



Voluntary Sector Assembly News

December 2005

REPORT ON THE 7TH VOLUNTARY SECTOR ASSEMBLY – This newsletter summarises the activities and discussions during the day. If you would like a full report please phone Judy Gwilliam on 01432 343932 and we will post or e-mail you one.

What is the Voluntary Sector Assembly?

We aim to:

- Be a voice for the whole of the sector
- Represent the interests of the community and voluntary sector – especially in developing long term planning of services, via the Herefordshire Partnership.
- Raise the profile of the community and voluntary sector.

How do we do this?

- We have elected representatives who speak on behalf of the voluntary and community sector, on a variety of topics – see further details in this newsletter.
- Hold twice yearly assemblies to discuss issues of concern and report on issues raised to regional, local and central government and others, with the aim of tackling sector issues.
- By being one voice for the sector we aim to raise the profile of the whole sector.

Discussions at the Assembly

1. Concerns for the voluntary and community sector.

Before the assembly, we sent out mailing identifying topics we thought concerned the majority of the voluntary and community sector. Whilst we have a small response rate, it did give us confirmation of what the main concerns of the sector are:

- **Transport** - Transport – improve public and community transport in Herefordshire.
(Votes: 88% for, 0% against, no vote 12%)
- **Volunteering** – lack of volunteers, more support needed to help recruitment,
(Votes: 77% for, 1% against, no vote 22%)
- **Funding** - work to secure more funding for the community and voluntary sector.
(Votes: 77% for, 1% against, no vote 22%)
- **Promote the Independence of the sector**
(Votes: 77% for, 1% against, no vote 22%)
- **Improve the status of the sector**
(Votes: 77% for, 1% against, no vote 22%)

- **Get the VSA working**
(Votes: 73% for, 3% against, no vote 23%)

- **Herefordshire Partnership** - help make the Partnership more effective
(Votes: 54% for, 1% against, no vote 18%)

The results were no surprise, but it is important to be sure: if the VSA is to represent the sector it needs to be clear what the main key issues of concern are, as was said at the assembly –

“it makes us less reactive and more proactive as a sector.”

We can now build on this and look to shape our activities more around these key issues.

The topic of key issues for the sector was discussed in 3 workshops, the main issues from those workshops were:

Volunteering – there was much discussion on the need for more support for volunteers, help with recruitment, raising the profile of volunteers. We are passing this information on to all those who provide assistance to the sector, we hope they can use this information to bring in more resources to improve their services.

Transport – this was not discussed in any depth in any of the discussion groups, we have a VSA representative on the Herefordshire Partnership Ambition Group. We will look at how we can do more on transport issues in the future.

Funding – the lack of long term funding for groups was identified as an important issue, as were concerns regarding the constant changes of funding criteria. We will pass on concerns regarding the nature of current funding opportunities to local, regional and national government as well as other funding sources. We will lobby for more funding sources, and for longer term funding.

Herefordshire Partnership – comments were made concerning the proposed restructuring of the partnership. The main concern was how it would operate, how would the new structure make it more effective? Whether the partnership saw the community and voluntary sector as a true equal partner in the shaping of services? We have already passed these comments on to Herefordshire Partnership and will continue to work to help make the new structure successful and effective.

Independence of the sector – there were no particular comments made about this topic. Having a voice for the sector such as the Voluntary Sector Assembly will help keep us independent and be able to be more pro active in influencing policies that affect the sector.

Improving the status of the sector – a lot of comments were made on this topic, mostly around the need for statutory agencies to cover expenses for consultation activities – attending meetings. There is a need for statutory agencies to recognise that it can take time for many groups to get information circulated and act upon it.

DO WE NEED A COMPACT?

Whilst not discussed, Herefordshire is now one of the few counties in the country that does not have an overall COMPACT (statement of principles of engagement between the statutory and voluntary sector). Perhaps it is time we made one as this will help improve the status of the sector,

and give the statutory agencies better guidance around good practice on communications with the sector. We will work with Herefordshire Council and Partnership to develop a voluntary and community sector Compact **THAT MEETS THE SECTORS NEEDS.**

2 Voluntary Sector Representatives – we asked the sector to vote on the 3 proposals, the overall, and the results were:

- **We create different representatives roles**
(Votes for 62%, against 8%, no vote 12%).
- **Allow for temporary appointment of representatives between assemblies, subject to voting at the next assembly**
(Votes for 55%, against 11%, no vote 12%).
- **Staff members of infrastructure organisations (sometimes called umbrella organisations – those that work to support community and voluntary groups such as Herefordshire Voluntary Action and Community First) can be representatives of the VSA**
(Votes for 61%, against 8%, no vote 11%).

Discussion groups also considered the role of representatives and the following comments were made:

Creating different representatives roles – we should have representatives working on sector issues outside of the Herefordshire Partnership structure as well as within it. We should have a VSA representative for cultural awareness and equality.

Appointing representatives between assemblies - we need to have a clear and transparent process for this, representatives should be elected at assemblies.

Staff of Infrastructure organisations should be able to stand as representatives– we should allow this, as they are often going along to key meetings anyway. Reps should come from across the whole sector, its important that we have the right people in the role.

There were lots of other comments about the roles of representatives – which the VSA must do better on:

Communications from and to representatives –this was the main issue of the discussions we need

- quarterly newsletters,
- An up to date web site (with facility to flag up new items via e-mail), better connections between representatives and interest groups.
- More clarity about what the role is about, and what representatives can and cannot achieve. Representatives need to have a higher profile. We will work to improve communications about the work of our reps and about what the VSA is and does.

What do representatives do? A need to promote the professionalism and raise the profile of the sector came up quite a few times. The role of representatives needs to be clearly defined; representatives should act as leaders of key interest teams or networks, and not work in isolation.

All the comments regarding representatives are being considered fully in January and we will report back to the sector about what we do.

The work of the VSA representatives

Our current representatives are:

Ambition Group	Representative	Contact Details
Economic Development	Geoff Tunstall	01432 276428 Email: geoff@workmatch.org.uk
Learning	Julie Wilson Thomas	07734 297200 Email: juliewilsonthomas@tiscali.co.uk
Social Inclusion	Claire Keetch	01432 270 536 E-mail clairek@hereford.demon.co.uk
Transport	Martin Setchell	01989 566615 E-mail martin.setchell@btinternet.com
Herefordshire Partnership Board	Philip Dazeley	01989 567810 E-mail dazeley@btopenworld.com

We have several vacancies; we are reviewing all reps roles in January and will report back to the sector on roles and recruitment processes. We recently had the following representatives resign and we thank them for their work over the years: Margaret Flanders – Economic Development and Richard Davies – Environment.

Please contact us for a full copy of our representative's reports

The following is a brief summary of activities:

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AMBITION GROUP (EDAG)

This Ambition Group has restructured and re-focused, it has reduced its membership. It has introduced an assessment panel to support activities to be more focused on implementation of its strategy and to help report on progress.

**** IMPORTANT NOTE ****

Any groups planning new projects with an economic aspect should contact our representative who can assist with getting project approval of the ambition group – this will help groups prove to funders that their project is appropriate for financing. The EDAG are particularly keen to support Social Enterprises.

The EDAG has amended its current strategy to include an action plan and agree some targets.

Tourism – a new partnership has been formed – Destination Management Partnership – a private/public sector partnership around tourism. It will meet 4 times a year, the current

Herefordshire Tourism Group will report into it. There are no voluntary sector places on this partnership, anyone interested in tourism issues should join the Herefordshire Tourism Group – contact your VSA rep for more details.

Rural Regeneration Zone is looking at a strategy and framework for encouraging multi use facilities – including community centres and village halls. Contact your VSA rep for more details.

The next EDAG meeting is on the 26th January 2006, contact your VSA rep with any issues or observations around economic development.

HEALTH AND WELL BEING AMBITON GROUPS

Voluntary Sector representation is being undertaken by The Alliance. The Alliance is a membership organisation for health and social care groups. It has representatives involved with the following areas:

- Children's and Young Persons partnership Board – Representative Jill Hiscox.
- Health and Social Care Partnership
- Vulnerable Adults Protection Committee -- representative to be appointed.
- Local Safeguarding Children Board
- Joint Commissioning Group
- A place on each of the clients group's Programme Boards (e.g. Older people, mental health)

The Alliance also has the following networks:

- Children's Interest Group
- Older People's Interest Group

To find out more about the work of The Alliance contact: Steph Dunn on 01432 265856 or E-mail Info@allianceherefordshire.org.uk

THE ENVIRONMENTAL AMBITION GROUP (EAG)

The EAG has been reviewing its priorities over the last 6 months, whilst there have been a number of notable successes within the EAG, such as biodiversity projects – converting the glut of locally grown cider fruit into bio-ethanol which can then be processed to produce green electricity, the group has not been performing at a high level and is keen to develop a more focussed and shared vision. The vision is emerging with 2 key themes of biodiversity and climate change. It is hoped that these 2 strategic priorities will help the group begin to make a difference directly but also across the rest of Herefordshire Partnership.

For more information on the EAG contact Sue Brazendale at the VSA on 01432 343932.

THE LEARNING AMBITION GROUP (LAG)

The HLP board comprises of 17 members including 2 places for the VSA. The members of the group are diverse, Schools, Learning and Skills Council, Connections and Job Centre Plus amongst them. The LAG has been reviewing its structure and is having a smaller strategic group; there is a place for the VSA on this new group.

Over the last year the LAG has been very involved with the work of the Learning and Skills Council in developing the Strategic Area Review (STAR). Our VSA rep has been active in ensuring that the training work of the community and voluntary sector has been properly represented within STAR. Comments from many groups have gone into STAR via our VSA representative.

To find out more about STAR or the work of the LAG contact our VSA representative Julie Wilson Thomas.

SOCIAL INCLUSION AND ANTI POVERTY AMBITION GROUP

This ambition group has a vision to:

- Ensure that no one has to live in poverty
- Ensure that everyone's voice is heard
- Ensure that everyone has access to the services and information they need
- Identify and respond to inclusion issues as they arise

With that vision in mind we then set ourselves priority areas of work:

- Involving excluded groups in decision making
- Strategy development, monitoring progress and linking to other work
- Raising awareness of inclusion issues
- Developing standards and best practice
- Rurality and Social Exclusion
- Combating Poverty

In the last two years the Social Inclusion and Anti Poverty Ambition Group has:

- Set up the Welfare Rights Forum
- Produced a Rural Issues Information Leaflet
- Produced a directory of accessible meeting rooms
- Run the Imagine Project
- Produced the Winter 2004/2005 Herefordshire Partnership Newsletter in conjunction with the Community Development and Local Services Ambition Group

The ambition group is to work on its role within the new structure of the Herefordshire Partnership. To find out more about the work of this Ambition Group contact your VSA representative Claire Keetch.

THE TRANSPORT AMBITION GROUP

About 20 people attend this ambition group, there are sub groups on cycling, bus operators, disability Forum, the Rural Transport Forum and the Railway Users Group. Much of the discussion time has been taken up with plans for a Rotherwas bypass rout and the development of the 'Edgar St grid'. Specific issues have been raised over the year by the VSA representatives such as a need for adequate weather shelters and timetables at bus stops. The ambition group operates as a sort of clearing house for specific issues as well as development of longer term strategies. Some of the issues raised have been incorporated into the new Herefordshire Transport Plan, which is now published in draft.

To find out more about the Transport Plan, or transport issues in general, contact your VSA representatives.

THE HEREFORDSHIRE PARTNERSHIP BOARD

The Partnership Board is responsible for delivery of the Herefordshire Partnership plan. It has been working to take Herefordshire into a new form of partnership working – the Local Area Agreement. This is a new strategic way for partners to develop long term plans. It does not involve any new money for the county from central government but is designed to give greater freedom and flexibility about how statutory agencies can spend existing budgets. The work is in draft formal with a final plan required by the 31st March 2006. The priorities for spending are to be:

- Economic development and enterprise
- Healthier communities and older people,
- Children and young people
- Safer and stronger communities

The involvement of the community and voluntary sector is required in not only the delivery of services around these topics, but in the shaping of the Local Area Agreement. Statutory agencies will have to align their budgets more closely. We await further details of how the voluntary sector will be involved in shaping the plan and delivering the plan.

For more details contact our voluntary sector representative Philip Dazeley.

We have several vacancies with representatives on Ambition Groups. The VSA steering group are reviewing the number of representatives needed, and the topics where we need representatives. If you are interested in becoming a VSA representative please contact Sue Brazendale on 01432 343932, we will report back to the sector in January 2006.

OTHER THINGS THAT HAPPENED ON THE DAY –

Opening speech – by Sue Brazendale, VSA Co-ordinator, gave an overview of the community and voluntary sector, for those of you who like statistics:

There are about 1,300 voluntary and community groups in Herefordshire, if you include all sports and social groups.

- 53% of charities have no staff, no offices and income of under £10,000
- 24% are mediums size organisations with a budget of £10,000 - £100,000
- 17% are large organisations with a budge of over £100,000

What do groups in the county do?

Support for people with disabilities and long term health issues	36%
Support for children and families (including pre school provision)	23%

There are about 360 sports groups in the county, and about 150 village halls.

We also know that:

- **69% of all groups activities cover a local neighbourhood**
- **20% of all groups activities cover a district**
- **29% of all groups activities are countywide**

About 13,800 people in Herefordshire volunteer. Regular volunteers contribute about 9 hrs a month.

Data Sources: ICT Research Survey Report 2004, Herefordshire InTouch, Valuing the Voluntary Sector 2000. Community First H&W, and Herefordshire Council, Herefordshire Voluntary Action.

Sue went on to give an overview of the work of the assembly to date, and an outline of the lessons learnt over the years, the key points were:

- The concept of representing the sector is a bit 'woolly' – it seems to mean different things to different people, so it is difficult to agree what the focus of the work should be and how it can be measured – but we do need to do this; we need to show we make a difference and add value to the sector.
- The work of the assembly is to lobby, push for change in policies that benefit the sector, this is LONG TERM work, which does not show immediate results, we are in the business of trying to influence decision makers and the results of our efforts may not be immediately obvious. But we do need to do better at communicating what we are doing.
- We need to be honest about what we can and can't achieve with a project like the VSA, we cannot fix day to day issues, but we can have a say in the development of things for the future. We cannot fit everything, but we can press others to fix things, we can report on the progress of key issues and keep reminding people of what those issues are for the sector.

Other activities on the day were:

- A talk by Water Brookes, Chief Executive Officer of St Michaels Hospice on getting volunteers and keeping them.
- A workshop on the roles and responsibilities of charity trustees – work shop notes available on request.
- An update by Barbara Parkinson, Consultant to Herefordshire Council on the development of their new strategy for supporting the voluntary and community sector. The Council has a draft strategy which has just been approved by Cabinet. The Council is committed to contributing to a dynamic voluntary and community sector that plays a full role in improving the quality of life in Herefordshire. The Council is working on a consultation programme with the sector for the strategy – we await further developments. For information on the development of the strategy contact Annie Brookes at Herefordshire Council.

Thanks to everyone who attended Bartestree Village Hall, we value your time commitment, your comments and your enthusiasm for the supporting the whole of the voluntary and community sector.

For more information on the VSA phone 01432 343932 and ask for Sue Brazendale