



Report of the fourth VCS Consortium Standing Conference

Tuesday 1 July 2008

at Alnwick Garden



www.northumberlandvcs.org.uk

Summary

This was the Northumberland VCS Consortium's fourth standing conference. The theme was **What's on Offer?** The morning included:

- hearing what the county's new political administration thinks about the voluntary and community sector.
- discovering what the Local Area Agreement means to us
- finding out from LINK about the new body responsible for making our voices heard over health and care services
- learning about the plans for improving support for volunteering

Approximately 800 Northumberland based voluntary and community sector organisations and groups, covering a wide range of interests, were invited. The venue limited capacity to about 100 and we had to turn away a number of individuals who wanted to attend. On the day, 96 people attended (see appendix 1 for the full list).

The morning was divided into three sections: presentations followed by questions, table discussions and a buffet meal.

Feedback from the Conference has been positive. 66% of those attending completed the evaluation form and, overall, the conference was very well received (see page 8 for the summary and appendix 2 for evaluation details).

Programme for the day

9.30	Arrivals, registration and refreshments
10.00	Welcome and introductions – Rodney James
10.10	Cllr. Neil Bradbury, Northumberland County Council
10.25	George Courtice, Our Local Area Agreement
10.40	Liz Prudhoe & Julia Lyford, The LINK
10.55	Anne Lyall & Charles Tremeer, Volunteering Northumberland
11.10	Question & Answers
11.25	Coffee
11.40	Table Discussions
12.30	Questions & Answers and Summing up
1.00 pm	Buffet Lunch

Each person was given a folder containing the following:

- Agenda and list of Consortium members
- List of participants and their organisations
- Background information on speakers
- What does the VCS contribute? - ranking
- Suggested subjects for table discussions
- Support services summary
- Evaluation form
- Consortium leaflet
- Compact leaflet
- Compact
- Evaluation form

Presentations

The following presentations can be accessed from the site as PDF files

Cllr Neil Bradbury

Northumberland's Local Area Agreement
George Courtice

LINKs
Liz Prudhoe and Julia Lyford

Volunteering Northumberland
Anne Lyall and Charles Tremeer

Questions & answer sessions

Participants were invited to ask questions at several stages during the conference. They included issues relating to the accountability of the sector; links to other organisations providing support for volunteers; how best to increase interest from potential volunteers and how the rewards for achieving some or all of the current LAA targets were to be allocated.

We have included below the questions directed toward Cllr Neil Bradbury as well as his responses in view of their high relevance to the sector as a whole.

David Francis (Community Action Northumberland):

You described the Belonging Communities concept as 'hastily prepared'. The process actually started back in 2005. Re the financial aspects – part of the voluntary sector receives funding from the NSP for infrastructure. This is not part of local government and this ends in March 2009. It is crucial that the new unitary authority addresses this key aspect of funding for support services which so clearly benefit voluntary and community sector providers.

Cllr Neil Bradbury:

The new UA will be examining this and won't be throwing out work done previously. There will be an opportunity for more involvement not less. The new administration will give as much assurance as possible and won't forget the infrastructure services in the county.

Peter Angus (Pegswood Parish Council):

UA needs to be more specific regarding the role of parish and town councils. We need to be reassured that the UA will listen to parish and town councils and not impose things not wanted on us.

Cllr Neil Bradbury:

We won't impose the solution. This won't just be a name change from Belonging Communities to something else, but will be a means of improving services.

Table discussions

There were ten table discussions and the facilitators reported back their main conclusions. We have condensed and amalgamated these in the following four sections.

1 Current advice & support needs

As expected the following overriding support needs featured large: funding sources and application advice, volunteer recruitment and retention, governance and constitutions, legal advice and networking.

In addition, specialist financial advice and marketing & publicity were seen as important. Learning from others was considered a particular priority and so systems and mechanisms to share good practice with similar groups and organisations needed to be developed.

It had to be accepted that most small organisations, particularly those which needed it most, were unlikely be in a position to purchase specialist support. HR, finance, legal services were all currently required if only on an occasional basis.

Greater clarity was needed in terms of responsibilities for ensuring that information over policy changes affecting the sector were disseminated as widely as possible.

Little things can make big differences. Recognising the contribution made by volunteers through awards etc can make a significant impact.

We need to prepare for the new era of procurement – if only to allay a few fears particularly in relation to smaller organisations.

2 Changing needs over next 3 years

The nature of the change in support needs really depended on whether the changes were internally or externally generated. External changes such as greater regulation, or a move away from grants to purchasing, mean that information, advice need to respond rapidly to this changing environment. Some tables considered that the changes were bound to reduce the numbers of voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) active in the county. Others viewed the difficulties of recruiting trustees as being the main barrier to growth. Work/life balances meant that it was also difficult to recruit general volunteers. People sometimes appeared to be happier to pay a joining fee to buy what they required rather than donate their time and expertise. But the sector needs to be much more savvy about the links between volunteering and moving back into the labour market. This would be particularly important come any economic recession.

There was an acceptance that some larger VCOs would be likely to purchase specialist support services over the next few years as well as have a greater reliance on nationally based umbrella organisations.

It needed to be recognised that 3 years was not a long time and so it was unlikely that most VCOs' needs would change significantly. However, long term trends like skills requiring to become increasingly specialist, means that the support sector must respond. What was required was greater clarity when it comes to knowing where to go and better integration of what was being offered. This might mean some rationalisation of support services.

The trend for the public sector to seek cheaper provision from the VCS needs to be countered. We need to design simpler ways of demonstrating our impact and the Compact needs more teeth. Working closer together and sharing more has to be the way forward.

3 Best ways of delivering that need

Email and web based communications, for much of the information exchanged, were largely recognised as the way forward. However, it has to be remembered that broadband does not cover all parts of the county and that must always be taken into account. The diversity of the sector is one of its strengths and so different organisations are likely to prefer different ways of obtaining advice and support.

The downside of easier communications is that we will all be smothered under mountains of emails. There was a clear preference for having people at the end of a phone and occasional one-to-one support. Some tables suggested that more “peer to peer” support might be a way forward which would fit in with the idea of more learning from sharing experiences. Some were keen to promote web based discussion forums; others to exploit public libraries more effectively as locations of funding information etc. Improved communications was the key and that meant better marketing of what services were available as well as better linkages between them. Having a single, central repository of information, which would sign post as necessary, was viewed by some as the ideal. Because capacities differ so much between organisations there will probably always be a need for a flexible mix of delivery methods.

4 Other issues and concerns

- Should the sector transform to match what funders want?
- Too much red tape (CRB clearances, safeguarding training etc) puts potential volunteers off.
- There is an assumption that those retiring early are all eager to volunteer. Where’s the evidence?
- The language of Belonging Communities is unnecessarily complicated – deters people from getting involved
- Known points of contact, with knowledge of particular communities, would be useful in the new authority.
- There was a need for support organisations to get to grips with the difference between their “influencing” and “representative” roles.

Ranking of contributions of VCS

People were offered the chance to rank what they thought were the three most important things the voluntary and community sector contributes. They had a choice of 10 statements and were given one gold star to place next to the statement they considered the most important contribution and 2 green stars for their second and third choices. One delegate from a public body found the idea that the statutory sector left any gaps difficult to contemplate and suggested that the VCS did not fill their gaps but added value to their services in an innovative and creative way.

The exercise was intended as an informal impression of what those present reckoned to be the most important “drivers”. The results for the top six are listed in the table below. I have ranked them according to their allocation of gold stars but “Providing a voice...” was the clear winner on second and third votes.

STATEMENT	GOLD	GREEN
1 Reaching people otherwise overlooked	30	20
2 Enabling people to volunteer their services for individual and community gain	11	23
3 Filling the gaps left by statutory services	9	25
4 Contributing to economic development by making the area more attractive to live and work in	8	7
=5 Providing a voice to those who need to be heard	7	29
=5 Campaigning for change	7	12

Evaluation

The conference was attended by 96 people, including speakers, and all were invited to complete an evaluation form. It asked delegates to assess ten elements of the conference on a five point scale. 63 evaluation forms were returned (equivalent to 66% of attenders) and, overall, they showed high levels of satisfaction throughout.

★ indicates the box with the most number of entries while appendix 2 gives the more detailed numerical distribution of the evaluations.

Excellent _____ Poor

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

Additional comments

The evaluation form also gave people the opportunity to make other comments. Over 20 people took advantage of this. Rather than include them all, we have summarised the critical ones in three main areas.

- Sound volume/quality was poor particularly at the back of the hall
- The two screens were too small and badly positioned for all to read the presentations.
- The food was eccentrically and slowly served.

The VCS Consortium would like to thank all those who took part.

A special thanks is due to all the speakers for their valuable contributions as well as to the facilitators of the table discussions.

As usual, a particular thanks is due to our chairman, Rodney James, who made sure the event ran smoothly.

A copy of this report can be found on www.northumberlandvcs.org.uk

Appendix 1 List of those attending.

Allan	Dave	Employment Opportunities
Ambrey	Helen	Elizabeth Finn Care
Andrew	Sue	Community Action Northumberland
Angus	Peter	Pegswood Parish Council
Aspden	Sue	N'land STARS
Banks	David	Crookham Village Hall
Bennett	Neil	Capacitybuilders
Best	Nic	N'land Credit Union
Bilton	Rachel	Marie Curie Cancer Care
Bland	Margaret	N'land Home Improvement Agency
Boaden	Richard	Historic Hexham Trust
Boundy	Pauline	CSV Training & Enterprise N'land
Bowden	Elaine	Alnwick & District Choral Society
Bradbury	Neil	Northumberland County Council
Bradley	Thom	Blyth Valley CVS
Braybrook	Roger	Tynedale CAB
Brearley	Janet	St Lawrence Church
Buckley	Pat	NSPCC
Butchart	Carol	Newbiggin WI
Carnaby	Cath	Women's Health Advice Centre
Carr	Mark	Alnwick Schools Partnership
Chadwick	Liz	Dawn (Advice) Ltd
Chan	Amanda	South Mountain Chinese Older People's Association
Claridge	Paul	East Chevington Parish Council
Corking	James	Norham Village Hall
Courtice	George	Sector Development Officer
Cresswell	Janet	East Ashington Development Trust
Cullingworth	Sue	NCH IN-PACT
Drake	Andrew	Royal British Legion
Edwards	John	Elsdon Village Hall
Elliott	Claire	Northumberland County Council
Elliott	Peter	Azure Charitable Enterprises
Elphick	Michael	Slaley Community Trust
Fakir	Lynda	Northumberland Community Devel. Network & NCC
Fenwick	Jill	RNLI
Finlayson	Brian	Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association
Francis	David	Community Action Northumberland
Gallon	John	Craster Community Development Trust
Gowland	Mike	Thropton Village Hall
Hannam	Linda	Learning Choices Northumberland
Harrison	Paul	Bell View (Belford)
Harrison	Sylvia	Felton Village Hall & N.N'land Village Halls Consortium
Hart	Jane	Community Action Northumberland
Herbert	Linda	Northumberland County Blind Association
Hill	Lesley	Northumbria Youth
Ho	Annie	Newcastle Chinese Healthy Living Centre
Hogg	Shaun	Community Action Northumberland
James	Rodney	Crossroads Church & Chair of Consortium
Johnson	Marc	Community Action Northumberland
Lennon	Dianne	The Rothley Trust
Littler	Joan	Alnwick Arts Association
Lodge	David	Greater Morpeth Development Trust

Logan	Angela	Morpeth Town Council
Lyll	Anne	Volunteering Northumberland
Lyford	Julia	N'land Community Development Network
Macfarlane	Moira	Alnwick and District CAB
Mavin	Christine	Richmond Fellowship
McCardie	Claire	Tyneside Cyrenians
McDonald	Fiona	Gateway into the Community
McKeown	Angela	Berwick Family Centre
McRae	Ian	Gallery Youth Project
Menzies	Chris	Barnabas Safe & Sound
Moran	Christine	Barnardos Northumberland Housing Project
Murphy	June	WATbus Community Transport
Nisbet	Kath	Age Concern
Oomes	Fiona	Wylam Institute Community Association
Peereboom	Angela	Beadnell WI
Proudlock	Vanessa	FONDT
Prudhoe	Liz	LINK
Raine	Anne	N'land Pre-School Learning Alliance
Reynolds	Jeff	Upper Coquetdale Community Transport
Richardson	Michael	Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institute
Ritchie	Walter	Stannington Village Hall
Robinson	Peter	Church of England
Robson	Jill	Job Centre Plus
Roper	Mavis	LINK
Sandbach	Russell	Berwick Community Development Trust
Scott	Jean	Cresswell Parish Council
Scott	John	Cresswell Parish Council
Scott	Michelle	Mental Health trust
Seabourne	Chris	Learning Skills Council North East
Shaw	Dave	Northumberland Credit Union (Prudhoe)
Shilton	Anne	Alnwick Community Development Trust
Smith	Simon	Spiral Skills Advocacy Service
Sprudd	Kirsty	Turning Point
Stephenson	Tony	Government Office North East
Tremeer	Charles	Volunteering Northumberland
Turnbull	Rachel	CABx
Tweddle	Jeff	Northumberland Rural Voices Network
Urwin	Kathy	REACH Volunteering
Walsh	Julie	WATbus Community Transport
Watson	Lynda	Compact & Contracts Officer
Weallans	Betty	Improving Croft and Cowpen Quay
Weldon	Trevor	Newbiggin Sailing Club
Whitfield	Ann	Heppele Village Hall
Wilson	Neil	Glendale Gateway Trust
Wren	Michelle	Age Concern Northumberland

Appendix 2

Numerical breakdown of evaluation

	EXCELLENT	2	3	4	POOR	TOTAL
BOOKING INFORMATION	26	24	7	1		58
LOCATION OF VENUE	40	20	1	2		63
VENUE	43	12	6	2		63
CONFERENCE PACK	19	28	13	2		62
PRESENTATIONS RELEVANCE	5	23	22	5	2	57
PRESENTATIONS QUALITY	5	20	27	8	1	61
Q & A SESSION	7	32	17	5	1	62
DISCUSSION GROUPS	13	30	14	4	1	62
CATERING	15	26	11	3	2	57
OVERALL	23	33	4			60
TOTALS	196	248	122	32	7	605