

Responses to draft consultation on proposals for Commissioning of VCS Support Services

7 responses received

	Commentary and suggested changes to proposed commissioning framework	NCC response to suggestions
Anne Lyall	1. I feel number 2 on the key aims " improve access, opportunities.... for volunteers....." I think this would be better if it read increase access, opportunities....."	Changed to: to increase the strategic focus and partnership working around the volunteering agenda across Northumberland]
	2. You have indicated that you are opening this up to others, not for profit organisations outside of Northumberland. In doing this I hope that this then will not become a bidding war, and I hope that the successful organisation will be judged not by finance alone but by the community benefits that will add social value to the communities in Northumberland. I appreciate the financial problems you have, but I would expect that the lead body for this commission will need a management fee to monitor the bid, so there will be less to put into community work.	Value for money will account for 30% Robustness of Financial Plan Identifying financial risk and issues Value for money <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proportion of management costs • Additionality So not about costs. We feel we need to explore all options to ensure that organisations and communities do get the absolute best support services to support them through what will be a very difficult time. Successful proposal will need to assure they can deliver the key strategic aim - <i>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</i>
David Francis	3. Overall, the idea of a single, all-purpose joint commission is something which we have been expecting. However, we have been surprised by the very-recent suggestion of competitive tendering, and no-one should underestimate the complexities of trying to secure agreement with delivery-partners over the next few months. Therefore, it would be preferable for the brief to be not <u>too</u> demanding on the fine-detail from the start: these things can be developed over time, in partnership with the County Council.	Apologies if by commissioning people thought this would not be an open process but this has always been the intention and indeed needs to be to ensure the best solution and reduce challenge to this approach. Timescales are demanding and we need to get a detailed picture of the approach people are proposing so the brief will be detailed for stage 1. This will enable us to then understand what is being proposed and aid an effective stage 2 process

	<p>4. It will be important for the brief to accommodate the post-General Election context, not least the Big Society and the implications of the Localism Bill (neighbourhood planning, Community Right to Buy, Build, Challenge etc). NCC/NSP has already commissioned various pieces of research on these themes (eg the 22 November Big Society event; and Sue Bevan’s work on Community-Led Planning), and so we should now be taking the opportunity to put an appropriate framework in place. Among other things, this will demand a greater emphasis on <u>communities</u>, and also parish councils, alongside voluntary organisations.</p>	<p>The commission needs to be cognisant of the key political drivers but it is also important that it does not suffer from mission creep. We are very clear about the strategic aim and outcomes but are asking you to evidence the services they think are required to achieve these outcomes. If you think these approaches are essential to the strategic aim then they should feature in your proposal. Again this demonstrates why a detailed submission is needed at this stage</p>
	<p>5. The loss of Capacity Builders money to Northumberland, and NCC’s reduction in its own budget for the VCS may put at risk the retention of all of the current local offices and staff which are dotted around the county, and at the same time the requirements of the proposed brief will necessitate an increase in programme- management staffing (ie ‘bureaucracy’). This appears to contradict what NCC members have been saying to us: that the priority for VCS infrastructure should be on making-available front-line support to local communities and their projects.</p>	<p>Do not necessarily recognise this approach necessitate an increase in programme- management staffing/bureaucracy. Very unclear what proportions are currently going to this function, so therefore challenge the assumption that this will detract from front line support.</p> <p>An integrated approach that recognises expertise, tackles duplication of practice, innovative use of technology etc. we believe will ensure quality front-line support to groups, organizations and communities and their projects.</p>
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">David Francis</p>	<p>6. The NCC draft brief draws heavily on a commissioning exercise carried out in Bristol. It will be important to modify the brief to take account of the significant differences between Bristol and Northumberland:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Northumberland is dispersed over 2000 square miles, with hundreds of separate communities, each one requiring access to a degree of front-line Community Development Officer support, in addition to the usual arms-length services. Therefore, the brief must acknowledge the need for local outreach centres. Our conversations with various NCC councilors, of all parties, confirm the importance which members attach to the availability of support for the VCS via local offices such as Blyth, Berwick and Hexham, etc - The brief reflects the long history of immigration and racial tension in Bristol: hence the emphasis on new communities and on integration. These issues are of far less significance in Northumberland - Bristol City Council has a number of in-house community development teams and a budget of £4m pa, such that the VCS infrastructure brief needed to focus only on strengthening voluntary organizations and giving the voluntary sector a voice, and it avoided the question of wider 	<p>We have significantly modified the brief, hope I have not given the impression we are slavishly following their model – however it is informative.</p> <p>Again the commission is defining the outcomes and asking the sector to provide the detail on effective access etc. based on evidence. I agree members etc see some aspects as really important this is important point of view but of utmost importance is the view of the beneficiaries.</p> <p>New communities are identified as a priority group as evidence suggests they are more at risk of disadvantage and discrimination. I think their issues are just as significant in Northumberland though the numbers may be less.</p> <p>I think the brief is clear that it</p>

David Francis	<p>community support. The situation in Northumberland is quite different, and the brief must acknowledge the need to work with communities, and not just VCS organizations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Because of its Bristol origins, NCC's brief has not yet acknowledged the issues and opportunities which Northumberland's communities must be helped to address: for example, broadband, social housing, provision of local services, asset –transfers, escalating fuel costs, climate change, flooding, decline in services, etc 	<p>encompasses communities and organisations. I am not sure that there is a clear distinction between the two, more of a spectrum.</p> <p>The approach is designed to ensure the needs of beneficiaries' shapes the support services that are offered.</p>
	<p>7. As currently drafted, the brief appears to place no value on the long-term relationship between the local authority and its VCS partners. CAN is celebrating its 60th birthday this year. NCC were instrumental in establishing us, and we have operated a symbiotic relationship ever since. We have 3 NCC nominees on our board of trustees and NCC's Director of Finance is also CAN's Treasurer. Similarly, the CVS' in Blyth Valley and Wansbeck have track-records dating back to the 1970s and 1980s, with a long-standing relationship with their communities and with local government. It is difficult to see how this long-term relationship can be reconciled with an open-market competitive tendering approach.</p>	<p>Do not agree with this point, this is about establishing a sound partnership between NCC and the breadth of the sector, support organisations for specialist areas as well as place, delivery organisations, social enterprise and front line community groups.</p> <p>An open and transparent competitive grant process will ensure NCC is able to consider a range of proposals and ensure the most effective use of public funds. We believe this strengthens the relationship as there is a clear rationale as to why the funding is going to those organisations. We believe this is essential to our strategic aim .</p>
	<p>8. If we can agree that there is merit in developing a case-tracking system, it would make sense for this to cover all forms of community and voluntary organization support (including the NCC Locality and the Regeneration teams, NNPA etc) and not just those services which are purchased by this commission.</p>	<p>We are committed to the fact that there is merit in a case tracking system and see the development of this as part of this commission as way of achieving Outcome 4. The VCS is represented and is influencing planning, policy making and service delivery at strategic levels as a result of infrastructure support activities.</p> <p>Incorporating this into NCC way of working would be a demonstration of this.</p>
	<p>9. The brief specifically excludes support for social enterprises, presumably on the grounds that there is someone within NCC to provide this (Tony Kirsop). This is not necessarily a problem if one uses the Government definition of social enterprise (businesses which trade for a social purpose). However, other definitions of social enterprise include voluntary organizations which derive a greater part of their income by levying charges on their users: this therefore includes mainstream VCS bodies such as village halls, pre-school groups etc. We need to arrive at a collective view with NCC as</p>	<p>The layered support approach within the framework is about effectively supporting the whole continuum of communities, voluntary bodies and social enterprises effectively.</p>

George Courtice	<p>to how the whole continuum of communities, voluntary bodies and social enterprises is effectively supported, taking account of any reductions which NCC itself is making to its services.</p>	
	<p>10. The combined resources of CAN, CVS', NCC Locality Team, NCC regeneration staff, NALC, FoNDT etc are now very small, and we really need to be working closely with NCC over the coming months to work out how best collectively to serve Northumberland's communities. There is a risk that an open competitive process will require NCC to keep us (ie CAN, NALC, CVS' etc) at arms' length over the next few months, or else risk a legal challenge from 'outside organisations'.</p>	<p>This process is looking for an integrated approach to support services which is a part of this wider picture. There will be other ongoing work that will progress this through NSP, localities, planning etc.</p>
	<p>11. Professor Chapman and Dr Victoria Bell's report identifies the services, which NCC would expect to be delivered (para 23). Chapman moreover sets out some basic principles for NCC to adopt (para 26), and some are reiterated in Daljit Lally's letter of 28 Jan. They include that NCC should "stipulate clearly what services and/or products should be produced as a result of investment." The commission report does not build on this but identifies six general outcomes, which few would challenge, but which leave potential suppliers the decision of selecting those services they consider should be delivered to contribute most to those outcomes. In the present circumstances of accumulated cuts (see table at end), inviting competitive proposals works against the interests of collaboration. In this respect, contestability is too great a price to pay. Furthermore it could stymie for 3 months valuable conversations between applicants and NCC for fear of breaching competition guidelines.</p>	<p>The approach has been revised in line with good practice.</p> <p>The Northumberland Compact</p> <p>The public sector should plan new programmes and services with a focus on outcomes, providing scope for innovation wherever possible.</p> <p>We are trying to strike the right balance between a competitive approach to ensure the best proposal but insisting on a collaborative/integrated approach to the brief.</p>
<p>12. Not sure why you assume the "move to commissioning and procurement by funders" is inevitable. We share the view which forms the basis of current government thinking - that contracts, rather than grants, should only be used where there is clear justification. Commissioning support services is nothing new in Northumberland. Commissioning through procurement is.</p>	<p>I feel there is a lack of consensus over what we envisage when we use terms such as commissioning and procurement.</p> <p>Commissioning of support services is nothing new – how this has been done in the past does not reflect the approach as outlined in the Compact</p> <p>Current government policy is moving VCS much more into procurement and commissioning, i.e taking over public services, this therefore needs to be relevant to support services</p> <p>Multi year finding equates to larger resource £1 million this needs more rigour.</p>	

<p>13. The intention to commission support services for a period of 3 years is welcomed. This has long been an assumption of central government and has always been part of the Northumberland Compact. The 2 year agreement made in February 2010 to maintain the size of the support service allocation was influential in the general acceptance of last year's cut, so we very much hope that this year's intention comes with a greater level of commitment.</p>	<p>Noted</p>
<p>George Courtyce</p> <p>14. The funding design – “a competitive funding agreement/grant process making the opportunity widely available in order to ensure the best proposal to achieve our strategic aim” (para 5.5) will not necessarily bring about that aim. Moreover the design is a confusing hybrid. Since when was “not-for-profit” a condition of the receipt of grant funding? (“The lead organisation must be a not for profit organisation order (sic) to be eligible for grant funding...” para 5.5) Perhaps this refers to eligibility for this particular commission rather the grant commissions from NCC in general. Either way it is unclear. Para 3 refers to “the outcomes we wish to purchase...” This is the language of procurement not grants. By insisting that lead bodies should be not-for-profit organisations (a wholly commendable & sensible decision) but by advertising widely a commission worth significantly above the European thresholds, NCC is, in my view, exposing itself to challenge from private sector providers on the grounds that, whatever you might call it, this is a contract. It is thus subject to the constraints imposed by the EU procurement rules. Daljit Lally's quote from Chapman of applying “rigorous principles of contract compliance” would further aid their case.</p> <p>There is a solution. NCC could ensure a not-for-profit lead, encourage collaboration, focus on outcomes & innovation and make the process crystal clear that this was a grant relationship if it accepted that it was <u>reconfiguring pre-existing relationships with organisations</u>. Anything less and NCC is vulnerable. This approach would also recognise the reality of the entry barriers imposed on non-current suppliers considering taking over similar services. This is particularly significant when it comes to the TUPE requirements to offer comparable pensions. It would also overcome the possibility of current support service suppliers failing to win the NCC commission but continuing to deliver on their commitments to other funders. This could give rise to much duplication and great confusion from users.</p> <p>The current Commercial Strategy is of course silent on non-procurement commissioning and so offers no help. It is hoped that future iterations will be more useful on this important area of commissioning.</p>	<p>Perhaps this refers to eligibility for this particular commission rather the grant commissions from NCC in general. This is the case</p> <p>Purchase has been replaced with achieve</p> <p>We have taken legal advice, talked to Bristol and we are assured this process is sound</p> <p><u>reconfiguring pre-existing relationships with organisations</u></p> <p>At what point do any other organisations get an opportunity if we just continue with existing organisations.</p> <p>NCC would be vulnerable not to open this up as would be open to challenge from other VCS groups</p>

		Existing organisations are not the only ones in receipt of additional funding so this situation exists under current arrangements
		This work has really helped developed this area, now linking in NSP grant experience into the Commercial Strategy
	15. The value the Council places on the sector in helping to deliver its aims is also welcomed.	Noted
	16. Although there must be sufficient monitoring and evaluation to ensure value for the Council's investment, there is always the danger that substantially increasing these requirements will divert resources away from the front line. That is in no-one's interests.	Monitoring and evaluation is in the sectors interests and help with the strategic influence
George Courtice	17. Relying on the Bristol model is fraught with difficulty. It is a very different place. In addition Bristol applicants had nearly 8 months from launch of commission to start date. We have just over 3 months. But that is not my main concern. The thinking behind both programmes does not seem to have taken account of the shift in the national thinking about the increasing role of communities as opposed to voluntary and community organisations. I am not convinced that "National Policy, key strategies and national developments" have been taken fully into account when identifying the outcomes. You define the voluntary and community sector on page one as including groups and organisations. I very much hope that this is not limited to them but reading the key aims from which the outcomes flow gives me some doubt. The proposed framework (para 4) is particularly organisation/group orientated. It is undeniable that this work forms an essential and very important part of any package of support services. However, it does not take sufficient account of our work with communities. Much of the thinking behind Sally Thomas' work on community development, most of the new powers planned under the Localism Bill, the imminent arrival of community organisers are about much more than working with discrete organisations and groups. Support bodies already engage with communities and with those issues that affect them. Should not NCC recognise that and include it in its plans?	See answer to point 6,
Sally	18. In 3.2, 'Key Aims', the bullet point on volunteering could be clarified so that it was clear the aim was not directly to deliver and support volunteering day to day but more as a strategic function.	Change made

Sally Thomas (Social Regeneration)	19. In 3.4, 'Outcomes', while the commission is clearly for support to the VCS, there may need to be a recognition here that this support is not simply for its own sake, i.e. to support VCS organisations per se, but to do so because the sector is fundamental to the strength and sustainability of neighbourhoods, communities and residents.	Change made
	20. SRC welcomes the general approach Northumberland County Council is taking to commission support services for the VCS in the County, particularly as it provides an opportunity for potential providers from other sectors to offer expertise and experience through collaboration with not for profit organisations.	Noted
	21. In section 3 et al, the emphasis on outcomes is important for a number of reasons, not least in the context of accountability (to the commissioning body, the use of public funds and to the communities of Northumberland), value for money and the need to assess, measure and quantify impact. We would advise a strong emphasis on this is retained with a flexibility about exactly what constitutes performance indicators, including monitoring, measuring and evaluation. It may be, however, that there is a requirement to set out an indicative approach at the appropriate stage in the commissioning process (as appears to be indicated at the end of 4.3 with reference to a monitoring tool and at the end of 4.4, 'Strategic influencing, etc').	Noted
	22. In 4, 'Proposed Framework', this model is helpful in terms of providing typologies of the varying and different groups, organisations and agencies which will need support and in illustrating the continuum of support required. However, it does so at the expense of creating a hierarchy which appears to imply that at the 'capacity building' end there are only forming and new groups, in the middle are established groups requiring development for growth and at the other end well-established organisations. In reality, the situation is likely to be more fluid and diverse and it might be useful to reflect this. There is also an implication that small groups are not as high-performing as larger ones, which is not necessarily so – it may be useful to indicate a hierarchy of scale and size but not equate this with quality and impact. The text in 4.3, 'Capacity Building' does go some way to addressing some of this but could be clarified.	<p>Further explanation provided</p> <p>We recognise this is quite a simplistic representation but feel it is useful to demonstrate the continuum of support that is expected from communities to specialist established groups.</p> <p>The arrows in the diagram are there to indicate that in reality the situation is more fluid and diverse, Capacity building is not only relevant to forming and new groups, established groups don't necessarily perform better than new groups and tailored learning may be relevant to groups and different stages of development.</p>
23. In 5.8, 'Quality Standards', this could usefully be elaborated to indicate what is meant by quality, over and above obtaining a Standard.	How groups manage quality within their organisations will form part of the specification	

Carol Southam (VoiCeS)	<p>24. <i>Section 3 Aims Objectives & Outcomes</i> Therefore the resultant specification will be explicit about the outcomes we want to purchase [think the use of term purchase will cause problems] while providing freedom to providers to propose how they will meet those requirements.</p>	Changed
	<p>25. <i>Section 3.2 Key Aims</i> To improve access, opportunities and quality support for volunteering [think this reads too operational, would like to see this read – to increase the strategic focus and partnership working around the volunteering agenda across Northumberland]</p>	Changed
	<p>26. <i>Section 3.3 Objectives</i> the following addition: To support/lead development of strategic partnership working in line with the changing agenda</p>	Agreed
	<p>27. <i>Section 3.4 Outcomes</i> the following addition: - The VCS in Northumberland has a collective profile and presence - The VCS in Northumberland is better informed - Sector/s work together better to achieve best outcomes for individuals and communities in Northumberland.</p>	Agreed
	<p>28. <i>Section 4.3 Layers of Support</i> These are expressed as 'layers of services' directed at these different developmental stages, from very new, forming groups to well-established, high-performing organisations. [don't like the implication of this statement – that new groups don't perform well but well-established ones do]</p>	See point 22
<p>Section 5 General Requirements [this section needs looking at, believe there are a number of sections here – Model (including governance/management and delivery/staffing) – funding (term, arrangements) – performance management</p>	Being tightened up	