

# 25 February 2011

## Commission for VCS Support Services in Northumberland

### 1. Introduction

Northumberland County Council is taking the lead in commissioning a new set of Voluntary and Community support services on behalf of the County for the next three years.

The Voluntary and Community Sector<sup>1</sup> (VCS) is explicitly valued as a key partner in key strategies for the County and the County Council.

Along with the public and private sector it will face a number of challenges and opportunities over the next three years, amongst which are, the impact of the recession, reduced public sector funding, and a move to commissioning and procurement by funders.

There has been ongoing engagement with the sector in general and infrastructure organisations in particular to understand and evaluate current practice with a view to informing future practice.

It is in this context that the County Council has undertaken to commission a new approach to investing in support services to the sector to achieve the following Strategic Aim.

***“To maintain the continued development of a vibrant, independent and sustainable sector that will work in partnership with NCC and other partners to ensure the best outcomes for individuals and communities of place, interest and identity in Northumberland”***

### 2. Background

The County Council has supported Infrastructure support to the VCS through a range of grant funding to individual infrastructure organisations. This has resulted in a number of valued services being provided. At the same time the County Council decided to undertake a range of monitoring and evaluation activities in relation to this investment.

Key has been the report produced by Professor Tony Chapman and Dr Victoria Bell of the Third Sector Development Unit, Teeside University “Report on a Consultative Exercise on Future Infrastructure Support Investment for the Third Sector by Northumberland County Council”.

---

<sup>1</sup> The term VCS for this commission includes voluntary and community groups, charities and social enterprises

The agreement from all parties is that this should be used as the basis for a new approach to support services and consortium working.

In addition to this report the following have also been very influential in determining the aims, objectives and outcomes of this commission:

- Consortium work to date, results of work shops and David Burnby Associates
- Monitoring and Evaluation returns from current Infrastructure Investment
- Research for the CEED Guide
- Engagement and Empowerment Mapping
- Consortium survey
- National Survey of third Sector Organisations and Northumberland Headline reports
- Current National policy developments on Infrastructure – “Building a Stronger Civil Society” – Cabinet office
- Sector Standards – NAVCA, ACRE, PQASSO
- Commissioning developments re; VCS services nationally, Stockton, Bristol,
- Sustainable Communities, Corporate, Commercial Strategies

### **3. Aims, Objectives and Outcomes**

In keeping with a key recommendation from the Chapman report and recognised good practice as articulated in the Northumberland Compact this commission has been planned by NCC to focus on outcomes, providing scope for innovation wherever possible.

The resultant aims, objectives and outcomes are informed by the joint activity between the sector and NCC, National Policy, key strategies and national developments in commissioning support services from the VCS.

Therefore the resultant specification will be explicit about the outcomes we want to purchase while providing freedom to providers to propose how they will meet those requirements.

#### **3.1 The Strategic Aim**

**To maintain the continued development of a vibrant, independent and sustainable sector that will work in partnership with NCC and other partners to ensure the best outcomes for individuals and communities of place, interest and identity in Northumberland**

Working from this Strategic Aim we have identified the following Key Aims and Objectives and from that flows the Outcomes. These are the critical elements to the commission; they will inform the key performance indicators, the scoring

schedule and need to borne in mind in designing the delivery and governance models.

### **3.2 Key Aims**

- To improve access to quality support services for all VCS organisations and groups within communities
- To improve access, opportunities and quality support for volunteering
- To reduce unnecessary duplication of practices
- To improve communication both within and across sectors
- To increase active participation in order to have the necessary intelligence to represent the sector as a whole and in its constituent parts
- To improve the sectors ability to respond to change
- To improve the collective understanding of the sector
- To strengthen leadership in the sector
- To enable the sectors perspective to influence policy and practice
- To improve partnership working

### **3.3 Objectives**

- To provide a co-ordinated, coherent, customer focused set of services
- To provide a common referral, recording and impact measurement processes and shared quality standards
- To recognised and respected areas of expertise and thereby avoid unnecessary duplication of practices
- To manage information and intelligence
- To support VCS networking
- To facilitate opportunities to gain sector perspectives
- To act as a strategic reference point for partners
- To promote understanding of the sector with NCC and other partners
- To Co-ordinate sector representation on strategic fora
- To promote and embed the principles within the Northumberland Compact

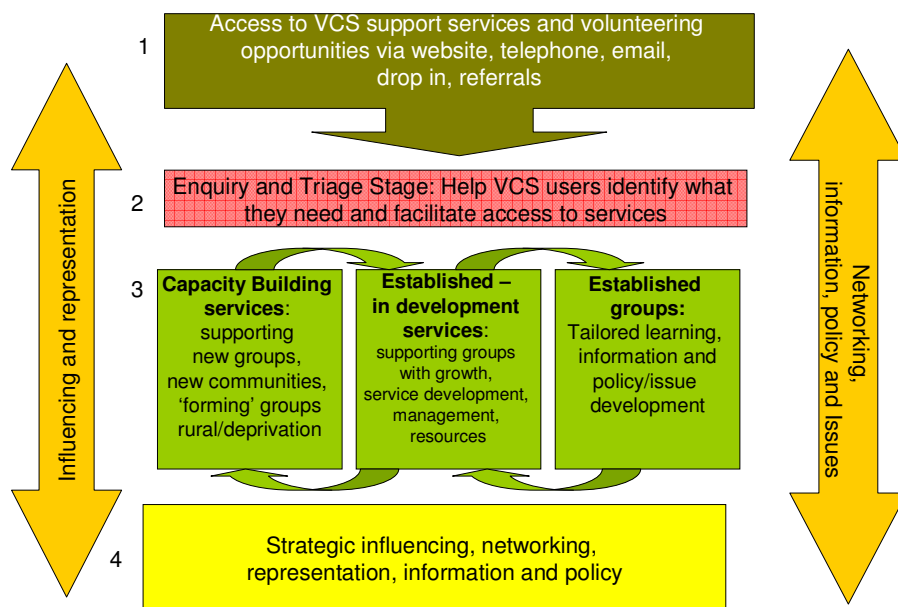
### **3.4 Outcomes**

1. The VCS in Northumberland becomes more effective, efficient and sustainable
2. VCS groups are supported to develop and innovate to meet changing needs in Northumberland.

3. VCS support services provide structured routes for consultation and dialogue within the VCS
4. The VCS is represented and is influencing planning, policy making and service delivery at strategic levels as a result of infrastructure support activities
5. There is information sharing, partnership working and collaboration between VCS organisations and the Private and Public sectors
6. The VCS in Northumberland has effective, informed and responsive leadership

#### 4. Proposed Framework

We believe the following framework is critical to the successful delivery of the aims, objectives and outcomes.



##### 4.1. Access to services

The provider/s will be expected to make all VCS support services within this piece of commissioning legible to both VCS groups themselves and other interested parties, such as funders, so it is easy to see all services which are available and it is easy to access them.

The VCS support service should be able to be accessed through website, via e-mail, phone contact (with appropriate accessibility options for deaf and visually impaired users and language support), through VCS support drop-in services and by direct referral. In addition there should be clear signposting to other sources of support available to the VCS outside of the scope of this commissioning.

The proposed VCS infrastructure support service needs to be promoted as a single, integrated offer.

A single essential key performance indicator will be set by the commissioners. Further key performance indicators which flow logically from the needs assessment will be invited from the successful provider which can demonstrate how effectively access is delivered and how they can demonstrate that they are adjusting their marketing and access to meet shortfalls for specific VCS groups.

#### **4.2. Assessment/Enquiry triage stage**

The provider/s will be asked to put in place a consistent process through which enquiries for support are recorded and appropriate diagnostic/needs assessment tools are used to assess need and refer within the service and outside the service as appropriate. This will need to operate at several levels, from responding to the most straightforward enquiry by e-mail or phone to an in-depth assessment for a group which will be worked with through on-going capacity building.

The successful provider/s will be asked to put in place minimum standards that they will operate to respond to all enquiries in a timely manner and how within their delivery model they will manage referrals within their service and outside to other sources of support.

The assessment and recording system will form the basis for the evidence which providers will use for self-monitoring and to track and describe outcomes to the wider VCS and to funders. The commissioners will be looking to the provider/s to propose efficient, imaginative solutions to this need which makes good use of new technologies.

Providers should be able to maintain an overview of the range of VCS group enquiries and assessments they make, note any under- or over representation of equalities groups, communities of interest or geographical neighbourhoods in the city and any patterns of enquiry which can feed into service planning and adjustments to marketing strategies.

A single essential key performance indicator will be set by the commissioners. Further key performance indicators which flow logically from the needs assessment will be invited from the successful provider which can demonstrate how effectively access is delivered and how they can demonstrate that they are adjusting their marketing and access to meet shortfalls for specific VCS groups

#### **4.3. Layers of Support**

VCS groups at different stages of development need different sorts of support and ways of delivering it from infrastructure providers. These are expressed as 'layers of services' directed at these different developmental stages, from very new, forming groups to well-established, high-performing organisations.

We envisage three key layers:

### **Capacity Building**

Capacity building is essentially negotiated, targeted development support delivered to individual VCS groups through a sustained working relationship over time that improves their performance. It should be tailored to a group's needs following a clear diagnostic assessment of needs. The priority groups for this sort of support include newly formed groups; groups serving newly-arrived communities; equalities-led groups (particularly BME; disabled; groups in deprived neighbourhoods and subject to rural isolation) and groups undergoing change or crisis – which could also include helping groups merge in order to survive reductions in funding or to wind-down organisations in an orderly and proper manner.

It is recognised that the needs of groups can vary over time and that some established groups can also develop problems which require this kind of negotiated, more intense support.

### **Established, in development service**

This 'layer' of support covers a wide range of development needs for VCS groups which are established but which need to develop some aspect of their capacity and competence with support from specialist skills and expertise:

- Fundraising and Procurement and Commissioning support from
- Service Improvement, Publicity & Marketing, Equalities/Community Cohesion/Diversity, Monitoring and Evaluation
- Strategic Planning
- Involving Volunteers

### **Established Groups**

This layer of support covers more specialised tailored learning, contributing to policy development etc.

The successful provider/s must develop a monitoring tool that will measure and demonstrate the progress ('distance travelled') of groups and individuals accessing development services. The distance travelled tool must reflect the views of the supported organisation on the intervention given and the progress made.

## **4.4. Strategic influencing, networking, representation, information and policy**

The Chapman report highlighted the following as key aspects of this area. To strengthen the VCS network and representation of VCS with external stakeholders, to include:

- a) delivering efficiencies through collaboration and rationalisation
- b) maintaining up-to-date records and intelligence on the sector
- c) effective two way communication between the sector and private and public agencies including through the local Compact
- d) representing sector interests
- e) network facilitation
- f) influencing policy

The successful provider/s will need to be able to develop a system of measuring how they have facilitated VCS groups in influencing decision making which should draw on quantitative and qualitative impacts of the influencing successes and failures achieved by the VCS as a result of their co-ordination.

It is recognised that any impact measurement tools proposed are likely to be subject to on-going development and refinement over the course of the funding agreement period, as practice nationally develops and experience of their strengths and weaknesses emerges over time. The successful providers must propose an initial system however and a clear timescale for introducing it within the first six months of service delivery.

## **5. General Requirement**

This section outlines some of the key areas that will form the basis of the specification. There will be more detail and further areas included in the final document.

### **5.1. Overall Delivery Model**

Providers are required to provide a description and illustration of their proposed model of the whole infrastructure support system which they are seeking to deliver as part of their proposal.

### **5.2. Management Model**

Providers should describe their proposed management model and how they will manage performance if they are putting forward a delivery partnership. Please describe both operational management and governance management structures. Please describe the service delivery roles of the lead organisation and all delivery partners. Please provide a copy of any agreement which sets out the arrangements between the lead organisation and any sub-grantee organisations. In particular this should be clear about how issues of under-performance are to be addressed by the lead organisation. Providers should explain how their proposed management model will deliver the *co-ordinated, coherent, customer-focused* service delivery described in the strategic goal.

### **5.3. Staffing**

Providers should describe the staff roles which they will put in place to deliver their proposed delivery model and identify which sit within the lead organisation and which in the delivery partners organisations.

### **5.4. Funding Agreement term**

It is proposed that the funding is for a 3 year period, with 6 monthly reviews.

### **5.5. Funding method**

These new services are being funded through a competitive funding agreement/grant process making the opportunity widely available in order to ensure the best proposal to achieve our strategic aim.

Those intending to submit a partnership/collaborative/consortium tender this must be submitted as one application through a lead agency

The lead organisation must itself be a not for profit organisations order to be eligible for grant funding but is free to develop delivery partners with the for profit sector for those elements of service delivery where they offer best value for the VCS.

### **5.6. Location and delivery**

The VCS support services in this commission must be delivered within Northumberland and the lead organisation must have a base in the county.

### **5.7. Performance Management**

In keeping with the working relationship described earlier in this document key performance indicators in the funding agreement will be reviewed with the provider on a six monthly basis and amended to reflect developing practice in advance of each funding year.

### **5.8. Quality Standards**

Providers should ensure that their plans include a clear timetable during which any organisation which is party to their delivery partnership and which does not have an externally qualified Quality Standard will obtain one.

### **5.9. Environmental Impact**

Providers should describe the steps they will take to reduce their own environmental impacts such as energy and transport impacts, water consumption, use green IT, pollution control measures and biodiversity improvements. Providers should also describe how they will provide and annual report about their own

progress in reducing their environmental impact and how they have supported the wider VCS in doing the same

**5.10. Transfer of undertakings and Protection of Employment Regulations (TUPE)**

The Council does not know and has no view as to whether TUPE may apply as between this current providers of these similar services and any other provider the Council may select to provide this facility. It is up to each funding applicant to reach its own view on this and if necessary make enquiries of the present funded organisations.

**6. Process**

There will be two stages:

- Stage 1 – EOI: outline proposal/methodology
- Stage 2 – Invitation to submit full application

**7. Indicative Timetable**

Activity	Timescale
Consultation - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comments back by -</li> <li>• Feedback Meeting -</li> </ul>	March 10th March 17th
Specification and scoring schedule issued	March 21st
EOI returned	April 18th
Invitation to submit full application	May 1st
Applications returned	May 23rd
Award	May 30th
Feedback period	June 6th
Funding agreement confirmed	June 13th
Start date	July 1st

Please send feedback on this outline for the Commission on VCS Support Services to [Kirsten.Francis@northumberland.gov.uk](mailto:Kirsten.Francis@northumberland.gov.uk) by **10 March 2011** and title the email VCS SUPPORT SERVICES COMMISSION.

A meeting will be held on 17 March to report back on the feedback received and NCC’s response.