

## **Outcomes from the 'Over the Rainbow – Reading's VCS Looks to the Next Ten Years' Forum Event Messages for the LSP Forum**

### **1. Introduction**

The Forum held an event for the local voluntary and community sector on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2009 entitled '**Over the Rainbow – Reading's VCS Looks to the Next 10 Years**'. Including presentations, workshops and a panel discussion, the event explored the following themes: the Sustainable Community Strategy: how the local VCS can better communicate with their public sector partners to ensure delivery of the Sustainable Community Strategy; and embracing the changes and challenges that the VCS will face in the near future.

The event was also designed to generate a series of messages from the local VCS to be explored further at the 2020 LSP Forum on November 17<sup>th</sup> 2009. These outcomes are as follows:

#### **1. The wider influence of society**

At the event, Zoe Hanim of Reading Borough Council presented on the second phase of the Sustainable Community Strategy, extending to 2030. Some delegates felt that it was unrealistic to plan ahead this far ahead when VCS organisations, due to funding programme constraints, worked to shorter time scales. However, a delegate involved in the sports and leisure sector suggested that as their funding cycle was based around a 3 – 5 time period, it was possible to set longer term strategic goals.

Delegates also suggested that it was possible to anticipate certain issues such as political changes resulting in changed goals; changes in family structure and housing occupancy; a decrease in funding streams; an increase in demand for services and an increase in the older population.

In fact, changes in local and national government and funding provision were key issues discussed throughout the event. It was felt that all the political parties understood the importance of VCS groups delivering services, but how they will be funded after any change in governance has yet to be established. It was felt that cuts in public sector funding would have knock-on effects on the VCS, and that the VCS is facing a "double squeeze" on finance and capacity at a time of increasing demand.

A related concern was how smaller organisations could survive in a culture where VCS organisations were dictated to by the contract they had to deliver. One delegate spoke about using "the power of small things" to maintain our impact. Using Stronger Together, who assist the local VCS with representation, influence, training and advice, was suggested as a way to support smaller groups.

## 2. Principles of Working

It was established at the event that the VCS uses the Local Strategic Partnership to learn of indicators and issues; familiarise itself with current strategies and shape future programmes and strategies. It was felt that how the VCS operates, and the services that it delivers, should be communicated to the LSP.

This could be done through the partnerships where the VCS have a presence, i.e. The Children's Trust; through websites like [www.strongertogether.org.uk](http://www.strongertogether.org.uk) or [www.rvsforum.co.uk](http://www.rvsforum.co.uk); through the Forum Voices or agreeing areas of interest through dialogue with RBC officers. It was strongly felt that relationships had to be built through face-to-face contact, and not electronically. Retaining and encouraging connections between people (an example given here was a child using Google to complete homework on the Second World War instead of asking a grandparent – technology supplanting human contact) was felt to be something that the VCS could encourage and deliver.

An LSP-related message that was suggested by delegates was the need to ensure that central and local government understand that society is made up of different minorities who have different needs. The VCS can demonstrate that it engages with communities that are difficult to reach, including those with limited internet access (this issue could also be addressed by the VCS offering IT training or IT resources sharing).

In order to deliver services, it was felt that the focus should be not on what the sector wanted to provide, but what people are looking for (an example being supporting NEET initiatives).

In terms of the mechanisms needed for the VCS to function effectively and efficiently, it was felt that the practicalities of working in small groups needed to be assessed in order to establish ways in which VCS groups could function 'commercially' (e.g. sharing resources to split staff costs).

A question was raised at the panel discussion of how the VCS could work more closely with Reading Borough Council on Scrutiny Panels. The response included the improved communication around the "understanding of scrutiny" and increased participation from both statutory and VCS partners.

Other areas of partnership working that were discussed included improvements in locality working, especially in areas of multiple deprivation; better communication; collaborative working in order to ensure representation and secure funding and the strengthening of partnerships as "we are stronger together than we are apart".

### **3. Strengthening the Sector**

The event generated several suggestions as to how VCS representation, and the sector as a whole, could be strengthened. VCS representatives should learn the “language” of subjects under discussion, including any jargon, and should seek simplified or summary documents from their statutory partnership meetings. It was felt that representatives could use existing VCS expertise to assist them, in addition to recognising their own organisation’s abilities and experience in identifying service areas, gaps or problems. It was agreed that VCS groups need to make time to reflect, think and plan away from their daily operations.

Merging was discussed as an option to strengthen groups’ positions, but only if core skills could be kept. It was felt that the sector needed to improve capacity in order to cope with future challenges.

### **4. Vision 2030**

Delegates identified threats to community cohesion such as a move towards the extreme left or extreme right by some groups and how police intervention with perpetrators of anti-social behaviour was being perceived by the wider community. The relationship between social cohesion and changes in employment, education, health etc was also discussed

Delegates felt that issues such as including social enterprise in the categorisation of Reading as a business centre, growing VCS capacity, funding for non-formal education and skills, developing super output area strategies and progressing the VCS Resource Centre were key to building on the Sustainable Community Strategy and taking it forward to 2030.

In a nutshell, delegates felt that the VCS needs to be sure of their values, decide where they are going and establish how they will meet needs. One delegate felt that ‘we have only just begun’ and that the sector needs to retain focus so as not to lose touch with grassroots level activity