Hartlepool Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy

2012 - 2017

HARTLEPOOL BOROUGH COUNCIL
In Hartlepool, there is a strong tradition of the public, private and community and voluntary sectors working in partnership to improve the environment and economic and social wellbeing of the borough. It is our ambition and our duty to build on these existing strong traditions despite the difficulties facing both the voluntary and the public sector.

The Voluntary & Community Sector (VCS) Strategy is a key document that has been developed in partnership with public sector partners and the VCS, outlining how organisations will work together to aid the development and success of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Hartlepool over the next five years.

The overall aim of the strategy will be to improve service delivery for the residents of the borough by creating and developing strong partnership working across both the VCS and public sector.

Stuart Drummond
Mayor of Hartlepool

This document can be viewed online with other supporting information at:
www.hartlepool.gov.uk/vcs
The Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy

Hartlepool has a large and vibrant Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), with a wide breadth of knowledge, specialisms and understanding enabling the delivery and provision of a range of services to residents, contributing towards improving quality of life and creating cohesive communities.

Whilst Hartlepool Borough Council has had a Voluntary Sector Strategy as well as a Compact (in partnership with public sector partners) servicing the borough for a number of years, it is recognised that in light of governmental changes and revisions to the National Compact it is now the right time to bring these two documents together to create a Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy that supports a strong and prosperous VCS that is recognised by everybody.

Changes recently introduced by central Government and the global economic downturn, have and will continue to have, significant implications for both the public and the voluntary sector. Substantial cuts across all public sector services and reductions in funding to voluntary sector organisations will challenge the way we deliver services in the future.

Other emerging factors which have resulted in the need to review the way we work, are the Localism Act and the Government’s Big Society concept. ‘The Localism Act outlines the Government’s priority to refocus power to communities by breaking down barriers that have prevented local councils and VCS organisations from getting things done’ (Department for Communities and Local Government 2011). The Coalition Government indicates that it is crucial that the VCS have an effective role in taking the Big Society concept forward at a local level.

It is important therefore that this strategy provides a clear guide to how the Council, its partners and the VCS will work together to aid the development, success and sustainability of the VCS’s work in the borough.

The strategy and the actions we take forward will provide a robust framework, which incorporates the principles of the Compact providing support and clear guidance on areas such as commissioning and procurement arrangements. This will enable all partners to respond to the current challenges in order to deliver and develop services that are a direct response to local needs.

In Hartlepool it is widely recognised that there is a local desire for people to work together within and across the sectors and this strategy will work to promote and encourage collaborative working to enable good communication between all partners. Build on and develop the capacity, skills and knowledge within the sectors to ensure that services are delivered effectively with enhanced work prospects for individual volunteers, and sets the conditions to encourage all partners to have an equal voice.

This strategy is intrinsically linked to a number of other Council strategies, these should be considered when dealing with specific groups, for example the Hartlepool Participation Strategy in relation to children, young people and families. Links to these strategies can be found at www.hartlepool.gov.uk/vcs.
The Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) in Hartlepool

There are over 500 VCS organisations and groups operating in Hartlepool, who provide a variety of different services to local people. The VCS groups are diverse in nature, ranging from larger organisations providing a multitude of services for example Credit Unions and benefits advice, to smaller volunteer led groups such as support groups and residents associations and also including support and guidance to individual volunteers. These groups have different focuses as outlined in the diagram below:

![Thematic focus of VCS Groups in Hartlepool](image)

Other areas of VCS work that is recognised by and complementary to statutory provision in Hartlepool include:

- Community engagement and participation, increasing social capital and community cohesion, helping to build stronger communities through volunteer activity.
- Providing a range of voluntary opportunities for local residents to get involved in their neighbourhood,
- Develop skills as well as social expertise of volunteers.
- Securing external funding to bring additional services to the borough.
- Providing additional services at the local level, which are designed to the specialist requirements of the service user.
- Tackling inequalities.
- Shaping service provision in the borough.

In the past the VCS in Hartlepool were supported, and represented by Hartlepool Community Network. Their primary role included building strong links between the VCS, residents and other sectors and ensured good public involvement and levels of engagement in local decision-making structures. Despite elements of the work being picked up by the VCS and the local authority specific provision for the sector is no longer available, all sectors need to be mindful of this potential gap in support.

It is clearly recognised that the VCS makes a significant contribution towards delivering added value to services in the borough. Whilst it is widely acknowledged that 2012 to 2017 will be an extremely difficult period for Hartlepool Borough Council, we are strongly committed to supporting the VCS to continue to be a strong, prosperous and independent sector with whom we can work in partnership.
Aims and Objectives

OUR AIM

The aims of this strategy will focus on:

- Assisting with funding either directly or indirectly.
- Encouraging collaborative working across the VCS.
- Strengthening partnership arrangements and ensuring good communication across both sectors.
- Providing clear commissioning, friendly procurement processes and performance management commitments.
- Supporting the VCS in difficult financial times.
- Supporting the VCS to deliver sustainable services.
- Encourage and support volunteering.

OUR OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this strategy are intrinsically linked with the Compact principles, which are:

Objective 1 – Have a Say

To ensure that voluntary and community sector organisations are able to comment on and influence public sector strategies and service delivery plans, in order to develop more reliable and robust policies and strategies that better reflect the community’s needs and wishes.

Objective 2 – Take Part and Deliver

To improve the relationship between public sector partners and the VCS within Hartlepool in managing and using resources to achieve a strong and prosperous VCS that contributes to the delivery of good public services within the town.

Objective 3 – Strengthen and Develop

To ensure a strong and diverse VCS that promotes inclusion across the town as well as a clearer understanding of community groups within the sector as a whole. The VCS is able to get involved, build capacity and develop, strengthening the local communities that they serve.

These aims and objectives form the basis of the undertakings agreed by all sectors to take this strategy forward; these will also form the framework for the action plan.

Vision

Aims

Objectives

Undertakings

Action Plan
**Undertakings**

The undertakings clearly outline what both the voluntary and community sector and public sector agree to do. These will help to build upon, develop and strengthen the working relationships between the two sectors. This transparency will help to manage expectation and it is anticipated that this will breakdown perceived barriers.

These undertakings form the Compact, and build on the previous Hartlepool Compact taking into account the recent Government changes to the renewed National Compact, which highlights the need to “Move towards tightly focused outcomes and practical commitments, increasing transparency and accountability in relation to implementation and partnership working” (The Compact, Office for Civil Society 2010).

The undertakings will need to be embedded via a range of mechanisms such as:

- Robust and meaningful action plan with efficient and effective outcomes
- Sound governance arrangements
- Effective promotion and implementation

“Move towards tightly focused outcomes and practical commitments, increasing transparency and accountability in relation to implementation and partnership working”.
Objective 1: Have a say

Ensure that voluntary and community sector organisations are able to comment on and influence public sector strategies and service delivery plans, in order to develop more reliable and robust policies and strategies that better reflect the community’s needs and wishes.

**SHARED UNDERTAKINGS:**

- Promote the VCS in Hartlepool.
- Ensure that all communications are clear, purposeful and effective.
- Have an active role in the development of policy and strategies that affect the people of Hartlepool.
- Promote and create opportunities for others to get involved in consultation on developing policy and strategies.
- Ensure that representatives have the skills in order to carry out roles effectively and efficiently.

**UNDERTAKINGS OF PUBLIC SECTOR PARTNERS:**

- Give early notice of forthcoming consultations, where possible, allowing enough time for VCS groups of all sizes to get involved, offering additional support to facilitate this as required.
- Ensure documents use simple, clear language and are made available in a variety of formats, including different languages if requested, to meet the needs of residents.
- Be mindful of the constraints upon, and resource implications for voluntary and community organisations.
- Use a variety of consultation methods and levels for engagement to ensure inclusivity.
- Clearly set out the purpose, scope and timeframe of each consultation and provide background information and contact details for additional information.
- Ensure transparent, detailed, constructive and timely feedback processes, which will set out the reasons for decisions made or why a specific approach was adopted.
- Use existing networks and forums for consultation and whenever possible share resources and coordinate consultation activity.
- Build early consultation into plans for statutory policy and strategy development, allowing a minimum of 8 weeks for consultation, where practicable.

**UNDERTAKINGS OF VCS:**

- Promote and respond to Public Sector Partners consultations where appropriate.
- Capacity permitting, seek the views of service users, clients, beneficiaries, members, volunteers, and trustees when participating in consultations and be clear about whose views are being put forward.
- Be clear about the constraints and resource implications of consultation on VCS groups.
- Identify existing networks and forums for consultation and promote to Public Sector Partners.
- Share the outcome of consultations with service users, clients, beneficiaries, members, volunteers, and trustees whose views have been put forward.
- Take advantage of support opportunities available to assist with consultation, as required.
Objective 2: Take Part and Deliver

To improve the relationship between public sector partners and the VCS within Hartlepool in managing and using resources to achieve a strong and prosperous VCS that contributes to the delivery of good public services within the town.

**SHARED UNDERTAKINGS:**

- Respect and be accountable to the law and in the case of charities, comply with the appropriate guidance from the Charity Commission including “Good Governance, A Code for the Voluntary and Community Sector”.
- Work together to ensure services are joined up and avoid duplication.
- Be clear of the expectations of each party when developing funding agreements, delivery arrangements and setting clear performance management and / or monitoring targets.
- Acknowledge the variety of roles that individuals have and be open and transparent of individual positions when discussing funding decisions.
- Ensure that all relevant polices are in place to deliver services that are readily available for purposes of funding.
- Engage VCS groups and service users as early as possible before making a decision on the future of a service; any knock-on effect on assets used to provide the service; and the wider impact on the local community.
- Where possible early notice to be given of forthcoming funding opportunities.
- Will endeavour to enter into early consultation with VCS organisations to ensure inclusion at the planning stage of projects.
- Ensure transparency by providing a clear rationale for all funding decisions.
- Seek to provide a diversity of funding support that recognises the different needs of the VCS.
- Recognise the independence of VCS groups to deliver their mission, including their right to campaign, regardless of any relationship, financial or otherwise, which may exist.
- Ensure greater transparency by making data and information more accessible, helping VCS groups to challenge existing provision of services.
- Where appropriate, look to make advance payments to ‘kick start’ projects.
- Recognise social value when allocating contracts ensuring that providers are aware of the needs of the Town.
- Wherever possible, tenders will be planned and staggered to avoid bottlenecks.
- Provide clarity on procurement systems and regulations to improve understanding of processes.
- Provide feedback on the outcome of procurement projects.

**UNDERTAKINGS OF PUBLIC SECTOR PARTNERS:**

- Have open, transparent and timely commissioning processes ensuring that the same information and guidance is available and applies to all potential providers ensuring a level playing field for VCS groups.
- Ensure that funding is paid in line with agreed targets and the schedule in the contract.
- Work to support and develop VCS Groups who are encountering problems delivering commissioned services before considering withdrawing funding.
- Recognise that VCS tenders will include appropriate and relevant overheads, including the costs associated with training and volunteer involvement.
- Where possible, give at least 3 months notice, when reducing or ending funding or other support to VCS groups, notice periods will be set out in contract terms and conditions.

The Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy
Objective 2: Take Part and Deliver

To improve the relationship between public sector partners and the VCS within Hartlepool in managing and using resources to achieve a strong and prosperous VCS that contributes to the delivery of good public services within the town.

UNDERTAKINGS OF VCS:

- Be open and transparent about reporting, evaluating, recognising the benefits of monitoring service delivery and responding to the requirements of funding providers.

- Have a clear understanding of the organisation’s financial structure and what they are trying to achieve.

- Ensure effective business planning processes including reserves policy and be able to demonstrate that services provide value for money.

- Adhere to the requirements of funding bodies in relation to the delivery of services, financial practices and other statutory obligations, legislation and regulations.

- Give funders early notice of significant changes in circumstances and any concerns about delivery.

- Recognise that Public Sector Partners are accountable bodies with strict priorities and funding constraints placed upon them, with a requirement to balance competing needs when allocating resources.

- Take up opportunities which are aimed at supporting organisations to commission for services.

- Commit to the development of skills, capacity and expertise to effectively compete for public service contracts, including understanding procurement processes.

- Be able to demonstrate that the services delivered are of a high quality and meet the needs of users.

- Ensure robust governance arrangements are in place so that organisations can best manage any risk associated with service delivery and financing models.

- Prepare for the end of funding and plan to reduce any potential negative impact on service users and the organisation.

- Work together as a sector to make the best use of resources available, developing consortia and partnering approaches as appropriate particularly in relation to tendering for larger scale contracts.

- Take up opportunities for helping to develop partnership and consortia approaches.

- Demonstrate added value of local level delivery.

- Where possible offer support and advice to other VCS organisations e.g. mentoring.
Objective 3: Strengthen and Develop

To ensure a strong and diverse VCS that promotes inclusion across the town as well as a clearer understanding of community groups within the sector as a whole. The VCS is able to get involved, build capacity and develop, strengthening the local communities that they serve.

SHARED UNDERTAKINGS:

- Ensure that no group experiences marginalisation, isolation, disadvantage, exclusion or discrimination.
- Strive to ensure that all community groups are properly represented.
- Ensure that no VCS group is discriminated against on the basis of age, disability, faith, gender, race or sexual orientation and will respect the voluntary nature of their work. All work undertaken is inline with the Equality Act 2010.
- Support existing diverse community groups and develop others so that people from diverse communities can raise concerns.
- Acknowledge that organisations representing specific disadvantaged or under-represented group(s) can help promote social and community cohesion and should have equal access to support.
- Acknowledge that there are different sizes of group and organisations within the VCS, with different purposes, needs and support requirements.
- Ensure that staff, volunteers and contacts receive training and awareness as to specific needs and respond to particular sectors of Hartlepool’s diverse community.
- Take practical action to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality and to ensure a voice for under-represented and disadvantaged groups.
- Encourage and support volunteering by ensuring that volunteering is the result of a free choice by the volunteer, open to everyone and publicly recognised.
- Understand the respective roles, cultures and constraints of others to enable good collaborative working.
- Named contacts will be identified to deal with issues raised by minority groups, and act as a conduit to access relevant officers, services and support.

UNDEARTAKINGS OF PUBLIC SECTOR PARTNERS:

- Support the development of voluntary and community groups and related infrastructure organisations, recognising their local knowledge, expertise and perspective.
- Encourage involvement and networking between the VCS, diverse people, and small community groups, thereby increasing skills and knowledge.
- Promote and monitor policies and services that eradicate discriminatory practice, implementing equality and diversity policies, and setting objectives and targets as appropriate.
- Work with VCS groups that represent, support or provide services to people specifically protected by legislation and other under-represented and disadvantaged groups. Understand the specific needs of these groups by actively seeking the views of service users and clients.
- Provide opportunities to build skills, capacity and understanding of procurement processes in the VCS to enable agencies to compete for contracts.
- Provide opportunities to build skills and capacity of smaller VCS groups.
- Encourage VCS groups to engage in development opportunities.
- Support and encourage VCS organisations to embed management, skills and governance arrangements and forward plan to ensure long term sustainability of services.
Objective 3: Strengthen and Develop

To ensure a strong and diverse VCS that promotes inclusion across the town as well as a clearer understanding of community groups within the sector as a whole. The VCS is able to get involved, build capacity and develop, strengthening the local communities that they serve.

UNDERTAKINGS OF VCS:

- Representatives will be selected or elected through an open and transparent recruitment process and representatives will be accountable to the VCS.

- Take up training and capacity building opportunities on representation, management and governance arrangements to ensure that roles are effectively delivered.

- Recognise the benefits of networking and partnership working amongst the VCS.

- Commitment to striving towards sustainability of services.
COMMISSIONING

Commissioning can be defined as the agreed formal arrangements set up to deliver a service to meet specific needs and objectives. The shift towards a total commissioning approach will bring about real changes to the way that the VCS are funded in Hartlepool.

In turn this presents challenges to the VCS, as some groups and organisations, especially smaller groups may not have the skills, capacity, resources or expertise to tender for contracts in the same way as larger, commercial and more experienced organisations.

The National Programme for Third Sector Commissioning outlines eight key principles, which are:

- Understanding the needs of users and other communities by ensuring that, alongside other consultees, you engage with the third sector organisations, as advocates, to access their specialist knowledge;

- Consulting potential provider organisations, including those from the third sector and local experts, well in advance of commissioning new services, working with them to set priority outcomes for that service;

- Putting outcomes for users at the heart of the strategic planning process;

- Mapping the fullest practical range of providers with a view to understanding the contribution they could make to delivering those outcomes;

- Considering investing in the capacity of the provider base, particularly those working with hard-to-reach groups;

- Ensuring contracting processes are transparent and fair, facilitating the involvement of the broadest range of suppliers, including considering sub-contracting and consortia building, where appropriate;

- Ensuring long-term contracts and risk sharing, wherever appropriate, as ways of achieving efficiency and effectiveness; and

- Seeking feedback from service users, communities and providers in order to review the effectiveness of the commissioning process in meeting local needs.

The undertakings under Objective 1, 2 and 3 of this strategy will be the mechanism for ensuring that these key principles form the future working relationship between all partners and help to inform the commissioning process across all departments of the Council.

PROCUREMENT

The Council has a Sustainable Procurement Strategy (2011 - 2014) which sets out to:

- Support the delivery of cost-effective high quality services which underpin the Council’s corporate priorities, through a strategic and systematic approach to procurement and business development.

This strategy sets out key principles underpinning procurement activities, with particular relevance to the VCS, which will:

- Enhance our commissioning and procurement relationship to the VCS.

- Support the VCS in understanding and implementing any legislative changes in EU and UK Procurement Regulations.

In addition to this, the Council will continue to invest resources in providing transparent and constructive feedback to all bidders through formal procurement processes.

Taking the Strategy Forward

How the undertakings are taken forward will be key to the successful implementation of the strategy. Ensuring that the processes and documentation is in place to action this.

The strategy will be driven forward by a Voluntary & Community Sector Strategy Steering Group; this will include a cross section of partners from the Voluntary Sector, Public Sector and Local Authority. VCS representation will be through an open election process facilitated by the sectors infrastructure organisation.

This group will oversee the implementation of the strategy and the key responsibilities of the group are:

- Communication and awareness raising of the strategy.
- Review and monitor the Action Plan.
- Report to Strategic Partners Group.
- Ensure that the undertakings are embedded.
- Oversee the Dispute Resolution Procedure.
- Ensure that there are linkages across the authority to other strategic aims.
- Ensure that there is a consistent approach across all departments within the Council towards the VCS e.g. contract management, commissioning and procurement.

The dispute resolution procedure attached as Appendix 1 is in keeping with The Compact Accountability and Transparency Guide from the Office for Civil Society.
ACTION PLAN

The action plan will be a separate document to allow for annual updates. It will focus on the key priorities for the strategy which will be guided by the 3 key objectives, related undertakings and will reflect the needs and priorities required by all partners to deliver effective outcomes.

MONITORING THE STRATEGY

The implementation of the strategy will be monitored by the following mechanisms:

- A cross-departmental and organisational Voluntary & Community Sector Strategy Steering Group taking forward and monitoring compliance with the strategy.
- An annual review of the action plan, to reflect the developments and current priorities, this will include self-assessment forms for both the public and voluntary sector partners.
- Progress will be reported on annually to the relevant Portfolio Holder and feedback will be provided to all partners via the Steering Group.

The intended period of this strategy is 5 years; therefore, a complete review of the strategy is expected in 2017.

If you would like further information on this strategy please contact the David Frame, Neighbourhood Manager on 01429 523034.
Appendix 1: Dispute Resolution

Voluntary & Community Sector Strategy
Dispute Resolution Flow chart - What to do when things go wrong

Identify what undertakings of the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy you believe have been breached. Is the organisation a signatory to the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy.

No

To improve partnership working, share lessons learnt with the VCS via Infrastructure Organisation.

Yes

Arrange a face to face meeting with a member of the Steering Group to discuss your concerns and understand the other party’s position. Focus on interests and issues rather than demands.

Resolved

Not Resolved

Meet again or involve other members of both organisations to try to find a resolution.

Resolved

Not Resolved

Use external neutral mediation service.

Not Resolved

Make a written complaint in line with the relevant organisation’s complaints procedure.

Resolved

Not Resolved

Follow the organisation’s complaints appeal process.

Resolved

Not Resolved

Consider referral to a higher authority e.g. Ombudsman.

Resolved

The Voluntary and Community Sector Steering Group will review any case studies referred to them in order to learn lessons and inform the ongoing development of the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy. The Steering Group will also keep a log of all disputes.
Hartlepool Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy
2012 - 2017