

# **Working together to improve outcomes:**

**A regional Hub for children, young  
people and families voluntary sector  
organisations in the North East**



**by Lesley Wood, September 2008**





## Working together to improve outcomes

### The Background

**“The Hub concept is part of a strategic re-alignment in response to changes in the operating environment.”**

**“If we want it enough we can get it – we need to believe that collaboration is worth it.”**

The voluntary and community sector (VCS) is changing. The shift from grants to contracts, reduction in some funding streams (e.g. from the European Union) and the fallout from the ‘credit crunch’ – are squeezing the sector, especially the smaller, local organisations.

At the same time there are new opportunities in the wider environment, with strong government support for the ‘third sector’ as a key partner in delivering targets. Every Child Matters (ECM), the government’s programme for reform of children’s services, identifies a significant role for the VCS in improving outcomes for children, young people and families (CYPF). Whilst this has sometimes been slow to impact on situations at local level, the VCS itself has been organising to make the most of these opportunities.

In the North East (NE) region this realignment has included:

- An increasingly strategic role for the NE group of the National Council for Voluntary Child Care Organisations (NCVCCO), which has members from a range of VCS service provider organisations, including those delivering play and pre-school services.
- Similar developments in the Regional Youth Work Unit (RYWU), including regional delivery of VCS Engage (a national CYPF infrastructure support programme funded by DCSF) which has networked CYPF infrastructure workers at local level, and the continuing work of the Regional Forum of Voluntary Youth Organisations (RFVYO).
- Investment by the Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC) in support for the VCS, through its Workforce Strategy Partners Programme (WSPP). This has created a network of people at local level delivering workforce development to the CYPF VCS. This network has now joined with the VCS Engage infrastructure workers network. Together, these networks can reach a wide range of VCS organisations, including the smaller, local groups.

In the summer of 2008, as part of a pilot of regional Workforce Strategy Partners Programme activity, CWDC funded a consultation on the proposal that this strategic realignment should go one step further – to create a collaborative Hub, linking the key VCS organisations at regional level. This document has been produced as an outcome of the consultation, to set out the main findings and provide a focus for further debate and development.



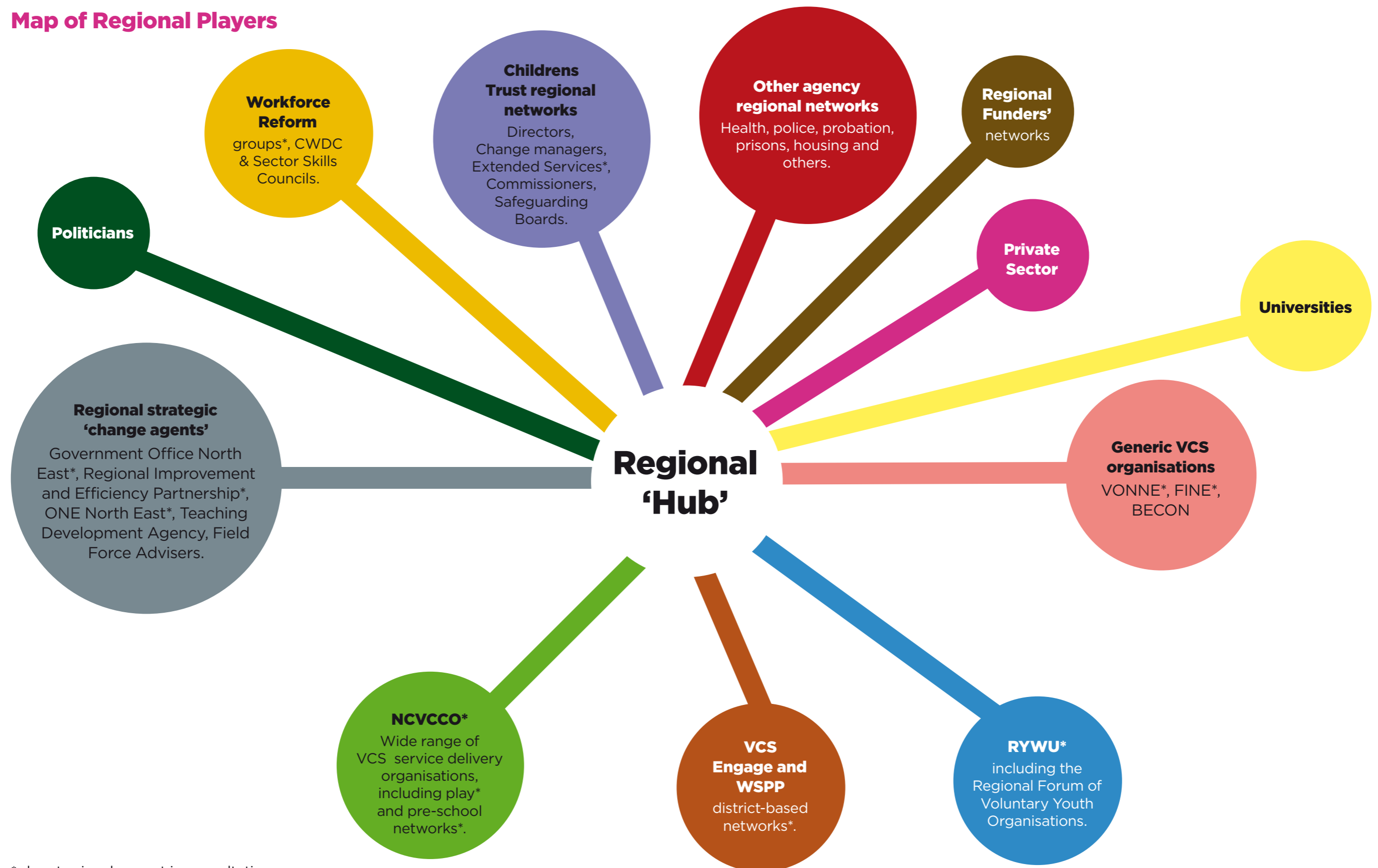
## Key Findings

- All of those interviewed were in favour of the creation of a CYPF Hub as a single point of contact for collecting and sharing information, data, views, support and challenge activity, and lead on new developments.
- Overall, interviewees said that the Hub would: improve communication and transparency; increase voice and influence for the CYPF VCS; ensure better delivery of government, Children’s Trust (CT), local authority (LA) and other statutory agency agendas; and improve cohesion and change management. More detailed information about the potential benefits is given below.
- From the statutory sector many interviewees wanted better ways to communicate and learn from the VCS and saw the Hub as a means to achieve this. They were especially keen to reach the smaller, local organisations which are the ‘heart blood’ of the sector and key to delivering some of the toughest ECM outcome targets.
- In relation to workforce reform and integrated working, the Hub presents opportunities for economies of scale for VCS training and development, as well as engagement and strategic influence with the evolving regional networks which are moving this agenda forward. This should lead to a more skilled VCS workforce and improved service standards and quality in the sector.
- Many interviewees described a positive and developing culture of collaboration and mutual support between key organisations in the region. For example, the interviewee from Government Office North East (GONE) said that:
 

**“The Hub would build upon work over the last 2 years, during which working relationships and shared knowledge have been developed among the main players.”**
- The developing partnership between VCS Engage, RYWU and NCVCCO offers the potential for the Hub to provide communication channels between high level strategic players and a wide range of VCS networks, including large service providers, small and medium sized organisations operating at local level, and organisations working right across the 0–19 age range.
- There is also a clear appreciation of the need for action to support VCS capacity for leadership of the change process.
- There is a realistic understanding of the obstacles to greater collaboration (competition for diminishing resources, low morale, insufficient developmental funding for the VCS, budget pressures on funders), and many positive ideas about how they could be overcome.
- Further resources will be required to ensure the Hub becomes a reality. There are a number of possible sources of funding and support.
- There is a great potential for the CYPF VCS to take up the opportunities presented both by Change for Children and the wider government agenda around the role of the third sector. The CYPF could ‘lead the way’ for the wider VCS, for example in relation to strategic engagement and service commissioning.



Map of Regional Players



\* denotes involvement in consultation





### The Benefits

There were a good range of potential benefits identified in relation to the Hub, summarised below under four headings:

**Workforce Reform; Networking; Leadership; Commissioning.**

#### Workforce Reform

**“Information, training, resources, influence, advocacy”**

The Hub would provide a good vehicle for supporting and disseminating VCS models of service delivery and user engagement. There were many comments about the importance of these models (flexible, accessible, non-stigmatising and user-led) to delivering ECM outcomes. It was commented during the study that CWDC cannot deliver its workforce reform agenda without active input from the VCS. Particular expertise included developing the ‘team around the child’, early intervention, working holistically and integrated working.

A number of examples of workforce development good practice were identified through the study, which could be brought together in the Hub. A centre of excellence for VCS workforce development was suggested which could add value to current initiatives and offer economies of scale in terms of:

- Training, including developing accredited courses.
- Organisational support and capacity building at a range of levels, particularly around leadership, business and strategic skills.
- Quality and standards development.
- Production of toolkits and protocols.
- Sharing of best practice and celebrating success.
- Gathering evidence about service impact.

There could be potential for generating income through these activities.

There is a developing regional ‘identity’ involving WSPP leads, and the Integrated Working Reform Leads from Children’s Trusts, with which the Hub could collaborate.



## Networking & Influencing

**“The Hub would support the diverse parts of the sector to work together without loss of individual identity.”**

**“If enough of us shouted, something might be done!”**

**“It is very important that the Hub links the widest range of organisations in the sector – this will be more credible and powerful, and act against unhelpful aspects of competition.”**

**“Shy bairns get nowt’ – we need to have the courage of our convictions.”**

The strategic realignment which has led to increased collaboration between VCS groups and networks offers great potential for dialogue throughout the system. This is modelled in the **Map of Regional Players** on pages 3 and 4. The Hub is central to this and was seen as delivering the following benefits:

- Supporting VCS organisations through active communication, including listening and consulting, disseminating information and organising conferences and events.
- Improved ‘support and challenge’ role for the CYPF VCS.
- Improved strategic collaboration with other regional VCS ‘players such as VONNE, Mental Health North East, Funding Information North East, Capacity Builders consortia.
- Support for participation of children, young people and families.

It was emphasised that the Hub needs roots deep into the sector, which can only be achieved through local infrastructure. A key role for the Hub would, therefore, be to increase local investment in CYPF support.



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### Leadership

**“Perhaps we should have a regional VCS Children and Young People’s Plan?”**

**“The sector should be more pro-active about endorsing particular approaches/ good practice, take on an active leadership role, make decisions, express a view, make choices, take a stand, and ensure support from the wider sector.”**

**“It’s there for the taking with a bit of leadership and strategic development - if we don’t who will?”**

Interviewees from a range of different roles noted that the CYPF VCS could be seen as ‘leading the way’:

- A recent national research study (Every Organisation Matters) commissioned by NCVCCO and NCVYS, suggested that the CYPF VCS employs between a third and a quarter of the total VCS workforce and generates at least £15bn/year nationally.
- There is a developed infrastructure, at both regional and local level (mapped by VCS Engage and supported by CWDC and other funding).
- Change for Children has made available many opportunities for engagement with the VCS, and growing expertise in partnership working now exists at both operational and strategic levels.
- Information is accumulating about the scale and impact of the CYPF VCS, with mapping and cost-benefit evidence being gathered at local, regional and national levels, promoting self-esteem and confidence in the sector.

The issue of leadership capacity in the CYPF VCS was much debated in the study. Many of those interviewed were people in leadership roles. They were impatient to move things forward but frustrated by competing pressures on their time and, in some cases, by negative aspects of the current operating environment. The Hub was seen as having the potential to increase sector leadership capacity in the following respects:

- Provides new space for strategic planning, mature dialogue and action planning among the key players, making the sector more pro-active, cohesive and effective.
- Promotes VCS visibility and recognition, increasing self-esteem, self-confidence and sense of value.
- Provides new opportunities for strategic activity such as horizon-scanning for business opportunities, collaborative working and the development of entrepreneurial and business skills.
- Enables the most positive and forward-looking sector leaders to demonstrate strategic competence and show the way for others in the sector.



## Commissioning

**“The commissioning agenda makes it harder to speak up as individual organisations – a regional Hub could provide greater safety for feeding issues back to statutory sector organisations.”**

**“Leadership is essential but it needs to be a model appropriate to the sector – not about money, but about social value, with active accountability to wider interests.”**

The commissioning agenda is the area of the current operating environment where the dissonance between government rhetoric and local reality is the most agonising, particularly for small/medium sized organisations. The VCS has done a great deal to prepare for the new approach but service commissioning is still relatively under-developed in most districts, and many in the CYPF VCS are under extreme financial pressure. Precious VCS service capacity is being lost. The Hub was seen as offering potential support in the field of commissioning as below:

- Tackling the commissioning agenda through its ‘support and challenge’ role, including highlighting good practice and challenging poor performance.
- Increasing strategic capacity to identify business opportunities for the CYPF VCS.
- Devising methods for evaluating cost-benefit issues in new ways, for example making the case for preventive approaches.
- Working collaboratively with other players in the field of commissioning, such as the RIEP and VONNE.
- Developing innovative approaches and working alongside others in current regional projects, such as social clauses, service brokerage, partnership development, work to ‘level the playing field’ for commissioning.
- Developing mechanisms for ‘match-making’ between large organisations and smaller local delivery partners, and more effective supply chain models.
- Acting as an advocate at all levels for investment in the sector, including for local infrastructure, as an effective means of managing the supplier market.
- Sector mapping, marketing and showcasing activity.
- Identifying market niches for the sector at regional level and forming delivery partnerships.
- Collaborating with the current regional Providers Forum for children’s services, which would be strengthened in terms of broadening its links with the wider VCS.



# Working together to improve outcomes

## Making it Happen

What are the obstacles to creating a Hub?	How could they be overcome?
Not enough buy-in, from key players so might be ineffective.	The Hub will need paid staff, a steering group, terms of reference, an action plan and leadership. It should also be accessible and open, with a dynamic relationship with 'members' – a network of networks.
Risk of being seen as a 'cartel'.	Establish clear protocols around service delivery issues – a Memorandum of Understanding?
Get seduced into 'representing' the sector, rather than providing the conduit for more direct expression from wider sector.	Leadership group must be as representative as possible and its members must be equal partners. Needs also to support local infrastructure to be more sustainable and link effectively.
Lack of resources – both people time and funds, short-term funding, recession.	The Hub is the best way forward in terms of economies of scale and best use of scant resources. Use cost benefit arguments to show the value of infrastructure investment.
Risk of duplication with networks already in existence.	Needs to be based on ongoing consultation with key stakeholders and clear linkage processes.
Competition is a major obstacle to collaboration – current financial squeeze on VCS means some effective projects are reducing services or closing down.	The will and understanding is there now – if we want it enough we can get it – we need to believe that collaboration is worth it. Recognise conflicts of interest and establish shared vision, honesty and preparedness to work for wider sector. Explore value of consortium activity and other options in market development.
Lose sight of the goals, values, support and engagement with membership.	Watch out for the tendency for infrastructure to be 'about itself' and keep clear about service delivery issues. Ensure it is not just about commissioning and 'getting the business' – but about wider social issues and improving outcomes.
Not fully representative of the wider sector (small/local organisations, equality and diversity networks).	Use NCVCCO and VCS Engage networks to feed info upwards, and keep reaching out. Dynamic approach to membership good events, good information exchange.
Negative thinking in VCS. Lack of motivation, weariness, low self-esteem and loss of capacity in the sector.	Creative thinking, positive people, quick wins, value and celebrate good practice. Work against negativity and 'distractions'. Time – we'll get there! Keep at it. Strong links with local third sector infrastructure.



## Next Steps

- The report of this consultation will be disseminated to all stakeholders across region. If you would like a copy of the full report contact Ivan Wintringham, details overleaf.
- This 'Vision' publication will be used to promote ongoing dialogue and development.
- A 'Task & Finish' group will be established with representatives from the key CYPF VCS networks (namely, NCVCCO regional group, RFVYO, and the VCS Engage/ CWDC network) to work on: structure and governance; resources; and stakeholder engagement.

**“If it doesn't help children and young people  
- there's no point”**



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