

COVER and the Voluntary and Community Sector: Representation in the new regional structures



Summary

COVER is concerned both with the future voice of stakeholders in the region, and also specifically with the future voice for the VCS in the region. We have contributed to the paper that has been drafted about the development of the proposed stakeholder group on the former issue. However, we remain unsure that a new stakeholder partnership with only one non-voting representative on the strategy board is going to be able to effectively represent VCS interests. This paper suggests alternatives.

Overview

Some of the issues which are most important to VCS organisations are under threat of being neglected (e.g. social agenda and health agenda) under the proposed new system. We are hopeful that the membership of the Development and Implementation Boards currently being drafted will include a role for VCS reps who have expertise in the areas that each DIB represents. However, we feel that there is still a missing element, and will contribute to the paper being drafted by the Social Inclusion Panel on that subject. There is a very important message that needs to be taken on board by all partners: the economy (as represented by growth in GVA) is not enough on its own, and won't be sustainable. The social and environmental agenda is crucial to building the 21st Century society that we aspire to.

VCS voice is also important for the strengths that the VCS can bring to decision making through their perspective on the region, based on experience of working at grassroots, local and regional levels. Often the VCS are best placed to represent the people of the region, by virtue of having the closest contact with them and expertise in their needs. A VCS perspective can highlight gaps and weaknesses, and support strengths in policy making in a way that other sectors historically have not.

This paper summarises arrangements that are being agreed in other regions for VCS engagement, and then outlines what we think could be the way forward for the region to ensure that the VCS continues to have opportunity to influence the regional agenda.

Other regional arrangements

Region	Summary of arrangements
North East:	VCS doesn't have representation on the leader's board, but fighting to get some. There are reps on each of the implementation boards.
North West:	The leader's board has been in operation for some time, with 3 leaders from each subregion (15 altogether), and 7 community stakeholders including the chair of the COVER-equivalent organisation. All have voting rights. The guidance that CLG has issued suggests that this model isn't acceptable so they are responding to argue that it is working well. The separate stakeholders group that they run nominates people to sit on each of the subgroups, but doesn't have any other significant role really.
West Midlands:	Their transitional assembly still exists, though they've set up the new single strategy board with leaders and the RDA. One of the delivery subgroups is 'third sector' specific.

Region	Summary of arrangements
Yorkshire and the Humber:	<p>The assembly has dissolved and the single strategy board with leaders and the RDA has been formed. They have 4 thematic groups: economy and skills, transport, housing and spatial. There is also a sustainable development board, and two cross cutting work teams on climate change and equalities. They are cultivating links with the groups but avoiding any appearance of it looking like it used to!</p> <p>They don't feel that there is much VCS representation, and so have separately established a Voluntary Sector Leader's Board with 5 members to provide expertise and strategic information to the Integrated Regional Strategy. This group isn't part of the formal structures, but is intended to be credible, influential and professional. Individuals went through a formal interview process and were selected according to their capability to influence.</p>
South West:	<p>The assembly has been wound up and the strategic leader's board established with 15 top-tier authorities plus one rep of a district in two-tier arrangements. There are also reps from the RDA and 6 reps from their stakeholder forum. Their subgroups will have VCS reps from the forum. The stakeholder forum includes non-Local Authority reps from the LSPs etc.</p>
South East:	<p>There are 2 'observer' seats on the proposed Strategy Board but as all Partnership meetings are public meetings it really isn't relevant. The stakeholder liaison group is non functional despite the work that we have done over the past year</p>

Suggested options for VCS involvement

Option 1

VCS reps to be members of the Leader's Board, as per arrangements in the North West.

This is the option most similar to the current arrangements, and would allow VCS reps an opportunity to influence the regional agenda. However, we recognise that this option is highly unlikely, and there are issues with the CLG guidance on this issue.

Option 2

VCS reps to have better representation than is proposed on the Strategy Board, including voting rights.

We feel that one representative for all stakeholders who doesn't even have voting rights is a position not really worth having. Although arrangements for the stakeholder group are still to be worked out, we find it hard at present to envisage a system where all the interests represented in the huge mass of 'stakeholders' in the region can be boiled down into one voice on the IRS Board.

Option 3

We are open to discussions around what Option 3 should be, making the assumption that Options 1 and 2 are not acceptable.

Our starting proposal is for a separate advisory board to be set up of 5-10 key players in the VCS sector, as per the arrangements in the Yorkshire and Humber region. This group would play an

advisory role to the Strategy Board providing a VCS perspective on decision making. The group's role wouldn't be to champion specific interests (as per opening paras above), as this will be best taken up through the proposed DIBs. Instead it would provide a cross-cutting VCS perspective, utilising the expertise and the networks available to each member.

Conclusion

- We feel that the VCS will not be appropriately represented under the proposed new structures.
- We would like to work together with EEDA and EERA to find a solution which is acceptable to all parties.
- We welcome any comments and recommendations from the Community Stakeholders group on this topic.