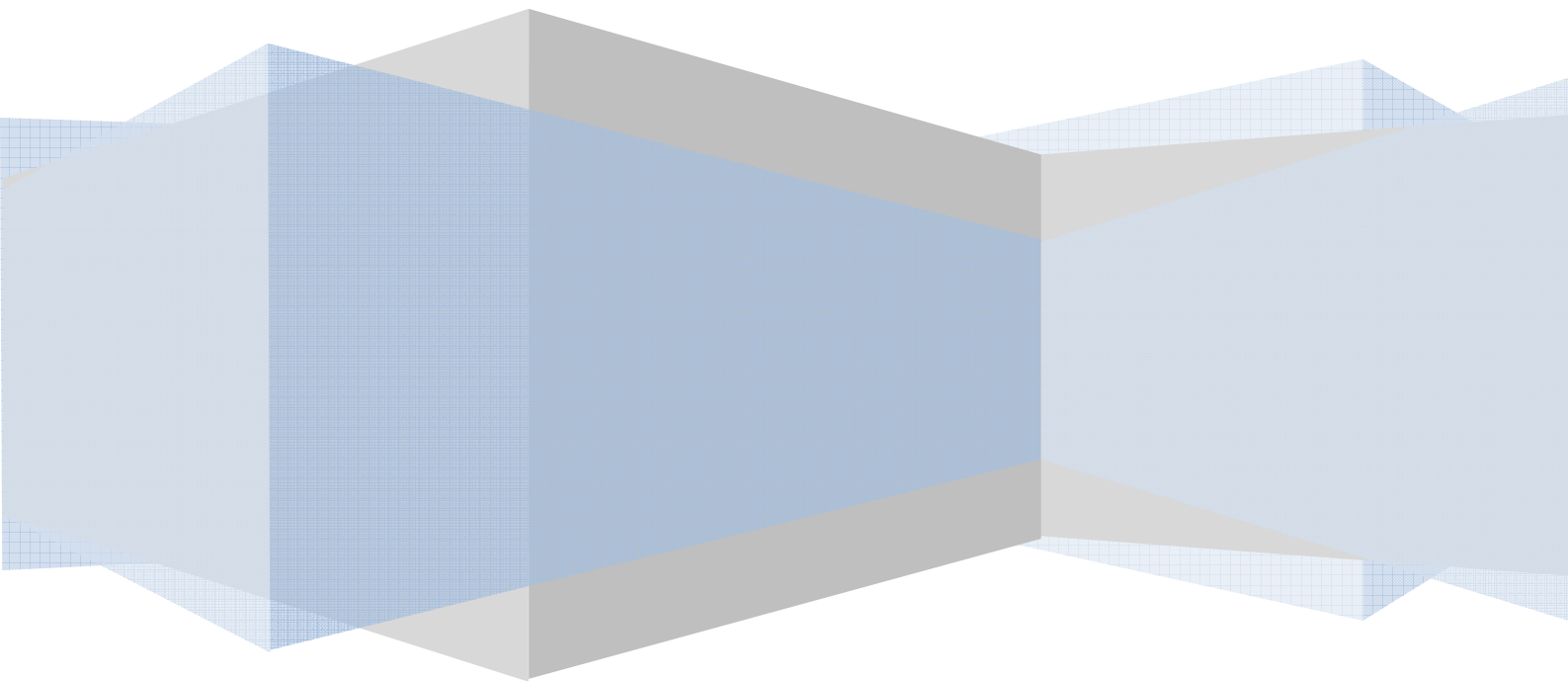


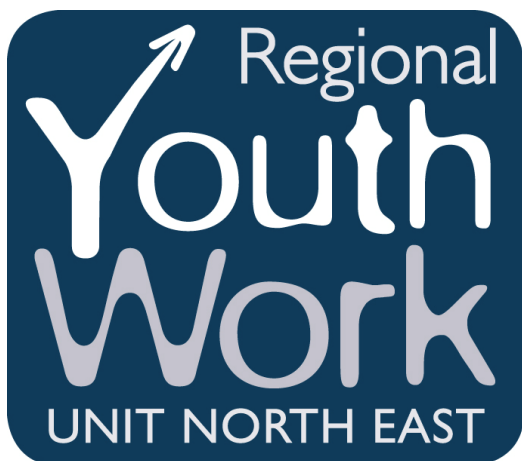
Regional Youth Work Unit – North East

CYPF VCS Representatives on Strategic Bodies in the North East

Snap Survey

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1 Background and purpose

As part of its VCS Engage contract the Regional Youth Work Unit undertook to update its data base of VCS Representatives on strategic bodies, principally, Children's Trust Boards, Children and Young Peoples Strategic Partnership Boards and Local Safeguarding Children Boards. In addition it was felt that it would be useful to undertake a short email survey regarding the role and its challenges. The purposes of the survey were to:

- Provide information regarding the involvement of the sector within strategic developments which could act as a baseline for future development and in particular to the end of year VCS Engage 'State of the Region' report.
- Provide a resource to inform the induction and operational orientation of the new VCS Engage Regional Development Manager appointed in July 2009.

2 Method

The initial task was to update the data base of VCS Representatives across the region which was done initially by contacting everyone on the original data base to check their details and status and then by checking against published lists on local authority websites to fill in the gaps and finally by telephoning agencies to confirm membership. As part of this report a brief analysis of the changes in the spread of representation has been undertaken.

A short email questionnaire comprising of five questions was compiled:-

1. What do you think are the main issues in being a voluntary sector representative upon a strategic body?
2. What are the main limitations to the role?
3. Do the statutory bodies provide any support or assistance and if so what?

4. Do you feel you represent a 'constituency' and if so what mechanisms are in place to provide feedback and information?
5. Any other comments or observations.

This was sent to all the identified VCS representatives filling places on Children's Trust Boards, CYPSP Boards and LSCBs and followed up with a reminder two weeks later. A total of 27 individuals were contacted of which 9 (33%) completed the questionnaire.

Of the 9 respondents, 4 work for one of the large national children's charities, 2 for regional or local organisations and 3 for VCS infrastructure bodies. The 9 respondents provided experience of engagement in 7 of the 12 local authority areas covered by the survey.

The respondents represent a fair cross section coming from the range of organisations and covering nearly 60% of the authorities concerned. However the relatively low number of respondents means that caution should be exercised in drawing firm conclusions from the survey results.

In writing the report I have, with one or two exceptions, relating to examples presented as good practise, sought to anonymise the quotes and findings both in terms of the authority concerned and the individual respondent.

3 Analysis of spread

Overall the number of people fulfilling the representative role has declined from 32 to 27 in the last two years (see Table 1). This reduction appears to be as a result of the establishment of Children's Trust Boards replacing Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership Boards which tended to have a wider representation of VCS organisations.

Within the Children’s Trust structures many authorities have developed a system of thematic sub-groups where voluntary sector engagement has been sought.

The role of the big national children’s charities (Action for Children, the Children’s Society, Barnardos and the NSPCC) has generally remained constant across the two years providing about 50% of the total. NSPCC are particularly prominent within the Local Safeguarding Children Boards.

There has been a relative decline in the engagement of local and regional organisations and a corresponding increase in the number of representatives who are directly employed by infra-structure or umbrella bodies. This change probably reflects the demands of the role both in terms of capacity and the complexity of the agenda.

4 Survey Findings

4.1 Main issues and challenges in fulfilling VCS Representational Role

A consistent set of views emerged from the responses to this part of the survey. Most respondents felt that fulfilling the role was a major commitment and that capacity both in terms of time to prepare and the need to keep up to date with a wide and rapidly changing agenda was a major challenge. The business of the boards and partnerships is often complex and accompanied by a large volume of papers requiring a considerable time commitment.

‘The main issue I find is having the capacity to meaningfully participate and when you go the extra mile to do so, you often find other barriers that drown out the sectors voice and contribution’.

‘Keeping up to date with the issues.’

‘Capacity to prepare for meetings (often weighty papers to go through).’

‘There is a significant task facing the sector and few people willing and/or able to take the challenge. It is a capacity and capability issue.’

‘Finding the capacity for the VCS sector to meaningfully participate at a strategic level and make a difference is a challenge.’

‘The time required can also be an issue as it will often mean sitting on more than one group to keep up with the agenda as they are so big and complex.’

Representatives often felt isolated in the role often being the only representative of the sector and felt a burden of responsibility in representing the interests of the sector as a whole. Some respondents felt constrained in the role and were concerned about the impact on their own organisations of being too challenging within certain settings. Others reported a sense of exclusion in that they were not party to informal meetings and communication between other board members outside the confines of the formal business.

Table 1: VCS Representatives on Strategic Bodies

Date	VCS Umbrella Organisation	National Children’s Charities	Regional or local organisations	Totals
2007	2 (6.3%)	17 (53.1%)	13 (40.6%)	32
2009	8 (29.6)	13 (48.2%)	6 (22.2%)	27

'Not being privy to the, sometimes informal, meetings that people have had in other places.'

'Not damaging your own organisational interests when challenging the authority as the VCS rep not the organisation you come from.'

'Feeling isolated'

'Responsibility to challenge appropriately on behalf of sector.'

'The main limitation that I have found is that you usually do not have many, or even any, other VCS reps to "bounce off" at these meetings. Remember the voluntary sector is such a huge diverse group that one voice cannot fit all.'

An important point made by one respondent who sits on a wider variety of bodies across the region is that practise and approach does vary considerably and that it is difficult to generalise. Much of the difference seems to depend on the attitude, understanding and approach of the statutory partners.

'...by their very nature every single group I attend is different in terms of the issues I face, how easy or difficult it is to make a point and have it addressed and how much support there is varies significantly. They are organised either better or worse and I get advance notice and clear papers from many but not all. The effectiveness of the reps role and the influence and impact they can have is also different. Some of it is down to the Chair, the membership, the length of time the group has been operating and how clear they/we are about the agenda. Some of it is about individual's perceptions, some prejudices but mostly their perspective from where they sit about what the Vol sector role is or could be.'

Many representatives felt that the VCS was not taken seriously and that it was a constant struggle to ensure that the perspective of the sector was not lost within the structures.

'Being prepared to start every sentence in a meeting with the VCS....and wait for the toes to curl again around the table.'

'The views of the VCS appear to be sometimes not to be taken on board and action is often slow, requiring reps to make further efforts to push issues through. This is very time consuming.'

'Being perceived as less – capable, informed, qualified, valuable.'

'The VCS [3rd sector!!!] is still seen as an add on and not a natural thought for inclusion. This is getting better but is still entrenched with some statutory organisations [eg schools and aspects of health].'

'Do the people there value them as a strategic partner...'

Where the representational role was part of a wider infrastructure function the VCS umbrella organisations might be more able to influence the agenda.

'I think that depends on those that are the reps. I feel that we are included quite comprehensively although I do feel the agendas are very weighted to local authorities. However we are able to put things on the agenda.'

4.2 Main limitations to the role

Under this heading many of the respondents focused on some of the issues identified above. Capacity was particularly highlighted, not only in the volume and complexity of the task but also with regard to communicating with the 'constituency.' Respondents often saw this as the need to access and provide

information to smaller and less well connected organisations across the sector.

'Knowledge of ALL issues impacting upon the wider sector, representing the sector is in addition to a 'day job' of managing projects and for some representatives a 'day job' and a voluntary role, having clear understanding and knowledge of all issues facing the wider VCS membership is almost impossible without structured systems and dedicated support.'

'The volume of materials which comes out of any strategic bodies means that we have to make decisions about what to do next, list priorities etc.'

'The amount of minutes and papers can be daunting.'

'Generally capacity in being able to communicate effectively to those who need to know especially those very small localised agencies.'

'Time to read papers.'

'Capacity. How others perceive VCS input.'

'Again capacity is an issue sometimes there can not be continuity within the representation from the VCS as a direct result of the fact that the role is in addition to project management etc...'

The speed of change and the pressure of needing to keep up with changing and developing agendas whilst still doing the 'day job' was clearly identified as a limiting factor.

'The current speed of change makes organising who gets what, when and how very difficult'

4.3 Support provided by the statutory sector to the role.

Responses to this question varied considerably across the region. There was also some variation in perception between representatives from umbrella organisations where there was an expectation that they represent the sector, larger organisations where there was perhaps more capacity and small organisations.

For example in the case of VCS infrastructure bodies whilst no direct support is provided for the representational role funding is provided to the infrastructure body itself. So it could be argued that the statutory sector is providing support through this mechanism. This is likely to be a fairly common situation across the region.

'No – not directly for my input into the Board, or indeed for reps into other strategic bodies. The local authority do however, by and long and circuitous route, provide some funding for (infrastructure organisation) currently, so it could be argued that they do support.'

Some of the smaller organisations identified issues such as the cost of printing and the lack of allocation of car parking as examples of the general lack of support. This indicates how they feel they are perceived by the statutory partners and perhaps how a small amount of support could be valued.

'None at all. Just being allocated one of the visitors' parking spaces at the civic for the duration of the meeting would save time having to find a space in the city and money.'

'Papers are sent by email so my organisation bears the cost of printing them'

Not all the comments are negative. A respondent who sits on a range of bodies across the region reported a degree of

variance in the level of consideration given to supporting voluntary sector engagement.

'I would say 'no' right through to being very helpful e.g. reducing the size of documents, holding specific meetings for the sector.'

And a representative from an infrastructure body reported that officers were willing to give up time to support VCS engagement.

'There was no formal induction although we are working on developing that. However officers do make themselves available to answer questions and take people through processes.'

In the case of Durham organisations providing sector representatives are able to access financial support to backfill their roles. This facility was not mentioned by other representatives and therefore may not be available anywhere else across the region.

'Funding is also provided by Durham County Council to support the sustainability of the Community of Interest (including 'back fill' costs; transport costs and room hire etc) VCS have membership within all of the strategic groups of the Children's Trust Arrangements'

4.4 Representing the constituency.

The extent to which VCS Representatives are drawn from a specific constituency and are able to feed back to that constituency appears to vary across the region. Again where the representatives are drawn from infra-structure bodies there is often a selection process. However capacity issues will restrict the range of organisations able to put themselves forward for the roles. Similarly within the infra-structure bodies there will be some mechanisms to provide feedback and canvass views across the sector. It would seem from the comments provided that this concept of representing a

constituency is a constant challenge fraught with difficulty and that representatives can find themselves in difficult and isolated positions.

'Through the network I believe there is some mandate. It's not perfect but I've got beyond the endless discussions about representation v perspective. Sometimes you just have to do the best you can in an imperfect world, otherwise I/we would do nothing.'

'There are a number of routes – newsletter, weekly email, network events, to access feedback.'

In some cases the idea that the representatives are drawn from a specific constituency does not seem to have overall credibility.

'The majority of VCS agencies that are on boards that have not gone through any election process. The sector receives very little feedback from these reps and/or do not know who they are.'

Equally representatives can feel frustrated at the lack of feedback and support coming from the sector as a whole and there are challenges and complexities within the systems for providing feedback. Inconsistency can be an issue and when individuals are trying to represent different aspects of the sector, a degree of confusion can occur.

'We have the Youth Forum and the Reference Group but no organisation contacts me to discuss a view or response to the authority's agenda.'

'Representatives feedback via the Community and Voluntary Empowerment Network. Feedback however is not consistent across the board. There are a number of people wearing different hats. This can cause confusion.'

Indeed where there is a perceived or actual weakness of mandate this may be used to undermine the overall credibility of VCS representation when advocating or negotiating with some statutory partners.

'Reps can only present a balanced VCS perspective based on your communications with a number of agencies. Therefore you will always receive comments from corners of the local authority, saying that the view presented is not everyone's perspective etc (not representative)?'

The comments provided by VCS Representatives suggest that Durham County Council seems to have developed a more robust and supportive approach than some of the other areas.

'Durham has a robust 'Community of Interest' Structure with clear supported mechanisms in place to provide opportunities for feedback and consultation. Feedback and informal discussions take place with the VCS Development Officer who then ensures that information is circulated or included as an agenda item at COI meetings as appropriate'

'I report back to our County's Voluntary Sector Communities of Interest using a standard proforma created to give ease and consistency of feedback.'

Where the partnership has engaged with a VCS infrastructure body they often undertake to provide the links with the wider constituency and undertake the feedback and accountability processes.

'We have set up networks that mirror the Sustainable Community Strategy themes. For these we have reps from the sector networks, voted in by the sector on to the themed groups, task and finish groups, and standing groups. We also have online forums linked to

the networks to share information, concerns and issues.'

4.5 Additional Points

Some interesting observations were made within this section of the survey. One issue raised was that of trust and the perception that organisations that provided representatives to these strategic bodies were able to gain some form of competitive advantage. There appears to be a degree of distrust of the role of the larger children's charities in representing the sector in this way.

'Sometimes there is competition and suspicion from other Vol sector organisations as to whether your role gives you an advantage There are rarely situations where this occurs and on many occasions what you say or do in a partnership is tempered because you are there very clearly as a rep.'

'Trying to make sure that there is openness and transparency is difficult in times of great change. There are beliefs held between the vol. sector organisations about the bigger voluntaries moving in and taking over everything – we are unable to do that, and until we can get rid of the myths between ourselves and work in partnership we will always be viewed as too big and too difficult for statutory services to get grips with.'

'Sometimes there could be conflicts of interest as vol sect reps may be looking out for further commissioning opportunities.'

Given that many voluntary sector representatives expressed feelings of isolation within the role these perceptions are clearly acting as a barrier to the successful engagement of the sector.

Another frustration to emerge is the feeling that statutory partners are themselves not

clear about the role and function of the partnerships in relation to issues such as commissioning and are ill informed about the realities of service provision within the VCS sector.

'There is often no clear concept of issues such as commissioning and funding processes within Partnerships and if I had a penny for every time another agency queried why we didn't get our act together in terms of developing services (when the commissioners weren't clear themselves what they wanted and had no money) or queries over why services had so many funding streams and weren't they double counting (no the multiple streams are about survival) I would be rich.'

'Sometimes I don't think people appreciate some of the paradoxes we work with. I have been in a position where as part of a partnership I was party to funding decisions that in theory I couldn't tell myself as part of the provider organisation.'

Finally it is clear that the experiences of VCS representatives range from the generally positive to the very negative. As illustrated by the quotes below.

'I have also had some really positive experiences of working in genuine partnership where partners genuinely and creatively try for the best for young people.'

'I feel we are the table because we are a token gesture to compliance with national Government. Having a rep means the authority can claim they consult with the sector and have the sectors view, which is not the case.'

5 Conclusions

It is almost too obvious to mention but it is clear that the VCS representatives have to cope with a massive power imbalance within the strategic bodies to the extent that some representatives feel that their role has become largely tokenistic. There appears to be a lack of genuine respect for the role of the VCS Sector within some partnerships.

Capacity within voluntary sector organisations and within individual work-loads are clearly stretched and this is compounded by high levels of complexity and the swift pace of change. Under these circumstances it would appear that only very highly motivated and skilled individuals and / or well resourced agencies can fulfil the roles.

About half the VCS representatives across the region are drawn from the big four national children's charities. There has been an increase in representatives drawn from staff employed by VCS Umbrella organisations and a relative decline in the engagement of local organisations. Feedback also suggests that local organisations are also struggling to engage with strategic planning and organisational processes at a thematic level.

The provision of support to the sector to promote engagement is variable across the region but appears to be very limited with only Durham being identified as providing support to cover participation. From comments provided by the respondents it would appear that even very limited support would be useful and appreciated.

The issue of distrust and suspicion within the sector is important. Given the nature of the roles and the current trends it seems likely that the VCS representation will continue to be drawn from the larger organisations and infra-structure bodies. Some form of debate or dialogue around the issue might be helpful.