

An introduction to the Northumberland Compact

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The Compact on relations
between the public sector and
the Voluntary & Community Sector in Northumberland

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1 About the Compact

What is the Compact?

The Compact is an agreement between the public sector and the voluntary & community sector (VCS) in Northumberland. It sets out commitments on both sides to improve the way in which the public sector and the VCS work together for the benefit of communities and citizens. It is based on the National Compact.

The Compact will have different implications for different parts of the sector. However, it will frame the relationship wherever a Voluntary & Community Sector Organisation (VCO) has dealings with public bodies. This holds true for organisations with a funding relationship with them, as well as informal organisations struggling to be heard on a policy question that they care passionately about.

The National Compact was developed from recommendations made in the 1996 Report of the Deakin Commission on the future of the voluntary sector.¹ The Deakin Commission concluded that the Government should recognise the importance of the third sector's diverse roles and its own responsibility to promote a thriving third sector.

'Third sector', 'voluntary sector and community sector' and 'civil society' are just a few of the terms used to describe some or all of the organisations that are not for private profit and not part of the public sector. There is no agreed or universal definition, and many groups prefer to define for themselves who and what they are. However, their defining characteristic is that they are value-led for public benefit.

The Government uses the term 'civil society' to describe voluntary and community organisations, charities, faith groups, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals, both large and small. In Northumberland the sector prefers the term "voluntary & community". It is this term which is used throughout the document. However, it is understood that each term comes with values attached, and that no term is acceptable to all.

¹ Deakin Commission, *Meeting the challenge of change: voluntary action into the 21st century, The report of the Commission on the future of the voluntary sector, 1996.*

What the Compact can do for you

Since the Northumberland Compact was agreed in 2006, the VCS has evolved and its relationship with public bodies has become more complex. Some public bodies, in turn, now also have a better understanding of the distinctive value of the VCS.

Many VCOs play a dual role. Not only are they advocates for change, but they also provide vital functions to beneficiaries and communities.

There is now recognition of the fact that, as well as engaging in independent activity, campaigning, delivering grant-funded programmes and strengthening opportunities for participation and active citizenship, the VCS provides a wide range of public services. It is this breadth of partnership working that makes the Compact as relevant today as when it was launched.

A genuine partnership allows each partner to achieve more. The public sector and the VCS use the Compact as a framework for partnership working because it recognises and supports the contribution they can each make to improve the lives of individuals and communities. Working together in this way also brings wider benefits, such as the creation of stronger working relationships across the public sector and the VCS, underpinned by mutual understanding, trust and respect.

The Compact sets out how the public sector and the VCS can get the most out of partnership working by meeting their respective commitments.

Implementing the Compact can help partners achieve:

- Equity in relationships
- Informed policy decisions, based on the expert knowledge of groups working directly with people on the ground
- Better programme funding that more closely reflects the needs of users
- Progress towards a more equal society, by identifying and tackling inequality and discrimination
- Value for money.

2 Who does the Compact apply to?

The intention is that the responsibilities and obligations of the Northumberland Compact apply to all those organisations within the voluntary & community and public sectors and all those working in them.

The majority of relationships between the VCS and public bodies exist at a local level. The Compact, plans to govern the relationship with local government, NHS organisations (such as strategic health authorities and primary care trusts), police, Jobcentre Plus and other local statutory bodies.

The Northumberland Compact is built on the principles of the National Compact and shares key commitments. The National Compact was used as a framework for the Northumberland Compact negotiations between the VCS, local government and other public bodies. The refreshed National Compact of 2009 provided an opportunity for Northumberland to look again at its purpose.

Compact principles are also reflected in the local performance frameworks for local authorities and their statutory partners.² National guidance on the local government performance framework sets out the essential role of the voluntary and community sector in local decision-making and delivery of services, and in holding local government to account. It also recognises the importance of the Compact and Compact ways of working in developing and implementing local priorities.³

The VCS in Northumberland is involved in a wide range of partnerships with local public bodies. For example:

- NSP
- three area partnerships
- four thematic partnerships
- two affiliated partnerships
- as well as sub groups which feed into them all.

Research shows that the way in which local relationships are developed has a strong impact on communities.⁴ In short, Compact principles are fundamental to robust and productive local partnerships.

The Voluntary & Community Sector

The VCS is remarkably diverse, consisting of a large number of independent organisations. It is this huge range - huge in terms of scope, size and activity - that gives this sector its unique strengths and qualities.

In Northumberland there are around 1200 charities, industrial provident societies, CICs and incorporated organisations limited by guarantee in Northumberland. In addition there are also a number of cooperatives, mutuals, faith groups and housing associations with very substantial assets.

The Compact's relevance extends far beyond registered and incorporated organisations. It embraces organisations and groups active at a local or community level. These are usually small, unfunded or modestly funded, and largely dependent on volunteers. There are estimated to be a further 1,500 of these, making them the largest part of the sector.

Due to the rural nature and its isolated communities, Northumberland has significantly higher numbers of VCOs per 1,000 people than the national average.

² Communities and Local Government (CLG), *Creating strong, safe and prosperous communities: statutory guidance*, 2008, p.18, 19, 35, 52.

³ Communities and Local Government (CLG), *Development of the new LAA framework: operational guidance*, 2007. See also, CLG/Cabinet Office, *Principles of Representation*, 2008, p.11.

⁴ *Office of the Third Sector, National survey of third sector organisations: analytical report*, 2009.

These smaller groups organise around their own local issues, working together on areas of concern and learning through active participation. They also develop locally specific knowledge and experience, which helps them to:

- Provide an authentic and distinctive voice for residents and service users
- Build mutually supporting relationships within neighbourhoods and communities

Develop and deliver services, often locally and informally, based on direct knowledge of community needs.

There are many organisations within the VCS that give a voice to the most marginalised groups and individuals in society. They identify and provide services that might otherwise be unavailable, and campaign in the interests of the community they represent.

The role of volunteers

The contribution of volunteers is one of the special characteristics of the VCS. Volunteers commit their time and energy to benefit society and communities by providing services and activities in many different ways, from acting as trustees through to active engagement. The Compact ensures that the value of volunteers is recognised.

Volunteering is defined as an activity that involves spending unpaid time doing something that aims to benefit the environment or individuals or groups (other than, or in addition to, close relatives). There are four principles that are fundamental to volunteering:

- **Choice**
Volunteering must be a choice freely made by each individual.
- **Diversity**
Volunteering should be open to all.
- **Mutual benefit**
Both the volunteer and the organisation that the volunteer works with should benefit from the relationship.
- **Recognition**
The contribution of volunteers should be recognised.

3 Implementing the Compact

Guidance for implementation

By recognising to the Compact, public bodies and VCOs agree to take responsibility for:

- Implementing the Compact
- Operating in accordance with it, in their relations with each other.

The Northumberland Compact Reference Group oversees the operation of the Northumberland Compact.

To implement the Compact effectively, the public sector and the VCS will each take steps to ensure that their constituent organisations:

- Incorporate the principles of the Compact into their policies
- Incorporate the undertakings given in the Compact into their operational practices and procedures.

Implementation guidance documents, which are produced nationally will be adapted and adopted locally. Each document will illustrate, for a particular section of the public sector or the VCS, or for a particular activity, how partners should aim to implement the Compact through their policies, practices and procedures.

The Joint Compact Action Plan

Each year, a Joint Compact Action Plan will be published. This will set out the agreed steps that will be taken during the year by:

- The public sector and the VCS in the implementation of the Compact
- The Compact Reference Group in the oversight of the operation of the Compact.

There will also be a review of what has been achieved against the previous year's Joint Compact Action Plan.

4 Resolving differences

The public sector and the VCS are committed to complying with the Compact. When partners fail to comply, those involved should explain why.

Disagreements over meeting the Compact commitments should be resolved, amicably and informally, between partners through open dialogue and negotiation before they escalate.

The Compact principles form the basis of the relationship. Where issues are not covered in the commitments, compromise and discussion should be based on these principles.

When things go wrong (as they sometimes do) there should be an open admission of the fact and an honest discussion to resolve the situation. The Compact is there to help build effective partnerships, and this includes navigating difficult times. Ignoring it would both be unacceptable and unhelpful. The Compact should be at the heart of dispute resolution as a constructive tool towards better partnerships.

For further advice on how to resolve disagreements, please refer to the Northumberland Positive Dispute Resolution Procedure. This can be downloaded from: www.northumberlandvcs.org.uk/pages/compact.php

5 Further information & contact details

Key organisations associated with the Compact

Compact Voice

This is the independent body representing the VCS in taking forward the Compact. Compact Voice is made up of an autonomous alliance of leading voluntary and community organisations with national, regional and local reach, providing the voice of the sector on Compact issues.

Compact Voice has a network of over 1,500 local and national VCS representatives across England. It provides expertise to support Compact implementation, facilitates the sharing of information and advice between

members, and enables them to develop Compact policy and practice. For more information, please visit: www.compactvoice.org.uk

Compact Advocacy

The Compact Advocacy Programme acts on behalf of the sector to ensure that public bodies treat the sector fairly. It handles cases for individual organisations when they have concerns with Compact practice at a national or local level. The programme is based at the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and is funded by the Big Lottery Fund.

For more information, please visit:

www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/compactadvocacy

Office for Civil Society

Created in May 2010, the Office for Civil Society replaced the Office of the Third Sector and leads work across government to support the environment for a thriving voluntary and community sector (charities, voluntary and community groups, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals), enabling the sector to campaign for change, deliver public services, promote social enterprise and strengthen communities.

It is part of the Cabinet Office, at the centre of government, in recognition of the increasingly important role the sector plays in both society and the economy.

For more information, please visit:

www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk

Commission for the Compact

Established in April 2007, the Commission for the Compact is an independent public body responsible for overseeing and promoting use of the Compact. It is sponsored by the Office for Civil Society and the Minister for Civil Society. It was set up to support the Commissioner for the Compact, improve awareness of the Compact and address the barriers to its adoption and implementation.

For more information about the National Compact, please visit:

www.thecompact.org.uk

For more information about the Northumberland Compact, please visit:
www.northumberlandvcs.org.uk/pages/compact.php

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