

# Northumberland Economic Strategy 2010-15

Observations from George Courtice, the voluntary and community sector development officer

1. The voluntary and community sector (VCS) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation draft. It supports the vision for a more equal society, greater financial inclusion and a greater retention of young people.
2. It is important to recognise that the VCS contributes substantially to the three thematic areas as well as all 8 priorities. The focus on sustainability and a low carbon economy is very welcome and again gives the sector an opportunity to demonstrate and disseminate new approaches to energy conservation and production.
3. Because the VCS penetrates all aspects of our lives, it impacts fundamentally on our wellbeing and prosperity. The references to the sector throughout the document are invariably linked to the other two sectors – private and public. While this triad of partnership working is undoubtedly essential for successful and worthwhile interventions, the unique contribution of the VCS to the economic wellbeing of the county is often missed. As a consequence, actions to enhance that contribution are sometimes overlooked.
4. The VCS in Northumberland is estimated to employ between 3000-4000 people. So, even using the measure favoured by most economists, GDP, it makes a substantial direct contribution to the wealth of the county. But you do not have to be a new age economist to recognise that its wider economic contribution extends much further. The sector also involves 15-20 thousand volunteers annually, over 5000 of whom are trustees or directors. This collective workforce adds hugely to the richness of our social and cultural experiences through entertainment, drama, sport and music. Importantly, because of its commitment to equality and diversity, it also ensures that people who might otherwise fall through the net are advised, supported and helped along the road to employment often through volunteering. Although a short mention is made to volunteering in Priority 6, for a county like Northumberland, particularly in the rural North and West Areas its impact on community life is paramount.
5. The Citizens Advice Bureaux, which help ensure that individuals receive their benefit/pension credit entitlements, suck in external resources. As a consequence they contribute substantially to the circulation of money in some of the county's most deprived areas.

6. It is no accident that the majority of providers for NEWS are voluntary and community organisations (VCOs). It has long been recognised that people who are some distance from the job market, and often on employment & support allowance, are more likely to respond positively to services offered by VCOs. So the gain is not only because they reach parts others don't but, as they are embedded in the community, they offer a degree of trust and independence not always present in private or statutory providers.
7. Reference in Priority 4 to reviewing Northumberland's procurement processes is very welcome. It is a common view within the sector that current procurement practice has turned its back on promoting ideas of LM3 on which the county once led the country. "Encouraging a deeper understanding of public sector procurement" is only half the problem. A greater understanding of the sector by public sector procurers is the other half and a gesture along this road would be to accept that although the VCS might be a broad church it doesn't ever describe itself as made up of "SMEs". In this respect language is important.
8. The four thematic areas – low carbon economy, people, business and place are intertwined. Post-industrial economies mean that non-economic drivers grow in importance. The decision makers of foot-loose businesses increasingly look to landscape, schools, entertainment, sport, social cohesion, sense of community and belonging when deciding where to locate or expand. The VCS, and its support bodies, clearly have a direct role to play in making sure that Northumberland remains a good place to live and work.
9. To fulfil this role, public bodies must recognise that it is in everyone's interests for sufficient investment to be flowing to the sector. The potential of the sector to help communities grow their social capital, to deliver vital public sector services, and to make Northumberland richer in the widest sense, can only be achieved if this is recognised. Enabling communities greater influence over local decision making and allowing them the freedom to be enterprising can reap real economic returns. The environment needs to be right and that means including actions which commit partners to recognise the value of support bodies.
10. The latest special Economic Strategy Edition of *People & Places*, which summarises the strategy, points out that actions will be required through the NSP and its family of thematic and Area partnerships. A real concern to the sector is that the influence of and commitment to the NSP is declining. This is primarily triggered by the perceived downgrading of the primacy of partnership working within the County Council. No longer being a major source of funding has not helped either. This is a worrying development and needs to be reversed if this or any other significant strategy is to form the basis of policy.