

Report to Newcastle Partnership and Paul Rubinstein, Asst CEO NCC

1. Purpose of this report

i. To ensure the continued provision of an effective Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) engagement mechanism with the Strategic Partnership by addressing Newcastle Council for Voluntary Service's infrastructure support funding requirements post September 2008.

ii. We are also asked to show the synergy between this work and the work of the City Council. This is important in the context of the new 'duty to involve' and meeting improvement targets.

Background to the report

Following a Newcastle Partnership led Review of engagement with the VCS, the Strategic board of Newcastle Partnership, on February 11th, agreed a number of recommendations with regard to NCVS's position as the primary infrastructure support agency for Newcastle.

We have been since charged with producing an outline bid which shows what we can do to meet our objectives with: existing resources; fewer resources; and more resources.

2. Aims and Objectives of this work:

We aim to:

- To facilitate and develop voluntary and community sector involvement in the work of the Partnership and related activity with the City Council;
- Maximise the effectiveness of VCS groups;
- Within that role, we also aim to enable as wide as possible support for the VCS voice to be heard and that appropriate networks are in place to provide a strong collective voice and representation.

Objectives

- VCS representation and involvement on the Newcastle Partnership its delivery groups and sub groups
- Providing a leadership role on the Strategic and Delivery boards for the VCS
- Ensuring the voluntary and community sector is involved in and influences regional and sub regional regeneration activity as it impacts on Newcastle
- Developing mechanisms to engage with emerging themes and Partnership initiatives
- Networking at commissioner, deliverer and service user level and supporting VCS involvement

- Providing information, advice and guidance on regeneration activity and ensuring the VCS is integral to achieving the aims of the Sustainable Community Strategy and Local Area Agreement
- Enabling the VCS to develop their voice and views on public policy and regeneration issues
- Developing partnership working within the VCS and with the other stakeholders
- To provide a skills framework and appropriate learning and development opportunities for representatives to Newcastle Partnership

3. Proposed activities:

The activities that are proposed are many and various. This is expanded in detail within **Appendix A**.

4. Justification of need and costings

4.1 The involvement of voluntary and community organisations in the design and delivery of public services is key part of the government's plans for public sector reform. The new statutory 'duty to involve' (coming into force April 2009) and the role described for VCS organisations in the 'Future Role of the Third Sector in Social and Economic Regeneration' present a challenge for both the VCS and public sector bodies. The City Council has already demonstrated through the Compact and its Codes a commitment to the VCS in Newcastle.

4.2 However, in order to meet these new challenges there is an even more vital need to continue a sustainable and sufficiently funded infrastructure support mechanism; one which will allow for a wide range of communities of interest and VCS organisations to engage with the work of the LSP, both at decision making level and at delivery partnership level as advocate or lobbyist.

4.3 A reduction in support at this crucial stage of development would impact severely on the ability of VCS organisations to engage with Newcastle Partnership and the LAA process. Security of funding from 2008 - 2011 will enable NCVS to continue the work already in operation but also to review, improve, and facilitate greater involvement of the VCS in partnership activity. It will enable the VCS contribution to meeting LAA outcomes and improvement targets and help to increase the quality of public service delivery and community cohesion.

5. Proposals

5.1 Currently this work is carried out by a core team of 3 Policy Officers. It is proposed that this continues. If resources permit, it is also proposed that this work be supported by a 3/5ths Information Officer post.

Policy Officers

5.2 Each policy officer will have responsibility for supporting representatives on the Strategic and Delivery Boards and Innovation Group. They will also have a flexible portfolio based on the five Newcastle Partnership Delivery

Partnerships, with responsibility for supporting VCS representatives; setting up and maintaining mechanisms to ensure the widest possible VCS engagement with individual Delivery partnerships; working with the LSP team, partnership co-ordinators and other statutory officers so that the VCS voice is heard throughout Newcastle Partnership structures, through carrying out activities described in **Appendix B**.

Information Officer

5.3 The work of the Policy team would be difficult if not impossible without the work of the Information team in keeping a sophisticated and up to date database that allows for communication with members. It is this that creates the link between the wider membership and the Policy Team and thus the work of the Partnership.

The existing Information Team is about to be cut by half due to funding constraints. This will severely impact on the ability of the Policy Team to keep in touch with an up to date membership base.

5.4 The proposed Information Officer post will carry out the necessary IT support and service the web based networking systems and membership database that are crucial to the communications strategy of the Regen Policy Officer Team.

6. Impact of different levels of funding

6.1 More detailed costings can be produced later, but overall effects can be easily predicted. **Failure to secure the projected level of funding will lead to the loss of one post.**

The impact of the loss of one post: This will lead to a significant reduction in the level of engagement activity, requiring a decision as to which area of LAA activity should be unsupported; fewer events; fewer mail shots; no representation on some delivery partnerships; no consultations; etc.

6.2 Additional funding on top of existing resources could allow for a 3/5ths Information Officer.

7. Conclusion

There is clearly a need for this work to continue if there is to be sustainable and robust mechanism for engaging and involving the VCS in the work of the Partnership. Current funding is due to end on 30th September. Not only is an urgent June decision required in order to comply with proper redundancy procedure, the longer it takes to make a firm commitment to a specific level of funding, the more likely it is that key staff will leave before this time, severely curtailing our ability to carry out the work at all. Thus we urge the Council to arrive at a conclusion by 1st June.

Appendix A

Proposed activities if existing or greater levels of funding are secured

1. Overview

- Holding regular events throughout the year to keep in touch and provide networking opportunities for its membership.
- Running focus groups; consultations; workshops; mail shots; emailing; to develop the sector's views on a specific subject and to inform the work of the Partnership.
- Results are fed back to members and representatives via our website, papers to meetings or in the Quarterly '*re:gen newsletter*'
- Bi weekly '**e Bulletins**' and e-discussion fora via NCVS mailings;
- Carrying out small scale qualitative and quantitative research into mapping service delivery
- Employability and social enterprise.
- Maintaining networks
- Giving talks/presentations
- Developing the capacity of the membership to engage with the LSP and encouraging them to do so
- Developing new initiatives

2. Targeted involvement: work specific to major LAA themes and Partnership initiatives

2.1 The Policy Team also aims to engage with the membership in a more focused way.

2.2 The Policy Team have successfully developed 4 'Reference Groups', which work directly to the Delivery Partnerships' agendas. The representatives attend these meetings; meet other interested parties, obtain their views and thus are able to develop a wider VCS response to any issues arising from the work of, for example, the Well Being and Health Partnership or the Safe Newcastle Partnership.

2.3 Membership is managed through a bespoke database that holds information under the following headings:

- classification of purpose (advocacy, homelessness, young people etc)
- themed interest – e.g. equalities and community cohesion; employability; Children and Young People

This allows for targeted involvement and communication and a connection between the work of the Partnership and communities of interest. For example, NCVS and the City Council's community development unit are co-

facilitating the steering group for an LGBT Centre in the city. The group is keen to support the development of mechanisms for partnership engagement with Safe Newcastle, Well being and Health and Children and Young People's partnerships.

2.4 We have also developed high level strategy with the key partnership themes of

- employability through Newcastle Futures;
- Well Being and Health through involvement and consultation with the sector over the Alcohol Harm reduction strategy and the Mental Health and Emotional well being strategy;
- Developing mechanisms to get voluntary sector input into Locality Partnerships of the Children's Fund;
- Developing the sector through joint working between the Council and the VCS on the Procurement Compact

The above work ensures that the voice of a key delivery partner, the voluntary and community sector, is threaded through the strategic activity of the Newcastle Partnership.

3. Representation

3.1 The Team, through the NCVS membership, identifies and supports representation to a variety of partnerships and groups. This involves:

- running election or selection processes;
- identifying accountabilities; roles and responsibilities for third sector partners;
- induction and ongoing learning and development;
- reading papers, briefing representatives;
- supporting representatives at meetings
- ensuring there is a two way communication channel between representatives and the wider membership;
- involving and informing the sector and the Partnership and its constituent members about the needs, issues and concerns of the third sector
- identifying the potential contribution of VCS groups as commissioners, deliverers and users of services

There are currently 18 VCS representatives to different parts of the Newcastle Partnership, all of whom are supported by the Policy team.

4. Accountability to the wider sector

4.1 Partnership issues and activity clearly now applies to the whole VCS rather than a smaller sub set of organisations who are interested in regeneration. Recognising this change since the Regen Forum was first created; we acknowledge that we need to broaden the base from which involvement with the Newcastle Partnership is facilitated. We plan to make NCVS membership the primary mechanism for implementing the work,

opposed to a smaller sub set of it, the Regen Forum, where current membership stands at around 200 members.

4.2 Any constituted voluntary group active in Newcastle can join NCVS. It usually has around 460 members, who range from the very small to the very large, and work in a wide range of fields. Usually about 25% of the membership are groups that are totally voluntary.

4.3 The Policy Officer Team and the Regen Forum currently are given direction by the Regen Forum steering group; a group of 12 people elected from the Regen Forum membership, which meets 6 times a year. This will be reviewed as part of our wider consultation on changes to our present system.

5. Partnership working

5.1 The work of the Policy Team is underpinned by the collaborative organisational ethos of NCVS and is driven by the aspirations and priorities of the VCS through NCVS' membership; the Regen Forum, and other networks that NCVS facilitates, such as the Health and Community Care Forum.

5.2 The views of the membership are frequently sought on all 'regeneration' issues and the activities of the Team's officers are (and will continue to be) a reflection of those regular consultation and involvement activities. In addition the officers regularly receive direction and advice from the membership on future action. Work is also undertaken in partnership with other agencies such as the Quality of Life Partnership; Healthy Cities; Newcastle Futures. We have also worked in partnership with other neighbourhood based VCS organisations i.e. Riverside Community Health Project; West End Community Development Consortium and the East End Community Development Alliance (who are also represented on the Regen Forum steering group).

6. Future Regen Forum involvement and engagement activity

6.1 Following the work of the Partnership review and the work of a GONE appointed Neighbourhood Renewal Advisor, to help assess partnership relationships in Newcastle, we will continue to review our working practices. This review includes: reviewing our steering group arrangements; selection and election processes to find the appropriate skill and leadership base for the various boards and theme partnerships; diversifying our membership base and networking arrangements and structures. We also aim to review our existing competency framework which will allow for clarity of role and responsibilities for representatives.

6.2 We aim to continue to use the Regen Forum as a useful network of organisations who are interested in the broadest range of regeneration activities in order to build their capacity to engage with the Newcastle Partnership.

SYNERGY WITH OTHER NCVS WORK

The Policy team does not work in a way that is separate from the rest of NCVS and its functions, and there is considerable synergy between all parts of the organisation. NCVS work falls into 2 major areas – policy and liaison work; and supporting and advising the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS).

Policy and Liaison

The NCVS sees a clear role for itself in enabling liaison both within the sector and between it and other agencies, of which the most important is the Council. It also sees itself as having a primary role of keeping abreast of government and Council policy that will affect the sector, and informing the sector in ways that are helpful to it, and assisting in partnership mechanisms to forward these policy issues.

The policy and liaison work is mainly carried out by the 3 Regen Policy Officers; a Policy Officer funded by the Council core grant, and the Director. They meet monthly as a Policy Team to ensure co-ordination of their work.

NCVS has always recognised that its members will not all share the same interests, and uses as its mechanism for dealing with this Forums or Networks, that allow for information and consultation to be targeted. The main ones are the Health and Community Care Forum that was started in the late '80s, and the Regen Forum, started in the mid '90s.

Policy Officers have to be prepared to change focus in line with the changing policy scene, but two themes have remained constant over the last decade.

- The Compact. NCVS led the work on the Compact between the VCS and the Council, and jointly with Council Officers services the Compact Review Group, and the implementation of its annual work plan. The Compact is central to the way the VCS and the Council work together.
- Work with Health and Social welfare issues, using the Health and Community Care Forum. This is always likely to remain a priority since there are more of our members working in these areas than any other. Currently the Policy Officer services the Voluntary Sector Advisory Group, which is the mechanism for liaison between the VCS and Social Services. She is also leading the Children's Work Force Development work for the Council in the VCS; servicing the Voluntary Youth Sector Forum, jointly with one of the Regen Policy Officers, and leading our bid for the LINK service.

Thus the team of 5 between them facilitate and enable a whole range of policy contacts with the Council, as well as with other bodies such as the PCT, the LSC etc. Using Forums, networks and information systems, they involve the VCS in Council policy and initiatives in an informed and positive way.

Support and Advice Work

The VCS consists of a large number of organisations from the tiny to the very large. All need advice from time to time on a range of issues, the most frequent of which are constitutional and governance issues; funding sources; employment matters and financial guidance. There are staff giving advice on all these matters, all of them expert in their field. Advice is given in 3 broad ways:

- Regular briefings to all members via the newsletters, mailings and emailings.
- Consultation sessions given to groups on issues with which they need assistance.
- Training courses

It would be easy to see this work as entirely separate from the policy and liaison work, but in fact the experience of the Information Officer in the matters that affect groups day to day gives a valuable grounding to the Policy Officers, and similarly the knowledge of Policy Officers on changes in government and Council policy is shared with Information and advice workers to ensure that they can give members advice that is attuned to current realities. In addition, it is usually the basic services offered to groups that brings them into membership, and therefore into a situation where they can be involved in Partnership and other initiatives.

The substance of and demand for this work changes remarkably little over time, though naturally changes in the law and factual detail have to be incorporated.

There are monthly Management Team meetings where information is shared between Advice and Information Officers and Policy Officers.

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