

Powerful Connections

How Agencies Connect with the Voluntary and Community Sector

*A report commissioned by the
Active Partners Unit of the Yorkshire and Humber Regional Forum*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

With an increasing desire across government to engage with stakeholders in the development and implementation of a range of policies and strategies, this report describes and assesses how five public agencies in the Yorkshire and Humber region have connected with the voluntary and community sector (VCS¹).

The Active Partners Unit together with the Yorkshire and Humber Regional Forum work to ensure that the voluntary and community sector has an influential and powerful voice in the region. This report, together with a shorter published report of the research, aims to increase the effectiveness and understanding of how voluntary and community organisations influence and affect the strategies and policies of public agencies and infrastructure organisations involved in regeneration and neighbourhood renewal.

1.2 Content of this report

This report details:

- the motivations and reasons for engagement;
- the ways in which public agencies engage with the VCS and vice versa;
- the strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches;
- the appropriateness of some of the connections;
- the impact of involving the VCS in policy and strategy formation; and
- key messages and action points for the VCS and public agencies.

The report and accompanying guide will be of particular interest to:

- generic and specialist infrastructure, umbrella or intermediary organisations within the region;
- networks or fora of voluntary and community organisations;
- regeneration and neighbourhood renewal partnerships;
- regional agencies (e.g. the RDA or regional assembly);
- sub-regional agencies (e.g. Learning and Skills Councils); and
- district or local agencies (e.g. Local Strategic Partnerships or Primary Care Trusts).

1.3 How this report was put together

The findings and case studies in this report are based on five different policies or strategies in the region and the different partnership arrangements behind their development. Some of the policies or strategies are already being implemented, some have not yet been completed.

Interviews were undertaken with one key person from the relevant VCS infrastructure body and one key person from the public agency in relation to the development of each specific strategy or policy. In some cases additional interviews were undertaken with other key personnel. The table below sets out the strategies and policies which were chosen and the

¹ This report sometimes refers to the voluntary and community sector as the 'VCS' or as 'the sector'.

agencies and voluntary organisations from which staff were interviewed². To find out more about any of the policies, strategies, public agencies or VCOs click on the link provided.

The *Active Partners* benchmarks for community participation in regeneration were used as a broad framework for analysis. The benchmarks are related to four dimensions of participation – influence, inclusivity, communication and capacity.

Policy or Strategy	Public Agency	Voluntary Organisation
The Regional Spatial Strategy	Yorkshire and Humber Assembly	Yorkshire and Humber Regional Forum
European Objective 2 Single Programme Document	Government Office	Voluntary Organisations Network for European Funding (VONEF)
Humber LSC Strategic Area Review (StAR)	Humber Learning and Skills Council	Humber Learning Consortium
Vision for Leeds II 2003 to 2018	Leeds Initiative (Leeds LSP)	Leeds Voice
Rehab to Recovery and Children's Trust pathfinder	York PCT Health and Social Care Partnership Board	York CVS

A draft of this report was discussed with public and voluntary sector delegates to an Active Partners conference held in Leeds on 6th September. The key messages and action points were developed from the feedback given at this event.

² See Appendix A for a complete list of those who took part in interviews.

2. Why connect?

2.1 The policy context in brief

Since 1997, this government has placed considerable emphasis on community participation and stakeholder involvement in both policy development and implementation. Government recognition of the contribution the voluntary and community sector can make to policy development has also grown significantly since 1997.

The 1998 Compact on Relations between Government and Voluntary and Community Sector in England is a symbol of the Government's specific commitment to the sector's role and contribution. The Code of Good Practice on Consultation and Policy Appraisal – one of the earliest Compact codes to be published - is specific recognition of both the need to engage with the sector in the development of policies, strategies and programmes, and the value of doing so.

The Code includes specific undertakings to build consultation with the sector into plans for policy development and to involve the sector at a sufficiently early stage. It refers to the resource implications of engaging with the sector and highlights the need to positively account for the needs, interests and contributions of different parts of a diverse sector.

Though a national code, it applies to Government Offices for the Regions and 'Next Steps' Agencies in England. The Government has also encouraged other local agencies to apply Compact principles or, ideally, to develop their own local Compacts. In addition it has become increasingly common for government to issue guidance to regional, sub-regional or local public agencies to involve stakeholders in the development of strategies, sometimes with specific reference to the VCS. This encouragement has in some cases been formalised into a legal duty, for example in relation to best value in local government or the development of Community Strategies.

But despite this drive from central government, public agencies at the regional, sub regional and local level are developing their own approaches to engaging with the sector and their own appreciation of the value of doing so.

2.2 Motivations to connect - the public agency perspective

Public agencies in the Yorkshire and Humber region expressed a variety of reasons why they wished to connect and engage with the voluntary and community sector in the development of policy or strategy. Indeed some set out by describing the sector's place at the table as non-negotiable. But why?

For some it is as simple as getting a different view or a more rounded picture. Some felt that drawing on the voice, experience and, indeed, expertise of the sector would result in a richer strategy with more credibility and legitimacy. Because the sector could bring new ideas, different voices or information to the table, strategies or policies would be drawn up which better responded to community needs.

“They bring a kaleidoscope of ideas and issues, rural and urban, people who are socially disaffected ... the more views the better.”

Jane Hustwit, Director of External Affairs, Yorkshire and Humber Assembly

Connecting with and engaging the sector in policy discussions was thought to ensure balance to the debate and in some cases prevent ‘traditional’ stakeholders from dominating. A number of agencies acknowledged the sector’s willingness to challenge accepted norms or ways of doing things. This was sometimes to an agency’s advantage (for example helping the agency to better balance competing interests where some interests have traditionally dominated) and at other times a more difficult pill to swallow. But it was generally welcomed.

“The voluntary sector can do things we can’t; they are more neutral, not being a statutory agency. They have a better understanding of preventative models rather than medical models”
Duncan Clarke, Head of Health and Social Care, York PCT

The sector’s skill at reaching out, particularly to marginalised communities and the hard to reach, was another motivation for agencies to connect. Some agencies referred to this as helping them to hear the voices of particular communities or constituents they might not otherwise hear.

“We wanted somehow to identify issues which affected people and communities in terms of learning...we wanted to hear the voice of the learner at community level. This was key to determining the suitability of provision at the local level.”
Bob Flockton, Head of Success for All, Humber Learning and Skills Council

The sector was in some cases recognised as having a particular, often very different, perspective on how to deliver things and get things done. In this respect some agencies wanted to connect with the sector to help them better identify and recognise particular issues (of which they may already have been aware) and to contribute their ideas on solutions or different ways of tackling the issue. For some the sector was felt to be a useful sounding board for ideas.

“The VCS is good at reaching out and trying experimental things; they have a particular perspective on how to deliver things and are good at challenging.”
Martin Deans, Programme Manager, Leeds Initiative

While it was not usually given as the primary reason, a number of agencies pointed out that government guidance, or indeed legislation, placed a duty on them to engage all stakeholders in the development of the strategy or policy, and that included the voluntary and community sector. However it was clear that these agencies would have wished to connect with the sector regardless and a number said their efforts to do so went further than any minimum requirements they may have been placed under by guidance or legislation.

2.3 Motivations to connect - the voluntary and community sector perspective

Those interviewed from the voluntary and community sector gave their views on why they thought statutory agencies wanted to connect with them, as well their own motivations for wishing to engage in policy or strategy development.

A number of infrastructure organisations saw engagement with statutory agencies as their central role. They were able to provide an interface between the wider sector and statutory agencies, enabling the sector to have its say in the development of policy or strategy. They could also bring a strategic overview of the sector and were often passionate to ensure the sector had the opportunity to get involved or have its skills and expertise fully recognised. This was not for its own sake, but was driven by a desire for a better outcome for individuals or communities or users of services. As a minimum it was done in the interests of a better policy or strategy.

“We need to be a channel for the big decisions that affect organisations in the region.”

Martin Houghton Brown, Deputy Director, Regional Forum

For some, there may be times when the decision to engage is driven by a desire to build organisational credibility with a public agency.

Some may engage to better understand the way an agency develops policy or strategy or simply to better understand the particular policy or strategy in question and its implications for the sector – to be ‘in the loop’ or kept up to date. But this can also go beyond the development of the policy. Some organisations engage to ensure that they are also involved in the implementation phase.

“The message is, don’t forget us once the consultation is over. Keep coming back to us at the implementation stage ... keep us involved. We are credible professionals.”

Jane Daguerre, Director, Leeds Voice

In line with the perceptions of the public agencies, voluntary organisations believed they should connect because of their ability to effectively engage with the hard to reach and the most disadvantaged in society, bringing their voice to the table, often in innovative ways. This was sometimes linked with the ability to give authority and received wisdom a ‘healthy kick’. The desire to challenge assumptions and use their experience as a catalyst for change often drove organisations to engage, with the aim of developing better programmes, strategies or policies.

“We had clear evidence that past large EU spends had not delivered to communities in crisis. We wanted to show how you could invest in communities in a sustained way and involve people in the process”

Mark Crowe, Voluntary Organisations Network for European Funding

However some in the sector appeared to judge the sincerity of engagement on whether hard cash or other support materialised for the sector as a result. This was particularly so in relation to service delivery agendas. Some organisations wanted to engage to better understand the basis on which services are planned and to subsequently ‘add value’ to what is delivered. For some this translated into a desire to secure contracts for delivery – revealing a ‘dash for cash’ mentality.

There was also a belief that many services would not be delivered if it were not for the voluntary and community sector or that the sector could offer greater choice and diversity in

relation to delivery and needed to engage to ensure this was recognised and their expertise was considered.

“The sector wants to engage because it offers diversity and choice in learning and the opportunity to reach hard to reach learners. They don’t set out with a learning agenda ... its about involving people and communities. This leads to access to learning – widens participation. It’s a niche in the market to take advantage of.”

Lisa Hilder, Preston Road Women’s Centre and member of Humber StAR Stakeholder Group

Finally, a perception appears to persist in parts of the voluntary and community sector that the desire on the part of public agencies to connect is driven primarily by central government legislation or guidance. Many still referred to a ‘tick box’ mentality on the part of agencies. Although this may well be a factor, it does not, in the main, match with the primary motivations put forward by the agencies themselves. So is the sector putting up imaginary barriers? Sector interviewees often tempered their views with suggestions that there were, nevertheless, individuals within agencies who genuinely wanted to engage with the sector, or that there was actually little opposition to involving the sector, even if it was only to enable the public agency to tick a box.

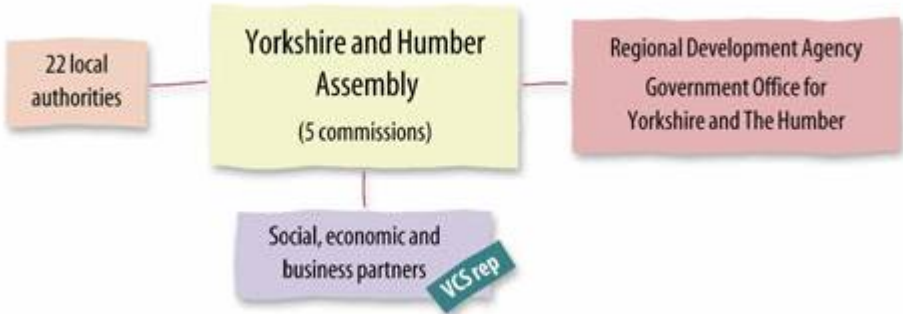
What can we draw from this? Perhaps the voluntary and community sector do not give enough credit to public agencies for their motivations to connect? Perhaps agencies do not, themselves, communicate well enough their motivations? Does it all come down to individual personalities, partnership skills and trust in the end? What is clear is the scope for greater mutual understanding and efforts to build trust to overcome such suspicion. And public agencies, in particular, may need to develop better communication strategies to support engagement with the VCS.

3. Routes to Powerful Connections – mapping the key characteristics

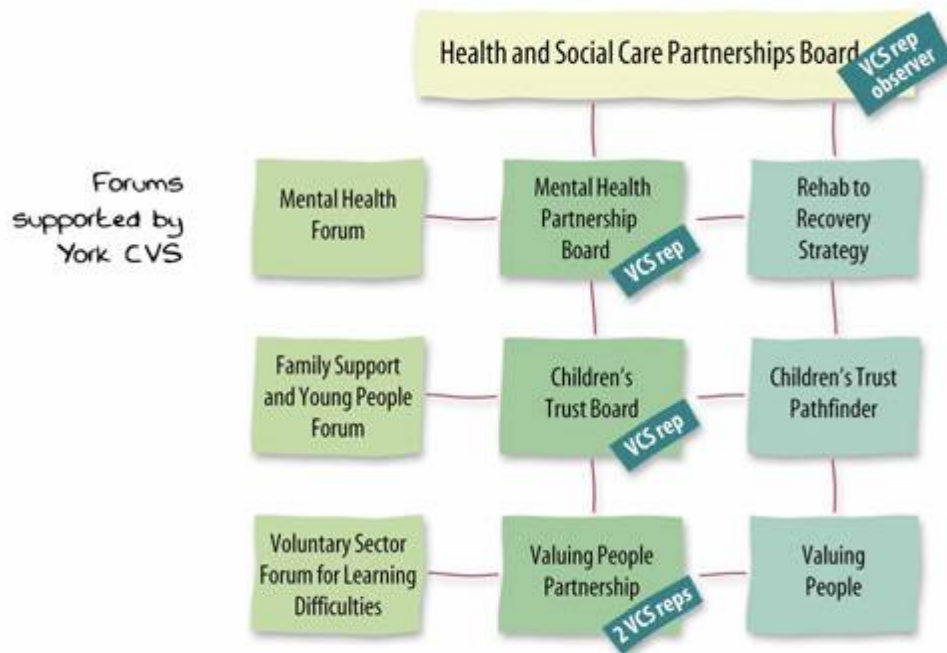
Each of the partnerships studied had different structures and processes for engagement. These models illustrate both the process and stages of strategy development, and the diversity and similarities of structures and the connections which were made at different levels.



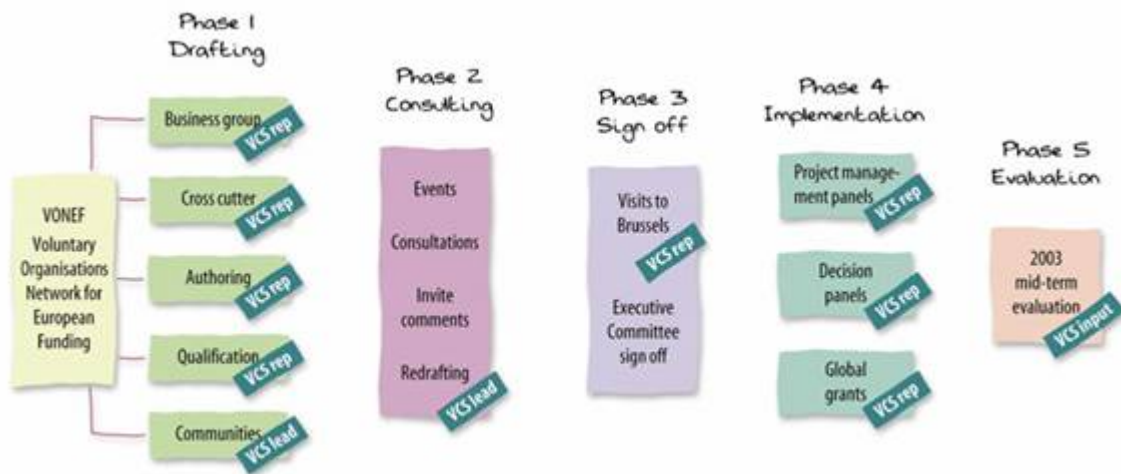
Map 1a – Developing the Regional Spatial Strategy



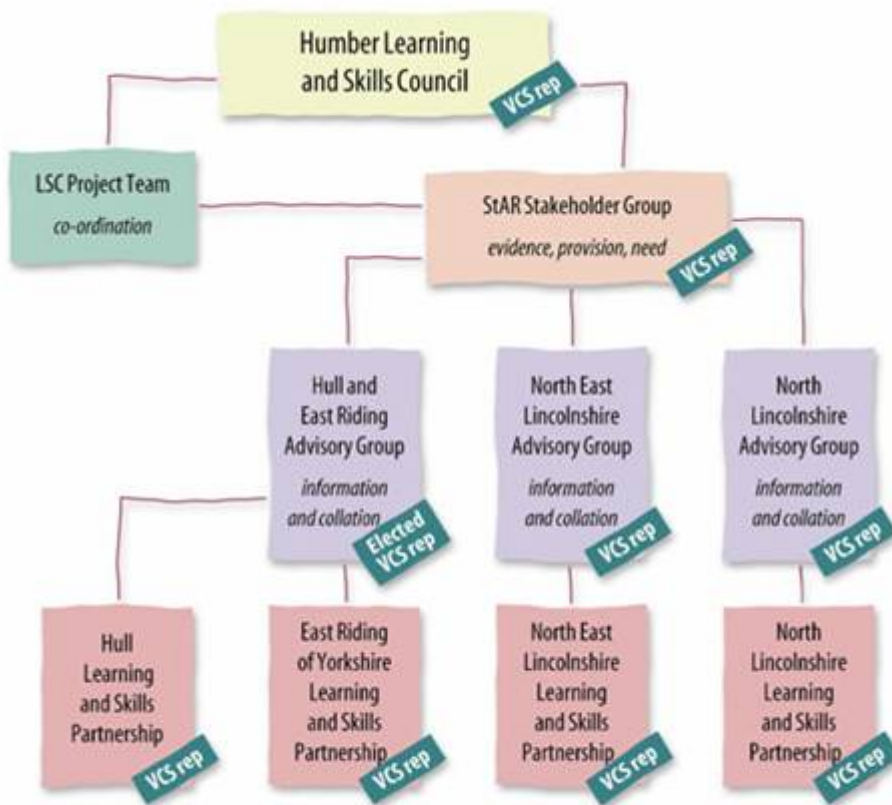
Map 1b – Structure of the Yorkshire and Humber Assembly



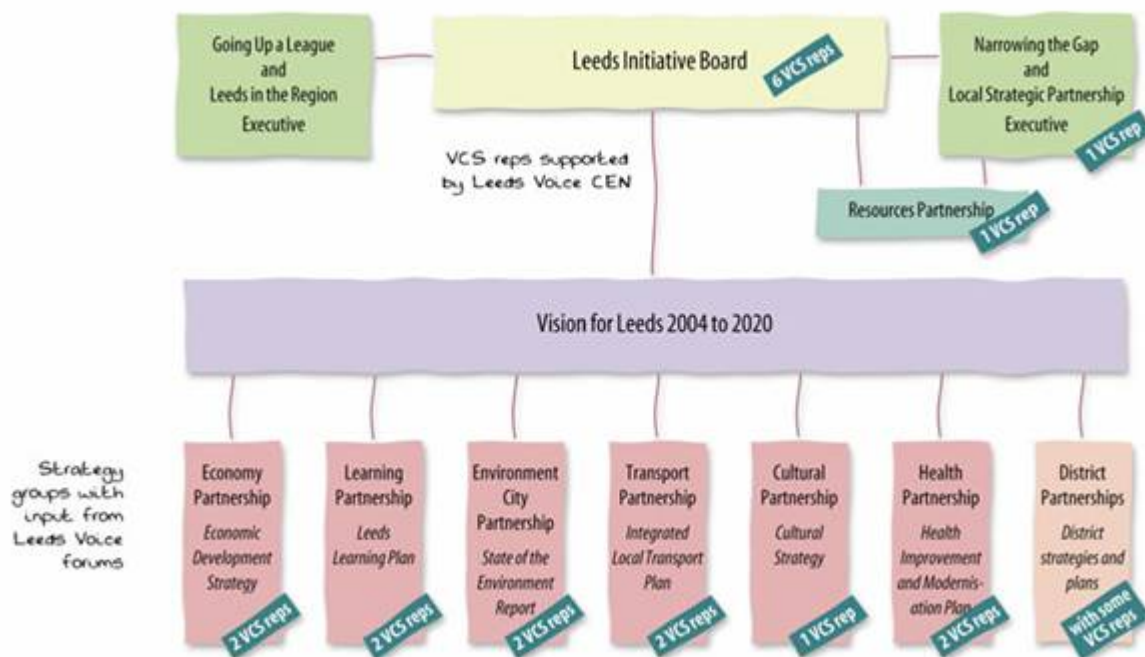
Map 2 –Structure of Health and Social Care Partnerships in York



Map 3 Process of the European Objective 2 Single Programme Document



Map 4 Structure of the Humber Learning and Skills Council Strategic Area Review



Map 5 Structure of Vision for Leeds II – the Community Strategy for Leeds

4. Achieving powerful connections – key success factors

All of the structures illustrated above shared common elements including the use of formally elected and informally invited representatives from the VCS to sit on a variety of partnership boards and decision making at a variety of levels. Each also shared some key success factors for achieving powerful connections.

Supporting strategic representation – building the sector’s capacity to engage

Public agencies can take a longer-term, often more sustainable, approach to engagement with the sector by funding, or providing in-kind support, to infrastructure organisations specifically to develop and deliver a strategic representation role.

Three years before Humber Learning and Skills Council embarked on the Strategic Area Review (StAR), part of the Government’s Success for All programme, it took a conscious decision to invest in the voluntary and community sector. The aim of this investment was enable the development and delivery of a two-way communication strategy and to enable the sector to deliver strategic representation.

Investment took the form of funding for Humber Learning Consortium (HLC), a sub-sectoral infrastructure organisation which existed to encourage and support learning within the community and voluntary sector in Humberside.

HLC views its core funding from Humber LSC as pivotal to everything it does. Indeed it describes the decision of the LSC to fund HLC as “fairly inspirational” and “possibly unique”. Funding enables HLC to communicate with the sector on a regular basis via a newsletter and to run on average one significant event per year. Consequently, HLC were able to get the message out quickly via the newsletter to a circulation of 7,000 and run a consultation event with the sector relatively early in the StAR process. The funding also enables them to participate at a strategic level, paying for officer time to sit on strategic or partnership groups, such as the Learning Partnerships or, in this case, the advisory groups set up as part of the StAR process.

Core funding was viewed by HLC as a key success factor in the sector’s ability to effectively engage with Humber LSC in the development of the Strategic Area Review. And the LSC was equally of the belief that the StAR had benefited from the relationship that had been built with the sector on the back of its investment.

York Primary Care Trust (PCT) provides the resources required to fund a development worker whose role is to support and facilitate five thematic voluntary and community sector forums. Each thematic forum matches with a thematic working group of the York PCT Health and Social Care Partnership Board. Each forum is able to feed into its corresponding working group via a voluntary and community sector representative on that working group. The development worker is based at York Council for Voluntary Service (CVS). This has proved particularly important because the CVS does not have a direct interest in service delivery in the health field and so is seen to be impartial and therefore better placed to support and facilitate partnership in the sector.

Structures to support representation

The voluntary and community sector will often have an allocated place within formal (or indeed less formal) partnership arrangements. The way in which representatives are chosen to fill those places, and the structures and mechanisms which are in place to support those representatives, can play an important role in building credibility, strengthening the sector's input to policy debate and providing a clear mandate for representatives.

Leeds Initiative, the city's strategic partnership body, includes representation from the voluntary and community sector. One place is automatically held by the chair of Leeds Voice – the voluntary and community sector partner on the LSP body. The five remaining places are filled through a rigorous application process and elections run by Leeds Voice. In addition, each sub-committee of the LSP board includes a VCS representative. And Leeds Voice runs a series of voluntary and community sector forums to complement each sub-committee and provide support for the VCS representative.

Leeds Voice has 2,500 groups on its database who make nominations for sector representatives on the various structures and subsequently vote.

The Yorkshire and Humber Assembly has 39 full members including the region's 22 local authorities and key social, economic and environmental stakeholders. This includes one place for the voluntary and community sector. The Regional Assembly approached the Yorkshire and Humber Regional Forum to help fill the VCS place. The Forum ran open elections for a representative to serve for two years and supports that representative circulating information, feedback on meetings and outcomes and relevant papers to the Forum membership via its mailing lists. The Director of the Forum is also able to deputise for the representative at formal meetings of the Assembly

The Assembly works through five Commissions. These are made up of experts and interested partners, who discuss and contribute to the development of specific regional issues reflecting the main areas of the Assembly's work (economy; education and skills; quality of life; regional planning and infrastructure; and sustainability). Some voluntary and community sector organisations are members of some of the commissions and the Forum is working to build and support the sector's involvement via these groups.

Supporting representatives to be representatives

While one success factor is often the representative structures that are in place and how they are put together, it should not be assumed that representatives – elected or otherwise – automatically *know* how to be representatives. Appropriate training and support for representatives is a further success factor which must not be overlooked. Representatives must also have a clear picture of how they fit in.

Voluntary and community sector representatives on the LSP Board in Leeds have job descriptions developed by Leeds Voice. The LSP Board and its sub committees all have clear terms of reference. Both of these factors help to manage the expectations of representatives and groups about their respective roles, responsibilities and limits of power. Increasingly, new representatives to the Board or sub committees go through an induction process to help them settle into their new roles.

Leeds Voice developed an initiative to provide training for voluntary and community sector representatives. While not as successful as they had hoped, mainly because it was pitched at too low a level, they have learnt from the experience and in the mean time have witnessed representatives getting stronger over time, outstripping any training they were given and gaining the confidence to really make a contribution.

But none of this would be possible without the support provided by Leeds Voice. This in turn highlights the importance of having a long term, sustainable infrastructure in place to support both the appointment and ongoing support of representatives. Funding from public agencies was, in this case, critical.

Building networks –better targeting of engagement

Networks of interest or specialist infrastructure organisations can help agencies, and indeed infrastructure organisations, to more effectively target engagement and consultation. But networks and infrastructure take time to set up and develop and often require long term financial and other support to reach their potential.

The Regional Forum took what it described as a ‘machine gun approach’ to targeting organisations to engage with the development of the Regional Spatial Strategy. This was a reflection of the fact that planning was a new topic for the still developing Forum. However, as a result of their work to support the sector’s engagement with the RSS, they now have a network of organisations interested in that particular area, and they have been able to build expertise and understanding among their own constituents. In future this will enable them to better target engagement or consultation. But they are also aware of the dangers inherent in such an approach. Targeting, they believe, can often lead to the ‘usual suspects’ coming forward and it becomes a considerable challenge to continually draw new people into the pool.

With support and facilitation from a development worker, funded by York PCT and based at York CVS, the voluntary sector have five voluntary and community sector health forums (e.g. mental health, older people, children) to match each of multi-agency working groups of the York PCT Strategic Health and Social Care Partnership Board. Forums are at a relatively early stage of development and are not necessarily developing evenly but they provide a mechanism for the exchange of information between the wider sector and the VCS representative on each working group.

Humber Learning Consortium provided a key mechanism by which Humber Learning and Skills Council could target their engagement with the voluntary and community sector. Indeed Humber LSC has provided funding to HLC to develop a two-way communication programme with the sector.

Leeds Voice received funding from the Community Empowerment Fund to enable the voluntary and community sector to engage with the local strategic partnership (Leeds Initiative). This is part of a long term approach to build the capacity of the VCS to fully engage in local strategic planning for neighbourhood renewal.

Early warning mechanisms

Infrastructure organisations whose remit includes strategic representation, will often be sufficiently ‘plugged in’ to developments in their sector - nationally, regionally, sub-regionally or locally - that they will have early warning of plans to develop new policies or strategies. In many cases they will have almost as much warning as local agency officials of, for example, the need to develop new central government-inspired strategies.

Humber Learning Consortium already knew that its local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) would be required to go through a Strategic Area Review (StAR). They had read central government policy documents setting out the government’s plans for local LSC provision and ‘knew it was coming’. It had also been raised within the local Learning Partnerships (the learning sub-groups of four LSPs in the sub-region) on which HLC representatives sat. They immediately identified the strategic importance of the StAR process and their responsibility as the infrastructure body to invest time and resources to try to influence it.

The importance of existing relationships

Voluntary and community organisations inevitably develop relationships with public agencies in the course of their work, whether through direct service delivery (e.g. contractual relationships) or through advocacy and representation in the development of policy or strategy. The importance of these relationships cannot be underestimated, whether they are developed at the organisational level or because of certain personalities, because they are often a key success factor.

It is a statutory requirement for the Regional Assembly to include voluntary and community sector members both on the assembly itself and the various commissions. At the outset, the Assembly had approached the Yorkshire and Humber Regional Forum to provide those members and in turn the Forum had held open elections to fill those posts. This was the basis of a developing relationship between the Assembly and the Forum.

The development of a Regional Spatial Strategy was a statutory requirement of the Assembly. As with many local strategies its development was constrained by government deadlines so early warning for stakeholders would have been crucial. As plans were being drawn up for its development, the Assembly naturally turned to the Forum at an early stage to involve them in the project planning process. Indeed, the Assembly had identified the sector as one of the key stakeholders to be consulted and wished to involve the sector both in the design of the process *and* the development of the strategy itself. So having a relevant – and credible - infrastructure organisation in place and with an existing relationship between that organisation and the Assembly enabled an early connection to be made.

Going the extra mile – demonstrating real commitment

In many cases nationally set frameworks or guidance, or sometimes even legal duties, set out minimum requirements for consultation with stakeholders at the regional or local level. Public agencies which fulfil only the minimum requirement are often characterised as ‘taking the tick box approach’. But an agency which clearly wishes to go beyond minimum requirements can enhance its ability to make powerful connections, building trust and overcoming suspicion.

The Department for Education and Skills had set a national framework for the development of Strategic Area Reviews by local Learning and Skills Councils (LSC). The voluntary and community sector were identified in that framework as a key stakeholder to be consulted. But Humber LSC wanted to go beyond the minimum and seek wider representation and an approach to StAR which really did include all key stakeholders and partners. And more than that, they wanted a process which was owned by all stakeholders – not a process which was done *to* them. To these ends the LSC recognised it was often *only* the sector who had access to some of the key stakeholders and could draw their views into the process and thus ensure balance in the debate.

The official in the Government Office responsible for Objective 2 at the time of the development of the Single Programme Document was widely acknowledged for being particularly committed to the voluntary and community sector's involvement and for driving forward the partnership which emerged. She recognised that the sector was an informed voice and allowed sector representatives to push at the boundaries to good effect. She also managed tension with other stakeholders effectively and maintained a balance between competing, and traditionally dominant stakeholders.

Valuing formal and informal connections

Formalised connections are clearly important and play their part, for example representatives elected onto partnership boards or advisory groups. But there is nonetheless a place for more informal connections and these can have real value too.

Humber Learning Consortium made a concerted effort to informally lobby the researchers tasked with writing the report of one of the three advisory groups to the Strategic Area Review in the Humber sub region. Their initial meeting was perhaps fortuitous – paths crossed at a meeting of HLC's local advisory group on the same evening staff from HLC attended to present the results of a questionnaire on learning provision by the sector. This allowed HLC to work together with the researchers. HLC later met with the researchers who chose to invite along representatives from the adult and community learning team of the LSC which shared some of HLC's frustrations with the focus on 14-19 education.

The questionnaire which HLC conducted enabled it to develop evidence that the voluntary and community sector supported 10,000 learners in the Humber sub-region outside of mainstream provision. They presented this evidence to the researchers who listened to their case and subsequently included key points which HLC had made to them, in their report. Indeed HLC was able to influence the content of two of the three advisory group reports in this way, which they are hopeful will in turn influence the overall StAR. Bob Flockton at Humber LSC described the review of provision of learning by the sector, contained in the North East Lincolnshire advisory group report, as “featuring prominently in the findings and executive summary”. HLC's informal approach to those writing the report paid off in securing recognition of the important role of the sector in learning provision.

Rather than simply inviting a representative onto the cross-sectoral partnership, the Director of Mental Health and Social Inclusion at York PCT found that a good way to hear for himself the diversity of views in the voluntary and community sector was to attend the sector's own mental health forum meetings himself and talk more informally to the range of organisations represented there.

The fact that the Director of York CVS sits on York PCT Health and Social Care Partnership Board is partly historical (because his predecessor sat on the board) but is partly because of his good relationships with the PCT which in turn recognised his long experience in the sector and willingness to constructively challenge the existing culture. As the director of the CVS his position has the advantage of being relatively impartial in relation to the health agenda while being able to provide a strategic overview and representation for smaller organisations whose views might otherwise get overlooked.

Involving the sector in shaping and writing strategies

In the past, stakeholders have simply been invited to comment on policies or strategies which have already been drafted, over which they feel no ownership or power to influence in any real way. But there is an increasing trend to draw stakeholders deeper into the process of actually shaping strategies or determining priorities, before a second phase of consultation on a resulting draft.

The Voluntary Organisations Network for European Funding (VONEF) - the regional EU funding advisory group for the sector - coordinated input to the Single Programme Document (SPD) for Objective 2 funding for the region. The Government Office had initially set up a core partnership group in 1998 and invited the sector to put forward its own representatives. The sector was allocated places on all the various strategic, thematic and authoring groups and VONEF ran elections for representatives to them all, providing them with a strong mandate. The thematic group on business included a VCS representative for the first time in recognition of the sector's economic contribution to the region. The core strategy group, which was responsible for drafting the text of the SPD and was responsible for getting approval for it from the European Commission in Brussels, included a representative from VONEF. This proved pivotal to the sector's influence over this particular strategy as the sector representative took on the responsibility for drafting the chapter of the SPD on Priority 3 of Objective 2 (communities). He, along with other sector representatives, also accompanied the officer group on visits to Brussels to secure sign off on the document.

In a mid-term evaluation of the Objective 2 programme, priority 3 was seen as the strongest performing element. Those involved highlight the value they now place on putting the sector in a position to draft the wording of policies or strategies itself. This is not the traditional role of the sector and is certainly a challenging position to be in. For example, the sector must be prepared for its ideas to be knocked down. But in this example it provided a real opportunity for the sector to say what it really wanted to say, and to come up with what it believed to be workable solutions. In this example, success may partly have come from having the right person (someone willing to stick their neck out and really take on responsibility) in the right place at the right time, but there is a belief that secondments to public agencies from the sector could offer one way of formalising such a role in the future.

The Regional Assembly is statutorily required to put in place a Regional Spatial Strategy. Despite tight government timescales, the Assembly involved the Regional Forum in the project planning process and the voluntary and community sector were targeted for consultation. The first phase of consultation was intended to involve stakeholders in determining priorities for the strategy. The Strategy would then be drafted and a second round of consultation would take place on the draft document.

The Assembly wanted to use innovative approaches to consultation in the first phase on what could otherwise be a very dry topic. They made resources available to the Regional Forum, following a tender process to manage engagement with the sector, who planned a highly creative event using a series of games involving role play and design.

Experts in engagement – providing agency-wide support

Not every official in every public agency will know how to connect with the voluntary and community sector in the course of their work, or how to manage such relationships. But their job can be supported by staff dedicated to engagement with the sector. Such staff can provide hands-on support across the agency or simply act as a champion for the sector. But, whether it is their role or not, there will always be those officials who understand the role of the sector and the value it can add and through their own commitment will drive forward engagement with the sector.

The partnership arrangements of the Regional Assembly are supported by the External Affairs Team which is responsible for liaison with the voluntary and community sector and other stakeholders. While the Infrastructure Commission of the Assembly, supported by planning officers in the planning executive, had lead responsibility for the development of the Regional Spatial Strategy, the Department of External Affairs was able to provide specialist and knowledgeable support in engaging with stakeholders such as the voluntary and community sector. It is the Assembly itself which has driven this approach to stakeholder involvement gaining national recognition for its success.

Leeds Initiative is the city's strategic partnership group. It was set up in 1990 to bring together the public, private, community and voluntary sectors, and set out a long-term plan for the ongoing social, economic, cultural, technological and environmental development of the city. The partners work together through a series of jointly developed and agreed action plans. Strategy and partnership groups develop these plans and put them into practice working as part of Leeds Initiative. All of the groups have wide ranging networks which bring together over 500 organisations under the Leeds initiative family.

Leeds Voice was set up as the voluntary and community sector partner on the LSP body to strengthen and represent the voluntary and community sectors throughout the Leeds Metropolitan District. Its role includes building capacity, securing recognition for the sector as a partner, enabling VCS representation and participation and supporting the sector to participate in consultation and decision making. They are, in effect, the experts in sector engagement operating to support Leeds Initiative and ensure the sector plays a full role in that strategic partnership.

York PCT benefits from the skills and experience of a Partnership Manager who acts as a link between stakeholders and the PCT's partnership board and thematic working groups. Her role encompasses liaison and engagement with stakeholders. This includes working with the voluntary sector development worker responsible for supporting and facilitating the five thematic voluntary sector forums. The role of the Partnership Manager was identified as a key success factor in the developing relationship between the PCT and the sector.

Piggy backing – reducing consultation fatigue

Connections can be made by holding dedicated meetings or consultation events. But it can sometimes be more efficient and just as effective to try to engage with the voluntary and community sector by 'piggy-backing' onto other events. This can help overcome consultation fatigue, make better use of officer time and save money.

Attendance at an event to discuss the Regional Spatial Strategy, run by the Forum with funding from the Assembly, was lower than had been expected. The evaluation of the event concluded that as a stand alone event had not been able to generate the interest hoped for, opportunities for piggy-backing on to other relevant events should be considered, using a slimmed down presentation and workshop.

Researchers tasked with writing a report to one of the three advisory groups to the Humber Strategic Area Review attended a meeting of Humber Learning Consortium's local advisory group to discuss the provision of learning by the voluntary and community sector.

A fresh eye – using external consultants

Bringing in consultants at any stage will use precious resources so it is important to judge when it might be appropriate to engage them and key considerations in the choice of appointment.

When the LSP body in Leeds came to update Vision 1 – the first strategic vision for Leeds – they brought together a working party which held a consultation event to consider the changes which were needed. The working group brought in external consultants from outside the area to look at the issues which the first vision document had raised and which needed addressing in the new vision. Having undertaken this task they played no further part in the process which was then shaped and led by local stakeholders. But the objective view which the external, independent consultants were able to bring to the start of the process was widely acknowledged as a very helpful use of such a resource.

Learning from each other

Some agencies and VCOs may have more experience of partnership or engagement in the development of policy or strategy than others. As agencies newer to partnership or engagement develop their approaches and as the VCS learns to engage with agencies they have not previously engaged with, there are always lessons to learn from the experience of others – a cross fertilisation of ideas and learning between public agencies, voluntary and community organisations and partnerships. Some of this learning can be formalised in local Compacts between local public agencies and the local voluntary and community sector.

Two years of hard work undertaken by a small group from the voluntary and community sector, led by Leeds Voice, working with statutory partners culminated in the launch of the Compact for Leeds. Statutory partners included the local authority, the Primary Care Trusts and other agencies such as the Connexions service.

5. Key weaknesses in the connections

Five key weaknesses were identified in the connections between public agencies and the voluntary and community sector in the Yorkshire and Humber region.

Valuing diversity – ensuring inclusive and equal participation

There was limited evidence of any real attempt to embrace diversity in the ways in which public agencies, and indeed voluntary and community infrastructure organisations, connected with the wider VCS. Too often, efforts to address diversity were described only in relation to black and ethnic minority groups. Very few appeared to equate diversity with other considerations such as gender, sexuality, faith or disability, or even size of organisation. And it appeared that diversity was more often addressed by accident than by design.

Clarity of communication – public agencies

The lack of clarity with which public agencies communicated their commitment to engagement with stakeholders was particularly striking. In many cases there was a significant mismatch between the public agency's *intention* and the VCS's *perception* of stakeholder involvement in policy development. This must be addressed to overcome suspicion of the public sector tick-box mentality and build trust between partners.

Poor communication – the VCS

Voluntary and community organisations at the sharp end of engagement with public agencies, including VCS representatives and their supporting infrastructure bodies, must also ensure that they effectively communicate and engage with the wider sector – and that the wider sector communicates and engages with them. There remains a risk that those in the sector not *directly* engaged in the policy process themselves also become disengaged from their representatives who in turn lose credibility and trust. While representatives supported by infrastructure bodies must take some responsibility for further action here, those in the wider sector not directly involved must also be prepared to *proactively* engage with their representatives, providing them with views, evidence and ideas. Failing this, they must simply trust their representatives to do their jobs.

Poor feedback

There was little evidence of feedback from public agencies to the VCS about the impact of their involvement. VCOs complained that their enthusiasm for engagement in policy development dwindled when they received no feedback from public agencies on the effect of earlier connections and could discern no obvious impact in the resulting documents. This is an important missing link in the overall process of engagement and undermines the chances of powerful connections.

Timescales

Both public agencies and voluntary and community organisations highlighted the continuing challenge presented by externally imposed timescales for the development of certain policies or strategies. In most cases, public agencies were themselves working to deadlines set by central government over which they had little, if any, control. This in turn presented challenges to voluntary sector infrastructure organisations and representatives facilitating engagement with the VCS. While some VCOs and public agencies found ways to ease the challenge the problem is likely to remain in the future.

6. Ensuring appropriate connections – increasing the power

Not all connections are appropriate and both voluntary and community organisations and public agencies should think carefully about:

- whether their motivations for engagement are appropriate; and
- whether their expectations of engagement are appropriate.

6.1 Appropriate motivations

Engagement with public agencies in the development of policy or strategy usually requires an eye for the bigger picture and an awareness of the wider operating environment. It may not be appropriate to focus on fine details or matters of organisational self-interest like securing funding or contracts for service delivery. So for example, it might be appropriate to call for more buses in rural areas, but not to call for pink buses instead of blue ones especially if your organisation runs pink buses. Public agencies should ensure clear separation between strategy development and implementation to avoid any conflict of interest in relation to the distribution of funding or delivery contracts. And voluntary and community organisations should try to do the same.

6.2 Appropriate expectations

Public agencies must be clear about what they expect to achieve by connecting with the voluntary and community sector. And they must communicate this clearly with stakeholders:

Quantity vs. quality

Is the purpose of engagement to register as many diverse views as possible or to secure validation or support for a draft policy or strategy from a large number of voluntary and community organisations? If this is the case it will be appropriate to plan for consultation methods which secure quantity of numbers. In other cases, agencies may simply wish to secure specialist input from key individuals in the sector with specific experience or knowledge. This would be particularly appropriate at the early stages of developing a policy or strategy. In this case quality input from a small number of individuals can be appropriate and planned for accordingly.

Shaping or rubber stamping?

Is the purpose of engagement to involve the VCS in actually shaping policy or strategy? Or is it simply to secure approval or support for a draft policy or strategy? The sorts of connections made with the VCS – and what is appropriate - will depend on the purpose of engagement. And when public agencies ask voluntary and community organisations to facilitate engagement with the wider sector it is important that they clearly communicate the purpose.

Getting the best out of representatives

In many cases it is appropriate for representatives to have a clear mandate. But this may not always mean that representatives should be elected. In some cases, particularly as new partnerships develop between agencies and the sector, it may be appropriate for agencies to invite individuals with whom they have good existing relationships to act as representatives, particularly if they have proven skills, knowledge, expertise or credibility with the agency.

All representatives, whether elected or not, should, nevertheless, have clear, shared expectations about their role and the limits of their power. For example, equality in a partnership may not always be appropriate but the partnership can still work where power relationships are open and understood, roles are defined and expectations managed. With appropriate structures and mechanisms to facilitate and support representation the sector will still be well placed to make appropriate contributions and powerful connections.

6.3 A final point

Finally, as public agencies draw the VCS deeper into the strategy development process, the sector will increasingly be called upon to back its case with appropriate evidence and statistics. It must be prepared to put its ideas and approaches up for scrutiny in jointly owned policies and strategies and to take criticism of them alongside public agency partners. At the same time public agencies must recognise the value in handing voluntary and community organisations *real* opportunities to shape and influence policy and strategy and should move away from tick-box approaches to consultation which breed cynicism and undermine trust.

7. The Impact of Powerful Connections

As it engages with an increasing number of public agencies, expectations of the voluntary and community sector are growing. Finding ways to demonstrate the impact of advocacy and representation work is particularly challenging. Unless policy makers are actually willing to admit that their thinking has been changed, it is very difficult to prove a link between the engagement activities of organisations and the strategy that results.

Nevertheless, as part of this research each interviewee was asked to give a subjective view of how the engagement and advocacy work undertaken had actually affected the policy or strategy they were working on. Some of these strategies have not yet been finalised let alone implemented. This means that it is possibly too soon to draw any strong conclusions. However the variety of positive responses to this question illustrate that significant identifiable gains have been made. Three examples illustrate this point.

Policy	Public Agency View	VCS View
European Objective 2 Single Programme Document	<p>“The SPD was more widely owned and covered things bureaucrats don’t normally think of for example we put in childcare, business support, crime and disorder, all things the EU doesn’t normally see itself as addressing.</p> <p>A gateway that applicants had to pass through before they could obtain funding was created. Diversity and sustainability were two portals applicants had to pass through. In the past it was easy for applicants to get these wrong and still get funded.</p> <p>The priority 3 programme, which was VCO written and led was recognised at the mid term evaluation stage as the strongest performing element of the whole programme”.</p>	<p>“We managed to win the argument that the VCS had an economic value and widened the range of VCS activity eligible for funding.</p> <p>We opened up business support to the social enterprise field.</p> <p>We levered in additional funding for the VSC and won the argument that strategy development should be as local as possible.</p> <p>The development of community plans subsequently followed a more inclusive (and hence time consuming but worthwhile) procedure”.</p>
York PCT Rehab to Recovery: Pathways.	<p>“They shaped our thinking and moved us away from a medical model. We ended up with a fuller document and better sign off as a result.</p>	<p>“We influenced the planning stages but we are not sure if this will follow through to the implementation stage”.</p>

	<p>The single most important change was the move towards open access and “drop in” away from transitional treatment methods”</p>	
<p>Humber LSC Strategic Area Review (StAR)</p>	<p>“The sector’s impact has been significant. Their involvement has extended the StAR process beyond LSC funded provision. The StAR process has recognised the skills and contribution of the sector and the future potential use of LSC funds. The StAR will improve the links between what the sector provides and that funded by the LSC.</p> <p>The VCS has a seat at the table now – a permanent seat.”</p>	<p>“We got a ‘foot in the door.</p> <p>We have brought a picture of the potential contribution the VCS can make to access disadvantaged people and change attitudes of how these people are viewed and their needs met.</p> <p>The process was almost exclusively about 14-19 provision and mainstream providers. We made sure that post 19 provision was not forgotten and the voluntary sector’s contribution in this area was recognised. We got this point across in the advisory group report.”</p>

8. Achieving Powerful Connections – the key messages and action points

As a result of this research and analysis, and following discussion with representatives from the public, voluntary and community sectors at an Active Partners conference held in Leeds on 6th September, we have identified a number of key messages and action points for:

- public agencies;
- VCS infrastructure organisations; and
- the wider VCS.

8.1 Key messages and action points for Public Agencies

Make more of your **commitment** to engage with the voluntary and community sector in policy development. Be more **open** about your desire to connect. And find ways to **communicate** this clearly, unambiguously and widely. Involvement in local **Compacts** can help you to do this. Ongoing relationships with appropriate infrastructure organisations can also be important. Build **trust**. Aim to **overcome suspicions** about your motives. If you are not just ticking the stakeholder engagement box, and you are going the extra mile, make sure the sector knows this.

Support effective engagement by developing ongoing **relationships** with relevant infrastructure bodies. Generalist infrastructure organisations can help to facilitate networks or fora of VCOs where relevant specialist infrastructure does not exist. Existing networks and fora can help you avoid reinventing wheels. **Invest** in the capacity of VCS infrastructure organisations to deliver or facilitate strategic representation on behalf of the sector. **Reimburse** VCS representatives attending your meetings for the costs of engagement – don't forget costs include both time and basic expenses. Appoint a **champion** for the VCS within the agency who can also provide specialist advice and support on how to engage with the sector and who is responsible for developing links with the sector. Remember that VCOs are also working in a difficult operating environment with constraints on time and resources. Try to understand them a little better.

Be clear about your **expectations** of engagement with the sector. Discuss these with VCS infrastructure organisations who may be facilitating engagement. You may need to adjust your expectations. The sector may need to adjust its expectations. Try to agree **terms of reference** and **terms of engagement**, or clarity about the roles people will play, especially for representatives on partnership arrangements. Work closely with VCS infrastructure bodies to determine the most **appropriate** ways to engage the sector. Think about your needs and expectations; existing partnerships arrangements, networks or other structures that could support engagement; and how to address **diversity** issues.

One of the most powerful ways you can connect with the VCS is to **share** the responsibility for both **shaping** policy or strategy and actually **writing** it. Sharing ownership of the policy or strategy can also create more mature relationships. Consider secondment from the VCS into the agency to advise, support and assist policy development if appropriate.

Provide **feedback** to the VCS on the **outcome** of consultation or engagement so they can really see what difference it made. Explain what changed as a result of the sector's input and

what stayed the same and why? Use the Compact code of good practice on consultation and policy appraisal as a framework for feedback.

8.2 Key messages and action points for VCS Infrastructure Organisations

Develop and facilitate relevant **networks or fora of VCOs** to support your own strategic representation role; to support better targeted engagement; and to support sector representatives on partnership arrangements. This is crucial to ensure both you and sector representatives can be effective and have credibility. It will also help to ensure that those in the sector not *directly* engaged in policy development do not become disengaged or disillusioned from the process. Embrace **diversity** and ensure equal and inclusive participation in network and fora.

If necessary build your **capacity** for strategic representation. Ensure you are plugged into relevant policy developments at national level so you receive early warning as they roll out regionally, sub-regionally and locally. Make full use of networks, briefings, foresight programmes and other information provided by national and regional infrastructure organisations to help you do this efficiently and effectively. But also maintain an **ongoing relationship** with relevant regional or local public agencies – they are more likely to discuss with you issues in the pipe-line if they have the opportunity to do so. You can be proactive too. Approach public agencies with which you work to discuss up-coming issues. **Offer your services** to facilitate consultation and engagement with the sector, second staff into the agency to support engagement or perhaps even assist in drafting strategy or policy. You don't always have to wait to be approached by them – they may not even be aware you can help them. Develop and implement a local **Compact**.

Provide **support for sector representatives** on partnership arrangements. As well as developing and facilitating networks to support them, you can source or provide training for them and help to build their capacity to be effective representatives. If appropriate you can help to ensure that they have clear **terms of reference** and that the partnership has mutually agreed **terms of engagement**. You can communicate the aims of the partnership, or the aims of public agencies who wish to engage with the VCS, to the wider sector. This way you can help to build a **shared understanding** of both the potential and the limitations of partnership and engagement including the difference between strategic planning and commissioning. In other words you can help to **manage expectations**.

Personalities will always matter. If your director or another member of staff has a good personal relationship with officers from the public agency build on that and use it. Where timescales and other constraints may not allow for formal elections of representatives they can step in instead or through them you can nominate other appropriate people. **Be pragmatic**. Don't be afraid of inviting 'the usual suspect' to step in. They can probably be relied on to do the job. Don't miss the opportunity to influence by trying to get the structures perfect. Use more **informal** one-to-one meetings outside of formal partnership discussions to help to get key points across, but use them wisely. And ensure that you feedback to the wider sector afterwards to avoid charges of 'gatekeeping'. Take the sector with you by building good communication links with them.

Look for opportunities to **piggy-back** on other events or gatherings of the VCS to undertake consultation. It will not always be appropriate to run a whole meeting dedicated to

consultation on one thing, particularly if VCOs cannot easily identify its relevance to them or if you want more specialist input. Think ‘**quality or quantity**’ and how best to get it.

8.3 Key messages and action points for the wider VCS

Engage with your representatives on partnership arrangements or with your infrastructure bodies to ensure they can effectively represent your views – or **trust** your representatives to represent you. If you want more information about how a policy or strategy is being developed **ask** your representative or relevant infrastructure body – if you don’t, how will they know you want to know more?

Recognise that formal election of representatives may not always be necessary, appropriate or possible – sometimes the ‘usual suspect’ or obvious candidate is the **right representative**, especially when it is difficult to find representatives with the time and energy required to get involved. If you think you can do a better job, put yourself forward.

Thinking in public agencies has moved on. Give them more **credit** for their efforts to engage with the sector. They are often going beyond minimum requirements set out in legislation or government guidance because they really *do* see the value of involving the VCS in the development of policy – but they may not always say that very explicitly. And they are often working to externally imposed timescales and other constraints, just as you are. So try to **understand** them a little better.

Do you deliver services *and* advocate for service users? Try to avoid confusing these different roles when you engage in the development of strategy or policy. Be honest about which perspective you are making your arguments from – the needs of the service user or the needs of your organisation? Be clear about the different stages in the process from the development of an overall **strategy for service delivery** to the **commissioning of services** to implement the strategy. Engagement is not always about accessing funding.

It is often difficult to see whether VCS engagement in policy development has had an **impact**. But just because it cannot easily be measured do not assume it is of less value. There is evidence to show that it *is* paying dividends. And sometimes the only difference it makes is to build the relationships. That can only be positive.

Get involved in local **Compacts** as the basis of an ongoing, mutually advantageous relationship.

9. Conclusion

Much progress is being made to develop mature, productive, partnership working between public agencies and voluntary and community organisations across the region. There is a growing recognition on the part of government and public agencies that the voluntary and community sector is able to bring a different but valuable perspective to the ways they develop policy and strategy for the delivery of local services. The key messages and action points in this report will help public agencies and voluntary and community sector organisations develop more real opportunities for voluntary and community groups to influence how policies and strategies are developed.

Helen Bush and Linda Mitchell
24th September 2004

Appendix A

List of those who took part in interviews to inform this report

Alison Biddulph, Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber with current responsibility for Objective 2

Sue Bradley, Network Development, York CVS

Duncan Clarke, Head of Health and Social Care, York Primary Health Care Trust

Mark Crowe, formerly of Voluntary Organisations Network for European Funding

Jane Daguerre, Director, Leeds Voice

Martin Deans, Programme Manager, Leeds Initiative

Vivienne Feetham, Humber Learning Consortium

Bob Flockton, Head of Success for All Team, Humber Learning and Skills Council

Lisa Hilder, Preston Road Women's Centre and sector representative on Humber LSC Strategic Area Review (StAR) Stakeholder Group

Martin Houghton Brown, Deputy Director, Yorkshire and Humber Regional Voluntary Sector Forum

Jane Hustwit, Director of External Affairs, Yorkshire and Humber Assembly

Gary Millard, Director of Mental Health and Social Inclusion, York Primary Health Care Trust

Isabel Mills, Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber formerly with responsibility for Objective 2

Jenny Mills, Humber Learning Consortium

Alyson Scott, Head of Participation, Leeds Voice

Colin Stroud, Director, York CVS