

Thank you for inviting me to speak today.

I am the assistant Portfolio Holder for Community Services in the new Liberal Democrat run administration at Northumberland County Council, with a special interest in working with the voluntary and community sector. We are a minority administration, run with the cooperation of the other parties.

My boss, Cllr Lesley Rickerby, the portfolio holder for Community Services, and I, have a number of areas of work that we have responsibility for, but the one closest to both our hearts is our role in engaging with the third sector in Northumberland.

I myself currently sit on the boards of two local community groups and have sat on various others in the past. In my professional life I have always worked in the voluntary sector or for it.

This means that Cllr Rickerby and myself, understand the crucial role the VCS plays in reaching out to all sectors of the community and in providing innovative solutions to areas where the state and the market risk failing our communities.

You have many friends in the new administration. Support for the VCS is found in every councillor in our administration.

Ensuring that the sector gets a fair deal from the council, and that in turn we benefit as a council from the strength of your contribution, is very important to us.

Therefore we realise that it is important to prepare properly for the big changes a unitary Northumberland will bring next year.

Voluntary and community groups need a higher degree of financial stability in terms of funding agreements from Northumberland - and we hope to deliver.

That's why we will be looking for ways to strengthen the provisions of the VCS county compact and why I can today announce that it is our aim for the financial year 2009/2010 is to honour grant and contract conditions the sector previously enjoyed under the District and County councils base budgets. This is part of an approach which will mean that groups are not subject to arbitrary cuts in funding levels.

Our vision for the council is one with the VCS at the centre of our agenda. We will not treat funding for the sector as the easy option when budget cuts are needed. Our aim is that the VCS budget remains at the same size as the base budgets for the sector of all 7 predecessor councils combined.

I personally campaigned against the move to one unitary council but now it is in place we need to make sure that the transition is a smooth one, making certain that services to the community do not suffer.

In May the people of Northumberland voted for a change.

My colleagues and I set out in our manifesto a clear message that we would not impose a homogenous solution on all our communities.

The principles of Neighbourhood management, where local neighbourhoods guide their own destiny, were also our guiding principles in making the new Northumberland County administration more trusting of the communities we serve.

There is a consensus across all parties that the 'Belonging Communities' agenda was hastily prepared and unnecessarily complicated. So we have gone back to re-examine it with an emphasis on a more community led focus.

We want to see the majority of grant funding for the sector devolved to local communities and focussed on local community delivery points, to give local people the power of initiative to improve their own areas.

From this administration you will see an openness to new ideas. We would like to see a widening of commissioning of services from the sector and I see an opportunity for the sector to run council services and for local partnerships to be the main drivers of regeneration. In this way Northumberland can become a leader in service innovation, fuelled by fresh thinking from within the sector.

There are two key messages I want you to take away with you today concerning the administration at County Hall.

Firstly, we are committed towards ensuring the sector is treated fairly and that the transition to one Northumberland is not a period where the council adds to financial instability in the sector.

Secondly, we see an increasing role for the sector in giving communities a voice and enabling them to innovate in the provision of services.

Thank you.