The Future Direction of the Policy and Representation Partnership

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The Future Direction of the Policy and Representation Partnership: Executive Summary

Introduction

The Policy and Representation Partnership was set up in July 2009 with the aim of helping the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in the North East to influence public policy. The Partnership is funded by the big Lottery Fund until June 2013. The Partnership commissioned the Department of Social Sciences at Northumbria University to explore the capacity of VCS organisations in the North East to engage in policy activity; the value of the work of the Partnership to date; and, where future investment could be targeted to further support the VCS in the North East to influence policy. The findings of this report are based on a review of relevant documentation relating to the activities and achievements of the Partnership and twelve semi-structured interviews with stakeholders who had engaged with the Partnership and/or had knowledge of the VCS in the North East or influencing policy.

Research Findings

Stakeholders reported that engagement in policy-related activities is an important part of the ethos of their organisations and while they are actively engaged in policy work at the local, regional and national levels, there is an appetite for this to be a greater focus of the work. Stakeholders reported to see the value of the VCS in the North East having a collective voice around key policy issues and to be prepared to mobilise around specific agendas, where appropriate. Stakeholders typically reported that the capacity of their organisations to influence policy had increased over time. On the whole, they reported to be confident in their ability to influence policy and cited various methods used to achieve this. They were also able to cite a number of policy successes at the local, regional and national levels.

More broadly, stakeholders agreed that the capacity of the VCS in the North East to influence policy had increased in recent years, evidenced by the growing emphasis within the sector on monitoring and evaluation in recognition of the need for robust evidence to underpin policy change, the volume of networks and forums which have emerged over the last decade and the make-up of those networks which have increasingly come to involve public and private sector organisations, in addition to VCS organisations. Some policy areas within the VCS in the North East were also singled out as 'ahead of the game' in terms of their capacity to influence.

Nonetheless, the capacity of the VCS in the North East to engage in policy work was described as 'patchy', drawing attention to the limited understanding of some VCS organisations of key policy agendas and limited research skills within the sector, although in some organisations, this had been overcome by the commissioning of academics or independent researchers to undertake research on their behalf. Relationships with universities were seen by stakeholders to be beneficial in terms of enhancing the quality of research undertaken, helping organisations to engage with new audiences and bringing additional knowledge to organisations. The demise of regional government was felt to be a significant loss within the region, with the loss of individuals and personal relationships felt to be equally important as the loss of the formal structures. It was reported that many organisations are no longer aware of the key channels through which to influence policy and furthermore, the region is yet to have fully recovered from this, with new regional bodies having a different remit. Additionally, stakeholders observed that, as a result of funding cuts, many of the partnerships and networks that they used to engage with no longer exist. Overall, it was felt that the capacity of the North East to influence policy is 'very reliant on individuals'.

Difficulties were felt to be further reinforced by the geographical disconnect of the region from the centre and the make-up of the VCS in the North East, which primarily consists of small to medium-

sized organisations. Stakeholders based within the regional offices of national organisations also reported to have limited resources, to lack a regional identity and to have their 'hands tied' in terms of the policy messages that they permitted to publicise. Funding pressures within the sector also led some stakeholders to report that engaging in policy-related activity is a 'luxury' within the sector, with service delivery taking precedence. Few organisations have specific resources dedicated to policy work. Where specialist roles do exist, several are reported to be changing as resources become more limited. It is important to recognise that resource constraints are affecting organisations at all levels within the sector. On a more positive note, however, stakeholders suggested that the Localism agenda and digital era offer the region new opportunities to engage in policy discussions. There was equally a sense that policy-makers, irrespective of their political affiliation, are generally keen to engage with the VCS.

The research findings indicated that the Policy and Representation Partnership has played an instrumental role in supporting stakeholders and their respective organisations, as well as the VCS in the North East more broadly, to influence public policy. The Partnership was felt to have significantly raised the profile of policy work in the North East. The policy forums were widely regarded as 'valuable' and 'relevant'. The content of the workshops were praised for its quality and reported to have enabled stakeholders to further understand the context of their work. Stakeholders were also highly impressed by the quality of the speakers; highlighting, in particular, the contribution of several national figures that they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to engage with. The opportunities provided by the Partnership for networking were described as 'critical', particular in the current climate where opportunities for networking are felt to be decreasing. Indeed, the contacts made at the policy forums had resulted in a number of tangible outcomes for stakeholders. Stakeholders discussed the quality of the research outputs funded by the Partnership, finding the local-specific nature of the research to be particularly useful. The projects have also been of value to the successful bidders in terms of gaining a better understanding of policy issues, awareness raising of key policy issues, raising the profile of their organisations and facilitating policy and practice change. One organisation was also grateful for the support and mentoring provided by the Partnership when undertaking their project overall, they felt this opportunity had had a positive impact on their capacity to influence. Finally, the training workshops were reported to be providing stakeholders with the practical skills needed to influence policy.

Conclusion

The research findings indicated a clear need and strong support for the continuation of the Partnership. The continuation of the Partnership is seen to be particularly critical in the current climate where it is felt to be one of the only remaining bodies whose primary focus is championing and supporting policy-related activities. All elements of the Partnership's current programme of activity were reported to be valuable to stakeholders – although particular elements were more valuable to some than others depending of the scale, expertise and experiences of their organisations – and there was consensus among stakeholders that future investment should continue to be targeted at both awareness raising and capacity building activities.

The research findings yielded a number of possible areas of development for the Partnership. The first relates to facilitating the development of closer working relationships between universities and VCS organisations. Stakeholders suggested that the development of a working group or workshop to facilitate new working relationships between universities and VCS organisations would be useful. The second area of development relates to the local-specific focus of the Partnership's work. Stakeholders stated that they would welcome a greater proportion of the Partnership' work being directed at exploring the relevance of different policy topics for organisations and service users in the North East. In doing so, stakeholders suggested that the Partnership work more closely with existing networks or organisations to source this type of information. They also indicated that they would be happy to provide the Partnership

with this type of information to be shared with the network. A further area of development could be the Partnership taking a lead in identifying relevant individuals and developing closer personal relationships with ministers on behalf of the sector in the North East. The importance of personal relationships when seeking to influence policy was stressed by stakeholders throughout the research interviews. Stakeholders typically explained that this is something that they would like to pursue organisationally but that they are generally unable to do so due to capacity constraints.

While there was consensus among stakeholders regarding the value of the above developments, the discussions raised a number of interesting points for consideration by the Partnership where no agreement was reached. The first relates to the range and nature of the policy topics that future investment should be used to explore. While some of the stakeholders engaged with during the research process suggested that the Partnership continue to support organisations to influence policy in respect of a range of issues, others felt that the work of the Partnership would be more likely to result in policy change if it were to undertake a sustained programme of activity in relation to a small number of cross-cutting themes which are likely to have a long-term impact on the sector. Alternatively, it was suggested that the sector should be consulted about which policy topics the Partnership should focus on, as it has been in previous years. A further, more fundamental point for consideration relates to the future role of the Partnership; namely, whether the Partnership should continue to focus on providing the sector with the tools needed to influence policy or whether it could play a more direct role in facilitating policy change. Stakeholders explained, for example, that while the policy forum events were an effective way of kick-starting important discussions within the sector, few tangible outcomes followed. They further went on to explain that while they would be happy to contribute to region-wide policy campaigns of relevance to their organisations, capacity constraints do not typically allow for them to play a leading role. While recognising the funding stipulations of the Partnership in its current form, stakeholders suggested that additional funding be sought for the appointment of dedicated posts to play a more direct role in facilitating campaigning activity.

<h1 style="text-align: center;">The Future Direction of the Policy and Representation Partnership</h1>

Introduction

The Policy and Representation Partnership – hosted by Voluntary Organisations' Network North East (VONNE) – was set up in July 2009 with the aim of helping the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in the North East to influence public policy. This aim was supported by two key objectives: to improve knowledge within the sector of key policy issues and to improve awareness within the sector of how to influence policy. The Partnership is funded by the big Lottery Fund until June 2013. The Partnership's key activities include:

- Quarterly policy forums
- The funding of research into six policy topics affecting the sector
- Briefings papers
- Consultations with the sector to disseminate information and gather views on policy issues
- A Communications Network.

The Partnership commissioned the Department of Social Sciences at Northumbria University to explore:

- The capacity of VCS organisations in the North East to influence policy
- The value of the work of the Partnership to date
- Where future investment should be targeted to further support the VCS in the North East to influence policy.

Methodology

The research consisted of three key phases. The first phase consisted on a review of all relevant documentation relating to the activities, outcomes and impacts of the Partnership since inception. This included both self-assessment and independent evaluation. The second and third phases of the research involved the completion of twelve in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders identified through a process of discussion between members of the Partnership and the researcher. It was anticipated that stakeholders would have engaged in various was and to varying degrees with the Partnership. In addition, the majority of stakeholder would have broader knowledge of the VCS in the North East and experience in influencing policy. In the second phases of the research, seven interviews were undertaken. These interviews were transcribed in-house and the dataset subsequently analysed. The findings were then used to inform the contents of a further five stakeholder interviews. The interviews were a mix of face-to-face and telephone interviews and ranged in length from 45 minutes to several hours. Broadly speaking, discussions centred around five key issues:

- The stakeholder's role within their organisation
- The engagement of their organisation in policy-related activities
- The engagement of their organisation with the Policy and Representation Partnership
- The capacity of the VCS in the North East to influence policy
- Suggestions for the future targeting of resources to support the VCS in the North East to influence policy.

<u>**Research Findings**</u>

The Capacity of Stakeholder Organisations to Influence Policy

Engaging in policy-related activities was regarded as highly important to stakeholders, with service delivery and policy seen to have a mutually reinforcing relationship. One stakeholder from a national organisations stated, for example, *'Because we deliver services, we can talk about issues in an informed way, but we can also apply theoretical/policy ideas to shape service delivery – so it works both ways'*. In addition, stakeholders reported that contributing to policy is an important part of the ethos of their organisations. Here, one stakeholder said, *'In terms of turnover, policy work is a small element but in terms of what we feel is important, we feel very strongly that [service users] are a marginalised group who don't get recognised as hidden victims of crime, so making a contribution to debate is a key part of our organisational psyche'*, while another said, *'I believe very strongly that the VCS is the only part that can and should be speaking out on the part of its beneficiaries'*. While stakeholders are actively engaged in policy activity at the local, regional and national levels, there is an appetite for this to be a greater focus of their organisations. Typical comments here were: *'We are – as an organisation – committed to increasing our policy influence'*, and *'we would like to do more –certainly within the region'*. Furthermore, stakeholders reported to see the value of VCS organisations in the North East having a collective voice around key policy issues and reported to be prepared to mobilise around specific agendas impacting on the sector. Several stakeholders reported that the most critical policy topic for their organisations at present is welfare reform, with one stakeholder saying, *'If the government is to cut housing benefit to people under 25, regionally and nationally, I can see that that would be a massive issue for [us], so things like that, I think we would have to say something and I think there are people in the region who would form a united front'*.

Stakeholders from a range of organisations indicated that their capacity to influence policy has increased over time and they are generally confident in their ability to influence policy at the local level. Here, campaigning activities tend to have a clear focus and are mainly focused around informing the content of (and furthermore, securing) commissioning contracts. Various strategies were reported to be employed to influence policy at the local level. Most notably, several stakeholders reported that their organisations are part of local working groups. One stakeholder explained, *'on a practical level, lots of our assistant directors or service managers sit on local strategic partnerships or subgroups. They are also involved in safeguarding children's boards. So our experiences are fed quite directly to local authorities or other commissioners'*. They went on to discuss the diversification of the organisation's activities into a new policy area. To do so, the post of a health development manager has been created: *'we have a specific person who is getting involved in different clinical commissioning groups, making contact with directors of public health etc. On one hand, it is about showing commissioners that [we] can deliver services that they can then pay for, but more broadly, it's an opportunity to flag up the potential impacts of policies and commissioning decisions on children, young people and families'*. Another approach adopted, particularly by small, local organisations, is the use of voluntary sector councils to share the views of the sector with local authorities. Indeed, the infrastructure bodies interviewed saw representation to be an important part of their role and reported to have good working relationships with local authorities: *'We have a good relationship with the council that allows us to function. They can see that we are a useful function for them as well as them for us'*. Other organisations have tried to develop relationships directly with MPs as a way of influencing policy, commenting, for example, *'I'd say we are pretty good on things like lobbying MPs, I keep up to date with who the MPs are'*.

At the regional level, stakeholders reported a number of instances where they have developed networks with other organisations to campaign on a collective basis. For example: One national organisation reported being *'quite powerful'* within the region in relation to child poverty. The regional director supported the development of the North East Child Poverty Network which has been successful at encouraging local authorities across the North East to sign a pledge to eradicate child poverty. Other regional successes have emerged as a result of research activity. One stakeholder recalled how a piece of

research which their organisation undertook was an effective way of generating media attention around a particular issue and having 'informed discussions' with policy-makers. They reported: *'when we make a concerted effort, we can be quite successful. The research done by [person]...enabled us to go to local authorities and commissioners and make an informed contribution. We have been able to change policy as a result'*. Another stakeholder similarly reported that through the work commissioned by the Policy and Representation Partnership, their organisation was able for the first time to provide leadership around a particular issue affecting the sector. Another stakeholder reported that work funded by the Webb Trust had provided their organisation with a *'platform to influence nationally'*. Other organisations have raised awareness around particular policy issues through regional events such as AGMs, workshops or conferences and annual reports. It is important to highlight that some of these activities have also enabled the organisations to have national reach.

At the national level, a vital mechanism for influencing policy is though national infrastructure bodies. Homeless Link, in particular, was singled out as a *'really exceptional lobbying and advocacy organisation'*, in that they are *'sophisticated in the way they work....they do their homework, they get good quality intelligence out of their members, they use their networks well...you can literally chart when we give them stuff, three months down the line it will have had in impact'*. Action for Prisoners Families was also reported to be an effective body which feeds member views into the cross-departmental body, the Family of Offenders Board. A policy lead interviewed further suggested that one of the most effective ways of influencing policy is to develop personal links with ministers by inviting them to see the work of the organisation or to speak at events, for example, saying *'it's smart business…they have to prepare and get to know the organisation to try to convey an appreciative stance'*. Indeed, a number of organisations have adopted this approach in the past attracting leading national figures; here, the Cyrenians were singled out as being *'very good'* at this. In some cases, policy successes have been driven forward by the London-based central offices of national VCS organisations. One stakeholder reported, *'Nationally, [we] have increasingly got the ear of ministers so there is a definitive focus on working to change things for the better'*. Similarly, another stakeholder said, *'Because the national body is based in London and we aren't affiliated to a political party, we do have a lot of links with minsters and with the main government departments'*. While stakeholders were able to recall a number of national policy successes, a notable case was a campaign for the Department for Work and Pensions to set up a free phone number for customers calling from mobile phones. The relevant stakeholder emphasised that this was a national campaign based upon data provided by local offices. They went on to say that central government regularly accesses the quarterly reports which they produce and post online. A key factor linked to the organisation's policy influencing success was suggested to be their reputation for collecting reliable datasets unique to those collected by other organisations. Another stakeholder had been successful in getting over 1000 organisations to sign up to a charter around mental health in the workplace; all 12 local authorities in the North East were reported to have signed the charter. The stakeholder explained that this had been achieved by engaging with the Chief Executives of organisations directly: *'I just contact them directly…if you haven't got that commitment from the top, you are wasting your time'*. Finally, another stakeholder from a regional organisation reported to have a highly influential voice at the national level in relation to child poverty, with their organisation feeding into select committees and advisory groups, for example. He attributed the capacity of his organisation to influence policy to positioning itself as an expert on the subject matter and being practice in terms of their web presence, writing to MPs and ministers about their actions, producing and circulating annual reports and conducting research into key policy topics.

The Capacity of the VCS in the North East to Influence Policy

More broadly, stakeholders agreed that the capacity of the VCS in the North East to influence policy has increased in recent years, evidenced by, for example, the growing emphasis on monitoring and evaluation in the sector in recognition of the need for robust evidence to underpin policy change. The

Citizens Advice model of working was hailed as best practice and several organisations reported to be striving to emulate this approach. Indeed, stakeholders reported that within their organisations, '*a lot of work goes on within individual services identifying the most important issues that service users face*'. One policy lead who had charted this development explained: '*the evidence-based culture [under New Labour] exposed the different working practices of organisations…I always tried to say there is a value in having numbers all of the time…I could see it being resisted but I think there was a shift over time towards more evaluation*'. The increased capacity of the sector was further felt to be evidenced by the volume of networks and forums which emerged over time, as well as the make-up of those networks which have increasingly come to involve public and private sector organisations, in addition to VCS organisations. One stakeholder felt this to be a significant development: '*you're not to effect change if it's just the same people talking about the same issues together...but if we think about where [organisation] has come from, so much more of what they do is about engaging the public sector the private sector with all sorts of different players…and I think as soon as you do that, you raise the bar*'. Multi-sector networks were felt to have resulted in a 'step change' in the opportunities available to the VCS in recent years. Some policy areas within the VCS in the North East were also singled out as '*ahead of the game*' in terms of their ability to influence. The homelessness sector, in particular, was regarded as one which is particularly well equipped to influence policy, having a pro-active umbrella organisation, similar approaches to delivery and monitoring across organisations, good working relationships with policy-makers and a shared agenda. There was also a sense from stakeholders that when the VCS in the North East mobilises around a particular issue '*…it works really well*'.

Nonetheless, stakeholders described the capacity of the VCS in the North East to engage in policy work – in terms of both knowledge and skills – as '*lacking*' and '*patchy*'. One stakeholder drew attention to the findings of a recent report on this topic, which, to their minds, suggested that there is '*a real paucity of skills, of specialist roles, of opportunities for people who want to progress*' in the North East. The stakeholder did point out, however, that there were equally '*some really notable exceptions in that mix*'. More specifically, stakeholders commented on the limited understanding of some VCS organisations of key policy agendas, particularly within smaller organisations. For example, one stakeholder commented, '*I do find the smaller charities – they aren't very well informed about major policy changes...and sometimes that's a resource issue*', while another reported, '*I don't think organisations are often well informed about policy issues. I am still shocked at how many people at workshops don't know key facts about certain agendas*'. Furthermore, while larger organisations were reported to have a generally good understanding of elements of political agendas which are of direct relevance to them, it was suggested that they lack a holistic understanding of agendas which limits their ability to anticipate the indirect impacts of policy changes for service users.

A further reported gap was the capacity of some organisations to gather the evidence needed to inform policy. Stakeholders in various capacities stressed the importance of having a robust evidence base, describing it as '*a key driver for change*', but suggested that some organisations continue to '*trade on assertions and anecdote*'. The lack of evidence about needs, outcomes and impacts in parts of the sector was seen to be linked to three factors, with the first being resources. As one stakeholder explained, '*it's very easy to overlook [numbers] in terms of day-to-day work and really powerful cases studies…that's not an issue unique to this region, it's across the sector...this need to get to grips with our numbers and really be honest about what impact we have on the areas and groups we work with*'; another said '*We have historically had an interest in it but the problem is the capacity and resource*'. The second issue is the absence of effective management information systems to help organisations collect and analyse data; the associated costs of this are recognised. The third issue is limited research skills. One infrastructure organisation suggested, '*I think a lot of organisations don't have research skills. They sit down to do a questionnaire and then they realise it's a lot harder than you think. I think many have had their fingers burned when trying to do research before*', while another stakeholder who works closely with local community groups stated, '*I think it's important for them to have [research] skills but it depends on the size of the organisation. I don't think it's addressed with at the local level. Universities have the facilities to gather so much information and offer support…there is a great value in that*'. A number of organisations have attempted to

address this by commissioning academics or independent researchers to undertake research on their behalf. On the whole, this was reported to be an effective strategy. One stakeholder with a good working relationship with a local university reported: *'The work we did with [the university team] was one of the first instances of [us] really taking a bit of a lead in terms of having that wider discussion with [the] sector because...we didn't have the resources, we didn't necessarily have the sophistication. With [University], we had the right partners at the right time to kick off some much bigger discussions'*. Another reported: *'There are relationships all over the country between [organisation] and universities...there are a whole load of projects going on'*. This same stakeholder went on to suggest that establishing relationships with universities is one area which they as an organisation would like to develop further in order to enhance the quality of the research they undertake and to help them to engage with new audiences: *'I'm really keen to do more work with universities....I think that's an area where we could have much stronger links and much stronger ties. I think some of our reports would look quite different if they were done in partnership with universities, having that academic flair makes it of more interest to people who probably wouldn't normally look at [our] documents'*. Academic relationships were also reported to be beneficial in respect of students bringing additional knowledge to organisations, while gaining important work experience themselves. One organisation, for example, explained: *'A lot of faculties of law have students work with us as volunteers...because of what they know in terms of the theory of law, they can offer clients better advice as they have a higher level of knowledge than advisors...one thing missing from a law degree is the client facing diagnostic stuff'*. Part of the difficulty of working with universities was highlighted to be *'finding the right individuals'* to work with in terms of their research interests. Several stakeholders suggested that one area of development for the Partnership could be in establishing links between VCS organisations and universities, via a working group for example: *'I see the universities as laying a key role in supporting the sector...and increasingly so...If I were [the Partnership], I would be looking to strengthen the links with universities. VONNE should be linking with academic research'*. Stakeholders drew attention to the work of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) as an effective model for this: *'ILG bring academic insight into public sector issues...this works really well'*.

Having the skills needed to facilitate a policy campaign was highlighted to be a further gap. Stakeholders commented, *'the issue is having people with the skills to run the campaigns...I think that is very minimal. I don't think the skills are there'*, *'I think there is a bit of a skills gap – we have done some workshops around influencing – people were generally interested in that'* and *'I wish we were better underpinned in terms of skills...it would great to have someone working alongside me to say 'you haven't thought of this approach''*. This issue applies equally to established organisations, as to smaller organisations, with one stakeholder from a national organisation saying: *'Regionally, I think we do want to be better at it. But on a big scale, I don't think we really know how to do it and don't have a plan of how to do that'*. In particular, stakeholders suggested that there is confusion within the sector about the difference between policy, research and awareness-raising activities, with many organisations disseminating information, rather than using information to make a case for specific policy and/or practice change. As one stakeholder put it, *'Access to information is one thing but you've got to know how to use it...if we're not solution-focused and we don't make an ask of those people then it's kind of a dead end'*. Gaining media attention around key policy issues was a noted difficulty in the sector, with stakeholders highlighting that it is not always possible to spark media interest in issues which are of significance to organisations. In the North East, it was also felt that policy influencing activities are *'very reliant on individuals'*, with some individuals reported to be more *'media savvy'* and *'able to get the messages out there'* than others. Indeed, some of the stakeholders interviewed reported that campaigning activities within their organisations are undertaken on an *'ad hoc'* basis in respect of the capacity of chief executives. Linked to this, stakeholders from infrastructure organisations and a policy lead with experience of acting as a conduit between the VCS and government spoke of the difficulties of maintaining constructive working relationships with policy-makers, while having a responsibility for advocating on behalf of the sector. Two poignant comments here were: *'they rely on us to give the unpopular messages which puts us in a difficult position but we have a responsibility to our members'* and *'obviously, we are dealing with government so at times, we have not been as self-critical...there were a couple of times when we had to be careful what we said'*.

The final issue raised was that many organisations are not aware of the key channels through which to influence policy, particularly with the demise of regional government. Stakeholders talked at length of the value of the regional infrastructure and landscape that existed under the previous administration, in terms of resources and channels of communication. Not only were Government Office North East (GONE) and the regional development agency, One NorthEast, described as vital conduits between the VCS and government, regional government in turn reported that their relationship with the VCS was valued and efforts were made to formalise the role of the VCS in policy development. The focus of this relationship was reported to have evolved such that both government and the VCS would use their collective resources to anticipate the impacts of future policy developments; one policy lead stated, *'there was a forward facing agenda there'*. Furthermore, as time went on, larger organisations were increasingly engaged in discussions, in addition to infrastructure bodies that had traditionally taken on the role of representing the VCS within policy circles. Accordingly, the rethinking of regional government was reported by stakeholders to be a significant loss to the North East, with comments including: *'there's a big gap between here and government with the end of regional policy...things have got worse in terms of national influencing'*, *'there is no link to national government'* and *'now that GONE isn't here, you can see the value, knowing that they would be a conduit to someone bigger...that they aren't there anymore leaves people hanging and wondering 'where do I go with this?''*. Within those structures, it was also stressed that there were a number of influential individuals who were strong advocates of the VCS and that the loss of those individuals, their expertise and relationships are equally as significant as the loss of the formal structures. It is further felt that the region is yet to have fully recovered from this, particularly as new regional bodies emerging appear to have a different remit, although several reported that organisations such as VONNE have clearly worked hard to *'get a seat around the table'* and *'increasingly have the ear of ministers'*. In addition, stakeholders observed that, as a result of funding cuts, many of the partnerships and networks that they used to engage with no longer exist. The reduced channels through which to influence led one stakeholder with a wealth of experience in influencing policy at the national level, to say: *'if [organisations] are not part of a national body and they are a local charity, I think they would be really struggling [to influence]...their only way is through their local CVS, but if they are not active or have lost a lot of resource...I really don't know what [they] would do'*. In some cases, organisations reported to be aware of key policy influencing mechanisms, but that they were unable to access or utilise them effectively. For example, one stakeholder seeking to engage with local authorities stated, *'they aren't thinking creatively about how to involve the voluntary sector and there aren't using the expertise on their doorstop...they are missing the vibrancy, energy, opportunity and added value [of the sector]'*, while another stakeholder said, *'people have become disillusioned because no matter how hard they try to influence things, they aren't being listened to very well...although to be fair to staff in local authorities, they are in a state of flux and confusion. I think some of the staff are stuck between a rock and a hard place'*.

The difficulties outlined above were felt to be further reinforced by a number of key issues. Firstly, the geographical disconnect of the region from the Centre is felt to have, historically, quashed an impetus for VCS organisations in the North East to be outward-looking. Linked to this, the make-up of the VCS in the North East, which primarily consists of small to medium-sized organisations, is seen to limit the capacity of the sector to *'see the bigger picture'* and *'mobilise'*. Furthermore, stakeholders working in national organisations with Head Offices in London reported to have their *'hands tied'* in terms of policy campaigns, due to the centralisation of policy activity (primarily due to logistics and cost). Indeed, one stakeholder reported: *'Because of their proximity to ministers, [the central policy and research team] are the ones who do the lobbying...the North East may be asked to pull together case studies, for example, to feed into lobbying activity, but it is generally co-ordinated centrally'*. In one instance, the regional base was called upon by central office to support lobbying in relation to child exploitation – an area where the North East base is regarded as a 'trailblazer' – but more typically, the regional base *'responds, rather than directs'*. Important to note here is that the messages emerging from the regions cannot conflict with those emerging from organisational centres. Another organisation further reported that while they have regional offices, the offices have limited resources, with *'only a handful of staff'* and therefore, *'do not have strong regional identities'*. Regional

bases within larger organisations suggested that they should be more pro-active in forging closer working relationships with policy teams within central offices and communicating regional issues upwards. Indeed, one stakeholder conceded: *'I think we could be a lot better at using the internal resources within [organisation]. I think sometimes we forget to make those links and to keep pushing'*. One policy lead also suggested that regional bases should utilise central offices to liaise with central government on behalf of the sector: *'that might be a good way of putting together the pieces...I think there is something there about using the strengths of the sector'*. Another policy challenge raised by a number of larger organisations was finding a 'space' to influence. This relates to issues of identity and branding. In one instance, a stakeholder reported that they used to be the only organisation that carried out the type of work they do on such a scale and with such a level of sophistication. Several organisations now have similar aims and working practices, however, leaving the organisation *'battling to maintain [their] place within the policy arena'*. Conversely, another stakeholder reported that their organisation has evolved and diversified its activities significantly from when the organisation was first established, but that perceptions of the strengths of their organisation have not developed in parallel, leaving it difficult for them to influence key agendas. Finally, and perhaps a more poignant issue in the current climate, are the funding pressures which the sector is currently experiencing. Stakeholders reported that at times of limited resources, *'policy will always be luxury'*, with delivery taking precedence. As one stakeholder said: *'Because you are so busy trying to hit your own targets, you have don't have the time or energy to do policy work'*, while another said, *'a lot of my time is about just making ends meets so we make the work, publicise it then have to turn our attention to bringing more money in just so we can survive'*. Few organisations have specific resources dedicated to policy work, but where specialist roles do exist, several are reported to be changing as resources become more limited. For example, stakeholders from two large, national organisations stated: *'I used to produce a lot more policy briefings when I first started in post but as time has gone on and money has become tighter, the focus of my role has been pulled towards working on bids and tenders'* and *'because of resources, we have to prioritise reshaping service delivery, that's taken precedence. I think the regional partnership role will start to be smaller'*. It is important to recognise that resource constraints are affecting organisations at all levels within the sector. Perceptions around resources were also reported to be a source of tension between organisations, hindering collaboration. A stakeholder from a national organisation reported: *'There is a tension…people think [we] are being predatory but actually it's just as important for us to get out and network. It's not about trying to take over or win money. I don't actually think we have anything like the level of resources which people think we do'*. Nonetheless, greater partnership working across the sector was felt to be an area in need of further development. Of particular note is the case of a national organisation who expressed a desire to learn about the communities in which they operate from small, local organisations. The stakeholder explained: *'I think we are on the ground and in communities, but I think there is a still a difference between [us] being in a community and community groups, for example, where all of the board are members of the local community. I think smaller organisations are always going to be that little bit closer to the communities that they serve so I think smaller organisations can bring things to us...we could learn from them'*.

On a more positive note, however, stakeholders with expertise in influencing policy suggested that the Localism agenda offers the region new policy opportunities. Localism represents a change in philosophy - with *'the regions being in government, rather than government being in the regions'*. Identifying the focus of policy at the local level in theory, presents a new opportunity for the VCS to play a greater role in the determining and shaping of policy. The digital era was also suggested to make government more accessible: *'You can go on line for a lot of stuff. There was almost a philosophical shift that if people have something to say, they will go straight to national government'*. There was equally a sense that policy-makers, irrespective of their political affiliation, are generally keen to engage with the VCS. A policy lead explained: *'ministers are very keen to get evidence of the impact of policies and to see the effects on policies on the ground...there is an enormous appetite to see what's happening'*. They strongly urged VCS organisations to *'dispel political personal myths and prejudices'*, as *'people are often very open and willing to learn'* and *'sympathetic to what the VCS is doing'* and to identify ministers with responsibilities relevant to their organisation and to try to establish dialogue with them.

The Value of the Policy and Representation Partnership

Stakeholders were overwhelming positive about the aims and achievements of the Policy and Representation Partnership to date. The very presence of the Partnership since 2009 was felt to be significant in helping to raise the profile of policy work in the North East. Stakeholders reported that few organisations *'go out of their way to encourage policy'* and further, *'the success of the partnership is in promoting policy thinking'*. Stakeholders felt strongly that the role of the VCS ought not to be solely about service delivery, but also to *'push back frontiers, trial new work, highlight inequalities and expose hidden problems'*. The Partnership was seen to have validated policy work in the sector and to have reminded individuals of the possibilities and value of a collective voice. Talking about the Partnership, one stakeholder said, *'I think it's really, really important to keep that going...it's good for morale'*.

All of the stakeholders interviewed had engaged with the Partnership in various ways and almost all reported that the purpose of their engagement was three-fold; increasing their knowledge of key policy issues, increasing their capacity to influence policy and networking. A typical comment here was, *'Knowledge, networking, skills…all of it'*. On the whole, the policy forums attended by stakeholders were widely regarded as *'valuable'* and *'extremely relevant'*. The content of the workshops were praised, with stakeholders reporting that the events generally provided a good overview of the key policy issue in question which further enabled them to understand the context of their work. Comments included: *'I think the Partnership has done a good job at informing people. Some of the themed events have been really good in terms of their content'*, *'it was really focused, it was very useful'*, *'the quality of all the forums I went to was exceptional, every single one was worth the two hours out of the office...that's quite an achievement for any organisation really'* and *'They are very good at disseminating knowledge around change and policies and soliciting people's views'*. Stakeholders were also highly impressed by the quality of the speakers which the Partnership had secured for the events; highlighting, in particular, the contribution of several national figures that they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to engage with. One stakeholder said *'I think the events have been remarkably good by and large, they have managed to great really good speakers'*, while another said *'some have some very good speakers that you wouldn't otherwise hear...I want to see a national quality speaker rather than a local speaker on the issue because I could probably contact [them] in a different way'*. Alternatively, the opportunities generated through the events for networking were upheld by some stakeholders as perhaps one of the most valuable elements of the Partnership's work. One commented, *'the opportunities to get together with other organisations in the North East are few and far between and they are valuable'*, while another said, *'being involved in the Policy and Representation Partnership, for me, it is an opportunity to go out and meet others in similar roles, find out what other organisations are doing, keeping abreast of local developments'*. Indeed, a number of positive outcomes were reported to have emerged from contacts made at the forum events. One stakeholder who is the sole member of his organisation reported to see the networking opportunities generated by the Partnership to be *'very beneficial'* and went on to say, *'On my own, I would quickly disappear…if I wasn't part of those networks'*. In another case, the connections made through a policy forum event led to one stakeholder bring invited to attend a new regional working group on homelessness. One of the benefits of the group is that it can utilise the collective knowledge, skills and resources of a range of homelessness organisations to engage in research and policy activities. Being part of the group has enabled this stakeholder to engage in policy work despite problems of limited capacity within their organisation and overcome potential conflicts of interest between the priorities of the regional and central offices within their organisations. This group have since gone on to secure funding to undertake a region-wide research project.

Stakeholders were further praising of the quality of the research funded by the Partnership, finding the local-specific nature of the research to be particularly valuable. Comments included: *'I think the quality of the research is pretty good...the value is that you are taking a national issue and giving it a regional focus'* and *'some of the work they did on children and prisoners and prisoners families, that has general relevance but it was good to see what that*

meant for families up here...you can take a big issue and drill it down'. The projects have also been of real value to the organisations that have undertaken them in terms of gaining a better understanding of policy issues, awareness raising of key policy issues, raising the profile of their organisations and encouraging policy and practice change. Feedback included: *'the funded project was so good as there was very little research on the issue so it was a good opportunity [to learn more] and people were interested in it'*, *'the VONNE project was really, really successful in kick-starting a new area of work for us…after the research, we managed to get money for practical services.'*, *'When I presented it…people were very supportive. They were saying we didn't even know you were here doing this kind of work…There are links that I made that have kept up to date with u via our Facebook page'*, *'it gave [us] some kudos at a national level...PACT never noticed us before that...we were able to enter into a partnership with PACT and bid for money for a national pilot...it's really opened doors for us in that sense'* and *'[following the research], we have a meeting with the new clinical commissioning group'*. One stakeholder in particular whose organisation was inexperienced at influencing policy was grateful of the support and mentoring provided by the Partnership when undertaking their funded research project: *'We learned a lot form working with the Partnership…they were well resourced, efficient, rigorous in the monitoring and very supporting…I was overwhelmed by some of the suggestions and they were able to disseminate it more widely than we would have been able to'*. The greatest policy changes as a result of the research occurred where organisations had a clear target audience for the research and had the commitment of policy-makers to the project. For example: One stakeholder attributed the outcomes of their project to the relationship which they had with the regional children and families pathways group; the key influencing body which would take forward the work. The research was described as *'continuing the direction of travel of the group'*. Similarly, another stakeholder who is engaging with policy-makers regarding their research findings reported, *'it was quite easy for us but I think that's because those relationships were already there…going in cold would have been very difficult'*. Where stakeholders had not applied to deliver policy projects, this was generally reported to be the result of resources. A typical response here was: *'we haven't bid for any of the projects...it's the running out of time and...sometimes we haven't quite identified how would we do the work with the resources we have. It's the cost-benefit thing...the value against the time'*.

In terms of capacity building, just two of the stakeholders who took part in the research had attended the training events organised by the Partnership in order to increase their knowledge of how to influence. While one stakeholder provided little comment on this, the second stakeholder spoke highly of their practical nature: *'It's been quite fantastic, excellent. I got out of it really knowledge, information I can use…who to contact, how to contact…it's just what you would want...a box of tools…how to campaign, how to lobby, what's the difference between the two. It's very practical'*. They went on to say, *'This current stuff really is 100% of what you want. That's how I would like to see it continue'*. Of those who had not attended any of the training sessions, there were a variety of reasons for this – most notably, lack of time or not feeling that they required training. It is important to draw attention to an issue raised by one stakeholder from a national organisation who explained that while the training events would have been useful to them, they did not feel comfortable booking a place which others may have perceived would have been of more value to individuals from smaller organisations, despite this stakeholder reporting that such training opportunities are not available to them internally.

The Future Development and Role of the Partnership

Stakeholders were highly supportive of the Partnership and strongly expressed their hopes that the Partnership or a similar model would continue beyond its funding duration. Typical comments included: *'I hope it does continue. In the climate that we are in today, it seems to be something of a luxury to have the [PRP]'*, *'I think the Partnership is essential'* and *'I think it's crucial that there is one organisation that tries to pull all this together and help influence'*. Building on the previous section, stakeholders raised a number of interesting points for discussion about the future of the Partnership and possible areas for development. In doing so, however, stakeholders drew attention to the varied nature of the VCS in the North East in terms of knowledge and capacity and accordingly, the difficult task of the Partnership in developing an

appropriate programme of activity to support the sector. All elements of the Partnership's current work were reported to valuable and there was consensus among stakeholders that future investment should continue to be targeted at both awareness capacity and capacity building activities. A typical comment was, *'For me, it would be more of the same…we do value the information sharing and the networking opportunities that are provided and we did definitely valued the opportunity for a grant and to showcase our work'.*

A key issue of debate, however, was whether the Partnership should continue to address a range of policy topics or should focus on a smaller number of critical issues. While some stakeholders drew attention to high levels of attendance at the policy forum events, suggesting that the varied subject matters appeal to and help to build capacity within a wide range of organisations across the sector, others suggested that the Partnership would be likely to have a more direct impact on policy if there was concentration on perhaps just one or two topics with mass appeal. Here, one stakeholder said: *'If it can just get a couple of wins in an area, that's quite a big thing'.* Welfare reform was cited as one such issue. In relation to welfare reform, it was felt that while many organisations would understand those elements of the agenda which will have a direct impact on their service users, it is likely that they will not understand the whole agenda. One stakeholder feared this would run the risk that, *'people are going to end up on their doorstep that they aren't anticipating'.* Others stakeholders agreed with this, saying, *'We can't just concentrate on the small bit anymore. I think Welfare Reforms are something that needs to be a priority as it comes in so many different forms'* and *'We've had the earthquake on changes to welfare but the tsunami is still to come. Under these circumstances, the VCS could have a potentially powerful voice on what this is doing to communities in the North East'.* Alternatively, while some agreed that the Partnership should continue to focus on a smaller number of issues in future years, they suggested that the Partnership should engage in a process of consultation with the sector to identify what the *'burning topics'* are. One stakeholder said: *'I think they've got to identify through consultation the policy issues that are concerning people most and then explore those',* although they agreed that *'it would be very difficult to narrow it down as we all have our own interests'.*

A further focus of debate was the generality of the information provided at the policy forum events and whether they should focus on providing national overviews of key policy topics or look at issues within the local context. Following one event, for example, one stakeholder reported that while they found the event useful, they felt *'[the Partnership] could have made a lot more of it'.* They explained, *'I would really have liked a quick overview of the national picture but then, this is what is happening in the North East, this is what we are doing, these are the opportunities to engage'.* They went on to explain that the subject matter of this particular forum was an agenda which their organisation had *'had to get to grips',* so rather than an overview of the national agenda, they would have liked to see a more detailed, focused discussion about the relevance of the policy topic to organisations and service users in the North East. One suggestion here was that the forum events could involve a two-stage process consisting of an overview event followed by a local-specific event, with local or regional organisations, working groups and networks asked to provide context-specific information. One stakeholder said, *'I think where there are other networks established, the two should link up to make sure they get the best out of events'.* Several stakeholders reported that their organisations would be willing to contribute to events on particular issues – either by providing local information which could be shared with delegates, speaking at the events about their experiences or by facilitating workshop discussions. A stakeholder from a national organisation, for example, said *'I think certainly, if they were looking at doing something in-depth at an issue that [organisation] were engaged with, I'm sure there are people here who would be happy to share information'.*

Linked to this, there was broader discussion in the interviews about the role and scope of the Partnership. In relation to the policy forum events, stakeholder asked, *'what are they trying to get out of [the events]? Is there a tangible benefit [so that] at the end we can say 'yes, we've met it' or is it more about information and discussion? Is that enough for what they are trying to do?', 'People come along, come to some very clear opinions but then what happens next?'* and *'there's an outcome in terms of inspiring which I think is really important but I don't think it*

goes further than that…I don't think there's an outcome in terms of influencing'. At the centre of this is a question about whether the focus of the events is information sharing – providing the sector with the tools required to influence policy – or instigating policy influencing activity? One stakeholder reported that the events they had attended had *'tended to be more information sharing, than any sort of two-way dialogue'*. They went on to say*, 'the outcome of the session I'd been to was much more kind of think about that at the back of my mind and sort of digest it'*. Stakeholders indicated that it would be useful to have follow-on events following the initial forum events, where interested parties could have a more detailed discussion about the subject and if appropriate, organise a subsequent policy campaign. One stakeholder said: *'the follow up is key, it's about saying what needs to happen now and who is going to help to do that'*. Stakeholders commented that open forum events are useful for purposes of awareness raising and networking, but are likely to be limited in the degree to which they will have a direct impact on policy: *'it works getting a small number of good people in the room for an off the record conversation about big issues I think that's a really effective way to influence change'*. Some stakeholders went on to suggest that the Partnership play a more pro-active role in facilitating the development of relationships between the VCS in the North East and government: *'People need someone to lead taking that forward…maybe the Partnership could do that…it should be a properly organised campaign'* and *'They could move things forward, coordinate a campaign of the people that want to, to change that policy'*. Stakeholders recognised the difficulty of the Partnership playing a co-ordinating role within the current funding requirements, but suggested that an alternative approach to supporting the sector in the future would be to secure funding for dedicated posts to lead policy campaigns in the region. As one stakeholder put it, *'I think they need to put process to one side and maybe just invest resources in [strong individuals]...particularly with policy because it's so nebulous and things happen in funny places, investing in people rather than in structures might yield a few more dividends'*. Finally, and linked to previous points about the importance of identifying and establishing personal relationships with relevant policy-makers at all levels of government, an important question raised by stakeholders was *'does the partnership know who to go to get the final word on an issue?'*. One policy lead emphasised, *'that is partly about spending time in London…knowing who's in charge of that policy, what their thinking is, what's coming up...that kind of intelligence is incredibly valuable. If you can feed that back into the sector, that would be a great development'*. Organisations indicated that this would be a useful development but one that they do not have the capacity to undertake themselves.

Conclusion

This research sought to explore where investment from VONNE/the Policy and Representation Partnership could be targeted in the future to further support VCS organisations in the North East to influence policy. In addition to discussions with stakeholders regarding the value of the Partnership's current activities and areas for development, the interviews also focused on the wider policy landscape in which the Partnership operates in order to further enrich and substantiate their views.

The research findings indicated that the Policy and Representation Partnership has played an instrumental role in supporting stakeholders and their respective organisations, as well as the VCS in the North East more generally, to influence public policy, by: improving their knowledge of key policy issues; providing opportunities for networking; and improving awareness of how to influence policy. All stakeholders who took part in the evaluation reported that their organisations are engaged in policy-related activities at the local, regional and national levels, were confident in their abilities to influence (employing various strategies to do this, including; being a member of local and national working groups, using councils of the Voluntary Sector or other infrastructure bodies to advocate on their behalf, developing relationships with MPs and ministers directly, using research as a basis for informed discussions and holding events such as conferences or AGMs, for example) and were able to identify a number of policy successes. In a number of instances, knowledge of key policy topics and how to influence, as well as a number of policy successes were directly attributable to the support received and opportunities provided by the Partnership.

More broadly, stakeholders agreed that the capacity of the VCS in the North East to influence policy has increased in recent years, evidenced in part by the growing emphasis on monitoring and evaluation in the sector in recognition of the need for robust evidence to underpin policy change, the volume of networks and forums which emerged over time and the make-up of those networks which have increasingly come to involve public and private sector organisations. Again, the Policy and Representation Partnership were seen by stakeholders to have played a key role in these developments.

The research indicated a clear need and strong support for the continuation of the Partnership. The continuation of the Partnership is seen to be particularly critical in the current climate where it is felt to be one of the only remaining bodies whose primary focus is championing and supporting policy-related activities. Stakeholders themselves also expressed a commitment to not only continuing to engage in policy work – which they see as being an important part of the ethos of their organisations – but also to increasing the level of policy work which they undertake, despite working in a context of limited resources.

All elements of the Partnership's current programme of activity were reported to be valuable to stakeholders – although particular elements were more valuable to some than others depending of the scale, expertise and experiences of their organisations – and there was consensus among stakeholders that future investment should continue to be targeted at both awareness raising and capacity building activities. While both awareness raising and capacity building activities were important to stakeholders themselves, the importance of this was further reflected in the stakeholders' views regarding the capacity of the VCS in the North East, more broadly, to influence policy which was felt to be variable across the sector, in terms of knowledge of key policy agendas and skills and knowledge of how to influence. In terms of specifics, stakeholders spoke highly of the quality of the information shared at the policy forum events and the quality of the speakers. They also valued the opportunity to network with others. The outputs of the funded research projects were also valued by stakeholders in respect of articulating the relevance and impact of national policy issues for organisations and service users in the North East. For the successful bidders, the projects enabled them to gain a better understanding of policy issues, raise awareness of key policy issues, raise the profile of their organisations and facilitate policy and practice change. The mentoring and support provided by the Partnership to successful organisations was also felt to have enhanced their research and influencing skills. Equally, the focus and content of the training workshops facilitated by the Partnership were reported to be providing stakeholders with the practical skills needed to influence policy.

Nonetheless, the research findings yielded a number of possible areas of development for the Partnership. The first relates to facilitating the development of closer working relationships between universities and VCS organisations. Here, stakeholders drew attention to the positive outcomes of the work of ILG, for example. Where VCS organisations have collaborated with universities to undertake research, this was reported to have had significant 'added value' in terms of the methodological robustness and quality of the research outputs produced and the engagement of the organisations with new audiences. These stakeholders reported to be keen to maintain existing relationships with universities and in some cases, develop these links further. Stakeholders suggested that the development of a working group or workshop to facilitate new working relationships between universities and VCS organisations would be useful.

The second area of development relates to the local-specific focus of the Partnership's work. Stakeholders stated that they would welcome a greater proportion of the Partnership' work being dedicated to exploring the relevance of different policy topics for organisations and service users in the North East. In doing so, stakeholders suggested that the Partnership work more closely with existing networks or organisations to source this type of information. Stakeholders indicated that they would be

happy to provide the Partnership with information on the impacts of different policy topics for their services and service users which they could then share with their network of contacts or to present this information at the forum events.

A further area of development could be the Partnership taking a lead in identifying relevant individuals and developing closer personal relationships with ministers on behalf of the sector in the North East. The importance of personal relationships when seeking to influence policy was stressed by stakeholders throughout the research interviews. Stakeholders typically explained that this is something that they would like to pursue organisationally but that they are generally unable to do so due to capacity constraints.

While there was consensus among stakeholders regarding the value of the above developments, the discussions raised a number of interesting points for consideration by the Partnership of which stakeholders were not in agreement. The first relates to the range and nature of the policy topics that future investment should be used to explore. While some of the stakeholders engaged with during the research process suggested that the Partnership continue to support organisations to influence policy in respect of a range of issues (drawing attention here to the high attendance levels of forum events, for example), others felt that the work of the Partnership would be more likely to result in policy change if it were to undertake a sustained programme of activity in relation to a small number of cross-cutting themes which are likely to have a long-term impact on the sector. One suggestion which several stakeholders offered as a possible focus of future activity was welfare reform. Alternatively, it was suggested that the sector should be consulted about which policy topics the Partnership should focus on, although the difficulties associated with this were acknowledged.

A further, more fundamental point for discussion relates to the future role of the Partnership; namely, whether the Partnership should continue to focus on providing the sector with the tools needed to influence policy or whether it could play a more direct role in facilitating policy change. Indeed, the majority of stakeholders indicated that a potentially useful role for the Partnership would be to provide leadership around, and play a more proactive role in developing and coordinating, policy campaigns on behalf of the sector. They explained, for example, that while the policy forum events were an effective way of kick-starting important discussions within the sector, few tangible outcomes emerged from the events. They further went on to explain that while they would be happy to contribute to region-wide policy campaigns of relevance to their organisations, capacity constraints do not typically allow for them to play a leading role. Stakeholders were aware of the funding requirements of the Partnership in its current form. They suggested, however, that in addition to seeking further funding to support the network, the Partnership seek funding for the appointment of dedicated posts to play a more direct role in facilitating campaigning activity in the North East.