

The VCS Manifesto for Public Sector Agencies in the Eastern Region 2008/9

Working Together for Good the voluntary sector and the public sector



July 2008

Produced by COVER on behalf of the East of England Voluntary and Community Sector

voluntary sector
COVER
enabling

Why a VCS Manifesto for the Public Sector?

Voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations emerge wherever there is a need in society. Being rooted in the communities we serve makes the VCS more responsive, flexible and in-tune with local interests than the public and private sectors are able to be. National government has recognised these strengths and has tasked local authorities and statutory agencies with increasing voluntary and community organisations' involvement and influence. But there are a number of obstacles that prevent us from fully engaging with organisations like yours.

In particular, **we need your help to:**

- **Enable equal access to tenders** - the VCS is still at a disadvantage when tendering for contracts
- **Improve working partnerships** - agreements between government and the VCS on working together, the Compact, are still not being fully implemented
- **Hear our voice** - changes to government structures risk squeezing the VCS's voice, together with that of thousands of its beneficiaries, out of future debates.

That's why we've created this manifesto - to explain to senior public and statutory sector staff why these issues are creating insurmountable barriers for the VCS and how, through very simple changes,

these barriers can be removed, so that we can work with you to deliver effective solutions for the whole community.

Why the VCS is your best partner

In this region the VCS is already a lead provider of services in: social housing; pre-school learning; social care; health research; rehabilitation and preventative programmes; mental health and drug and alcohol programmes.

Statutory authorities like yours choose to work with us because of our

- **Extensive networks** - we can bring you in touch with individuals or groups you may find hard to reach and communicate with
- **Client focused & needs centred approach** - we know your clients and their needs as individuals, not just numbers
- **Expertise** - we bring fresh insights and perspectives to the issues and problems you face on a daily basis
- **Adaptability** - we are nimble, adaptable organisations that can be flexible and responsive to changing requirements
- **Community base** - we are based in and empowered by communities. We understand the issues from the grassroots, and we believe in the power of people – to change themselves, their community and the wider environment

We need to work more closely together

The VCS is keen to work more closely with local authorities and agencies. We need you to be aware what is stopping us engaging more fully with you - and to ignite your support in getting these barriers removed.

“The voluntary sector plays a vital role in the well-being of the region and I encourage public sector organisations in the East to read this manifesto and support the call of the sector to build closer and more effective partnerships”

Barbara Follett MP
Regional Minister for the East of England

“The voluntary sector have been a welcome partner with GO-East for many years, enhancing and improving the Eastern region and its communities. We welcome Working Together for Good which highlights the areas where regional organisations like ourselves can build a closer working relationship with the third sector for the benefit of all”

Andrea Young
Interim Regional Director, GO-East

“The community and voluntary sector plays a major role in the East of England and this manifesto highlights not only the importance of the sector but also the challenges and opportunities which lie ahead.”

Richard Ellis,
Chair, EEDA

Encourage equal access to tenders



Many voluntary groups want to work with local authorities and government organisations to improve service delivery, but often their involvement is blocked by the size of contracts and the reluctance of some organisations to offer full cost recovery.

Contract size

Following the Gershon Report, the trend is for government funded agencies and authorities to offer contracts across whole districts or counties, even regions. This may appear to make economic sense, but it automatically excludes smaller to medium size charities, who may operate solely in a housing estate, village or town, from applying for the work.

Yet it is often these grassroots organisations that have the expertise, local knowledge and long-term relationships with your target audience that you need to offer services such as Sure Start, after school clubs, adult literacy programmes, youth training, and elderly care schemes.

Large contracts necessarily favour large organisations, with the result that corporate firms and big national charities are hoovering-up contracts, and their related funding, across the country. The resultant loss of funding is driving many smaller VCS organisations to the

wall, together with their expertise and local know-how, and with the possible loss of other support programmes that contribute to your community.

Full cost recovery

Historically the VCS has struggled to secure funding for their overhead costs, leading to under investment in training, management, strategic development and governance. This has resulted in important services, and the organisations that deliver them, becoming unsustainable. Yet the government has specifically flagged-up capacity building within the voluntary sector, to enable it to be self-sufficient, as a key priority. And from as far back as 2002* the Treasury has endorsed the principle of full cost recovery and even set a deadline of April 2006 for statutory funders to implement it.

How you can help

Consider the option that large contracts may not necessarily be the best solution for the problem in hand. Local residents overwhelming want local solutions provided by local people, and you can support VCS organisations and your local community by:

- **Avoiding discrimination** - not making all your contracts district, county or region-wide. Offer smaller, more targeted contracts that locally-based organisations can run, tailored to local

or individual needs.

- **Supporting VCS organisations to tender** – consider creating a VCS liaison officer within your agency or authority to support voluntary organisations wishing to tender for contracts
- **Delivering maximum benefit** – prioritise social outcomes above profitability by including social clauses in your contracts that recognise the special benefits VCS contractors can bring.

*HM Treasury 2002 cross cutting review, 'The role of the voluntary sector in service delivery'.

CASE STUDY: YMCA Training works with people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds offering apprenticeships, NVQs, adult key skills and job search training. In the past 30 years it has worked successfully with JobCentre Plus, but the size of the latest Flexible New Deal contracts has resulted in the charity re-evaluating the nature of its involvement.

"New Deal contracts now cover huge geographic areas and demand levels of administrative experience and financial risk we can't consider. Future Flexible New Deal contracts are rumoured to cover more than one region and have a value around £40m. The result is that YMCA Training is unable to bid for direct contracts, because the risk factor is too high, and in future we will only act as a sub-contractor, which may result in us getting less money to deliver the programme."

YMCA Training East, Ashley Seaborne.

Work with us in partnership

The public and voluntary sectors have long recognised the need to work together and have even established rules to dictate how this should happen – the Compact.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the Compact and sees every local authority and many agencies as signatories to either local or national compacts. But if you asked your staff what the Compact covered and if, indeed, your organisation was a signatory, how many of them would know?

Key Compact principles

- **An independent and diverse VCS is fundamental** to the well-being of society
- **Voluntary action is an essential component** of a democratic society
- In the development and delivery of public policy and services, **the Government and the VCS have distinct, but complementary, roles**
- Common to both the Government and the VCS is the **need for integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership**
- **There is added value in working in partnership towards common aims and objectives.** Meaningful consultation builds relationships, improves policy development and enhances the design and delivery of services and programmes
- **VCS organisations are entitled to**

campaign within the law in order to advance their aims

- Both government and the VCS **acknowledge the importance of promoting equality of opportunity for all**, regardless of race, age, disability, gender, sexual orientation or religion/belief.

All public agencies and local authorities in the East of England would be well advised to take their responsibilities seriously. Since, although the Compact is a voluntary agreement with no statutory back-up, recent public law cases have demonstrated that renegeing on Compact clauses may well be interpreted as breaking the law.

How you can help

If your organisation has signed up to the Compact, you and your staff are duty bound to honour its principles, but in particular we would ask you to promote:

- **Awareness** - make sure all relevant staff understand the Compact and undertake regular Compact awareness training
- **VCS involvement** - allow voluntary organisations to contribute to preplanning and service and programme design
- **Financial fairness** - recognise it is legitimate for the VCS to include overhead costs in their tenders and endeavour to make payments in



advance of expenditure

- **An outcomes focus** - be proportionate in monitoring requirements and focus on outcomes
- **Reasonable funding** - implement longer term funding arrangements and give reasonable notice of the end of grants or contracts.

If your organisation has not yet signed the Compact, now is the time to get involved. Encourage senior management to sign up, publish a set of principles for working with the voluntary sector and embed its principles throughout your organisation.

CASE STUDY: Hertfordshire County Council secured two commendations at last year's Compact Awards, one of only three councils to be similarly honoured.

The first commendation recognised their part in facilitating third sector involvement in setting Primary Care Trust priorities. The second recognised Andrew Burt, Herts' funding & partnerships manager, for consistently developing the Herts Compact and contributing regularly to the third sector policy agenda.

These commendations build on previous awards won by the council in 2006 and 2005 when it won the Gold Award for its VCS support work.

Hear our voice



The voluntary and community sector has long had a role in bridging the gap between citizens and communities, and government.

Voluntary organisations enable the voice of communities and interest groups to be heard and to influence decisions made at every level across the East of England. But changes in government organisations and accountability threaten to reduce, and in some cases eliminate, the voice of the community in regional decision making.

For example, decisions currently made by the Regional Assembly need to be scrutinised and ratified by the Assembly, one third of whom represent community stakeholders. But in 2010 the Assembly's statutory planning and transport functions will be transferred to the Regional Development Agency and, as a consequence, many community stakeholder voices, including those which represent the interests of voluntary and community groupings, may be lost.

Currently VCS representatives sit on more than 30 regional panels and committees, across sectors as diverse as planning, housing, learning and skills, caring and health services, equal opportunities, disability, children's and youth issues.

Many of these places are currently under threat, which could mean that the voice of

a large part of the region's population will be silenced - especially of those already disadvantaged or marginalised.

As representatives of the hundreds of voluntary and community groups across the region, and their many thousands of beneficiaries, VCS representatives have undoubted legitimacy, which is coupled with a desire to address issues, and present solutions, that result in better outcomes for everyone in the region.

CASE STUDY: Cambridgeshire County Council has recently opened a new foot and cycle bridge across the river Cam. Original plans outlined three possible locations, all using council land. However, none of them offered any significant benefits to the community. Old Chesterton Residents Association used their local knowledge to suggest another location which would link a major redevelopment site with the town's Technology Museum.

"The council had overlooked the fact that the wider community would be the main users of a new bridge and would have their own views on the most convenient route," explained OCRA spokesman, Michael Bond. In the event the Chesterton residents' suggested route was the one selected, following a full public consultation.

How you can help

Our scrutiny role on regional panels and committees is under pressure and opportunities to feed in legitimate views may be lost. We ask you to help to ensure our voice is heard by:

- **Maintaining VCS scrutiny** - Support a full and effective transfer of the VCS scrutiny role to the new structures
- **Supporting our representatives** - VCS representatives should be properly supported, both in terms of provision of information, and in financial recompense for travel expenses, participation in meetings and contributing to consultations
- **Enabling wider representation** - the VCS should be sufficiently represented. Since we encompass a broad range of interests, some issues may require more than one VCS representative.

About COVER

COVER is an independent membership organisation that represents and co-ordinates community and voluntary groups in the East of England.

Set up in the late 1990s by the sector itself, we operate as a 'network of networks' - representing the views of the voluntary organisations in the region by working with their representative networks and co-ordinating bodies, who are our members.

Our vision is of a just and inclusive society that recognises and supports the value, and values, of the community and voluntary sector,

Our membership has set us three main challenges

- Influencing regional strategies, plans and investments
- Enabling the VCS to respond to regional opportunities
- Communicating regional information from the VCS to regional agencies, and from regional agencies back to the VCS.

Our mission is

- To develop, encourage and maximise the impact of voluntary organisations and community groups on social, economic and environmental policies in the East of England.

We seek to do this by

- Operating transparently and fairly
- Recognising and acknowledging diversity
- Promoting and practising equality
- Promoting opportunities for learning and professional development for our staff, trustees and member organisations.



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This project is funded by the East of England Development Agency



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COVER members include:

Active Chelmsford, Advice UK (Eastern), Age Concern, Alzheimers Society, Bedfordshire District Voluntary Support Agency, Bury St Edmunds Volunteer Centre, Cambridge & District Volunteer Centre, Cambridge Ethnic Community Forum, Cambs Acre, Cambs Community Reuse and Recycling Network, Citizens Advice Bureau, Community Action, Community Connections, Community Development Agency, Community & Voluntary Service, CPRE, Diocese of St Edmundsbury & Ipswich, Disability Essex, East of England Faiths Agency, East of England Faiths Council, Eastern Region Older Peoples Advisory Group, Educational Centres Association, Essex Council for Voluntary Youth Services, Gujarati Mitra Mandal, Haverhill Association of Voluntary Organisations, Hunts Forum of Voluntary Organisations, Keystone Development Trust, Living Sport, MENTER, National Housing Federation, National Pensioners Convention, National Trust, Norfolk Rural Community Council, North Herts CVS, Princes Trust, Ravidassia Community Centre, Race Equality Council, Rural Action East, Rural Community Council of Essex, Social Enterprise People, Suffolk ACRE, Suffolk Association of Voluntary Organisations, Suffolk Family Carers, Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource, Voluntary & Community Action South Beds, Voluntary Action Epping Forest, Voluntary Norfolk, Voluntary Sector Refugee Network, Voluntary Sector Training, Voluntary Youth Services Eastern, WAVET, West Norfolk Voluntary & Community Action, YMCA, Young Lives, Young Suffolk.