

# **The Northumberland VCS Consortium**

**These thoughts are a compilation of the discussions Consortium members had back in October as well as at its meeting in December.**

## **Vision**

For the Consortium to develop a responsive leadership, to engage strategically on behalf of the voluntary and community sector and to nurture supportive partnerships to help deliver excellent services.

## **Mission**

To have a vibrant, independent and sustainable voluntary and community sector working collectively and in collaboration with others to secure the best interests of all those working and living in Northumberland.

## **Purpose**

The overarching purpose is to serve the sector in the county. In doing so the Consortium will:

1. promote and celebrate the diverse views of Northumberland's VCS
2. facilitate collaboration within and with the sector
3. supply a lead to the sector's perspective over a range of interests and strategies.
4. inform the sector through the dissemination of information
5. evidence the sector's value and impact
6. identify the support needs for the sector and facilitate the provision of resources
7. create spaces for pro-active dialogue in decision making
8. act at county level and beyond

It is recognised that the diversity of the sector (size, structure, values, interests, capacity etc) is one of its major strengths but that this makes life difficult for those finding themselves performing a representative role. There must be clear lines of accountability and structures in place to allow for a two-way flow of information. A range of sector perspectives sitting on the Consortium's decision making body would also provide for greater legitimacy.

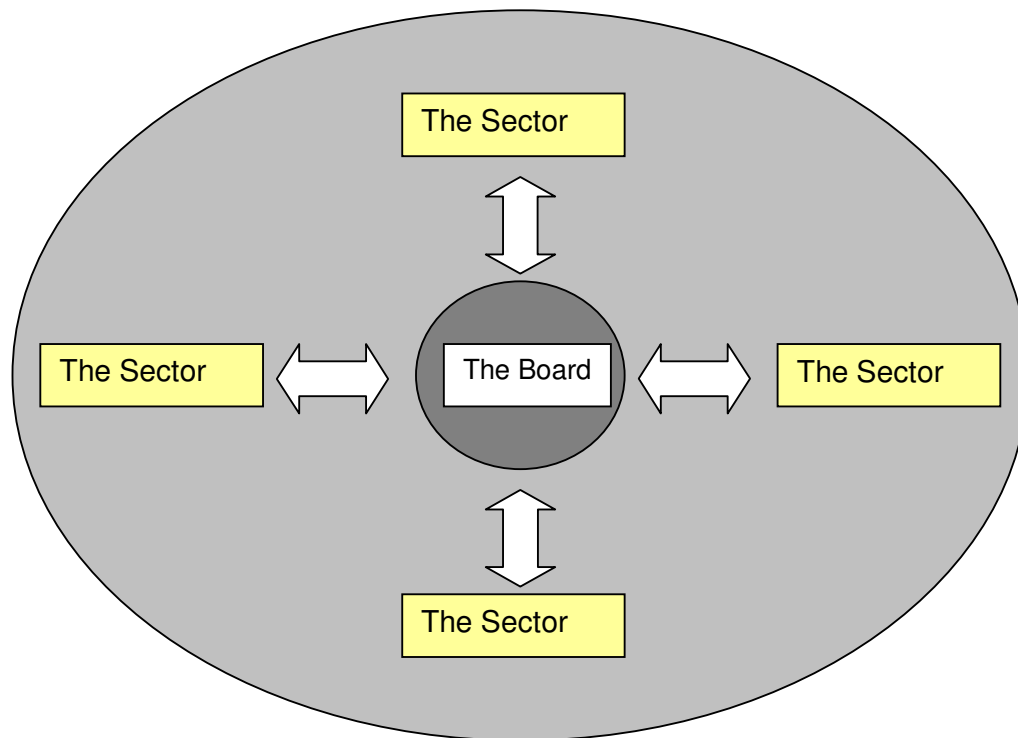
## **Basis of Consortium Membership**

It was agreed that membership is to be open to all voluntary and community organisations active in Northumberland. Most members would primarily engage with the Consortium by being on the receiving end of regular, relevant, information and attending network meetings or standing conferences to allow them to feed back their ideas and views. This approach recognises that the bulk of members want to be reassured that someone, somewhere is acting in their interests.

The core work of the Consortium would be directed by a Board made up of members working over a number of themes, with often more than one person in each theme. A person specification for members defining their role,

responsibilities and commitment required was considered to be a useful starting point in identifying Board members. Rather than have a standing, smaller executive-type body, the Consortium would appoint task groups to take responsibility for delivering specific pieces of work. This would match the intention to be more flexible in relation to changing needs as well as reduce any potential duplication/substitution that an executive might be tempted to perform. It would leave the Board firmly in the only driving seat but being responsive to the whole sector.

## The Consortium



The Board could be drawn from the following:

<b>Themes, networks and interests</b>	<b>Public sector observers/advisers</b>
Infrastructure including volunteering support	Local Councils
Employability & learning	Northumberland County Council
Regeneration	Jobcentre Plus
Advice & support to individuals	GP Commissioners/NHS Care Trust
Health, wellbeing and care	
Climate change & environment	
Children and young people	
Older people	
Faith	
Community Buildings	
Sporting activities	
Equality and diversity	
Culture & heritage	

## Activities

It is important to cement purpose to activities. It is also important to enable the Consortium to be highly flexible in its response to fast-changing circumstances. But prioritising activities in a resource tight era is a pre-requisite. To help this process of selection I have listed, as a guide, the main activities of the present Consortium and its support worker in fulfilling current purposes:

1. provides information: first-stop shop
2. interprets new reports/policies/strategies/initiatives
3. co-ordinates meetings of Consortium and Steering Group
4. co-ordinates & supports representation of VCS perspectives on range of county and area partnerships.
5. researches sector affecting change
6. co-ordinator of engagement in influencing new policies/strategies
7. monitors and promotes aggregate impact of sector
8. identifies gaps in sector's support needs
9. manages & edits website and database
10. provides secretariat for Compact Reference Group; liaises with signatories, deals with breaches
11. represents sector on regional VCS bodies & sign-posts to regional training provision
12. produces policy documents for Consortium, responds to consultations and facilitates engagement of sector by outside bodies.

The first four activities were identified by the meeting (October 19) as having high priority. It was further recognised that number 11 might decline in importance as regional public bodies wither. However VCS engagement in LEPs and the vacuum created at regional level might increase the demand for regional collaboration to ensure Northumberland's messages are delivered.

## Resources

Because Capacitybuilders have been funding the Consortium for the last 3 years, and ceases to exist on April 1 2011, we need to seek a different source or method of funding. An obvious source might be the County Council but the chance of increasing its present £354,190 allocation to infrastructure services appears remote. Indeed we might have to cope with a further reduction of 20%. There are no mechanisms in the present framework to accommodate the circumstances where external funding dries up without reducing the allocations for current recipients.

### Some options

1. **County Council** Consider a collaborative bid in response to the Council's invitation for Consortium activity
2. **Third Sector Capacity Fund** There might be case for an application by the Consortium for funding between April 1 – November 30<sup>th</sup> 2011. It would depend on how convincing we were that the Consortium contributed significantly to the economic sustainability within the sector.

3. **Central Government.** The Office for Civic Society is currently reviewing its plans for funding support bodies having recently invited comments for consultation. The conclusions are expected late spring/summer. The possibility of additional support for specific infrastructure services cannot be ruled out although support for consortia appears unlikely.

## **Managing resources and activities**

Background: For the last 3 years support (£48,000/y) for the Consortium has been provided by Capacitybuilders (a non-departmental government body). This ceases at the end of March 2011. The current accountable body for the VCS Consortium, which was a requirement of Capacitybuilders for all consortia it funded, is Community Action Northumberland.

Options:

1. Continue with a single host arrangement – agree which single host
2. Divide the activities between a number of different hosts

## **Governance**

The consensus reached at meetings where organisational type was discussed, was that the potential difficulties arising from turning the Consortium into an incorporated body would outweigh any advantages that it might bring. Furthermore, the agreed purposes do not lend themselves to limited company or registered charity status.

Suggestions:

- The terms of reference would be revised to accommodate the new purposes and structure.
- Each member organisation of the Consortium and Board would be limited to one vote.
- The quorum for the Board would be eight voting organisations.
- There would be an agreed way in which members of time-limited task groups would be appointed and how they would report back etc.
- The roles, responsibilities and obligations of members representing the Consortium on outside bodies would be clarified and agreed.