

Summary of EATA response to the Commission for the Compact consultation on the debate into “the future of the compact”

The European Association for the Treatment of Addiction (UK) is the main representative body for the voluntary and independent drug and alcohol treatment and aftercare sector, working to ensure that people affected by substance dependencies get the treatment they need.

The Association contributes to the debate on policy that relate to drug and alcohol treatment. In this role we respond to consultations and reports from government departments and agencies and other bodies.

Below is EATA’s response, following consultation with our members, to the discussion paper exploring the future of the Compact.

Many of EATA’s members who responded to this consultation via email and through face-to-face and telephone conversations explained that their experience of operating under the Compact (particularly Local Compacts) has led them to conclude that the current Compact is not protecting the autonomy of the voluntary sector or they cannot use it as a functional tool to repel external threats to their independence. The problems that most members experience are at a local level. The proposed changes to the national Compact will need to be accompanied by changes and improvements at the local level, where our members say it is needed most and will have more impact.

Some of the comments we’ve received concerning this problem include:

- “The Local Compact in our area has no bite. Therefore we don’t feel the independence that it is supposed to guarantee.”
- “There are no sanctions or recourse to justice. It is purely voluntary and in many cases, depends on the goodwill of the person you are building a relationship.”
- “A Local Compact Agreement was introduced in our area but it was not abided by. In fact, many of the people we work with in a local authority seem to be totally unaware that it’s there.”
- “If we protest against departures from the Local Compact, particularly with regards to full cost recovery, we feel as if we will receive a black mark against our names when it comes to future application bids. We feel pressure to keep quiet, and to grin and bear it.”

The voluntary sector, particularly the drug and alcohol treatment service providers who make up most of our members, find it frustrating and at times incredible when an agreement is set up and then blatantly ignored. They do not know where they stand and believe that to try to ensure that the statutory sector stick to the letter of the Compact puts their organisation’s future funding in jeopardy. This state of affairs not only could undermine the security of their organisation but also the level of treatment that is available to those who need it in the area.

Our members want an agreement that is based not only on mutual understanding and respect, but also once in place, is abided by. The Compact needs to be strengthened and more effectively outline how the public and voluntary sectors should behave towards each other.

However, EATA and our members were uncertain about the value of giving “Statutory Powers” to either the Commission for the Compact or another independent body to enforce the Compact and issue sanctions where transgressions have been made. For not only would a Statutory Compact put obligations on the statutory sector, it would also put further obligations on the voluntary sector which might in the long term undermine its independence. But where the Compact appears to be ignored by either party, more powers by either the Compact for the Commission (which in that case would need to be made an independent body) or another independent body are needed to investigate these issues and publicly report findings and failures to Parliament and Government. Government would also be required to respond and to make recommendations for improvements.

The Compact does need to be set on a stronger footing than it appears to be at present. Alongside the recommendations we have made in our previous paragraph, EATA would like to see something implemented along the lines of the Welsh model of statutory provision, which requires the Government to set out its proposals towards the Voluntary Sector (including the Compact) and to account to Parliament each year. This annual endorsing not only strengthens the relationship between the Statutory and Voluntary Sectors, but also may result in better awareness. For whatever the shape of the agreement in the future, without greater awareness of the Compact and the role it should play in governing how the public and voluntary sector should behave towards each other, all the hard work to make it more relevant and effective will be undone.

It is interesting to note from the discussion paper (page 3) that every top tier local authority in England now has a Local Compact for its area. However, the majority of our members who sent in their comments appeared to agree that they were unaware of this development. And in their dealings with the public sector, they have learned from local authority employees that they are also unaware of their own Local Compact and what it means for them in terms of the way its principles affect the nature of its working relationships.

A full list of open consultations can be seen at www.eata.org.uk/policy. On the same webpage you can find our responses to previous consultations.

For further information about this summary or our other policy activities, please contact:

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