



**Regional Forum
Briefing Paper No. 3**

“The Sector Connector”

Working Together to Make a Difference

**Regional Forum
Annual Conference 2006**

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Introduction

When you have a problem, who do you tell? As voluntary and community organisations what do we do with all the issues that we hear?

“Sector Connector” was all about discovering how the voluntary and community sector (VCS) can connect together to make a difference. We wanted to explore what connections already existed and how these connections could be used to ensure that issues from the ground influenced regional policy. The focus was also on identifying how issues affecting a local area connect into the district, sub-regional, regional and national context. The emphasis being on identifying how connections made around specific themes can resolve issues.

The Regional Forum brought together speakers and delegates to take part in debate, listen to personal experiences, and look at how the voluntary and community sector can further contribute to building useful connections.

Keynote Speaker - Simon Hebditch, Chief Executive of Capacitybuilders “Making a Difference Nationally”

Simon became Chief Executive of Capacitybuilders in January 2006.

Capacitybuilders is the independent agency charged with developing the work of ChangeUp at arms length from the Government. He was previously Executive Director of External Affairs for the Charities Aid Foundation. Simon also chaired the consortium which drew up the business plan for the Financing the Voluntary and Community Sector national hub of the ChangeUp programme.

The third sector is developing its work at both a regional and national level and it is important not to underestimate the impact of the voluntary and community sector in how society operates.

The political environment for the voluntary sector has changed with the opening of the Office of the Third Sector and a dedicated Minister, Ed Miliband, spending 90% of his time on sector issues. For the Government, it is not just a question of the sector delivering services but it's about developing the sector's infrastructure to strengthen its ability to negotiate workable contracts and respond to the needs of communities.

Ed Miliband would like to see further development of social enterprises and a strengthening of the sector's campaigning role. He believes that the sector should be influencing policy and its voice should be stronger in the political arena. Simon believes these aspirations are shared across the political spectrum, so it is unlikely there would be a significant shift in policy if there was a change of government.

Capacitybuilders has been given the task of investing in and transforming the voluntary sector by 2014. Investment in third sector infrastructure will benefit frontline organisations through increased support for their work. Voluntary organisations will be more efficient, effective and responsive to communities' needs as evidenced through the range of services being offered. Capacitybuilders' success will be measured by increased frontline activities. Capacitybuilders has been supporting sector infrastructure by channelling investment through local ChangeUp consortia and by supporting the work of six thematic Hubs.

Organisational sustainability is a pressing third sector issue. Simon hopes to see more three – five year contracts being issued, as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review, which would offer more stability to the sector. Increased engagement with local authorities will be necessary to ensure they co-operate with such a process.

The sector has a strong ability to reach out to marginalised communities unlikely to participate in society through traditional democratic routes. These connections can empower people to bring about change in their communities. Simon hopes Capacitybuilders will increase the strength of the third sector, allowing it to provide more targeted support to communities and individuals.

“Making a Difference in the Region”

Presentation by Laura Moynahan, Yorkshire Forward Board Member and Chief Executive of Netherthorpe and Upperthorpe Community Alliance

The Regional Economic Strategy (RES), produced by Yorkshire Forward, reflects the ambitions and opportunities in the Yorkshire and Humber region. The region’s economy is worth £72 billion, the equivalent of Scotland, Norway and Denmark and its population is just over 5 million people. The RES identifies many positive aspects of the region’s development including a successful renaissance agenda and an economy that accounts for 12% of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP). However there are areas in which the region lags behind the rest of the UK. These include:

- A low number of business start-ups even though there are more businesses in the region than five years ago;
- High unemployment and;
- A high number of people living in deprivation.

The challenges of addressing deprivation cannot be met by any sector working in isolation – it needs strong partnership between the public, private and voluntary sectors. For example, unemployment can be tackled by the private sector creating jobs, frontline voluntary organisations providing training and support to people to access the jobs, and public sector services providing housing and health care services.

It is also paramount to involve local people in decision making, which will affect their area. Local people have specialist knowledge and they need to take ownership of the developments. Voluntary organisations are good at engaging local people in regeneration but the sector also needs to be influencing policy as well as delivering services.

Partnerships between the sectors should involve stakeholders consulting others about their ideas to address issues. Effective partnerships take time and effort to deliver and they are affected by political, financial and time restraints.

Good communication is essential to developing partnerships and it is hoped that the Regional Compact will contribute to facilitating communication.

“Asylum Seekers and Refugees – Making the Connections”

Peter Richardson introduced Charles Nhova, a former asylum seeker, and Mohammed Gass from the Northern Refugee Centre. The focus of the discussion was looking at the issues faced by asylum seekers and refugees and what connections are being made to improve the experience.

Charles explained that he had applied for asylum after coming to the UK on a business trip from Zimbabwe. His passport was lost by the Home Office for two years, so he was not eligible for an interview with the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) to access support, housing, food or money. Once his passport was found and he was granted asylum, he found it difficult to get employment or access education. On being granted asylum he received no specialist support.

Mohammed explained that the number of refugee groups in the region has grown. In 2000, there were 20 and in 2005 there were 80. These groups have developed as a self-help response to issues that refugees face when accessing health, education and legal support. The groups also provide computer and language training.

Issues that refugees face include:

- When asylum is granted, people are no longer automatically entitled to housing so they are put on long waiting lists leading to high levels of homelessness especially amongst single people.
- When seeking asylum individuals are not entitled to full healthcare.
- Children are automatically put in classes relating to their age regardless of their language ability and skills. This is problematic as some refugee children and young people will have had little previous education.

The Northern Refugee Council is a strategic organisation, which includes representatives from 30 organisations including NASS and the voluntary sector, focusing on influencing government policy to address many of the problems faced by refugees.

“Connecting the Issues”

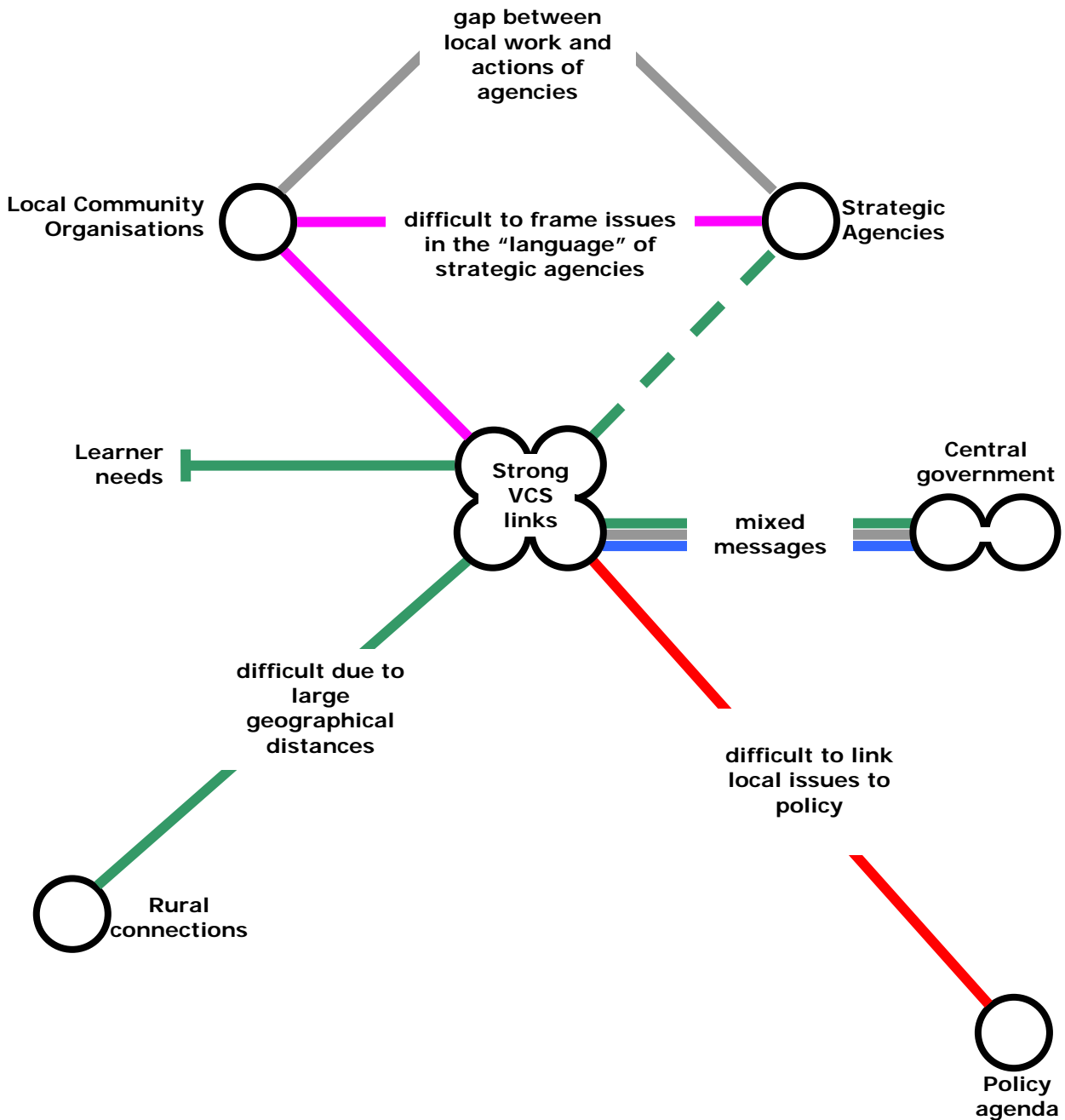
Individual workshops covered a range of topics: Children and Young People, Environment, Rural issues, and Learning and Skills. These workshops gave delegates a forum to identify further connections and issues. There was a certain overlap of the issues identified and we have tried to give a visual representation to the issues and connections through the diagram on page 4.

Key points raised were:

- The difficulty in linking local issues to the wider policy agenda.
- The difficulty in framing issues in the “language” of strategic agencies.
- There is a wide gap between the work of local community organisations and the actions of strategic agencies.
- Central government is seen as a barrier to change because although it is central to the connections process, it can send out mixed messages on issues.
- Rural connections can be hard to establish due to the large geographical distances between places.

- Links within the voluntary and community sector are good but connections between the sector and statutory agencies not so good. For example there are poor links between parish plans and local authorities.
- There needs to be greater sharing of good practice and learning.
- There is a need to strengthen the links to strategic decision making levels.
- In the learning and skills arena it is essential that the needs of the learner are central when developing regional plans and policies.

Issues raised in the workshops



Acknowledgements

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Mohammed Gass, Northern Refugee Centre.

Simon Hebditch, Chief Executive, Capacitybuilders.

Laura Moynahan, Yorkshire Forward Board Member and Chief Executive of Netherthorpe and Uppertorpe Community Alliance.

Charles Nhova, Northern Refugee Centre.

David Wears, Project Director, West Yorkshire Learning Consortium.

Andrew Wood, Forum Co-ordinator, Yorkshire & Humber Regional Environment Forum.



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