



The voice of the voluntary and community sector

Report of Standing Conference

May 18 2007

Stannington Village Hall

Introduction

This was the first conference held by Northumberland's VCS Consortium. It was described as "standing" to indicate that it would be a regular feature in the voluntary and community sector's calendar.

Approximately 500 voluntary and community sector organisations and groups were invited. They were selected from a database of about 1000 on the basis of geographic spread (proportionate to the populations of the 6 districts), spread of size and range of interests. We received acceptances from about 100 and, on the day, 81 people attended.

The morning was divided into four sections: presentations, discussion, questions & answers and a buffet meal.

Feedback from the Conference has been positive. Half of those attending completed an evaluation form and, overall the conference was very well received (see p 9 for evaluation report).

Programme

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|-------|---|
| 09.45 | Registration coffee and tea |
| 10.15 | Welcome and introduction
Rodney James, Chair of VCS Consortium |
| 10.25 | Consortium - what it is and why?
George Courtice, Sector Development Officer |
| 10.45 | Some dangers of Consortium collaboration
George Hepburn, Community Foundation serving Tyne & Wear and Northumberland |
| 11.05 | Opportunities and challenges
Ben Kernighan, National Council for Voluntary Organisations |
| 12.25 | Discussion groups |
| 12.45 | Questions from the floor |
| 12.45 | Buffet meal |

Each person received a folder containing the following:

- Agenda
- List of attendees with their organisations
- Summary biographies of outside speakers
- Consortium leaflet
- Summary of projects overseen by the Consortium
- Membership of Consortium and themes/target groups
- Achieve More (Performance Hub magazine)
- Future Focus (What will our funding be like in 5 years' time?)
- Evaluation form

Presentations

George Courtice, Sector Development Officer

See slide summary

George Hepburn, Chief Executive

Community Foundation serving Tyne & Wear and Northumberland



George started with an open question of whether we were in danger of sowing the seeds of our own destruction. David Miliband had talked about the importance of making the voluntary and community sector the “heart of government” and he wondered whether this could be a double edged sword. The voluntary and community sector was too complex to be treated in a monolithic way.

Fundamental questions about the relationship between the quality of infrastructure support and the quality of the services which frontline organisations deliver needed to be asked particularly in view of the evidence from some parts of the country that CVS provision is very variable.

Perhaps funders should even consider funding delivery organisations for them to decide where to purchase infrastructure services?

There are other support models out there: Road Haulage Association; Country Land & Business Association; Small Business Federation are all highly effective at supporting their members both nationally and locally. We should learn from

these organisations. We should demonstrate clear leadership; be much better at promoting ourselves and stop being so self-effacing.

There are real challenges ahead. Web based support & skills exchange has to be an important part of the future. Current levels of infrastructure support are just not sustainable if funding declines. Bottom-up demand is the key to survival.

Ben Kernighan Deputy Chief Executive National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)



Ben outlined some of the important national drivers influencing the VCS. The NCVO acts as the umbrella organisation for over 5000 charities in England & Wales. The recent flurry of government interest in the sector (ChangeUp, the Compact, Futurebuilders, Office of Third Sector) provides us with an opportunity. But we have to accept that there is plenty more to be done. The Compact might have been widely “adopted” but has the time arrived to give it a legal basis? Ed Miliband has made his mark but is likely to move on and upward when Gordon Brown takes over. *(This has turned out to be the case as Ed Miliband has been promoted to Minister at the Cabinet Office and now oversees the work of the new Minister for the Third Sector – Phil Hope)*

Much is talked about leadership but this is often difficult because many people in the sector don’t want to be led. He likened it to herding cats.

A recent survey confirmed that funding was the top priority for 70% of those questioned. Public funding is likely to get tighter with spending on health and education growing more slowly. Lottery income is slowly declining and grants are still going to be the “lifeblood” of the sector. But there are new opportunities. “Unclaimed assets” might be a new source to benefit the sector; increases in income from trading will also contribute.

Retaining the trust of the public in the sector should be a top priority. Currently it is higher than the police, army or BBC but it is declining and that must be stemmed. One important way of maintaining trust & confidence is to ensure we stay true to our values and missions. That means being open and being willing to share failures as well as successes.

The most important component of our leadership is reflected in the quality of our trustee boards and management committees. Collaboration should be the norm and the priority should be to defend the cause before the interests of the organisation.

Politically the environment looks reasonably healthy: financially the future looks more challenging.

Questions for groups to consider

The conference then divided into nine tables, with a facilitator on each, to discuss four questions. Some decided to concentrate on only one or two questions but most groups covered all four. The contributions were summarised by the facilitators but, because many similar concerns and issues arose, these summaries have then been further condensed as follows.

1 *What should be the top two priorities for the Consortium in relation to:*

a) the support services you require?

- Small organisations need basic, generic support.
- Funding advice was included in most groups' top priorities
- Interpret legislation & government policy for VCS
- Disseminate information as widely as possible
- Anticipate & analyse impact of policy change
- Advice on merging, sharing skills, publicity

b) policy and representation?

- Open doors to new opportunities & initiatives
- Campaign and lobby on behalf of sector
- Vigorously challenge policies which work against the sector's interests
- Make sure the Compact is working effectively

2 *Do you see the delivery of services on behalf of public bodies an important way of securing a financial future?*

- Only a small minority of participants had any experience of contracts
- More information was needed before an informed view could be taken
- Procurement officers will need to change their attitudes towards the sector
- Small organisations will always find this route difficult and it is not realistic to expect them to explore it
- This route is sometimes viewed by public bodies as a cheap option. Paid staff should never be replaced by volunteers.
- The sudden withdrawal of contracts can create real problems
- Mission drift is associated with this direction and should be resisted
- Tenders are often too short and don't give sufficient weight to local knowledge and experience.
- Don't want to be part of any decline in public service provision
- Trend towards fewer and larger contracts could require a coordination role from the Consortium.

3 How can the Consortium communicate with you better?

- Use a variety of methods as some are not connected to the internet.
- Don't drown organisations with information but target groups with what will interest them.
- Must always make clear the relevance of the Consortium to their organisation in all communications
- Promote Consortium to networks more effectively and distribute the leaflet widely
- Feedback findings to recipients of questionnaires
- Many had not heard of Consortium till today so more press coverage, better marketing
- Make use of dedicated website

4 How can the Consortium be better structured to reflect your needs?

- Have we got the right make-up of membership?
- Have a much clearer induction for people joining the Consortium so that they understand their roles and responsibilities much better.
- There appear to be gaps...recreation, uniformed groups, men
- Small groups find it difficult to feed into the present structure
- How effective are the theme/target leads in disseminating information upwards as well as downwards?
- There is a real difficulty in expecting the Consortium to deal with the issues facing large organisations as well as smaller ones. Perhaps split it into divisions?
- Vigorously resist the adoption of the term "Third Sector"

Questions and Answers

Sandi Downing: Could George Hepburn expand on his suggestion that frontline organisations should receive funding to allow them to select what support they wanted to buy?

George Hepburn: The idea is to give power to where it matters most - organisations and groups which deliver the services, allowing them the freedom to shop around for the best deal. Infrastructure services are only useful if they supply what is required and improve delivery as a consequence. Marketing your organisation is a good example. Try including that in your next grant application.

Angela McKeown: We have all had our fingers burnt with buying in training courses which have not turned out to be very valuable. Many local organisations would be well placed to provide training, often on a one-to-one

basis. It has worked for us. All that is needed is the funding available for this practical help.

Ben Kernighan: I agree. The NCVO runs a scheme called “Only Connect” which allows groups involved in trading activities the chance to share their experiences.

Alison Thomas: Wansbeck too has a similar system where organisations can be compensated for “visit and learn” days.

Rodney James & George Courtice: The issue of whether the Consortium sufficiently reflects the voice of small community and volunteer based organisations has long been a concern. **George Hepburn:** The split between voluntary and community is worrying. In some areas the divisions are making life difficult.

Richard Powell: NALC arguably supplies the community voice and ensures a flow of information to groups and networks. We need to encourage more networks & more effective networks but recognise that there are no easy answers.

Mike Coleman: Whoever came up with the term “Third Sector” should be held to account! Our challenge to George Courtice is to get it changed.

Ben Kernighan: I have always favoured “civil society”. The trouble is that voluntary and community is not a sufficiently wide description. We need a more embracing title to include social enterprises. Social Purpose Organisations has also been suggested.

Unrecorded: The Consortium’s problem is that it is trying to cater for both small and large organisations which is just about impossible.

The Consortium has recognised that it needs its membership to reflect a range of different sized organisations if it is to identify infrastructure support priorities. At present and over and above generic support for all groups, the Consortium oversees 15 different projects providing support services most of which are designed to benefit community groups.

Mike Coleman: When it comes to dealing with public bodies re-structuring, name changes, people changing/leaving all lead to real barriers. It makes it difficult to build up productive relationships.

Brian Fishwick: That really emphasises the importance of better communication within our sector which was a really important theme on this table.

Anne Lyall: Many organisations struggle with attending meetings. We must accommodate this and look for additional/different ways of communicating. Clearly the web site will have a role to play.

Ben Kernighan: The press & other media are useful means of communicating our message to a wide audience. It's important that we have evidence to support our opinions. It doesn't have to be formal market research. There's nothing to beat case studies.

Thom Bradley: We should use the Compact to help ensure multi-year funding; to make sure that the sector is not always the first to be cut when public bodies attempt to reduce costs. It's a matter of respect for a sector sometimes exhausted by the cheapest deals and the shortest commitment.

Louise Currie: My table thought the most important role for the Consortium was to lobby, campaign and convince...to do those things which individual organisations & groups rarely have the capacity to consider.

The Consortium would like to thank George Hepburn and Ben Kernighan for their valuable contributions and the facilitators of the discussions.

I apologise for any errors & omissions and inaccurate attributions to participants. The responsibility is entirely George Courtice's.

Evaluation

Prepared by

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The Northumberland Voluntary and Community Sector Consortium hosted a conference, at Stannington Village Hall, on 18 May 2007. The conference was attended by 81 delegates including the four speakers and the delegates were invited to complete an evaluation at the end of the conference. The evaluation form asked delegates to assess ten elements of the conference on a five point scale. 40 (50%) evaluation forms were returned and the analysis shows high levels of satisfaction throughout.

The table below shows the average score for each of the elements assessed whilst appendix 1 gives the numerical distribution of the evaluations.

Pre conference information useful		●				Pre conference information not useful
Location of venue convenient	●					Location of venue not convenient
Venue good	●					Venue poor
Conference pack useful	●					Conference pack not useful
Presentations relevant to my work		●				Presentations not relevant to my work
Presentations of good quality		●				Presentations of poor quality
Discussion groups useful		●				Discussion groups not useful
Question and answer session useful		●				Question and answer session not useful
Catering good	●					Catering poor
Overall conference well organised	●					Overall conference poorly organised

As stated above the table clearly shows that overall the conference was very well received by those who attended. A review of the numerical distribution of the returns (appendix 1) shows that there was a very small amount of dissatisfaction with regard to the relevance of the presentations and the usefulness of the discussion groups and the question and answer session. This is probably a result of the wide spread of organisations attending the conference and the fact that only four delegates out of 40 who returned evaluations thought that the presentations had little relevance to their work is a good indication that the pitch was about right. The same can also be said of the discussion groups and question and answer session where three and two delegates respectively gave a low assessment.

The names of the delegates who attended and their organisations are given in appendix 3.

The evaluation form also gave delegates the opportunity to make other comments and 15 choose to do so. The list of comments is given in appendix 2.

Whilst a lot of the comments confirmed how useful, interesting and informative the conference had been some useful pointers for future conference improvements were also given, in particular:

- speakers should be wary of using too many initials and acronyms within a large diverse grouping
- awareness of the drawbacks of microphones where the user is not experienced in their use
- the size of the venue needs to be sufficient to ensure that the room does not become stuffy towards the end, or a break needs to be scheduled to allow the room to ventilate
- the political correctness of any jokes or witty asides need to be considered

Two delegates also asked about the next steps (Wansbeck CVS) and future developments (Berwick Family Centre) and these should be followed up if possible.

Appendix 1 Numerical distribution of evaluations

Pre conference information useful	10	6	12	3		Pre conference information not useful
Location of venue convenient	25	9	6			Location of venue not convenient
Venue good	24	10	4			Venue poor
Conference pack useful	24	15				Conference pack not useful
Presentations relevant to my work	8	15	11	3	1	Presentations not relevant to my work
Presentations of good quality	20	17	3			Presentations of poor quality
Discussion groups useful	17	14	6	2	1	Discussion groups not useful
Question and answer session useful	7	21	8	1	1	Question and answer session not useful
Catering good	30	7	1			Catering poor
Overall conference well organised	25	15				Overall conference poorly organised

Appendix 2 Other comments

- I would welcome further info and feedback from conference on further development of sub-groups.
- As a new WI Trustee I found this experience very useful. Thank you.
- Interesting but maybe not relevant to a very small organisation at times.
- It was very useful to hear other people's voices and exchange of views.
- Please refrain from using initials and acronyms when some of the participants are unfamiliar with them.
- Not particularly relevant to our group, although an interesting overall picture.
- Please tell George Hepburn they are INUITS (not INTUITS).
- Q & A group was very helpful. I enjoyed meeting people with the same problems from other parts of the county.
- Discussion group was very good. Please get website up and running a.s.a.p. Communication is the way forward.
- I did not appreciate the non-PC reference to women/cricket at start although other witty asides well received. The venue was rather stuffy by end of the third speech. Microphone training required for the main speakers.
- Difficult to satisfy the expectations of such disparate groups - common willingness to 'do good' must be exploited somehow though
- Next steps?
- Mix at our table was unfortunate, with four people who knew nothing about consortium, two NSP and me!! Difficult to guide conversation
- Very informative but I feel we are minnows amongst whales!

Appendix 3 Delegate list

Armstrong	Anthony J	Food Chain N.E.
Baring	Francis	Community Foundation serving Tyne & Wear & Northumberland
Barker	Norma	Hepscott Parish Council
Beattie	Edna	Wylam Institute Community Association
Beighton	Sandra	Capacitybuilders
Bevan	Sue	Northumberland Strategic Partnership
Bibby-Wilson	Kim	Morpeth Gathering
Bradley	Thom	Blyth Valley CVS
Britton	Audrey	Northumberland Friendship Centre
Britton	Bill	Northumberland Friendship Centre
Carins	Karen	Stannington Village Hall
Carnaby	Cath	Womens Health Advice Centre
Coleman	Mike	Volunteering Tynedale
Cooper	Fay	Northumberland Strategic Partnership
Courtice	George	Sector Development Officer
Cowans	Christine	Castle Morpeth Borough Council
Crosby	Thomas	Ashington Veterans
Currie	Louise	Community Action Northumberland
Davidson	John	Glendale Gateway Trust
Davison	Diane	Coqbeck Outreach
Dickson	Eric	Blyth Talking Newspaper
Downing	Sandi	Northumberland Childrens Fund
Elliott	Peter	Azure
Fishwick	Brian	Age Concern Northumberland
Galbraith	Gemma	Princes Trust
Gibson	Tony	Blyth Talking Newspaper
Glascott	Linda	Contact, Morpeth
Gooding	Andrew	Lynemouth Community Trust
Gowland	Mrs	Thropton Memorial Hall
Gowland	Mike	Thropton Memorial Hall
Harrison	Sylvia	North Northumberland Village Hall Consortium
Hart	Jane	Community Action Northumberland
Hepburn	George	Community Foundation serving Tyne & Wear & Northumberland
Hogg	Diana	Alnwick Mencap
Holland	Jenni	North Tynies Childcare
Hume	John	Ashington Veterans
James	Rodney	VCS Consortium Chair
Johnson	Marc	Community Action Northumberland
Kelly	Mary	Prudhoe Parish Hall
Kernighan	Ben	National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)
Lambert	Sheila	St John Ambulance
Lepingwell	Annabel	Northumberland County Blind Association
Lumbley	Deborah	Pre-School Learning Alliance
Luther	Joanne	Castle Morpeth BC
Lyall	Anne	Volunteering Northumberland

Macdonald	Fiona	Gateway into the Community
Macfarlane	Moira	Alnwick CAB
Mackison	Jim	Community Foundation serving Tyne & Wear & Northumberland
Maxwell	Lilian	Prudhoe Parish Hall
McKeown	Angela	Berwick Family Centre
McQueen	John	Castle Morpeth Disability Association
Middlemiss	Maureen	Amble MACPI
Niven	Pamela	Riding Mill Village Hall
Oomes	Fiona	Wylam Institute Community Association
Paton	Anne	North of Tyne Patient's Voice
Poppleton	Richard	Hedgeley Parish Council and Alnwick Rural Network
Prudhoe	Liz	ADAPT
Raine	Anne	Pre-School Learning Alliance
Reid	Heather	Charlotte Straker Project
Robson	Ann	Slaley Parich Council
Robson	Doreen	Stannington Village Hall
Skipsey	Graham	YMCA N'ld
Snowden	Richard	Haydon Parish Council
Stella	Maria	BECON & N'ld Multinational and Minority Ethnic Group
Strasenburgh	Lorena	Northumberland Multinational and Minority Ethnic Group
Strong	Alison	Northumberland Federation of Womens Institutes
Swanston	Susan J	St Marks Utd Reformed Church Amble
Taylor	Paul	Blyth Valley BC
Taylor	Philip	Antiquarian Society
Taylor	Marjorie	Craster Memorial Hall
Thirtle	Brent	Blyth Star Enterprises Ltd
Thomas	Alison	Wansbeck Initiative
Tighe	Monica	Blyth Valley Disabled Forum
Turnbull	Rachel	Alnwick CAB
Tweddle	Jeff	Northumberland Rural Network Partnership/Rural Voices
Wadds	Pat	Craster Memorial Hall
Watson	Anna	Coqbeck Outreach
Watson	Lynda	Contracts & Compact Officer, Community Action N'land
Watts	Hilary	Opus Employment Project
Weddle	Ross	Berwick Borough LSP
Wilson	Amelia	Northumberland Federation of Women's Institutes