



The voice of the voluntary and community sector

Report of the VCS Consortium Standing Conference

March 17 2008

Choppington Welfare

www.northumberlandvcs.org.uk

Introduction

This was the third standing conference held by Northumberland's VCS Consortium. The conference originally planned to focus on two main topics under the common theme of **Belonging to What?**

- Local Government Restructuring
- Local Area Agreement

Approximately 800 Northumberland based voluntary and community sector organisations and groups were invited covering a wide range of interests. The venue limited capacity to about 100 and 30 would-be attendees had to be turned away at the registration stage. On the day, 86 people attended. (See appendix 2 for the full list).

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

Feedback from the Conference has been positive. 53% of those attending completed an evaluation form and, overall, the conference was very well received (see below for evaluation details).

Programme

| | |
|-------|--|
| 09.30 | Registration and refreshments |
| 10.00 | Welcome and introductions Rodney James, Chair of VCS Consortium |
| | Guest Speaker: Jill Dixon, Deputy Chief Executive of Northumberland County Council. Local Government Reform : What's it all about? |
| | David Frances, Director of Community Action Northumberland Local Government Reform, What's the role of the community & voluntary sector? |
| | Question & Answer session |
| 11.00 | Break |
| 11.45 | Table Discussion |
| 12.50 | Summing up |
| 1.00 | Buffet Lunch |

The original programme included a presentation by George Courtice on Northumberland's Local Area Agreement, but it was agreed to postpone this for a future conference to allow sufficient time for questions and discussion.

Each person received two folders. The first contained information about the Northumberland Compact and the second contained the following:

- Agenda
- List of attendees with their organisations
- Summary biographies of outside speakers
- Latest map of intended Area & Belonging Communities Consortium leaflet
- List of membership of VCS Consortium
- Individual questionnaire
- Suggested subjects for table discussions
- Evaluation form

Presentations

Please double click the icons to reveal the PowerPoint presentations

Jill Dixon, Northumberland County Council



David Francis, VCS voice on Joint Implementation Team



Question and Answer Session

- 1. Diane Lennon – Rothley Trust:
What backing and support will be in place for local groups which were formerly distinctly District based?**

DF: A transition plan is in place. This includes a baseline survey to identify all those projects which each district has supported to ensure continuation of funding. With the disappearance of the 6 Districts in April 2009 new arrangements will have to be made to reflect new borders of various tiers – belonging communities, area communities - as well as the likelihood of new parish councils being formed in Wansbeck and Blyth Valley.

2. Peter Elliott – AZURE:

How will the proposed Strategic Directorates work? What has been the process and what will this be in the future?

JD: The structure needs to be looked at very differently from the current structure. We are conscious of costs and the trend in local government appears to be towards strategic directorates rather than specialist services such as Director of Education etc. The revised structure will have 3 directorates (people, place and performance) to cover all aspects of adult services, people and a close link with current structures in the north, west and south-east. The next level will have 10 sections.

3. Richard Poppleton - Hedgeley Parish Council & Alnwick Rural Area Network:

The concept of Characteristic Communities still seems a little vague – is this basically just going to be ‘Super District Councils’?

JD: Definitely not – this will be the way in which the new council can devolve services and decision-making to areas in order that area-level can recognise the different characteristics and reflect the different needs within the county.

4. Douglas Hoblyn – Friends of Morpeth Museum:

The reorganisation to incorporate the new tier of local government appears to be: County, Area, Belonging and parish/Town Councils. What happens if we want more than this?

JD: Belonging Community boundaries have been under discussion for more than 2 ½ years and will continue to be developed in the future. The new councillors elected in May will have new ideas and will need to work within the framework of the bid agreed by parliament. This could result in 4 or 5 areas instead of 3.

5. Ann Robson – Slaley Parish Council:

There seems to be a lot of additional work for parish councillors. Whereas Area Committees have elected councillors, where is the accountability for the Belonging Committees, who won't need to be elected?

DF: Parish Council feedback has shown that they want a bigger voice. Yes, this will present more challenges but clusters of parish councils are already sharing the workload to prevent duplication of effort.

The hierarchy needs to be clarified, with Belonging Community forums needing to work together to get added value, as the forums need to be about wider issues.

- 6. Bill Gale – Wanbeck CVS:**
It is stated that there will be £17m savings –will this being used to improve services?

JD: Yes, the £17m will be redirected to front-line services and will stay within the council in order to provide improvements.

- 7. Joe Sennett – Widdrington Station and Stobswood Parish Council:**
Where will the parish councils be in next year’s pecking order? Will they be outvoted by voluntary groups?

JD: The powers and rights of parish councils will be unchanged – only the Districts and County Council will be abolished.

The new arrangements aim to deliver better services. Parish Councils are needed to work with the new unitary councillors. Need to identify the best way to set this up and to work together.

- 8. Thom Bradley – Blyth Valley CVS:**
Parish Councils are the third tier of local government – this is a Voluntary and Community Sector conference.

DF: The VCS is wider than voluntary groups and needs to include parish councils as a voice of the community. There may be slightly different avenues and perspectives but the key factor is the composition of Belonging Community forums. ALL should be included in this voice.

- 9. Dave Shaw – Prudhoe Credit Union and Town Council:**
Where is the funding coming from to cater for the additional responsibilities? Although parish and Town Councils can increase the precept, this would not be a popular option. Will funding be available from the new set-up?

JD: Funding for the old districts and County Council will go to the new council. They will devolve the funding along with responsibilities. If a parish council is being asked to take on a specific service then this would be seen as a contract for which funding would be provided.

- 10. Andrew Gooding – Lynemouth Development Trust:**
There will be a considerable balancing act between services and cost savings. What will be the protocol to ensure the local level on service delivery is not overtaken by demands to reduce costs?

JD: Core corporate support services need to be made more efficient and cost effective so decentralisation services can work. Choices are to be made on how best to do this.

**11. Muriel Thompson – Wansbeck Friendship Society – Town Twinning:
At present we receive a small grant from Wansbeck District Council,
as a Compact has been set up between the twin towns. Where do
groups go for information in the future?**

JD: Policy and commissioning arrangements need to set up between the new authority and the Voluntary Sector, with both sides being involved in the decisions. It is highly likely that the same officers will be in place in the new set-up.

Later question and answer session with David Francis:

**12. Norman Dunn – Community Action Northumberland:
There are currently 27 Belonging Communities, with much interest
being shown in these. But what of the new council? What might go
and what might stay?**

This is not yet clear. It is predicted that the 67 councillors will be very different from the current line-up and party control could well change. And there will be time constraints on sorting out the problems. Consultation with the VCS is high on our agenda.

13. How do we go about getting involved?

In relation to the Belonging Community forums, a county-wide approach is being used to get the message across with meetings organised by the current District Councils. It is up to individual areas to sort out the detail. There will be further meetings during May, June and July as it is important to open these consultation events to all organisations.

14. Who appoints the people on the forums?

The current consultation process should identify different options. Some decisions will be made locally when organizations, specific to the area, are identified.

**15. What advertising is being used for the consultation process? Many
are still in the dark about the details of the events.**

This can be a big struggle – a better system is needed for the follow-up meetings.

**16. Why are the events by invitation only? Why not advertise in the
press?**

Susi Goncu: When the meetings were first organised there was a tight

deadline so the District Council Strategic Partnership Officers decided who to invite. Subsequent feedback will be looked at and suggestions as to the next round will be taken on board. This issue will be fed back.

17. Aside from meetings, the whole process of Unitary Authorities is ongoing. Can the Consortium pick up on this and present an updated picture – perhaps on the website – as the interpretation needs to be clarified. Disinformation can be destructive.

Table Discussions

The conference then divided into twelve tables, with an average of 7 per table, to discuss Belonging Communities. Several questions had been provided in the conference pack to stimulate discussion and the main points were recorded usually by the facilitators. Because many similar concerns and issues arose, these summaries have then been further condensed in six main headings (see below). These will be made available to all those within the JIT charged with developing the natural community initiative.

BCs = Belonging Communities; VCOs = Voluntary and Community Organisations
CFs = Community Forums

Belonging Communities Consultation process

1. Many present had not been invited to the consultation events and had no knowledge of them. Invitations had ranged from a minimum of one person per table to 50%.
2. The new arrangements must not cherry pick the 'usual suspects'
3. everyone should have the opportunity to get involved... it is short sighted to do otherwise
4. Were voluntary & community organisations (VCOs) which operate county wide expected to attend all 27 events?
5. Generally insufficient consultation which does not lead to better understanding of the distinctions between participative/representative democracy
6. 'Invitation only' meetings are guaranteed to give rise to feelings of exclusion and do not bode well for future relationships
7. Some significant VCOs have not been invited – this is not a good start as they have substantial contributions to make and expertise to offer.
8. Leaving the invitations entirely to the District Councils was bound to create problems

Communications

1. There must be a more streamline approach to obtaining information
2. BCs should have high profiles in their local areas and given much greater publicity
3. Communication is the key. One solution is to ensure post offices are kept open.
4. How do we reach the VCS in each Belonging Community? Who keeps the data and how is it best shared?
5. A web based info site would be useful where people can ask questions and get answers.

How Community Forums could/should work

1. Mechanisms need to be in place to put items on agenda and attend if appropriate
2. How can the forums be accountable to the community they serve?
3. representatives from the forums should sit on other bodies
4. The Chairs of each forum should sit on the Area committees
5. The forums can be large and all encompassing but their management groups could be lean. Leadership is important
6. The forums should talk to each other and learn from each other.
7. Forums should not be dominated by the presence of members from a particular town or organisation. There should be a spread of membership in terms of both geography and interest.
8. Important to have clear terms of reference
9. They should look for solutions and opportunities rather than problems; learn from past mistakes and the experience of Area Panels etc.
10. Area Committees must listen to the views of Community forums
11. Training and resources must be available if forums are to be effective.
12. Representatives from the VCS Consortium should sit on each Community Forum
13. BCs should hold elected councillors to account

Role of Community Forums

1. Members of CFs need to have very clearly defined roles – what they can and can't do. Concern to date has centred on geography rather than role. This must now be addressed.
2. They should be more than talking shops; they must have powers to act and that might mean delivering some local services.

3. In a perfect world they would perform like the best of the LSPs albeit over a much smaller areas.
4. We are not starting from a blank sheet. The Community Strategy has set out the general direction.
5. There may be two main types of power: one influencing and one delivering & involving money. The latter would require councillors to vote if they are to remain accountable.

Concerns

1. BCs will add an additional layer of bureaucracy
2. Impose an additional burden on the already hard-pressed VCS.
3. Larger settlements would threaten the interests of smaller communities
4. The lack of knowledge and experience of county council staff in dealing with the VCS did not instil confidence in future relationships
5. General confusion about the role of each level in the new structure
6. Erosion of parish councils' influence
7. Mixing 'delivery' with 'influencing' could create problems
8. Different arrangements in each BC could cause confusion for customers
9. Reduction in numbers of elected councillors would make them too thin on the ground and therefore remote from their constituents
10. That education and youth services seem to have opted out of the debate - almost as if the extended school partnerships is a rival structure.
11. Similarly FACT gives the impression that it is already 'sorted' thus losing an opportunity to integrate local services more effectively.
12. Would there be a danger of VCOs losing their autonomy?
13. Who will belong to CFs and who will nominate them?
14. Parish councils need to be much more responsive to community needs. Are they really good examples of the democratic process in action – when did you last vote for one?
15. VCS needs a greater say on JIT to ensure that all its many voices are heard.
16. The BC model does not seem to accommodate those VCS operating at a county wide level but delivering locally.
17. Demand to serve this new bureaucracy could be stifling for the VCS
18. What's wrong with existing structures like town and parish councils?
19. That elected councillors will take no notice of non-elected members of CFs.
20. Attendance is always going to be a problem. At present people tend to only come together when they want a decision reversed.
21. Where are the links with other communities of interest rather than place eg people with disabilities?
22. How can we guarantee inclusion?
23. Devolved powers can be easily removed
24. Won't involving councillors make BCs political?

25. What will happen to VCOs operating at a district level eg the CABs?
With the districts disappearing, will they be forced to merge etc?
26. Need to ensure that elected councillors do not take over.
27. What is the planned relationship between BCs and Area Committees?
28. How will BCs be resourced?
29. What is the source of VCS authority?
30. Danger of turning the VCS into cheap auditors
31. Where do the Local Involvement Networks (LINK) fit into the structure?
32. Smaller parish councils fear that the larger ones will swamp them.
33. How can small groups with limited capacity, delivering over a district, get involved across all the BCs in their area?
34. Anxiety from small community groups that the proposed structures will not offer sufficient security, funding or communication.
35. What happens to local mayors?
36. There is an assumption that everyone is a member of something. Some individuals are not and are therefore out of the loop
37. Should all CFs be structured in a similar way to ensure wide representation on each? Or should membership be determined by each CF?

Implications

1. Some VCOs will have to restructure to 'fit' better with the new arrangements
2. Funders should recognise that VCS engagement in the process comes at a cost which should be reflected when it comes to issues of full cost recovery.
3. BC structure could give rise to class differences and/or rural/urban divides
4. VCS needs to be more demanding and demonstrating its legitimacy in these early days.
5. Individual organisations need much more clarity as to what is going to be delivered at the various levels so they can adapt their services accordingly.
6. VCS needs a strong voice at the three Area levels as well as county and BCs.
7. If BCs took over some of the powers of parish councils would that be such a bad thing?
8. All parties involved in BCs should be prepared to make compromises
9. Parish councillors should be subject to strict codes of conduct in relation to BCs.
10. There needs to be 'culture' shift for the 16000 employees of the new authority
11. There needs to be an unequivocal statement from the new authority expressing its commitment to engaging with & supporting the VCS.
12. We must have things agreed and in place before April 2009.

13. In the absence of the Districts, parish councils might be overburdened making it even more difficult to attract nominations
14. Not convinced the £17m/y savings will be made and, if that is the case, services could be hit.
15. Meeting the new 'duty to involve' will test the new authority.
16. The Compact way of working should be embedded in all CFs and their relationship to areas and the new authority.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was included in the conference pack for all VCS attendees to complete on behalf of their organisations. 49 or 57% of attendees submitted one. We have included below a complete breakdown in the responses according to the size of the organisation to which they felt they belonged. The main purpose of this questionnaire was to compare responses between organisations of different sizes. There was a similar response to most questions apart from the Compact where larger organisations were clearly more familiar with it.

| Questions | Small | Medium | Large |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| How would you describe your VCS organisation? | 28 (57%) | 13 (27%) | 8 (16%) |
| Is your organisation thriving in the current environment? | | | |
| couldn't be better | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| good | 4 | 5 | 3 |
| room for improvement | 21 | 8 | 3 |
| no, not at all | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Is it becoming more difficult to recruit volunteers? | | | |
| easier | | | |
| the same | 14 | 8 | 6 |
| more difficult | 15 | 3 | 2 |
| Not applicable | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Is it becoming more difficult to retain volunteers? | | | |
| easier | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| the same | 18 | 8 | 6 |
| more difficult | 4 | 3 | 2 |
| Not applicable | 2 | 1 | |
| Northumberland Compact | | | |
| know nothing about it | 7 | 3 | 1 |
| heard of it but don't know much about it | 9 | 3 | 1 |
| familiar with it | 11 | 3 | 5 |
| think it could make a difference | 3 | 6 | 3 |
| How would you prefer to receive information? | | | |
| email | 22 | 11 | 7 |
| post | 8 | 4 | 1 |
| website | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| other | 2 | 0 | 0 |

Evaluation

The conference was attended by 86 people including speakers and all were invited to complete an evaluation at the end. The form asked delegates to assess ten elements of the conference on a five point scale. 46 evaluation forms were returned (equivalent to 53% of attendees) and the analysis shows high levels of satisfaction throughout.

★ indicates the box with the most entries while appendix 1 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 |

As indicated above, the conference overall was very well received by those who responded.

The evaluation form also gave people the opportunity to make other comments and 12 chose to do so. The list of comments is given below.

Additional comments

- JIT need to set up email addresses for Question/answer for voluntary organisations. No local paper in S.E. North'land for information on consultation meetings
- We provide services across the county. Who do we talk to about commissioning and funding?
- Please hold next standing conference nearer to Tynedale
- Very useful forum and discussion where issues were raised very pertinent to the debate overall.
- Would like more info for organisations like ours.
- Support the point that this should have been for VCS only with separate opportunities for public sector consultation & feedback.
- Learning more at each event. Takes a while to absorb all the information given.
- Thanks
- Marketing advertising as done with this meeting is essential for developing a new council and to include the opinions of local population & where & how people & organisations (vol and stat) can access the forums to develop & grow.
- Why could NALC not organise similar event for PCs? Perhaps those VCS members on waiting list may have been able to attend.
- Parking! Writing on slides not big enough. Who was meant to be the audience? Voluntary sector or parish councils?
- Coffee is not very good!

The VCS Consortium would like to thank Jill Dixon and David Francis for their valuable contributions as well as to the facilitators of the table discussions. A special thanks must also go to our chairman, Rodney James, who donates so much of his time and expertise to Consortium affairs.

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

Appendix 1

Numerical breakdown of evaluation

| | EXCELLENT | GOOD | FAIR | NOT SO GOOD | POOR | no answer |
|--------------------------------|------------|------------|-----------|-------------|----------|-----------|
| BOOKING INFORMATION | 14 | 19 | 6 | 2 | | 5 |
| LOCATION OF VENUE | 20 | 17 | 5 | 2 | 2 | |
| VENUE | 30 | 14 | 2 | | | |
| CONFERENCE PACK | 17 | 24 | 5 | | | |
| PRESENTATIONS RELEVANCE | 9 | 30 | 6 | | 1 | |
| PRESENTATIONS QUALITY | 11 | 29 | 4 | 1 | | 1 |
| Q & A SESSION | 9 | 20 | 14 | 2 | 1 | |
| DISCUSSION GROUPS | 19 | 20 | 6 | | | 1 |
| CATERING | 20 | 16 | 1 | 1 | | 8 |
| OVERALL | 21 | 23 | 1 | 1 | | |
| TOTALS | 170 | 212 | 50 | 9 | 4 | 15 |

Appendix 2 Attendees

| | | |
|-----------|-----------|--|
| Andrew | Sue | Community Action Northumberland |
| Angus | Johnathon | BLISS Mediation |
| Appleby | Alison | North of Tyne Patient's Voice |
| Aspden | Sue | Northumberland STARS |
| Bailes | Sonja | Community Action Northumberland |
| Baker | Bob | Northumberland County Council |
| Baron | David | Widdrington Station and Stobswood PC |
| Bevan | Sue | NSP |
| Bland | Margaret | N'land Home Improvement Agency |
| Boydon | Harriette | Relate (N'land & Tyneside) |
| Bradley | Thom | Blyth Valley CVS |
| Braybrook | Roger | Tynedale CAB |
| Broome | Ann | Castle Morpeth & Wansbeck Volunteer Centre |
| Casson | Jay | Children North East |
| Castle | Frances | Headway |
| Coe | Ernie | Hartburn PC |
| Courtice | George | Northumberland VCS Consortium |
| Davidson | Andrew | TINN |
| Dickson | Eric | Blyth Valley & Wansbeck Talking Newspaper |
| Dixon | Jill | Northumberland County Council |
| Downing | Sandi | VoiCeS |
| Dunn | Norman | Community Action Northumberland |
| Egan | Barry | Castle Morpeth Borough Council |
| Elliott | Peter | Azure |
| Fakir | Lynda | Northumberland County Council |
| Field | Jane | Bell View (Belford) |
| Ford | Chris | Consultant |
| Francis | David | Community Action Northumberland |
| Franklin | Teresa | Coquet High School Community Educ. |
| Gale | Bill | Wansbeck CVS |

| | | |
|------------|-----------|---|
| Gardner | Jean | Cresswell Village Hall |
| Gibson | Tony | Blyth Valley & Wansbeck Talking Newspaper |
| Goncu | Susi | Tynedale Council |
| Gooding | Andrew | Lynemouth Community Trust |
| Goodman | Mike | Wansbeck CVS |
| Graham | Tom | Pegswood Community Project |
| Graham | Ken | Hauxley Village Hall |
| Hart | Jane | Community Action Northumberland |
| Hoblyn | Douglas | Friends of Morpeth Museum |
| Hodgson | Dawn | WEA |
| James | Rodney | Chair, VCS Consortium |
| Kelly | Mary | Prudhoe Parish Hall |
| Langley | Bob | Community Action Northumberland |
| Lazzari | Mike | One NorthEast |
| Lennon | Diane | Rothley Trust |
| Lyall | Anne | Wansbeck CVS |
| Lyford | Julia | Northumberland Comm Development Network |
| Lynch | James | Blanchland Community Development |
| Macfarlane | Moira | Alnwick CAB |
| Mains | Lilian | Hepscott Village Hall |
| Malloy | Sue | N'land Federation of WIs |
| Maude | John | North Country Leisure |
| McGuckin | Sheila | Wansbeck CVS |
| McMutrie | Ada | Wansbeck CAB |
| Melia | Derrick | Hepscott Parish Council |
| Moran | Christine | Barnardos N'land Housing Project |
| Muckle | Billy | Pegswood Community Project |
| Mudd | Margaret | St Benet Biscop Catholic High School |
| Paton | Anne | North of Tyne Patient's Voice |
| Poppleton | Richard | Network Hedgeley Parish Council |
| Probert | Yvonne | & Alnwick Rural Area Network (ARAN) |
| Proudlock | Vanessa | Prudhoe Community Partnership |
| Richardson | Sue | FONDT |
| Robinson | Vee | Community Action Northumberland |
| Robson | Alan | TINN |
| Robson | Ann | Greater Morpeth Development Trust |
| Robson | Jill | Slaley Parish Council |
| Rushworth | Kelvin | Jobcentre Plus |
| Russell | Joan | Berwick Voluntary Forum |
| Scott | Jean | Prudhoe Community Allotment |
| Selman | Brian | Cresswell Village Hall |
| Sennet | Joe | Heddon on the wall PC |
| Shaw | David | Widdrington Station & Stobs PC |
| Smart | Paul | N'land Credit Union (Prudhoe) |
| Smith | Simon | REVIVE Enterprise |
| Stephenson | Tony | Spiral Skills Advocacy |
| Sullivan | Carol | GONE |
| Thomas | Alison | Bereavement Visiting Service |
| Thompson | Muriel | Wansbeck District Council |
| Walker | Lorraine | Wansbeck-Schalksmühle Friendship Society |
| Walton | Joanna | BLISS Mediation |
| Watson | Lynda | Wallington Demesne/Hartburn PC |
| Wilkinson | Sandra | VCS Compact & Contracts Officer |
| Williamson | Terry | Community Substance Misuse Service |
| Yeo | Kay | Cresswell Village Hall |
| Younger | Doris | Northumberland Care Trust |
| | | Wansbeck Friendship Society |

