



Annual Report 2010/11

**Shropshire Voluntary and
Community Sector Assembly**

Executive Summary

This report covers the progress made by Shropshire VCS Assembly over a 9 month period, since the last Annual Assembly on 30 June 2010 to the end of March 2011. The last 9 months have seen a period of significant change.

A change in Government and the new national policies and initiatives that this has generated means that the Voluntary and Community Sector is now viewed as central to the implementation of the Government's vision of transferring power from the state into the hands of local communities. The environment within which the VCS Assembly is now operating feels a long way removed from the issues and challenges that were present in previous years. Much progress has been achieved. The VCS no longer needs to fight for its views and issues to be heard and recognised. The VCS is now seen as an equal partner alongside public and private sector colleagues and sits at the table when key decisions are being made.

However new challenges are now evident and this report not only identifies recent achievements but also aims to draw attention to future priorities and ongoing projects and initiatives.

The report does not do justice to the range of work undertaken by the Assembly's Forums of Interest or its individual members but does help to demonstrate the work of the VCS Assembly Board.

During 2010/11 the VCS Assembly Board:

- Undertook a detailed review of the VCS Assembly.
- Focused on developing and maintaining strong representational arrangements.
- Worked to support representatives in their roles through the use of available training and development.
- Welcomed a new Forum of Interest: the Social Enterprise Forum.
- Worked to communicate key sector wide issues to all partners and to improve understanding of good practice in partnership working.
- Supported the growth of strong working relationships between the Chair and Vice Chair of the VCS Assembly and Shropshire Council's Chief Executive and senior managers.
- Established task and finish groups to deal with key issues.
- Supported the development and implementation of the Shropshire Compact via the Compact Implementation Group and Compact Champions Network.
- Worked to further strengthen communication using a range of communication methods.
- Acted on the feedback obtained at last VCS Annual Assembly 2010.
- Developed a Strategy for the VCS Assembly.

More information concerning the core work undertaken by the VCS Assembly Board and the progress made since the last Annual Assembly is included below.

Introduction

The Shropshire Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Assembly works to represent Shropshire's voluntary groups and organisations. It brings the sector together, providing a voice, and raising common issues and concerns. It encourages and promotes collaborative working within the sector but also partnership working with other sectors. In particular the VCS Assembly allows the VCS to work with the Public Sector to increase cross sector understanding and facilitate joint projects and initiatives that allow the needs of local people and communities to be met more effectively.

Any VCS group or organisation operating in Shropshire is encouraged to become a member and to participate in the Assembly as much or as little as suits their organisation. The benefits of joining the VCS Assembly may include the ability to network, exchange information and ideas, address common problems and develop more awareness of the context within which we all work. All members are kept up to date with the latest developments through the website, information bulletins and a regular newsletter. Becoming a member is free of charge and benefits include:

- Being first to hear of latest networking, funding and consultation opportunities
- Learning of new contracts and service delivery opportunities
- Accessing reports and information
- Joining in at the annual event
- Finding out more about, and joining, a Forum of Interest

Forums of Interest are groups of VCS organisations which come together to discuss and address common issues. Forums of Interest may deliver similar activities/share aims, provide common types of service and target similar client groups. New Forums of Interest are developing all the time. Established forums include:

- Shropshire Pan Disability Forum
 - Disability Forum
 - Disability Network
 - Visual Impairment Forum
 - Deaf and Hard of Hearing Forum
- Health and Social Care Forum
- Voluntary Sector Mental Health Forum
- Children and Young People's Summit
- Shropshire Community Transport Consortium
- Visual Arts Forum
- Shropshire Community Recycling Network
- VCS Training Providers Consortium
- Shropshire Infrastructure Partnership
- Supporting People Providers Forum
- Shropshire Heritage Forum
- Social Enterprise Forum

More information on the Assembly's Forums of Interest is available as a separate document. This includes a summary of the work of each of the Forums of Interest. Strong communication with Forum of Interest members is a top priority for the VCS Assembly Board. The Assembly is led by a Board which meets at least four times a year. The Board is formed of representatives from the different Forums of Interest. Through its meetings, the VCS Assembly Board works to deliver an annual work programme and to respond to the issues raised by its members.

Progress Report

The tables below summarise the work that has taken place within the 9 month period since the last VCS Annual Assembly on 30 June 2010. At the last Annual Assembly the Board requested feedback on its members concerns and priorities and has worked to respond to the comments obtained. The report covers the work of the VCS Assembly Board but is not a reflection of the diversity of work and considerable achievements of all the VCS Assembly's Forums of Interest and member groups and organisations.

You said...	The VCS Assembly responded by...
The VCS Assembly should produce a report concerning the 'state of the sector' and key sector wide issues.	The VCSA Board worked to produce a position statement at the end of 2010. It was issued in January to encourage sector wide input. It was circulated widely via email and is available on the website.
The VCS Assembly newsletter should contain more information for small organisations such as new resources, tools and practical developments etc. You needed to know more about national policy developments that would impact upon the VCS.	By tapping into a wider range of national bodies (e.g. VolResource) the VCS newsletter has been further developed to include a wider range of information. Over the last 9 months the newsletter has included a stronger focus on policy and links to key policy documents. The VCS Assembly Board have also covered key national and local policy issues with representatives able to feedback to Forum of Interest members.
The VCS Assembly should provide more information on how charities can change their business models in more tangible ways.	This has been considered in the newsletter where possible and fed back to the Shropshire Infrastructure Partnership. This year's Annual Assembly has also been designed to take a more practical look at the ways VCS groups and organisations can consider change.
You wanted to know more about volunteering and felt volunteering was a priority issue across the whole sector.	This was fed back to the Shropshire Infrastructure Partnership. A range of activity has since taken place to support volunteers and groups and organisations working with volunteers.
One of your main priorities was maintaining a strong dialogue with the local authority.	This has been reflected within the work undertaken by the VCS Assembly Board and an emphasis placed on securing strong representative processes and arrangements. More information will be provided within reports at the Annual Assembly 2011.
Annual updates from the Chief Executive of Shropshire Council were very important and should be included as a standard part of the Annual Assembly.	This has been organised as part of the VCS Annual Assembly 2011. The Chief Executive of Shropshire Council and his senior managers have also attended VCS Assembly Forum of Interest Meetings.
You wanted the VCS Assembly Board to understand the levels of cuts experienced by the VCS as a result of reductions in public sector funding.	This issue has been a main focus within many meetings and recent project groups. The VCS Assembly Board has worked closely with the Compact group to explore and monitor this issue.

You said...	The VCS Assembly responded by...
<p>You were unsure of how the needs of disabled people were considered by the VCS Assembly.</p>	<p>The VCS Assembly is formed of multiple groups, networks and forums working to support individuals with disabilities and their families. The Assembly's Pan Disability Forum includes the Disability Network, Disability Forum, Visual Impairment Forum and Deaf and Hard of Hearing Forum.</p>
<p>Transparency and accountability were key throughout the work of the VCS Assembly.</p>	<p>This is one of the main principles and values adopted by the VCS Assembly and its Board Members. Representational arrangements with Forums of Interest promote transparency and accountability, as do the Assembly's communication mechanisms. These are reviewed regularly and feedback requested from Assembly members. A detailed review of the Assembly was conducted in the summer of 2010 and the results reported widely in September and October.</p>
<p>Consultations should be promoted widely to ensure all VCS Assembly groups and organisations were able to contribute.</p>	<p>The VCS Assembly has worked with the public sector to establish widespread awareness of the VCS Assembly email news and database as a means of promoting consultations. Work has more recently been started to review use of the online consultation portal and the VCS Assembly's needs are being considered as part of that process.</p>
<p>The VCS Assembly should work to strengthen its relationship with staff employed by Shropshire Council.</p>	<p>The VCS Assembly's representatives work hard to maintain good working relationships with Shropshire Council staff and with staff employed by the Primary Care Trust and other public sector partners. In addition to this the Compact Implementation Group has been working to promote guidance on partnership working between the sectors.</p>
<p>The VCS Assembly should have a dialogue with Council Elected Members.</p>	<p>Over the last 10 months Elected Members have been working with the VCS to respond to national policy. Several groups have been in operation including a Scrutiny group looking at the role of social enterprise, a Big Society Task Force and joint sub groups with VCS and Elected Member representatives. The VCS Assembly has also planned an elected member briefing.</p>
<p>You would like the VCS Assembly Board to consider good practice in other areas of the country.</p>	<p>The VCS Assembly Strategy Group and other sub groups reporting to the Assembly Board have all started their work by taking a look at good practice examples from across the country and in some cases visits have been organised.</p>

You said...	The VCS Assembly responded by...
Quality representation is important.	Over the last 9 months the VCS Assembly has invested a considerable amount of time in the provision of support for VCS representatives and the maintenance of good representational processes and arrangements. This has included a number of training courses over the last 10 months to develop and support Forum of Interest representatives and Board Members.
'One Voice' is needed to speak for the VCS. You asked the VCS Assembly to provide that one voice.	The VCS Assembly Board has worked to respond to your request and to strengthen its role and operation to generate confidence that it can fulfil this request. The VCS Assembly Review process helped to identify the changes required and a Strategy has since been developed to take this work to the next level.
You would like the VCS Assembly to focus on the needs of small groups and organisations.	The VCS Assembly's Strategy will be discussed at the Annual Assembly to encourage input from members. The needs of small groups have been placed at the heart of this strategy.
You would like the VCS Assembly to have a clearer strategy or plan for its work.	The VCS Assembly Board has focused on developing a strategy and ensuring it is reflective of members needs and of national policy changes.
That the Assembly should work to provide more support for the Forums of Interest and continue to develop new forums to ensure the whole sector is represented.	Although only one new Forum has joined the Assembly in the last year, the Board has worked with other VCS networks that have expressed an interest in joining. It is recognised that this is not always a quick process as the needs of all network members must be considered. Existing Forums have been asked to present their support needs and this information fed into the Strategy for the Assembly.
We have had feedback to suggest that sometimes groups and organisations are confused whether or not they are members of the Assembly.	By regularly communicating directly with our members by email we hope this confusion may be minimised.
You wanted the VCS to be an equal partner and sit alongside Public and Private Sector representatives.	With support from others, this has been achieved. The VCS Assembly has a representative at key strategic meetings including the Partnership Leaders Board and has been asked to join in with many different strategic decision making processes. The Chair and Vice Chair of the Assembly, along with support from other Board Members have found that the demands on their time have increased considerably – a real indicator of success.

Working with Our Public Sector Partners

The VCS has benefited from working with the public sector in many different ways, most obvious perhaps has been the financial and in-kind support offered to the sector over many years. However this relationship has now altered as public sector funding cuts, coupled with new policies and the 'Big Society' agenda generate a change in the way public sector bodies are operating. Initially the benefits of working together may seem less obvious but partnership remains the best way of serving local people and meeting local needs.

There are many and increasing reasons for the public sector to work with the VCS via the VCS Assembly. The benefits include allowing bodies such as Shropshire Council, Shropshire County Primary Care Trust and others to:

- Obtain collective VCS views to influence strategic planning and policy decisions.
- Improve understanding of issues affecting the VCS.
- Better manage contractual and funding relationships.
- Improve and expand service delivery options for local residents.
- Implement new ways of delivering services and meeting needs.
- Via the VCS, access groups within the community considered hard to reach.
- Obtain a wider knowledge/evidence base by drawing on the skills and expertise of VCS groups and organisations.
- Demonstrate social responsibility and the 'duty to involve'.
- Implement new national policy and the Government's Big Society agenda.

The VCS Assembly works with its partners at the strategic level through the Shropshire Partnership Leadership Board and through the Boards and sub groups working to deliver Shropshire's Community Strategy. Shropshire Council and Shropshire Primary Care Trust work with Shropshire VCS Assembly at all levels of work from strategic policy groups to more practical task and finish groups.

New Partnership Arrangements

Shropshire Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Assembly and Shropshire Council have developed new partnership arrangements to consider the implications of the Government's Localism Bill and other key policy documents such as the Modernising Commissioning Green Paper and national strategy 'Building a Stronger Civil Society'.

Recognising that the national agenda seeks to promote the devolution of power, responsibility and resources to the community level and encourage the transfer of local assets and services to voluntary organisations, Shropshire VCS Assembly and Shropshire Council have produced a Joint Communiqué. The Joint Communiqué takes national policy and translates it into a clear statement of what the VCS and Shropshire Council collectively hope to achieve.

The intention is to grow a stronger, more self-sustaining voluntary and community sector in Shropshire; promoting resilience, innovation and creativity so that it's best placed to face the challenges ahead. Shropshire VCS Assembly and Shropshire Council collectively commit to:



Members of the VCS Assembly with the Assault Glider Trust at RAF Shawbury.

- Explore ways to ensure Shropshire has a thriving Civil Society, best able to respond to future needs, demands and funding.
- Develop a shared understanding and approach to exploring the potential from the new powers emerging from the Localism Bill, ensuring Shropshire communities are well prepared to benefit.
- Create a new commissioning framework to guide the relationship between the VCS and Council, and as a basis for negotiation with other public sector commissioners, including the forthcoming model for healthcare.
- Foster an open and transparent culture of data sharing – both financial and in performance terms, as a basis for negotiating this new relationship.
- Explore means of ensuring a measured and pragmatic approach to asset transfer, recognising the need for timely and adequate capacity building to enable long term, high quality service delivery.
- Identify demonstration projects as a means of illustrating practical examples of what works and what needs to change in future.



The VCS Assembly takes part in Voice and Echo Training. Working to explore community influence in Shropshire.

These objectives will be achieved via a number of partnership groups. A VCS Task Group has been established to lead the process of change. The group comprises Shropshire Council's Chief Executive, Senior Managers from Shropshire Council, Elected Members, The VCS Chair and Shadow Chair and VCS Assembly Board members working as sector representatives.

Reporting to this main group are three sub groups focusing on:

- Commissioning
- Performance
- Community Right to Buy and Community Right to Challenge

These are all key themes within the Assembly's new Strategy.

Working with Elected Members

Shropshire Council's Elected Members have been working with VCS Assembly Board members through the groups detailed above. However more recently the VCS Assembly Board has also been working to support the work of Elected Members via a Scrutiny Task and Finish Group exploring the role of Social Enterprise in Shropshire and the benefits the social enterprise model can bring to support VCS resilience and financial sustainability. The VCS Assembly Board and Compact Implementation Group have also been working together to plan and organise a workshop style briefing for Shropshire's Elected Members in order to communicate key VCS issues and facilitate discussion around the ways in which VCS representatives and Elected Members may work more closely together in the future to support Shropshire's communities and better meet local needs.

Identifying and communicating key issues

Through VCS Assembly Board meetings, the VCS Assembly has been considering a number of key issues and developments affecting the sector. These have included Personalisation, the Transformation of Health Services including changes to service delivery in Shrewsbury and Telford hospitals, the impact of public sector cuts, the impact of changes in the UK economy, public sector restructuring etc. The Board works to identify key issues and concerns and then feed this information to and from the Assembly's Forums of Interest and partner organisations. Communication and consultation remain key priorities within the Assembly's work.

Communication and Information Sharing

The Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly's core work programme includes a focus on communication and information sharing. The management of the VCS contacts database (this includes key characteristics of each organisation such as communities served, service type, organisation type, volunteering information, how funded etc) supports this work. Ongoing communication work includes:

- Fortnightly email updates to all
- members covering funding opportunities, consultations, events and sector news.
- Maintenance and development of the VCS Assembly website (<http://www.2shrop.net/shropvcsassembly>).
- Provision of membership packs for individuals, new forums of interest and Assembly representatives.

Feedback from VCS Assembly members suggests that regular communication is important as a way of keeping members up to date with key developments and signposting to more detailed and specialist sources of information.

Evidence and Research

2010 saw the VCS Assembly Board focus on undertaking a detailed review of the VCS Assembly. The review included use of a questionnaire distributed widely to members and non members, the use of a workshop and discussion sessions within meetings and a short questionnaire designed to encourage the Assembly's Forums of Interests to consider their needs, ambitions and priorities for the future. The review produced some very helpful feedback and it has been used in the design of the Strategy for 2011 onwards.

The work undertaken in 2010 to produce a VCS Evidence Base (completed just in time to include in last year's annual report) is proving useful as it has helped the VCS Assembly and Shropshire Council work together to take forward changes in the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment process. Although Shropshire Council has worked to involve the VCS Assembly in multiple needs assessment processes in the past (including the publication of its current Joint Strategic Needs Assessment) it is becoming more evident that the voluntary sector input will increase. New guidance includes a dedicated section relating to the voluntary sector. Shropshire's VCS Assembly is keen to highlight that an evidence base should be considered a living document that can be added to and developed as more evidence of VCS impact is produced and brought forward. Since initial publication 2 new sections have been added highlighting the importance of VCS infrastructure support and available evidence



Echo Training: VCS Assembly representatives working with Shropshire Council officers to explore community influence.

concerning social enterprise in Shropshire. It is hoped the work completed to date will continue to be an aid to partnership working, influencing decision making processes and supporting the development of local strategy documents and plans.

The VCS Training Providers Consortium has worked with Shropshire Council's Children and Young People's Directorate to undertake a VCS Training research project. The project has surveyed and researched the provision of training by the VCS in Shropshire and collated information concerning accreditation, available trainers, types of courses offered and where capacity exists to further develop VCS training provision. It is hoped that this project will assist in the development of new opportunities and training services.

Leadership and Representation

The VCS Assembly has a very small budget and its work relies predominantly on in-kind support and voluntary work undertaken by Board Members and others. However, the Assembly has been fortunate in that it has been given some free support and access to training from Shropshire Partnership and RAF Shawbury. This support has resulted in the delivery of two training courses for VCS Assembly Board Members and Forum of Interest representatives.

Shropshire Partnership has provided the VCS Assembly with the resources to train key members in Voice. The training was delivered by a local organisation named Changes, which delivers a regional programme named Taking Part. Voice is a practical tool that allows community groups and VCS networks/forums to assess their capacity to influence and their ability to influence. A similar tool named Echo is being used within the Public Sector to assess, for example, Shropshire Council's openness to community influence and its capacity to respond to community influence. By working together and undertaking practical actions the relationship between sectors can be improved significantly. This also fits with the work of the Shropshire Compact.

RAF Shawbury gifted the VCS Assembly with a free training day covering leadership and team building skills. The day included a series of mental and physical challenges including a high ropes course and climbing wall. The day allowed the VCS Assembly Board members to get to know each other better and to consider their roles as leaders for the sector.

Supporting Forums of Interest

During 2009/10 a significant focus was placed on the development of new Forums of Interest. This has not continued to the same extent during 2010/11 but it is hoped that more work can be carried out during 2011/12 to fill any gaps in sector representation by facilitating discussions with elements of the sector focusing on sports, leisure and the environment. One new Forum of Interest has been established: the Social Enterprise Forum. Support has also been offered to existing Forums, particularly those new to the VCS Assembly.



Alan Bain on the high ropes at RAF Shawbury. VCS Assembly Leadership & Team Building Day.

Supporting New Ways of Working

The VCS Assembly Board has worked to promote the involvement of the VCS in new projects and initiatives such as the development of the Marches Local Enterprise Partnership and the Place Based Interventions initiative led by Shropshire Council. The Place Based Interventions project focuses on communities with particular needs. It aims to focus efforts of a wide range of services to collectively solve community level problems and better meet needs by combining resources. It is anticipated that this type of work could grow over the next year as new initiatives are established to implement recently published national policy.

Compact Working

Implementation of the Shropshire Compact remains a priority within the Assembly's work. The Compact is the agreement which sets out how Shropshire Council and the Voluntary and Community Sector will work together based on shared values, principles and commitments. The Compact was formally approved by Shropshire Council in November 2009 and by the VCS Assembly in December 2009. The VCS Assembly is the compact signatory on behalf of the wider VCS.



Shropshire VCS Assembly and Shropshire Council adopt the Shropshire Compact.

December 2010 saw the publication of a new National Compact. The new document highlights a wide range of issues and reflects the feedback local VCS groups and organisations have fed through the Shropshire Compact over the last few years. Together with other national policies the Compact aims to create strong and independent VCS organisations that will play a bigger part in designing and delivering public services. The VCS Assembly Board and Compact Implementation Group have been considering the implications of the new National Compact. It is acknowledged that work that now needs to take place in Shropshire to review the Shropshire Compact and reflect the national principles and priorities at the local level.

Out of County Links

2010/11 has seen a considerable increase in the number of areas wishing to learn more about Shropshire VCS Assembly and how it operates. Many areas of the country do not have strong representational arrangements for the VCS and no means of providing a collective voice for the sector. Shropshire VCS Assembly has worked to support other areas by sharing information on how the Assembly was developed and how it works. One example is the work Shropshire VCS Assembly has done with representatives from an area in Finland keen to learn more about community and voluntary sector engagement and partnership. Similarly Shropshire VCS Assembly has benefited from other areas of the country and has aimed to make out of county links where possible to facilitate the sharing of good practice.



Shropshire VCS Assembly welcomes visitors from Finland.

Recent Developments

Over the last 4-6 months the VCS Assembly has seen:

- A significant increase in the number of task and finish groups and projects working to the VCS Assembly Board.
- A sustained increase in the number of public sector workers seeking VCS representation and involvement in consultation processes across all areas of work/service.
- More enquires from VCS groups and organisations concerning the work of the VCS Assembly.
- Greater use of the VCS Assembly's communication channels as a way of sharing information between members.
- A stronger focus on identifying priorities within the development of the VCS Assembly Strategy.

Key Priorities

Priorities for the coming year include:

- Implementation of the VCS Assembly's Strategy for 2011+. This will include key themes including commissioning, quality and performance and the implementation of new powers such as community right to buy and community right to challenge.
- Support VCS Forums of Interest. Continue to develop partnership within the sector between networks of VCS groups and organisations.
- Continue to recognise diversity within the sector by implementing initiatives that will support small and emerging groups and organisations as well as larger, more established organisations.
- Maintain strong communication with all VCS Assembly members.
- Continue to respond to the issues and concerns raised by members.
- Work to maximise sector representation by encouraging greater numbers of local VCS groups and organisations to join the Assembly and get involved in its work.
- Work to understand and respond to new national policies, including working with partners to establish new processes and guidance that will help implement policy at the local level.
- Review representational arrangements in line with public sector transformation and change. Organise new arrangements to reflect sector needs and priorities.
- Undertake work to assess how the VCS Assembly can work with others to provide support at a sub county level. To include a focus on different needs within Shropshire's three main geographical areas: North, Central and South.
- Identifying the ways in which the VCS Assembly can work to better support communities by building relationships with community leaders including elected representatives.
- Develop new relationships with the private sector.
- Explore options for developing joint delivery of services with other sectors.

VCS Assembly Board Members

Julia Baron	Chair*
Sonia Roberts	Vice Chair*
Gill Green	Shropshire Training Providers Consortium
Dee Ploszay	Shropshire Infrastructure Partnership
Geoff Forgie	Shropshire Disability Forum
Bob Morgan	VCS Mental Health Forum
Linda Cox	Shropshire Community Transport Consortium
Hilary McGlynn	Children's Summit
Carola Fielden	Visual Arts Network
Rosemary Collie	Shropshire Community Recycling Network
Mark Hignetts	Shropshire Heritage Forum
Hilary Paddock	Supporting People Providers Forum
Laurel Roberts	Northern Area Partnership
Anne Seymour	Central Area Partnership
Vacant	Southern Area Partnership
Heather Osborne	Co-opted Member, Older People
Nicola McPherson	Health and Social Care Forum
Jean Jarvis	Social Enterprise Forum

*The VCS Assembly Chair will change at the Annual Assembly on the 7 April 2011.

Contact Details

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