

**A VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY
SECTOR FIT FOR PURPOSE**

**DEFINING THE ROLE OF
HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL**

PROJECT REPORT

**Report prepared by Alison McLean and Barbara Parkinson
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INTRODUCTION

Herefordshire Council recognises the important contribution made by the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to the quality of life in the County. The roles of the sector are many and various and the nature of the organisations diverse in both scope and size. Given this diversity the relationship between the Council and the Voluntary and Community Sector is broad and complex. The VCS is a partner in developing policy and best practice, a supplier of services for the Council, a community builder, an employer of local people, a valuable source of information, advice, expertise, knowledge and resources.

There are currently a number of national and local drivers that make this a good time to re-examine and define more clearly the role of the Council in ensuring that the Voluntary and Community Sector can fulfil its potential in contributing to Herefordshire life.

These drivers include the government's often and clearly stated commitment to increasing volunteering and the proportion of public services delivered through the VCS and at a local level the new challenge presented by the Local Area Agreement to draw together resources across all sectors to meet local priorities.

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT AND DEFINITIONS

In 2004 Herefordshire Council undertook a review of the support it gives to the Voluntary and Community sector. One of the key recommendations that emerged from this review was that the Council should develop and adopt a VCS support strategy:

The terms of reference for the project define two objectives for the work:

- 1. To draw together a strategic framework to guide Herefordshire Council's support to the Voluntary and Community sector over the next 5 years.*
- 2. To develop an Action Plan that will ensure that this framework is used to direct the nature and focus of support to the Voluntary and Community sector, while remaining responsive to changing needs.*

The benefits that were being sought were:

- Greater clarity of purpose and processes for the Council and for VCS organisations
- Greater transparency, greater consistency and a more level 'playing field' in the allocation of resources to the VCS.
- Higher standards in conducting the relationships between the Council and the sector, and encourage working as equal partners.
- Increased awareness among Council members and staff of the activities and contribution of the sector and among VCS organisations of Council expectations and constraints.

- Increased capacity of the Council and the VCS to work together to meet the needs of the community.

For the purposes of this project the Voluntary and Community Sector is defined widely as any not for profit organisation operating within Herefordshire. However, the focus of the work was on those organisations that are locally based and are of medium or small size. We did not for example include consideration of the specific role of registered social landlords.

THE PROCESS

Two independent consultants worked with a project group whose members were drawn from within the Council and from voluntary and community organisations (membership of the Project Team is attached at Annex 1). The role of the project team was to oversee the work and to contribute their expertise and advice to the development of the strategy.

The project consisted of the following key stages:

- a) Definition of terms of reference and development of detailed project plan.
- b) Information gathering including a desk study of national and local documents, a series of semi-structured interviews and a half day workshops with wider representation from the Council and VCS. (Annex 2 lists the names of the people who were interviewed and those who attended the half-day workshop).
- b) Analysis of findings and evaluation of options
- c) Development of Strategy and Action Plan

Communications and reporting ran throughout the project, with the project team meeting four times while the work was underway.

It was agreed that the strategy should be developed with Compact principles in mind, and contribute to the development of the partnership based Compact in Herefordshire, that it should be informed by and linked to national policy and programmes, and it should build on good practice already in place.

NATIONAL AND LOCAL CONTEXT

The strong Government commitment to working with the voluntary and community sector as partners is evidenced by the number of policies giving clear directives to involve the sector in building stronger communities and modernising service delivery. The desk study covered a range of policies and guidance (list of research material at Annex 2).

The principles and commitments of the Compact and the proposed Compact Plus are fundamental to the process of strengthening the relationship between the sector and public bodies. Locally the Alliance for voluntary organisations in health and social care has an agreed Compact with public sector partners. Development of the wider Compact is currently in hand.

Herefordshire has been designated Local Area Agreement (LAA) status, which requires all public bodies to improve co-ordination between themselves and their

partners to plan and provide the very best services for local people. The Government has clearly stated that they must empower and encourage the voluntary and community sector to be involved and requires a Statement of Involvement, which describes how the sector is involved in the planning and delivery of LAA activities.

Local Public Service Agreements are the reward element of the LAA and the sector's participation in the stronger communities element of LPSAs within the themes of community engagement, community cohesion and volunteering is strongly encouraged.

The launch of ChangeUp following the Treasury's 2002 Cross-Cutting Review of the voluntary and community sector's role in public service delivery sets out the government's strategy for the provision of infrastructure services to front line voluntary and community organisations. The funding programme to deliver co-ordinated support is available through Government Offices who are responsible for commissioning services through county wide consortia developing Infrastructure Investment Plans.

Think Smart.... Think Voluntary Sector was launched in June 2004 by the Home Office and provides good practice guidance on the procurement of services from the voluntary and community sector and is intended to open supply opportunities to voluntary and community groups.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1. *Purpose and Functions of the Voluntary and Community Sector*

Interviewees and attendees at the workshop identified the following menu of roles that VCS organisations play in Herefordshire. These are consistent with the roles identified in national best practice guidance and reflect the wide variety of types of organisations that are operating within the County.

- **Community builder:** VCS organisations provide the 'invisible glue' of communities of place, interest and identity, which is essential for sustainable communities. They build social capital and provide meaning and purpose to peoples' lives, providing a wide variety of opportunities for activity. They promote civic pride, community harmony, community safety and entrepreneurial activity and celebrate diversity. They provide community leadership.
- **Service Deliverer:** VCS organisations provide an essential part of service delivery in rural areas, engaging with service users and extending the range of services available.
- **Resource Captor:** They harness masses of resources, both human and financial.
- **Income generator and entrepreneur:** Through charity shops and other trading activities.
- **Employer and training provider:** The VCS is an important source of jobs and training and provides opportunities and support for volunteers.

- ***Contributor to policy creation, design and commissioning of services and review:*** This is a role that is increasing with latest government directives.
- ***Challenger and lobbyist:*** VCS organisations act as a critical friend of the Council (and others).

- **Identifier of needs:** VCS organisations provide a wealth of evidence, experience and information about local needs and aspirations.
- **Champion, advocate:** Especially for the most excluded groups.
- **Expert advisor and Innovator:** VCS organisations often discover new ways of doing things and so inform best practice.
- **Translator/Intermediary:** VCS organisations assist the communication between public sector, service users and communities.
- **Smoke detector :** They are often able to identify issues early and to respond with preventative action.
- **Catalyst for changing attitudes:** They can access community networks to change attitudes – e.g. towards recycling and healthy eating.
- **Distributor of funds:** They administer grants.

2. *The distinctive characteristics of the Voluntary and Community Sector*

Many of the roles above are also the roles of public sector bodies. The desk study and interviewees identified a number of characteristics of voluntary and community organisations that are distinctive to the sector and can add value to the activities they undertake.

Voluntary and Community Sector organisations are often:

- In touch with the needs and aspirations of users of services.
- Approachable and trusted by users, particularly the most disadvantaged.
- Innovative and inventive, good at testing out new approaches.
- Fast moving, flexible and responsive
- Able to achieve a lot with little cash.
- Able to access a wide variety of funding.
- Very diverse and so able to meet diverse needs.
- Driven by the purpose for public good rather than by profit – are highly motivated and committed.
- Independent, impartial and non political.
- Closely in touch with particular networks (e.g. age, interest, geography).

3. *What does a brilliant Voluntary and Community Sector look like?*

Interviewees and workshop attendees were asked to paint a picture of a VCS in the best possible shape. They said it would be *self-confident, robust, diverse and independent* and would:

<i>Be characterised by lots of dynamic community-based activity</i>
Plenty of organisations well supported in the local community, looking after their own interests. Lots of people contributing, volunteering and being involved in many different types of activity. Local people identifying their own needs, people feeling that their voice is being heard and they can influence decisions. Community leaders and activists ensuring the diversity of community based activity.
<i>Be professional, efficient and effective when they are delivering public services</i>
Expert and professional organisations, working to agreed priorities and quality standards and focussed on outcomes. Skilled staff and leaders (able to deal with ambiguity and partnership working) Organisations that are outcome focused and clear about what impacts they are having, using resources efficiently and targeting them where they will have most impact. Monitoring and evaluation in place that encourages improvement and best practice.
<i>Have a strong and co-ordinated services that support VCS organisations</i>
Streamlined infrastructure support for the sector that is easily accessible and inclusive, well informed, linked to the national resources, and responsive to local needs (including small and start up organisations). Specialist and generalist infrastructure organisations would be working well together, with clarity and transparency about their roles. They would act as an honest broker and be driven by the needs of the VCS organisations they serve.
<i>Be well networked and co-ordinated</i>
Organisations working well together with little or no duplication of services and efficient use of resources. Achieving a balance between competition and collaboration that provides the best outcomes for local people. Well connected to regional and national networks and well represented and participating fully in local partnership arrangements. Frameworks in place that encourage good relationship management.
<i>Be adequately resourced</i>
Financially stable organisations with a variety of income sources. Rich in capital assets and resources, including skilled and experienced people.
<i>Be focused on Herefordshire needs</i>
Predominantly locally based organisations tuned to the needs of a rural area. Larger (national) organisations contributing where they are best placed to do so. Responsive to local needs and aspirations - meeting the diversity of needs across in the County. Responding to need on the basis of evidence.

4. *What needs to change in order to move towards this vision?*

Interviewees felt that Herefordshire Council should:

a) *Be much clearer about what it wants Voluntary and Community Sector organisations to do.*

In particular to be clear about the different purpose of grants and service level agreements, undertake proportionate monitoring arrangements and recognise good practice. Be clearer about the role of members in relation to individual organisations.

b) *Be more open and courageous.*

Herefordshire Council should be more transparent about their decision-making processes. It should be prepared to take hard decisions and cuts in services should not necessarily fall outside the Council first. It should encourage the VCS to deliver more public services and be willing to share the risks.

c) *Be more consistent*

Have a consistent funding and procurement process for VCS organisations involved in service delivery across all departments. Be consistent about the in kind support that is available to VCS organisations.

d) *Involve the VCS more appropriately and communicate better.*

Involve the sector early in service planning as well as blue sky thinking to reach solutions. Consult the sector before launching initiatives and exchange best practice more often.

e) *Understand the VCS better.*

Find out what the VCS does and what it has to offer. Use secondments and job swaps to build greater awareness of the way the sector works and the added value it brings. Understand better what full cost recovery means and adopt it throughout the Council when dealing with VCS organisations.

Interviewees felt that the Voluntary and Community Sector should:

a) *Have clearer and more effective collaboration between organisations.*

This relates particularly to the delivery of infrastructure support. The Herefordshire Infrastructure Consortium is seen to be in a good position to put in place a single vision and implementation plan for infrastructure support in the County. The Voluntary Sector Assembly could work more effectively.

b) *Be clear about their purpose and stick to it.*

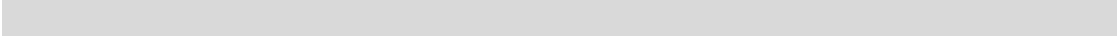
VCS organisations need to be clear about their role and not be diverted from their original purpose. They also need to make a clear distinction between organisational needs and the needs of their users.

c) *Be more business like (particularly larger organisations with paid staff).*

This relates to those organisations involved in delivering public services. VCS organisations should also be looking at the opportunities for efficiency savings from combining back office functions.

d) *Understand Herefordshire Council's agenda better.*

VCS organisations need to understand the Council priorities and constraints and be willing to recognise Council contributions to their activities where appropriate.



ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE STRATEGY

Using the information from the desk research, interviews and workshop, the consultants worked with the Project Team to develop a strategic framework to guide the Council's support of and investment in the Voluntary and Community sector. They also developed an Action Plan, which maps out the next steps in implementing the strategy.

The idea is to put in place the building blocks that will define more clearly the role that the Council has in ensuring that Voluntary and Community Sector organisations are able to make the fullest contribution to the quality of life in the County. This framework will act as a guide to the Council in its dealings with Voluntary and Community Sector setting out the direction of travel. The Action Plan indicates the next steps along this road, but further work will be needed to ensure that the journey stays on track.

The project team identified a single aim and four objectives for the strategic framework.

Aim – Herefordshire Council is committed to contributing to a dynamic Voluntary and Community Sector that plays its full role in improving the quality of life in Herefordshire.

Objectives – the Council will do this by -:

1. Supporting community-based activity that builds strong and self-reliant communities.
2. Opening up opportunities for the sector to delivery more public services
3. Investing in support and development services that build the capacity of the sector.
4. Building a strong relationship with the Voluntary and Community Sector and assisting the sector to engage fully and equally in developing partnership based policy, service planning, service delivery and review.

These four objectives reflect four different types of relationship with Voluntary and Community Sector organisations.

Objective 1 – Supporting community-based activity

Most community based activity in the County will and should continue without any intervention by the Council or other public bodies. The role of the Council here is to support this activity and to help create the environment where the richness and diversity of community based activity can flourish. This calls for a light touch and straightforward mechanisms that recognise that this activity is often dependent on small organisations and on volunteers.

Objective 2 – Opening up opportunities for the sector to delivery more public services

The focus here is on extending the opportunities for VCS organisations to be deliverers of public services. Here the Council and other partners are 'buying' services from VCS organisations to deliver the priorities they have identified in their

service plans (whether Council plans or joint commissioning plans). Clear, consistent and modern procurement and contracting arrangements need to be in place. Capacity issues in terms of negotiating and implementing these arrangements need to be addressed (in both the Council and VCS organisations).

Objective 3 – *Investing in support and development services that build the capacity of the sector.*

Strong infrastructure support for VCS organisations will help deliver both stronger communities and better public services. The Council’s role here is to invest in this infrastructure support. It can do this by providing services itself, offering resources in kind or investing in other organisations to provide those services to the sector. This is a long-term relationship where the focus should be on achieving outcomes that build the strength and sustainability of the sector.

Objective 4 – *Building a strong relationship with the Voluntary and Community Sector and assisting the sector to engage fully and equally in developing partnership based policy, service planning, service delivery and review.*

The Council is committed to putting in place a strong partnership-based Compact with the Voluntary and Community Sector, which will guide the future development of the relationships with VCS organisations. At the same time VCS organisations are being asked to be involved in many different partnership arrangements from deciding priorities to designing and delivering particular activities. The Council has a role in building a strong partnership with the VCS in the County, strengthening its own capacity to relate to the sector and in supporting the VCS in undertaking its role as full and equal partners.

Key Principles

A set of key principles has been identified to underpin the strategic framework. These will be added to and amended in the light of the discussions around the development of the Compact in due course.

Key Principles – the Council will pursue these objectives by:-

- Respecting the independence of the sector
- Providing clarity about what the Council expects
- Ensuring communications are effective
- Fostering respect and honesty between the sectors
- Building on best practice already in place
- Ensuring consistency with national policies and programmes
- Raising awareness of what the sector does within the Council
- Ensuring consistency and transparency
- Promoting full cost recovery
- Developing this work in the spirit of the Compact principles
- Using Plain English

Key risks and barriers

a) Leadership

The strategic framework and action plan provide a road map for a change process that should result in better outcomes for VCS organisations and the communities they serve. Like any change strategy it will need to be led not just managed. The issue of leadership is a matter for both the Council and the VCS.

b) Defining the priorities for community based support

Herefordshire has a rich tradition of community based activities. This diversity is a huge strength, but creates a problem for the Council in trying to decide where and

how to define priorities for support. Communities of place (specific geographic areas), interest (including sports and arts, young and old etc) and identity (ethnic and other minorities) all contribute to the strength and vibrancy of Herefordshire life. Mechanisms for deciding priorities between these very diverse groups are difficult to define and can be politically complex.

c) Achieving the balance between competition and collaboration

There appears to be a consensus that infrastructure support should be delivered collaboratively. The place of competition in the delivery of other forms of activity is not clear.

d) Defining the role of generalist and specialist infrastructure support

There is a danger that specialist infrastructure bodies will duplicate the work of the generalist organisations, or on the other hand generalist organisations may not have the capacity to meet all the needs of VCS across the board.

e) Vested interests

The experience of establishing the national hubs as part of the Change Up programme, which has been delayed by trying to negotiate sharing up of the funds among national organisations, may be replicated at a local level. Also allegiances to individual organisations could stand in the way of change.

f) Financial and human resource constraints

Both the Council and VCS organisations have considerable pressures to deal with in terms of the demands on their time and finances. That said there is much that can be achieved through changes in culture and processes.

These findings have been used to draw together the Strategic Framework (consultation draft) and the Action Plan, which are the companion documents to this report.

MEMBERSHIP OF PROJECT TEAM

Wendy Coombey - Hereford Diocese
wendy@hereford.anglican.org

Magda Praill - Age Concern
magdapraill@achw.org.uk

Claire Keetch - CAB
clairek@cabhereford.demon.co.uk

Sara Burch - Policy and Community Directorate (Social Enterprise)
sburch@herefordshire.gov.uk

Steve Merrell - Children Services Directorate
smerrell@herefordshire.gov.uk

Jean Howard - Adult Services
jean.howard@herefordpct.nhs.uk

Karen Stanton - Policy and Community Directorate (Community Development)
kstanton@herefordshire.gov.uk

Julie Brown - Finance Department
jbrown@herefordshire.gov.uk

Richard Ball - Environment Directorate (Transport)
rball@herefordshire.gov.uk

Annie Brookes - Policy and Community Directorate (Community Development)
ab1@herefordshire.gov.uk

Helen Horton - Alliance
helenhorton@allianceherefordshire.org.uk
01432 265856

Independent consultants

Alison McLean - Consultant
Alisonmclean1@btinternet.com
01432 830116

Barbara Parkinson - Consultant
barbara@nashrockshouse.com
01544 260621

INTERVIEWEES

Geoff Tunstall	Workmatch
Geoff Knock	Ledbury and District CVS
Brian Burrows	Age Concern Hereford
Richard Betterton	Hereford Council of Voluntary Youth Services
Richard Quallington	Community First
Will Lindesay	Herefordshire Voluntary Action
Sheenagh Davis	The Hope Centre
Collette Coleman	Age Concern Leominster and District
Cllr Roy Stockton	Herefordshire Council
Cllr. Roger Phillips	Herefordshire Council
Jane Jones	Corporate Services, Herefordshire Council
Sue Feinnes	Children Services, Herefordshire Council
Geoff Hughes	Adult and Community Services, H'fdshire Council
Stephanie Canham	Adult Services, Herefordshire Council
Jon Ralph	Community Youth Services, H'fdshire Council
Zandra Pitt	Herefordshire Council
Natalia Silver	Cultural Services, Herefordshire Council
Additional Consultees	Cllr. Rees Mills, Sue Brazendale, Nick Read

WORKSHOP ATTENDEES

Andrew Strong	Herefordshire Mind
Geoff Tunstall	Workmatch
Julie Wilson-Thomas	HELP
Colette Colman	Age Concern, Leominster and District
Catriona Roberson	Age Concern, Ledbury and District
Claire Keetch	CAB
Magda Praill	Age Concern, Herefordshire & Worcestershire
Helen Horton	Alliance
Wendy Coombey	Hereford Diocese
Geoff Knock	Ledbury Community and Voluntary Action
Roger Hughes	Ledbury Community and Voluntary Action
Will Lindesay	Herefordshire Voluntary Action
Sue Brazendale	Herefordshire Voluntary Action
Megan Bennett	Herefordshire Voluntary Action
Richard Quallington	Community First
Gladys Brookes	Shaw Homes, Ledbury
Marin Tweed-Rycroft	Centre for Independent Living
Philip Dazeley	Alliance
Richard Betterton	Herefordshire Council for Voluntary Youth Services
Lynn Money	Hereford Diocese
Sue Dale	Preventions Services Manager, HC
Shirley Coultas	Joint Funding Accountant, HC
Zandra Pitt	Project Manager, HC
Karen Beadman	Asset Management Plan Officer, HC
Trish Marsh	Environment Officer, HC
Ros Hatherill	Early Years and Childcare Manager, HC
Karen Stanton	Community Development Officer, HC
Sara Burch	Social Enterprise, HC
Annie Brookes	Community Development, HC
Steve Merrell	Children's Services, HC
Julie Brown	Finance, HC
Neil Pringle	Chief Executive, HC
Roger Phillips	Leader of the Council
Jane Jones	Corporate Director, HC

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- Herefordshire Council Procurement Strategy (2005)
- Herefordshire voluntary and community sector Infrastructure Investment Plan (2005)
- Herefordshire Council Local Public Service Agreement (2005)

GLOSSARY

Key definitions:

▪ **VCS (voluntary and community sector)**

For the purposes of this document the voluntary and community sector is not tightly defined. It is intended to be wider in scope than general charities or the voluntary sector, inclusive of organisations reflecting the characteristics of social enterprise, but narrower in scope than not for profit or third sector

▪ **Voluntary and Community sector infrastructure**

Voluntary and community organisations whose primary purpose is the provision of infrastructure functions, (support and development, co-ordination, representation and promotion) to frontline voluntary and community organisations

▪ **Generic Infrastructure**

Infrastructure organisations who provide support to all front line organisations within a particular geographic area

▪ **Specialist Infrastructure**

Infrastructure organisations that provide support to a particular “sub-sector” of the voluntary and community sector, or offer a specific area of expertise

▪ **Infrastructure**

The physical facilities, structures, systems, relationships, people, knowledge and skills that exist to support and develop, co-ordinate, represent and promote front line organisations thus enabling them to deliver their missions more effectively

▪ **Front line organisations**

Voluntary and community organisations that work directly with individuals and communities in order to provide services, offer support and campaign for change

▪ **Social enterprises**

Businesses with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners

▪ **Public services**

Services that are wholly or partly publicly funded and are delivered by public, voluntary and community or private sector agencies

▪ **Resources**

Includes physical, financial, human and in-kind resources

▪ **Capacity Building**

A working definition is “empowering activity that strengthens the ability of voluntary and community sector to build their structures, systems, people and skills so that they are better able to:

- define and achieve their objectives
- engage in consultation and planning
- manage projects
- take part in partnerships, social enterprises and service delivery

PRINCIPLE ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Central to the successful implementation of the Strategy and Action Plan is open and effective communications for all concerned, at all stages, to establish the wider knowledge, understanding and agreement of the Council's approach and the key objectives and activities being proposed and implemented.

Principle Elements

The Communications Plan has three main elements:

1. Herefordshire Council agreeing an internal process both immediately and in the longer term to embed the aim and objectives of the Strategy across the Council and the full implementation of the Action Plan.
2. Consultation with the voluntary and community sector and other stakeholders – to engage views and consensus for taking the Strategy forward.
3. On-going communications both within the Council and with the voluntary and community sector and other organisations to ensure transparency and understanding at all stages

Lead

The Corporate and Customer Services Directorate has overall responsibility for taking the Strategy and Action Plan forward and will ensure that communications both within the Council and with external stakeholders are carried out.

The strategic framework and key activities as identified in the Action Plan, significantly cross-refer with the emerging structures, principles and activities of the Local Area Agreement. This will be further developed with the consultation period being aligned to take this into account.