

‘Working Together’ A Strategy for the Voluntary and Community Sector and the Learning and Skills Council

Evidence Digest: Main messages from the consultation

Introduction

1 This report summarises the responses received during consultation on ‘Working Together’, the LSC strategy for working with the voluntary and community sector (VCS). It does not provide a comprehensive analysis of the results; rather it seeks to highlight the main messages emerging from the consultation exercise and give a sense of respondents’ priorities. Though the key reason for its publication is transparency on the part of the LSC, it also provides some insights into perceptions about the current ‘state of play’ between the sector and the Council’s offices and staff, by way of context and baselines for implementation of the strategy.

The consultation process

2 The consultation ran over a period of thirteen weeks from 24th December 2003 to 23rd March 2004. The draft strategy was published on the LSC and NIACE websites, and copies were distributed to some 3,600 organisations, including local LSCs, VCS organisations and umbrella bodies, local authorities and organisations in the health sector. Additionally, electronic copies went to key regional and sub-regional VCS umbrella bodies and networks for further cascading.

3 Written responses were invited via a questionnaire in the document which was structured around the five themes of the strategy, and over 200 were received.

4 In addition to this a series of formal events was held, with LSC and VCS speakers, and workshops structured around the five strategy themes. Two, designated national events, involved up to 200 participants, and a further eight, focused regionally in different parts of England, involved up to 50 participants each – a total attendance of 500-600 people.

5 Additionally, VCS organisations themselves were invited to organise their own consultation events or to add the topic to regular meetings, with financial support from the LSC, and an organisers’ resource pack. This proved a popular, effective and economical approach, giving a voice to small, local VCS groups in particular. Some fifty events took place across the country, with numbers ranging from four to 200, and it is estimated that up to 1,300 participants took part overall.

There was insufficient data on the nature of respondents' home organisations to provide a thorough analysis of the proportion of comments coming from the VCS, from local LSCs etc. What information there was, however, and a judgement on the content of feedback received, indicates that VCS organisations were clearly in the majority in both written comments and event attendance, and that the sector was represented at every level - national, regional, and local organisations, as well as a mix of infrastructure bodies. The majority of local LSCs contributed; LEAs, colleges and central and regional Government were also represented, as well as a small number of private sector and trade union respondents. The predominance of the VCS is in turn reflected in the content of this report.

6 Despite a notional structuring around strategy themes, workshop discussions generally ranged beyond the specific questions posed, to reflect in a more subjective way on the wider relationship between the LSC and VCS, and to concentrate on delegates' top priorities. This in itself was informative. Most discussions, whatever the nominal title, generally spent time on contracting and funding issues. By contrast, discussion of the VCS' potential as strategic partners in planning and as sources of expertise was often hard to sustain and it was clear this was a role which relatively few delegates had experienced or considered.

Structure of the report

7 Wherever possible this report brigades the consultation evidence around the five specific themes in the draft strategy. However, it begins with a number of general observations, frequently made, which span these categories. Throughout the text, direct quotes are included where they are typical of comments received. The Appendix contains illustrations of existing approaches to joint working revealed through the consultation process.

General views on the document

8 The strategy was warmly welcomed by the overwhelming majority of respondents. Typical comments were:

"We welcome the aims of 'Working Together' and the recognition of the role of the VCS in contributing to lifelong learning. Developing a workable strategy to put into practice the governmental compact with the sector is essential if VCS potential is to be developed and resourced."

VCS umbrella/representative body

"There is much to commend here. The strategy is very much in line with the kind of culture/step change we want to achieve in Government's relationship with, and support for, the VCS."

Central Government

"Yes – this is the first formalised working document, and very welcome. It will take time for there to be a cultural change on both sides."

Local LSC

However many respondents from all sectors pointed out that the LSC would need to be careful to manage expectation amongst VCS organisations.

9 The document's analysis of the issues was generally felt to be accurate. Confirming this, the majority of comments emphasised and developed points already made in the draft, rather than adding new ones. By far the most common comment was that "the proof of the pudding is in the eating", respondents generally agreeing with the aims of the strategy, but expressing concern about the level of resource that would be dedicated to implementation, and about the impact of the strategy at local level.

The final version of the strategy reflected this desire for action, most noticeably by including an implementation plan with timescales and lead responsibilities assigned. Other changes were largely a matter of emphasis, responding to the weight given to certain issues during the consultation. The key concerns might be summarised as:

- capacity, in terms of resources and skills
- culture, as both an enabler and a barrier
- consistency of approach; and
- clarity of expectation.

The only other difference of any significance between the consultation and final versions is some restructuring of the final two sections so that consideration of the VCS as a channel of communication sits with other issues around expertise, advice and strategic engagement in Section Four, leaving Section Five dealing solely with LSC/VCS working relationships.

Cross-cutting issues

10 A culture change within the LSC, permeating the whole organisation from national through to local level, was seen as critical to a full appreciation of what the VCS can offer, as well as to good working relationships. Secondments from the LSC to VCS organisations were often advocated as a way of encouraging knowledge sharing and helping develop a deeper mutual understanding. There was some feeling that residual stereotypes of the VCS (such as seeing organisations solely as providers of basic skills or 'first steps' provision) are a barrier to LSC/sector engagement around workforce development and strategic planning and funding.

11 VCS respondents felt strongly that perceived sub-regional differences, and unevenness in LSC's approach to the sector (in comparison to FE colleges, for example) would need to be addressed for the partnership offered by the strategy to be seen as genuine, mutual and equal. Some argued for local implementation groups overseeing a set of common 'minimum expectations' for the VCS across the country covering issues such as core funding.

12 Respondents called for a shift in LSC/VCS engagement, and particularly funding, from an insistence on innovation towards stability and sustainability. Mainstreaming funding was widely seen as desirable but there were concerns among both LSC and VCS about the sector's readiness to meet the associated requirements, and the potential effect of mainstreaming on its nature and independence. Potential erosion of the sector's ethos and autonomy was a recurrent concern.

13 VCS and LSC respondents identified lack of capacity in the VCS (both resources and skills) as a major barrier to the implementation of the strategy, and agreed that capacity-building needs must be addressed before the sector can realise its full potential. Just as LSC staff need to be able to work with the VCS, reciprocal efforts are required among the sector to adjust to LSC standards, taking action where necessary to 'bring the rest up to the standards of the best'.

14 LSC and VCS organisational capacity was recognised as a limiting factor on direct engagement, and the consortium approach was generally seen as the best way to connect local LSCs and VCS organisations and get VCS organisations together to bid for funds. However, there was concern that consortia are not always sufficiently inclusive, and that dealing exclusively with consortia may lead the LSC to overlook organisations in touch with the very hardest to reach learners.

15 Consortia or other infrastructure organisations could also play a helpful role in providing other 'intermediate' services for smaller VCS organisations such as information, advice and guidance, communication, capacity building and workforce development. However VCS respondents pointed out that lack of financial stability for member organisations and intermediary bodies jeopardised existing infrastructure and inhibited further development. LSC investment in well-connected and credible coordinating structures and systems was seen as mutually beneficial to both the LSC and the sector.

16 It was argued that the strategy should take a long-term view, for example taking account of the end of ESF which is a main source of support for many VCS organisations.

Finally, it was noted that there was no mention of the learner in the strategy, and that as the end 'users' of what is being delivered, they ought to be more prominent.

"There is no mention anywhere in the strategy of participation from the learners themselves."

VCS umbrella/representative body

Section One: Aims and rationale of the strategy

17 The overwhelming response to the aims and rationale of the strategy was positive. However some respondents were concerned about the role envisaged for the VCS, feeling that the LSC needed to acknowledge that the

sector does not provide learning in isolation, but rather has a wider, holistic role to work with people in all aspects of their lives. Too narrow a focus could inhibit the sector's potential to bring added value to the LSC's agenda and 'join up' with complementary policies and initiatives. Linked to this was the fear expressed by some organisations that a narrow LSC agenda, tied to funding, would have an impact on the independence of the sector, compelling organisations to change what they do to qualify for funding.

"It must be recognised by the LSC that the learning offered by the VCS is often only part of the range of activities undertaken within the sector and individual organisations. This factor needs to be taken into account when LSC staff build relationships with colleagues in the sector."

VCS umbrella/representative body

18 Some responses commented that the strategy did not properly recognise the diversity of the sector, or the needs of learners, and it was suggested that this was because LSC was simply using the VCS to meet its targets.

"There is a concern that the strategy really only meets the needs of the LSC by using the sector to deliver services to their most difficult to reach groups. There still seems to be lack of understanding of the sector and how it operates."

A sector-wide VCS umbrella/representative body

19 VCS organisations felt it was important for 'Working Together' to remain linked with other LSC strategies on equality and diversity and widening participation, and for implementation of all three to be coordinated.

20 Respondents confirmed their support for the principal of 'mutuality' and partnership that underlies the approach to the strategy. However, many were keenly aware that the LSC, as the provider of funding, was potentially the dominant partner in the relationship. Many emphasised the importance of transparency in mutual expectations to ensure that all organisations, especially small ones, were treated fairly.

"Just as the VCS approach each individual as an individual, which enables trust to be built and the individual to develop, so the LSC needs to approach the way it develops its relationship with VCS in a similar manner."

Voluntary organisation

21 Some organisations expressed concerns around current levels of VCS representation and influence, feeling that if the sector is to be a valued partner of the LSC it has to be consulted and represented at all levels including the senior and strategic.

"Need to develop a better understanding between LSC and Voluntary and Community Sector as it is obvious that LSC do not understand how the sector operates!"

Comment from local VCS-led consultation event

Some advocated the establishment of a clearly defined framework to ensure true partnership between the LSC and VCS, manifested by the incorporation of VCS interests in strategic planning.

“It is important that the strategy for relating to the sector is part of an overall strategy, and that the different roles that can be played by the sector are referred across into the mainstream planning process”

Voluntary organisation

22 Although most respondents supported the actions proposed, they felt that the semi-autonomy of local LSCs could present a problem, with varying interpretation of the strategy leading to inconsistency of implementation. Respondents called for mechanisms to ensure that there is no ‘post code lottery’ for the VCS.

“There is an inconsistency about national working with the VCS and how this is reflected at a local level – will the strategy change this?”

Comment from a local VCS-led consultation event

23 It was widely felt that the LSC would need to support VCS capacity building efforts, not just for delivery to LSC’s immediate needs, but also for longer-term development of core capacity in areas like leadership and management, governance, bidding, quality management, etc. However there was a strong minority voice among VCS organisations insisting that any additional resources be focused on boosting grassroots staff numbers rather than “more people involved in bureaucracy”.

24 Some respondents noted that because of the sector’s emphasis on inclusion and consensus, change within the VCS is likely to be slower than, for example, in the commercial sector. The LSC needed to be clear and flexible about timescales; if these were too compressed, the strategy would not work.

Section Two: The voluntary and community sector as a provider of learning opportunities

25 The general feeling was that the document did correctly identify the main issues here. However many thought that the LSC underestimated the amount of learning that the VCS already provided, and perhaps undervalued the wider role that the sector played in working with people who were hard to reach.

A frequent message was that stable, long-term funding is crucial and that without it, the rest of the strategy is academic. Short-term funding is destabilising and inhibiting to the kind of development the LSC wants to see VCS providers make.

26 Many VCS organisations were uneasy about a perceived over-reliance on the consortium approach, feeling that it was not always a robust way of engaging with the sector in all its complexity.

“If the only option for organisations is to collaborate with a consortium this may not be acceptable to all, as organisations often have a main purpose that does not come directly under the learning and skills banner – they may see involvement in the bureaucratic process as unwieldy and withdraw.”

VCS umbrella/representative body

“Consortia can give the illusion of openness but actually be closed shops to new organisations.”

Voluntary organisation

27 Several respondents felt strongly that the LSC needed to keep in mind that VCS organisations are different from other providers such as colleges, and consider the positive aspects of this. Though they may have less capacity to service bureaucratic requirements, they deliver outside term times, for example, and in accessible locations, and their unique style would be lost if forced into a college mould.

28 The proposed actions were largely considered appropriate and adequate. However, respondents highlighted a number of factors needing to be tackled for implementation to work, such as regulation of franchising arrangements, VCS representation, and levels of bureaucracy.

“We have serious reservations regarding sub-contracting and franchising agreements. We would like to access direct mainstream funding.”

Voluntary organisation

“A common problem is the amount of bureaucracy involved. VCS organisations, especially small ones, are not equipped to provide the kind of paper trail that the LSC requires, and therefore struggle.”

VCS Umbrella/representative body

29 Capacity building was again an issue. Some wanted reassurance that whatever extra capacity was supported in the sector should contribute to the strategic agenda of the organisations concerned as well as that of the LSC.

“Will the LSC support capacity building for the VCS with mutually agreed outcomes, rather than imposed LSC target outcomes?”

Voluntary organisation

More stable funding patterns were often seen as part of the solution to the capacity-development problem, a recurrent suggestion being a shift to three-year allocations. Some LSCs felt, however, that they were already engaged in this process, and that their efforts were being rebuffed.

“There could be issues around capacity building. Despite many different approaches to this we feel that generally VCS organisations have not responded positively to our efforts.”

Local LSC

There was considerable concern around the issue of contracting. Any targets set as part of a contract needed to be flexible, as the work conducted by sector organisations is unpredictable. Smaller organisations were often worried that the demands of the bidding process would squeeze them out, and indeed that the strategy as a whole would favour larger VCOs.

Large organisations wanted changes in national contracting, seeking more transparency and clarity, and a rationalisation of contracts through group negotiations. Current arrangements were felt to inhibit national organisations' ability to deliver to the highest standards. The piloting of 'lead LSC' arrangements for multi-site organisations was welcomed as a step in the right direction, but some were unsure as to whether this would work.

30 The issues of quality and accreditation also generated comment. Some suggested that there was a need to recognise existing arrangements adopted by the VCS and build on these as a way of helping the sector to move closer to government targets. Others, however, resisted any perceived shift from quality to quantity. The need for capacity development in this area was widely acknowledged, with suggestions that the LSC could usefully engage with sector infrastructure bodies, as well as first tier delivery organisations.

"There is a need for soft outcomes to be included in quality assurance monitoring."

Voluntary organisation

There were calls for financial support to help measure the outcomes of provision, with a linked idea that the LSC could usefully provide guidance about what learning can be purchased with the funding that they have on offer, and how they view soft outcomes, as opposed to accreditation.

Some respondents suggested that LSC should consult with the sector to identify existing good practice, and ensure its dissemination.

"The VCS needs to be able to register 'softer' outcomes, as this is a key part of its work."

VCS umbrella/representative body

31 Respondents perceived a continuing lack of mutual understanding and trust between the LSC and the VCS and were concerned that this could inhibit implementation of the actions proposed in the strategy. Improvement here was seen as a criterion by which the VCS is likely judge the LSC's commitment to the strategy.

"In implementing the strategy, each local LSC will need to involve the local VCS in jointly developing plans and action to meet local circumstances. Unless this is done the strategy will be seen with suspicion and just another set of words, not an exciting opportunity to work together for mutual benefit."

VCS umbrella/representative body

32 Funding was also considered a key factor in implementation, with particular calls for the LSC to make resources available to infrastructure bodies like consortia (perhaps accompanied by common guidelines on how consortia can be made representative). However respondents were clear that the LSC also needed to devote some internal capacity to make sure that the strategy works – demonstrating the effort and commitment needed to communicate properly with the VCS, for example.

33 There was a feeling that funding needs to have a contribution to organisational core costs built into it, and that the LSC must be prepared to pay the full cost of what they receive from the sector – “full on-cost recovery”. This could make the VCS appear more expensive than other providers and it needed to be recognised that the kind of work that the VCS does is more difficult.

“I would want to see the paragraph on full-cost recovery and overheads, along with recommendations from cross cutting review, included in actions and not lost.”

VCS umbrella/representative body

Section Three: The voluntary and community sector as an employer

34 Most respondents felt that the draft strategy did reflect this issue well. However, some felt that it gave the impression that the VCS sees staff training as a low priority – in fact it doesn’t, but resources are always a problem. It was pointed out too that most VCOs do not have a dedicated human resources manager, which can limit the time and expertise available within an organisation for workforce development issues.

A blanket assumption that everyone in the VCS needs training simply by virtue of working in the sector would appear patronising and must be avoided. Thorough analyses are needed to identify areas of existing skills and remaining weakness. Some felt there was perhaps too much emphasis on skills in the consultation document, leaving less room for more general professional development that accommodated the varied nature of the sector and the diverse needs of different organisations, occupational groups, and individuals within it.

“We would urge that the strategy takes account of the variety within the voluntary sector and does not rely upon a ‘one size fits all’ approach.”

VCS umbrella/representative body

“A national approach also needs to allow for local variation, and identification of minority groups on a local, as against a national, level.”

Voluntary organisation

There needed to be greater recognition of the significance of volunteers in the workforce, and the importance of training them too, if standards are to be raised. Both accredited and non-accredited training should be supported, and

any arrangements would need to take account of the fact that many VCS workers have basic skills needs themselves.

“Need approaches to hidden literacy and numeracy needs of the VCS workforce.”

Voluntary organisation

Respondents highlighted that failure to provide development opportunities can increase difficulties with recruitment and retention, which have knock-on effects for the stability of the organisation and quality and standards in its services, in turn making it less likely to attract funding.

It was pointed out that the Treasury cost cutting review (HM Treasury, 2002) recommended that VCS organisations should be able to budget more than one year in advance in order to retain expertise, and that consequently longer-term contracts from the LSC would help the sector improve working conditions, and retention of skilled staff.

35 The majority of respondents supported the actions proposed in this section. There was a strong feeling that the VCS should be involved in the delivery of training to fellow sector organisations, to avoid any feeling of training being something ‘done to’ them from outside.

“If we are given the resources/funding we do have our own ‘learning professionals’ who can provide relevant training. There are examples where consultants are contracted to work with the VCS with little understanding of our needs.”

Voluntary organisation

Respondents felt that LSC financial support was vital if the proposed actions on workforce development were to be implemented. This was not simply a question of paying fees – in small organisations, cover for the absence of key staff is a significant problem, and help with “backfilling” would be extremely valuable. Alternative ways of delivering training should also be considered.

“Having the resources to allow staff to attend workforce development sessions is very difficult. Finding a way of doing this online would be helpful.”

VCS umbrella/representative body

36 Respondents also suggested a range of specific areas in which the LSC’s help would be useful, such as training for delivery of e-learning, encouraging nationally-recognised qualifications in community work, supporting training for trustees and management committees, facilitating work shadowing opportunities and proving incentives for VCS staff to train.

Section Four: The voluntary and community sector as a source of expertise and intelligence

Respondents generally agreed with the analysis of the main issues in this section, though there were reservations around the issue of representation,

with a feeling that the sector should be present on LSC boards (ideally through election) as a matter of course. It was also suggested that small targeted groups may need to be established to lead on key issues in each area/region.

“In the future we want to be engaged with – not ‘done to’.”

VCS umbrella/representative body

37 Not all respondents were convinced that the LSC yet acknowledged that the VCS had important expertise to offer, which they should be prepared to pay for on a fully professional basis. The VCS should not simply be seen as a way of getting something on the cheap that would be more expensive to source for elsewhere. There was a perceived danger of the sector being exploited – though it was acknowledged that responsibility to avoid this lies with the VCS as well as the LSC.

“The LSC has to be prepared to pay for expertise. We recognise that as a sector we have to be more business minded. In the past the sector has been seen as a ‘cheap option’ and this is something that we have accepted. We need to be more realistic about the cost of our ‘expertise and intelligence’ and other partners have to accept that and fund accordingly. ‘Full cost recovery policies’ must be supported with contract funding covering management and staff training.”

VCS umbrella/representative body

Many responses confirmed that VCS participation in Strategic Area Reviews (StARs) had been patchy and that there was a widespread wish for a more consistently inclusive approach across the country. Some called for automatic, core VCS involvement in StARS and similar planning activity, rather than optional consultation.

“StARs have been prepared by the LSC, not jointly prepared with the VCS or other agencies. This does affect the focus.”

Voluntary organisation

Some respondents also noted that the strategy should give more prominence to regional and sub-regional networks as a medium for expertise and communication, and to the benefits to the LSC of supporting these to the same extent in all parts of the country. However there would need to be acceptance that development of such bodies, especially when starting from scratch, would be slow, and that to be effective they needed to remain autonomous VCS-“owned” organisations. Also, their ways of working would need to be subject to review and evaluation to ensure they remained open and transparent for all VCS organisations, especially the smallest.

38 Most respondents felt that the proposed actions were appropriate for the issues identified here, though there were comments about the fact that no mention was made of the LSC putting any resource into this VCS role.

39 Two additional suggestions for action were that local LSCs need better links with local Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS) and that VCS organisations should be more involved with local learning partnerships. On the latter point, the onus was on both the organisations themselves to seek out contacts, and on the partnerships to ensure they operated in an inclusive way.

“It is not always appropriate for a national body to speak for us when the picture locally is different.”

Voluntary organisation

Section Five: The voluntary and community sector as a channel of networking and communication

40 Most respondents felt that this issue was adequately analysed.

41 Some VCS respondents sought to challenge the idea that all sector organisations are always “representative, transparent and accountable to their constituency”, and advised caution on the part of the LSC. Two-way secondments and joint training events would be a good way to develop a realistic picture of strengths and weaknesses.

The majority of comments on this section focused on the proposal for a named VCS contact at each local LSC. Many VCS organisations reported frustrating experiences trying to find the appropriate person to talk to contact their local office, and there was widespread support for the idea of a lead contact, provided this person had sufficient authority within the organisation to act as a champion for the sector across the LSC office.

“Having one identified lead contact would be ideal. This should be the contract manager, as they will be able to feel back to other staff.”

Voluntary organisation

Some respondents saw potential drawbacks to this arrangement, however, and suggested that local LSCs should designate more than one contact. There was a risk that if the contact moved on to another job, the knowledge base and working relationships would have to be built with their successor from scratch again. Logistically, too, there could be a danger of the contact being swamped by the number of people from the VCS trying to get in touch.

“A named person in each LSC office is fine in principal but this could work in such a way as to abdicate [sic] other LSC staff from having to worry themselves about the VCS. It is also a highly person-dependent model which could backfire when the named person moves on to another job.”

Voluntary organisation

A VCS champion at LSC national office was also suggested.

42 There was a widespread feeling among respondents that busy VCS organisations would not have time to attend many meetings. The benefits of

participating would need to be made very clear, so that people could prioritise their time and attention, and the LSC would need to acknowledge the time and resource required.

“Hard pressed (for time) community workers are unable to attend ‘talking shops’. Perhaps support visits for those organisations would be more useful.”

Private sector organisation

43 On this issue too, some respondents advised greater use of existing networks, with more thought particularly as to where grassroots community networks fitted in.

“The LSC are not currently/consistently using the networks and infrastructures that already exist within the VCS – in some areas links appear better than in others.”

VCS umbrella/representative body

Finally some non-VCS organisations wanted to register the view that the LSC needed to take care not to be seen to be favouring the VCS unfairly at the expense of other sectors.

“Traditional providers delivering large quantities of what the LSC funds may feel alienated by special dealings with the sector.”

College

References

Cross cutting review of the role of the voluntary and community sector in service delivery (HM Treasury, 2002)

Illustrations of Effective Practice

These brief descriptive examples of VCS/LSC joint working are gleaned from the draft strategy document, from LSC's own sources, and from responses to the consultation responses. They are included here to give an impression of the scope of current approaches prior to implementation of the strategy. They are not intended as fully analysed case studies (though some are likely to be expanded in this way in later material to support the strategy) and they certainly do not pretend to be an exhaustive digest of every instance of effective practice.

The illustrations are brigaded under the themes in the strategy, though some categorisations are rather arbitrary, since work covers several bases.

Section One: Aims and context of the strategy

London East: 'Working with the Voluntary and Community Sector: The Third Way'

The LSC London East (LSCLE) has undertaken a thorough mapping exercise to benchmark its current engagement with the VCS and inform a forward strategy, focused particularly on work with organisations that link with people currently disengaged from learning.

The work is set firmly in the context of the LSC's remit to address barriers to participation and achievement in learning, especially for people in poorer communities. The document points out that "without a fresh impetus, the LSCLE will struggle to attain what are already acknowledged as 'very challenging performance targets'" by which its performance will be judged, including:

- 16-18 year-old participation;
- 19 year-old Level 2 attainments;
- 19 year-old Level 3 attainments;
- adult literacy; and
- adult Level 3 and adult Level 2.

and continues: "To make a worthwhile contribution to these targets, the work with the voluntary and community sector will need to broaden in scope and develop radical new approaches to complement existing activity."

In successive chapters the study examines in detail:

- the characteristics of the sub-region and its population (economy, skills, employment etc.);

- the characteristics of the VCS in the area (numbers, activities, funding sources etc.) and the issues concerning them;
- all aspects of LSC engagement with the sector;
- gaps and key issues arising from current LSC/VCS engagement (communication, funding, consultation, mainstreaming, gateway criteria and many more); and
- proposed solutions (from mainstream, development and progression budgets).

Homing in on the idea of progression funding (“the third way”) as a means of supporting VCS providers to work towards mainstream-funded status, the strategy then spells out mechanisms, infrastructure, estimated costs, implementation process and timetable.

South East: Regional VCS/LSC compact on learning and skills

RAISE (the regional VCS forum in the South East) and the six local LSCs in the region have agreed a ‘compact’, developed after a lengthy period of joint working and consultation. in order “to work more effectively together to achieve more for learners, potential learners and communities”. Sections of the compact cover:

- the purpose of the compact;
- shared vision / aims;
- the respective roles and contribution of the VCS and local LSCs;
- shared values and principles;
- undertakings by the VCS, LSC and jointly, on issues such as consultation and communication, funding, involvement and capacity development;
- monitoring and review;
- an initial action plan with SMART actions; and
- an extensive glossary of learning and skills terms.

RAISE and the local LSCs are now employing a regional worker to support both VCS and LSC in taking forward Compact actions.

Section Two: The VCS as a provider of learning opportunities

Dorset: Dorset Community Action

Dorset Community Action (DCA) became a registered provider with its local Learning and Skills Council in the summer of 2002 and began working to develop its capacity to deliver learning from mainstream funding, preparing a self-assessment review, a three-year strategy and three-year development plan. Local Initiative Funding contributed to the process but the crucial success factor identified by DCA has been strong support from a senior LSC manager as link officer, and from other Councils for Voluntary Service in the area who see DCA as a pioneer for the sector. DCA now has a modest

amount of mainstream funding for basic skills, delivering learning direct to individuals and building basic skills awareness and delivery capacity among other VCS providers. It is also involved in ESF co-financing and in a national LSC-funded pilot delivering NVQ training to VCS organisations in management, customer care and caring, and is eager to explore the scope for developing further management and governance training for VCS workforce and trustees.

Derbyshire: Learning & Development Consortium

The consortium consists of key umbrella bodies seen to be representative of the client range in Derbyshire, supported by 40 associate members delivering learning. It pools available resources relating to the learning and skills agenda to expand and enhance the opportunities available to local people. The consortium acts as the voice of the VCS in Derbyshire and has established a regular dialogue with the local LSC.

In partnership with Derbyshire Adult Community Learning and Derby Adult Learning Services, the consortium ensures VCS organisations have the capacity and resources to become either deliverers or enablers, and to this end has developed a central support service to save individual VCS providers having to duplicate quality assurance and administrative systems.

Derby CVS' contract with Derbyshire LSC for its role as host to the Consortium includes an element for the costs to the organisation in areas such as rent, utilities, administration, reception and finance, and an estimate of management time committed by member organisations. The Consortium is working with the LSC to determine funding arrangements from April 2004 onwards to preserve and develop an important developing partnership.

Oxford: Oxford Women's Training Scheme (OWTS)

OWTS delivers free positive action training for women, enabling those with least access to education to return to work or further learning, or enter technical and non-traditional areas. Main curriculum areas are construction, IT and video media skills, with associated basic and key skills. Childcare and travel costs are central to the provision, and outreach, personal tutorial support, work experience and employer liaison are also integral.

OWTS has been operating with a mix of funding sources including ESF since 1988. In 2002 OWTS secured a direct FE contract with Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire LSC, making them the first new FE mainstream LSC provider in the region. After a steep learning curve they successfully earned 95% of the LSC contract after audit. OWTS is now working with the LSC to find ways to sustain the provision long term. A key concern is the inadequacy of FE funding formula uplifts and weightings to cover the overheads involved in small-scale provision of specialist vocational programmes to target groups under-represented in provision elsewhere.

The local LSC has also agreed to fund another voluntary sector provider of business, IT and basic skills provision to black and minority ethnic communities during 2004/05.

South Yorkshire: VC Train

VC Train provides a mutually beneficial consortium structure for VCS learning providers in South Yorkshire. It enables member organisations to gain access to mainstream funding and help develops their capacity to achieve high standards of quality and performance.

VC Train is involved in innovative work to develop a strategic way of delivering training provision which meets the needs of 'cluster' disadvantaged groups. The priority cluster groups identified are lone parents, ex-offenders, black and minority ethnic communities and disabled people. VC Train is responsible for drawing together a network of some 55 provider agencies to support these target groups.

VC Train continues to work towards arrangements whereby the sector will be able to access funding direct from the LSC, acting as contract holder for many of the voluntary and community organisations and improving the quality assurance measures of its members.

Hampshire & Isle of Wight: PALs (Promoting Adult Learning) Learning Champions Project

The local LSC has worked with Learning Links (an educational charity and voluntary organisation) to develop this 'grassroots' volunteer network across its patch to work in partnership with other VCS organisations, colleges and other agencies, to widen participation in learning. With the support of six area coordinators, PALs learning champions work within their own communities to encourage participation by reluctant learners, signposting people to sources of information advice and guidance (IAG) and acting as mentors/classroom support workers.

Volunteers' training has been delivered in partnership with 18 colleges across the region but sited in outreach locations. Since September 2002, over 620 trained volunteers have gained qualifications to underpin their role and together have supported thousands of new learners and enabled progression routes into mainstream learning for many who would not otherwise have engaged with colleges.

Through the learning champions, community members have quickly become empowered to negotiate with mainstream providers for the kinds of learning provision they want, in venues convenient to them. The increase in attractive, accessible opportunities has succeeded in drawing in new learners, who benefit from continued support from the learning champions. Originally funded through ESF co-financing, support is now provided through mainstream IAG funding. By providing community-based advice on learning and work, the IAG

partnership has been able to deliver cost-effective outreach provision in the heart of the communities who need it most.

Devon & Cornwall: Learning Plus

'Learning Plus', a new VCS consortium in the region, has moved from project to mainstream status in less than three years. Following an approach to the LSC in 2001 for funding to deliver education and training, 'Learning Plus' was initially supported by a three-year, tapering LIF/LID allocation, and Basic Skills Capacity Building funding, then was accepted as a mainstream provider in 2003.

Learning Plus currently contracts with ten VCS providers, with a diverse client base including minority ethnic groups and disaffected young people, offering learning in areas such as ESOL, basic skills, media and care, as well as IAG. Delivery is predominantly in established local venues linked to other partner organisations, but all providers also have access to the Learning Plus facilities, including an office, training room and small computer suite.

'Learning Plus' and the LSC felt it important to begin with well-established organisations that stood the best chance of success, to build a foundation of capacity within the sector and confidence within the LSC. The consortium continues to grow gently, currently developing its first three-year plan, and working to engage even more challenging learners. With participation doubling each year from the first 60 learners, the LSC envisages Learning Plus growing to some £1m of business in the near future.

The LSC benefits from having much of its VCS-based learning organised 'under one roof', quality aspects are improving and participation by hard to reach learners is increasing. The VCS clearly benefits from relatively secure funding, allowing them to make more effective, longer-term plans for their provision.

Suffolk: Bangladeshi Training and Skills Development Project

The LSC's local data highlights the need for greater efforts in engaging the Bangladeshi community since very few of its young people are on work-based learning programmes and this under-representation continues in Further Education. This project sought to avoid the pitfalls of previous attempts to overcome marginalisation, by building on the Bangladeshi community's own expertise and aspirations to identify and address education, training and employment needs.

The project offers a broad training programme to people seeking employment or wishing to increase personal and social skills, in a culturally sensitive training environment. The first phase targets the management committee and staff of the Bangladeshi Support Centre, with the second delivering training to some 150 people in the wider Bangladeshi community. A needs analysis establishes preferences for content and delivery styles. Though other providers such as colleges are used, the most common model involves

delivery in-house with tutors' "bought in", and provision of an interpreting facility.

Currently supported with two years of ESF Co-Financing, when the profiled training is well under way the project will seek further support from the local authority and others. The longer-term aim is to attract core funding by offering basic skills and ESOL training.

Derbyshire: Work 2 Work

Operating out of the 'Ability' community centre in Chesterfield, Work 2 Work is a training and education programme preparing people with learning disabilities for employment, work placements and vocational training. A third of the centre's directors and some of its staff have personal experience of learning disability.

Training takes place largely in-house and at external work placements, with a local college providing specific inputs linked to accreditation. Mentoring is also a key component. The centre also has a restaurant managed and staffed by trainees. The programme has exceeded its targets for recruitment and qualifications, and met those for progression.

Derbyshire LSC has worked closely with 'Ability' to develop the project, providing initial pilot funding through ESF co-financing followed by two further years of significant investment. The LSC benefits by working with an established networking and communication hub, and from the unique skills and knowledge present within 'Ability' in the areas of learning disabilities and employment. Both gain from the multi-agency cooperation that the centre accommodates.

Sussex: VCS Learning Consortium

After a year of discussion and a further year of operational status, SVCSLC is establishing itself as a key forum for information sharing, systems development, quality assurance, ESF delivery and capacity building with its member organisations. The consortium was initiated by RAISE, the regional VCS forum, working closely with sector organisations and Sussex LSC. RAISE further supported the consortium by funding its Management Information System.

Key people within the sector and the LSC worked hard to break down initial concerns about the VCS' potential to meet the stringent requirements of a statutory funding body, and counter beliefs that funds were unobtainable. A realisation of mutual benefits eventually created the environment for progress.

The consortium began with a successful ESF bid in its first year. A full-time coordinator is now in post and the LSC has agreed to fund a further two-year development plan, subject to confirmation of LID budgets. Development is intentionally slow, however: taking on too much too soon could outstretch capacity and prove counter-productive. Members seek to balance the need to

take on board more formal structures and systems with the wish to remain flexible and responsive, conscious that losing those qualities would mean losing touch with the people they exist to support.

SVCSLC operates on the understanding that members' contributions to, and requirements of, the consortium will vary according to their circumstances. Some members are already learning providers seeking to develop further; for others learning provision is a new venture. However there is a common commitment to partnership working and shared learning within the group, with the needs and aspirations of all-comers considered.

Section Three: The VCS as an employer

Black Country: 'Backfill' project

The 'Backfill' project arose from research conducted by the Black Country LSC and its local VCS Skills Task Force. Run as a pilot through the first half of 2003, it provided a pool of 20 support workers to fill in for staff in VCS organisations while they attended training courses. The project is believed to be the first of its kind in the country helping to overcome one of the major obstacles to workforce development in the sector, that of freeing up staff, particularly in small organisations, to take advantage of learning opportunities.

A local provider handled the process of recruiting and matching organisations and support workers. During the pilot temporary members of staff covered basic administration duties such as answering the telephone, reception duties, data input, and typing letters, and although these represent fairly basic roles this did provide sufficient additional capacity to allow permanent staff to undertake training to support the organisation's objectives. The service was free to participating organisations: all support workers were paid a wage together with their travel costs. The pilot has proved so successful that additional funding has been secured to take the service forward in 2004.

'The 'Backfill' project is part of a wider programme of VCS workforce development supported by the LSC and the Task Force which includes:

- 'Equal First', which offered over 600 learning opportunities such as managing volunteers, short courses for management committee members and volunteers, NVQs in advice and guidance as well as coaching and mentoring;
- 'Improvement at your own PACE (Practical Award in Community Excellence)' – a capacity-building project for VCS organisations;
- a programme of networking and support for VCS organisations committed to achieving the Investors in People standard; and
- supporting a new Black Country VCS learning consortium convened by the four CVS in the area, to be launched in Autumn 2004. Early priorities will be to establish a VCS training brokerage service and website.

Birmingham and Solihull: Capacity-building for BME-led organisations

Birmingham and Solihull LSC has supported a capacity-building initiative for the 'Service Provider Network', a new consortium of seven Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) VCS training providers delivering a range of New Deal and further education programmes to African-Caribbean young people and adults. The LSC's objective for working with this group of organisations was to enable it to meet its remit for diversifying its provider base and to develop the capacity of each member organisation to secure further funding from other sources to meet community needs.

Combining LSC funding with other sources including SRB, a training needs analysis of each organisation was carried out to help shape a development programme that addressed service delivery and organisational strengths and weaknesses. The programme included training opportunities from NVQ2 to NVQ4 for non-teaching staff, basic skills qualifications for tutors and a range of management and governance skills, managers and committee members. Member organisations were supported in working towards the MATRIX standard for Information, Advice and Guidance, which included funding to purchase the necessary software and licences.

Other support provided included an organisational analysis of MIS and financial management procedures that resulted in each organisation being provided with consultancy support to address weaknesses as well as facilitation to enable the partners to work together to develop a vision and forward strategy for the network.

As part of a wider workforce development agenda for the VCS, the LSC has also used ESF funding to support BME staff in the voluntary sector to achieve a higher education certificate in management at Westhill College, University of Birmingham.

East Midlands: ENGAGE 'cluster' initiative

Research by ENGAGE (the regional VCS forum for the East Midlands) and NCVO, commissioned by the Regional Development Agency, concluded there was potential to extend the 'cluster' approach to collective development, familiar among private businesses, to the voluntary and community sector. Proposed areas for collaborative action included:

- marketing and lobbying;
- capacity-building and skills sharing;
- fundraising and income generation;
- improving use of resources, including purchasing and volunteer recruitment; and
- service delivery.

Pilot projects in three different locations explored the approach in practice and pioneered a programme of support, including close working with facilitators

employed and trained by ENGAGE, and consultants with a brief to evaluate the activity and analyse success factors. Emerging benefits identified by participants include:

- raised profile and greater influence for the sector;
- working at a more strategic level;
- mutual trust and peer support;
- creating opportunities and maximising innovation; and
- joined up working and services.

ENGAGE is now considering how to support further cluster development across the region, including through training, materials and web resources, and to pass on its experience to other VCS infrastructure organisations.

Berkshire: 'TEECAP' Project

A partnership between the Berkshire LSC and the VCS provides a forum for strategic joint working, with the aims of:

- building a learning culture that will make a difference to people's lives;
- supporting families and building stronger neighbourhoods;
- supporting the regeneration and capacity building of communities; and
- supporting competitive businesses.

The 'TEECAP' project illustrates the partnership in action. An initial pilot carried out an in-depth workforce training needs analysis for VCS organisations in the Slough, Windsor and Maidenhead area, identifying existing opportunities and highlighting gaps. In the next phase, training coordinators/brokers were engaged to provide information advice and guidance and match prospective learners with appropriate courses where these existed, or to negotiate new courses with existing providers, or even buy training from other sources to ensure the needs are met. The coordinators are themselves encouraged to take formal IAG training leading to the Matrix Award.

Through collaborative working, the VCS should enjoy more equitable partnerships with colleges and the LEA. With a better-trained workforce the sector can meet the needs of the local community even more effectively and build its capacity and cost-effectiveness, putting it in a better position to access appropriate funding.

The LSC benefits from improved partnerships between providers and the community through regional and local compacts. High quality, accessible IAG helps a wider range of people engage in learning, and Matrix accreditation contributes to performance targets.

London West: Hillingdon Association of Voluntary Services (HAVS) Management Development programme

This programme offered management training to some 30 senior managers of local VCOs across West London, developing skills to underpin a change in business ethos throughout organisations and help build capacity to meet new challenges in the sector.

Initially the training concentrated on strategic planning, recruitment and staffing issues, standards and quality. A second course added the offer of three units at Level 4 in Management, and a full level 4 option is being considered. Delivered part-time over approximately 6 months, the course combines classroom activity, 1:1 tutorials, and on-site mentoring, supplemented by 'self-help' classmate network based on e-mail.

The selection process coordinated by HAVS took into account the business needs of candidates' home organisations, rather than focusing exclusively on their chances of achieving a qualification. It was acknowledged that 'distance travelled' by participants would be of real value – and for many the course represented their own "return to learning".

VCS organisations clearly benefit from increased resources for training relevant to their needs, with staff gaining recognised qualifications, and their self-confidence is increased by LSC's recognition of their improved quality measures and standards.

The local LSC has used this project to enhance its engagement with the sector, building its capacity to bring adults back into learning from 'hard to reach' communities. Its cross-boundary approach is helping to break down geographical barriers.

Section Four: The VCS as a source of expertise and intelligence

London South: LSC and South London CVS Partnership

LSC London South funds the South London CVS Partnership to undertake a wide and substantial range of activity supporting capacity-building for VCS learning providers and delivery of community-based learning for individuals. Among these is a 'Co-Financing Community Advisory Group', a VCS group which advises the local LSC on ways to improve their relationship with, and funding for, the sector, and feeds back on issues around ESF contracts.

Humberside: Humberside Learning Consortium communication strategy

The LSC Humberside funds Humberside Learning Consortium (HLC) to develop and deliver a two-way communication strategy for the VCS, enabling identification of needs within the sector and coordination of a sector voice to influence policy and strategy. Straightforward communication activity includes:

- a bi-monthly newsletter offering a calendar of training events;
- a telephone information service;
- a series of conferences and seminars; and
- a network of local advisory groups meeting three times per year, open to any VCS organisation; and
- a website containing the training newsletter and other useful documents, information, contacts and linkages.

Recognising the value of HLC's position at the centre of this information hub, the LSC also works with the consortium to broker services for the sector such as:

- identifying individual and organisational needs;
- organisational development planning;
- developing and negotiating provision to meet needs;
- securing funding to pilot new initiatives; and
- evaluating results to influence future provision.

Cheshire and Warrington: Cheshire and Warrington Voluntary Sector Learning Forum

The Forum is a diverse and flourishing membership network of VCS organisations with an interest in learning issues. Currently hosted by Chester CVS, it has been operational since September 2000. The Forum has built a positive relationship with the local LSC, having negotiated a communication framework to share information of mutual benefit.

In summer 2003 the LSC offered funding for the Forum to consult on the activities and functions a county-wide Learning Forum should undertake, and identify possible structures. The Forum had a free hand to choose its own approach and make recommendations. A sub-group of members drove the project (and were reimbursed for their time), which proved a capacity-building process in itself for individuals and the organisation.

Results showed overwhelming support for the Forum to become an independent company limited by guarantee with charitable aims. Prioritised activities included information dissemination, capacity-development, supporting access to funding, providing expertise and intelligence and further development of communication channels with external stakeholders.

This was one of the most comprehensive consultations as yet undertaken looking at the working of a learning forum at local level. Cheshire and Warrington LSC confirms that the calculated risk it took in enabling the Forum to carry out this work has paid dividends, producing credible research with valuable outcomes. Discussions are now underway with the LSC to plan for a smooth transition into the Forum's next phase of development.

West Midlands: Regional Action West Midlands (RAWM)

As the VCS forum for the West Midlands, RAWM views learning as a cross-cutting strategic theme intrinsic to the sector and its interests. It has developed key relationships with regional players such as the RDA, and for the past two years has run a VCS Learning Strategy Group which brings together key players from across the sector to develop strategic regional engagement around learning. In 2003, RAWM published a major piece of research mapping the contribution of the VCS to the regional economy, which confirmed the substantial part played by the sector's workforce, paid and unpaid, in the economy and in the provision of learning in the West Midlands. This research demonstrates RAWM's developing intelligence and knowledge-management role, to the benefit of the sector and other players at regional level. To this end it has now secured resources to appoint a Learning Development Officer, who will be responsible for helping the sector to link with the LSCs in the region, and with the wider regional agenda. Future priorities include promoting careers in the VCS across the region.

Lancashire: Accrington & Rossendale College

The college has been either prime mover or active participant in several forums which draw on VCS expertise to establish what learners need and how best to deliver it. The college and the sector analyse what each other has to offer and decide on changes in their provision.

Initiatives resulting from this process include:

- Community-based learning for young mothers from ethnic minorities
- A full-time community-based course for young people.
- Up-skilling of VCO staff
- Work on quality systems
- Volunteer training

The joint partnership forums are building VCS self-confidence and capacity and providing disadvantaged communities with a voice to influence decisions on learning provision.

The local LSC supported much of the development work that went into setting up links and franchise arrangements, and benefits by being able to work through a single organisation to engage with people in the community who are harder to reach. The VCS organisations have the potential benefits of more sustainable funding and the support of an established provider.

Section Five: The VCS as a channel of networking and communication

South Yorkshire: LSC/VCS Compact

This local compact aims to ensure that the LSC plays a major role in supporting the development of the sector's infrastructure and assists organisations in meeting LSC expectations and requirements. It is seen as an expression of commitment by both the VCS and LSC to learning participation and skills attainment in South Yorkshire. Providing a mechanism for enhanced working relationships and communication between the two, the compact has integrated better organisational development with joint planning and consultation, and supported the development of joint targets and funding policy.

Key to the success of the compact has been the joint commitment to:

- raising awareness of best practice within the sector;
- reviewing the effectiveness of the compact on an annual basis;
- developing agreed ways of working between the LSC and VCS providers, to forge closer and more productive links;
- securing the right level and range of learning provision, with supporting contributions from FE Colleges, local authorities and other funding regimes;
- agreeing sub-regional targets for reduction of non-participation in learning;
- the governance of the South Yorkshire Open Forum for the VCS; and
- the management and delivery of the Training Working Group.

Black Country: Learning and Skills Policy Officer

Conscious that the local VCS needs support and resources to help it engage effectively with the LSC, the Black Country LSC uses Local Intervention and Development funding for a VCS liaison post hosted by a local Council for Voluntary Service and managed jointly by the LSC and the CVS. The post costs less than allocating an LSC senior manager to the role, and is felt to have several other advantages including:

- the local LSC has better access to the sector since the policy officer is easily able to win the trust of VCS organisations because of being VCS-based;
- the policy officer is able to focus on the full breadth of local LSC activity since they have no area of specialisation within the LSC;
- the post provides capacity building for local LSC staff on access to, communication with, and understanding the strengths of, the sector and;
- the post can help the sector 'get a foot in the door' by signposting organisations to their relevant contact within the LSC office.

Northumberland: Community Liaison Group

Northumberland LSC established a working relationship with the VCS very early in its life, building up an understanding of the very localised nature of sector organisations in the area, in terms of settings, people and focus. Following up research it commissioned, the local LSC became prime mover in the establishment of a liaison group to engage with community groups, encouraging them to undertake projects on learning using in ESF co-financing and other LSC-linked funding sources. Now stepping back from its perceived lead role in the group, the LSC maintains its interest in the group as an equal partner.

Improved liaison with the VCS has led to a range of developments that have more recently included the increased delivery of Level 2 and 3 qualifications for the youth sector using mainstream LSC budgets. Developments will continue with the offer of Modern Apprenticeships and Foundation Degrees in youth work. A successful request for ESF Co-financing from the VCS is to lead to the setting up of a local assessment centre to deliver nationally recognised Level 2 and 3 qualifications in Community Development.

Through this group the LSC has brought people to the table who may not have worked together before. The VCS has become more target and outcome driven, and has been able to take on many new learners at different levels.

Northumberland: The Newbiggin Learning Initiative

This initiative emerged from the Wansbeck Local Strategic Partnership, a forum involving the local LSC, the VCS and other agencies.

With the LSC's influence, the Partnership brought people together to develop a wide-ranging multi-agency learning initiative to reverse negative attitudes to learning in this small, disadvantaged town. Community organisations contribute unique, very localised knowledge of marginalised groups such as the ex-fishing and coalmining communities, to ensure provision meets all needs.

Partners include the local authority, CVS, college, high school, IAG Network, Jobcentre Plus, Women's Health Advice Centre and LSC, many of whom have contributed funding. Most learning takes place in the local leisure centre, seen as a neutral, familiar venue, and partner agencies are on hand to provide the support mechanisms that underpin learning opportunities. The initiative is achieving its aims of attracting new learners and continues to grow, and in doing so demonstrates that formal learning providers and the VCS can work together and support each other successfully.