

Notes from fourth Reference Group meeting held on Tuesday 5th April 2016 at Diocese of Worcester Offices, The Old Palace, Worcester

Present: Michael Hunter (Chair - Voices), Roger Britton (Worcestershire Community Foundation), Doug Chaplin (Diocese of Worcester), John Taylor (Community First), Kate Walton (Persore Volunteer Centre), Cat Illingworth (Young Solutions), Derek Markie (Voices) and Karen Edwards (South Worcestershire CAB).

Apologies: Philip Talbot (AgeUK H&W), Jim Smith (Worcestershire Carers), Gary Roskell (Barn), Lindsay Peniston (Worcester Volunteer Centre), Richard Quallington (Voices), Mark Jackson (St Richard's Hospice)

The meeting addressed a number of topics, including: (key points only)

The direction of travel for Voices in the period until the conference. The role of Voices was originally a 'Route to Market' but times have changed and the role needs to be one of 'Leadership'. The questions raised included "Who is driving?", "How do we engage with the wider sector", "How do we demonstrate what we are doing". It should be a vehicle for debate and discussion but what can Voices 'add'? Seem to be 'struggling in a vacuum with amorphous ideas'.

The agenda for the conference needs to be wider than just the VCS but include the wider 'civil society' – we all need to work together. We need to bring the whole sector along with us – and not be too prescriptive.

Research: IPPR 'Too small to fail' and NCVO 'The Road Ahead'

Philip Talbot's suggestions following the last meeting. (Michael apologised for not circulating.)

Suggestion that we look at a vision for 5 years' time to begin to put some structure on it.

Discussion around **interfaces** – in its many different aspects – felt that the conference needed to be geared up to being 'cascaded' to a much wider audience – by various means. Perhaps have some short 'videos' on the key points made by speakers – recognition that our constituency is considerably wider than those who will attend and we need to offer something particularly to encourage some smaller groups – their voice needs to be added to the debate.

Focus needs to shift away from a 'commissioning approach' – many in the sector are not impacted by commissioning but their contribution to 'society' is great - 'holistic' approach – may not be most 'efficient'

Conference might break into segments / groups based for example on size of organisation or geography. This will allow the 'real issues' being experienced on the ground to come to the fore (examples given).

There was a debate around **building trust** – the commissioning approach means organisations are in competition for funds to survive – but want to get to the stage where we help each other to 'strengthen communities'. Trust is really about how people behave – we need to take on board the reality of the 'need to survive' for some.

Volunteering – discussions suggested the roles of volunteers is very varied. All need managing – but it was recognised that bids including costs for 'volunteer management resources' were not looked on favourably.

The topics we threw up last time – Interfaces, Volunteering, Organisation Development and Internal Networking - still seemed relevant but the 'words' were not very user friendly and would certainly need some work. The topics were likely to come from the conference delegates (along with other topics) and also could be provided as a prompt to the speakers.

Outcome of conference: Not just to clarify the role of Voices but must have value to the diverse sector. An outline programme was proposed (see over) which was very much a starting point – not set in stone.

Possible Programme for Voices Conference

Objectives

1. Increase awareness of the changing context in which VCS operates and the need to manage organisations to best operate in that environment.
2. Improve trust between individuals who lead organisations in VCS
3. Provide “bite size” information on new and important issues which can be immediately useful to organisations.
4. Improve the environment for collaborative working.
5. Indicate a direction of travel for the work of Voices.

Pre-event activities

1. Announce dates as early as possible.
2. Ensure promotion of event is appropriate for VCS segment receiving that promotion
3. Publish a series of teasers and advertisements via appropriate media
4. Talk-up event at every opportunity, seeking “buy-in”
5. Ensure that other sectors of civil society are aware of event and significance (as part of general promotion of VCS)

Draft Outline Programme

1. Introduction and welcome

From significant and recognisable figure who will not only deal with domestics and welcome but will set the tone for the whole event, seeking to raise the bar on aspiration and potential as well as significance of changes facing the sector.

2. Keynote address

Outlining the new context in which VCS operates and the challenges facing both the sector and whole of civil society (see The Road Ahead and Too Small to Fail documents). This presented in an engaging way either through a high quality speaker (NCVO have indicated willingness to assist), dramatic presentation of some other format.

3. Posing the question

Explanation of the task for following discussion. This needs to be kept tight and focussed. Issues are (a) do we agree with the descriptions of the opportunities and threats set out in the keynote (b) in light of this what are the strengths we need to build on and weaknesses we need to address as individual organisations and sector as a whole (limit number of allowable responses)

4. Group discussion

Pre-set groups on basis of organisational size and function to ensure that discussions are most relevant. Each group to have expert facilitator to keep on track and maximise value. Refreshments available during discussion.

5. Plenary

Feedback and initial comments with this recorded across wall for later reference.

6. Lunch and Clinics

Series of clinics on “hot” topics each open for 10 minutes including presentation and Q&A with maximum audience of 6 to make them more intimate and facilitate conversation. Participants visit there as they wish, some can run several times. Also opportunity for networking. Lunch available during this period.

7. Panel Session

Panel of keynote speaker and other “experts” with high quality MC comment on issues emergent in plenary. MC also calls for audience comments. This session will seek to pull together threads and draw up agenda for action.

8. Concluding summary and commitment

Where we go next, including commitment to continuing a set of critical conversations digging deeper into sector’s experience.

Support for this approach – something for everyone – recognition that the topics from last time still appropriate – and expect to come out of discussions. Important to get wider engagement before and after the conference. Some challenge on who was involved in planning group but pointed out initially a group who volunteered last time but expecting wider engagement. Dates of planning meetings to be confirmed – although agenda will change in light of discussions.

Other topics

Michael mentioned **WCC Peer Review by LGA** – he and some others who work with WCC at strategic level had been invited to be part of it.

Invitation to join a **WCC group planning Volunteers Celebration** – thought this was too late and did not recognise what is happening in many Districts already. Some value in PR but very much seen as an example of not considering the best way to achieve the outcome required. Don't want another event – volunteers are busy volunteering and /or showcasing their organisation during that week.

Suggestion that WCC consider having staff to spend day in a voluntary organisation finding out what volunteers do and to report back on what they find – but not during this week.