



VONNE
voluntary organisations' network north east

**North East VCS Regional
Leadership and Governance
Project: Survey of Voluntary and
Community Sector Representatives
on Regional Networks**

March- May 2009

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Commissioned by VONNE 2009**

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North East VCS Regional Leadership and Governance Project: Survey of Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Representatives on Regional Networks (2009)

Introduction

1.1 This research was commissioned by VONNE the North East Regional VCS Infrastructure Organisation which secured funding through Capacity Builders Modernisation Programme (2009). The research has been carried out by independent consultants (Jane Streather and Christabel James ICT consultant) March – May 2009. The findings are based on data collected from VCS members of VCS networks or multi- sector networks which have a regional focus in the North East of England. The aim of the research was to identify the support needs of VCS representatives of regional networks and how to make networks more lively and effective. Recommendations are for consideration by the VONNE Board.

Background

2.1 In April 2008 ***The North East Voluntary and Community Sector Leadership Strategy*** was launched with a number of recommendations for developing the leadership capacity of the Region's VCS

www.vonne.org.uk

The strategy seeks to develop leadership in the sector in three broad areas:

- For ensuring that the sector has well governed and well managed third sector organisations in order to deliver quality services and other aims.
- For promoting and representing the 'voice' of the sector.
- For promoting social change for the benefit of the region and its citizens.

One of the key actions proposed in the leadership strategy is 'to support policy networks to develop an independent voice' regarding the above.

2.2 VONNE as the regional infrastructure organisation has a key role in implementing this recommendation; developing and supporting regional VCS networks is a core function of VONNE in exercising its roles of engagement with public policy and representing the views of the third sector in the region. In 2006 an independent review of VONNE was

undertaken for the VONNE Board to identify the organisation's strengths and weaknesses at that time and in the context of its resources. The 2006 review highlighted that there was room for improvement in the performance of policy networks a view which was reinforced by the research undertaken in the following year which informed the VCS Regional Leadership Strategy referred to above.¹ More recently IPPR North has put a spot light on regional Strategic Partnerships (which provide a mechanism for VCS engagement with public policy) and stated in trailing their research "There is a strong case for policy priorities to be influenced and shaped at a local level, but finding effective and accountable mechanism of doing so has proved challenging"²

Context:

3.1 Voluntary and Community Sector Roles

The role of the voluntary sector as advocate on behalf of those for whom it works is not new as the history of the sector since the 19th century demonstrates. Most voluntary organisations were born because there was an injustice that needed to be put right or the needs of poor and disadvantaged people were not being met. Over the years many VCS organisations at national and local levels have combined the roles of service provider, advocate and campaigner drawing on their work with individuals, groups or communities to provide the evidence to make the case for change. It is easy to forget this given governments' emphasis in recent years on promoting the sector's role as primarily a provider of public services underpinned by political rhetoric, policy changes in the public sector and a preference for contracting for specified services rather than providing grants for supporting an 'independent' voluntary sector. Inevitably Government views about the role of the VCS, has had an impact on the sector as has the increasingly difficult funding environment.³ Tighter resources in recent years and the growth of contracting with public sector agencies has led some organisations to focus on service provision, put 'policy on a back burner' (as one respondent to this survey said) and 'dance to the funders tune' - at least where the funding is coming from a government source.

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) has long championed the sectors campaigning role and since 2006 it has supported the sector via its Campaigning and Effectiveness

¹ VONNE 'Telling it How it is' 2008

² www.ippr.org.uk Governing through Partnerships: taking strategic decisions about social and economic development at the regional and sub-regional level in England.

³ VONNE 'Surviving not Thriving' May 2009

Programme.⁴ In 2007 the Third Sector Review signalled that Government, despite its strong interest in the VCS as a service provider, recognizes that the sector has a legitimate role in policy making and in campaigning.⁵ Even the Charity Commission recognizes that campaigning is allowed as long as charity law is observed and is promoting it as a legitimate activity.⁶ A more recent development is that some charitable foundations are taking more of an interest in supporting the advocacy and campaigning roles of the sector; this may reflect awareness that the impact of the current economic recession is likely to have a disproportionate negative impact on those in society who have the least resources to weather it.⁷ There has been a shift in government policy too as public sector agencies at local and regional levels are urged to engage with the third sector regarding policymaking and their performance may be measured against national indicators such as NI7 set for local government and its partners.⁸ A manifestation of government interest in 'engagement' and of particular relevance to this study is the support via Capacity Builders (a non departmental government body) to VCS infrastructure organisations to support them in providing a voice from the third sector to public policy makers.⁹

There is another problem for the sector as an influencer of public policy. Despite the official view about 'engagement' the VCS often feels that the statutory sector does not regard the VCS as an equal partner or as having parity of respect with other partners. There is evidence from this study that the VCS thinks that its contribution is undervalued by the public sector and that there are some public sector employees who think that VCS organisations who are a 'provider,' have no right to have any say on policy and indeed they think that there is a conflict of interest and sometimes this view becomes internalized by the VCS itself. Those who view the statutory and VCS relationship in this way demonstrate a lack of understanding about the nature of the VCS, the need for pluralism in governance and the role of civil society in shaping policies for the benefit of the region. Of course engagement, partnerships and influencing are activities which may be desirable and aspirational are not easy to practice as they throw up difficulties and challenges for all partners. IPPR's current research on 'Governing Through Partnerships' which is referred to above, addresses these problems and when published the recommendations are likely to be relevant to this study and vice versa and value would be added if they are considered in the round.¹⁰

⁴ www.ncvo-vol.org.uk

⁵ www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/thirdsector

⁶ Charity Commission www.charity-commission.gov.uk

⁷ Association of Charitable Foundations www.acf.org.uk

⁸ : www.communities.gov.uk Download National Indicator 7: Environment for a thriving third sector

⁹ Capacitybuilders (2008) Capacitybuilders Corporate Plan 2008-2011 <http://capacitybuilders.org.uk>

¹⁰ IPPR North (Katie Schmuecker) to be published in 2009

Notwithstanding these difficulties some organisations have the capacity to engage with statutory partners, exercise 'voice' and campaign effectively. However, most, especially those at a local or regional level do not have the resources to access policy makers independently. The collective organisation and action of VCS organisations with their representatives via networks are mechanisms for promoting the voice of the VCS and engaging with the policy making process.

Context:

3.2 Regional VCS Networks

The opportunities for VCS organisations to participate in a regional network where there is a common interest are many and various in the north east region. Most networks are for the VCS but some are multi – sector usually led by a statutory agency or a quango - covering a wide range of policy fields and interests. A number (76) of these have been identified by VONNE and details can be found in a briefing paper on VONNE's web-site however but the scene is ever changing.¹¹ Such a large number of regional VCS networks inevitably prompt the question of whether all of these networks are necessary and whether concentrating effort and resources on a smaller number might be more effective.

There are a few regional networks which were set up as an organisation or have become one, with paid staff and they are often registered as charities; amongst these are VONNE, BECON, NESEP, FINE. These are often referred to as infrastructure organisations as their main role is to provide a range of support services the voluntary and community sector. Some larger networks, having started out as a special interest network, have gained the status of an organisation or are considering developing in this way for example MHNE, RuCANNE and possibly the Equalities Coalition.

It is important to bear in mind that only some of these regional networks have been set up by VONNE as most have grown independently of the regional infrastructure organisation. However VONNE has been proactive in establishing and supporting networks operating in regional policy areas relevant to its own policy priorities which are considered to be relevant to key regional issues. These policy priorities change as the regional policy agenda changes. Currently the Government promoted Sub – National Review provides a framework as it links to the regional

¹¹ VONNE Briefing paper January 2009

strategy¹². Herein is a dilemma for VONNE as responding to Government initiatives such as a regional strategy is resource intensive yet they are inherently unstable as the political climate changes. VONNE therefore has to balance working within current policy frameworks with scanning the horizon for change and being prepared for when change happens.¹³ As VONNE is a membership organisation it has also responded to requests to support other networks which may not be so high on VONNE's policy agenda which may conflict with the organisations strategic role. Where a network is well established (e.g. Children England NE Board which is supported by a regional Children's Organisation and a national parent charity) VONNE's involvement is less. The networks promoted by VONNE are relatively well supported by a Policy Officer or a paid facilitator where resources permit.

Most networks have term of reference and as the findings of this study show they often have a wide range of aims and objectives - some are to support members and their organisations in their day to day work and others are concerned with promoting the sector's 'voice' and engaging with public policy covering a wide range of policy fields.

Notwithstanding VONNE's strategic role in developing and supporting some networks it is significant that there has been no overall explicit regional strategic plan for regional networks; most have grown in response to a perceived need and they vary in size and capacity and there are probably some overlapping functions and membership and possibly some duplication. There appears to be little coordination. Most have been set up for specific purposes but with limited resources to develop or promote their existence and work yet clearly as this research shows they are meeting a range of needs and most appear to be having an impact although more could be done to enhance members' satisfaction and the networks effectiveness.

3.3 Context: Regional Governance and Policy Environment

An important contextual factor for this research is cognizance of the structure of regional governance. One of VONNE's remits as the regional VCS infrastructure organisation which (receives government funding) is to act as a conduit for the VCS in the region to engage with government at a regional level, to represent the sectors views. The regional governance context with which the VCS has to work is complex

¹² Sub –National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration (SNR) (HMT, BERR and CLG 2008)

¹³ At the time of writing there is a probability that there will be a change of Government within one year and the Sub National Review policy agenda may not survive. See also Conservative Party proposals for an Office for Civil Society – 'A Stronger Society :Voluntary Action in the 21st Century' June 2008

and ever changing and VONNE and other VCS infrastructure organisations have a necessary role in helping the sector navigate its way through its structures and locating where and who has power and resources in order to facilitate VCS engagement with public policy making. Katie Schmuecker (IPPR North) has done a great service in explaining this complexity in her research on governing through regional partnerships.¹⁴

For the purposes of this study it is important to note that governance at regional and sub-regional levels is in a state of transition and further changes are likely if there is a change of government in 2010. The following regarding governance in the region needs to be taken into account.

- The Regional Assembly has been abolished. There is no democratically elected regional body replacing it.
- There has been recent significant local government reform in County Durham and Northumberland
- There are a large number of quangos operating at regional level and these change frequently.
- There is a regional government Minister and regional Select Committees have been set up in Parliament with a scrutiny role.
- At regional level there are changes related to the Sub National Review (SNR).
- The new Local Authority Leaders Board jointly with the RDA has responsibility for producing an Integrated Regional Strategy (IRS) embracing economic, social and environmental strategic objectives for the region.
- Local authorities' role has been strengthened and they have key roles in multi – area agreements, city region partnerships and the Local Authority Leaders Board.
- In recent years the sub-region or city region notion has become a locus for decision making in economic development.
- There are a large number of partnerships in relation to policy and functional areas.
- Government Office (GO-NE) represents Government in the region across many policy and programme areas and is therefore an important centre of power and influence.

VCS regional infrastructure organisations need to be clear about where they can be most effective. The places where key regional policy decisions, are taken (which are likely to be small in number), need to be identified and there also needs to be an understanding about where decision making at a sub-regional level fits; the VCS needs to organize

¹⁴ IPPR to be published in 2009

activity accordingly. To do this VONNE will need to balance its strategic engagement and representational role with its service support role to its member organisations.

3.4 Context – Economic Recession

The economic downturn has begun to impact on the region and it is not known how long it will last or how deep it will be. Two things are certain. First a growth in unemployment throughout the North East will inevitably mean that more people will turn to the VCS to get help to meet their needs. This increase in demand will put greater pressure on many VCS organisations which are already having difficulty in funding their current level of activity. Secondly, there will be more competition within the sector to access less available funding from both the statutory sector and from charitable grant giving trusts. Funding which will be available is more likely to be for direct service provision than for infrastructure or policy work. However there are voices in the sector urging it to be bolder, to raise its voice and to campaign for social justice on behalf of those who will be hit hardest by the recession.¹⁵

4. Key Questions Explored

4.1 Little is known outside individual VCS networks about their activity or effectiveness or about the experience of VCS members on multi-sector networks or partnerships. A few VCS networks, mainly those which have received public funding, have been evaluated but most have not. There does not appear to be much sharing of findings or lessons across networks. This research, seeks to scope and identify some issues related to member's experience of network participation in order to frame some recommendations with the aim of improving satisfaction and performance.

A number of **key research questions** were developed for this study. These include:

- What is the range and extent of VCS participation in VCS networks?
- What do members regard as the main purposes of their network and how well did VCS members think that their network realizes its main aims.
- What did VCS network members think could be done better and what would make their network more effective?
- Who benefits from VCS networks?

¹⁵ Stuart Etherington NCVO at an ACF meeting for chairs of charitable trusts London September 2008 and the Coalition for Independent Action.

These questions were explored by the following methodologies

5. Methodology

5.1 This survey was designed by the researcher with VONNE to identify perceptions of VCS members of some networks which have a regional focus. It collected both quantitative and qualitative data.

The study began with a **scoping** exercise to determine the sampling frame. Discussions took place with VONNE staff to identify which regional networks should be targeted for inclusion in the survey taking into account various factors such as policy interest, size and activity. This scoping exercise was also to get an understanding about the purpose and operation of the regional networks which have been mapped by VONNE as a basis for choosing which should be targeted for the survey. The sampling frame did not seek to be representative but rather was designed to get a spread of networks which could generate enough members to make the survey viable. It was not intended to evaluate any network in depth so in this study networks are rarely named but rather, from a cross section of networks, the aim was to identify some common issues which could help frame some ideas for discussion with a view to providing support and enhancing effectiveness.

Each network selected was approached via the 'lead member' or coordinator to gain consent and to access membership lists for the survey either directly by the researchers or by the network coordinator. Assurance was given regarding data protection and confidentiality. The networks which were targeted for the survey are listed at paragraph 7 of this report. However the researcher was aware that respondents were likely to be members of more than one network so to widen the net and to give respondents some say about the network of most interest to them they were given the option of choosing a network either from this list or any other *regional* network of which they are a member.

Respondents were interviewed by means of an electronic survey using the web-based survey tool "Survey Monkey" www.surveymonkey.com The questionnaire had both closed and opened questions the latter providing qualitative data which was not only rich in itself but also provided a prompt for further exploration by means of a telephone interview. Most questions relate to just one network even though the researcher was well aware that respondents are likely to be a member of more than one network. This approach was adopted to help each respondent who was being asked quite a few questions to focus and to provide clarity for the researcher when processing and analyzing the

responses; it was necessary to be able to relate answers and comments from individuals to particular networks (even though it was not intended to comment on individual networks) in case a telephone interview was thought to be appropriate.

Following the analysis of the electronic survey 10 supplementary telephone interviews took place which enabled the researcher to explore some answers in greater depth and this added to the qualitative data in the survey.

In addition there has been a small action research element to this study. The researcher participated in Café Politique discussion co-sponsored by a network which was established 18 months ago, interviewed a key member and also after an evaluation participated in a network discussion as a 'critical friend' about the future of the network. The insights gained from this interaction have added to this study and has made a contribution to the forward planning of the network which is at a crossroad.¹⁶

The findings of the research are indicative. Although the sample was approximately 290 and potential respondents were drawn from a range of networks after a great deal of discussion with key members it generated 62 responses.¹⁷ This was lower than was hoped for and a reason is likely to be that the VCS was suffering from survey fatigue given the number of surveys and evaluations going on in the last quarter of the financial year. However the electronic survey did contain a number of open ended questions providing many opportunities for respondents to express their own views which provided some rich qualitative data, and telephone interviews added to this. Sufficient data was generated to identify some common themes arising from VCS network members experience and aspirations.

This report has five sections.

Section 1 gives information about survey respondents and their organisations.

Section 2 focuses on experience. It gives a sense of the extent of regional network participation by the VCS – the range and time spent in this type of activity. It also explores what members understand to be the main purposes of their network, whether the networks are meeting their needs and how effective they think their networks are.

¹⁶ The network was RuCANNE

¹⁷ For reasons of confidentiality a few network lead members preferred to send out the survey questionnaire themselves. It is assumed that they all did so but it is not possible to be exact about the number of potential respondents received an invitation to participate in the survey.

Section 3 is interested in finding out what respondents think needs to be improved and what they think should be done.

Section 4 discusses some of the implications of key findings

Section 5 four makes recommendations for consideration by VONNE's Board.

6 Section One. Personal and organisational information

6.1 Respondents were asked to identify the type of organisation they come from, its size; where it is based and where in the region it is active as well as information about policy areas of concern and areas of activity. We were also interested in the respondent's role within the organisation

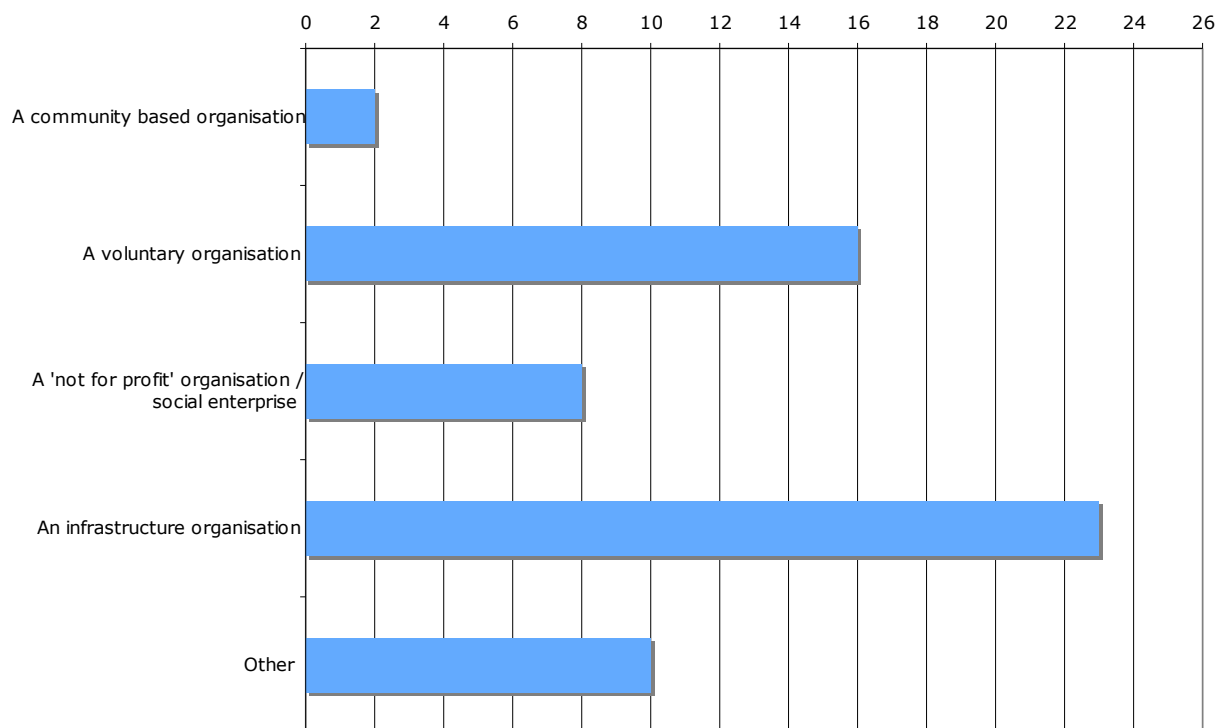


Figure 1 Type of Organisation

Figure 1 above suggests that respondents from infrastructure organisations are over-represented in this survey. It can be seen that 40% chose 'infrastructure organisation' to best describe their organisation. There was a further 40% who said that their organisations are best described as a voluntary organisation or a social enterprise combined. Respondents from community based organisations hardly signified. An over representation of infrastructure organisations in this survey is so because we know from the network membership information which was gathered to invite survey participants that most

members (and there are many) come from other kinds of third sector organisations. An explanation might be that network members from infrastructure organisations are likely to be more motivated to respond to a survey with this particular focus because network membership is likely to be a core activity and an important one for an infrastructure organisation.

6.2 Other characteristics of respondents are of interest:

- Respondents from small organisations (0-10) were the single largest category however more respondents work in medium (11-30) or large (over 100) organisations. A small number work as volunteers in organisations with no paid staff.

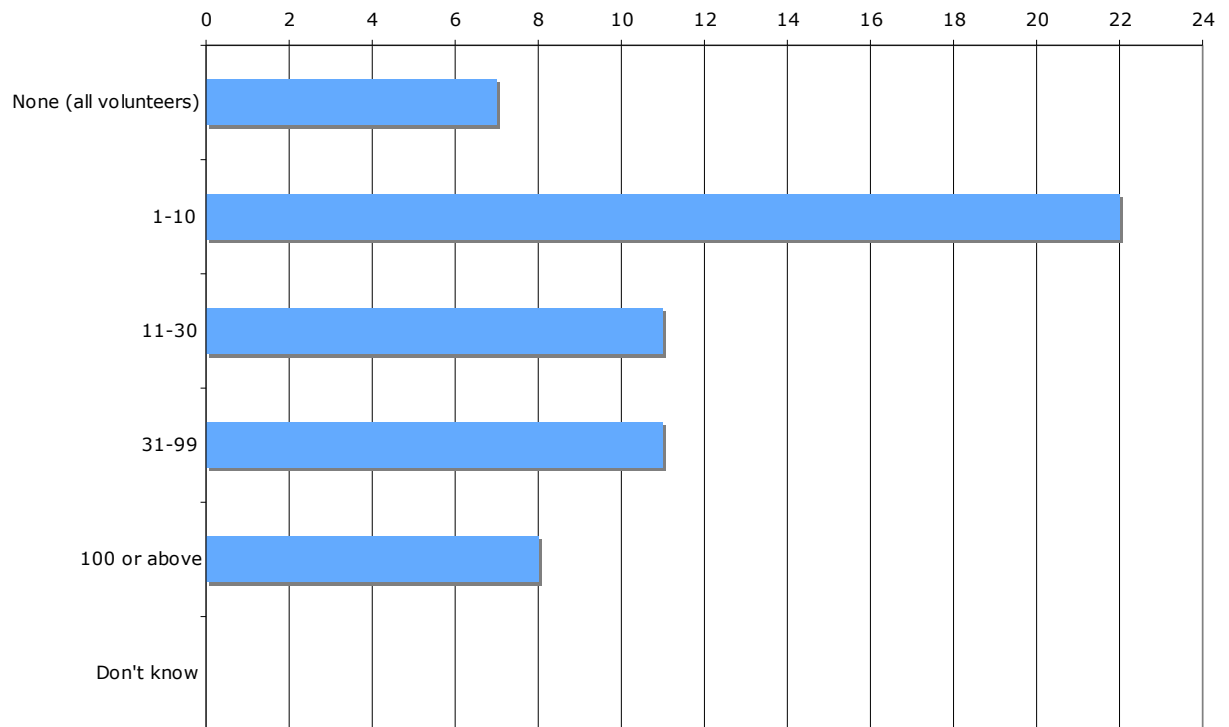


Figure 2 The Number of Staff Employed in Respondents Organisation

- Respondents came from organisations based in all parts of the region – most from Tyne and Wear. Organisations from Northumberland were underrepresented.
- Most respondents (45.8%) are members of their organisation’s senior management team. It is perhaps not surprising that it is senior members of staff who tend to be network participants because they are more likely to have a wider job role remit than a non management staff member. Senior staff involvement in networks suggests that this is regarded as relatively high level work and that activity at a regional level is regarded as important to the organisations that join networks.

- Nearly three quarters of the organisations whose members responded to this survey were said to be ‘active at a regional level’ although the nature and extent of that activity at regional level is not known.
- The respondents organisations are concerned with a wide range of policy areas – All of the 28 policy areas listed were said to be relevant by some, if not all of the respondents.

6.3 When asked to identify their organisation’s **main** concern the most prominent was ‘VCS infrastructure.’ The numbers for each of the other areas of main concern were small as there was a wide spread across categories. None said that there **main** concern is young people; ‘refugees and asylum seekers’; ‘race’, ‘climate change’; ‘sport’ or ‘volunteering’ although for a number of organisations these areas for activity are a concern.

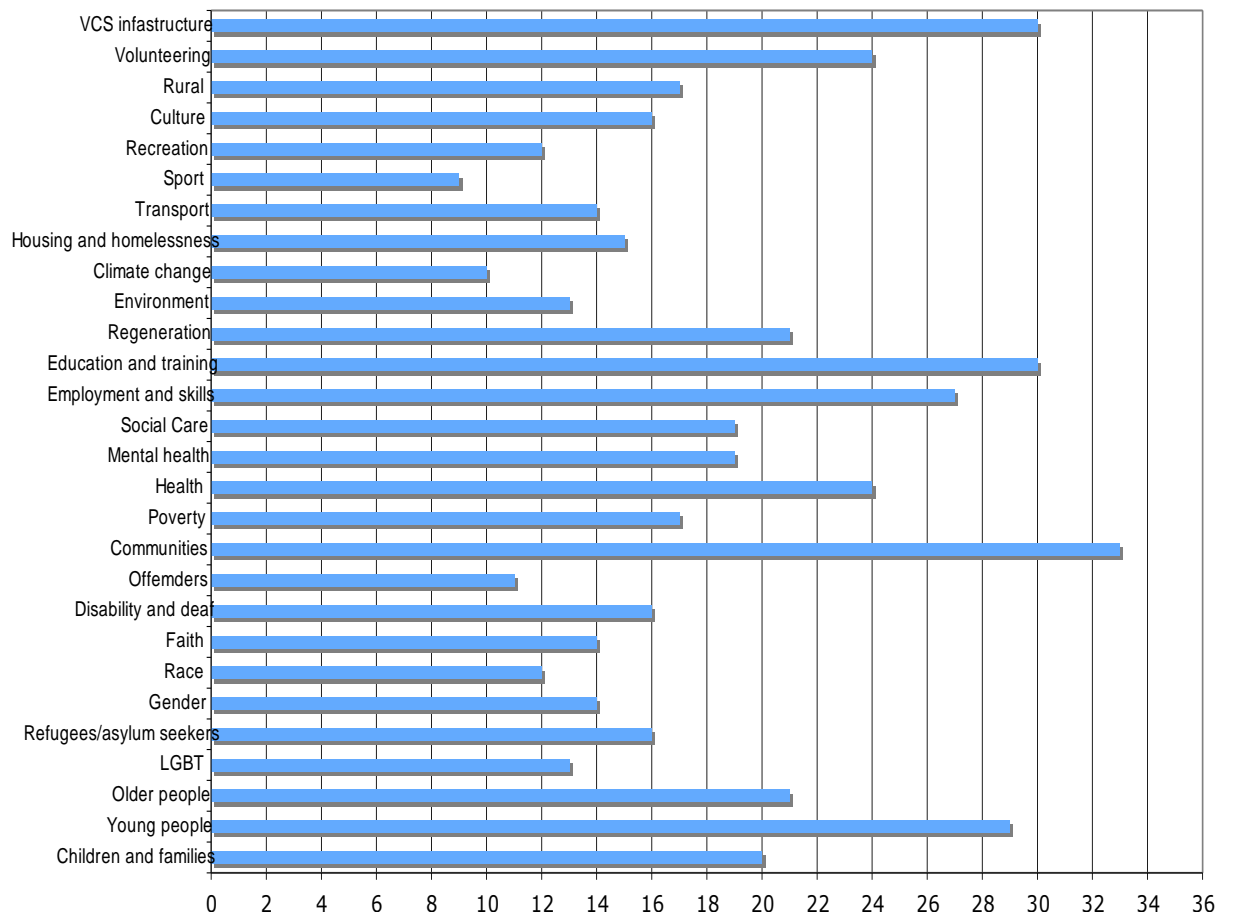


Figure 3 Policy Areas in which the Organisation of Respondents Work

6.4 Within their area or areas of interest organisations appear to be carrying out a wide range of **functions** commonly associated with the VCS and as such appear to be typical of the VCS as a whole.

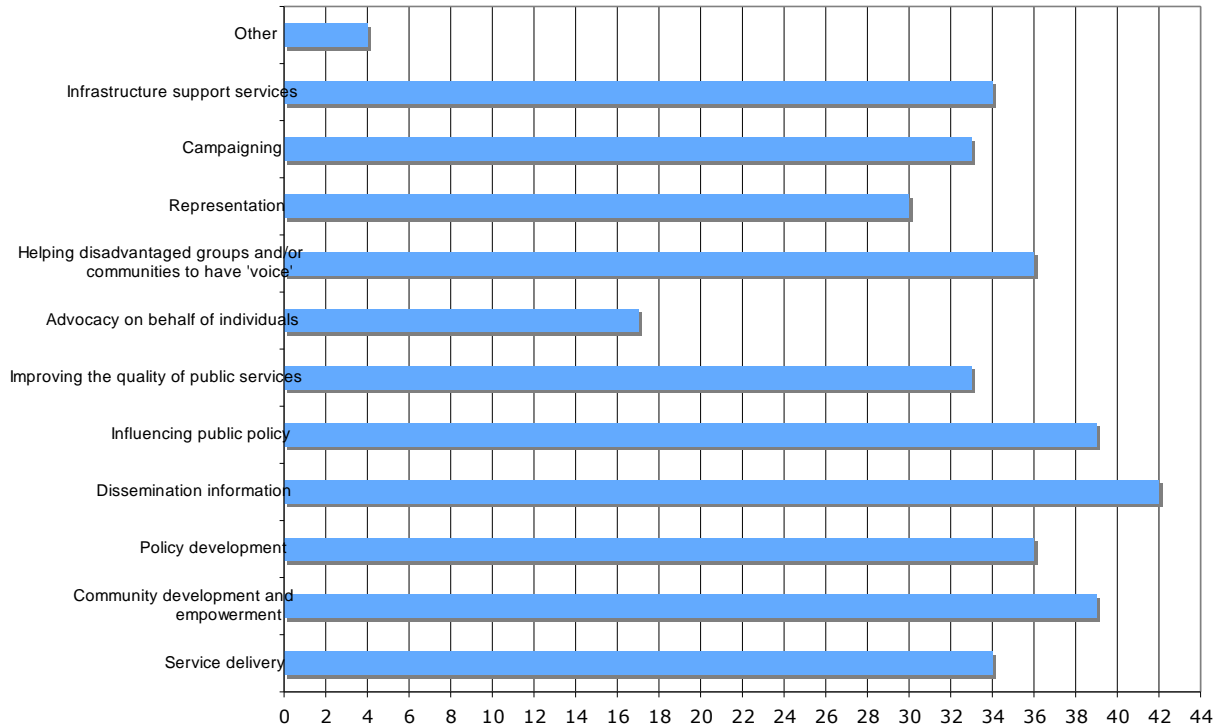


Figure 4 Functions of Respondents Organisations

When the respondents were asked to say *in their own words* what they think is the **main purpose** of their organisation the following are prominent.

- Community development and empowerment
- Infrastructure support
- Regional representation
- Information, support and advocacy on behalf of their main client group or area of policy interest.

None said that the provision of services is a *main purpose* but this may not be reflecting a true picture. Clearly, providing information, support and advocacy which is said to be a main purpose organisational purpose by many respondents can be regarded as the provision of services to the organisations beneficiaries. However this type of activity is of a different nature from services such as 'care services' (for children, older people or others with special needs) which are usually associated with the term 'service provision' or 'service delivery'. Moreover, although no one said that the provision of services is a main purpose of their organisation it should be borne in mind that 56.6% of respondents in answering another question said that 'service delivery' is a concern of their organisation. Even so this is probably on the low side when compared with the VCS as a whole but the over representation of infrastructure organisation respondents may explain this and the main purposes identified above.

7. Section 2 What is the Range and Extent of VSC Involvement with Regional Networks?

7.1 Respondents were asked to indicate whether they are members of one or more of 20 listed networks and or any other regional network not on the list.

All of the networks listed have respondents who are members.

- Economic Regeneration Forum
- Employability Reference Group
- Business Link VCS Reference Group
- Rural Community Action Network North East (RuCANNE)
- Health and Social Care Forum
- Procurement and Commissioning Steering Group
- North East Empowerment Partnership (NEEP)
- North East Environmental Link (NEEL)
- Voluntary Sector Advisory Forum of the North East Housing Board
- Regional Youth Homeless Network
- Children England –North East Regional Board
- Equalities Coalition -The Years Ahead Forum
- Equalities coalition – Age Youth Strand
- Equalities Coalition - Disability and Deaf Strand
- Equalities Coalition - Faith Strand
- Equalities Coalition - Gender Strand
- Equalities Coalition - Race Strand
- Equalities Coalition – LGBT Strand
- Regional Infrastructure Development Group (RIDG)
- Regional Sports Volunteering Group
- England Volunteering Council North East
- other

The numbers on each network are few because the choice was large.

50% of respondents also said that they are a member of one or more networks not listed and categorized as '**other**'. The other category elicited a mixed bag of regional, sub-regional and local networks; when pruned 14 additional regional networks were identified as having respondents as members.

- Mental Health North East (MHNE)
- Regional Environmental Volunteering Action Group
- Equalities Coalition
- NE Combined Transport Activists Roundtable
- NE Environment Forum

- Economy, Culture and Environment Advisory Group to Department for Public Health
- NE Cultural Diversity Arts Forum (NECDAF)
- North East Third Sector Partnership
- Church action on Poverty North East
- SHA Commissioning Neuroscience Network
- North East Volunteer Infrastructure Organisation (NEVI)
- VONNE
- Regional Infrastructure Consortium
- Funders Network

The responses to the ‘other’ category remind us that in addition to regional network membership many are also involved with networks at a sub-regional and local level – these are not mentioned above.

7.2 An interesting finding and one with implications for the use of an organisations main resource (staff time) was that several respondents are members of more than one regional network and a few of these are members of five or more regional networks.

Question 14 - Participation in one or more Network

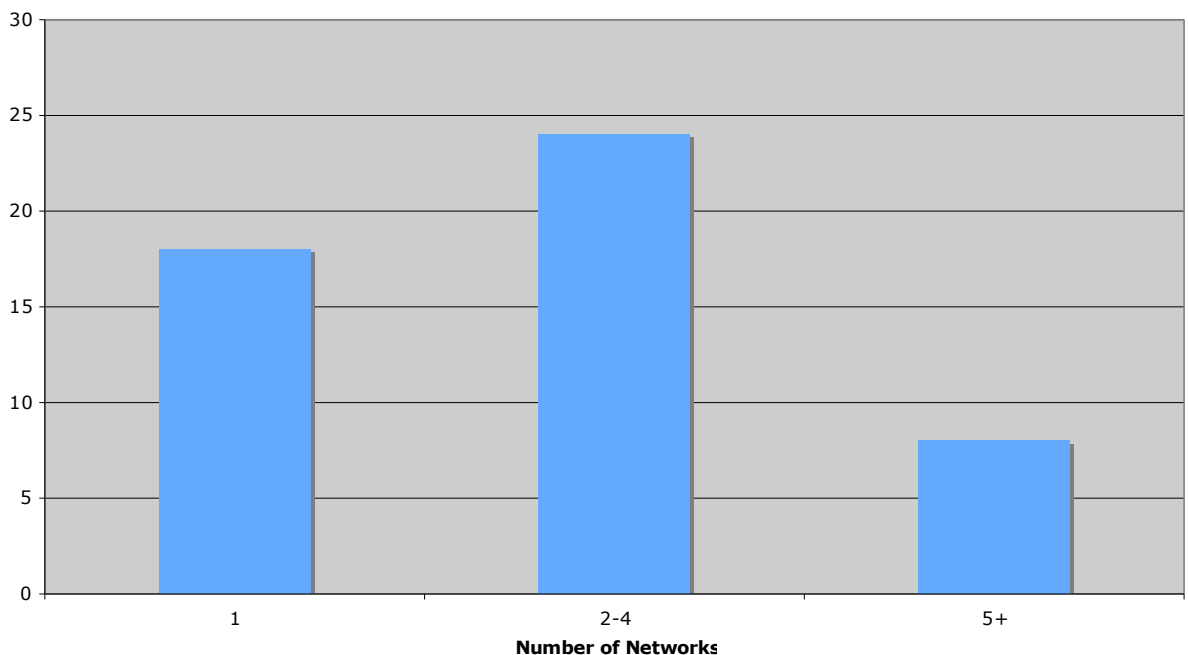


Figure 5 Number of Networks of which Respondents are Members.

7.3 Having identified the range and number of networks with which respondents are engaged the aim was then to get them to select just **one** network to answer the remainder of the survey questions and they selected 15 different networks from the list of 21.

- Economic Regeneration Forum
- Employability Reference Group
- Rural Community Action Network North East (RuCANNE)
- Health and Social Care Forum
- Procurement and Commissioning Steering Group
- North East Empowerment Partnership (NEEP)
- North East Environmental Link (NEEL)
- Voluntary Sector Advisory Forum of the North East Housing Board
- Children England –North East Regional Board
- Equalities Coalition -The Years Ahead Forum
- Equalities Coalition - Disability and Deaf Strand
- Equalities Coalition - Faith Strand
- Equalities Coalition - Gender Strand
- Equalities Coalition – LGBT Strand
- Regional Infrastructure Development Group (RIDG)

10 additional networks were chosen from the ‘other’ option.

- Mental Health North East (MHNE)
- Volunteer Centre Network (NEVI)
- North East Cultural Diversity Arts Forum (NECDAF)
- Tyne & Wear Business Link Organisation (TWEBLO)
- Strategic Health Authority Commissioning Neuroscience Network
- Regional Infrastructure Consortium (RIC)
- NE Regional Faiths Forum
- VCS Equalities Coalition
- North East Environment Forum
- North East Combined Transport Activists Roundtable (NECTAR)

7.4 Network members say that they are regular attendees at network meetings; 83% of respondents said that they rarely miss a meeting of their selected network. If, and we do not know, these same people are also regular attendees at the meetings of all the other networks of which they are members then a great deal of time is spent on this type of activity.

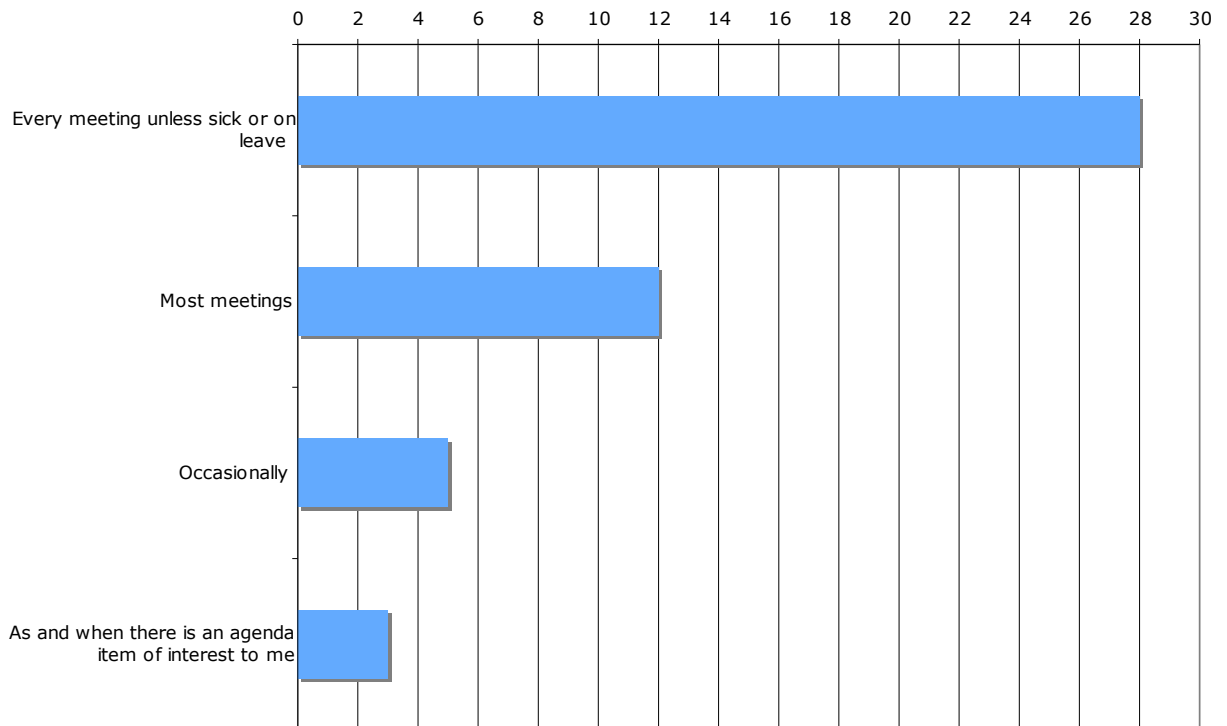


Figure 7 Frequency of Attendance at Network Meetings

Most were representing their organisation; a few represent another network. The majority were members with no specialist role but about one third hold the position of chair or vice – chair; lead member or facilitator. Facilitators of whom there were 5 tended to be paid VCS officers or consultants.

8. Understanding of the purpose of the chosen network

8.1 Respondents were asked to say what they think are the main purposes of their network. As most networks have terms of reference (and all but a few respondents knew this) and many possible aims and objectives this survey aim was to find out what individual members think are the **three main** purposes of their network. They were assisted in this by being asked to select the three main purposes from a list of 15 possibilities.

If we look at the purpose which they thought to be **the most important** i.e. their first choice, the 4 most frequently identified were:

- To receive and to share information
- To communicate and to work with strategic partners
- To influence the design and delivery of public policy and services in the region
- To build a voice for the VCS to represent their constituents needs at regional level

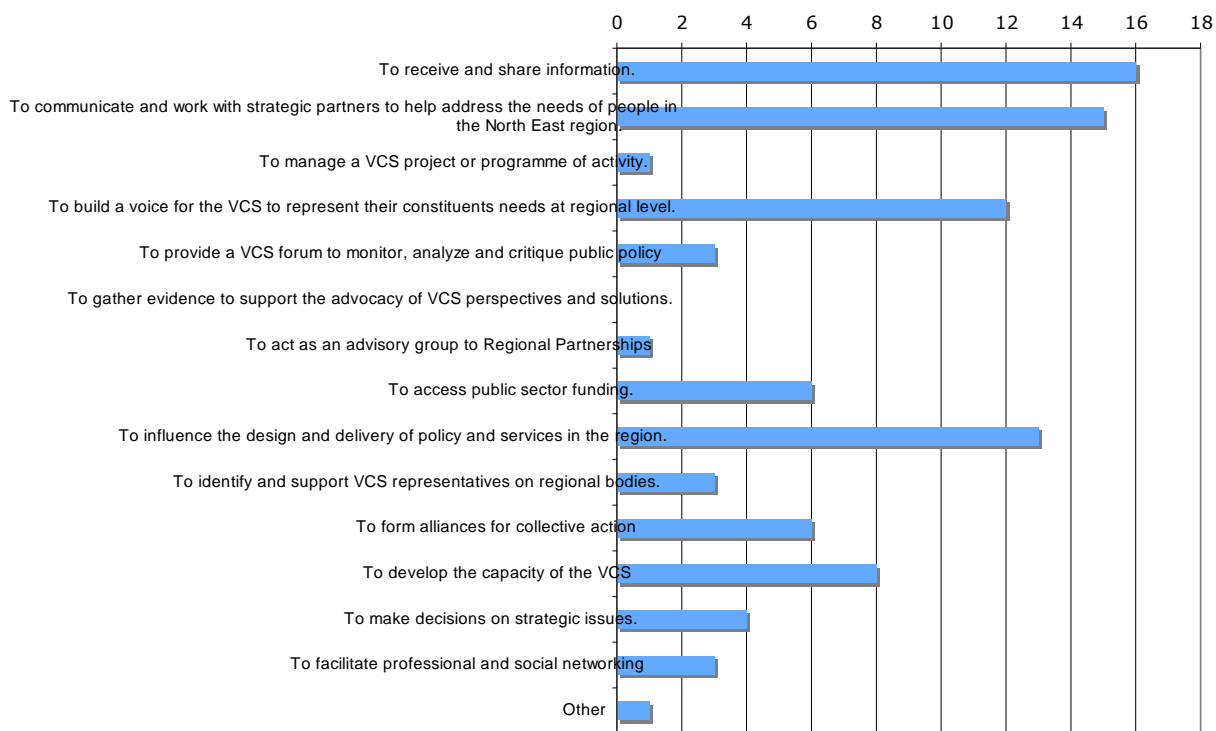


Figure 8 Main Purpose of the Network – First Choice

When the top **three main purposes** are combined the pattern is slightly different but not significantly so.

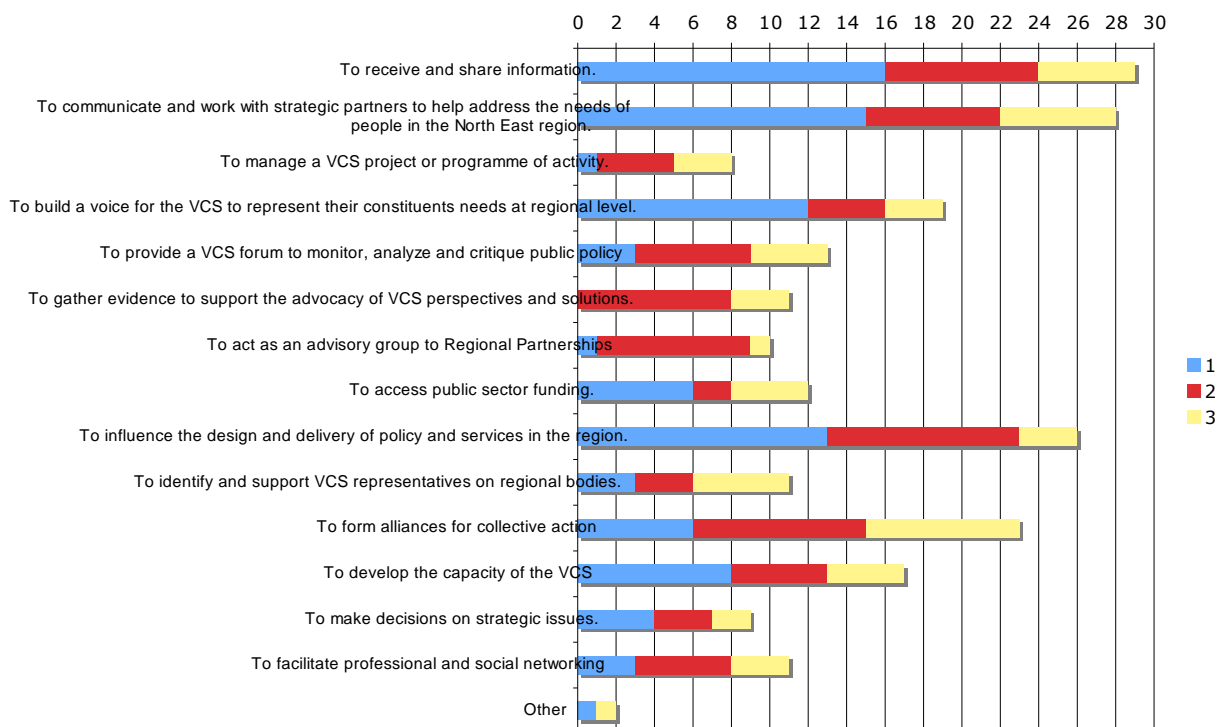


Figure 9 Three Main Purposes of the Network

- To receive and share information
- To communicate and work with strategic partners
- To influence the design and delivery of public policy and services
- To form alliances for collective action

Not too much should be read into this apparent small difference as the numbers are not large, and also because it is not known whether respondents gave equal weight to all the top three which they selected from the list rather than giving a greater weight to their first choice.

Managing a VCS project hardly featured as a main purpose; this probably reflects the fact that only a few of the networks have funding for a project requiring management.

8.2 A further question was asked to find out whether the respondents perception of the main purposes of their chosen network correspond with the **three main purposes which are important for them** as individual members of their network. The reason for asking this question was that it could be reasonably assumed that notwithstanding the stated and agreed terms of reference of a network individual members would have their own priorities according to their main interests.

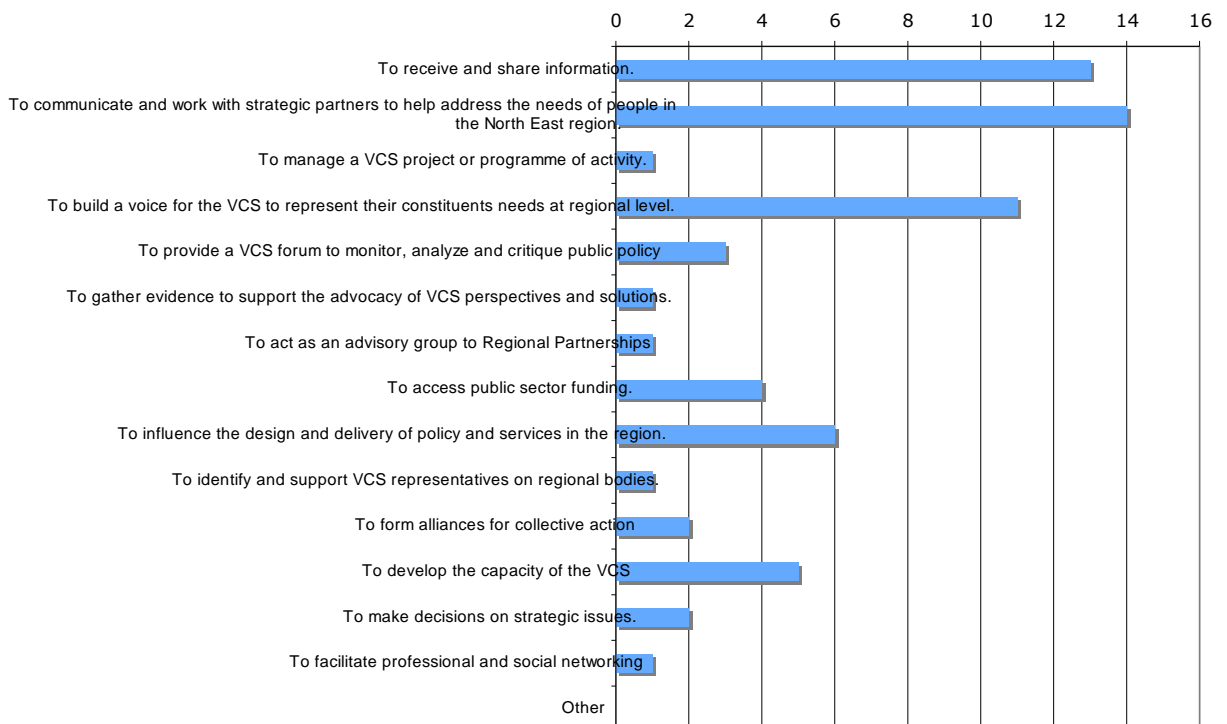


Figure 10 Most Important Network Purpose for Members

It can be seen from figure 10 that the purposes which are **most important to individual members** i.e. their top priority, are and in priority order

- To communicate and work with strategic partners
- To receive and to share information
- To build a voice

When top three are combined there is a similar picture.

- To communicate and work with strategic partners
- To receive and share information tied with To influence the design and delivery of public policy and services
- Building a voice tied with to form alliances for collective action

Figure 11 below compares the first main purpose of the network with the respondents own preference for a main purpose and it shows that there is not a great deal of difference.

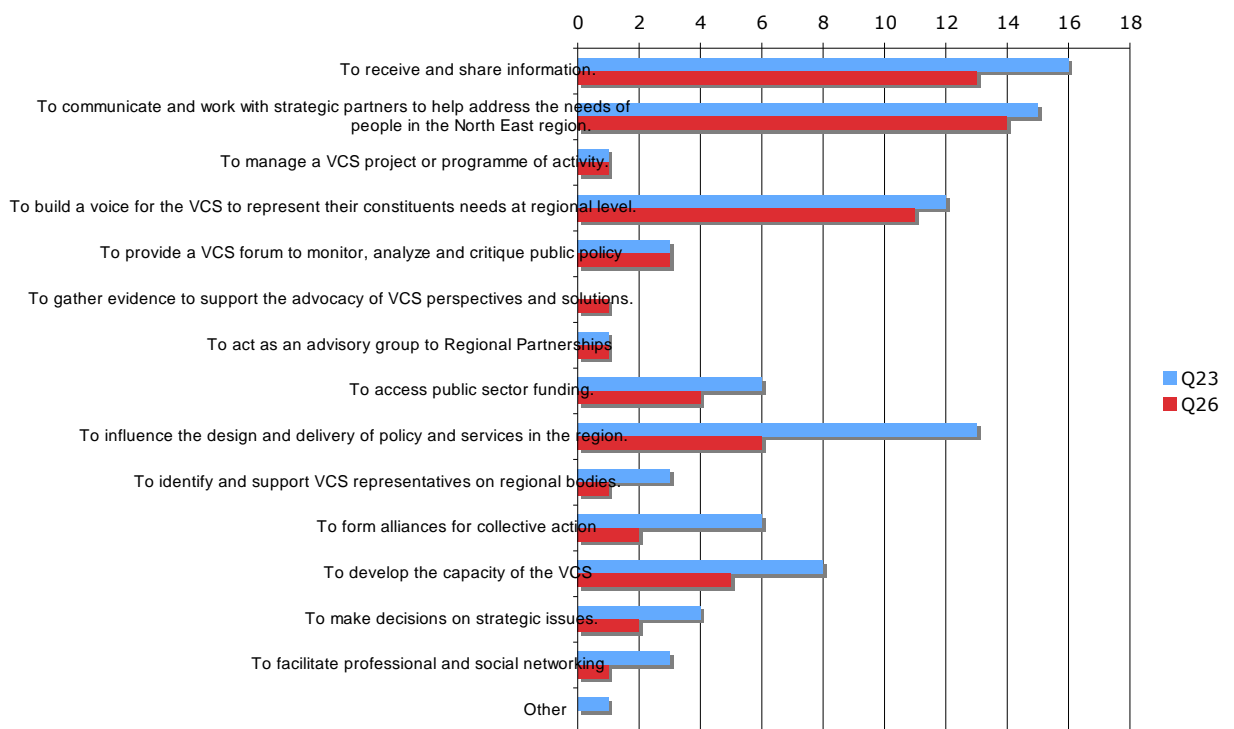


Figure 11 Main Purpose of the Network Compared to Main Purpose Most Important to Network Members

9. How well do members think that their network realizes its main aims?

9.1 The answers to this question reflect respondents subjective perceptions; few VCS networks have been evaluated and those that

have tend to be ones which have been supported by government funding where an evaluation was a condition of the grant.¹⁸

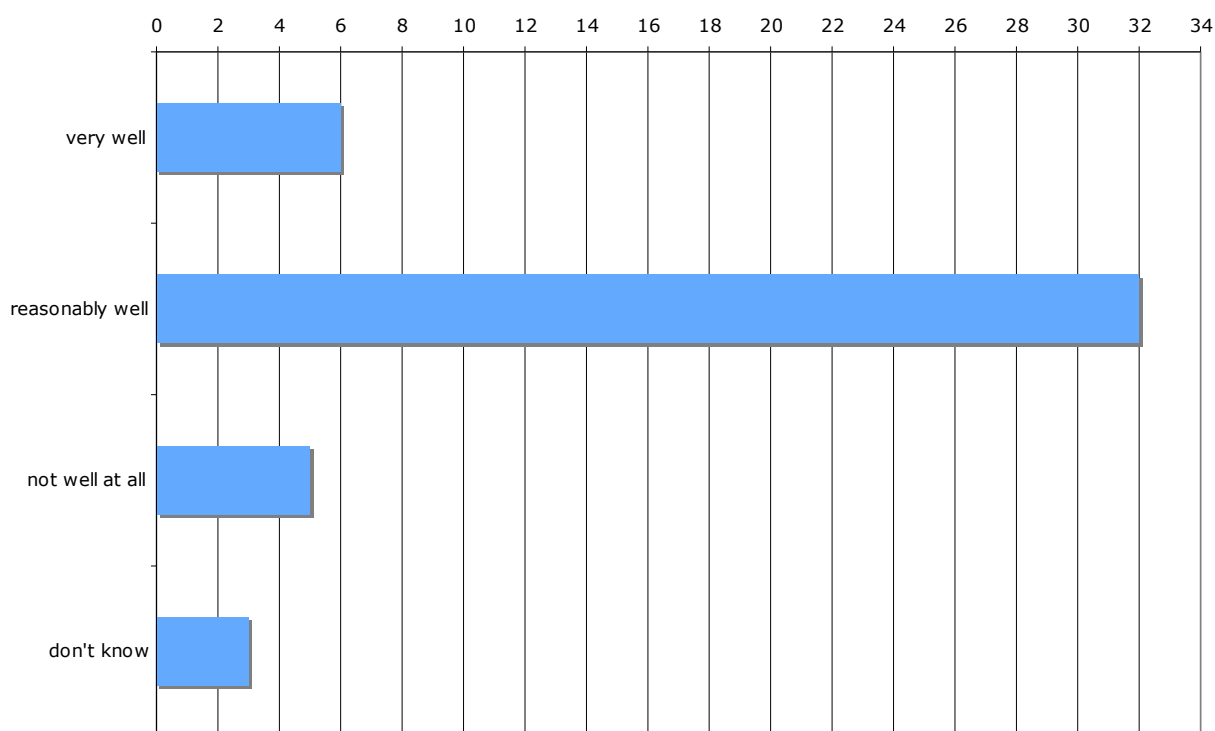


Figure 12 Respondents Views on How Well Their Network Realizes its Main Aims.

Overall there is a high level of satisfaction with network performance. Of the 46 who responded to this question 38 (82.6%) rated their network as performing very well or reasonably well. Only a minority said 'not well at all'. A selection of comments from those not satisfied is as follows;

“The knowledge base of the members is too diverse – there are too many who know too little about employment issues, and too few bother to read key documents such as Green Papers- too many members are infrastructure generalists”

“Few can see the bigger picture and few can step outside self interest”

“If the network had been stronger it may have stopped the reconstituted regional strategic group dropping all third sector representatives.”

“Engagement is difficult. The public sector often doesn't accept that the VCS has a legitimate policy role if they are also provider organisations

¹⁸ For information about recently evaluated networks contact vonne@vonne.org.uk

as they assume a conflict of interest but they are not even-handed as the private business sector providers are not excluded in this way.”

“Since 2006 the VCS has just been chasing funding to survive hence policy work has been put on a back burner”

“There has been too much attention relating to the funder’s interests through the Partnership Board (ONE) and now their interest has waned the network is forced into a crisis”

9.2 When asked what they thought that their network had achieved a number of themes emerged the most frequently mentioned where;

Voice and Representation

“The Coalition is groundbreaking - there still doesn’t seem to be anything like it in the country-linking together grassroots, excluded communities through infrastructure, giving a voice to groups who can often be overlooked...mechanisms are in place for sharing that voice and for external bodies (mostly public sector) to access a viable and credible voice of marginalized people.”

Recognition as a Strategic Player

“Significant influence on regional spatial strategy and recognition by non VCS environment sector bodies”

Policy Development and Influence

“Playing a key role in helping shape the mental health section of ‘Better Health Fairer Health’ regional strategy”

Bringing People Together for Discussion, Collaboration and Action

“Bringing partners together for discussion and action around issues”

“Good document on do we eat or do we heat”

Services to the VCS (for example they transmit information; provide infrastructure support; and help to improve skills.)

“Updating on funding and procurement activities for my organisation to use effectively”

“We have had some problems but it has been responsible for the development of some good infrastructure support to the VCS in the

region and hopefully it will do more via projects such as BASIS Round 2 funded policy project”

There were a few less positive answers regarding achievement.

“very little”

“I had hoped that it would be a way to bring about change but disability is not a Government priority and there is no organisation taking a lead at a regional level. If I felt that my time would be best used attending the network I would then be putting more in and getting more out of it but at the moment I don’t feel that and I am able to have a greater impact nationally”

“Difficult to quantify any real outcomes for the VCS other than networking and sharing information”

“Still early days so not a lot as yet; some research undertaken”

9.3 Respondents were asked to think beyond what it has done and to think about the **impact** of their network. Prompts were given to help them think about making a difference to policy, services, resource allocation, representation or anything else respondents might think as important. 38 respondents were in no doubt that their network has ‘made a difference’ in a number of areas but it is notable that a number either did not know what the impact has been or did not want to answer this question.

- ***Benefits to the VCS, particularly regarding networking; information sharing and collaboration.***

“Effective networking with large and small organisations”

“Created a sustainable and trusted information network”

“Ongoing professional development for staff, greater sharing and collaboration and increased recognition for rural development”

- ***Differences to partnership working***

“National information sharing and dissemination and joined up working between VCS and other agencies”

“Probably little on its own but more through working within the wider regional environment forum which also includes local authority and statutory agencies”

- ***Influence on policy and services and the promotion of issues***

“Building a stronger profile for rural issues in a policy vacuum and has sustained a rural agenda in public sector agencies through the process of local government reform in Northumberland and Durham”

“Strengthened the visibility of the LGBT community within the region and we have worked with providers and policy worker for LGBT friendly policies and provision”

“Strengthened the faiths voice and increased awareness of the contribution made by faith in the region”

“Car dependency is less, public transport has improved. NECTAR has been but one contributor”

“A sustained link between frontline VCS practitioners with real life experience of contracts and representatives of statutory agencies who design and develop regional and local commissioning and procurement processes”

- ***Stronger voice and representation***

“We now have a collective voice on equality issues and a mechanism for working together as VCS organisations working with people whose voice is often unheard by decision makers in the region”

“The network has secured representation on and from the Regional Improvement and Efficiency partnership. Informed the NE2 bid and will now have a role in a successful project”

“We have enabled the VCS to have representation at strategic level but the capacity to participate in a meaningful way is weak”

- ***Impact on the allocation of funding***

“It has made for fairer allocations of infrastructure funding”

“Attracted funding to enable social action by faiths working together”

“Has attracted income at regional level that has benefited local and sub-regional members”

- ***Making a difference for beneficiaries***

“It has helped people feel safer and more informed and for those who enquire about what is safe for LGBT to go to.”

A minority of some felt that the impact has been negligible.

“Lined up the funding for the REF but not got any further”

“None yet that I am aware of” “Not sure yet”

10. Representation

10.1 One of the main purposes of a regional network is to engage with the statutory sector and to represent the VCS at a regional level. The issues for representation by the VCS are many and various some are about the needs of the sector to enable it to contribute effectively to civil society but most relate to the needs of the groups and communities on whose behalf the sector is working. The voluntary and community sector has long regarded representation as a difficult issue because it raises questions of trust, good organisation and support and resources which are in short supply.

34 out of the 43 respondents who answered this question have represented their network and all but a few of these said that they were able to make an impact. Only 4 respondents said that their impact was ‘not at all’.

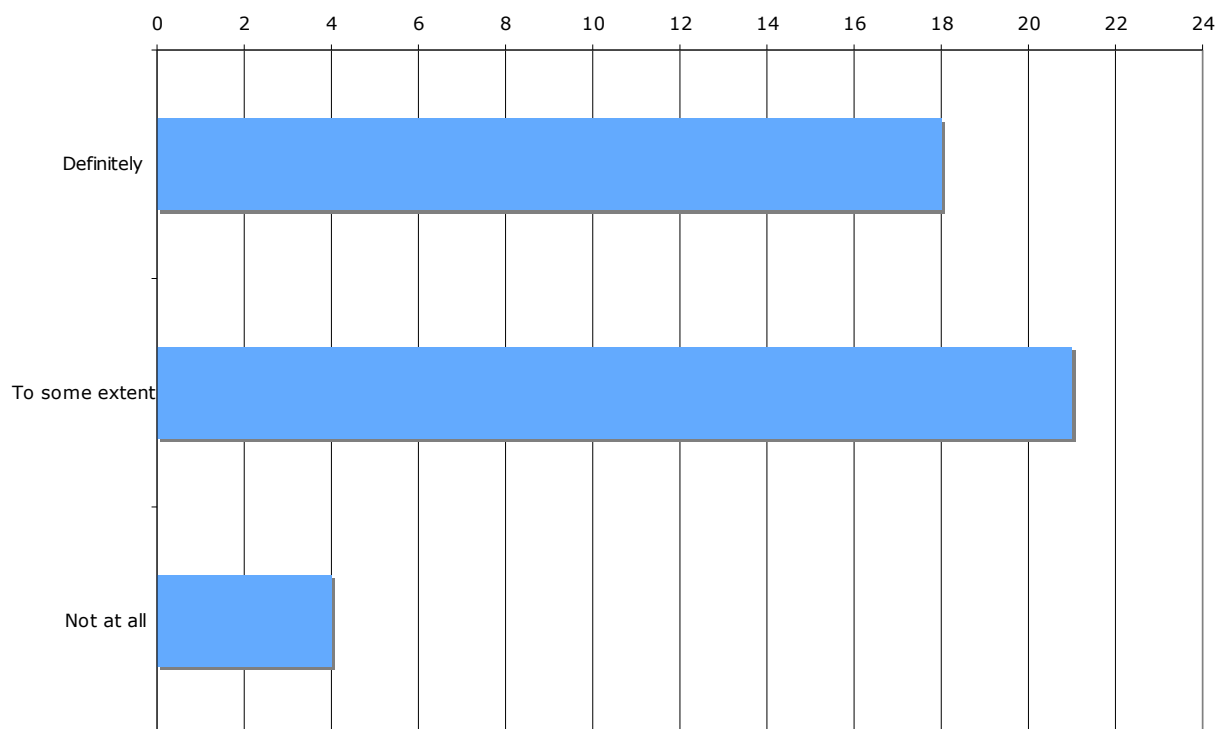


Figure 13 Representation – Making an Impact

Although the majority felt that they were able to make an impact there was clearly room for improvement and respondents were able to make suggestions about what is necessary to improve effectiveness when representing their network; these can be grouped under the following broad headings. Some of the comments come from telephone interviews.

- **Clarity of purpose**

“Requires clarity of the network’s role and the role of the representatives something we have been working on which should be much clearer in the future”

“If you are representing peoples’ views you have to be clear about whom you are speaking for”

“In order to have good representation we need to identify our target audiences, have clarity of purpose, legitimacy and a mandate and clear structures and processes for accountability.”

- **Recognition by the region’s strategic bodies of the role and value of the representation**

“Strategic recognition of the network and its role with public sector agencies”

“The VCS needs public sector recognition. Contributions should be recognized and be attributed and endorsed where the statutory body has agreed with a VCS view. Also attribution is necessary in public documents so the VCS can track its influence. ONE did this regarding the last RES which was appreciated.”

“The public sector usually wants to conduct the discourse from their perspective only and often it is national government which frames the parameters of the debate which can be limiting. Local authorities often want to lock people into their way of thinking. Also they want ‘the view from the sector’ when there may be many views so it may be necessary to demonstrate areas of consensus and areas of difference but the public sector can’t cope with that complexity”

- **Authority to speak on behalf of the network or sector.**

“For it to have the full trust/interest and mandate of its constituent members but this takes time and relationship building”

“It works because there is a lot of good will but if that goes we would have problems”

“A clear mandate and trust from the rest of the sector”

“Representatives have rights as well as responsibilities so there has to be trust”

“It is necessary to know how the public sector system works and its language but some VCS people think by doing that you are ‘selling out’.

- **Network structures and reporting mechanisms**

“Clear structures and routes for obtaining feedback for the benefit of the wider membership”

“It is possible to develop a code of practice around good representation. There are templates; we use one in training, which can be used as a starting point for discussion but each network would need to devise a charter appropriate for its purpose”

“There should be two representatives to ensure all meeting are covered and for support and we need a system for feedback to meetings. Representatives are reluctant to do the paperwork.”

“Newcastle CVS has an excellent template for representatives to report back – it could be replicated.”

- **Knowledge about other networks**

“Probably an induction into the regional networks which is probably looking at issues and mapping the relationship between networks and also finding out how effective each network is”

- **Resources – time and funding**

“Reliable funding is needed to help us promote our network more effectively.

Much of the above was encapsulated in a single comment from a network facilitator who said

“What would have helped me when I have on occasions represented the network are a clear mandate, clear objectives, and another

representative to share the responsibility with, time to prepare and to share afterwards and a clear protocol for sharing information gained”.

Size seems to be a factor in representing the sector.

“It is easier to represent a small group rather than a large one as larger groups need more formal consultative processes.”

“I recognize all the issues around representation we have them in (a sub-regional network) so if our network gets bigger, which it may do, then all the issues will have to be dealt with”

11. Section Three: What could networks do better?

11.1 Respondents were asked to say what they would like their network to do better. About a third of respondents did not answer this question the answers from the rest suggest that there could be improvements in *all* aspects of their work and views were expressed by those interviewed. The areas which stand out as needing improvement are - clarity about role and purpose; improved structures and processes; strengthening the network’s voice; greater influence on policy and securing more funding.

Clarity about role and purpose seems fundamental and is cited by many in need of improvement. Despite networks having terms of reference more work appears to be needed regarding clarity of vision, aims and objectives for the sake of existing members and for new ones and because the environment in which the network is operating changes over time. As well as the need for greater clarity regarding aims and objectives, conflicts of interest need to be sorted out, networks need to be more representative and inclusive; representation must be got right.

“More clarity and purpose around key objectives

“More focus”

“Vision is crucial which is understood and jointly owned”

“Develop a constitution, consult and feed back, sharpen vision and mission”

Structure and Processes

Respondents were asked specifically about the effectiveness of structures and processes for delivering their network’s objectives. Most felt that they are either ‘very effective’ or ‘effective’.

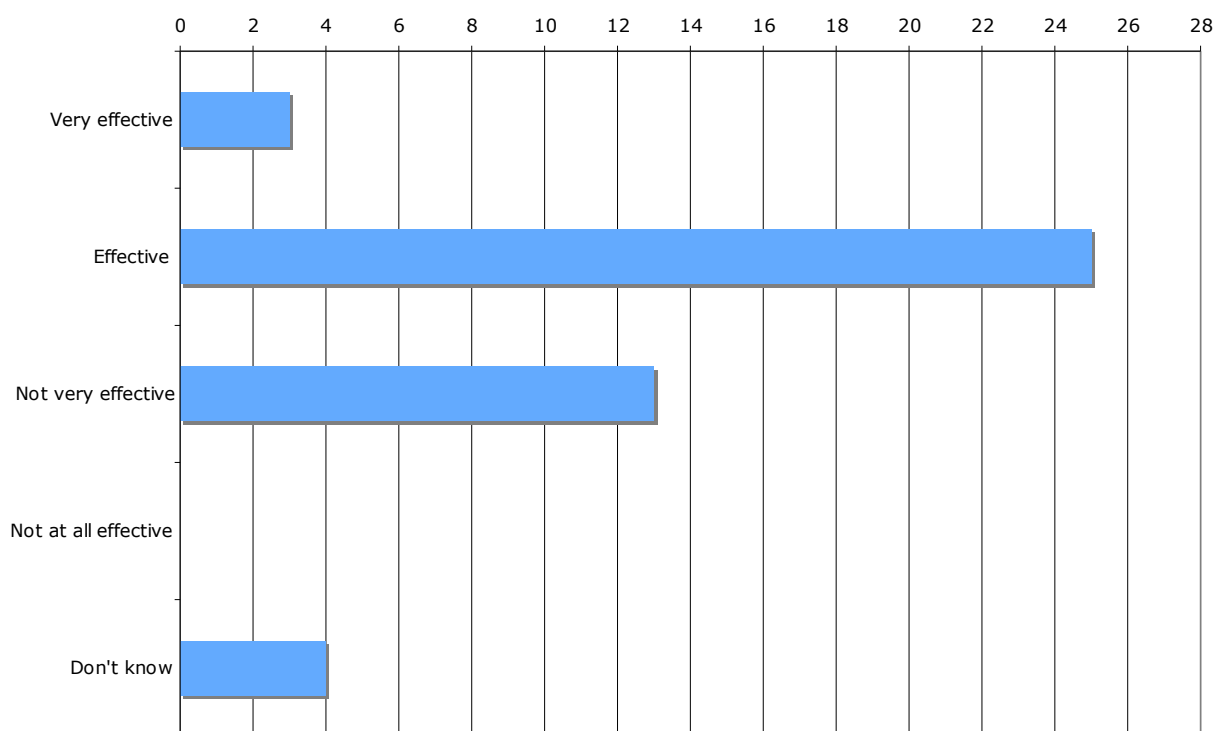


Figure 14 Effectiveness of Structures and Processes

Despite overall satisfaction many comments suggest that there is room for improvement. Issues raised included relevant membership, induction; conflicts of interest; conduct of meetings, policy input and briefings; strategy and action plans, representation mechanisms and resources to do the job properly.

“Induction meetings with information packs would help to know who is doing what and we need to know about other networks”

“It needs a good chair -there is a case for paying a chair to do a proper job. It is not good enough to rely on good will, there ought to be a proper selection process based on a job description for the role.”

“There is a need to make decisions better and to agree a strategy for the medium term. We’re working on this now in terms of agreeing an organisational structure”

“Be inclusive”

“It wasn’t working well- it was too unwieldy and members have different interests so we have split into two grouping for policy and practice with links between the two – its too early to say if this will work better”

“Communicate with those not represented at meetings to identify their needs and set out some achievable goals based on them.”

“There is much potential for conflicts of interest”

“Help to build robust locality networks to ensure mandate representation on MHNE Board”

Strengthen Network’s ‘Voice’ Some think that more attention should be given to promoting the sector’s ‘voice’, and its advocacy and campaigning roles.

“Have a greater voice in what older peoples needs are”

“Harness carers’ voice”

“To become more proactive, particularly in supporting those most excluded and in building effective campaigns”

“Campaigning and advocacy role is under developed because of limited resources.

Greater Influence on Policy

For some influencing policy needs to be strengthened.

“Greater influence on policy”

“The network needs a campaigning agenda and the public sector has to recognize that campaigning is a legitimate and important role for the VCS as we are not just service providers”

“Provide more policy briefings”

“Co-ordinate the collection of reliable evidence more effectively so the sector can mount an unassailable case”

“We know what the public sector wants from us – intelligence and we can provide it. Although there is good national evidence the weak link is getting it in and out at the regional level. We need some support from the universities and resources to collect and collate the evidence to make our case better”

“Capture and disseminate examples of good practice. Members should more actively feed information in to and out of the network.”

“I would also like to see closer and more pragmatic working relationships with the public sector agencies”.

“The public sector finds it hard for the VCS to have a policy role partly because they control the policy agenda and resources but also because they see the VCS as providers which they think, but wrongly, that there is a conflict of interest”

Some were very specific about the policy areas they wish to influence

“Influence changes in procurement methods”

“Influence transport policy in the new regional governance structure

“Engage broad cross sector partners to collaborate to increase the efficiency and contribution on Intercultural arts to the region’s economy and social cohesion”.

“Get a seat round the table for the implementation of the REF. Address interest issues in the sector”

Secure More Funding The lack of funding to support the network was frequently cited as a constraint which prevents the network doing all that it wants to do and from doing it well.

“It definitely needs dedicated resources for it to work well”

“A network of this size and complexity does need a funded facilitator but funding is not necessary for all networks.”

Time, money and staff capacity to develop strong evidence base, stronger advocacy and therefore to influence policy more”

“All networks could benefit from a small budget for specific purposes e.g. for a chair or to pay for specific pieces of work”

“Campaigning and advocacy role is under developed because of limited resources.

“Secure more funding, greater influence on policy”

“Some funding is needed to run a network but it depends upon the in kind contributions”

“We need more paid staff, I am putting in a lot as chair –I’m part chair and chief executive as I supervise the staff and give the work they do

for the network a steer. I think as we do so much for health, policy and commissioning so the region should fund us. After all the regional manger has said if our network didn't exist they would have to invent it"

11.2 Linked to the question regarding what respondents would like their network to better was another which asked them if there is anything they would like to change. Less than half answered this question; of those that did wanted to see changes to network leadership; structures and more resources.

"Stronger steering group"

"Need an informed chair, members who keep up dated in the subject. Fewer infrastructure organisations and more practitioners"

"Clear purpose and structure with actions identified and take forward. Successful out comes or issue to be simply stated to enable a wider majority of people understand how they can help and support aims"

"We are only just effective because we manage on small level of funding and have no dedicated full time resource to support the work which is generated. I would like to bring in adequate administration to allow for more concentrated energy into joint working and for campaigning and advocacy".

"We are working towards improving"

11.3 It was felt important to ask respondents whether they could think of alternatives to meetings (which are very time consuming and resource intensive) to meet the networks objectives. Less than half of respondents have answered this question of the 29 who did two felt that meetings are valuable.

"It is important to see people face to face"

"Regular meetings are necessary to network and to circulate specialist expertise"

Although not a substitute for meetings more imaginative and varied communication techniques were suggested to inform and to share information - more use of electronic communication, more bulletins, briefings and research, telephone conferencing and more links with other networks as well as having a sustainable point of contact.

"Electronic communication"

“Website and email communication

“Our web portal is well used by our members”

“Discussion forums might help (though I have yet to see an example of one working well in the VCS – jismail.ac.uk has some really good ones)”

“Co-coordinated, regular and consistent bulletins, backed with strong evidence and an ongoing programme of Action research.”

“Briefing papers”

“With travel time by public transport from Hartlepool to Newcastle meetings can take a whole day so we need more telephone and video conferencing”

12. What makes a lively and effective network?

12.1 Having been given an opportunity to give their own views about what makes for an effective network respondents were also asked to rate from a list of 18 factors and according to importance, which are necessary for a network to be lively and effective. Some things stand out as being more important than others. Ten characteristics are regarded as being **very important**;

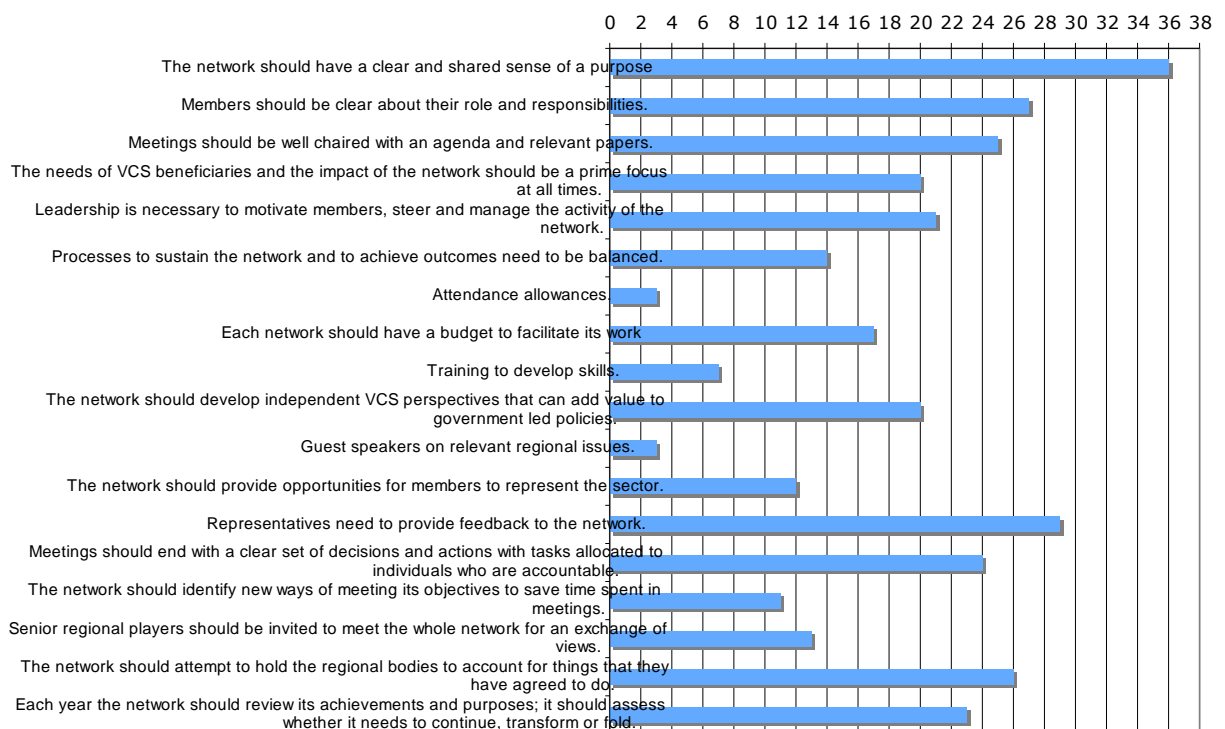


Figure 15 The Most Important Thing Needed to make a Network Lively and Effective.

1. The network should have a clear and shared sense of purpose (87.8 %)
2. Representatives need to provide feedback to the network (74.4%)
3. Members should be clear about their role and responsibilities (65.9%)
4. The network should attempt to hold regional bodies to account for the things that they have agreed to do (63.4%)
5. Meetings should be well chaired with an agenda and relevant papers (62.5%)
6. Meetings should end with a clear set of decisions and actions with tasks allocated to individuals who are accountable (61.5%)
7. Each year the network should review its achievements and purposes: it should assess whether it needs to continue, transform or fold. (57.5%)
8. Leadership is necessary to motivate members, steer and manage the activity of the network (51.2%)
9. and 10 were rated equally. The network should develop independent VCS perspectives that can add value to Government led policies. (52.6%) The needs of VCS beneficiaries and the impact of the network should be a prime focus at all times (51.3%)

13. Personal Aptitudes for Effective Networks

13.1 When asked about necessary aptitudes of members for network effectiveness the one that stands out very clearly is the ***'ability to rise above the needs of your own organisation'***.

"Leadership is very necessary to keep people to the common purpose of the network. The leader must keep reinforcing the message that this is not about you and your organisation but it is about us and our collective views"

"We are going to have a Members Charter which will set out standard for an organisation to be a member, a code of conduct governing the responsibilities and behaviour of the members of the network as we have a reputation to protect"

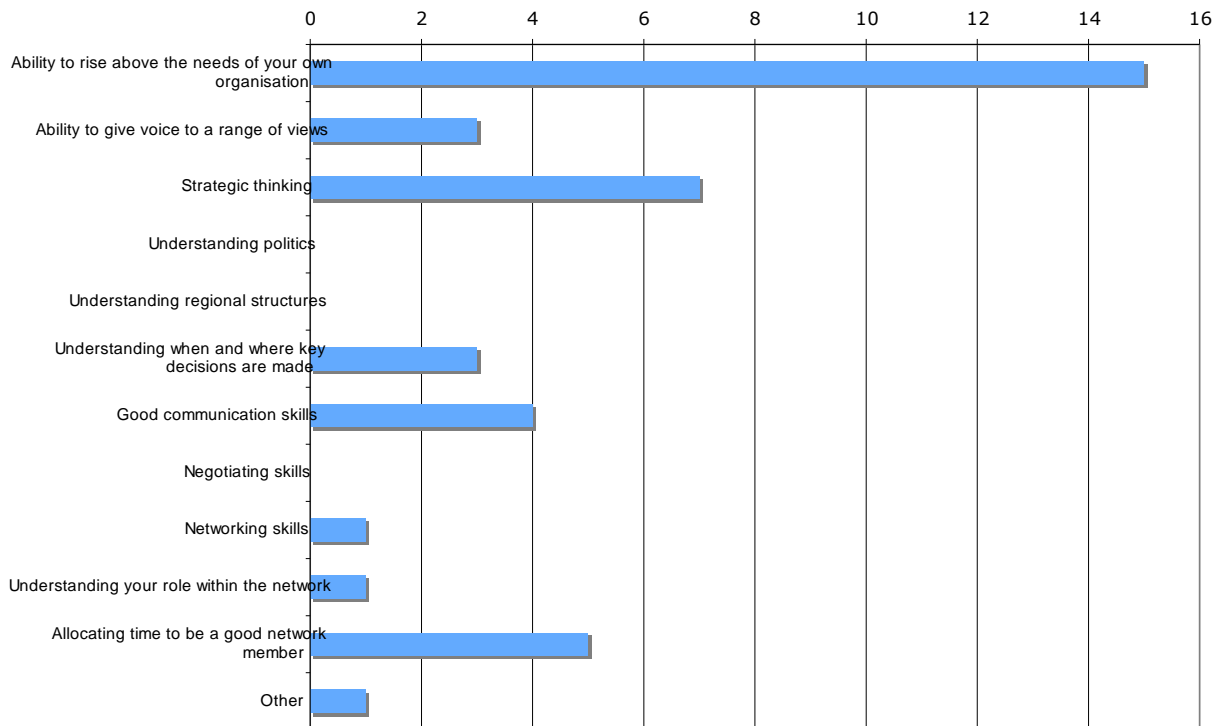


Figure 16 Personal Aptitudes for Effective Networks.

14. What would help network members to put more into and get more out of their network?

14.1 Respondents were clear about what would enable them to put more into their network and to get more out of it. The most frequently mentioned wish is for **more resources – time and money**. Typical responses were:

“Away day; more time” “Time to do it right”

*“Money; resources; more staff” “Better more sustainable funding”
“More time; funding; support”*

“Additional funds to facilitate quarterly and subgroup meetings and administration”.

“Employers need to recognize that network membership is a two way street and that membership requires working for the network and this should not be an add on to the day job”

14.2 Funding, although regarded as important, is not seen as a panacea. As many said what would be of help to them are reforms to the operation of the network regarding leadership; clarity of purpose and roles, commitments to deliver agreed actions; feedback from

representatives and clearer means of accessing impact, although some would say that funding is necessary to get all this in place.

When presented with a list of things which might be of benefit ***‘policy experts on tap to inform the network’*** received the most support from half of the respondents.

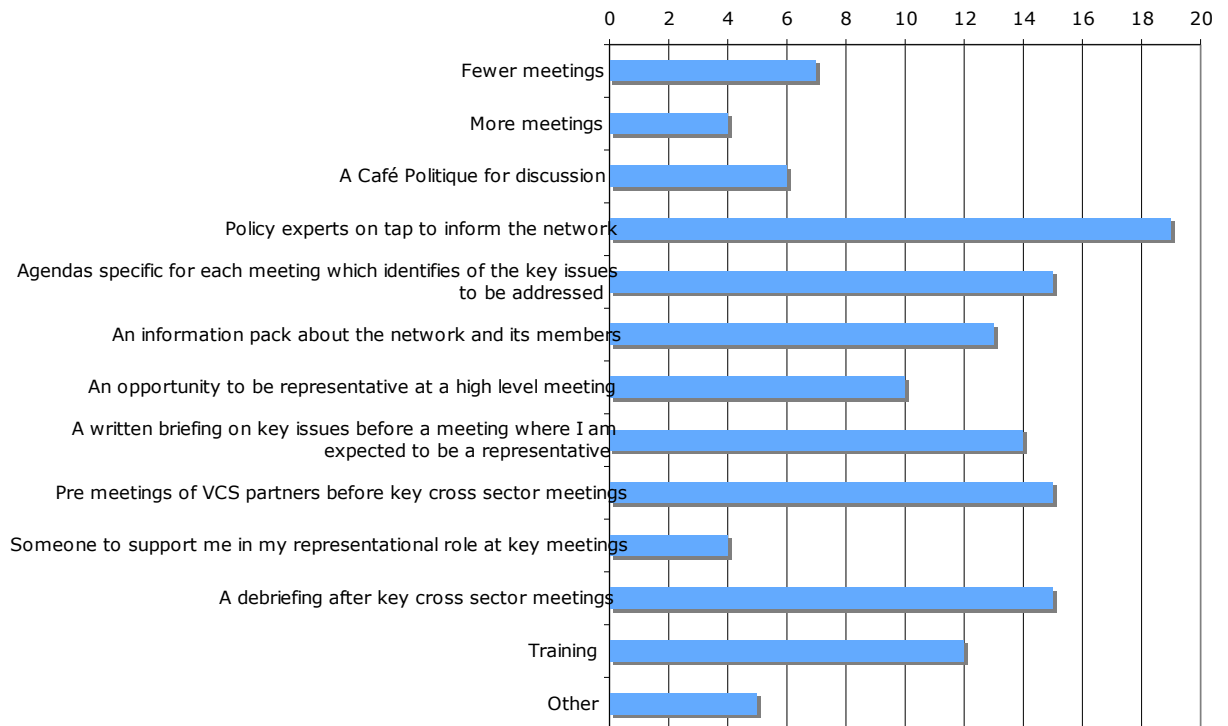


Figure 17 What Members Would Find Helpful?

“We need policy experts to help us decode the government jargon as we need to be clear about what is being said before we can make a critique of it- for example ‘engagement and empowerment’ may have a different meaning for the VCS than is the case for government”

14.3 Some said that they would find some ***knowledge and skill*** development helpful. Again briefings and high quality reports were mentioned; more knowledge about other regional networks

For some, training would be helpful and the most popular choice by far is ‘The politics and the decision making processes of the North East’ which was selected by 71.4% of respondents.

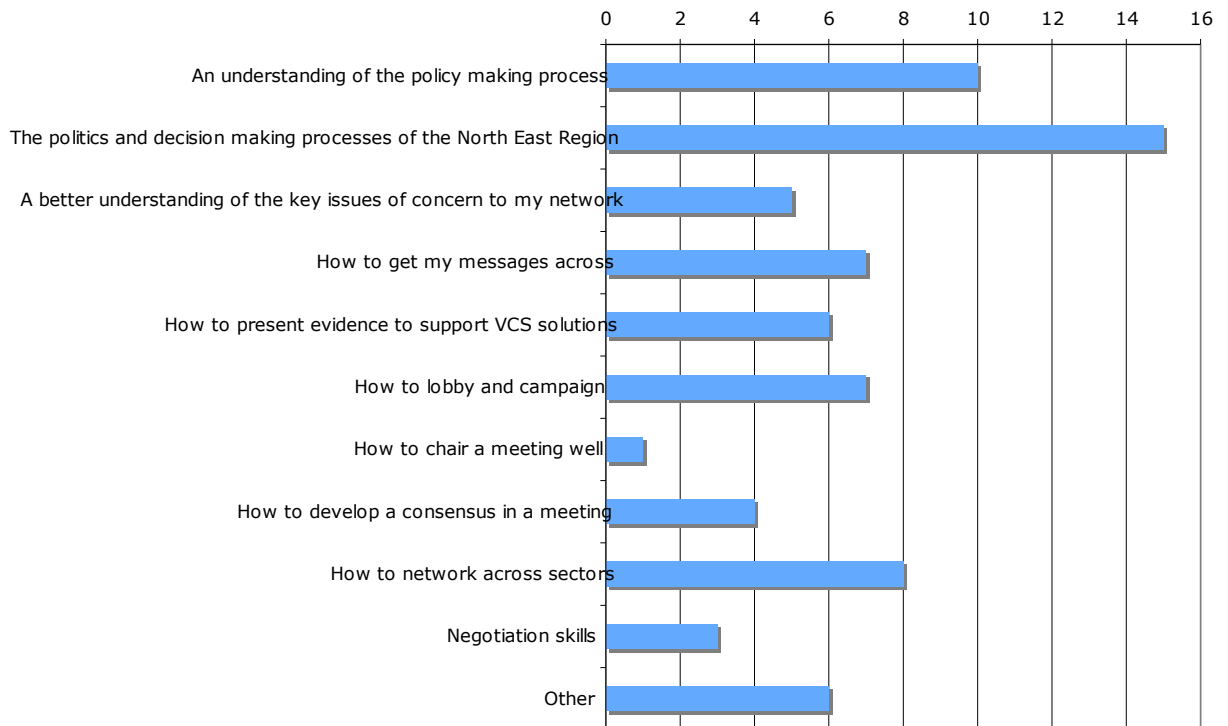


Figure 18 Skills Members Would Like to Develop

15. Who benefits from VCS networks?

15.1 Finally, given the time and effort going into the work of networks and the lack of evaluation regarding their impact effectiveness respondents were asked to say what they think are the benefits to themselves, their organisation, to the sector and to the region and its citizens from being a participant in their chosen network.

For **individuals** the benefits stated are:

- **Networking** which features strongly
“Networking with others with a similar focus”

“Knowing that I am not alone out there and many of my issues are common to others”

- **Learning**, especially regarding regional matters is a clear benefit to many

“Keep informed about what is happening in the region”

“Better knowledge of decision making structures in the region”

- **The feeling of being able to give something back’.**

“I feel that my role helps support and create change for the better of the community that I feel part of”.

“The sense that I am giving something back to my community”

For **organisations** the benefits of network participation are said to be:

- ***Belonging to a network promotes organisations***

“Raises the profile of our org in the region”

- ***It helps to deliver their organisations objectives***

“Helps deliver the aims of my organisation”

- ***It enables their organisation to work with others with a similar interest***

“Working with partners in a similar field with similar interests and concerns helps us to minimize waste, maximize potential and collaborate for more creative solutions and ideas”.

- ***It provides an opportunity for representation and influencing***

“Opportunity to influence transport policy in the direction of sustainability”

Benefits to the **VCS** are said to be:

- ***Networks facilitates a coordinated and stronger voice with an opportunity to influence***

“Supports the VCS to engage with people whose voices are not normally heard by decision makers”

- ***Enables organisations to work collectively***

“Working collectively to a better capacity than working individually”

- ***Promotes the value of the sector***

“It’s one of the mechanisms which contribute to the promoting the value of the sector”

- **Better engagement with statutory partners.**

“The statutory sector can’t just pick and choose in an arbitrary way when it comes to commissioning as there has to be discussion with us so commissioning and contracting is more transparent and fair”

Perhaps the ultimate test of value is the **impact on the region and its citizens**. Respondents think that VCS networks contribute to:

- **Improved quality of life**

“Better protection of woodland in the region”

- **Community Cohesion**

“Better community cohesion, raised profile and contribution to the regional economy”.

- **Better informed policy and decision making**

“Wider set of views brought to the table should result in more relevant policy for people”.

- **Better services**

“Services and policies are developed to benefit all, not just the usually included people”

Section Four: Discussion

16.1 This survey has effectively been a consultation with some VCS people who are actively involved in networks operating at a regional level. The study has elicited views about the purposes and effectiveness of networks and overall there appears to be a relatively high level of satisfaction, nevertheless respondents have ideas about how to make networks more effective. These can be turned into practical proposals and actions, some of which are suggested below.

16.2 However for VONNE there are some larger issues which ought to be addressed before making any commitments which will inevitably define the organisation’s roles and purposes and which draw on the organisation’s resources. Some key questions for VONNE are:

i) **What value does VONNE place on activity related to engagement with public policy** and facilitating the sector's 'voice' regarding regional issues linking the local to sub-regional and regional decision making forums? What is the relative value of this work compared to the value attributed to other activities?

ii) **Has the organisation got the right balance between being proactive and reactive?** Does it have much choice? For example to what extent should the VCS be following a Government agenda rather than promoting a third sector vision for the North East for the next decade which might be different? What should be the balance between VONNE taking a strategic lead on priority policy areas (with implications for network development) and responding to requests for support from a large number and range of networks set up by its member organisations? To what extent is VONNE constrained by the need to respond to expectations of Government which provides a large share of the funding of the organisation?

iii) **What is the point of VONNE's time and effort in the networks it is currently working with?** Should there be a review by management of current network activity by VONNE in the context of outcomes and impact as well as relevance in the light of the organisation's priorities and the changing external environment?

iv) **Are there too many VCS networks?** What impression does the large number of VCS networks operating at a regional level give to partners and the public? Is there scope for some rationalisation?

This research does not answer these questions because they are issues of value or first principle. However some of the findings of this study and the questions which they prompt can inform some of the thinking to help VONNE make decisions.

17.1 A Strategic Approach to VCS Network Development?

The large number of regional VCS networks in the North East region is confusing to the VCS and its partners.

Some network members would like more information about other networks (VCS and multi-sector); how they relate to each other and how effective they are so that they can see if there are areas of common interest with a view to coordinating activity.

A starting point could be for VONNE to develop the information in the briefing note of January 2009 to give more information about each network listed e.g. web-site details; aims; membership; key activities;

achievements and the key messages the network wishes to project. All networks should be encouraged to have a website or information on VONNE's website as some networks do. It would be useful if collation and presentation of network information were to be in a common format providing a directory which could be located on VONNE's website; this would need to be kept up to date. This information could be available for the induction of new members to a network and for discussion within networks.

There appears to be a large number of regional VCS networks given the relatively small number of policies where decisions are taken at a regional level. There may be scope for some rationalisation in the form of coordination or mergers. It would be helpful if VONNE and its regional VCS partners were to focus on some priorities in order to develop and communicate some clear messages to regional partners and to use VCS resources to best effect. It may be helpful if VONNE in collaboration with other regional infrastructure organisations were to develop ***A Regional Network Development Plan (Strategic)*** which could identify the networks which they think are most relevant to the regional policy agenda in order to provide a focus for work and resources. A strategic plan could provide a framework for development, support and coordination of a small number of effective networks to engage with partners to promote the views of the sector and help to frame public policy and practice from a VCS perspective.

The clarity and transparency afforded by a strategic plan for regional networks would assist VONNE in a number of ways. It would help to develop clear messages for the sector and its strategic partners of why these networks are valuable and to make decisions about the deployment of staff time. It would also provide a framework for developing a business plan to raise funds to provide good support a cluster of key networks. A starting point for VONNE would be a review of the current priorities and arrangements as there were some indications from this research that VONNE may be supporting one or two networks that may have outlived their usefulness or that the role of VONNE regarding a particular network may need to change. If VONNE were to allocate its resources more selectively by concentrating on a smaller number of key networks its impact might be greater and it may be able to use staff time to develop some models of effective networks from which other VCS networks could learn. This approach would not be easy because to some extent VONNE has its hands tied by central government funding with expectations that it provides infrastructure support through government programmes. A balance needs to be struck. VONNE would need to take some hard decisions about the number of networks it will actively support which would not be

universally popular but it may be a case of less means more if impact and effectiveness are the goals.

What about Leadership?

18.1 VONNE is already leading on setting up and supporting policy networks related to key regional policy issues. An extension of this leadership role is implicit in the recommendation above that it develop a rigorous and transparent strategic plan for regional VCS networks. However other networks will continue and each of them needs good leadership. The findings of this study suggest that the role of the chair, secretary or facilitator is crucial. To its credit, and without naming networks, it was apparent in this study that where VONNE was providing facilitation and support to a network there was more likely to greater satisfaction with its structures, processes and impact, but that may have been due to the dedicated resources and the skills of staff members to the networks activity. It is clear from the findings of this study that leadership is necessary if a network is to be relevant, lively and effective. And it is particularly needed in the following areas:

- To assist the network to develop a clear vision, which has to be commonly owned by all members who will not be allowed to put their own organisation's interests first. Creating a culture of enthusiasm, contribution and trust.
- To ensure that the network has a plan of action and has the resources to carry it out. Some of these resources may have to come in kind or in small donations from participating organisations.
- To have agendas that are relevant to the business, sent out in advance of meetings and that necessary papers to aid decision making are available.
- To be clear about who is doing what and that people are accountable to the network for acting on its behalf.
- To steer the network to review its work and to make critical assessments about effectiveness and future direction.

18.2 There are people in the sector who can provide this leadership the problem is their time to do so. In some situations a large organisation may be able to provide this resource in kind and it may help if the person in the role has specialist knowledge of the network's main policy area. It may be the case that some large specialist organisations feel that they can represent their interests or influence policy independently and this may be true. However the sector's voice and influence is likely to be stronger if these organisations can be identified and if not already playing a role in a policy network be strongly encouraged to do so as they can bring some expertise and possibly some resources. There are

already some examples of such altruism and where it exists networks seem to be the stronger for it. There is however a case for a chair or her/his employing organisation receiving some payment for this role. The chair should work to a job description and be recruited through a transparent and agreed process and serve for a time limited period.

Do networks need to do something about their membership?

19.1 A network is as strong as its members but some in this study have raised issues about 'are the right people members'? That is a question for each network to ask itself and perhaps they should do so; the answer should relate to a networks aims and objectives and its will to have an impact. Some networks wish to be 'inclusive' although it is not clear what that means in practice – open to all or based on a representative structure? Most want 'commitment', others stress specialist expertise rather than generalist infrastructure interests nearly all want members who don't put their own interests first, who are prepared to do some work for the collective endeavour and who trust and support others who are working for a common good. Inevitably some networks will have a diverse membership possibly with different priorities so to manage and make the most of that the following suggestions are worth considering:

- A ***Member's Charter*** to be signed by all members. A template for a member's charter could be drawn up and adapted according to the needs of individual networks. Such a charter would embody rights and responsibilities of organisations represented and of individual members; it could have some values and principles, a code of conduct for being a member and would set out expectations about members' contribution to the network etc. One large network based on a representative structure is very interested in having a charter which could have wider application. There is a danger however that network members will spend too much time on the process of getting this right at the expense of acting to make a difference.
- This project could recommend that all network members are properly inducted into a network – some networks do this but it may not be common practice. This would not only be useful to new members but also would emphasize that being a network member is a serious endeavour and should not be undertaken without thought and commitment by individuals and their employing organisations.
- There is an issue about network membership being comprised of paid staff of organisations when others have an interest too.

Networks should think about having mechanisms for volunteer and community involvement either through membership or shadowing opportunities. Expenses to cover the costs of attending should be paid if appropriate.

- Large networks tend to have members with different interests. Some join because they are mainly wanting to network with colleagues working in the same field as themselves others are interested in issues about practice and what they can learn from being a member and some are more interested in putting across the voice of their beneficiaries or influencing public policy; this mix is a recipe for confusion and tension and needs to be well managed. One network which felt that it had become 'unwieldy' has recently divided members in to two groups – 'practice' and 'policy' with mechanisms for sharing information and coordination. It is early days yet but for some groups this might offer a useful model for a new structure.
- Overall respondents did not think it is important to pay people to attend network meetings although, a minority of network members are known to support payment by the public sector as a matter of principle. Participating organisations should try to see network membership as part of the job and of the day job rather than an 'add on'. However there are issues about payment for time and/or backfill if the network or individual members are members of a multi-sector group or are doing something specific which is mainly for the benefit of the statutory sector. It would be difficult to get a common policy across the board as the public sector is diverse but the infrastructure organisations could raise the matter as an issue of principle with some of the key regional governance forums and multi-sector networks and individual networks might wish to formally request a statutory body for some financial support for specific pieces of work which are of assistance to the public sector. One respondent said that there is a tendency for the VCS to feel that it has to earn its place at the table and to be heard by doing a lot of free work for a cross sector forum and it does so at great cost to itself.

What can be done to improve the policy role of a network?

20.1 This study has confirmed that for many network members a main purpose of a network is 'to influence the design and delivery of public policy and services'. There is some evidence in this study that some networks are successful in doing this and we have cited network achievements in the policy fields of mental health; rural affairs; progress in equality for LGBT citizens; public transport; commissioning

and procurement; regional spatial strategy; woodland protection; public health; community cohesion and contributions to regional economic policies to name a few. Yet there is a feeling there needs to be *'a greater influence on policy'* and that *'since 2006 the VCS has just been chasing funding to survive so policy has been put on a back burner'*.

20.2 Networks which have been set up with an overt and explicit campaigning brief appear to be doing better as they have been clear to their members and others for what they are here to do, for example Mental Health North East (MHNE). This network has also secured funding from a charitable trust to work for policy change. NECTAR the combined transport network was cited as an effective VCS policy network and as its website shows it has a focus on policy and campaigning. It is the case however that most networks have multiple purposes and policy work often competes with other priorities and activities.

This study suggests that there is an appetite for developing independent VCS policy perspectives with a view to influencing the statutory sector and more of it should be happening. It is not clear from this study whether independent VCS policy promotion is constrained by a network being heavily dependent upon Government funding. Government funding has strings attached about purpose and often government funding for a VCS network comes with conditions, the meeting of which can take priority over outwardly facing activity and impact. Some of these government funded networks appear to spend a great deal of time on structures and processes to set up and maintain the network. Where this is the case the outcomes and impact is for some members difficult to discern, although some would argue that where there is a large coalition with a complex structure it can take a long time to become established and for it to begin to engage with the substantive policy agenda and influencing the way services are delivered.

20.3 Despite the desire to influence policy it is not clear whether many of the VCS networks are geared up for doing it, although there are some notable successes. Overall the policy formulation role of most networks does not appear to be well developed, however it may be necessary to have a number of in depth studies about the activities and impact of some networks to be sure about this. There have been some recent evaluations of a handful of networks so it might be useful to review them to find out what they have to say about what they have achieved regarding policy development, advocacy and influence.

20.4 If policy work is not as good as network members would like it to be is possibly because of the lack of capacity rather than a lack of will. Few organisations have dedicated staff time to do policy work.

VONNE's Policy Officers are few and are thinly spread and are conscious that they do not have the time to do all that they would like to do and think should be done. The policy dimension of many networks seems to be mainly about the provision of information about government policies which is necessary for discussion, interpretation and critiquing but all of this is not sufficient for a network to have an impact on policy making. The sector needs to develop supplementary or alternative perspectives to the policy agendas of the government of the day (which can be centrally driven and not always sensitive to regional needs) and this requires expertise and skills.

20.5 Some networks are aware that they need a research and data resource to be more effective. National organisations are cited as being a good source of information as is VONNE but it is local evidence that is needed to make a strong case for change and this is in short supply. Yet, there are five universities in the region but their links with the third sector, with a few exceptions, are not strong although there are some signs that this is growing. Of course university expertise is not free but areas for collaboration could be explored in a specific policy context. One example of where this is happening is via Newcastle and Durham Universities' BEACON project working with the rural network RuCANNE and some of the larger organisations in the region, (for example Barnardos), work with university researchers on specific projects related to policy.¹⁹ More joint VCS / university policy discussions such as those convened by Professor Fred Robinson at St Chad's' College at Durham University might lead to collaboration for policy related research and intelligence gathering.²⁰ There is also scope for the VCS engaging post-graduate students in research projects useful to the sector and to students via fieldwork opportunities - students would welcome it and the VCS would benefit.

20.6 When presented with a list of things that might be of benefit to a network more than half of respondents said they would like 'policy experts on tap to inform the network'. Each network could if it wished, identify some policy experts in the region who can be called upon from time to time to assist with their policy making role. Independent policy work based on good evidence arising from VCS experience and placed in the right arena at the right time can have an influence.

In recent years at the VONNE AGM there has been opportunity for the wider membership to hear about and engage with policy work but these short information sessions have limitations. VONNE could with some

¹⁹ Barnardos North East has secured funding from Millfield House Foundation for some university assisted peer research on youth homelessness. (May 2009)

²⁰ Fred Robinson of St Chad's college Durham University convened a number of cross sector policy focused round table discussions in 2008.

partners hold an annual **VCS Regional Policy Summit** drawing on the expertise and membership of VCS networks. It might be possible for VONNE to this with some partners such as IPPR (North); the RDA and ANEC which would extend influence and help to cover the cost. Such an event should be over two days and provide a showcase for good policy work, engagement and influence and provide a discussion forum in key policy areas. It would provide an opportunity for the sector to get some of its regional messages across to the wider sector and partners. Linked to this could be training sessions, master classes and workshops on how to get messages across, on lobbying regional decision makers and on how to campaign effectively. The involvement of public sector and business leaders in an event of this kind may add some liveliness to the debates and provide opportunities for cross sector networking which many VCS people would welcome.

It was clear from this study that there is a need to build the networks' policy capacity however building the sector's strength in policy making alone is not enough to bring about change. The messages have to be got across so engagement, representation, lobbying and campaigning also need to happen.

Engagement and Representation

21.1 Respondents frequently complained of a lack of recognition from statutory partners. Clearly there are problems concerning engagement arising from complexity, cultural differences and an imbalance of power. The findings and recommendations of IPPR's research on engagement in the North of England should be considered along with the findings and recommendations of this research on networks with particular reference to the opportunities arising from new and changing governance arrangements in the region.

There are things that networks can do:

- Developing relationships is conducive to effective engagement so it might be useful if a network's leading members initiate a meeting once a year with the chair of a multi-sector network to discuss the role and expectations of the VCS representatives and what they can bring to the discussions.
- Minutes of meetings should be monitored and challenged by VCS representatives if necessary. A complaint from the sector which is voiced in this study is that VCS point of view are rarely written into the minutes of meetings and that sometimes VCS ideas are attributed to someone from the public sector. Attribution is

important for people to feel that they are making an impact and for tracking influence over time.

- Where barriers to satisfactory engagement are the fault of government agencies something can now be done by way of challenge by the third sector as there are now levers given the need for the statutory sector to engage with the third sector via performance assessment and National Indicators.

21.2 Representation poses difficulties for the sector around issues of principle for example, who has authority to speak for the sector and of putting satisfactory processes in place especially regarding support and accountability. There are both strategic and practical issues to be addressed and most are obvious and widely understood but it is clear that often basic requirements are not put into practice. Networks and individuals engaged in representing the sector need to address the following if they are to be effective.

- i. The VCS messages must be clear but that does not necessarily mean that a single and simplistic view has to be put forward. Skilled representatives should be able to get partners to engage with complexity if necessary by identifying the areas where there is consensus and areas where there are dissenting or different views. Preparation by the sector's representatives in the form of written submissions and for presentation at meetings is essential, based on clear messages coming out of their network. These messages need to be about what it is that they want to be heard, what they want to change and how they think change can be brought about. The sector will be taken more seriously if solutions can be offered.
- ii. Network members also need to be clear about to whom they need to be speaking. The study identified a need for some political education for the VCS about who runs the North East and where and how decisions are made. This political intelligence is important if the VCS wishes to exert influence, and it seems to be lacking. There is expertise in the region to be found in organisations such as ANEC and there are political and VCS leaders and academics which can help to share political information with VCS networks. To be influential the VCS has to understand the politics of the region as well as its formal governance arrangements.
- iii. There is a role for the regional infrastructure organisations to identify for all the key networks where decisions are taken and

how they can get a seat at the table and if necessary open some doors. Given the changes in governance in the region and the growing importance of sub-regional decision making forums this is an urgent matter to be addressed and the sector may need to be more assertive about its right to participate in key decision making forums. VONNE should draw on good practice if it can be found in other regions to help argue the case for being represented as an equal partner at the highest levels in regional governance for example on the new joint Local Authorities Leaders Board with the RDA responsible for the Integrated Regional Strategy.

- iv. When any person is representing a VCS network there needs to be clarity about whether he or she at the table is a participant offering expertise or speaking as a representative of the sector with a mandate or authority.
- v. There is a need for clarity about which organisation is best able to represent the sector in particular forums. Infrastructure organisations must decide whether it is appropriate for them to represent the sector or whether they should be facilitating a network and its representatives to do so. The generalist or specialist distinction might be helpful and VONNE could have a formal agreement via a 'memorandum of understanding' with the key specialist networks similar to the one it has with Mental Health North East.
- vi. It is important for the sector to field its most effective advocates who may vary from meeting to meeting.
- vii. Networks need guidance about the structures and processes for representation. The most needed reform is for there to be clear mechanism for feedback in the form of a debriefing of representatives after meetings and to the networks members. It is not easy for a single person to act as a representative of a complex sector with multiple issues so a buddy system as standard practice might be helpful. A representative should be able to take a non-participating 'friend' to a meeting and, ideally, if a representative cannot attend there should be a named alternative who could step in. All of this may need to be negotiated and may meet some resistance but 'nothing ventured, nothing gained' and such requests are not unreasonable given the capacity pressures on the VCS and if the multi sector grouping wants to get the best from the VCS.

- viii. It might be useful for each network to have a **VCS Representative's Charter**. There are templates available to kick start the process; developing a practical tool to aid good representation would be time well spent by network members.

What about Lobbying and Campaigning?

22.1 Outside of the formal structures for representation the sector needs to become better at lobbying and campaigning. VONNE has raised the profile of the need for campaigning but more needs to be done. Where networks have run a successful campaign it would be useful to share their experiences with other networks. If any new resources are available for network development allocating some to campaigning would be well spent. Capacitybuilders could be asked to fund a network as well as individual organisations to run a campaign from which lessons can be learned.

Are Too Many People attending too Many Meetings?

23.1. There is no simple answer to this question but it is one which should be asked by individual network members, their managers and their employers because staff time is an organisation's main resource and time for the VCS are hard. There are a large number of networks (and this study only focused on the regional ones), many people are attending not only one but several networks and those who responded to this survey say they rarely miss a meeting and additionally a number are representing their network elsewhere. Moreover many who attend are senior managers so network participation can be financially expensive to an organisation so it has to be worthwhile.

The answers will depend upon whether networks are delivering their aims and objectives and if not can they improve? The second of those questions will depend upon a number of factors but mainly on leadership, organisation and resources to get things right. A useful starting point would be for all networks to build in a simple self-assessment tool to review and evaluate performance on an annual basis. An infrastructure organisation may be able to assist in providing guidance about methods.

Given the amount of time spent in meetings and for some considerable travelling time too, respondents were asked if they could suggest any alternatives to meetings to achieving their aims. There was not any enthusiasm for fewer meetings but there was for making the business of meetings more efficient by using a greater range of communication methods. All networks should have a website providing comprehensive information about policy, activity and achievements. For some,

telephone conferencing would be a bonus between meetings to share information and to generate ideas. This is a method used by a high profile and successful national anti-smoking campaign which telephone conferences with activists every week. What networks do need is minutes soon after meetings and information bulletins as well as the tools to do the job such as relevant agendas, policy briefings; research data and a sustainable point of contact. Perhaps most important of all they need feedback on the impact of their activity.

Capacity and Resources.

24.1 There is truth in the old adage that 'if something is worth doing then it is worth doing well'. It is clear from this study that people engaged with networks certainly think that it is a necessary activity but many are frustrated by seeing that certain things could be done better. One of the refrains from the VCS is that there is not the capacity to get it right and that for networks to be really effective they need some financial support for some dedicated time to facilitate, administer and carry out task on behalf of networks. Raising money and on a sustained basis to do things over and above direct service delivery has never been easy for the VCS and during a recession it is likely to become harder. We have noted just how few people are doing policy work in the region both in specialist and infrastructure organisations and there will be an increasing tendency for some staff to be given a policy role in addition to their main organisational role and sometimes the skills to do this properly will be lacking. For networks to achieve their potential they need more financial support than most now have. What can be done?

- A Regional VCS Network Development Plan could be located in a longer term VCS engagement programme' with network activity in key regional policy areas at the heart of it. The public sector in partnership with a charitable trust (if possible) should be asked to fund this important civil society initiative for the benefit of the region.
- Some larger specialist organisations could be asked to actively engage with a network if they are not already doing so and to offer some network support services in kind for administration, meetings, information and publications etc.
- Individual networks are unlikely to ask for a membership fee but they can ask some of the organisations who are key players to jointly fund areas of activity such as policy work, research and for campaigning. Where networks are large the cost to individual organisations will be small. If a network is running a specific campaign they could fundraise for it by getting a little money from

a large number of people who might support it and in so doing raise the profile of the campaign.

Section Five: Conclusions

25.1 Those who participated in this survey are clear that networks are important for the VCS to achieve its objectives. networks are clearly relevant to the Regional VCS leadership strategy regarding promoting the sector's voice and campaigning for social change. Networks are seen as of particular value as a means of sharing information; to engage with regional partners; to voice the sector's concerns and to influence policy and services. Although network participation is time intensive and it necessarily competes with other organisational activities respondents were able to say that networks bring benefits to individuals who are members, their organisations, the wider VCS and to the region and its citizens. There is however room for improvement in how they are run and in what they are achieving.

Recommendations

26.1 VONNE should consider this report and also the forthcoming IPPR report on engagement between the statutory and third sector in the North of England and make decisions about the role of VONNE in relation to networks operating at a regional level.

Some suggested areas for *priority action* are:

Strategic

- 1) The questions posed in section four of this report should be considered by VONNE in the light of the organisations priorities and the information contained in this report.
- 2) VONNE should immediately review the networks it is currently supporting and assess whether it wishes to make some changes and allocate its resources, especially staff time, accordingly.
- 3) For clarity, VONNE should quickly develop a **Regional VCS Network Development Plan (Strategic)** in the context of regional governance arrangements and regional policy priorities and the need to improve statutory and third sector engagement. The plan should provide a framework for priorities in network development and for fundraising to support it.
- 4) VONNE should plan a **VCS Regional Policy Summit** with partners and involving key networks for 2010. The aims could be to set out a

vision for the North East and to promote the role and contribution of the VCS in developing civil society. Given the importance and potential of such an event some dedicated funding should be sought to make it happen.

Infrastructure support

- 5) VONNE could provide comprehensive information about regional networks, including some models of what is working well within the region and possible elsewhere and place it on the VONNE website.
- 6) Networks should be provided with a briefing note about the key findings of this report. They should be encouraged to review their work and develop operational protocols. Particular attention should be given to vision, leadership, membership roles and responsibilities, structure and processes; policy development; engagement and representation; assessing impact and coordination with other networks.
- 7) VONNE, working with some networks could develop templates for a Network Members Code of Conduct/ Members Charter and a Charter for Representation.

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