

**Cabinet**

**5 June 2013**



## **Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy**

---

**Report of Corporate Management Team**  
**Lorraine O'Donnell, Assistant Chief Executive**  
**Councillor Brian Stephens, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for**  
**Neighbourhoods and Local Partnerships**

---

### **Purpose of the Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to seek agreement for the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy and Action Plan.

### **Background**

2. The County Council, together with other public sector partners, has a strong and on-going commitment to supporting the voluntary and community sector (VCS). This commitment is highlighted in the Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) for County Durham.

'Partners in County Durham have long recognised that the development of strong, sustainable communities depends on residents' active participation in decision making and making a positive contribution to improving the place where they live. The voluntary and community sector has an essential role to play in bringing community voices into partnership and agency working, building social capital in communities and delivering accessible services'

3. Following local government reorganisation partners supported the idea of developing a 'Third Sector' strategy to promote a consistent approach and support for the VCS. In parallel with this, the sector, at that time represented by the One Voice Network, also outlined their intention to establish a comprehensive Third Sector Strategy. Through discussion it was agreed that this should be a shared strategy strongly linked to the SCS.
4. To scope this piece of work a workshop was held with the VCS and other partners to generate ideas for a vision and what might be included as the aims and objectives of a strategy. A steering group was then established consisting of representatives from the VCS, the Council, Durham Constabulary and NHS County Durham.

5. In July 2011 the new County Durham Compact was launched which outlines the principles for the working relationship between the public sector and VCS and provides the basis on which 'Better Together' has been developed.
6. Whilst the steering group has been developing new ways of working more effectively and preparing the strategy a number of key policy changes have been introduced that have had an impact on this work. The Localism Act and Best Value Guidance, the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, NHS Reforms, the inception of the role of the Police and Crime Commissioners and most recently the Welfare Reform Act. There have also been more generic messages coming from national Government on the role of the VCS. These policy changes and messages have all been considered as part of this work.

### **VCS Working Group**

7. Alongside the development of the strategy, working relationships with the voluntary sector have strengthened. As a result, knowledge has been improved, understanding increased and productive working relationships have developed.
8. In December 2011 Cabinet endorsed a report which set out the Council's vision for the future of VCS infrastructure support in the County and approved the setting up of a VCS Strategic Working Group to develop a shared understanding of the needs opportunities and capacity of frontline VCS organisations and allocate the Council's grant funding and any funding provided by other public sector partners, agree targets and monitor the delivery of core services. The Working Group is led by the Council and is made up of Cabinet Portfolio Holders, Senior Officers, and representatives from the VCS sector, the Police, and Health.
9. All partners recognise that a strong, active and flourishing VCS is a vital component in building resilient communities and enabling individuals to reach their potential. VCS organisations have the ability to provide services and support that are not available from statutory organisations. They also have financial freedoms to lever in additional sources of funding not available to the public sector and which may add significant value to an initial grant or contract.
10. The Working Group have been building up their knowledge and understanding about current engagement with the VCS across service groupings as well as considering opportunities for the future provision of services. They recognise that VCS organisations can play a vital role at all stages of the commissioning process leading to better outcomes and value for money. VCS organisations are also increasingly playing a key role in the delivery of services, particularly at a time of major change for public sector organisations.
11. Area Action Partnerships have a key role in engaging with and working alongside the VCS. A VCS representative sits on each AAP board and many of the public representatives are involved in VCS groups within their communities. During the coming year more than half of the AAPs will be

supporting the VCS as a priority and 11 of the 14 have highlighted the changing landscape in which all partners are working and how important the VCS organisations are in meeting needs of local communities, particularly as they are often able to reach the most vulnerable.

12. A key attribute of the VCS is their close links to the beneficiary groups that they serve. Consequently the VCS is well placed to support the development of tailored services which improve health outcomes and create a wider range of choices for the new Clinical Commissioning Groups, as well as service users. Commissioners will benefit from engaging with the sector in the process of service design and in supporting a diverse provider market.
13. A positive example of outcome focussed partnership work with the VCS is the work carried out by Children and Adults Services in encouraging consortia working amongst VCS organisations. This has resulted in a Consortia Framework and agreement involving 38 organisations and the development of 'Durham Voice' as a communication network with the sector.
14. Many VCS organisations in the North East, and in County Durham, in particular, are looking at forming consortia which allows them to pool resources and provide each other with financial scale and flexibility. For example the recent formation of Collaborate Durham which is a partnership of four VCS organisations providing similar or complementary services in the areas of homelessness and mental health. Each organisation is partly funded by Children and Adult Services. By coming together they are better able to meet client needs, reduce their costs, share their knowledge and skills and consolidate their position in the market. In this way they are also better able to work with commissioners and funders to respond to new opportunities and achieve better value for money.
15. Improvements to the Council's procurement process have been welcomed by the VCS and work is on-going to continue to engage with and respond to the sector to encourage and enable VCS providers to bid for contracts. In particular the Council's approach to early market engagement and market testing with the sector has been welcomed.
16. The Council is recognised as one of the leading authorities in England in the adoption and practice of sustainable procurement. It is the Council's stated policy to ensure that all Durham County Council's commissioning and procurement activity is undertaken in an economically, environmentally and socially sustainable manner. VCS organisations, especially those based in the community, can be particularly effective in addressing some of the sustainability issues highlighted in our policy. In addition the Council encourages private sector bidders to bring in VCS organisations into their supply chain where this can help them deliver the outcomes the Council is looking for.
17. A key focus of the Working Group to date has been to consider the likely impact of welfare reform and the role the VCS can play in partnership with the public sector. As Members will be aware, the Council, working with its partners, has developed an extensive programme looking at all aspects of the

Welfare Reform Act. Through the working group, the VCS is playing a key role in supporting the Council's work and help put in place mechanisms to support local people and build their capacity to deal with the changes they face. As well as implementing the processes necessary to ensure the changes introduced by the Act can take place, a key part of the programme is to understand the impact in communities and on residents. The Council will build on its partnership approach with the voluntary sector and other third parties in an attempt to ensure necessary support mechanisms are in place to help communities manage the change brought about by implementation of the Government's changes to the welfare system. The focus will be on practical actions and initiatives as well as working through the AAPs with local groups to understand where the impacts are being felt and what the specific needs are of each locality and community.

18. The VCS Working Group have been kept informed about progress with the strategy development and areas where work has already been undertaken to improve knowledge and understanding about the sector and areas where achievements have already been made. It is intended that the strategy takes forward the work already begun whilst remaining flexible enough to take into account the changing policy landscape including responding to the implications of Welfare Reform.

### **The Strategy: Vision, Aims and Objectives**

19. The strategy has a clear vision and purpose and is intended to influence future policy, identify opportunities for partnership working, and illustrate the diverse role and the social and economic impact of the VCS in County Durham. A number of case studies have been added to bring the strategy to life and give examples of the diversity of the sector's work. An Action Plan has been developed to implement the strategy and to drive forward the shared objectives. This will also be used to ensure that partners can work together effectively through changing political and economic circumstances.
20. Formal consultation on a draft strategy took place between 11 September and 4 December 2012. Responses were received from a total of 55 individuals and organisational representatives from both the VCS and public sector. A clear majority of the responses agreed that the proposals outlined under each objective would help achieve those stated objectives. All the views expressed in the consultation have been considered by the steering group and have helped to shape the final strategy. In particular a greater emphasis has been placed on the economic impact of the VCS; a stronger link has been made between the Compact and the Strategy; and a clearer emphasis has been put on the process for developing a joint action plan.
21. The VCS Working Group have considered and endorsed the strategy, a copy of which is attached (appendix 2).
22. The Vision for the strategy is:  
  
‘As partners together we want County Durham to be a place where a diverse voluntary and community sector thrives, where everyone works together to

realise the aspirations of individuals and communities to improve quality of life.'

23. The aims of the strategy are:

- To build confidence and resilience in individuals and communities to enable improved quality of life.
- To nurture a flourishing and growing VCS to contribute to vibrant communities.
- To maintain strong and effective partnership working in order to achieve sustainable outcomes.

24. The objectives of the strategy are:

- i. To increase the sustainability of the Voluntary and Community Sector by building capacity to meet identified needs and be flexible enough to meet future needs.
- ii. To improve communication within the VCS and between sectors.
- iii. To increase the number, diversity and quality of volunteer opportunities and recognise the impact and value of volunteering in local communities.
- iv. To develop the capacity and resilience of individuals to manage and shape change in their lives and their communities.
- v. To strengthen the influence and effectiveness of the VCS in strategic and local decision making.

### **Strategy Outline**

25. The introduction to the strategy emphasises that it has been developed between partners in the context of a changing policy landscape and a challenging economic environment, making partnership work all the more important.
26. The strategy states that a joint Action Plan (appendix 3) has been developed which sets out initial outcome focussed actions for partnership groupings to work together in order to achieve the objectives outlined.
27. The strategy defines the use of the term VCS and seeks to describe the variety of types of organisation which exist in County Durham. Case studies are used throughout the strategy to highlight the diverse role of the VCS and to illustrate the social and economic impact which organisations have within the County.
28. The strategy highlights what partners will seek to achieve together under each objective. These aspirations are developed in the Action Plan.

### **Development of Action Plan**

29. The Action Plan identifies a range of outcome focussed actions under each objective, these include:

- a) Create a forward looking and adaptable VCS to ensure it is fit for the future
  - b) Enable all partners to be well informed, responsive and collaborative
  - c) Increase the range of volunteering opportunities across all sectors
  - d) Facilitate individual choice and self- determination to enable individuals to be resilient and better able to adapt to change
  - e) Ensure the VCS has a strong strategic voice
30. Each outcome focussed action is accompanied by specific suggested outputs and activities such as:
- a) Development of advice and guidance on diversifying funding and increasing more socially enterprising ways of working
  - b) Improve understanding of Compact commitments for all partners
  - c) Increase proportion of local people who volunteer formally
  - d) Adoption of an asset based approach to community development and community health and wellbeing
  - e) Establishment of a consistent effective strategic involvement mechanism for the VCS
31. The Action Plan also identifies lead partnership groupings to build on the actions and develop specific targets to achieve the desired outcomes as well as ensuring that the Action Plan complements and enhances existing plans and strategies. The identified leads include:
- a) VCS Working Group
  - b) Lead VCS Infrastructure Organisation
  - c) Business Enterprise and Skills Working Group
  - d) Health Improvement Partnership
  - e) Corporate Procurement
32. The Council will continue to work with partners in the steering group to develop the Action Plan further and ensure that the most appropriate organisations have an opportunity to contribute to the identification of additional actions so that it remains flexible enough to adapt to changing political and economic circumstances. Implementation of the Action Plan will be from July 2013.
33. Progress and performance will be monitored quarterly by the Steering Group and reported to the VCS Working Group. The Action Plan will be reviewed annually and a report made to the County Durham Partnership.

### **Recommendations and Reasons**

34. It is recommended that the VCS Strategy and Action Plan for County Durham is agreed.

---

## **Appendix 1: Implications**

---

**Finance** – Implementation of the strategy will be within existing budgets. Opportunities for additional external resources will be sought as part of the Action Plan.

**Staffing** – Implementation of the strategy will be facilitated within existing staff resources.

**Risk** - None

**Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty** – An Equality Impact Assessment initial screening was carried out prior to the formal consultation process which was revisited following the formal consultation.

**Accommodation** - None

**Crime and Disorder** - None

**Human Rights** – None

**Consultation** – A formal 12 week consultation was carried out on a draft strategy and changes made to the final document which take into account the responses received. On-going informal consultation with the VCS and other partners remains key to the success of the implementation of the strategy.

**Procurement** - None

**Disability Issues** - None

**Legal Implications** - None