

NORTHUMBERLAND COMPACT

VCS CONSULTATION TOOLKIT



July 2008

The Northumberland VCS Compact is a commitment to enhance relationships between public sector organisations and the voluntary and community sector. This toolkit sets out to complement and support the VCS Consultation Code of Good Practice to make a positive impact on consultation.

Introduction

The Northumberland Consultation Code of Good Practice builds upon the key principles contained within the Northumberland Compact. This toolkit complements and supports the Consultation Code of Good Practice and provides the 'how to consult'. It is a practical guidance note. The toolkit introduces a local context which can be useful when public bodies are consulting with the voluntary & community sector. There may be occasions when this role is reversed and the VCS is consulting with the public sector.

It is recognised that a consultation carried out by a public body may have a wider audience than the VCS and as such may vary in delivery and content. It is hoped that in these circumstances the variety of methods used would be inclusive.

Everybody cannot be consulted on everything! So how will we decide on what and who to consult? What other methods are we going to use to ensure good communication? This toolkit should assist you with these decisions.

Key aims

It has long been recognised that good effective communication and consultation with all interested parties leads to more effective policy making. The purpose of the Code and toolkit is to ensure that consultation is carried out effectively, using the most appropriate consultation method, allowing sufficient time for responses, ensuring that feedback is provided and, perhaps the most important of all, ensuring that consultees are listened to.

- Consultation should be well planned
- Consultation should seek to involve all affected parties
- Consultation should be fully accessible to all VCS organisations by offering many different ways to get involved
- There should always be effective communication between the VCS and the public sector
- Consultation should always be monitored to ensure it is working and improving

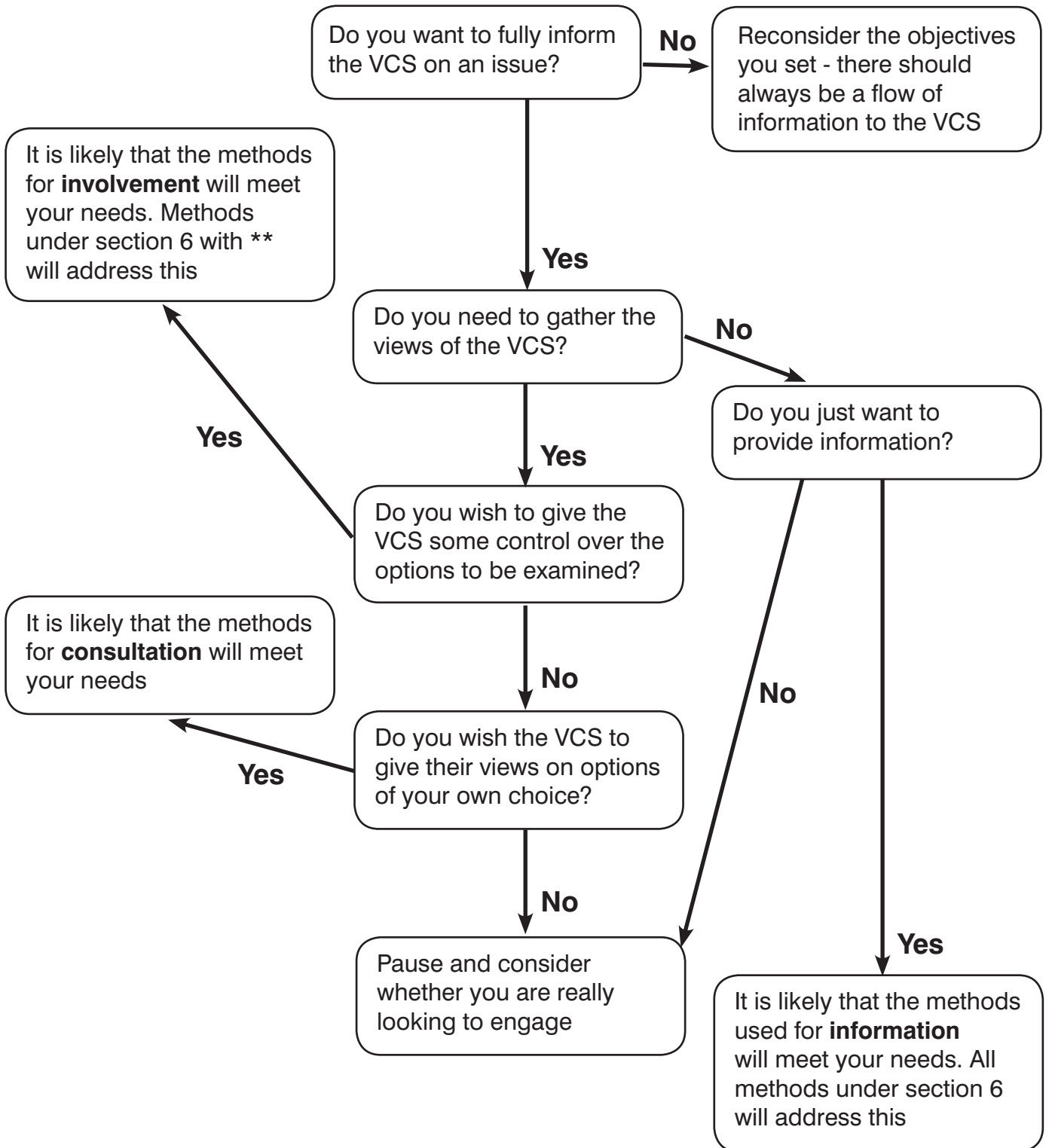
Remember VCS organisations span over communities of place, interest and identity

Explain

- Why you are consulting
- Who is being involved and why
- What decisions will be influenced - making it clear what people can hope to change by participating
- Who will take these decisions
- When the decisions will be taken
- How the results will be feed back to people
- Who they can contact if they are unhappy with the exercise

What are you doing? Informing Consulting Involving

Be clear - this flow-diagram will help you decide
Remember, the reference to VCS could be changed to Public Sector if required



1. Are you sure you are consulting?

<i>Informing</i>	<i>Consulting</i>	<i>Involving</i>
------------------	-------------------	------------------

Consultation is not something to do when a decision has already been taken. Be clear what decisions will be affected and when.

Communication covers a whole range of possibilities, ranging from simply information giving, through to consultation to actual involvement. This toolkit focuses on consulting but it is useful to make the distinction between the three.

Definitions:

- Consultation* - to ask people's views and take them into consideration when making a decision. To use those views to inform a decision. For example inviting complaints and suggestions
- Informing* - to impart knowledge, to give information. For example press releases, exhibitions or road shows
- Involving* - to engage the interest of people. For example users on committees/panels or councillor surgeries

A checklist is provided which will help when planning your consultation. Working through the checklist, suggested on page 8 will enable you to check that you have addressed the points below:

2. Why am I consulting?

What decisions will it influence? Focus on issues that the VCS can change or strongly influence. How does it link with the work of others?

3. What am I consulting about?

Have you thought of the 'right' issues and questions to focus on?

Don't just ask what you consider appropriate; think from the VCS point of view and what they would want to tell you about. Or vice versa if it is the VCS consulting public bodies.

Examples:

- Challenge an existing service
- Look for unmet needs
- Shape the way a service is delivered
- Measure satisfaction with a service
- Set priorities for future spending
- Set targets for a service
- Check out reaction to new ideas or initiatives
- Check opinions, views and attitudes
- Assess potential interest in something

4. Who needs to be involved - have you thought of everyone?

Whose views will be most influential, why?

How will the views of the VCS or public bodies be balanced against each different stakeholders.

A common issue for both public bodies and the VCS is who to consult. There are a wide variety of VCS organisations which exist in Northumberland: specialist groups; area specific groups; Development Trusts; social enterprises; infrastructure organisations like CVS's; networks.

5. Points of contact

The Consultation Code of Good Practice applies to both public bodies and voluntary & community sector organisations in Northumberland. Undertakings within the Code involve both the public sector and the voluntary & community sector but, depending who is doing the consulting, these undertakings may be reversed. Therefore the information within the toolkit will give points of contact. These are 'starting points' for contact with both public bodies and voluntary and community sector organisations.

For those public bodies seeking the views of the VCS, first points of contact are:

- VCS Consortium
- Community Action Northumberland (CAN)
- Wansbeck Centre for Voluntary Services (WCVS)
- Community & Voluntary Action Blyth Valley (CVABV)

These organisations will be able to provide local intelligence.

Voluntary and Community Sector

The **VCS Consortium** has members from a wide range of voluntary and community groups and support bodies. The Sector Development Officer holds a database of these VCS organisations.

Contact:

- George Courtice, Sector Development Officer, Community Action Northumberland, Tower Buildings, 9 Oldgate, Morpeth NE61 1PY Tel: 01670 500817
georgecourtice@ca-north.org.uk www.northumberlandvcs.org.uk

VCS infrastructure organisations like CVS's provide support and advice to VCOs operating in Northumberland. They have detailed knowledge of the areas in which they operate.

Contact:

- Sheila McGuckin, Chief Executive, **Wansbeck CVS**, 107/109 Station Road, Ashington NE63 8RS Tel: 01670 858 688
sheila.m@wansbeckcvcs.org.uk www.wansbeckcvcs.org.uk
Wansbeck have a Voluntary and Community Group Directory.

- Thom Bradley, Chief Officer, **Community & Voluntary Action Blyth Valley (CVABV)**,
22 Beaconfield Street, Blyth NE24 2DP Tel: 01670 353623
thom@blythvalleycvs.org.uk www.blythvalleycvs.org.uk
- David Francis, Director, **Community Action Northumberland (CAN)**, Tower buildings,
9 Oldgate, Morpeth NE61 1PY Tel: 01670 517178
davidfrancis@ca-north.org.uk www.ca-north.org.uk

Public Sector

The VCS often find it difficult to know exactly who to speak to in a large organisation. Compact Champions have agreed to be the first point of contact and will assist in locating the appropriate person within their own organisation. This could be beneficial if the VCS are carrying out some form of consultation.

- Bob Baker, Head of Executive Support, **Northumberland County Council**, Morpeth
NE61 2EF Tel: 01670 533184
rbaker@northumberland.gov.uk www.northumberland.gov.uk
- Julia Knox, Partnership Manager, **Jobcentre Plus**, Newcastle BDC, PO Box 633,
North Shields, NE29 1BH Tel: 0191 2038100
JULIA.KNOX@JOBCENTREPLUS.GSI.GOV.UK www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk
- Janice Gerard, Partnership Manager, **Learning & Skills Council**, 5th Avenue, Team Valley,
Gateshead Tel: 0191 4926402
janice.gerard@lsc.gov.uk www.lsc.gov.uk/regions/NorthEast/
- George Irving, Senior Manager, **Northumberland Care Trust**, c/o Northumberland County
Council, Morpeth NE61 2EF Tel: 01670 533855
George.Irving@northumberlandcaretrust.nhs.uk www.northumberlandcaretrust.nhs.uk
- Maureen Harwood, Head of Community Engagement, **Northumbria Healthcare NHS
Foundation Trust**, Units 7/8 Silver Fox Way, Cobalt Business Park, North Tyneside
NE27 0QJ Tel: 0191 2031352
maureen.harwood@nhct.nhs.uk www.northumbria.nhs.uk
- Sam Harrison, Head of Involvement, **NHS North of Tyne**, Ctr for Advanced Industry,
Coble Dene, Royal Quays, North Shields, NE29 6DE Tel: 0191 2022014
sam.harrison@northoftyne.nhs.uk www.northoftyne.nhs.uk

Inevitably some contacts may change. The VCS consortium website will be kept up to date and will list all champions www.northumberlandvcs.org.uk

6. What method of consultation will be used?

Listed below are examples of what form consultation could take. Use the most appropriate; it may well be a combination of several.

It is important to recognise that with any consultation exercise there will be a resource implication and this will vary depending upon which methods are used. This should be acknowledged if a public body wishes the VCS to carry out consultation on its behalf, and should be adequately funded.

Methods of **consultation** include:

- Focus groups**
- Partnership groups**
- User groups**
- Surveys – self completion; telephone; face to face
- Citizens Panel
- Consultation Documents
- User Comments and Complaints
- Forums
- Advisory Committees
- Seminars / Workshops Staff feedback and suggestions
- Website
- Public Meetings

Those listed above also provide a method of **information** giving and those marked with** can be used as a method of **involvement**. Make it clear what you are doing.

If you are using an intermediary to carry out the consultation on your behalf, ensure you receive a list of those consulted. Ensure your systems are adequate ~ a common issue is low response, and another is non receipt of papers.

For further information on the pros and cons of different methods visit:
<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/68967>

7. When should the consultation be carried out?

The consultation should take place at an early stage. The VCS should be involved in the design of services and the framing of policies. Therefore, it is important to ensure that the VCS are represented on strategic partnerships. The role of the VCS on partnerships and boards should be recognised and recorded. This does not preclude wider consultation with a greater number of VCS organisations and groups.

The consultation should be timed to allow the results to be collated, analysed and presented to decision makers.

8. How long should be given for consultation?

Best practice acknowledges 12 weeks is the recommended period for consultation, with 8 weeks being the suggested minimum. This should be factored into the planning process to ensure it happens in advance of change.

If a shorter timescale is used you need to be able to let people know the reason why.

9. What should happen to the consultation responses?

You should let consultees know what will happen to the results of the consultation; how these results will be fed into the decision making process and what the likely timescale is for this to happen. If the results of the consultation are overruled, then an explanation should be given as to why.

10. How will the results of the consultation be reported back to the consultees?

The process should be transparent and information needs to be easily accessible or directly fed back.

11. How and when will the consultation process be evaluated?

As with all evaluation it is more practical to plan this at the start of the exercise. Guidance on evaluation is given in the VCS Consultation Code of Good Practice

In brief:

- Were the objectives understood by all stakeholders?
- Did the methods used match the objectives?
- Could we say that a representative set of views was obtained?
- Was the timescale/process transparent and followed?
- Was the consultation accessible (eg plain English)?
- Did you get to the 'hard to reach' people?
- Did it lead to a change of policy, service etc?
- How many people will be affected by the changes?

Remember

Use Plain English

Avoid ambiguous questions

Use best methods - several might be required

Design to ensure that the consultation informs the decision to be made

VCS Consultation Toolkit Checklist**Consultation Title:**

CONSULTATION	Comments
Objectives	
Have you written your objectives?	
Are they clear, specific and realistic?	
Do the methods, tools and techniques that you are planning to use allow you to achieve the objectives?	
Timetable	
Start, Finish and Feedback Dates?	
If your timescales are shorter than good practice guidelines what are the reasons?	
Consultees	
How many third sector organisations are you aiming to consult with? (scoping exercise)	
Are you targeting a specific group of people?	
Methods/ resources	
Have you decided on the approach/ methods you are going to use?	
Do you have a rationale for the approach and methods you are going to use?	
Have you decided how the information is going to be recorded?	
Will the sector you are consulting need any preparation material?	
Are you well prepared in terms of the resources needed?	
General	
Have you drawn out a timeline for the consultation (include finish dates for each stage)?	
Have you planned how you are going to give feedback to the people who participate?	
Have you considered what the potential problems might be?	
How do you plan to present the information once the consultation has taken place?	
Have you decided on the roles of each person involved? Contact details in case of queries?	

The Consultation toolkit is the result of work carried out by the Compact Reference Group which is made up of representatives of both the public sector and voluntary & community sector organisations.