



## Consortium helps sector face challenging times

Northumberland VCS Consortium has responded to challenges in ways that put support services on a stronger footing

Local government reorganisation and planned funding cuts in Northumberland have presented real challenges for infrastructure organisations. Through the Northumberland VCS Consortium, the county's main generic infrastructure service providers have been able to respond proactively in order to ensure support services have a sustainable future in Northumberland. At the same time, collaboration around the development of Volunteering Northumberland has helped re-establish support for volunteering in the north and west of the county, addressing gaps in support while bringing the Consortium's activities more closely in line with local stakeholders' priorities.

## *What Capacitybuilders funding was received and how was it used?*

Northumberland VCS Consortium - the local ChangeUp Consortium - secured £144,000 of Consortia Development Funding for 2008-2011. Amongst other things, this has been used to fund a Sector Development Officer who coordinates the work of the Consortium, which aims to provide a single voice to represent the third sector in the county. The Consortium was the chosen mechanism for selecting third sector representatives to sit on Northumberland Strategic Partnership structures like its Board, Executive, Thematic and Area Partnerships and the LAA. It is through the work of the Consortium that discussions between CVSs about closer collaboration in the future have been made easier.

Wansbeck CVS was awarded £123,809 of Consortia Modernisation Funding for Volunteering Northumberland for 2008-2011. This covers the salaries of 1.5 full time posts in Volunteering Northumberland (the remaining funding for the team of five is provided by Big Lottery BASIS funding). In addition, in 2007 a small amount of Capacitybuilders funding was used to fund an officer from Wansbeck CVS to prepare a report on the future of volunteering support in Northumberland.

## *How has the local context changed for support services in Northumberland?*

Northumberland became a unitary authority in April 2009, transforming the county and six district councils into a single authority. This Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) represented a huge challenge for support services. The new unitary authority was responsible for taking on relationships with the third sector, a role which the district councils had largely fulfilled prior to LGR. Northumberland Council was therefore seeking to engage with and understand the sector.

## *How has the Consortium supported the third sector to respond to reorganisation?*

The creation of a unitary authority in Northumberland made the work of the Northumberland VCS Consortium – the countywide ChangeUp Consortium – more important. The Consortium has 28 network members from a mixture of infrastructure and frontline organisations. They represent the full breadth of the VCS sector, including the six equality strands (disability, gender, age, race, faith and sexual orientation). As it aims to reflect the views of the whole of the county's diverse third sector, the Consortium is best placed to act as the voice of the sector and engage with the new council.

The Consortium consulted with the third sector, including all members and a number of non-member frontline organisations, about local government reorganisation. They fed back findings to the council, who agreed to maintain grant funding of the sector in 2009-10 at the same level the districts had funded them in 2008-09 (approximately £1.5 million). Funding was secured for a range of infrastructure organisations including the three CVSs that together provided generic support to TSOs across the whole county - Community and Voluntary Action Blyth Valley and Wansbeck CVS in the more urban south east of the county, and Community Action Northumberland (CAN), a CVS and rural community council, in the largely rural north and west. Local authority funding was also secured for specialist infrastructure organisations, including those providing support to groups working on disability, children and young people, learning, and equality and diversity.

Several CVS staff members felt that the Consortium played a pivotal role in this by providing a single voice for the third sector. As Sheila McGuckin, Chief Officer of Wansbeck CVS, says:

*“Northumberland County Council made a commitment to maintain various bits of funding in this financial year and I think that is as a result of having the Consortium”*

## *How has the Consortium supported the third sector to respond to Northumberland Council's third sector review?*

Northumberland County Council began a review of its relationship with the third sector in June 2009. The review proposed a change of the Council's relationship with the third sector, for instance by increasing the participation of third sector organisations in delivering public sector contracts. It reported at the end of November 2009, which coincided with the announcement of the Council's intentions to reduce grant funding to the third sector by £300,000 (a cut of 20%). This is part of planned cuts to general Council budgets of up to £30 million for the 2010-11 budget (an overall cut of 10%). The review also proposes that the Consortium advises the Council on how best this reduced sum can be spent.

The planned cuts have now provided a stronger stimulus for the three main generic infrastructure organisations in the county – CVA Blyth Valley, Wansbeck CVS, and CAN – to consider working more closely together. They are currently working with the Consortium to prepare options for collaboration, which they will discuss with the other infrastructure organisations. Current thinking suggests that in the lead up to April 2010, the CVSs will make commitments in their business plans to closer collaboration; from April 2010, they will develop a package of collaborative initiatives, and prepare for

substantial organisational change; and from April 2011, they will share resources across the three organisations. There is currently no clear commitment to a full merger of the CVSs, mainly because learning from elsewhere shows that this would require a significant investment in the short-term, which would be difficult given planned funding cuts.

These recent discussions about closer joint working are based on strong relationships between the CVSs that have been built through the Consortium. Facilitated by the Consortium, CVSs have jointly commissioned research and jointly delivered support projects to the whole county (though usually led by one organisation). As Sheila McGuckin put it:

*“ChangeUp and Capacitybuilders funding has made a significant difference in the working relationship. Prior to ChangeUp and Capacitybuilders we all used to do our own thing, whereas now there is a much more coordinated approach and much more joint working.”*

By intensifying joint working over the next 12 months and beyond, they hope to achieve efficiency savings. This should help make the smaller pot of funding go further, and so reduce the impact of reductions in funding on support services. This should also ensure they provide value for money for local authority investment, strengthening their case for maintaining funding in future.

### *What role does ‘Volunteering Northumberland’ play?*

Increasing rates of volunteering is one of Northumberland’s 35 Local Area Agreement (LAA) targets, and therefore a priority for the Local Strategic Partnership and the Council. In 2006 there were intensive discussions between the three volunteer centres in the county - Wansbeck and Castle Morpeth, North Northumberland and Volunteering Tynedale - about closer joint working. However, in 2007 the Tynedale and North Northumberland volunteer centres closed, owing to a lack of funding. This put an end to discussions about closer joint working and left the majority of the county without volunteering support.

Faced with this radical scaling back of volunteering services in the county, the Consortium made volunteering a priority in its VCS Infrastructure Development Strategy 2008-2014. As Anne Lyall, the officer responsible for Wansbeck and Morpeth Volunteer Centre at the time, put it:

*“The joint working through the Consortium focused the mind on ‘we need to provide a countywide service that will align with the new authority’ [and] as the unitary was formed, it brought the volunteer centres together.”*

The Consortium produced a report setting out possible models for a countywide volunteering service, Fit for Purpose, Fit for the Future: Strengthening Volunteering Infrastructure in Northumberland 2008-2014. It proposed creating a countywide volunteering organisation called Volunteering Northumberland, with a small team of home-based development workers providing outreach support for volunteers and volunteering organisations. The proposals took into account the establishment of the unitary authority – a driver for countywide structures – and the uncertainty of grant funding – a driver for more efficient working.

Volunteering Northumberland (VN) was established in June 2008, with the Consortium channeling in a mixture of funding - from Capacitybuilders and the Single Programme (devolved funding from the Regional Development Agency – ONE North East) - to cover the salaries of core staff. This included an overall manager and two development workers based in the north and west of the county for the first nine months. The Consortium then supported successful Volunteering Northumberland bids to Capacitybuilders’ Modernisation Fund (2008-11) and Big Lottery BASIS 2 programme (2008-12). A full team is now employed, comprising the manager and four development workers.

The development workers are geographically based, but as a countywide service, they can travel to volunteers or groups anywhere in the county. Individual volunteers or groups can also attend any Volunteering Northumberland training sessions regardless of which part of the county they are held in. This has clear benefits in terms of access to specialist advice or training, says Anne Lyall, Senior Executive Officer at Wansbeck CVS:

*“One member of staff has a lot of experience in delivering training on volunteering; if we had been parochial in the south east we wouldn’t be sharing those skills.”*

The new organisation has essentially replaced the two volunteering centres that closed in 2007 but has built on services already provided by Wansbeth & Morpeth volunteer centre. It has standardised the type of volunteer services provided in the county, and VN is working to gain Volunteering England accreditation. Unlike the centres it replaces, it follows one set of policies and procedures and has a single, recognisable brand. This new organisation has been making a coherent case for volunteering support services in the county in a way that has not happened before. The manager of VN is now actively highlighting the fit between VN’s activities and the Northumberland Strategic Partnership’s target to increase rates of volunteering, which is one of the partnership’s LAA targets, at relevant NSP meetings.

## How are support services more sustainable?

By leading or supporting the two activities above, the Consortium has facilitated the emergence of a support sector that is better placed to weather challenging times ahead.

The Consortium's engagement with the newly formed unitary authority appears to have been crucial to maintaining their funding for the third sector in 2009-10. Funding is certain to be cut in 2010-11 following completion of the Council's review of the third sector. Though the extent of these cuts has not been confirmed, what is clear is that the Council sees the Consortium as the mechanism for engaging with the third sector. As Kirsten Francis, Third Sector Officer at Northumberland Council put it:

*"The council sees the Consortium as an essential bridgehead to link with the third sector, we don't have the capacity to work individually with every third sector organisation."*

Past experience suggests that this means the Consortium is well-placed to influence decisions on future funding on behalf of the sector.

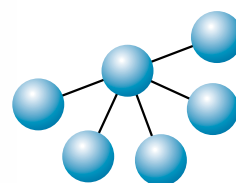
The Council's review not only proposes cuts but also asks the Consortium to identify the essential elements of support services and to propose ways they can be delivered more efficiently. The Consortium is preparing a response to the review for the third sector as a whole. As part of this, it is helping infrastructure organisations in the county to identify key services. As outlined above, it is also facilitating the three main generic CVSs to collaborate more closely over the next 18 months and beyond, with a view to ensuring more efficient services that respond to strategic threats to countywide funding. Together they provide support to frontline organisations across the county, and if any of them faced cut-backs this could have a substantial impact on support available to TSOs in the county. Their sustainability is therefore crucial to the sustainability of support services in the county as a whole. In addition, they deliver relatively

similar services and some of their back office functions overlap; closer collaboration therefore has the potential to deliver efficiencies. By taking a strategic approach to closer collaboration, the CVSs should be able to remodel their services in a way that reduces the impact of these cuts on support for frontline organisations.

The volunteering service also faces funding challenges, but these are less imminent, as they have Capacitybuilders funding to 2011 and Big Lottery BASIS funding until 2012. Nevertheless, Volunteering Northumberland has consciously tried to place itself well to compete for future funding, by aiming to achieve Volunteering England accreditation for their services. In addition, it provides a 'lighter', more efficient service than the three volunteer centres it replaces. Having home-based outreach workers has helped reduce administrative costs and direct costs spent on office rent, and has allowed them to focus staff time on the frontline, providing a similar service for less money. Experience from elsewhere suggests that achieving greater value for money should put them in a better position to secure funding in future.

## Key learning points

- The Consortium has helped manage the impact of Local Government Reorganisation on the third sector by providing a single voice in engagement with the Council.
- The Consortium is facilitating discussions about closer collaboration between three infrastructure organisations, helping accelerate plans to provide a more efficient countywide support service in line with the Council's third sector review.
- By centralising volunteer services Volunteering Northumberland has been able to standardise the quality of services and place itself better to secure funding in the future. By using home-based outreach workers VN has reduced costs whilst retaining accessible services for groups and volunteers across the county.



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