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The stronger communities agenda in local authorities in the South West of England

A descriptive analysis of the South West Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership surveys

1. Introduction

Aim

At the beginning of the year a survey was organised and funded by the South West Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership focusing on the 'stronger communities' agenda.

The aim of this exercise was to better understand the range and scope of local authority responses to the 'stronger communities' agenda outlined in the White Paper 'Communities in control: real people, real power' of July 2008 and to further plan and shape the RIEP's stronger communities programme so that authorities in the region gain the maximum benefit from it.

The questions in the survey covered the following areas:

- About the respondent and their local authority
- What each authority has done historically on activities that are grouped together under the heading of the 'stronger communities' agenda.
- The immediate responses of each local authority to the White Paper.
- Identifying the most appropriate contacts in each local authority for issues around the 'stronger communities' agenda.

The aim is to use the information provided together with the launch event in April to enrich the RIEP's programme and inform the delivery plan which will seek to address the following six key themes:

- Mainstreaming – achieving culture change in councils and partnerships
- Integrating community empowerment with equality and cohesion
- Building the evidence and business case for community empowerment
- The role of members in community empowerment
- Working with community and neighbourhoods
- A vibrant third Sector

Response rate

A survey was sent to each local authority in the South West region, and 18 out of a possible 51 were completed, which is a 35% response rate. However a number of local authorities in the South West are currently being restructured into new unitary authorities, this was a particular issue for local authorities in Cornwall and Wiltshire, which should be taken into consideration.

A range of local authorities completed the questionnaire; including district, county and unitary authorities and a range of both rural and urban local authorities (according to the Defra, 2005 method of classification), see table 1 and 2.



Table 1

Type of Local authority	Frequency	Percent
Upper tier	10	55.5
Lower tier	8	44.4
Total	18	100

Table 2

Urban or rural local authority	Frequency	Percent
Urban	6	33.3
Rural	12	66.7
Total	18	100

This report summarizes the findings from the 18 completed questionnaires. The survey is only intended to be an initial exploration of current activity of local authorities in the South West in relation to the stronger communities agenda and the extent of support that local authorities feel they require. The survey is not designed to explain the reasons behind current activity but simply to describe what is happening. Furthermore, this is a relatively small sample and therefore the analysis is limited.

2. Strategic context for work on the ‘stronger communities’ agenda

Issues to tackle

The survey asked what issues are local authorities looking to tackle through the stronger communities agenda. Respondents were asked about seven issues and of these improving the quality of services offered by the local authority in terms of beneficiary/client satisfaction is the one that most considered to be very important (61% of respondents). In addition tackling areas of disadvantage, improving engagement of young people and improving cost effectiveness all appear to be very important issues to around half of the respondents. Whereas, respondents attach the least importance to the issues of low voter turnout and worries about getting appropriate people to stand as councillors, with around half respondents considering these areas to be only relatively minor issues. Finally there was a range of responses to the issue of improving the capacity of the third sector to engage in public service delivery, from some respondents highlighting its importance to others who thought it was a relatively minor issue (see table 3 in the appendix).

The stronger communities agenda aims to involve citizens from different groups of the population. The survey asked about tackling the issue of non-participation and the importance of including different groups of the population to the local authority’s ‘stronger communities’ agenda? On the basis of age, ethnicity, gender, religion and belief, sexual orientation and disability there was a tendency for the majority of responses to consider these groups as either very important or quite important to be included in the stronger communities agenda. This pattern was particularly apparent on the basis of age and ethnicity and fractionally less important for religion and belief and sexual orientation. All but one respondent had a view on the importance of the

issue (only one respondent claimed not to know in one instance). See table 4 in the appendix.



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Strategies and the stronger communities agenda

Local authorities and their partners have numerous strategies and plans. According to the survey only 28% of respondents' local authorities/LSPs have a specific community empowerment strategy (see table 6 in the appendix). However despite 72% of local authorities not having a specific community empowerment strategy, other council strategic documents refer to activities associated with this agenda. The survey shows that the Sustainable Community Strategy is the council strategy that most commonly refers to the stronger communities agenda in its key objectives (83% of respondents agreed). Although only 27% of respondents claimed the stronger communities agenda was mentioned in the text of their Sustainable Community Strategy, and only a further 11% of respondents said this agenda was mentioned in their SCS action plan. Many respondents said their Local Area Agreement referred to the stronger communities agenda. A little over half of respondents claimed that the stronger communities agenda was referred to in a key objectives of their corporate strategy while just under half of respondents said it was referred to in the text of the document. Approximately a third of respondents claimed the stronger communities agenda was referred to in their service plans, in their key objectives, the text of the document as well as in the action plan. In fact only 11% of respondents said this agenda was referred to in the SCS action plan whereas 33% of respondents claimed it was in the service plans action plans (see table 5 in the appendix).

The survey asked if each local authority has an approved Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) as part of the Local Development Framework; 61% of respondents said their local authority has an approved statement of community involvement as part of the Local Development Framework. A third said the SCI is still in preparation and 1 respondent didn't know (see table 7 in the appendix). However, 66% of local authorities have a strategy for engaging with the third sector (see table 8 in the appendix). Furthermore 94% of local authorities are a partner in a Local Compact, with the remaining 6% unsure (see table 9 in the appendix).

Indicators

There are a number of national indicators aimed at monitoring the progress of the stronger communities agenda. The survey asked if each Local Area Agreement included one or more of five relevant indicators including NI3 civic participation in the local area; NI 4 the percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality; NI 5 overall general satisfaction with local area; NI 6 number of people volunteering; and NI7 environment for a thriving third sector (see table 10 in the appendix). From these five national indicators the one most utilized was NI4 with 83% of respondents revealing it is included in their LAA. Another common choice of indicator was NI7, with 72% of respondents including NI7 in their LAA. NI6 was also a popular choice with 61% of respondents including NI6 in their LAA. NI5 and NI3 were less common with 38% and 16% (respectively) of respondents choosing these indicators. Eight of the respondents indicated that as well as using one or more of the NI outlined in the survey they also utilized other relevant national and/or local indicators in their LAAs. These respondents represent 2 counties, 4 unitary authorities and 2 districts (who will be referring to their counties LAA). There are obviously different interpretations of which indicators are relevant to the stronger communities agenda. However the most frequent other NI quoted in relation to this agenda is NI 1 - percentage of people who believe people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area.



3. The response by local authorities to the White Paper 'Communities in Control: real people real power' and an understanding of how LAs engage with the third sector

The White Paper outlines a number of key areas associated with community empowerment, this section of the survey asked a series of questions to see what each local authority is doing in relation to these themes.

Impact of the White Paper on stronger communities agenda

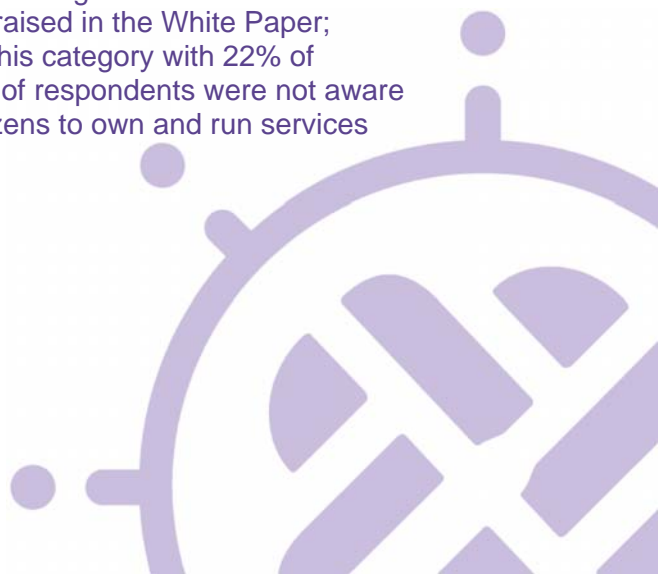
The White Paper outlined a number of issues which should be improved to create stronger communities. The survey asked if the White Paper had changed how each local authority tackles these issues highlighted in the Communities in Control. A number of authorities emphasized how the White Paper simply strengthened existing work rather than changing the focus of activity. One authority commented "*the White Paper has given stronger backing to ongoing work*". Another respondent pointed to a review of their authority's community planning and partnerships work, which concluded this authority was in fact ahead of the White Paper in several respects.

The issue of enabling citizens to influence local decision making, seemed to be the issue which most respondents felt had a significant influence on local authority priorities (although only 39% of respondents supported this claim). It seems the White Paper did little to change LA priorities on increasing volunteering, with 50% of respondents pointing out that their LA was already addressing this issue. And 44% of respondents felt that the White Paper had some influence on existing local authority priorities for improving access to understandable information for citizens and supporting citizens to stand for office (see table 11 in the appendix).

Survey respondents outlined a variety of different issues that local authorities were tackling in light of the White Paper. These ranged from working with other tiers of government, for example Town and Parish councils, effective consultation and the lowering of barriers to participation, improving the quality of deliberation about local issues and problem solving and getting the most out of citizens panels, as well as improving transparency of decision-making.

Review of actions on the stronger communities agenda

The survey asked respondents which of the issues identified in the White Paper their local authority were reviewing or implementing changes. 44% of local authorities were thinking about or reviewing activity on improving the ways that citizens might hold the council to account. 38% of respondents were thinking about or reviewing actions on both improving access to understandable information for citizens and improving procedures to enable redress for citizens when things go wrong. Whereas 44% of respondents are implementing actions to enable citizens to influence local decision making. Relatively few respondents were collecting evidence or commissioning work to better understand the issues raised in the White Paper; increasing volunteering had the highest response in this category with 22% of respondents collecting evidence on the subject. 50% of respondents were not aware of any activity relating specifically to encouraging citizens to own and run services (see table 12 in the appendix).





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Respondents also discussed other areas of work that their authorities are involved with that influence their approach towards empowerment (not specifically outlined in the White Paper). Those authorities who were in transition to a new unitary authority pointed to activities relating to supporting these new structures such as building new local arrangements to increase engagement and involvement in decision-making and

defining and agreeing a shared understanding of strong, resilient and sustainable communities. Partnership working was a subject which local authorities highlighted in relation to their work on empowerment e.g. working closely with community area partnerships to develop inclusive engagement processes, developing community networks and community partnerships in market towns leading regeneration of those towns. Respondents indicated work is also focusing on how local decision-making takes place e.g. in the form of local contracts, community charters, area boards and community partnerships.

Implementing initiatives and good practice

The White Paper includes a range of initiatives including; the upcoming duty to involve, the councillor call for action, local petitions, participatory budgeting, community anchors and neighbourhood management, to mention a few. The survey asked respondents which of these initiatives were being implemented in their local authority and to what extent. 22% of respondents are implementing participatory budgeting as a pilot and 11% are implementing it across the whole LA area. 33% of respondents are implementing the duty to involve as both a mainstream initiative and across the whole LA area. Considering the duty to involve comes into force on 1 April 2009, this number is surprisingly low, although only 17% of respondents claimed there was no current activity, and 6% didn't know if there was any activity at all on the duty to involve. 56% of respondents revealed there was no current activity in their local authorities on the councillor call to action or local petitions. 66% of respondents suggested that their local authority was engaged in effective empowerment in terms of its service areas (see table 13 in the appendix).

The survey asked respondents if there were any projects/actions that the local authority is currently engaged with that demonstrates good practice. 83% of respondents considered their LA to be engaged in projects that would demonstrate good practice. The most common examples of good practice respondents suggested were around area committees, area forums, neighbourhood projects/ management/ partnerships and participatory budgeting. But also included local compacts, parish charters, transfer of community assets, partnership working, safer and stronger community groups, various governance structures.





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Good practice in the South West

The survey asked: are there any projects/actions that your local authority is currently engaged with that you would consider to demonstrate 'good practice', and the answer was a resounding yes. Here are a selection of the projects which local authorities feel represent good practice.

Operation Black Vote in **Bristol** was used as case study for best practice in the *Communities in Control* white paper.

Wiltshire are working with the University of Southampton on a civic behaviour project to improve the quality of local deliberation through the use of audio visual tools and facilitated debates on local issues. The project focuses on a number of design experiments in Wiltshire (6 experiment areas, 6 control areas).

My Neighbourhood Project is a pilot project in **Exeter**. The project has focused on four wards in Exeter between June 2007 and November 2008. The project set up partnerships in the four wards between Residents, local Councillors, Police, City Council and other interested parties. Exeter City Council is looking to roll out this project to more wards from April 2009. The council has developed good links with voluntary sector colleagues through the project and the council continues to work with these colleagues through the 'Take Part' initiative led by Exeter CVS.

South Gloucestershire have Establishment of Safer Stronger Community Division and created Safer Stronger Community Groups.





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Good practice in service areas in the South West

The survey also asked respondents if there are any service areas in particular where their local authority is currently engaged with what they would consider to demonstrate effective 'empowerment'. Again, there were plenty of examples, some of which are outlined below.

Wiltshire highlighted empowerment work in areas including young people, people with learning disabilities and parish steward schemes. Voice and Influence for Young People, 'Aiming High' and Community Area Young People's Issues Groups (CAYPIGs) with funding and decision-making devolved directly to young people.

Wiltshire's Service User Engagement Strategy has established user boards for example Learning Disability Partnership Board.

Wiltshire has a Parish Stewards Scheme aligned with CLARENCE fault reporting and direct control of the Town and Parishes over local repairs and maintenance.

North Somerset has an area officer's programme for local environmental and street scene type activities.

Bristol has a Neighbourhood Partnership programme which comprises 14 neighbourhood partnerships (local forums) with an operational budget giving an enhanced opportunity for local communities to have a greater say in the way services, and responses to local issues, managed by Bristol City Council (and other service providers).

North Dorset is working on devolving services to the community for example through transfer of assets to the community (e.g. Gillingham Community Centre) and the Sturminster Newton Exchange Project (which has won three national awards).

Somerset has a Forum for Equality & Diversity contributing to the community empowerment agenda.

Support and training

The survey asked if local authorities had identified the need for additional support and training in order to tackle the issues outlined in the White Paper. Few respondents were either looking for support or training or looking for peer review on any of the issues identified in the White Paper. 56% of respondents were looking for support on networking to improve engagement with the third sector. 39% of respondents were hoping to improve networking in order to improve access to understandable information for citizens. And 56% of respondents felt the LA had sufficient capacity to develop and implement the Local Compact and 50% felt they had capacity for commissioning from the third sector (see table 16 in the appendix).

However, two respondents expressed an interest in all support that is available on many of these issues including getting appropriate information to local people about their local area, engaging/ empowering hard to reach groups, and appropriate community governance.



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4. Key contacts in local authorities on the theme of 'stronger communities'

It seems that when it comes to specific officers who have a remit relating to this agenda most local authorities have a specific officer charged with developing engagement with the third sector, in fact 83% of local authorities have a specific officer and only 5% of local authorities do not have a such an officer (the remainder 11% of respondents were unsure). Over half of local authorities (61%) claim to have a specific officer who is charged with the community empowerment agenda, with a further 28% of local authorities not having such an officer and 11% were unsure. There was a clear division between local authorities who had an elected member who has responsibility for the community empowerment agenda with half of local authorities with an elected member with this remit and the other half without such an elected member, and 11% of respondents unsure.

5. Overview of key findings

- Improving the quality of services from the perspective of beneficiaries was the most important community empowerment issue for SW authorities.
- Involving all different groups of society to participate in the stronger communities agenda was considered important.
- Only a third of SW authorities have a specific community empowerment strategy. Although two thirds of SW authorities have a strategy for engaging with the third sector.
- Empowering communities activities are most often framed by Sustainable Communities Strategy rather than a stand alone strategy.
- The most utilized national indicator related to the stronger communities agenda in the SW is NI4 - the percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions on their locality.
- Enabling citizens to influence local decision-making was the issue in the White Paper which had the most significant influence on local authority priorities in the SW.
- Improving the ways that citizens might hold the council to account was an issue that half of local authorities in the SW were reviewing their activity.
- The duty to involve is being implemented in a relatively low number of local authorities considering it comes into force on 1 April.
- Support and training is sought on networking to improve engagement with the third sector in order to implement effective actions.
- Most local authorities have a specific officer charged with developing engagement with the third sector, fewer have a specific officer who is charged with the community empowerment agenda or an elected member with this responsibility.



Appendix

Table 3

Which of the following issues does your local authority look to tackle through activities/outcomes associated with the 'Stronger Communities' agenda?				
Outcome issue to be achieved through 'stronger communities' activities/action	Very important in my area	Quite important	A relatively minor issue in my area in comparison to areas	Don't know
Low voter turnout	16.70%	22.20%	55.60%	5.60%
Tackling areas of disadvantage	50%	44.40%	0	5.60%
Improving the quality of services offered by the local authority in terms of beneficiary/client satisfaction	61%	38.90%	0	0
Improving engagement with young people	55.60%	33.30%	11.10%	0
Improving the cost effectiveness of public service delivery	55.60%	22.20%	16.70%	5.60%
Worries about getting appropriate people to stand as councillors	5.60%	38.90%	44.40%	5.60%
Improving the 'capacity' of the local third sector to engage in public service delivery	44.40%	27.80%	27.80%	0

Table 4

How important is it to include different groups of the population to your local authority's 'Stronger Communities' agenda?				
Tackling issues of non participation in local government of people on the basis of :	Very important in my area	Quite important	A relatively minor issue in my area in comparison to areas	Don't know
Age	66.70%	22.20%	11.10%	0
Ethnicity	66.70%	33.30%	0	0
Gender	61.10%	22.20%	16.70%	0
Religion and belief	50%	27.80%	22.20%	0
Sexual Orientation	50%	33.30%	16.70%	0
Disability	61.10%	22.20%	11.10%	5.60%



Table 5

Which of the following Council or Partnership strategic documents specifically refer to activities/outcomes that you would associate with the 'Stronger Communities' agenda?					
	Referred to in key objectives of document	Referred to in text of document	Referred to in the action plan to the strategy	Not applicable to this authority	Don't know/ not familiar with this document
Strategic document					
Corporate Strategy/Core Strategy (for local authority as a whole)	55.60%	44.40%	16.70%	5.60%	5.60%
Sustainable Community Strategy	83.30%	27.80%	11.10%	0	0
Local Area Agreement	77.80%	16.70%	11.10%	5.60%	0
Service plans	38.90%	38.90%	33.30%	5.60%	5.60%
Others	22.20%	11.10%	11.10%	0	0

Table 6

Does your LSP and/or local authority have a specific community empowerment strategy?	
No, my local authority/LSP does not have a specific community empowerment strategy	72.20%
Yes, my local authority/LSP does have a specific community empowerment strategy	27.80%

Table 7

Does your local authority have an approved Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) as part of the Local Development Framework?	
No, the SCI is still in preparation	33%
Yes, my local authority does have an approved SCI	61.10%
Don't know	5.50%

Table 8

Does your LA have a strategy or plan for engaging with the third sector?	
No	33.30%
Yes	66.70%
Don't know	0





Table 9

Is your LA a partner in a Local Compact?	
No	0
Yes	94.40%
Don't know	5.60%

Table 10

Does your local area agreement include the following indicators?	Yes, included in LAA	No, not included in LAA	Don't know
NI 3 civic participation in the local area	16.70%	72.20%	11.10%
NI 4 the percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality	83.30%	16.70%	0
NI 5 overall general satisfaction with local area	38.90%	61.10%	0
NI 6 number of people volunteering	61.10%	38.90%	0
NI7 environment for a thriving third sector	72.20%	22.20%	5.60%

Table 11

To what degree has the White Paper changed how your local authority tackles the following issues?	Significant influence on local authority priorities	Some influence on existing local authority priorities	Little influence on existing priorities – local authority already addressing issue	Little influence on existing priorities – not a priority for this local authority	Don't know
Encouraging citizens to be active	16.70%	33.30%	38.90%	11.10%	5.60%
Increasing volunteering	11.10%	22.20%	50%	16.70%	0
Improving access to understandable information for citizens	27.80%	44.40%	27.80%	0	0
Improving communication with residents	27.80%	33.30%	38.90%	0	0
Enabling citizens to influence local decision-making	38.90%	38.90%	22.20%	0	0
Improving the ways that citizens might hold the Council to account	27.80%	27.80%	38.90%	0	5.60%
Improving procedures to enable redress for citizens when things go wrong	5.60%	27.80%	61.10%	0	5.60%
Supporting citizens to stand for office	5.60%	44.40%	33.30%	16.70%	0
Encouraging citizens to own and run services	5.60%	33.30%	22.20%	33.30%	5.60%



Table 12

In which of the following areas identified in the White Paper 'Communities in Control' is your local authority reviewing what it does/implementing changes in what it does?					
Issue identified in White Paper	Thinking about it/ reviewing activity	Collecting evidence/ commissioning work to better understand	Refreshing strategies to include	Implementing actions to tackle	Not aware of any activity relating specifically to theme
Encouraging citizens to be active	27.80%	5.60%	16.70%	27.80%	22.20%
Increasing volunteering	27.80%	22.20%	5.60%	33.30%	16.70%
Improving access to understandable information for citizens	38.90%	0	11.10%	38.90%	11.10%
Enabling citizens to influence local decision-making	27.80%	11.10%	16.70%	44.40%	5.60%
Improving the ways that citizens might hold the Council to account	44.40%	0	11.10%	16.70%	27.80%
Improving procedures to enable redress for citizens when things go wrong	38.90%	11.10%	5.60%	16.70%	27.80%
Supporting citizens to stand for office	16.70%	11.10%	0	27.80%	38.90%
Encouraging citizens to own and run services	22.20%	5.60%	5.60%	11.10%	50%

Table 13

To what degree is your local authority implementing some of the following initiatives/actions noted in the White Paper?	No current activity	Yes as a pilot	Yes as a mainstream initiative	Yes across the whole local authority area	Yes as an area-based project	Don't know/ not aware of
The 'duty to involve'	16.70%	11.10%	33.30%	33.30%	5.60%	5.60%
Councillor call for action	55.60%	5.60%	11.10%	16.70%	0	11.10%
Local petitions	55.60%	5.60%	5.60%	11.10%	5.60%	16.70%
Participatory budgeting	33.30%	22.20%	11.10%	11.10%	11.10%	11.10%
Community anchors (community led organisations)	38.90%	11.10%	16.70%	5.60%	11.10%	16.70%
Neighbourhood management	38.90%	5.60%	22.20%	11.10%	11.10%	11.10%



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Table 14

Are there any projects/actions that your local authority is currently engaged with that you would consider to demonstrate 'good practice'?	
No, I am not aware of anything specific	16.70%
Yes, my local authority is currently engaged in projects/activities that would demonstrate good practice.	83.30%

Table 15

Are there any service areas in particular where your local authority is currently engaged with what you would consider to demonstrate effective 'empowerment'?	
No, I am not aware of anything specific	27.80%
Yes, my local authority is currently engaged in effective empowerment in terms of its service area(s)	66.70%

Table 16

In which of the following areas have you identified the need for additional support and training in order to tackle the issue/implement effective actions?					
Issue identified in White Paper and with a focus on third sector	Looking for support/training	Looking for peer review	Looking for networking	Local authority has sufficient capacity to deal with issue	Not aware of any capacity issues/don't know
Encouraging active citizenship	5.60%	5.60%	33.30%	16.70%	38.90%
Increasing volunteering	11.10%	5.60%	22.20%	27.80%	27.80%
Improving access to understandable information for citizens	11.10%	5.60%	38.90%	27.80%	11.10%
Enabling citizens to influence local decision-making	16.70%	0	33.30%	27.80%	11.10%
Improving the ways that citizens might hold the Council to account	5.60%	0	22.20%	33.30%	22.20%
Improving procedures to enable redress for citizens when things go wrong	11.10%	0	22.20%	27.80%	27.80%
Supporting citizens to stand for office	5.60%	5.60%	22.20%	22.20%	38.90%
Encouraging citizens to own and run services	5.60%	5.60%	22.20%	22.20%	33.30%
Developing and implementing the Local Compact	0	0	11.10%	55.60%	27.80%
Engaging with the third sector	11.10%	11.10%	55.60%	16.70%	16.70%
Commissioning from the third sector	16.70%	0%	16.70%	50.00%	16.70%



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Table 17

Is there a specific officer who is charged (formally or in practice) with the community empowerment agenda who we could contact?	
No	27.80%
Yes	61.10%
Don't know	11.10%

Table 18

Is there an elected member who has responsibility for the community empowerment agenda who we could contact?	
No	44.40%
Yes	44.40%
Don't know	11.10%

Table 19

Is there a specific officer who is charged (formally or in practice) with developing engagement with the third sector?	
No	5.60%
Yes	83.30%
Don't know	11.10%

