

Guiding Principles for VCS Area Networks

1. Context

The emergence of the North, South East and West Areas in Northumberland, with their associated Area Partnerships, makes it important for voluntary and community organisations and groups to consider organising themselves on a similar geographical basis. This is to ensure that the sector is able to influence and help frame policy at this level of decision making. An effective & vibrant VCS Area Network in each of the three new areas would allow a two-way flow of information and opinion, ideas and concerns communicated. It would also be the mechanism whereby perspectives of the sector would be drawn.

2. Purpose

- i) To allow voluntary and community organisations active in the Area the opportunity for their voice to be heard.
- ii) To provide a mechanism for information, opinion, concerns and ideas to be fed up as well as down the decision making structures. This would include appropriate area, thematic and county based bodies within the sector as well as partnership bodies.
- iii) To share best practice including that of VCS engagement in Community Forums
- iv) To identify and support appropriate representation on Partnerships and the VCS Consortium

3. Membership

Membership is open to all VCS organisations operating and active in the Area. Membership of all Area Networks would therefore be open to those organisations active over all three areas. For this purpose, the VCS is defined as those organisations and groups which are governed primarily by people who receive no financial gain from that role. In most instances this will be self declaring. Common characteristics include:

- i) Not-for-profit
- ii) Non-governmental
- iii) Independent

iv) Value driven – primarily motivated by desire to further social, environmental or cultural objectives and for any surpluses to be reinvested similarly.

This would therefore include, but not be limited, to members with the following structures and purposes:

- Registered Charities
- Organisations, Groups & Networks with charitable purposes
- Companies limited by guarantee with a minority of paid directors
- Community Interest Companies (CICs) with a minority of paid directors

The Area Networks would be encouraged to involve public bodies but voting rights would not be extended to them.

4. Governance

The VCS Consortium invites VCS Area Networks to consider aligning themselves to the VCS Consortium. The VCS Consortium is made up of voluntary and community organisations reflecting a range of VCS themes and target populations. Public bodies are also present as advisers and active observers but do not have voting rights. The VCS Consortium has an accountable body which is responsible for any funding allocated to it and the projects it manages. If an Area Network chooses to align itself with the Consortium then this would avoid having to establish a structure to receive funding directly.

The VCS Consortium would use its best efforts to raise funds for the effective operation of Area Networks.

The VCS Consortium is committed to ensuring that the views of the sector reflect the interests and concerns of each Area concerned. It therefore respects the independence and autonomy of each Area Network.

It is important for the Network to agree a named body/individual who would manage the affairs of the Network, and connect with the Consortium and outside bodies for administrative and communication purposes.

5. Meetings

Two meetings per year are likely to be the minimum necessary to make the Area Networks effective. Regular communications should be made to VCS members and due notice given of meetings etc.

6. Equality, Diversity and Social Inclusion

The Area Networks will seek to inform, support, involve and give a voice to all sections of the voluntary and community sector. This is particularly important for groups and organisations which are often excluded and disadvantaged as a consequence.

7. Working Together

The VCS Consortium recognises that members of Area Networks will be accountable to a variety of different organisations and interest groups. But the Networks are also accountable to the sector in their Areas. So working together for the benefit of the Network as a whole may sometimes require sacrificing their own organisation's interests. Area Network members are asked to:

- a. Work with mutual trust and respect, and combine their expertise
- b. Be clear when their individual roles are in conflict
- c. Treat everyone with dignity, courtesy and respect regardless of their age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability, or religion and belief.
- d. Recognise that all members have equal status within the Network
- e. Not to tolerate bullying or other disrespectful behaviour
- f. Actively promote equality of access and opportunity

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