the increasing porosity of sectoral boundaries** leads to entrenched patterns of behaviour.

- Failure by the statutory sector to fully enact guidance documents** (such as statements of intent) creates

a gap between intention and implementation that gives rise to frustration and, potentially, anger.

- Much statutory sector consultation is seen by the voluntary and community sector as a tokenistic 'tick-box' process.** This creates disillusionment and can result in withdrawal from the process. Statutory bodies need to develop meaningful opportunities for VCO input at a strategic level.

- Legal frameworks** are not sufficiently flexible. A combination of confusion and fear prevents organisations from fulfilling their dual role as both service deliverers and advocates.

- Despite Government acknowledgement of the issue, short-term funding** continues at local level. This continues to create a sense of insecurity and instability for VCOs.

Enabling partnerships are those that are...	Disabling partnerships are those that are...
prepared by all parties	top down – power with the funder
offer a flexible framework, based on what parties want to include and how Accountable in two or more ways	accountable in only one way i.e. back to the funder focused on risk minimisation
more willing to take risks, relying on trust, respect and process rather than legalistic clauses	focused on compliance
flexible, have faith in relationships and agreed processes	based on a 'principal-agent' arm's length relationships
interactive, ongoing relationships	short-term, and focussed narrowly on delivering specific outputs
based on longer term relationships and where the schedule of tasks is likely to change over time	based on partnership as a universal solution

**Comparative Issues**

## **Key points of comparison between Manchester, UK and Auckland, New Zealand**

The smaller population of New Zealand as a whole has two important impacts for VCOs in Auckland:

- Politics feel more informal; with individual politicians being closer to their electorate. Personal connections to elected politicians and government officials ensure individual activists and VCOs are closer to key individuals who can open up avenues through which they can effect influence and social change.
- In Auckland, sectoral boundaries appear more porous than those in Manchester, due to more inter-sectoral working and greater movement of individuals between and within sectors during their careers. This aids knowledge transfer. Further, over the course of a career, individuals appear more able than their UK counterparts to attain positions of influence through which they can continue their own activist activity or champion that of others.

### **Also**

- Partnerships are being played out in different ways in different places. The formal, mandated partnership bodies that have proliferated in the UK are less common in New Zealand. Informal inter-organisational connections often take their place, sometimes bypassing the difficulties of representation and process that UK VCOs suggest frequently surface in more formal arenas.
- New Zealand's cultural context shapes the discourse surrounding partnerships. The 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, sets out a model of partnership against which all others are judged. The lack of such an 'ideal'

model of partnership in the UK has led to panoply of informal working practices or formal agreements being described as 'partnership'. This makes it difficult to distinguish between different relational forms.

## **Sub-sectoral issues: mental health and community safety**

- Mental health and community safety organisations face similar challenges in both countries. However, it is not always easy to distinguish between these two sub-sectors as there are many areas of overlap between the two. This is particularly true in Auckland where the porosity of organisational and sectoral boundaries is greater than in Manchester.
- Individual mobility contributes to the blurring of sub-sectoral and sectoral boundaries. People working in discrete fields are, thus, likely to have a greater awareness of issues in the other fields, this promotes cross-sectoral trust-building as well as the exchange of ideas, which, over time, can break down sectoral barriers.
- The national policy context is important to the development of discrete sub-sectors. This is particularly evident in the field of community safety. In Auckland this appears a less clearly defined sector than in Manchester. This is because in the UK, government legislative frameworks provide a clear discourse (and related funding) around which a discrete sub-sector can be built. In New Zealand community safety straddles several fields, hence, it is not just the preserve of criminal justice.

## Recommendations

There is a serious need for:

- ✓ city councils to commission independent evaluations of partnership models and processes.
- ✓ city councils to make good social innovation visible in the city, for example, through awards for 'flagship' social innovation projects or for a 'partnership of the year' award.
- ✓ the city councils in Manchester and Auckland to build on existing links to set up an exchange programme to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and good working practices with the voluntary and community sector
- ✓ Opportunities for the voluntary and community sector to be involved meaningfully in agenda-setting in relation to local and national policy.
- ✓ more formal recognition of experimental and practitioner knowledge and skills within the voluntary & community sector.
- ✓ all sectors to recognise that building mutual trust and respect demands time, talent and resources. Partners from both the voluntary & community sector need to engage in appropriate training and trust building activities to facilitate this development.
- ✓ capacity building initiatives within the voluntary & community sector, for example, through the funding of professional development projects.
- ✓ government at all levels needs to ensure that social and welfare policies are 'voluntary & community sector-proofed'.

Hard copies of the full report are available from:  
Dr Christine Milligan, Institute for Health  
Research, Bowland East, Lancaster University,  
Lancaster, UK, LA1 4YT.  
Tel: +44 (0)1524 592127,  
e-mail: c.milligan@lancaster.ac.uk

A downloadable version of the full report and  
other papers arising from the project are  
available in .pdf format from:  
[http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/projects/placing-  
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