



The voice of the voluntary and community sector

Response to Medium Term Strategy

1. We welcome the broad approach, the four strategic priorities and the recognition that the Council needs to adopt new attitudes and ways of working.
2. "Narrowing the poverty gap" features in the Visions of many voluntary and community organisations and the sector welcomes the opportunity of sharing its experiences to help achieve our shared outcomes.
3. The draft paper refers on a number of occasions to the importance the Council affords to partnership working at both a community level and through the structures of the NSP. The VCS's position is that if we do not work in unison, actively seeking solutions together, then the interests of the people of Northumberland will suffer.
4. It is refreshing and reassuring to see the Council's commitment to the idea that the real basis of progress ultimately rests with empowering people and communities.
5. It is important to recognise that communities of area and interest are much more than groups of consumers of council services. Developing a sense of place, of belonging, and the obligations which flow from that, mean that people engage with a host of suppliers from all sectors. None have a monopoly of influence but all the indications are that there will be a shift away from state driven and delivered services to personalised, flexible, highly responsive modes of delivery which are tailor made for the voluntary and community sector.
6. The emphasis on the sections on climate change (p3) and the environment (p7) over the need to respond to the era of a low carbon economy is welcome. It links in well with the thinking behind the Economic Strategy as well as the draft Sustainable Community Strategy. The Council, particularly in relation to its planning processes, has a major influence over the take-up of micro-generation projects but its partners in the VCS have a long history in promoting energy efficiency schemes to both communities and individuals. Both must work closely together to benefit the people of our county.

7. There is a trade-off implied between community cohesion and diversity/creativity (p8). Things have moved on since Putnam. New evidence indicates that interaction/personal contact is the key to reducing negative attitudes and enhancing social cohesion. So social cohesion, diversity and creativity can all coexist. The Council obviously has a role to play in this particularly in encouraging the vibrancy and inclusiveness of the informal social economy.

8. Transformation. We welcome the approach of taking a strategic view over service provision and the plan not to make arbitrary cuts to budgets or services (p7). We look forward to it being implemented.

9. The MTS accepts the idea that the Council “cannot do it all” (and should probably not try). Encouraging and developing mechanisms (p16) for communities to influence others’ decisions and make their own decisions is the essence of community development. The sector would be pleased to share its experiences.

10. The sector has been urging the Council to enter the world of intelligent procurement (p21) for some time. The recognition that the purchaser stands to gain from building up the capacity for potential, local suppliers is welcome. To complete the perfect circle, the Council should also include social and environmental clauses in all its contracts.

11. Novel ways of sourcing investment (p20) is encouraged. The gift economy is what keeps the VCS buoyant and endowments have made a significant contribution to recent funding schemes supported by both the previous Government and the Community Foundation (Grassroots). The untested Social Impact Bond might be one way... but it is not the only way to invest in better public services.

12. p23 The sector looks forward to making better use of some of the surplus Council property for community benefit and, to this end, has contributed to the framing of the Council’s Community Asset Transfer Policy. This is a good example of how both sectors can work together to maximise benefits.