The Voluntary and Community Sector in Blyth Valley – Developing A Vision For The Future

Research undertaken for Blyth Valley Local Strategic Partnership by the Sustainable Cities Research Institute at Northumbria University

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FINAL REPORT

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Executive summary

1. Sustainable Cities Research Institute has produced this report following research carried out on behalf of Blyth Valley Local Strategic Partnership. The research involved documentary analysis, case studies, and interviews and focus groups involving key players within the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS).

2. The VCS is regarded as a significant contributor to the area's economy and a key service delivery agent. Broadly defined, it contributes about 3.8% of regional GDP and employs an estimated 4.4% of the region's workforce. An estimated 40,000 organisations are thought to be active in the region.

3. A number of external pressures influencing the sector were identified: the need to engage with LSPs and play a full part in other local and regional networks; the need to respond to changes in governance structures; funding changes such as the end of SRB funding; and the need for strong infrastructure organisations to support the sector and enhance communication systems.

4. Contributors identified the following strengths of Blyth Valley VCS: good partnership working; dedicated volunteers; flexibility and speed of response; valuable training provision; high quality community centres; excellent community links, including involving hard to reach people; value for money; and diversity within the sector.

5. However, it was thought that the following areas could be improved upon: the relationship with the LSP; some community buildings being underused; heavy reliance on a few key staff and volunteers; structural issues, which can result in duplication of resources; heavy demands in terms of time, resources and skills; inflexible monitoring systems; the problems of short-term funding; level of social economy activity; and the need to promote the sector.

6. A number of aspirations were identified for the sector: better funding arrangements and more long-term funding; developing the infrastructure by building more centres outside Blyth town; more centralised organisational support for VCS agencies; more social economy activity, and closer working between agencies.

7. The preferred option for the future of the VCS was the development of a new infrastructure organisation that can, where appropriate, incorporate the existing infrastructure organisations and provide support to the sector as a whole. It was thought that the option of establishing this new organisation as a Development Trust should be further explored.

8. The new organisation could act as a 'One Stop Shop' providing advice and support on fundraising, management, human resources, health and safety, insurance, and training. It could also lend weight to funding applications; help to develop more sustainable relationships with the Council and LSP, thus freeing the Community Development Team to develop its strategic role; enhance levels of co-ordination within the sector; and develop a dedicated research facility for the sector.

9. To minimise the range of concerns expressed about how the process of change is to be managed, it is recommended that the next step should be to commission a feasibility study that will explore the various options regarding the process of change - and the establishment of the new organisation - in greater detail.

10. This report will be launched at an event held for Blyth Valley VCS in Spring 2004.

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1. Introduction

1.1 In 2003, Blyth Valley Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) commissioned Sustainable Cities Research Institute (SCRI) at Northumbria University to undertake research on the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in Blyth Valley.

1.2 The research aim was to provide a starting point to help visualise how the voluntary and community sector in Blyth Valley might look in five years time. It was proposed that SCRI would work with a variety of relevant stakeholders to identify the key external and internal drivers of change facing the VCS in Blyth Valley and to examine potential responses.

1.3 The key emphasis would be on 'adding value' to existing arrangements, and bringing forward agreed proposals for change to enhance the capacity of the VCS within new community governance structures.

1.4 SCRI's approach involved drawing on a wide range of information:

♦ Key policy documents (such as: Blyth Valley Community Strategy - The Peoples' Plan; Active Community Unit and Treasury reports; NCVO reports; regional review's of the voluntary sector).

♦ The experiences of other relevant local authorities in the North East with regard to the organisation of voluntary sector agencies.

♦ Semi-structured interviews with a range of relevant regional and sub-regional organisations (including Government Office, One North East, VONNE and a number of funding organisations).

♦ A series of three workshops with relevant stakeholders to explore and address aspirations, questions and other issues relating to the future development of the voluntary sector in Blyth Valley, in order to formulate a vision for the future. The workshops involved the following:

• Voluntary sector organisations and projects in Blyth Valley;	• Voluntary sector support organisations in Blyth Valley (Community Matters, Blyth Valley Enterprise Ltd, CVS and CSV);
• Statutory agencies;	• Blyth Valley LSP;
• Government Office North East;	• Funding organisations;

1.5 It was agreed that SCRI would use the research findings to produce a short visioning report, which would give impetus to a wider debate on the future of the VCS in Blyth Valley. The report would be launched at an event in spring 2004, at which stakeholders could discuss the emerging recommendations. The emphasis of this event would be on inclusiveness, and it would involve consulting as many potential stakeholders as possible about the process of change.

2. Research approach

2.1   SCRI has taken an inclusive approach to this research with the aim of involving and enabling communities and organisations. This has meant placing an emphasis on getting the *process* of consultation right, and viewing it as an opportunity to inform and facilitate a wider debate. It was agreed that the research should be guided by the following principles:

- Listening to the VCS – and capturing its needs and aspirations;

- Balancing the need to respond to external drivers of change with the importance of building on existing strengths in Blyth Valley;

- An emphasis on 'bottom-up', not 'top-down' solutions. It is important to bear in mind that any changes will take time and cannot be forced;

- Empowering the VCS, and building its internal capacity;

- Developing ways of strategically involving the VCS across the public service agenda – service delivery and mainstreaming must be accepted as key aspects of the role of VCS;

- Recognising the merits of diversity. The VCS can be diverse, fragmented and, occasionally, untidy, but this should be viewed as a strength as well as a weakness.

- Recognising the danger of looking for *'neat and tidy'* organisational solutions and in trying to replicate blueprints from elsewhere - local circumstances and histories can constrain opportunities for transferring solutions.

3. The Voluntary and Community Sector: external drivers

3.1   The VCS is considered to be a significant component of the region's economy and an important 'social partner' in developing and delivering joined-up strategies aimed at combating social exclusion. Research recently commissioned by Voluntary Organisations' Network North East (VONNE) and One North East (ONE) stated the following of the VCS:

"…the wide range of activities which are undertaken by the voluntary and community sector can be successful in contributing to reducing social exclusion, developing community learning, raising aspirations and creating strong, healthy and safe communities as a means of building capacity for effective contribution in the future. In addition the sector has the capacity, in partnership and when well funded and supported, to make direct and immediate contributions to the regional economic strategy and its targets".

(Shared Intelligence, 2003)

3.2   The VCS also plays a vital role in the democratic process by enhancing community involvement in regeneration partnerships and programmes. VCS organisations often actively seek to empower communities. This view is reflected in a recent DEMOS report:

"*Many projects aim to transform relationships of dependency into individual and collective capabilities for autonomous action. These community based organisations go beyond service provision by developing leadership skills in individuals and within groups, thus building the capacities required to demand real change in the balance of power between citizens, government and employers".*

(DEMOS, 2003)

3.3   As well as responding to Government policies to promote social exclusion, deliver neighbourhood renewal and empower communities, the sector is also faced with a wider agenda for change associated with the emphasis on community governance and joined-up service delivery.

3.4   One 'driver' relates to need for the sector to be 'fit for purpose' in terms of its engagement in Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), while also ensuring that its independence and accountability is retained, and even strengthened. LSP involvement places pressure on the VCS in terms of capacity, ensuring accountability and reporting back to organisations and projects. Issues of training and skills also emerge, as does the potential problem of partnership fatigue. Evidence also suggests that the VCS is not effectively represented on the sub-regional partnerships that now decide single programme allocations (Urban Forum, 2003).

3.5   Furthermore, the continuing proliferation of Government initiatives (particularly Area Based Initiatives), the increasing prominence of the regional agenda, and the potential implications of local government re-organisation in Northumberland make it imperative that effective linkages are developed between voluntary organisations and other local, sub-regional and regional networks, and that any proposals for change within Blyth Valley VCS is sensitive to changes in the nature of governance.

3.6   The current Home Office Active Community Unit Review of Support for Infrastructure Organisations (due to report in spring 2004) also poses challenges for VCS infrastructure organisations. The review stresses the importance of developing high quality support for VCS organisations - delivered as *'close to the point of need as is economically viable'* – and to encourage *'generic'* infrastructure organisations that are better able both to provide advice and assistance to individual VCOs, and to act as a channel for cross-sector communication (Active Community Unit, 2003).

3.7   The publication of the Treasury's 2002 report, *'The role of voluntary and community sector in service delivery: A cross cutting review'*, promoted the role of the sector in service delivery. The report argued that:

"VCOs may be able to deliver services more effectively to certain groups because their particular structures enable them to operate in environments which the State and its agents have found difficult or impossible". (p16)

The report also outlined the sector's strengths in terms of service delivery, including: specialist knowledge, experience and skills; innovative ways of involving people in service delivery; independence from existing and past structures and models of service; access to the wider community without 'institutional baggage'; and freedom from institutional pressures.

The report contained a number of wide-ranging recommendations to strengthen the role of VCS organisations in service delivery (see Table 1). While the report clearly raised profound issues for VCS organisations involved in service delivery, it is important to note that these challenges will not apply across the board to the VCS. Many smaller organisations in the sector may not view their primary role as involving formal service delivery.

Table 1: Recommendations to strengthen the role of the VCS in service delivery

- *Policy makers, including local government, should involve the VCS at an early stage in the design and planning of services;*
- *When drawing up contracts, providers should always consider innovative ways of working;*
- *Local authorities should include VCS representatives on Best Value Review teams;*
- *Local authority staff who work with VCS should receive training in order to understand the ethos of the VCS sector;*
- *Government should conduct wide-ranging reviews on how to enhance infrastructure capacity within VCS;*
- *New protocols should be developed to highlight best practice in collaboration and joint planning of services;*
- *Joint work to tackle skill gaps in the VCS should be undertaken;*
- *Funders should recognise that it is acceptable to factor in some overheads when providing a tender for service provision;*
- *The VCS and ACU should jointly raise the profile of the COMPACT;*
- *Government should commit itself to increasing the number of local compacts.*

3.8   The funding regime for VCS organisations is also experiencing a period of change and development. The perennial problems of funding in the sector have been clearly noted in the recent research report by Northumbria Information Network, *'Voluntary and Community Sector Employers In Northumberland: Current Contributions and Future Needs'* (2002). According to the report, the major barriers to developing the sector across Northumberland included:

- A lack of funding to develop the potential of staff and volunteers. Employers in the VCS were twice as likely to cite this as a problem as employers in other sectors;

- Short-term funding arrangements which do not recognise the true cost of service delivery;

- The absence of longer term funding arrangements, which would allow the sector to develop core functions, retain skilled staff and volunteers and pursue their long-term goals.

3.9   There are both 'opportunities' and 'threats' in relation to funding. Opportunities include the availability of new resources such as the Treasury's new £125 million *futurebuilders* fund, which aims *'to overcome obstacles to effective service delivery, to modernise the service delivery part of the sector for the long term and to increase the scale and scope of VCS service delivery'*. The fund is for non-recurring capital expenditure rather than ongoing revenue commitments, and aims to enhance the capability of organisations already delivering front line services.

3.10   In March 2001 it was announced that there would be no further rounds of Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funding. Instead Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) would be given greater flexibility to spend their funding allocation through a Single Pot (the amalgamation of 11 funding streams). A recent report by the Urban Forum suggests that the VCS may lose as much as £60 million for social regeneration funding under the new arrangements. The report further noted that many VCS organisations consider the single pot to have an overly economic focus:

"The single pot is not accessible to many VCS organisations who may, for example, be involved with activity to promote social inclusion and cannot therefore link the outcomes of their activity to rigid economic outputs".

Urban Forum, 2003

3.11   There is concern that with the demise of the SRB funding stream, the VCS will find it more difficult to access funding. New initiatives like the *futurebuilders* fund are specifically designed for those involved in service delivery and infrastructure organisations. If the aims of VCS organisations do not fit neatly into these boxes, they will find it increasingly difficult to secure funding. Existing funding programmes such as NRF cannot replace SRB funding, while the process of applying for European funding is often considered to be overly bureaucratic.

3.12   Taken together, these key drivers of change provide an overall context within which to locate any proposed developments in the VCS in Blyth Valley. They also confirm the view that this report is particularly timely and that there are now considerable opportunities for developing a vision for the future of the voluntary sector in Blyth Valley.

4. The Voluntary and Community Sector in Blyth Valley - a review

4.1   Both the semi-structured interviews and the focus groups explored the views of individuals regarding the particular strengths and weaknesses of the VCS in Blyth Valley. While a range of views was expressed, there was a wide measure of agreement across different sectors and agencies concerning the key issues that should be addressed. Table 2 highlights the range of strengths identified:

Table 2: Strengths of the VCS in Blyth Valley

Strength	Details
Partnership and joint working	Effective partnership working arrangements have evolved over a long period of time and organisations have *'got to know each other'* very well. The amount of mutual support between organisations is highly valued. Occasionally, organisations even share funding.
Key role of volunteers	The organisations could not survive without dedicated volunteers – there is a strong network of volunteers in Blyth.
Flexibility and speed of response	Unlike some statutory agencies, VCS organisations can be flexible, accessible and can in some instances protect confidentiality. They possess detailed local knowledge and are able to fill some of the gaps left by statutory provision. The sector can also respond quickly to external events.
Training	This is an important confidence builder. The training benefits of the VCS organisations are possibly underplayed, and may need to be more formally built into their outcome targets.
Facilities	In some parts of Blyth Valley there are excellent community and enterprise centres *"just down the road"* from service users.
Close to the people	The VCS provides a valuable link to *'hard to reach'* groups, and a vital empowering role for the community.
Value for money	Services provided by the VCS offer excellent value for money. However, the statutory sector should not view the VCS as a way to *"get things done on the cheap".*
Diversity	The diversity of the VCS in Blyth Valley is not accidental, but has been nurtured over a long period of time.

4.3. There was a similar measure of consensus about the areas where there was scope for improvement and development in Blyth Valley (Table 3).

Table 3: Weaknesses of the VCS in Blyth Valley

Weakness	Details
Relationship between VCS and LSP	The sector currently has little real strategic representation on the LSP, and getting the VCS involved is a very difficult issue. For example, who should be invited to meetings? Is representation too reliant on key individuals? How should dissemination through the sector be managed and resourced?
Buildings	VCS buildings are generally good quality, but some are full and overflowing, while there is concern that others are not being used as fully as they could be.
Staff and volunteers	The sector is reliant on a few highly committed individuals (whether volunteers or paid staff). There appears to be an increasing number of organisations seeking a small and diminishing pool of volunteers. It is particularly hard to get people to sit on management committees.
Response to the bidding culture	Concern was expressed about the sector's capacity to respond to the bidding culture. Some funders thought too few bids were received from the area, and that the quality of bids could have been improved.
Sector structure	Some respondents felt the VCS lacked coherence, and tended towards duplicating work and effort. Others thought there were too many infrastructure organisations.
Demands on time and resources	Many individuals reported that they had too much to do in the time available, e.g. making funding applications, monitoring performance, dealing with administrative and human resource issues. Several contributors felt that there was some evidence of partnership fatigue.
Monitoring and evaluation	Several individuals felt that outcome and output targets set by funding bodies bore no resemblance to the quality of results being achieved on the ground, and that monitoring was often too strict considering the small sums of money involved.
Funding issues	The need to continually chase short-term funding was described as a 'vicious cycle', made worse by the perception that funders expect the VCS to constantly re-package projects and come up with "new" initiatives, when existing initiatives often work perfectly well. It was thought that the VCS would find it even tougher to secure funding with the end of SRB funding in 2006 and the squeeze on other funds such as the EU and Charities.
Social economy	Social enterprise activities were thought to be somewhat under-developed, and not always well understood.
Advertising	Is the VCS, and particularly the social enterprise sector, doing enough to publicise its work and achievements?

4.4. Interviewees and focus group members were also asked about their views and aspirations regarding the future development of the VCS in Blyth Valley (Table 4).

Table 4: Aspirations for the future of the VCS in Blyth Valley

Aspiration	Details
Greater continuity of funding	Infrastructure organisations are often in a position of a) constantly having to chase funding for core costs, and b) competing against other voluntary agencies for funding. If Councils and LSPs took the responsibility to properly fund infrastructure organisations – in a sustainable and long-term way - they would be better equipped to support other voluntary agencies.
Further development of community infrastructure	The development of more high-quality buildings in other parts of Blyth Valley (outside of Blyth town) would be welcomed as providing local centres for the VCS. There was also an emphasis on such centres becoming financially self-sustaining (some existing resource centres are on short-term leases).
Integrated approaches to corporate support	Voluntary sector organisations are now increasingly faced with the twin pressures to provide local public services and to capture continuing funding for their own staffing. This requires effective management arrangements, detailed financial systems, and specialist skills in areas such as fundraising and writing bids. Respondents welcomed the idea of having 'centralised' organisational support for the VCS to provide help with this range of tasks. According to one contributor, *'a single infrastructure organisation would lead to economies of scale, better joint-working and co-ordinated administrative support'*.
More social economy activity	There was a feeling, especially within the statutory sector and among key players working in the area of social enterprise, that Blyth Valley would benefit from increased activity within – and better promotion of – the social economy.
Closer working between organisations	Closer working between organisations could lead to better mutual support systems, less duplication, and more integration of responsibilities. It was thought that any such change would clearly impact upon other relevant sections of the local authority and other mainstream agencies (e.g. the PCT and youth service). There was a clear view that the voluntary sector could be better represented on the LSP.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Opportunities

The VCS in Blyth Valley has a timely opportunity to build on its existing strengths and embrace an agenda for change. This could allow the sector to:

♦ Respond to Government consultations on the role of the VCS in service delivery and on the role of infrastructure organisations;

♦ Take advantage of new funding opportunities (whether central, regional or local) and respond effectively to changes in funding regimes;

♦ Further develop the skills of the sector, and therefore improve its effectiveness;

♦ Minimise any existing duplication and overlap within the sector;

♦ Rationalise and co-ordinate a range of administrative and support services for VCS organisations;

♦ Minimise service users' confusion with regard to the proliferation of VCS organisations;

♦ Develop a more proactive and strategic role for community development support within Blyth Valley Council;

♦ Play a key role within the LSP.

5.2 A new infrastructure organisation

Many of the aims described above could be achieved by developing a single, integrated organisation for infrastructure support in Blyth Valley. While this idea was supported by a large majority of people consulted via this research, differing views were offered regarding how it might be achieved.

5.2.1. Some contributors supported the idea of developing the role of one of the current infrastructure organisations, so that it become the main 'umbrella' body for the sector in Blyth Valley. Others noted that such a step could cause problems, for instance in deciding which organisation would be chosen to take this role, and how this would affect other organisations. Concern was also expressed that the existing organisations may not have the capacity or appropriate structure to become the one umbrella body.

5.2.2. A second option was to develop the role of the Council or LSP so that it can provide more comprehensive support to the VCS. It was argued that the impetus for change is likely to come from the Council, as it has an incentive to transform the VCS in order that the sector can help it fulfil its objectives. Voluntary sector agencies may resist change, being content to continue as they are and possibly lacking the capacity and resources needed to change. However, it was not certain whether such a top-down model of change would be acceptable to the VCS.

5.2.3. Most respondents favoured developing a new infrastructure organisation to support the sector and incorporate the existing infrastructure organisations. It was also the majority view that consideration should be given to exploring the feasibility of using a Development Trust framework for the new, integrated organisation. It was

argued that the new organisation could become a focal point for the VCS in Blyth Valley and enable it to respond proactively to a series of new opportunities.

5.3 Additional recommendations

The following recommendations respond to some of the identified shortcomings in the current VCS infrastructure, and aspirations for the future, listed earlier in this report. It is suggested that the proposed new infrastructure organisation could provide the necessary functions to fulfil these recommendations; alternatively, they could be addressed via separate means.

5.3.1. VCS organisations would benefit from more advice and support – or direct provision of services – on matters such as management, finances, accountancy, Human Resources, marketing and PR, health and safety, insurance, and training.

5.3.2. Steps should be taken to tackle issues surrounding funding – such as the end of SRB funding, difficulties attracting European funding, and reliance on short-term funding - and develop more sustainable and long-term core funding relationships with the Council and LSP. In addition, the new organisation could give increased weight to voluntary sector funding applications.

5.3.3. It would be beneficial for the sector to develop and promote more social enterprise activity. For instance, Blyth's Community Enterprise Centre could become a more proactive local centre for enterprise.

5.3.4. There is a need to address the physical infrastructure of the VCS. AS discussed earlier, some community buildings are underused, while other organisations lack adequate space for development. Furthermore, some buildings are in a bad state of repair, highlighting the need for capital investment. The proposed new organisation could form the centre of new infrastructure developments by being housed in a new VCS building.

5.3.5. No organisation is currently responsible for promoting and co-ordinating volunteering activity in the area, and it is under-developed as a result. Delegating this responsibility to a specific agency – such as an arm of the proposed new infrastructure organisation – would help to address this problem.

5.3.6. The development of a more balanced and effective sub-regional structure for the VCS would help it to engage more fully in sub-regional partnerships such as the LSP, facilitate exchange of information and good practice within the sector, and streamline communication between the sector and the Council.

5.3.7. In addition to the above recommendations, the new infrastructure organisation could also help to fulfil a number of other useful functions, such as co-ordinating the efforts of different organisations that are currently in competition for the same funding streams; absorbing some of the Community Development Team's current operational duties, thus freeing the Team to take a more strategic and proactive approach to developing the sector; and establishing a dedicated research capability for the sector.

5.4   Concerns

However, a number of concerns were voiced. These are noted below:

5.4.1. Some individuals felt that the process of bringing about change – and developing a new organisation – was likely to be a gradual, long-term undertaking, and were concerned that it should not be rushed.

5.4.2. Respondents were concerned that any changes might mean organisations losing their identity, and particularly that personal relationships within the sector could suffer. It was also thought that the sector might become too bureaucratic and detached, losing its current advantage of local responsiveness. The importance of keeping things local was stressed.

5.4.3. It was not certain how all of the different current VCS infrastructure organisations would fit into the new model, and there were concerns that existing infrastructure organisations may become less powerful as a result.

5.4.4. Respondents were wary that any changes to the sector might become an exercise in 'empire building'.

5.4.5. Extensive consultation within the sector both before and throughout the process was seen as a vital element.

5.5   Feasibility study

It is suggested that these concerns could be addressed, and the finer details of the proposed changes worked out, by undertaking a feasibility study.

5.5.1. This study could involve more detailed examination of issues such as: what precise form the new infrastructure organisation would take; how the role of current VCS organisations could be developed and supported (e.g. by being absorbed into the new organisation, or by operating as satellites); how community centres could benefit from the changes; how the needs and wishes of people working within the sector could best be met; and what other elements the process should involve (e.g. the development of a compact).

5.5.2. A feasibility study would also provide an opportunity to explore the relationship between the VCS, Blyth Valley Council and the LSP, and how this relationship would be likely to change. For instance, how support systems for the VCS can best be divided between the new organisation and the Council's Community Development Team, and whether this would require any re-structuring at Council level.

6. Conclusion

The decision to review the voluntary and community sector in Blyth Valley is timely, and will provide an opportunity for the sector to respond to external changes, while also allowing it to build on its current strengths and address developmental needs.

Several options for the future of the VCS were considered during the research, and a range of stakeholders from the voluntary and statutory sectors were consulted. The preferred option was for the development of a new infrastructure organisation that can incorporate the existing infrastructure organisations and provide support to the sector as a whole. It also was thought that this new organisation could be established as a Development Trust. A number of other recommendations were framed, which could either be achieved via the development of the new Trust, or treated as separate issues.

Concern was raised that the process of change must be managed sensitively so as to protect the sector and safeguard its existing strengths. It is recommended that the next step is to commission a feasibility study that will explore the various options regarding the process of change and the establishment of the new organisation in greater detail.

It is important to bear in mind that the development of a new infrastructure organisation for the VCS will not alone tackle all of the problems of the VCS (e.g. the need to recruit volunteers). Neither should it diminish the important role of front-line voluntary agencies in Blyth Valley.

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