

**RESPONSIVE SERVICES & CUSTOMER CARE SCRUTINY PANEL**

**POLICY REVIEW 2013/14  
VOLUNTEERING: UNLOCKING CAPACITY**

**FINAL REPORT**

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## **Foreword**

The Responsive Services and Customer Care Scrutiny Panel agreed to undertake an Inquiry into the role volunteers play in our communities under the title 'Volunteers: Unlocking Capacity' as part of its 2013-14 work plan.

This is my first year as a Lead Scrutiny Member and I would very much wish to express my thanks to all the other members, support staff and expert witnesses who contributed so effectively during the year and enabled us to produce this report.

The Panel recognises that current social, economic and demographic pressures are placing a great strain on services and programmes that have been delivered by both the statutory and community sectors for many years.

Shrinking budgets mean that there are fewer paid, professional staff working on the front line and a number of well-known providers of services in communities have reduced activities or closed down altogether.

The principal resource that stands ready and available to fill this space is volunteers – many people reading this report will themselves be volunteers in schools, faith communities and even at work. This report sets out the challenges that we face in Sunderland but also identifies many excellent schemes and programmes that are already working hard to fill gaps.

Particular credit goes to those groups who have responded to establish food and clothing banks across the city and the volunteers they have engaged – many of these groups were not involved at all in this type of service two years ago. It is also worth recognising the steep increase in demand for welfare rights and money management support – funded services are really stretched and again volunteers are filling important gaps.

I hope this report will inform an appropriate and effective response from the city council to help facilitate appropriate strategies and structures that allow volunteers to maximise their capacity through training, support and guidance underpinned by access to effective systems of management and supervision.

**Councillor Iain Kay, Lead Scrutiny Member  
Responsive Services and Customer Care Scrutiny Panel**

## **2. Introduction**

- 2.1 There is a very active voluntary and community sector (VCS) in the city and a long history of individuals coming together as part of community groups and networks to do things for themselves. In this review, the Panel considered the role of the council in supporting local volunteering.
- 2.2 The review was set within the context that local authorities have to look at new ways of doing business. The Government has expressed an intention that local authorities will deliver fewer services directly in the future, operating a more mixed economy of direct and contracted service provision.
- 2.3 The council's high level priorities are set out in the Corporate Plan, which outlines a vision to make Sunderland a place where people can fulfil their ambitions and potential. Yet, there are far fewer resources available to meet the challenges. Within five years, the council as we know it will have changed significantly with new ways of delivering services. It is anticipated that more services will be provided by the VCS, including, social enterprises and community groups. Legislation has been introduced to support this agenda, including the Localism Act 2011, which has implications for the council's commissioning activity and the way in which it will need to engage with its communities and partners.
- 2.4 The council is responding to the need to work smarter within its communities through a community leadership role whereby work is on-going to understand the needs, aspirations and opportunities at a local level. Community leadership runs through all the council's work and shapes work with local communities. Community leadership builds change incrementally on the basis of establishing trust in new ways of doing things. Once trust has been established around new and responsive ways of working, the council can begin to tap the potential for community engagement to help respond to the big social and economic challenges which the city faces.
- 2.5 Much of the current activity on building new partnerships with the voluntary and community sector (VCS) represents a continuation of earlier arrangements, although there is a sense that the relationship will be an increasingly significant part of what the council does, whereas in the past it was more peripheral to mainstream service delivery.
- 2.6 A council-led project was underway at the time of our review which was reviewing the council's approach to working with the VCS from both a strategic corporate level and at an area level through the council's area arrangements. By developing further the councils' relationship with the sector, the aim is to deliver the council's wider corporate objectives through resilient local communities thereby reducing demand on council services and enabling opportunities for VCS organisations to support the creation of alternative service delivery models.

### **3. Aim of Review**

- 3.1 To review and identify what the council can do to unlock the capacity within communities including where we are now, what approaches could be taken and what challenges are faced.

### **4. Terms of Reference**

- 4.1 The Panel agreed the following terms of reference for the review:-
- a) To review community capacity, including support in the community, and the existing use of volunteers within council services;
  - b) To review the role of the council including longer term support to individuals and communities in the way that using local capacity requires;
  - c) To identify potential barriers to using volunteers in a wider range of council services and review ways to overcome these.

### **5. Membership of the Scrutiny Panel**

The membership of the Scrutiny Panel consisted of:  
Councillors Iain Kay (Lead Scrutiny Member), Anne Lawson, Barry Curran, Elizabeth Gibson, George Thompson, John Scott, John Wiper, and Bob Heron.

### **6. Methods of Investigation**

- 6.1 The following evidence was taken at monthly meetings of the Panel:
- a) Organisations providing infrastructure services to other voluntary and community organisations: Voluntary Organisations' Network North East (VONNE), Volunteer Centre and Skillsbridge.
  - b) Organisations providing some infrastructure services to other groups as well as frontline activities: Age UK; CAB.
  - c) Groups from outside the voluntary and community sector which provide support and volunteering capacity: Local Authority (Council officers working at strategic level and within the voluntary sector); Sunderland University; Gentoo.
  - d) Community groups working at grassroots level delivering frontline services: Easington Lane Community Access Point.

### **7. Findings of the Scrutiny Panel**

#### **7.1 State of the Sector in Sunderland**

- 7.1.1 The most recent research by VONNE indicates that there is a significant economic contribution in Sunderland from the VCS<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Voluntary Organisations North East "Surviving not Thriving" 2013

- a) 529 VCS organisations are based in Sunderland
- b) 48 VCS organisations operate in Sunderland from outside of the city
- c) There are over 1000 'under the radar' groups
- d) The collective annual income is £53 m
- e) Nearly 8,500 staff are employed
- f) Approximately 52,000 formal volunteers

7.1.2 This is a challenging time for the VCS and the pressures are evident to a similar degree in Sunderland than in the rest of the north east:

- a) 47 organisations in Sunderland stated in the last 12 months they had seen a 68% decrease in funding, but a 61% increase in demand for services.
- b) 25% lost staff, 46% were using reserves and 66% were sourcing some or all of their income from public sector grants.
- c) Within the next 12 months, 40% expect to or are considering closing a service, 42% may make staff redundant and 19% may close the organisation.

7.1.3 The survey revealed there were expressions of anxiety; worries about sustainability, but willingness to fight for survival and an acceptance of the need to look at diversifying.

*"We will fight for survival. We will have to diversify and look at ways to raise enough money to cover our utility bills and repairs. We are determined to keep our centre running and supporting families in the local community."*

7.1.4 Few organisations seemed to see the situation as hopeless, but many were undoubtedly worried about what the future holds in the next financial year and uncertainty was commonplace.

## **7.2 Current issues for VCS organisations**

7.2.1 Two broad areas of concern stood out in the evidence we heard.

7.2.2 Firstly the cumulative effects of significant policy changes. For example, VCS organisations delivering front-line advice services emphasised an increased demand for their services following welfare reform. The reforms have placed a great strain on advice services many of which rely on a volunteer workforce. In some organisations reserves have been depleted. For example, Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) advised that they are using 20% of their reserves to get through this financial year, further reducing their reserves below the Charity Commission's guidance of retaining 6 months' worth of reserves, which is considered unsustainable.

7.2.3 The view from the CAB is that additional support has not kept pace with new expectations placed on advice services following welfare benefit changes. CAB has reported that competition to recruit and retain volunteers is fierce. The complexity of Welfare Reform has put a huge burden on volunteers and

many of the more experienced volunteer advisers have chosen to retire. In their place CAB have many younger people coming through who are keen to learn new skills and who are extremely competent but who see volunteering as a way to build their CV. This type of volunteer may only stay for a relatively short period of time. Whilst there are many benefits to younger volunteers, not least their digital experience, the high turnover makes it more expensive and labour intensive to develop a volunteer work force.

### **CASE STUDY 1: Sunderland Advice, Collaboration, Enterprise and Sustainability (ACES) Project**

Support for advice services in Sunderland has been boosted by Big Lottery funding to provide a collaboration of advice providers and VCS agencies in Sunderland known as the ACES project. The project will deliver a fully integrated advice service for the first time city-wide. This is needed to meet the rising demand for advice services in the midst of decreasing resources at a time of major welfare reform.

The project aims to provide an additional 4000 volunteer appointments in its first year through the following activities:

- A Volunteer Academy to support city-wide recruitment and training of volunteers;
- Generating new income and becoming more business minded through the creation of sustainable social enterprises;
- Employing shared staff across 5 VCS advice organisations to develop and manage the Volunteer Academy and social enterprises;
- Pooled training budgets to reduce costs among advice partners;
- Reviewing and sharing through on-going evaluation.

### **CASE STUDY 2: One for the Basket**

Sunderland's Food Bank Project distributes food parcels to Sunderland's needy. A Food Bank operates in each of the five areas of the city. They are run by volunteers primarily through faith community projects. The Salvation Army estimates it is issuing between 15 and 20 food parcels a week. Their project handed out 319 food parcels to 648 people in the year up to April 2013. Two years ago, the project was reporting a 70% increase in referrals from agencies including the Probation Service.

The number of food parcels given out in the last year has increased significantly following welfare reforms. The council is supporting the project and the model is being tested with other provisions such as the re-use of primary school uniforms which may be adaptable to be rolled out to area level.

- 7.2.4 The second issue that the sector said was concerning them related to the amount and types of funding available to organisations. Clearly, fluctuations in income for the VCS are endemic. Most organisations exist on a mixed diet

of funding from many different sources including: earned money (e.g. through the delivery of contracts), given money (e.g. grants) and borrowed money.

- 7.2.5 Fluctuations in this mixed economy are unlikely to change. However, given the recognition that VCS organisations are seen as valuable to the future delivery of many public services, this will necessitate the council reviewing how funding is allocated through grants and contracts and how opportunities for external funding are maximised. With scarce resources allocations must be targeted to the council's key service priorities.
- 7.2.6 The Panel is aware that considerable resources have been allocated to the VCS via grants and contracts from the council and through working with the council to access external funding. In 2012/13 VCS organisations successfully secured almost £12 million from the council to deliver services in addition to groups securing £1,540,486.16 in grants and £252,365 in Service Level Agreements (SLA) to support infrastructure costs.
- 7.2.7 It is recognised that, in line with the localism agenda, a shift has occurred in the approach to community funding. Funding is increasingly being offered to local groups directly, rather than through the council or local strategic partnership. This presents a concern, particularly, that new programmes in communities may fail to join up with existing projects delivering similar services, and the subsequent opportunities to add value by working together may be lost.
- 7.2.8 The council has established an External Funding Working Group which aims to make best use of funding programmes that are of potential benefit to local communities in Sunderland. It does this by aiming to link partners together in funding bids. Since the establishment of the group a grant for Communities Living Sustainably totalling nearly £1million was won.
- 7.2.9 The Panel was encouraged by the aims of the Working Group and, having been impressed by the various examples of good practice which have been made possible by Lottery funding, the Panel felt that the Group could also consider lessons learned and successes from city Lottery projects. This could include sustainability of projects and also their mainstreaming potential.
- 7.2.10 An emphasis of current commissioning favours competition over collaboration even though the organisations do not act for financial gain but for community benefit. The Panel discussed whether it would be possible for organisations to collaborate and support each other, possibly by merging resources. Evidence seems to show this is not an easy or achievable solution however there may be opportunities for VCS organisations to collaborate to win public contracts in partnership or consortium.. The Panel felt that work should be undertaken on the development of collaborative resourcing models.
- 7.2.11 The changing landscape may provide an opportunity to review documents to encourage bids from organisations of all size, sector and type while, of course, safeguarding healthy competition. This may involve a simpler financial assessment and enhanced technical questions that focus not only on price

and competence, but the wider social value elements that bidding organisations could deliver.

7.2.12 The Panel also felt that the council should commit to retaining some provision for community grant-making and that this should emphasise outcomes (given the budget constraints of the council). We want to ensure that the council is able to provide small-scale, time limited seed funding to smaller community organisations and groups given the potential payback from small-scale investment as identified in the work of below-the-radar groups. This needs to be within a structured framework to ensure that funding clearly supports council strategic priorities. The council should not be seen as routinely supporting projects where the likely return on investment is unclear.

7.2.13 An issue reported to us from the sector is that many organisations feel disadvantaged by the often onerous paperwork and bureaucracy required to access funding. The commissioning landscape has been described as a “mist of fog”<sup>2</sup>. Smaller organisations report they still struggle to access and win contracts even though they can bring social value. This is a historic complaint and not one restricted to this council. Regionally, only 1 in 12 charities are successful in applying for a grant. This means a lot of paperwork, most often for no outcome.

7.2.14 Recent research has identified that the public sector organisations reporting most success with using resources to tackle local needs are those that have worked with their local community sector at an early stage to identify how contracts can tackle local issues and meet social value needs. It also identified a lack of pre-commissioning collaboration between commissioners and providers with fewer than one in five community organisations involved in consultation prior to commissioning<sup>3</sup>.

7.2.15 For VCS organisations to be in a position to anticipate new opportunities and to have a fair chance to bid for contracts, market engagement events for specific contract activity, particularly those for new and innovative services, may support mutual needs and capabilities. For an equitable environment, and to make use of limited resources for social value, pre-consultation and early collaboration with providers on community needs is required.

7.2.16 We are aware that work is underway within the council to determine the capacity of the sector to comply with public sector requirements and expectations. Our evidence showed the importance of good governance for a voluntary organisations success with prudent business planning just as important in the VCS as it is in any other type of organisation. This prudent approach to business planning in VCS organisations is important if the council is relying on organisations to deliver public services.

7.2.17 Sunderland is home to some first class leaders in the field:

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<sup>2</sup> Vonne Annual Survey 2012

<sup>3</sup> Social Enterprise UK Social Value Summit 28.1.14 [www.socialvaluessummit.org](http://www.socialvaluessummit.org)



- a) Sunderland AFC Foundation of Light - using the power of football to involve, educate and inspire more than 42,000 young people each year through a broad range of innovative and award-winning programmes
- b) Sunderland Homecare Associates which is a nationally recognised franchised model
- c) Gentoo – Between April 2013 and September 2013, employees gave a total of 1677.5 hours of the time to volunteer, benefitting 938 people
- d) The Community Foundation Serving Tyne & Wear and Northumberland which is the largest outside of Europe, with a £52 million endowment, and grants of £5 million (small grants).

7.2.18 The emphasis for the Panel was on the importance of the 'organisation' of volunteers, of good governance and of business planning. This reiterates the point that volunteers are not a free resource.

### **7.3 Sunderland's VCS infrastructure**

7.3.1 The Panel heard there is no such thing as a typical voluntary or community organisation. Organisations differ considerably in terms of many factors, including their size and ambition, the particular sub-sectors they are operating in and their funding arrangements.

7.3.2 Many VCS organisations in Sunderland have been hit by the economic downturn and public spending cuts with some seeing a 68% decrease in funding. At the same time many (61%) are seeing an increase in demand for their services<sup>4</sup>. The pressures faced by the sector could potentially have a significant impact on vulnerable groups served by these organisations.

7.3.3 The Panel heard that small organisations and volunteer-led organisations have not in the main been affected by the external economic situation. Where groups do not have their own premises there is less pressure financially. The main pressure on those organisations is demonstrating an impact which is always a challenge. Those smaller, self-sustaining groups may not want to deliver public services. Small organisations value their independence and don't always want to get caught up in the bureaucracy that can come with public sector work. It could be said that such organisations are the bedrock of the 'big society' – if the concept means people doing things for themselves in local communities. A great strength of these organisations is the commitment of their volunteers.

7.3.4 Larger organisations with paid coordinators may see more of an impact although these organisations are adept at coping with change. They are also most able to bid for contracts. Many medium-sized organisations are feeling the squeeze particularly where they rely on public funding. To survive and thrive they need a supportive policy environment and a fair chance to bid for contracts.

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<sup>4</sup> VONNE Surviving not Thriving 2013

- 7.3.5 A key infrastructure organisation in the city is the Sunderland Volunteer Centre, which aims to promote, support and develop volunteering in Sunderland. The Volunteer Centre recruits volunteers and matches them to volunteering opportunities within local organisations, as well as providing support and guidance around good practice.
- 7.3.6 One of the principal functions of the volunteer centre is brokerage - matching individuals with appropriate opportunities, however, the Centre acknowledges that some other core functions have had less emphasis such as good practice development, policy issues and strategic development. Pressures on the sector and capacity issues over recent times have led to a concentration on day-to-day role matching with less of a focus on the strategic development of volunteering in Sunderland.
- 7.3.7 The Sunderland Volunteering Forum is led by the Sunderland Volunteer Centre and its purpose is to raise awareness of volunteering at a strategic level and promote collaboration. Membership of the Forum is drawn from the both the public sector and the VCS. The Forum's Steering Group consists of representatives from the Sunderland Volunteer Centre, Sunderland City Council and VCS organisations. However, at the time of taking evidence we heard that the Forum had been in abeyance and targets in the business plan had therefore not been achieved.
- 7.3.8 The Panel felt it is important for the Forum to be revived and built up to be used as a consultative body for all volunteering issues. The Forum is the place to raise issues and concerns relating to volunteering in Sunderland, and to share best practice, thereby returning to a more strategic development of volunteering in Sunderland.

## **7.4 Asset-based approaches**

- 7.4.1 Increasingly, councils talk about an 'asset-based approach' and about what local people can do to help themselves. In essence this means looking at the resources people and localities already have and exploring how they could be better used, rather than by starting with what people don't have and would like or need.
- 7.4.2 This can be a valuable approach when it comes to unlocking the capacity of individuals to play a more active role as volunteers, because it begins with what people already have at their disposal. This might be physical assets like a car or a garden shed, or skills and talents that make them better placed to participate in some activities.
- 7.4.3 The fact that assets relate to individuals as well as buildings is important, and responds to the idea that treating people as 'needy' might be well-meaning but is ultimately disempowering. Timebanks operate in the city and are a particularly good way to engage people who would not typically be attracted to standard volunteering opportunities. Participants 'deposit' their time in the bank by giving practical help and support to others and are able to 'withdraw' their time when they need something done themselves. It implies that

everyone's time can be valuable to someone else, making everyone a contributor as well as a beneficiary.

### **CASE STUDY 3 – Coalfield in Bloom**

The VCS has an active presence in Coalfields. Currently 125 VCS organisations are on the Coalfields VCS Network mailing list and approximately 20-35 organisations attend each Coalfields VCS Network meeting. During 2011/12 82 Community Chest grants were awarded to individual groups in the Coalfields to deliver a range of projects for the benefit of the local community including:

Coalfield in Bloom - a large scale bulb planting and landscaping scheme in 35 key locations involving 20 VCS organisations, six residents groups, nine faith groups, five public sector partners, 19 schools and around 300 volunteers. Following the large scale machine planting of bulbs across 35 locations, the bulbs are left in place and tended each year as part of the usual maintenance programme. Gentoo works in partnership with the Lead Agent to ensure a joined up approach to the maintenance programme. The project has been developed by Area Committee in line with the Local Area Plan. Bulb planting and landscaping was selected by elected members as one of the 6 priorities for this year and the need to engage the community was considered as part of a workshop held in June 2010. The Committee members developed the project as a result of community consultation and the need to make the area more attractive.

In addition, the Coalfield Community Challenge Project supports the promotion of local heritage and the improvement of allotments and community gardens. Around 18 organisations are involved. The Community Allotment in Houghton won the It's Your Neighbourhood award, after being graded as outstanding. Houghton Racecourse Community Access Point runs the thriving plot with local residents, including adults with learning disabilities and pupils at Gillas Lane Primary School and Houghton Community Nursery.

- 7.4.4 The Easington Lane Community Access Point operates almost as an informal hubs and spokes model with a clear overlap between corporate and community. Coalfield in Bloom is an example of how local networks can work together to improve an area. The project started with £50,000 from Strategic Initiatives Budget (SIB) to make use of neglected land. It now runs with minimal spend and the involvement of traders and others to keep it going.
- 7.4.5 Sustainability of such projects is a crucial issue. SIB funding kick-started the project and this enables other funding to be attracted. Volunteering is not free, but this kick-starting of a project with a relatively small grant using SIB funding to target a priority area, linked to organised delivery, a strong lead and good project planning will sustain the good work and enable a community to build on its assets.

- 7.4.7 The case study demonstrates other evidence we heard that grants are the lifeblood of the sector and without this, true community-led projects cannot get off the ground. Through the Area Committee, money is used effectively with upfront funding to initiate a project and then partners come on board to sustain the good works already established. We heard that grant funding is the core bedrock for most organisations but it must be applied strategically. .

## **7.5 Policy Context**

- 7.5.1 The Panel was informed that the policy currently in place to determine relationships and support for the VCS is incorporated within:
- a) Sunderland Volunteering Strategy – developed by the council with the Volunteer Centre for the Sunderland Partnership. This sets out strategic objectives and an action plan. Sunderland Volunteering Forum was meant to oversee the delivery of the action plan, but this hasn't happened as it's become more like a networking group.
  - b) Sunderland Compact – the Council led the refresh of the Compact in 2009, which includes a Volunteering Code of Practice. The Code of Practice is a set of principles and commitments for both Sunderland Partnership organisations and VCS organisations outlining how they will work together to support and promote volunteering in the city
- 7.5.2 In addition, a Volunteering Toolkit developed by the Council and the Volunteer Centre in 2009 gives organisations information and guidance on working with volunteers. 400 groups have received the toolkit and the Volunteer Centre delivers training to support its use.
- 7.5.3 At the time of the scrutiny review the Volunteering Strategy was three years old but events had largely overtaken it. In determining how the council and partners including the VCS will work together over the next three years, this must be driven by the current economic climate, budget pressures being faced by all sectors and the drive towards creating capacity within communities.
- 7.5.4 A new Volunteering Strategy will need to set out how Sunderland City Council and partners from across the public, private and VCS can work together most effectively to promote volunteering in the context of these challenges, building on community assets and the potential to extend good practice across the city.
- 7.5.5 The council is going through a major transformation in order to respond to economic pressures. Over the next 3 years the Community Leadership Council role will be developed providing services in innovative ways through a closer relationship with elected members and the communities they serve. The VCS is central to achieving this transformation.
- 7.5.6 While there is no need to start a policy framework with a clean sheet, the policy direction needs to be different to what has gone before in relation to demonstrating that working with the VCS is an increasingly significant part of

what the council does, whereas in the past it may have felt more peripheral to mainstream service delivery. A benign policy environment is not enough.

- 7.5.7 Given the substantial diversity in the range of VCS organisations, from care related functions to education, arts, leisure and other community activities, the aim should be to work towards a shared strategic agenda.
- 7.5.8 The Panel felt that unless policy documents are embedded in practice they cannot underpin a new way of working and there can be no connection between the Compact and council's commissioning practices. Despite a large number of signatories to the Volunteering Code of Practice it is not clear that the principles are embedded into a way of working for the signatories with an adherence to better awareness and implementation.
- 7.5.9 We were encouraged by the council's stated commitment to the principles of the local Compact. However there seemed to be consensus among witnesses that there is more work to be done on increasing understanding of and adherence to local Compact commitments and values both within the council and among voluntary organisations. As both the public and voluntary and community sectors undergo difficult change, the Compact could be one way of helping to manage some of the most difficult aspects for example if services need to be decommissioned. Despite its limitations the Compact was still seen as a useful framework.
- 7.5.10 The Panel also felt that policy should outline clear social value priorities that match their core objectives, in collaboration with local communities, social enterprises and voluntary organisations.
- 7.5.11 The council's policy for directing this relationship is impacted upon by central government policy including the Social Value Act which came into force over one year ago. The Act places a duty on councils, the NHS and other public bodies to consider how they might improve the economic, social and environmental wellbeing – the "social value" of a relevant area when they buy and commission goods and services. If fully implemented, it can release considerable public spending to the benefit of whole communities.
- 7.5.12 The Panel felt that all council staff undertaking commissioning, contracting and grant-making roles should be supported to be up-to-speed with current requirements on Social Value for their respective localities.
- 7.5.13 Our evidence showed that the emphasis in setting policy direction should be on developing policies that help successful organisations to expand their service offer. The council should support these organisations to do more because they are good at delivery, not because they are VCS (although their ethos is important). It is important to be clear about the motives and ultimate goals in setting policy direction, focusing on securing the best service and best value for beneficiaries. For successful organisations, a supportive policy environment will help them to develop their role, and contribute fully to community well-being.

## **7.6 Volunteering**

- 7.6.1 Investing in community development and volunteers is something the council has always done. The council works with VCS umbrella organisations to build and sustain participation in volunteering locally.
- 7.6.2 There are estimated to be 52,000 formal volunteers in Sunderland and many are older residents (65+). While this is a significant number it is lower than the councils' consortium average<sup>5</sup>. One in seven residents have done some type of informal voluntary work at least once a month for a group, club or organisation and more than one in three residents have given unpaid, informal help at least once a month.
- 7.6.3 It is estimated that the return on investment from volunteering is likely to be at least 11 to 1 in terms of the value that volunteers contribute compared to the costs incurred in volunteer training and development. So the business case for volunteering is self-evident, but the council needs to be very clear about its motivations and intentions for investing more in volunteering.
- 7.6.4 The Volunteer Centre commented that 5 years of lottery funding has enabled the breaking down of barriers to volunteering. This has contributed to a level of sustainability within the sector. In terms of opportunities in local communities, increasing the numbers of volunteers participating in the council's priority activities will be a focus of a future relationship which we anticipate will be described in a revised Volunteering Strategy.
- 7.6.5 The evidence we heard emphasised that volunteering is a way to enhance services, not a cheaper substitute for paid roles. Any attempt to use volunteers as part of cost control programmes, or even the perception of this, would lead to a lack of trust and goodwill.
- 7.6.6 We heard many times during the review that using volunteering is not a 'free' option. There is a cost of recruiting, training and induction and other expenses. Volunteers require as much, if not more training than paid staff. A regular training and development programme is therefore essential although witnesses reported that capacity to achieve this was limited.
- 7.6.7 There is also a need to be clear what is expected of volunteers. Our evidence showed that the quantity of volunteer applications was reasonably good, but not necessarily the quality which is related to the capacity to provide training and mentoring. We heard about the importance of reliability when expecting volunteers to carry out certain roles, for example, support services for vulnerable people. Securing commitment is extremely important in these circumstances.

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<sup>5</sup> Sunderland City Council Resident's Survey 2012 (Consortium: Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, Stockton on Tees)

- 7.6.8 It will also be important to build on good practice; learning from other organisations in the area, nationwide and internationally who have a proven track record in supporting volunteering. Examples in the city include Nissan which promotes volunteering to its staff who are due to retire by holding retirement fairs and City Hospitals Sunderland which has over 300 volunteers supporting their organisation.

#### **CASE STUDY 4: Gentoo – Employee Volunteering**

Gentoo recognises that there can be situations in which the help of a volunteer can make an appropriate and significant contribution to the work and service objectives of Gentoo and other organisations in the city of Sunderland. Gentoo encourages and supports staff who would like to get involved in volunteering activities alongside their day job. Opportunities include:

- a) Befriending Project – a one-to-one service that allows volunteers to go out to customer's homes to spend time with them to help prevent loneliness and isolation. In 2012-13 Gentoo staff delivered a total of 445 befriending hours.
- b) Reading in Schools – volunteers spent time in schools with pupils who require one-to-one support with their reading to help raise literacy skills. In 2012-13 Gentoo delivered a total of 61 reading hours.
- c) Secret Santa – 200 gifts were donated by 89 staff in 2012 with 16 beneficiary organisations.
- d) Foodbank – In its first year the Foodbank distributed 217 food parcels to families in crisis amounting to 4,680 meals. Gentoo not only collects for the Foodbank but has 6 staff registered as distributors of the Foodbank vouchers across Sunderland.

- 7.6.9 Organisations like Gentoo with effective employer supported schemes also work with other organisations to develop their own employer supported volunteer schemes. Employers understanding the benefits of volunteering to their organisation can be a valuable contribution to the volunteer capacity in the city. The Panel heard that opportunities can be lost when employees retire and contact is lost.

- 7.6.10 Sunderland City Council's employees currently can earn Learning Credits for six half days per year of voluntary experience within the core hours. However, this is not well publicised and the promotion of the Learning Credits Scheme could help boost numbers. If the council wishes to lead by example, increasing the range of opportunities for employee volunteering could include matching recently retired employees to voluntary roles as part of their exit strategy and link this to one of the 5 ways to wellbeing.

- 7.6.11 We are aware that both staff and councillor development needs to be within available resources and but there is a need for a focus on increasing internal knowledge and informal opportunities for employees to be involved in volunteering.

## **CASE STUDY 5: Love Where You Live**

In the East Area nearly 1,000 people including volunteers, schoolchildren and businesses (including Gentoo volunteers) have taken part in the Love Where You Live campaign, from litter picking and clean-ups to bulb planting. Love Where You Live is an SIB funded project which involves local residents in helping to improve their own neighbourhood. The campaign, backed by Keep Britain Tidy, is about everyone doing their bit and taking responsibility to change the way people think and act about littering. Other East Area improvements have included the council working alongside the Bridges Shopping Centre with shop staff decorating, and plant bedding to improve the city centre and the Galley's Gill Park area, near the Vaux site.

- 7.6.12 The council's relationship with the University of Sunderland enables it to help and support the students to be involved in community life. The range and scale of the voluntary opportunities for the students is to be commended. . As well as a range of existing connections, the Student's Union is starting to link with local schools and are developing other links including with Gentoo, but establishing connections takes up a lot of time for the small team of paid staff. We felt that there is scope for further partnership support through help with connecting to existing community groups such as youth groups and community projects such as the EDF Energy volunteer's project which would enable the University to develop their outreach programme.

## **CASE STUDY 6:– Sunderland University Student's Union - Local, national and international volunteering opportunities**

The Student's Union is a charity run by 5 lay trustees and 5 executive officer trustees. They coordinate a pool of student volunteers and match them to a variety of opportunities linking with local organisations and charities including global projects The University provides £1 million pounds of funding to provide this service. This service is also student-led in respect of the services offered. 86% of students are local to Sunderland. International students are encouraged to take up volunteering opportunities to help them integrate into the local community. 248 volunteers were involved in a variety of projects in 2013.

A scheme called SU Buddies supports and pairs existing students to international students with over 500 applicants. The Union has worked with many organisations including Age UK, Book Aid for Africa, and the Go Green project which encourages volunteers to work with schools, and take pride in their communities.

- 7.6.13 The Panel heard that there is scope to develop this relationship further, for example, with support through the Volunteering Strategy to help match student volunteers with a varied range of opportunities. The Panel felt that the annual Fresher's Fair provides opportunities to raise the profile of how the



council and other strategic partners can support local students and link in to University activities.

7.6.14 The big challenge in taking forward a revised Volunteering Strategy is how to change the conversation with residents in a way that they can be active contributors rather than passive recipients.

7.6.15 A revised Volunteering Strategy should aim to embed a more strategic understanding of volunteering. Many organisations already collect feedback from current volunteers. This knowledge could be used to inform improvements and service changes including what volunteers want and need from the experience, where to draw the line between appropriate staff and volunteer roles and, crucially, the impact volunteers have on service user experience and quality. Communities should be able to maximise the enormous potential that volunteers have to offer. It is time to think big about volunteering.

7.6.16 The role for the council at this stage is to review and revise the Volunteering Strategy and to translate the vision into clear outcomes for the council's strategic priorities around people, place and economy.

## **7.7 Partnership with the VCS**

7.7.1 The council wants to work in partnership with the VCS because it values the contribution it makes to developing resilient communities. Investing in partnership with the sector and with volunteers is something the council has always done. But, co-producing more council services will involve new ways of working that draw on the skills and resources within communities.

7.7.2 Partnership between the voluntary sector and the council currently exists in a number of ways including partnership at a strategic level which helps partners to shape a shared vision. Inviting the VCS to organise itself in a representative way at a strategic level enables the sector to properly participate and have a voice on behalf of communities and to influence decisions. Other partnership approaches include committing to Compact ways of working or receiving grant funding.

7.7.3 The interaction between the council and the voluntary sector can differ depending on a number of factors, for example, the nature of the service being delivered.

7.7.4 A great deal of the council's involvement with the VCS has been in the statutory sector such as the delivery social care or educational services where involvement is highly structured within those relevant service areas. The principles of the Sunderland Compact are more well-known and used by those involved in statutory service delivery. Extensive voluntary work is also carried out in non-statutory public services, such as leisure services, although this may be less structured.

- 7.7.5 The Panel felt that there needs to be identification of potential barriers to using volunteers in a wider range of council services and make proposals on ways to overcome these, whilst also identifying where their use may be inappropriate.
- 7.7.6 Another factor influencing partnership with the sector is related to certain individuals being active within an area and the involvement of ward councillors and officers in particular projects. There are close links between elected members and voluntary organisations in Sunderland. Councillors serve on more than 50 voluntary groups' management committees or on partnership groups; some sit on several. Some councillors and council officers act as 'skilled connectors' using local knowledge to link people together in a light touch to support each other in informal networks. This represents a considerable investment in supporting the voluntary sector.
- 7.7.7 The Panel felt that the essential role many officers and councillors undertake in acting as 'connectors' with VCS organisations should be encouraged and developed by supporting them to share learning more effectively across the council, particularly relating to local knowledge, assets (people as well as property) and diversity and sharing ways of working on the local Compact.
- 7.7.8 We heard evidence from voluntary organisations that partnership working is one of the ways they are adapting and adjusting to a changing environment. Many were seeking out relationships with others and establishing connections where there was mutual benefit, for example, Gentoo were seeking out connections with other large businesses in the region including Barclays Bank and Newcastle Building Society.
- 7.7.9 For the VCS to be a means of securing the future resilience of local communities, the council will need to increasingly build on its partnership with the sector to commission the VCS to achieve key outcomes for local people. The council recognises that there are challenges to achieving this.
- 7.7.10 Challenges include, competing and conflicting priorities and the different cultures in the public sector and the VCS. However, the opportunity to better meet the needs of communities by working in partnership must compel the council to work through these challenges. Economic pressures tend to increase competitiveness but also offer an opportunity to look at smarter ways of working collaboratively and to deliver services in innovative ways.
- 7.7.11 Where organisations do wish to take on responsibilities in support of council priorities, the council needs to ensure that the support structure is in place to be able to provide advice and be able to identify potential problems. It is not enough for the council to be well-motivated. Witnesses emphasised the importance of supporting groups as they wish to be rather than seeking to 'professionalise' or even control organisations unnecessarily.
- 7.7.12 We heard that knowledge about who is working in a local area and providing services is sometimes all that is needed to help organisations work collaboratively. Through Area Committees a directory of organisations has

been compiled at local level for all five areas. A new Intelligence Hub will support local decision making with an integrated Geographical Information System.

- 7.7.13 The Panel anticipates that these data gathering exercises for all VCS provision will better ascertain VCS activity on a geographic and thematic basis. This in turn will support delivery of strategic priorities for work with VCS organisations which recognise local diversity and can form the basis for developing improved relationships, genuine partnership working and greater co-efficiency.
- 7.7.14 The Panel further anticipates that the data will support and inform a clear basis for the city's investment in and through the VCS, whether through commissioning (or decommissioning) on the basis of need, social value, and value for money.
- 7.7.15 To build on the relationship with the sector, the council will need to demonstrate a transformation of their services by combining the best of the public, private and voluntary sectors through partnering, mutualisation, or other innovative forms of commercial model.
- 7.7.16 Transformation approaches may require new and radical approaches to engagement work at local level, for example, embedding staff in target neighbourhoods for a time. This can lead to stronger relationships and trust between council staff and local people, which can be the basis of more co-production in the way services are designed. This could be a natural extension of neighbourhood management activity.

## **7.8 Providing Community Services in future**

- 7.8.1 The council regards the VCS as a key partner in delivering its vision for stronger, more resilient communities in Sunderland. Strategically; the council wants to work with the VCS to develop a shared vision for Sunderland across a wide range of issues including housing, health, community safety, and transport. As such it is strategically important to develop a positive relationship in a way that is consistent with the Sunderland Compact.
- 7.8.2 The council's ambition is for integrated VCS locality based arrangements across the five areas of the city as well as integrated networks among specific interest groups. However, there is no need to re-invent the wheel. Structures are already in place. Without volunteering some services could not provide a fraction of what they do now. However, we heard evidence that there is often a gap in coordinating the capacity and goodwill within communities and more could be done within existing resources.
- 7.8.3 The council recognises that the VCS has a perspective on the needs of communities. As such, the council has a responsibility to develop and nurture positive partnership working with the VCS because this can result in more self-sufficient communities, better quality services, better value for money for public funding, and can deliver benefits to the local economy.

- 7.8.4 Area VCS Networks operate in each of the five regeneration areas in the city. These Networks are the council's recognised mechanism for engagement with the sector. Currently delegates represent the Area VCS at Area Committees as a method of influencing strategic policies and practice that affects local communities and the VCS.
- 7.8.5 The original intention of the Area VCS Networks included supporting the nurturing and capacity building of small community based groups, as well as larger voluntary sector organisations at area level; maximising the opportunity to have a coordinated approach between the council and VCS activity and the opportunity to work together to build community capacity.
- 7.8.6 The Panel felt there was plenty of scope for further development. Current network activity is not yet able to coordinate with all neighbourhood activities. It was also evident that neighbourhood activity is influenced by the presence of key organisations in the city. For example, Gentoo has a substantial presence in some areas but not in others. This also means they have a stronger presence at some Area Committees.
- 7.8.7 We anticipate that locality level work would be re-framed in light of a revised Volunteering Strategy. This could mean that where the council funds the VCS to deliver a service, the council will work with the provider on a collaborative basis, considering the impact of funding decisions on the local VCS 'market' including any impact on equalities and commitment to Compact ways of working.
- 7.8.8 A new initiative being developed through the Area Committees is the Community Connectors Project which again hopes to build capacity within communities.

### **CASE STUDY 7: Community Connectors**

A virtual network will act as a focal point for information exchange; promote community resources and services available (news, activities, clubs, events, services); signpost and refer users to access a range of local services; support people to access and use services; meet and greet new members into an organisation and support people to access other services.

Community Connectors are spread across each of the five wards. Issues still to be addressed are training, capacity issues, financial implications, and on-going support. Running parallel with the launch of the directory, the Connectors will be the eyes and ears in the community. Customer surveys identified that an effective way to promote what's happening in the neighbourhood is by word of mouth.

The Connectors will be important to sharing information to and from the community, directly into council, and via the Area Network.

- 7.8.9 There is potential for voluntary organisations to take on an even greater role in supporting and delivering public services, providing the engagement is mutually beneficial. Local networks should be effective in strengthening the voice and influence of the VCS. For example, the role and purpose of the Area VCS Networks and how these link to Area Committees and the People and Place Boards is important in the context of a revised Strategic Volunteering Framework. We also felt it was important to ensure that networks are truly representative, particularly for smaller community groups that are volunteer-led.
- 7.8.10 The Panel felt it is important to support the alignment of council and volunteering activity by raising awareness of the benefits of getting involved. This could involve incorporating volunteering into planned communications campaigns to raise the profile and promote the personal benefits of volunteering.

## **7.9 Emerging Policy on Volunteering**

- 7.9.1 At the time of our review, the council was reviewing its approach to facilitating and promoting volunteering, including the use (and expansion) of volunteering to support delivery of council services.
- 7.9.2 Given the council's increased reliance on an asset-based approach to more resilient communities, a review of the city's approach to volunteering, including links to Skillsbridge and the Volunteer Centre was underway.
- 7.9.3 The LSP's Volunteering Strategy (2011) was the starting point for this work. The outcome of the review will determine an approach to the recruitment, development and maximising the potential of volunteering in the city.
- 7.9.4 The review will include an assessment of the council's future needs, the resource implications and the potential impact on VCS organisations.
- 7.9.5 In relation to community-led initiatives, the review will cover what the council currently has in place to promote volunteering in communities, including legacy arrangements following delivery of the existing Sunderland (Partnership) Volunteering Strategy.
- 7.9.6 An incentive in developing a new strategy is to understand the role of other organisations in promoting volunteering and how this could be aligned with public service goals and to determine the future role of the council in increasing volunteering, including the role of commissioners and other council employees.
- 7.9.7 The result of the review will determine a clear vision and approach to expanding the use of volunteers to support the delivery of council services and facilitating and increasing volunteering and mutual support in communities.

7.9.8 Our review and recommendations are intended to inform this new strategy.

## **8. Conclusion**

- 8.1 It was evident during the review that there is a strong commitment between the council and the voluntary and community sector to work together for mutual benefit. The Panel was impressed by the examples of joint working and we would like to thank everyone who was involved in and contributed to the review.
- 8.2 The sector has unique knowledge and insight linking to local communities and an excellent track record at being able to reach those groups identified as 'hard to reach' e.g. young people, black and minority ethnic communities, refugee and asylum seeking communities, disability groups, mental health groups etc. However, VCS organisations are 'feeling the squeeze' as well and all sectors will need to work together to find new and innovative ways of doing business that reduces cost without compromising quality.
- 8.3 The VCS is a crucial component in the development of a Community Leadership Council and alternative models of service delivery. We felt that the issues for the VCS included:
- The extent to which the VCS either want to or have the capacity to become involved in public service delivery;
  - Balancing the other important functions that the VCS provides for local communities i.e., advocacy, campaigning, lobbying and helping to shape public services rather than become direct providers of public services;
  - Involvement by individuals is largely on an informal basis i.e. members of the public choose to participate, mostly in a fairly low-key way;
  - The extent to which VCS is prepared for and able to undertake the equivalent monitoring, reporting and inspection that public sector service providers have to undertake.
- 8.4 As public sector efficiencies require local authorities to look to obtain 'more for less', it is more important than ever before for the council to have the best possible understanding of the capabilities, limitations, opportunities and risks of its local communities. Moving forward the council will increasingly commission providers, including the VCS to achieve key outcomes for local people.
- 8.5 The key challenge will be about how transformative the approach will be in creating a new relationship with local communities and how to create capacity within communities building on local assets. In presenting these findings the Panel hopes to complement transformative developments already underway.

## **9. Recommendations**

- 9.1 The Panel's recommendations are as outlined below:-

- a) To revise and embed a Volunteering Strategic Framework which is owned and delivered by the Sunderland Partnership;
- b) To include in the Strategy a set of measurable outcomes of delivery against objectives;
- c) To develop a clear Volunteering Policy for the involvement of volunteers in council services;
- d) To incorporate into the Policy an approach to coordination of activity at area level;
- e) To support Elected Members to act as 'skilled connectors' in their communities and to provide them with the means to actively engage with the voluntary workforce;
- f) To promote and facilitate opportunities for council employees, including retiring council employees, to engage in volunteering;
- g) To increase opportunities for raising the profile of volunteering including the use of existing and planned communication campaigns.

## **10. Acknowledgements**

10.1 The Panel is grateful to all those who have presented evidence during the course of our review. We would like to place on record our appreciation, in particular of the willingness and co-operation we have received from the below named:-

- a) Jo Curry, Chief Executive, VONNE
- b) David Curtis, Chief Officer, Sunderland Volunteer Centre
- c) Ross Wares, Sunderland Volunteer Centre
- d) Andrew White, Chief Executive, Skillsbridge
- e) Amanda Ladner, Operations Manager, Gentoo Living
- f) Susan Brown, Project Manager, Easington Lane Community Access Point
- g) Alan Patchett, Director, Age UK
- h) Jane Hibberd, Head of Strategy & Policy, People & Neighbourhoods
- i) Vivienne Metcalfe, Area Community Officer (North)
- j) Carl Taylor, Students' Union President, Sunderland University
- k) Joan Reed, Strategic Change Manager, People Services Directorate
- l) Natalie Maidment, Local Development Officer, Clinks/VONNE
- m) Jessica May, Partnership Manager
- n) Jackie Nixon, Promoting Health Engagement Lead

## **11. Background Papers**

11.1 The following background papers were consulted or referred to in the preparation of this report:

- a) Sunderland Volunteering Strategy, Sunderland Partnership 2011
- b) Sunderland Residents Survey 2012 <http://www.sunderland.gov.uk>
- c) Volunteering Toolkit for Organisations in Sunderland. Sunderland City Council and Volunteer Centre Sunderland 2009  
<http://www.sunderland.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=463>
- d) The Sunderland Compact Sunderland Partnership 2009  
<http://www.sunderlandcompact.org.uk/>

e) Surviving not Thriving, 2013 VONNE

## 12. Key

The **Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS)** comprises diverse organisations of varying sizes with a range of purposes and ways of working. It includes registered charities, as well as non-charitable, non-profit organisations, associations and self-help groups and community groups. They all involve some aspect of voluntary activity, though many are also professional organisations with paid staff. The definition of VCS used within this review also incorporates social enterprise - businesses with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for those objectives.

**The Sunderland Compact** is an agreement between the Sunderland Partnership organisations and the VCS. The agreement outlines a way of working that improves their relationship for mutual advantage. It offers improved funding processes, clear consultation standards, enforceable rights, and an overall improvement in working relationships.

**The Sunderland Partnership** brings together public, private, community and voluntary sectors to work together for the benefit of everyone in the city. It recognises that organisations cannot achieve everything on their own and that by working together we can be stronger together. The Sunderland Compact is closely aligned with the values of the Sunderland Partnership.

There are five **Area Committees** appointed by the council to ensure improved service delivery at a local level. Area Committees cover Sunderland North, Sunderland East, Sunderland West, Washington and the Coalfields. They involve councillors for each particular area and meetings are held in public. In 2012/13 the Area Committees established **Place and People Boards** to help to identify areas of priority, opportunities for action and ensure the delivery of those actions. Each Board has representation from every ward in the area.

Reference to **Communities** includes:

**Geographical communities** - made up of people who have a shared identification with a locality, from immediate locality to the city as a whole. Transposed on this are the administrative boundaries within which service providers operate, such as the five areas, and localities that have particular needs, such as areas with high Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) scores;

**Communities of interest** - where people define themselves by shared characteristics, whether as members of groups defined by ethnicity, age, sexuality, physical condition, or indeed, leisure or other interests. The diversity of experiences covered by this category presents a wide range of issues to be included within the strategic approach, and can create challenges for inclusiveness among competing interests;

**Communities of service users** - this has the potential to include all residents, but it also includes discrete groups such as tenants of Gentoo. These interests are specific to groups as consumers of services, and present issues for individual partners within the Sunderland Partnership, as well as creating the possibility for greater joining up of service provision and support. It also creates challenges for the inclusion of the most excluded groups, such as young people leaving care.