

Working as a VCSE representative Shropshire Compact Briefing



**Shropshire
Compact**

An introduction to being an Assembly representative and providing a voice for the Voluntary and Community Sector.

Why is representation important?

The importance of voluntary and community sector involvement in planning, strategic decision making, service delivery and service review is being increasingly recognised by national government, local public services and a wide range of other stakeholders. **The VCS is an essential element of any partnership working designed to produce the best outcomes for local people.**

There are an increasing number of meetings held where the views of the VCS are sought and valued but not every VCS organisation can be invited and often individual organisations don't have the capacity to attend multiple meetings.

The overall aim of the VCS Assembly is to provide an effective mechanism for representation so that Shropshire VCS groups and organisations can have their voice heard, and influence....while still having time to do their valuable work!

Benefits of VCS Representation

- Ensures the knowledge of the VCS is always considered.
- Generates participation in local decision making and planning.
- Develops partnership working within the sector and with the public and private sectors.
- Strengthens influence across the broader strategic agenda.
- No one misses out just because they haven't been invited to a meeting or know a particular person.
- Enables all VCS organisations and groups to have their voices heard if they wish it.
- Maximises opportunities for service delivery by the VCS through improved commissioning arrangements.
- Organised representation can assist the VCS in advocating on behalf of service users and local communities.

What does a Representative do?

Representatives attend meetings on behalf of the wider VCS. There are four broad tasks for a Representative to try and fulfil:

- **Being a 'voice'** - taking issues of concern forward and feeding back information and opportunities to the wider VCS community.
- **Influencing thinking and decisions** - challenging and supporting proposals; standing up for the sector while maintaining good relationships with partners.
- **Education** - developing a deeper understanding and knowledge among partner organisations of the value and contribution of the VCS
- **Partnership development** - identifying and supporting opportunities for collaborative working, building and strengthening relationships.

What will I gain during my time as a rep?

Serving as a rep will benefit both you and your organisation, as you will:

- Gain insight as you operate at the forefront of county wide developments.
- Deepen your knowledge in a particular themed area of work.

- Gain new opportunities to network and build relationships within and across the sectors.
- Develop skills in representation, facilitation, writing reports and presenting.

What key messages should I give?

Each meeting is unique and different issues will be raised for you to respond to, these will have to be considered on a case by case basis (see top tips below). However, whenever you are in a meeting with anyone who does not work within the VCS, try and emphasise some of the following:

- Shropshire's voluntary and community sector is large – the 5th largest in the region.
- There are 1,184 registered voluntary sector organisations in the county and an estimated 1,127 small, informal community groups.
- The VCS is a significant employer.
- Shropshire's rate of volunteering is significantly above the national average.
- Effective volunteers need support. Volunteering isn't free, but is fantastic value for money. Volunteering for any cause has wider community benefits including improving social cohesion, improving mental and physical well being, and sharing and improving skills. It is often a stepping stone into employment.

All this may seem obvious to us but these messages are important, particularly in the face of reducing public sector budgets. Remind others that the VCS is:

- A huge contributor to the current quality of life experienced by Shropshire residents
- Great **value for money**. The social returns on investment reduce the potential burden on the public purse.

Top tips

- Be clear why you have been invited to a meeting and the purpose of the group.
- Explain that you represent the VCS Assembly and how the Assembly works. (You could use the Assembly leaflet and the briefing paper written for partners seeking VCS representation).
- Use agendas to help present you with an opportunity to speak. Don't be afraid to request agenda items when you are representing the VCS Assembly and also at VCS Assembly meetings when you have issues to feedback.
- Prepare for meetings and read papers in advance whenever possible. Don't forget that you can always ask the team administrating the meeting to clarify points.
- While you are representing the VCS Assembly, bear in mind how you will report back.
- If you are not happy with minutes of meetings do raise your concerns on receipt of the minutes or at the following meeting.
- Think about consultation mechanisms that you can use to broaden your knowledge of the VCS viewpoint (for example discussion at a particular Forum of Interest, a focus group, an email to canvass opinion, a whole Assembly survey etc.). Ask the VCS Assembly Coordinator for help.
- Read 'Representing the VCS Assembly (2)' which offers reassurance and guidance on dilemmas, such as conflicts of interest, which Representatives sometimes face.
- Finally..... remember you have the support of the Assembly behind you. It can take time to become comfortable with a new role but there are others available to assist you



Representing the VCS Assembly

Guidance and reassurance for common dilemmas

Being an Assembly Representative can be very rewarding. You will gain **new opportunities to network** and **build relationships; develop new skills** and **insights** as you contribute at the forefront of county wide developments. You will have the satisfaction of seeing the value of the VCS increasingly recognised by other sectors (see 'Representing the VCS Assembly (1)'). However, in any new role you may come across challenging situations. This briefing sheet offers guidance on the most commonly faced dilemmas so that you can approach your new role with confidence.

As you read on, don't forget that, for the most part, being a Representative is straightforward and requires no more than common sense and tact. You have the support and experience of the VCSA Board and Assembly Coordinator: so if you need a second opinion on how to handle something, don't hesitate to ask.

What if I don't know the answer?

This can be of particular concern when you first attend a new meeting. Assumptions may be made that, because you are a VCS Assembly Representative, you will automatically know the views of the whole sector.

Try to avoid this situation by:

- Sharing briefing sheet 3 'Working with a VCSA Representative' with the Chair and/or other group members when you first join the group, to help them have realistic expectations, understand your role and the role of the VCS Assembly.
- Reading papers in advance and establishing a relationship with meeting Chairs so that you are forewarned about issues that are likely to be discussed and have time to look for answers.

If you are asked at a meeting what the VCS thinks about a certain issue and you aren't certain, try the following:

- Offer to bring information to a future meeting.
- Explain the communication and consultation mechanisms that can be used and ask the VCS Assembly Coordinator for help. (For example a whole Assembly survey, discussion at a particular Forum of Interest, a special focus group, use of a task and finish group to undertake a specific piece of work, an email to canvass opinion etc.)
- If you feel under pressure to give your own personal view, ask for it to be minuted that this is your **personal** view and should not be used as a basis for wider decisions until you have had a chance to discuss it more widely.

What if I am asked to represent a particular view?

You may be asked by another VCS Assembly member to represent or raise a particular viewpoint at a meeting, this may be entirely appropriate, but be cautious about doing so until you have a good understanding of how widely held that view is.

The Assembly does not campaign on individual issues on behalf of organisations, but it does support the principle that individual views should be heard and responded to (Compact Principle). The Assembly will help point organisations in the right direction to enable them to advance their own individual issues.

If you are asked to raise a minority viewpoint then try the following tactics:

- Explain that you are unable to represent specific views (unless it is a broad perspective or widely held viewpoint) because the Assembly does not campaign on individual issues.

- Explain that the Assembly does support the principle that individual views should be heard and responded to.
- If, as a Representative, you know something about the issue you could suggest who they speak to directly, or direct them to an upcoming event where similar issues will be discussed. Alternatively direct them to contact the VCS Assembly Coordinator who will find out who they should speak to.
- Reassure them that if they can demonstrate that the issue impacts on a significant number of organisations they can it raise again with you.

How do I deal with conflicts of interest?

Conflicts of interest are best dealt with by clarity and openness. Some possible situations are considered below:

Conflicts within the VCS view.

If you are aware that there are differences of opinion within the VCS and that no consensus is available, try and summarise all the views and explain clearly how they differ.

Declaring a personal conflict.

If there is an item on the agenda that is of particular interest to you/your organisation you should declare this as soon as practicable in the meeting.

Can I declare my own position?

Although, as an Assembly, we do not campaign on behalf of individual viewpoints, we do understand that sometimes you may have agreed to represent the Assembly at a meeting where your organisation could have had a seat anyway (so you represent both your own organisation and the Assembly). We do not want our Representatives to be disadvantaged and so in this case, if an issue is raised during a meeting that your individual organisation has a strong individual view on, you should state your own viewpoint as long as you make it clear that it is your own view (also stating if it is a minority view).

We would not encourage you to use your position as a Representative to ask for individual issues concerning your organisation to be raised as agenda items unless you are confident that they have broad support by the VCS. Such issues would be best pursued outside the meeting.

Can I act on information I find out?

If you find out something advantageous to your organisation while acting as a Representative then you would be expected to act on this, but you should not do so before you have let others know about the opportunity. The Assembly recognises that you belong to one particular organisation and appreciates that you must do your best for that organisation. However, as an Assembly Representative you have a responsibility to ensure that all Assembly members get the same chance..... other Representatives will do the same for you!

Finally.....

Relax and enjoy being a Representative, have an open mind, make some new friends and don't forget to ask for help if you need it. The VCS Assembly coordinator can be reached using the details below.

How do I find out more?

Contact Shropshire VCS Assembly:

 **Email:** VCSAssembly@shropshire.gov.uk  **Telephone:** 01743 252740

For more information about the Shropshire Compact use the details above and below:

 **Website:** <http://vcsvoice.org/the-compact/>

