

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

VCS LIAISON GROUP

NOTES of the inaugural meeting of the **VCS Liaison Group** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall on 4 December 2014 at 3.00pm.

PRESENT

Councillor L. Grimshaw (Chair) In the Chair

COUNCILLORS

R. Gibson
V. Jones
J. Reid

A. Sambrook
E. Simpson
A. Wallace

VCS REPRESENTATIVES

A. Atkinson
J. Jackson

S. Patience
L. Prudhoe

POLICY BOARD MEMBER

V. Tyler

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

M. Bird
K. Francis
T. Kirsop
C. Maddison

Team Leader, Democratic Services
Principal Inclusion Policy Officer
Social Enterprise Manager
Apprentice, Democratic Services

1. WELCOME FROM CHAIR

The Chair welcomed everybody to the meeting and invited everybody at the meeting to introduce themselves.

Ch.'s Initials.....

2. MEMBERSHIP AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

The membership and terms of reference of the VCS Liaison Group, as agreed at the Annual Meeting of the County Council held on 1 October 2014, was noted:

8 Members (4:3:1)

Portfolio Holder to attend as an observer

Chair – L. Grimshaw

Vice Chair –

Labour	Conservative	Liberal Democrat	Independent
L. Grimshaw	R. Gibson	J. Reid	
A. Sambrook	V. Jones		
E. Simpson	G. Sanderson		
A. Wallace			

Four representatives from the Voluntary and Community Sector

Functions

It was established that this Group consider and make recommendations to Policy Board on:-

Mutual opportunities and share common concerns. These will help to support the production of a Policy Statement which will provide clarity about the Council's corporate approach to working with and supporting the sector.

Actions identified by the Liaison Group will be taken forward by a cross-authority officer working group.

3. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor G. Sanderson and VCS Representative Anne Lyall.

4. ELECTION OF VICE CHAIR

RESOLVED that Councillor Simpson be appointed Vice-chair of the VCS Liaison Group.

Ch.'s Initials.....

5. DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Cllr V Jones declared that she was a board member of the County Blind Association; however this membership was coming to an end.

VCS Representative J. Jackson declared that he was the Independent Chair of the Standards Committee for Northumberland County Council.

6. CURRENT POSITION

Members received a PowerPoint Presentation from the Principal Inclusion Policy Officer with regards to the current position of VCS Support Services (a copy of which is attached to the signed minutes). The key areas of the presentation included information about the current situation in Northumberland, the support provided by Northumberland County Council, direct funding provided, the key principles for work with the voluntary/community sector, details of particular funding packages, and the reasons for forming the VCS Liaison Group.

Discussions were held throughout the presentation, as summarised below:

Responding to a query it was confirmed that EU funding for coastal communities came out on a biannual basis and was still available. The coast and lowlands funding covered areas from Berwick to Lynemouth, and there was a rural uplands funding pot for areas inland. A member queried if these were separate funds and how were they accessed? It was confirmed that the Council had commissioned Wansbeck CVS, to provide a range of support to VCS organisations across Northumberland which included advice and support on funding. In addition there was a modest enterprise and innovation fund which was operated by the Social Enterprise Team. The Social Enterprise Manager's team identified needs and then worked with an organisation called SkillsBridge to identify ways in which they could be supported. This involved work with the private sector including organisations such as Sage. The £60,000 funding could be split up depending on needs and was demand led but the maximum for one group to receive would be £20,000.

It was noted that some VCS organisations were diversifying their income streams and some sold products at County Hall.

The Liaison Group was further advised that its discussions could feed in to the Policy Board and County Council, ensuring a good relationship between the County Council and the VCS, helping a strong and vibrant VCS in Northumberland.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

7. VISION DISCUSSION

Members and VCS Representatives discussed what they wanted from the relationship between the County Council and the Voluntary and Community Sector.

The four main geographical areas included North Northumberland, Central Northumberland, West Northumberland and South East Northumberland. It was noted that Wansbeck CVS now covered all of Northumberland, and that a countywide name was being developed in order to prevent confusion.

A VCS Representative felt that a Statement of Intent from Northumberland County Council would be a good next step toward development and working together. It was also felt that a statement from the voluntary sector with regard to what they wanted from Northumberland County Council and what they would do to support the Council's corporate objectives would be beneficial.

Some felt that competition between different voluntary services had been an issue, as they were putting bids forward for a limited amount of money, therefore not all could be successful in their bid. It was mentioned that joint bids could improve the likelihood of being successful with a bid. Knowledge of similar organisations would be helpful in that organisations could work together for the bid application. Work could take place with officers and members to consider how to develop this and help all organisations, assisting joint working and putting together the best bids they could.

Some issues within the sector were highlighted: geographical, competition, cross-cutting and a differentiation between the needs of infrastructure organisations and little groups that existed.

In response to a query it was confirmed that around 1200 VCS groups existed in Northumberland. This included a wide range including regular church groups, scouts, girl groups and guide groups. Reference was then made to the 2013 'State of the Sector' report's statement that there were 1047 groups in 2013; this report had been circulated to the Group.

It was confirmed that funding was not available to regular businesses, rather to those with charitable status where profits were invested back into the business, not shareholders. It was felt that that encouraged employment. There were some stipulations which were less clear, for example support for a group to help reduce long term unemployment. It was also noted that Development Trusts were eligible.

It was felt that some voluntary organisations might not be fully aware of the funding opportunities available to them. The long and often complicated

application process could be seen as off-putting. Due to the nature of voluntary sector organisations, a high turnover of staff often added to the difficulty of organising funding applications.

Infrastructure organisations were available to aid the voluntary sector organisations with information regarding funding applications, and to help with the application forms. It was important that VCS groups knew about the infrastructure organisations and what they provided, and bridge the gap between what services people were aware of and what in reality was actually available.

The Principal Inclusion Policy Officer would look into providing members with information about where people needed to go to get support so they could give advice to their constituents and other interested groups. The involvement of town/parish councils provided a large opportunity.

It was noted that the information in the State of the Sector report was a year old, and one member pointed out that some of the figures contradicted each other, for example on pages 10 and 11, with regard to the percentage of voluntary organisations which were predicted to close in the 12 months to follow. It was mentioned that Northern Rock had been tracking the sector over the past few years. The information in the State of the Sector didn't necessarily reflect the voluntary groups in Northumberland, as Northern Rock's information showed that Northumberland groups had had a positive outlook on the future. It was noted that 80% of VCS groups were 'bombproof' due to their funding streams, but the other 20% could be less secure.

It was agreed that an update be provided for the Liaison Group's next meeting in March 2015, to provide evidence and the latest statistics about the numbers of VCS groups in the county, who needed what types of support, from which further support could be planned.

It was noted that some childcare organisations had to close, not due to financial issues, but due to a lack of volunteers often due to less availability of people to give their time due to other commitments, for example work and childcare.

RESOLVED that the presentation and the Group's comments be noted.

8. DISCUSSION – WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE AND WHAT IS NEEDED TO GET THERE

Discussion followed in which the Group identified a number of key issues for achieving success and how to do so:

- It was felt that it would be beneficial to have up-to-date figures about what organisations were doing. One of the biggest issues was a lack of volunteers. It was felt that volunteers were helpful, appreciated and motivated by passion. It was important to take note of which voluntary sector services were reducing, as many of them provided vital services to the community, such as support for victims of domestic violence and childcare.
- Using volunteering for a route into employment as a positive way to encourage the younger generation to volunteer
- Charities needed three or four trustees to run efficiently. A typical situation was described as a lack of volunteers and difficulty in the replacement of trustees; working together to support trustees was important
- The Northern Rock study found that the key to sustainable organisation was governance; it was important to develop people so they could successfully serve on VCS boards
- Recruiting people could be difficult, it was important to look at whether it was a case of the interested people not being there, or just not having the time to be there?

RESOLVED that the comments on the Group's views of success and achieving it be noted.

9. NEXT STEPS

Discussion followed about practical next steps for achieving success. Key points included:

VCS Representatives would take information regarding a vision to the VCS Assembly and the result could then be shared with members. Discussion could then follow about how these views could be articulated into a statement. It was important to know what VCS success looked like.

Views on what the VCS felt success would look like should be submitted to the Principal Inclusion Policy Officer in the first instance. This should include what both the County Council and VCS both needed to do to achieve success; it was important not to encourage any type of 'them and us' approach however. It was agreed that the feedback should be discussed by this Group as a whole as an agenda item, rather than as a subgroup.

Feedback should be sought on whether other VCS representatives should be invited to future meetings, although the number had to be realistic.

It was suggested that a baseline be established setting out the current position and numbers of VCS groups active, perhaps as a standing item on the agendas. Groups on a VCS database could be contacted about their current status.

RESOLVED that information be attained from the VCS regarding their aspirations and statements about what success looked like, and discussed at the Liaison Group's next meeting.

10. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Discussion took place about future dates and ensuring they were suitably located in the diary of county council meetings. The calendar for May 2015 would be agreed by County Council in February 2015. Members agreed that a 2pm start would be preferable for future meetings. It was noted that the VCS Assembly would arrange their meetings to take place shortly before VCS Liaison Group meetings so they could timely feed in to the process.

The next meeting would be held on 5 March 2015 at the earlier time of 2pm. The venue would be confirmed in due course by email.

**COUNCILLOR L GRIMSHAW
CHAIR**