What’s Next? A third sector approach to the

UK-Shared Prosperity Fund

**Wednesday 25th August 2021**

Facilitated by Network for Europe and Selnet

The meeting attended by more than 50 enthusiastic VCSE leaders looking to find out more about future resources to replace the current European Structural Investment Funds that for the past seven years have enabled so many organisations to support inclusion, skills development, and progression for people in our communities with complex needs.

Chaired by Ann Marie Wrigley, Network for Europe those attending expressed concern about the changing environment, the void in information and increases in local needs.

Ann Marie opened the meeting with Introductions and information on why we are meeting.

As part of the event agenda, we heard updates from:

* Andy at Network for Europe on: Community Renewal Fund, Community Ownership Fund, UK-Shared Prosperity Fund and Local actions and the Third Sector
* Sally Yeoman at Halton & St Helens VCA: Partnership, what worked with CRF
* Jessica Williams, Wales CVA: Lessons from Wales, Influencing and working with the UK Govt.

To facilitate involvement and discussion the meeting broke into eight groups to discuss sector influence in more detail – below details the questions asked of the groups, the responses and summary:

* Do you feel your organisation can influence Public Policy?

*Not all the attendees felt they have any influence in Public Policy. Those that say they do also feel their influence is limited, and mostly relevant to their local and/or operational areas.*

*Groups felt much more involved in local strategy development prior to 2010. Since then, there have been little to no mechanisms for the third sector to influence in any structured way.*

*Engagement with local authorities largely depends on personal relationships.*

*There needs to be a system of devolved decision making based on agreed strategies in the development of which the sector is fully and equally involved.*

*Some organisations which have a national footprint or are part of a national network sometimes have influence in particular areas and it is sometimes possible for organisations to have influence with specific ministries through their contract holding function.*

* Is this important to you?

*Overwhelmingly the group/s agreed that influencing the UK SPF agenda was an imperative for the sector, on the basis that as a sector we are giving a voice to the clients (and volunteers) we work with.*

*As a sector we can represent the value of the voices of our clients and service users and that having the opportunity to influence means incorrect assumptions are not made.*

*The value of building on coal-face reality will enable best impacts.*

*There must be support for specific services, especially for newer organisations. Communities and issues are evolving (Covid, Brexit) and so are organisations. They must, to ensure they create new approaches to provide relevant support and meet changing needs.*

*It is important that we use whatever influence we do have to widen the government's agenda to encompass those needs which have been identified especially by our sector.*

*Centralised decision making is deplored and distant from the impact of those decisions.*

* How/when does this work well? Locally, nationally

*Given the diverse nature of the third sector, we agreed that having strong third sector lead organisations that reflect and bring together the voices of their members was critical in bringing high level clarity and messaging to the influencing process.*

*It was noted that local or national influencing was very much dependent upon the size, scale, geographical reach so no ‘one size fits all’ but more a case of how and where you influence with most impact e.g. national organisations with public affairs teams tended to be able to influence directly with national governments (but also drawing on their devolved footprint and relationships there) whereas smaller organisations would tend to influence locally via third sector leads or in conversation with senior officers in local and regional government.*

*There was some reflection on the challenges of devolved and non-devolved AEB as an example of where you have the same fund that is then localised and how this increases the demands on relationship management, bidding, etc. If SPF is devolved perhaps at local authority level, then that could have issues for larger charities operating regionally. No silver bullet on the latter point, just more of a reflection that the third sector is made up of many moving parts so an SPF that works for all would be highly desirable.*

* What would be useful to improve your influence?

*Some groups need infrastructure support; start-ups, non-formal services, orgs with no EU-funding delivery experience.*

*Possibly smaller/newer organisations might be wary of traditional infrastructure organisations and struggle to engage at a suitable level*

*Collaboration is important, highlighting approaches of community coops. Several spoke of the support from being part of a consortia examples of good working practices were given*

*Talked about the proposals and timing for UK-SPF seem to be “a mess” / that as process develops partnership working must be mandatory.*

In closing, we agreed that despite the politics, the sector needed to work with and influence government and bring forward ideas that could make SPF the positive, improved, and natural successor to ESIF.

Without a doubt, there were concerns about the lack of consultation on the UK SPF by UK Gov and thus a major worry that the scheme is not designed in a way that gets the best out of the sector in terms of reaching the people and communities that can/should benefit from it most.

There is a real difficulty for many organisations in keeping up to date on opportunities and developments.

We must address challenges around inclusiveness and diversity in the new Fund.

The presentation from Wales had been impressive and presented a challenge for the North West.

Issues in working with local government are not helped by different boundaries for example on health and education.

**Possible Action:** A mapping exercise of infrastructure organisations and services being provided, especially since/in response to Covid, and identify connections and gaps.

It was felt important that we build opportunities to influence in whatever way we can including through the Civil Society Forum.

From the CHAT:

There is a UK Gov consultation live now with a 14 September deadline on the UK/EU CSF and Domestic Advisory Group setup.

WCVA is coordinating a response from SCVO, NCVO and NICVA. If anyone wants to feed into that maybe message Andy so he can liaise with me or directly with us at WCVA. Its short deadline to coordinate a large collective response but we are open to taking on board input from a wide range of organisations.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-engagement-with-business-and-civil-society-groups>