



# Annual Survey Report 2007

## Feedback from our service users

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## Introduction

This report looks at the results of the second VAR Annual Survey which was carried out during November 2007. The Annual Survey targeted local voluntary and community organisations that used VAR services during 2007 and is designed to help us find out whether the work we do really does make a difference. It gives the organisations we support the opportunity to tell us how we are doing and provides an indication of what we do well, and what we could do better.

The information gained from the annual survey will help us to learn and improve so that we can provide better services in the future. It provides evidence of the difference that using VAR services has had on local voluntary and community organisations and enables us to examine the different issues affecting the organisations and groups we work with.

This report examines the impact VAR is having by comparing the 2007 results to those from 2006, and looks at the difference particular areas of service delivery are having on their users. It includes the following information:

- What do we know about our service users? A summary of beneficiary data
- The awareness and impact of the advice, help and support we provide
- The impact of our support for networking, partnership and representation
- The impact of our policy and information work
- Working with the public sector – our service users' perceptions of local statutory partners
- Customer Satisfaction
- Key messages – the five key issues that have emerged from this research

The Annual Survey is an integral part of VAR's strategic planning process and provides data for performance outcome indicators in the VAR Performance Management Framework. It will be carried out annually - by comparing the results year-on-year we will be able to monitor the difference we make over the next few years and ensure that we understand how the services we provide need to change.



## Methodology and sampling

### Data collection

Data for the Annual Survey was collected through a postal questionnaire during November and December 2007. The questionnaire was sent to 252 organisations that had received advice, help and/or support from VAR between November 2006 and October 2007 identified through the VAR organisational database. A total of 113 responses were received representing an overall response rate of 45%. However, a number of questionnaires were not completed because the organisations had either closed or said that they had not received support from VAR during 2007. This left 88 valid questionnaires for inclusion in the analysis – 35% of the sample. Of the 88 valid responses 76% were from voluntary organisations and 24% were from community groups\*.

**Table 1.1:** Breakdown of questionnaire responses

	<b>Total responses</b>	<b>Voluntary organisations</b>	<b>Community groups</b>
<b>Number</b>	88	67	21
<b>Percentage</b>	100%	76%	24%

\* For the purposes of this study and to enable useful analysis, we defined a voluntary organisation as having one or more paid employees and a community group has having no paid employees.

Additional data on VAR service users during 2007 was collected from the VAR organisational database. This included information the types of people organisation's services were targeted at and their annual income.

### Weighting

This report builds on baseline data generated through the first Annual Survey in 2006 and enables us to begin monitoring trends year on year to assess the impact VAR is having. It is therefore essential that the data is collected and presented according to the same methodology.

The proportion of responses from voluntary organisations and community groups will vary year-on-year and is unlikely to be representative of the actual breakdown between voluntary organisations and community groups within the total number of VAR members and service users or the Rotherham VCS as a whole. To ensure that the data presented is meaningful and not distorted by the disproportionate number of responses from voluntary organisations, weighting criteria is applied to the data. As such the data for the majority of questions has been weighted to give equal weight to the responses of voluntary organisations and community groups. This ensures that changes in the overall sample or the response rate from voluntary organisations or community groups in different years does not have an effect on the integrity of the overall findings, and allows meaningful year on year comparisons to be made.



## What do we know about our service users? A summary of beneficiary data

Through the Annual Survey, VAR database and other monitoring tools, we have been able to develop a good picture of the types of organisations and groups receiving advice, help and/or support from VAR:

- A high proportion of our service users employ paid staff – 64% are voluntary organisations compared to 36% who are community groups.
- 69% of our service users that employ paid staff employ 3 or more people.
- A large majority of our service users use unpaid help – 92% have volunteers.
- We support a high proportion of organisations from the top end of the VCS income spectrum – more than half of our service users generate more than £100K per year.
- Our service users work across a number of communities of interest – nearly half target children and young people and disabled people, and over a quarter target older people and BME groups.
- A significant proportion of our service users are well established – 63% have been running for more than 5 years.

The figures also suggest that VAR's service users are a vital component of the local economy:

- They generated at least £10million in income during 2007 – this figure could actually be in excess of £20 million.
- They employ in excess of 1500 people

### Comment

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These findings suggest that VAR currently works with a disproportionate number of large voluntary organisations. The 'typical' VAR service user is likely to have at least three members of staff and an income in excess of £100K per year whereas around two-thirds of the sector relies entirely on volunteers and incomes of less than £10K per year. To an extent this is a reflection of the kind of services VAR currently offers – small community based groups have less need for a payroll service or HR support and are unlikely to want to procure public service contracts. Nevertheless, this does raise some questions VAR might want to consider regarding our future direction and service provision:

1. Should we aim to provide more services to support the development needs of small community based organisations?
2. Rather than building capacity, have existing VAR services created a 'dependency culture' within a small number of organisations that use our services on a regular basis?



## The awareness and impact of the advice, help and support we provide

This section examines the awareness and impact of the advice, help and support VAR provides.

### a) Awareness of VAR services\*

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Awareness of VAR services remains high within VAR service users but significantly lower amongst the wider sector:

- 80% of VAR service users felt well informed about VAR services compared to 84% in 2006.
- 37% of wider sector organisations felt well informed about VAR services compared to 28% in 2006.

\*This information was collected through our 'Valuing the VCS 2008' research project.

### b) Attracting volunteers

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The environment around volunteering appears relatively stable:

- Similar to 2006, half of all VAR service users that have volunteers said the number of volunteers in their organisation remained same during 2007.

However, organisations using the Volunteer's Centre appeared to do rather better:

- Volunteer's Centre service users were one and a half times more likely to report an increase in volunteers than other VAR service users during 2007.

### c) Income

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Although a large proportion of VAR service users (42%) reported that their income remained static during 2007 there are signs that the increasingly competitive funding climate is beginning to have a negative impact. Compared to 2006:

- Fewer organisations reported that their income had increased – this went down by 3 percentage points to 29%.
- More organisations reported that their income had decreased – this went up by 6 percentage points to 29%.

Voluntary organisations appeared to be most severely affected by a decrease in income:

- 35% reported that income had decreased during 2007 compared to 27% in 2006.

Despite this apparently negative outlook organisations working with the Procurement Service appeared to benefit from the support:

- 46% of Procurement Service users experienced an increase income during 2007 compared to only 26% of other VAR service users.

However, VAR service users are not yet well equipped to benefit from social enterprise activity:

- Only 42% of VAR service users were generating income through the sales of goods and services and only 20% were generating more than a quarter of their income in this way.

### d) Business planning

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A large proportion of VAR service users are not engaged in forward planning:



- 53% of VAR service users did not have an up to date business plan and 68% did not use a formal planning process.

Voluntary organisations appear to be better at business planning than community groups:

- 51% of voluntary organisations had a business plan compared to 43% of community groups.
- 40% of voluntary organisations used a formal planning process compared to only 24% of community groups.

#### **e) Quality assurance**

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There are fewer VAR service users implementing a quality standard compared to 2006:

- Only 17% of VAR service users implemented a quality standard during 2007 compared to 38% in 2006.

However, organisations working with the Procurement Service were more likely to have engaged with quality issues during 2007:

- 36% of Procurement Service users implemented a quality standard during 2007 compared to only 22% of other service users.

Despite the decline in the use of quality standards a large proportion VAR service users regularly reviewed their services in response to information about needs from a range of sources:

- On average 69% of VAR service users said they reviewed their services at least once a year in response to information about changing needs from either their service users, members of the local community or other sources.

#### **f) Human resources and legal issues**

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VAR service users continue to benefit from effective human resources and legal support:

- Almost half (44%) of VAR service users received advice on HR and legal issues during 2007.
- Similar to 2006, 80% of organisations that received this support said they were better equipped to deal with similar issues in the future.

#### **g) Training**

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Despite the closure of VTL, VAR's dedicated training team during 2007, VAR service users are still benefiting from the training opportunities provided:

- Similar to 2006, 75% of VAR training recipients said that the training they received had improved the overall capacity of their organisation.

#### **Comment**

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These findings clearly demonstrate that the advice, help and/or support VAR provides to the local voluntary and community sector is making a difference. Established services such as training and the HR and Legal Service continue to be effective, while newer services such as the Procurement Service and Volunteers Centre are also having a positive impact.

Despite the success of these services the findings also suggest there are areas where we need to help our service users and the wider sector develop for the future:



1. Although awareness of VAR services is high among service users, it could be higher within the wider sector. The findings suggest that this would enable more organisations to benefit from the advice, help and support available.
2. The competitive funding environment is having an impact on the income of many organisations, but the sustainability of our service users is possibly threatened by low levels of income diversification and limited use of business planning and quality assurance.



## The impact of our support for networking, partnership and representation

This section looks at the impact of the networking, partnership and representation work of local VCOs facilitated by VAR.

### a) Networking and collaborating, and communicating

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The proportion of VAR service users that felt that VCOs were effective at networking and collaborating and good at communicating with each other decreased between 2006 and 2007:

- 60% felt that VCOs were effective at networking and collaborating compared to 66% in 2006.
- 55% felt that VCOs were good at communicating with each other compared to 60% in 2006.

This decrease appears to be primarily caused by significant decreases in the proportion of community groups that felt that VCOs were effective at networking and collaborating and good at communicating with each other:

- 55% of community groups felt that VCOs were effective at networking and collaborating compared to 65% in 2006.
- 50% of community groups felt that VCOs were good at communicating with each other compared to 57% in 2006.

However, there is clear evidence that the networks we support are popular, and that members are benefiting from their involvement:

- 43% of VAR service users were involved in at least one network during 2007 but a higher proportion of voluntary organisations (52%) were involved compared to community groups (33%).
- 71% of network members thought VCOs were effective at networking and collaborating compared to 55% VAR service users that were not involved in a network.
- 67% of network members thought VCOs were good at communicating with each other compared to 50% of VAR service users that were not involved in a network.
- 86% of network members said involvement in the networks enabled them to share good practice and resources with other VCOs.

Network members appeared to be happy with the way the networks were run:

- 89% of network members said VAR was good at involving them in the operation of the networks.
- 83% of network members said VAR was good at involving them in the development of the networks.

### b) Local planning structures

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Around a two-thirds (65%) of network members felt well informed about developments surrounding local planning structures such as the LAA and LSP. However, it should be noted that this information was captured prior to activity surrounding the Sustainable Community Strategy refresh, which could have had a positive impact on this measure.

In addition, 59% of network members that felt they had the skills to get involved in the LAA and LSP, 61% had the confidence to get involved and 49% felt their views were promoted by VCS representative involved with the LAA and LSP.



## Comment

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These findings clearly demonstrate that network members are benefiting from their involvement in effective consortia. Compared to other VAR service users they are more likely to be positive about the way VCOs communicate, collaborate and share resources with each other. It suggests that a key challenge for the future will be to increase the involvement in networks, as this would enable a greater proportion of organisations and groups have access to the benefits that networking brings.

The findings also suggest that there is scope to improve the quality of VCO's engagement with local planning structures such as the LAA and LSP. If a larger proportion of the VCS can be supported to be well informed, confident and able to engage in these structures, it seems likely that the voice and influence of the VCS in the borough will also improve.



## The impact of our policy and information work

This section examines impact of the work VAR does to raise awareness and improve understanding of national, regional and local policy developments that have an impact on the local VCS:

### a) Policy information

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A number of findings were similar to 2006:

- Just under half (46%) of VAR service users were well informed about policy and strategy developments.
- VAR service users were most likely to be well informed about local policy and strategy developments (62%) rather than regional (39%) and national (37%) developments.

The findings also demonstrate that involvement in VAR networks had a positive impact on the extent to which VAR service users were well informed about policy and strategy developments:

- VAR network members (58%) were almost twice as likely to feel well informed about policy and strategy developments as other VAR service users (31%).

### b) Understanding developments

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There was a general trend of improvement compared to 2006:

- More than half (55%) of VAR service users felt they had a good understanding of how policy and strategy developments affected their organisation – an increase of 5 percentage points compared to 2006.
- Just under half (45%) of VAR service users felt they had a good understanding of how policy and strategy developments affected the Rotherham VCS – an increase of 5 percentage points compared to 2006.

The findings also demonstrate that involvement in VAR networks had a positive impact on the extent to which VAR service users understood the implications of policy and strategy developments:

- VAR network members (70%) were more than one and a half times as likely as other VAR service users (40%) to say they had a good understanding of how policy and strategy developments affected their organisation.
- VAR network members (63%) were more than twice as likely as other VAR service users (29%) to say they had a good understanding of how policy and strategy developments affected the VCS in Rotherham.

### Comment

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These findings suggest a positive trend in the extent to which VAR service users are well informed about and understand the impact of policy developments at all levels. That they are better informed about local policy issues is also positive, as most VCOs have a local focus, delivering services at local level and engaging with local policy makers. The findings also suggest that getting more organisations involved in network activity is key factor to continued progress, as network members were significantly more likely to be well informed about and understand policy issues than other VAR service users.



## Working with the public sector – our service users' perceptions of local partners

This section explores VAR service user's relationships with and perceptions of local public sector organisations:

### a) Involvement in decision making

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The overall trend suggested some improvement compared to 2006:

- 30% of VAR service users thought the public sector was good at involving the VCS in the decision making process compared to 24% in 2006.

VAR service users rated the Council as the best public sector organisation at involving VCOs in decision making. South Yorkshire Police were second followed by the Primary Care Trust:

- 40% said the Council was good at involving the VCS in the decision making process.
- 29% said the Police was good at involving the VCS in the decision making process.
- 21% said the PCT was good at involving the VCS in the decision making process.

This represented a significant improvement for the Council, which was bottom in 2006, while the Police and PCT showed little change compared to 2006.

There were also distinct differences between the voluntary and community sectors. Community groups were twice as likely as voluntary organisations to say the public sector was good at involving the VCS in the decision making process:

- 20% of voluntary organisations thought the public sector was good at involving the VCS in the decision making process compared to 40% of community groups.

### b) Listening to views

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The overall trend suggested little change between 2006 and 2007:

- 48% of VAR service users thought the public sector either fully or partially listened to the views of VCOs.

As in 2006, VAR service users rated the Council has the best public sector organisation at listening to VCOs' views. South Yorkshire Police were second followed by the Primary Care Trust:

- 56% said the Council either fully or partially listened to VCOs' views.
- 47% said the Police listened to their views.
- 41% said the PCT listened to their views.

Compared to 2006, voluntary organisations were more likely to think that the public sector listened to their views but community groups were less likely to think that the public sector listened to their views:

- 47% of voluntary organisations said the public sector either fully or partially listened to their views compared to 35% in 2006.
- 48% of community groups said the public sector either fully or partially listened to their views compared to 58% in 2006.

### c) Influencing public service delivery and policy development

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The overall trend suggests little change between 2006 and 2007:



- Around 40% of VAR service users thought they could influence local public sector organisations when they were making decisions affecting the delivery of public services and when they were developing policy

Compared to voluntary organisations community groups were more than one and a half times as likely to say that they could influence local public sector service delivery decision making and policy development:

- Around 50% of community groups felt they could influence local public sector service delivery decision making and policy development compared to around 30% of voluntary organisations.

#### **d) Responding to consultation**

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VAR service users were more than three times as likely to respond to local consultations as national consultations during 2007:

- 67% responded to local consultations.
- 21% responded to national consultations.

Community groups were more likely than voluntary organisations to respond to local consultations:

- 59% of voluntary organisations responded to local consultations compared to 75% of community groups responded.

But voluntary organisations were nearly three times as likely as community groups to respond to national consultations:

- 31% of voluntary organisations responded to national consultations compared to 11% of community groups.

#### **e) The Compact**

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The overall trend suggests there were improvements in factors linked to the Compact between 2006 and 2007. Compact awareness was higher across VAR service users compared to 2006:

- 71% of VAR service users were aware of the Compact compared to 62% in 2006.
- 75% of voluntary organisations were aware of the Compact compared to 63% in 2006.
- 67% of community groups were aware of the Compact compared to 61% in 2006.

VAR service users also thought the Compact was more effective compared to 2006:

- 42% of VAR service users said the Compact had improved the relationship between the VCS and the public sector compared to 31% in 2006.

VAR service users that contracted with the public sector were more likely to have at least one three year contract compared to 2006:

- 47% of VAR service users with public sector contracts had at least one three year contract compared to 41% in 2006.

#### **Comment**

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The findings suggest there have been a number of improvements in VAR service users' relationship with the public sector in the last year. In particular there appear to have been improvements in:

- The way the Council engages with our service users.



- Awareness and effectiveness of the compact.

In addition, the proportion of organisations with at least one three year contracts has improved and a significant proportion of groups are engaging in consultation, particularly at a local level.

Despite this progress, the findings suggest there is room for improvement in a number of areas. In particular the public sector, with support from VAR, could improve the way it:

- Involves our service users in decision making, including those affecting the delivery of public service and the development of policy.
- Listens to our service users' views.



## Customer satisfaction

This section summarises VAR service users' satisfaction levels, including their satisfaction with VAR's role supporting the voluntary and community sector in Rotherham, and their satisfaction with the individual services received throughout the year.

The results show that satisfaction with VAR was high, and had improved compared to 2006:

- 96% of VAR service users were satisfied with VAR's support for the local VCS, an increase of 12 percentage points compared to 2007.

This increase was consistent within voluntary organisations and community groups:

- 97% of voluntary organisations were satisfied compared to 84% in 2006.
- 95% of community groups were satisfied compared to 83% in 2006.

VAR service users' satisfaction with advice, help and/or support received from individual services was also high:

- Every service received a satisfaction rating of over 85%.
- Most received ratings of over 95%.



## Key messages

Since 2006 our Annual Survey research has collected a large amount of data about the experiences of our service users, and the impact VAR is having on the organisations it works with. From this data a number of themes have emerged:

- 1) The services VAR delivers make a difference – they improve outcomes for the organisations and groups we work with and are delivered in a professional yet personable manner, resulting in high levels of customer satisfaction.
- 2) VAR currently works with a disproportionate number of larger voluntary organisations. Although this can be explained by the way some services are currently focused, we do need to consider whether we should be aiming to provide more services to support the development needs of smaller community based organisations.
- 3) Where VAR services are designed to build capacity (e.g. Procurement), we should consider improving our understanding how they have helped their service users to progress and develop, to ensure that interventions have a lasting impact. Where services are designed to provide specialist support (e.g. HR advice, accountancy) we should consider the implications for their service users if the resources for particular types of support reduce or disappear.
- 4) The sustainability of some of our service users is a concern, and has implications for their need for support in the immediate and short-term future. A significant proportion of organisations still do not appear fully equipped to meet the challenges of an increasingly competitive funding environment - although more organisations are experiencing decreases in income, only a few appear to be planning effectively, engaging with quality standards or diversifying their income streams.
- 5) Participation in networks is a key factor in our service users' success. Contact with other organisations enables them to communicate and collaborate more effectively with other organisations, and provides more opportunities for the sharing of resources. Additionally, involvement in networks enables VCOs keep up to date with key policy developments, particularly at a local level.
- 6) Our service users' relationship with the public sector and with the Council in particular, appears to be improving. The Compact is starting to have an effect and perceptions of the council are getting better. However, there is still progress to be made –the public sector to help it improve the way it engages with the VCS and involves them in key decisions. Meanwhile, our service users need support to ensure they have the skills, confidence and knowledge to engage more effectively with the public sector, both for themselves and on behalf of the wider sector.

