

# Minutes

## Northumberland VCS Consortium

10.00am Friday 10 September  
St James's Centre, Alnwick

### Present:

Rodney James	Chair
Moira MacFarlane	Citizens Advice Bureaux
John Maude	North Country Leisure
Thom Bradley	CVABV
Charles Tremeer	Volunteering Northumberland
Mike Goodman	Wansbeck CVS
Carol Southam	VoiCeS
Kirsten Francis	Northumberland County Council
John McGough	Northumberland Community Development Network/NSP
David Francis	Community Action Northumberland
Christine Bone	GONE
Angus Robson	NGEP
Bob Langley	CAN/NSP
Mike Dungworth	CVABV/NSP
Peter Robinson	Church of England
Janice Rose	Northumberland County Council
Jill Robson	Jobcentre Plus
Sandi Downing	Carers Northumberland

### In attendance:

George Courtice	Sector Development Officer
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### Apologies:

Annie Bishop	Northumberland Disability & Deaf Network
Julie Davenport	Northumbria Daybreak/NSP
Georgie Cruddas	SixtyEightyThirty/NSP
Vanessa Proudlock	FONDT
Patrick Price	Northumberland Care Trust
Anne Lyall	Wansbeck CVS/NSP

**1. Welcome & matters arising from last meeting**

Rodney James welcomed those present and the apologies received (see above). No matters were arising from the minutes of the last meeting May 14 2010.

**2. Update on how changes are likely to affect the sector**

Some of the changes which would impact: the ending of OneNE, the Comprehensive Area Assessment, the Audit Commission, GONE, Place Survey no longer required by govt, £40million cut in NCC expenditure, on-going personnel & structural changes in all public bodies, intended shift of service provision to sector, Coalition commitment to voluntarism, the emergence of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). BL explained that the review of Area Partnerships had widened to include all NSP partnership working on the grounds that changing circumstances had made the present structures unsustainable. How best to promote partnership working in these testing times was the aim and the five questions asked in the latest edition of Matters Arising (see [www.northumberlandvcs.org.uk](http://www.northumberlandvcs.org.uk)) were highly pertinent. The arrival of LEPs,(the result of the submission from Northumberland to join forces with North Tyneside was not yet known) might place too great an emphasis on economic growth rather than other important issues for the sector – closing the gap, inclusion etc.

JR gave the view that the days of constancy were over. We should prepare ourselves for permanent change. There were a number of other key changes emerging. The move away from reporting to central govt and the move towards accounting to communities. Any new partnership structures must reflect this new way of thinking which was still evolving and therefore uncertain.

KF pointed out that the thinking behind Big Society offered opportunities but that leadership was important.

DF The changing financial and political landscape should be viewed from a Northumberland perspective. The intended process of LGR was only half complete. The plan was for it to transform service delivery but the increased pressure on savings (starting in 2008 to what looks likely to be 2014) has stymied many of the plans. Moreover, all the indications are that govt pressure to deliver savings will intensify.

Big Society and the localism agenda certainly throw out some opportunities but if no resources are attached to it, the sector could view it as having little substance. It will certainly test assumptions about

lengths of consultation periods, full cost recovery, role of volunteers.

TB One of the features of the changes is an accountability vacuum. It will also inevitably create tensions within the sector as resources get tighter, test commitments not to compromise on vision etc.

CT If Community forums and Area Partnerships were to disappear that would further threaten community accountability.

MD There are real opportunities offered by the localism aspects of Big Society. It is the sector's role in this which we should stress.

JM Most community based sports clubs only really need public sector engagement when they are in the process of change – refurbishment, expansion etc. When that occurs it is vital and more deprived areas could well lose out if this support was withdrawn. On the other hand there are very real opportunities to take-over buildings and playing fields and make better use of them.

CS We have to recognise that the sector can't be everywhere in terms of influencing policy but are we sure we are in the right places?

JR Even though much is in the air, it is important to keep partnerships & networks going.

PR A priority must be to work out how we best support vulnerable people during these uncertain times. We have to recognise that this period won't be over quickly and it will require mature leadership.

TB/MD We must make sure that the sector is not marginalised when it comes to decision making. We must be involved with the LEP; we must not be bypassed by local councils.

CS VoiCeS have met with Children's Services to discuss ways of doing things better. The recent decision to withdraw early from the Children's Fund contract is a case in point. We need to make sure staff are better informed about their obligations under public law and the Compact and VoiCeS can offer that.

DF There are other networks/partnerships which are outside formal the structures which must not be forgotten.

GC We must also not forget that recent decisions by the Council to reduce its spending this year by over £10m has meant that the sector has again found itself on the receiving end of "easy" cuts.

JR We are in this together. We must work together.

CS Was the NCC document listing the In Year Savings, which had been distributed to the Consortium, in the public domain? Sometimes it is unhelpful to share early drafts.

GC This originated from NCC, was the basis of the Exec's decision to approve the reductions and was in the public interest to discover how officers' were thinking.

### **3. The future of Northumberland's VCS Consortium**

GC summarised the green paper which outlined the main recommendations from the Consortium's Steering Grp which in turn took account of the responses from about 15 members.

It was agreed that the Consortium had a valuable role to perform.

AR We are in a critical period and the purpose of the Consortium should be more about enabling. We should look towards the private sector much more than we have in the past. So less about lobbying more about contributing. Not sure that the description of "critical friend" accurately summed up our relationship with public bodies.

TB Intelligence gathering is also a vital function. We mustn't solely concentrate on NCC. The health trusts also have a responsibility in relation to the sector.

JR The Consortium should concentrate on its prime purpose - to serve the sector. Improving relations with public bodies emerges from that.

JM Most of the 800 or so sports clubs rely not on the public sector but the private sector for external funding. So we should be tapping into the whole corporate responsibility/ social audit agenda. The Consortium has a role here to ensure that organisations have the know-how and advice available to get better connected.

Discussion around the term "Critical friend". Might be too benign. Perhaps "positive challenger" would be better.

Consortium Steering Group. Need to clarify its role. Does it make decisions on behalf of the Consortium or does it just steer the Sector Development Officer? In terms of membership perhaps there is a place for "affiliated" membership status. Affiliates would commit to the Consortium and receive information but regular attendance at meetings would not be expected. This could increase its flexibility, make it more

responsive to changing sector needs, involve more VCOs and thereby increase its collective authority.

Capacity is an important issue. We don't necessarily need a dedicated post. Perhaps a number of organisations could collectively provide the capacity?

It needs two decisions: What is the capacity required? Who provides/hosts it?

There is a link between structure and the level of funding required.

We should not be too fast to discount new models of incorporation. They might overcome problems of the more traditional models and provide a sound basis for working together.

It was important for the Consortium to demonstrate how county wide VCOs contribute and demonstrate good practice – CABx, Age Concern etc. It needs to show its contribution to the big issues of the day.

MMcF The Steering Group has made recommendations. It is now up to the Consortium to move forward. We should either accept them or propose an alternative.

SD Perhaps set up a small group of members to pull the ideas together. It must have a degree of separation from the present post holder.

BL The key issue is the ownership of the Consortium. If it is essential, what does it demand from all of us? It must be a shared responsibility. That might mean sharing in its provision.

PR What are we asking this group to do?

To agree recommendations for the Consortium's priorities of purpose, its membership and what it plans to deliver. In short a manifesto of its intentions as well as a *modus operandi*. **GC**

It was agreed to arrange two meetings which would report back, initially to the Steering Grp on October 21<sup>st</sup>.

#### **4. Report Backs**

Place Shaping Thematic Partnership AR Explained that he would shortly be leaving Groundwork and that Sam Pallombella would be taking over as director of both Northumberland and Tyne & Wear. Following on from the publication of the Heat is On, its action plan was being consulted on. A more coordinated approach from the sector was needed. It was agreed that Groundwork continue to sit on the Place Shaping Partnership and continue its Consortium membership. AR's report was on our website.

NSP Executive DF was the only member of the Consortium present at the last meeting. There was a tendency for the Exec to be more responsive rather than discussive... let alone decisive. The Place Survey is no longer required by Government to be carried out by local authorities. Its absence would mean we no longer have an indication of "how communities feel". It is hoped that a slimmed down version of the survey would still be conducted so that change can be measured since the baseline of 2008.

Performance Improvement Forum GC/JR The last meeting of the PIF agreed to suspend its meetings until after the announcement of the Spending Review on October 20<sup>th</sup> when greater clarity over likely resources and expectations would be available.

Volunteering Northumberland The changes arising out of the library service review had major implications for the use of volunteers. More (six at present) are likely to be run by volunteers and issues like job substitution etc were bound to arise.

#### **Next Meetings:**

Open meetings of Steering Group to discuss Consortium future:  
All at 10.00am  
October 5 and October 19 Venue TBC

Steering Group October 21 and November 25, Wansbeck CVS

Next VCS Consortium meeting December 10, Age Concern, Ashington.