Developing a Sector Led Plan for Norfolk: early impressions

Introduction: Norfolk County Council has commissioned work to improve the dialogue between the Council and the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector. The project, VCS Engage, is a close collaboration between Momentum(Norfolk), Norfolk Rural Community Council and West Norfolk VCA. Together, and in collaboration with the wider sector, VCS Engage are developing a 'sector led plan' – a picture of the VCSE sector in Norfolk and a statement of shared priorities and vision for the future. This document is designed to share early impressions from the consultation. We hope it will be of interest but it should not be seen as a definitive consultation result summary.

Background: In the months leading up to Christmas Momentum(Norfolk), Norfolk Rural Community Council and West Norfolk Voluntary and Community Action held a series of workshops with VCSE organisations to gather views about the main challenges the sector, and the individuals and groups with whom it works face in Norfolk today.

This report is a summary of the findings from those events. It sets out the main themes that were highlighted, giving a broad-brush picture of the views of the sector at the moment. However, it is not an exact science. The views are those of the group of people willing and able to attend (a list of the organisations represented is included at the end). There is only so much information you can gather from a post-it note, and "funding" – which was written on many – can cover a range of more specific issues. However, while it may lack detail it has the benefit of volume, with more than eight hundred individual responses across the eight workshops.

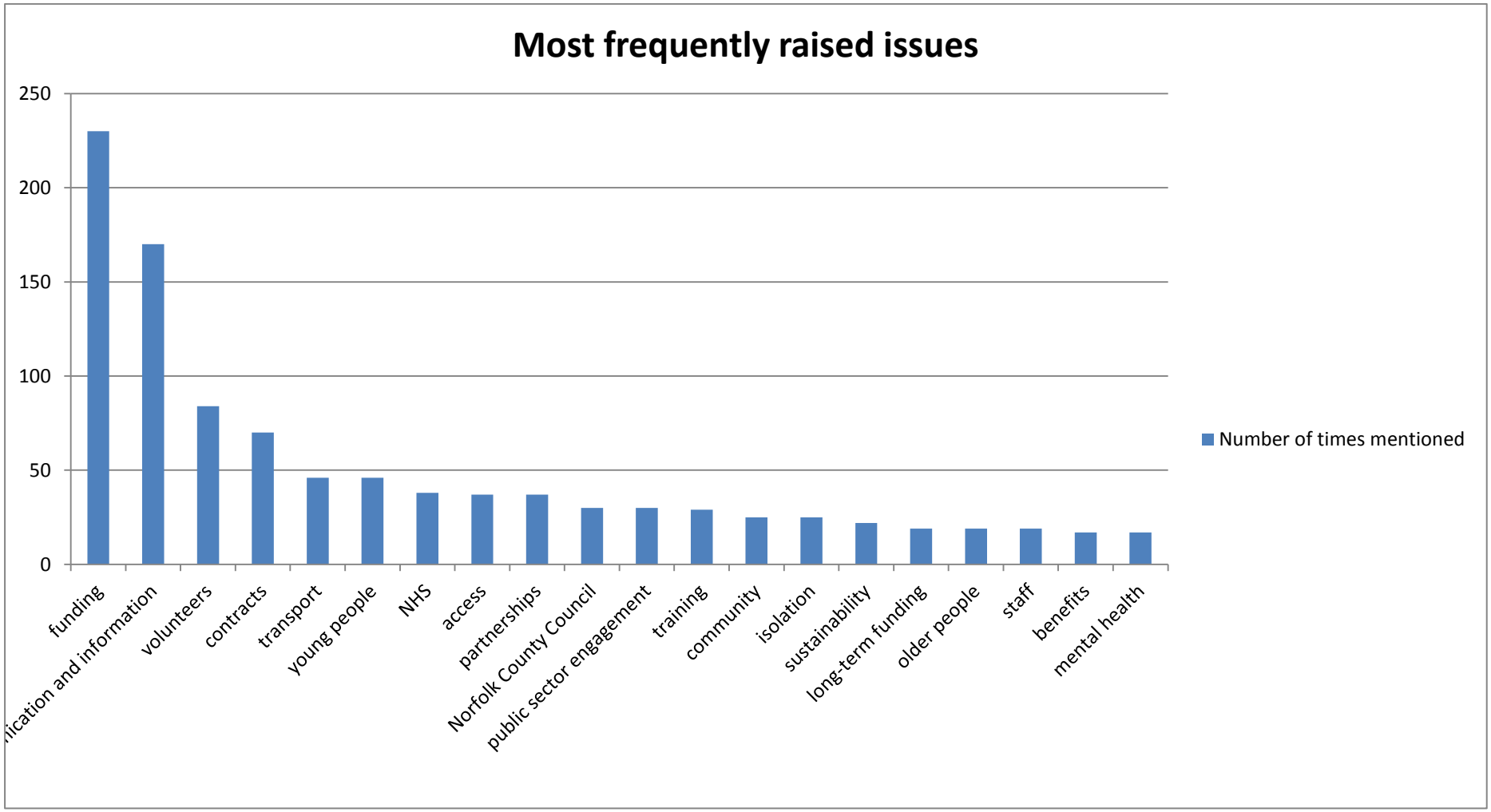
Methodology: Participants were asked to write down the issues and challenges facing their organisation and then prioritise them as a small group. Each issue became an entry in our database and was tagged according to the theme or themes to which it corresponded. This means that there is overlap between the issues listed – for example, concern about mental health services in the county would be listed as 'NHS' and 'mental health', or a lack of convenient or affordable transport options preventing clients from accessing services would come under 'transport' as well as 'access'. In this context 'access' covers both clients' ability to access services, and organisations' ability to identify and reach the people who could benefit from their services. Similarly, 'contracts' covers anything relating to the bureaucracy and complexity of contracts and grant applications, whether that be onerous reporting requirements or the time-consuming nature of the tendering process itself. Issues raised under the 'communication and information heading' could be either within or between the voluntary and public sector, or both. 'Public sector engagement' falls under that broad category and relates to concerns with the way the public sector relates to the VCS.

This is not the whole picture but it gives a valuable early indication of the main issues and challenges facing the voluntary and community sector in Norfolk today. We are carrying out interviews and a survey, informed by this work, to build up more detailed evidence about the challenges facing the sector in Norfolk and shared priorities for the future.

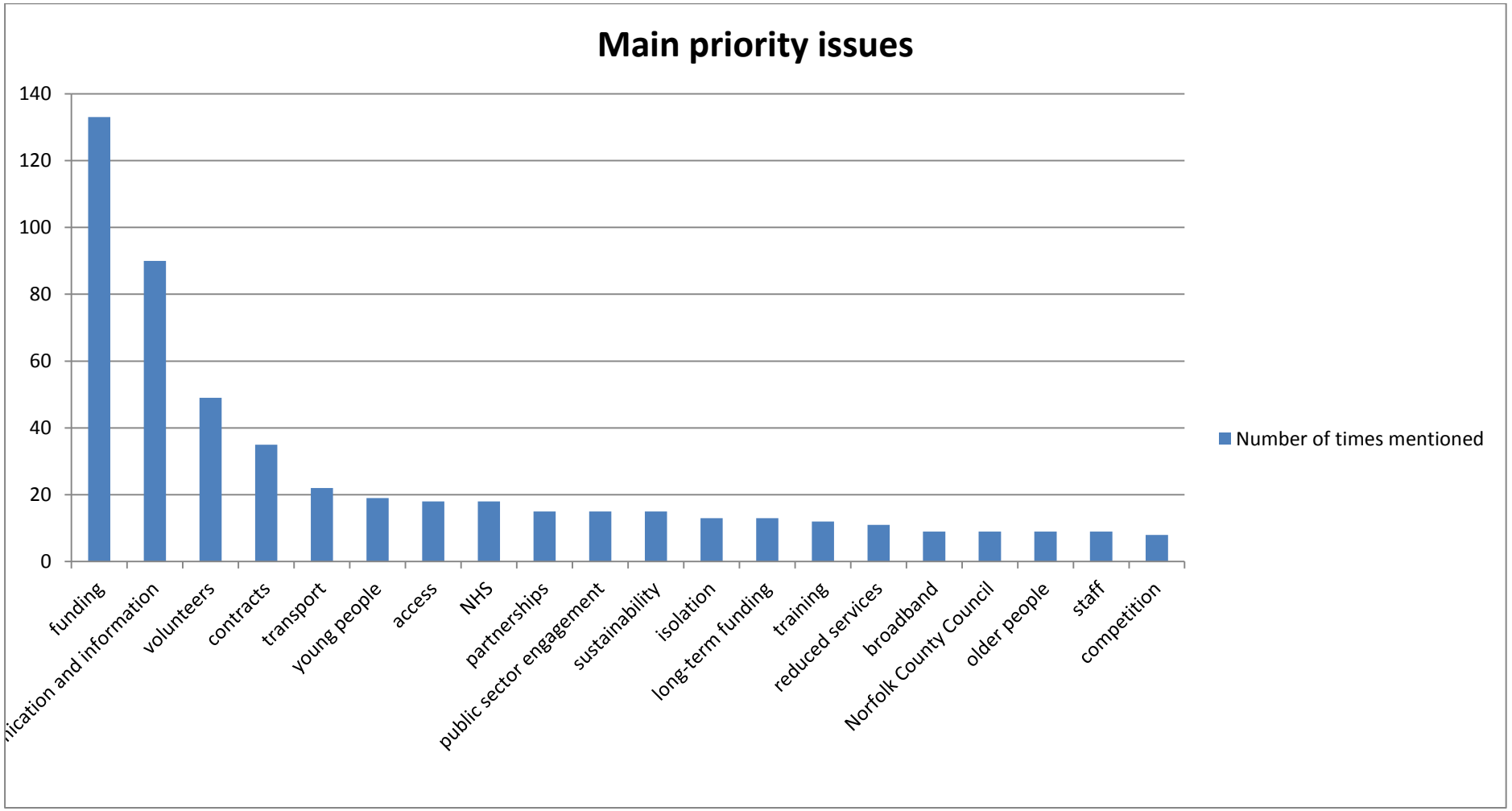
Summary

More than 150 people attended the events, giving 854 individual responses which touched on approximately 80 issues (a separate document sets out the responses from each event in more detail). Some themes came through very clearly:

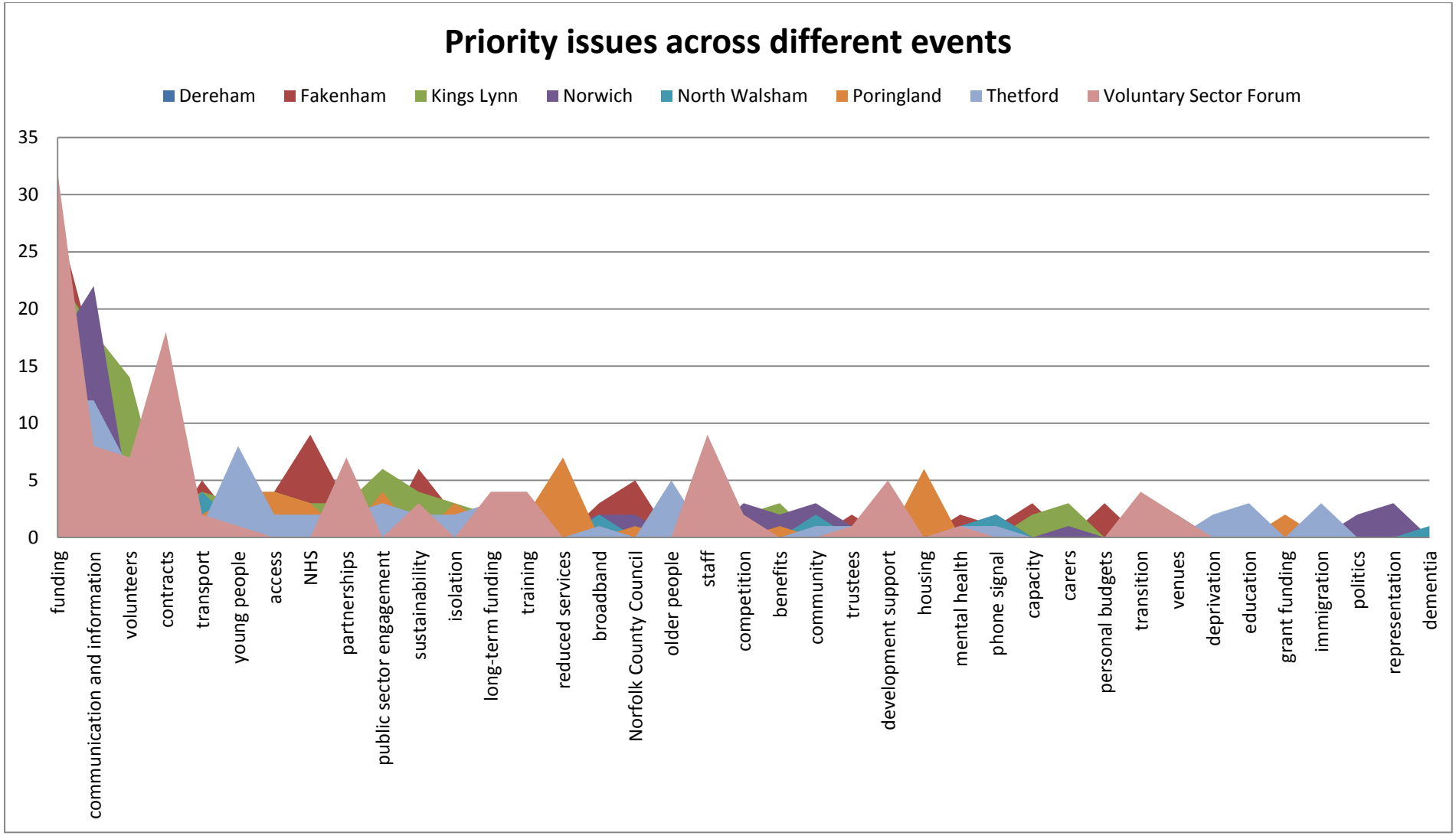
This chart shows the twenty most frequently mentioned issues:



Participants were also asked, in groups, to prioritise among the many different concerns. Once this is taken into account, the top ten issues remain almost exactly the same. However, reduced services, broadband and competition replaced mental health, benefits and community engagement among the top twenty issues.



The main themes – funding, communication and information, volunteers, transport – were fairly evenly spread across events, but some of the other issues featured more prominently at some events than at others. The diagram below gives an indication of where particular issues came up in different areas.



Funding

"Funding" was by far and away the biggest issue facing the sector and covered a range of related topics:

- **Reduced funding:** uncertainty about future funding affects staffing, morale and service planning and provision, while increased competition for the limited funding available undermines cooperation and collaboration with other organisations. At the same time, budget reductions in the public sector are leading to increasing demand for the services provided by VCS organisations. Benefit sanctions were mentioned by some participants as having an impact on demand for their services.
- **Bidding for funding:** knowing where to look for funding and having the skills to write effective bids was raised by many. When bidding for funding, there is a sense that organisations and their work have to 'fit into boxes defined by someone else'. Funding is usually short-term and project based, rather than being available to support the core costs (such as staffing) of existing work – this was an issue which came up frequently. Organisations feel they have to invent new projects in order to be eligible, when what they really want to do is continue and develop their existing work. Some said that having reserves can count against you when bidding for funding, making people feel they are being penalised for sensible financial management.
- **Application processes:** grant application or tendering processes can be very complicated and time-consuming, taking people 'away from the day job' and potentially favouring larger organisations which have dedicated staff for this. However, one respondent suggested that large organisations were less likely to receive support from District Councils, who they said prefer to fund smaller groups. The time taken up with applications for funding is a particular problem for organisations who rely on numerous small pots of money, particularly as the complexity of the process can be disproportionate to the sums involved.
- **Commissioning:** a number of issues were raised to do with commissioning, particularly by organisations working with children and young people. The demands of the tendering process were highlighted as being particularly complicated and time-consuming. Some organisations are focusing on becoming commissioning ready while others, already involved in commissioning, have found that the timescales and tendering or reporting requirements can change unexpectedly. The underlying theme concerned the relationship the VCS has with commissioners and whether the expectations on both sides are fair.

Information and communication

A range of issues relating to information-sharing and communication, both within and between the voluntary and public sectors, were also frequently raised:

- **Advocating for the VCS:** there is a clear desire to increase awareness of what the VCS does and the impact it has, and to celebrate success. Some felt that the VCS is under-valued, with local and national government failing to acknowledge the need for the VCS and the potential impact if it was not there. Others highlighted the importance for the sector of becoming more evidence-led and having the data to demonstrate its impact.
- **Using and sharing information:** some suggested we could be better at information-sharing, both within the sector and with statutory services. Issues around transition and/or duplication between different services were also raised, particularly in relation to services for children and young people. Not knowing who to speak to was also a very common problem, particularly with the current restructuring at Norfolk County Council.
- **Marketing and promotion:** As well as *general* awareness-raising about the value of the sector as a whole, respondents wanted to make sure others – be they the local authority, GP surgery, local community, or other VCS organisations – know about *their* organisation and services. Some acknowledged a need to improve their events, fundraising and/or marketing function, and smaller organisations in particular want to see more networking opportunities.
- **Partnership working:** there is a clear appetite among the VCS to do more partnership working, coupled with recognition of the difficulties involved. Some people say they need help finding opportunities for partnership working, while others wondered whether the sector could be better at sharing resources such as venues or specialist roles. The tension between working together in partnership with others and competing with them for limited funding came up frequently.

Volunteers

The recruitment, retention and development of volunteers, staff and trustees was an issue on many people's minds:

- **Recruitment:** many respondents said they have difficulty recruiting enough volunteers and trustees with the right skills. There are also concerns about being over-reliant on volunteers and about the age profile of the volunteers that groups do have. Many said they needed to engage more with young people and to widen participation and involvement in the work of their organisation.
- **Development:** having the time and money to provide appropriate training and support for volunteers is an issue many groups are facing, with some respondents interested in opportunities to share training, potentially with the local authority, at reduced or cost price. The time and cost of the DBS process was also raised a number of times.

- **Staff:** many of the same issues regarding support for volunteers also apply to staff. Organisations working with children and young people were more likely to highlight issues around staff recruitment and skills (such as the impact that uncertain funding has on retention of staff).

Transport and isolation

Lack of transport options, and the cost of public transport where it does exist, was commonly highlighted as a priority issue, along with social isolation and the ensuing problems for people trying to access services.

- Transport was the fifth most commonly raised issue and also deemed a priority issue by participants at the events. Lack of transport options, and the cost of transport where it does exist causes problems, and there was particular concern for young people and vulnerable groups.
- Access to services and social isolation were also among the most frequently raised issues. As well as highlighting the difficulty individuals may have accessing services, respondents also commented on their difficulties accessing the people or groups who could benefit from their services, with comments such as, 'how to reach the right people,' and 'finding those in need' highlighted as issues.
- Broadband was also chosen by many groups as a priority issue; while mobile phone signal was prioritised by some.

Services and groups

Young people and older people were both mentioned as groups with particular needs. Although Norfolk has an ageing population, young people were mentioned considerably more often – and not just at the event for groups working with them. Apart from 'reduced services' as a general issue, transport, the NHS and mental health were the services most frequently mentioned, along with welfare ('benefits'), housing, broadband/phone signal, social care ('personal budgets'), education and employment. More detail about views on public services in the county is given below.

Summary of views on services

- **Community:** people were positive about Norfolk as a place to live, about good community relations, friendliness and the work of small local organisations such as charities and community groups, parish councils, community hospitals, local libraries, local newsletters and magazines.
- **Staff/volunteers:** people praised the dedicated, passionate people who provide essential services. However, they also highlighted the high turnover of council staff as an area of concern.
- **Children and young people:** lack of positive activities and infrastructure for young people was an issue, with one respondent commenting that there are 'almost zero [youth services] at present in rural areas'.
- **Health and social care:** GP access, preventive services, waiting times, mental health services and home care were all raised as issues that need to improve.
- **Transport:** although respondents felt that the community transport sector works well *where it exists*, the frequency, reliability and affordability of transport options were deemed areas that need to improve, as were the coordination of the transport network and wheelchair access to it.
- **Income:** there was a great deal of concern about public sector funding cuts and the impact of welfare reforms. Various respondents suggested that this is something Norfolk's Health and Wellbeing Board and Clinical Commissioning Groups need to be alert to.
- **Information and communication:** respondents want to improve the sharing of good practice and awareness of available support, including among the VCS itself. This may require IT training for people to access information – but respondents also pointed out that not everyone is on the internet and that there is poor mobile and internet service in some areas. A 'no wrong door' policy was also suggested, allowing organisations to refer clients on to others if their service is not appropriate for the client's needs.
- **Strategy:** there were concerns about duplication of, and gaps between services, with too much choice in some areas and not enough in others. There is a desire for a more consistent, integrated, long-term approach to service delivery and better strategic planning/collaboration across sectors (statutory, voluntary and private), including a real focus on prevention.

Summary of views on VCS infrastructure

- **Services:** people were positive about the practical support services available from infrastructure organisations, for example help with funding and project development, DBS services, HR/Payroll, and template policies. Specialist support seems to be particularly well-regarded. However, people do not necessarily use, or are not always aware of the support available. One area to improve is to clarify what 'infrastructure' is and to make sure people know about the support available: 'if you know about it and access it, generally services and support are very good'.
- **Ethos:** people were positive about the ethos, enthusiasm and commitment from infrastructure organisations and positive about the value of volunteering itself. People want to see infrastructure organisations promoting the sector and celebrating success.
- **Volunteers:** volunteer recruitment remains an issue and there is a particular desire to recruit younger volunteers, including through working with schools and colleges. Some feel volunteer advertising and recruitment through infrastructure organisations works well, others suggested that specialist services such as the Treasurer role could be made available to small charities or that a shared volunteer database could help support small organisations. There was also a suggestion that the private sector could become more involved.
- **Training:** people seem to be broadly satisfied with the quality of training but a number of training needs were mentioned, including fundraising, grant-making, legacies and trusts, governance, and social media. People are particularly looking for more support on funding, for example guidance to funding sources. It was suggested that there should be an analysis of training needs followed by the development of a collaborative training programme, even a central funding pot for training and shared learning from/with the statutory sector. People want to know about events, including training, in plenty of time (perhaps through an online calendar) and they should not always take place in Norwich.
- **Networking:** there is clearly an appetite for networking opportunities, perhaps themed by special interest or geography. It was suggested that newsletters could feature a member(s) (which would help both to increase awareness of other organisations and to celebrate success). There is also an interest in informal peer support/peer learning, eg through online forums and contact lists that enable people to share skills, resources, good practice and their own experience.
- **Communication:** people want communications through a range of different channels, with more targeted newsletters and information which is clearly set out (headlines, bullet points) to make it easier to find what is relevant. It was suggested, for example, that people might be able to select the areas of interest to them. The importance of using plain English and not using abbreviations was also raised. WNVCA's Stop Press newsletter seemed popular. Information needs to be accessible and up to date and it was also suggested that infrastructure bodies' websites should be usable by mobile app. It was also highlighted that it is sometimes difficult to identify who to go to for what.
- **Public sector:** people want help navigating Norfolk County Council – identifying the correct person to speak to and understanding the structure of the organisation.

- **Partnerships:** cooperation and competition, already mentioned above, also came up in this part of the workshops. Apart from the difficulty in managing this tension, the timescales involved in bidding for funding can also prevent partnerships. People want help getting commissioning ready or facilitating partnerships and they want to see greater emphasis on cooperation rather than competition.

Comments on 'building the right interfaces'

- **Relationships:** the challenge of knowing who to contact was frequently raised, particularly given personnel changes at Norfolk County Council
- **A forum to meet:** some people were in favour of bringing people together more regularly, while others cautioned against meeting for the sake of it. Clearly there is a balance to be struck and content must be relevant.
- **Connections:** There is also an appetite for organisations within the sector to be better connected, for example through web forums or use of databases/directories, to enable people to swap ideas and share learning. Networking meetings were suggested by many, within the sector and/or with statutory services – but with the caveat that meetings have to be relevant and not too frequent! Grouping by theme and by geography were both suggested.
- **Representation:** people raised questions of the legitimacy, accountability and openness of the process to select 'representatives' of the sector. There was a call for greater openness and transparency, for example around funding and conflicts of interest, with the question posed, 'do all members have a shared voice?' Smaller groups in particular had questions about who represents them and highlighted the importance of a two-way communication process. Suggestions included making better use of existing networks and forums, raising their profile, and developing ambassadors to engage with small groups.

Conclusion

Momentum(Norfolk), Norfolk RCC and West Norfolk Voluntary & Community Action are grateful to all those who participated in the events and who have given their time to talk to us in interviews. The comments received will feed in to the Sector Led Plan and as we develop a response to the issues highlighted. If you have any comments, queries or suggestions about this work, please contact Ruth Gripper, Policy Officer on ruth@norfolkrcc.org.uk or Steve Nunn, Communications Officer, on steve@norfolkrcc.org.uk

Appendix: List of participants

Where attendees gave the name of their organisation when they registered, that has been listed here.

Aaron Machaya, New Covenant Apostolic Ministry
Alan Quinn
Amanda Hedley
Amanda Payne
Andy Moulton
Anita Beckett
Anne Ebbage
Anne Leitch
April Simnor
Beatrice Humarau, North Norfolk Advice Project
Bob Bones
Bob King
Brenda Bond, Crossroads Care
Brian Farrell
Canon Peter Howard
Carolyn Graham
Chris Knighton
Chrissy Chalmers
Christine Walton
Claire Collen, Voluntary Norfolk
Clare Stiles
Cllr Eric Seward
Cllr Julie Brociek-Coulton
Croxton Village Hall
Dale Curtis
Daphne Pritchard
David Hammond
David Orr
David Pearson
Deborah Carter
Deborah Sacks
Dennis Roberts
Derek Edwards
Derek Land
Dianne Fernee
Dianne Howes
Dominique Wood
Dr. David Seaton
Eamon McGrath, Age UK Norfolk
Elizabeth Hargest
Emma Mayes
Esther Heybourne
Fernandez Reis
Freda Selby
Georgina Sait
Hannah Worsley
Heather Nunn
HM Lord Lieutenant Norfolk
Isabel Coe
Jacqueline Saville
James Kearns, Build
Janka Rodziewicz
Jazmin Dembicki
Jenny Bevan
Jo Huxtable
John Hindley
Jolyon Booth
Julie Helsby
Karen Roper
Kathleen Arnold
Kaye MacKinnon
Kayley Rutland
Keith Bendell
Lady Joyce Hopwood
Lesley Bradfield
Margarethe Phillips
Mark Foley
Mark Reilly
Martin Fuller
Martyn Lane
Maureen Lisings
Maureen Hammond
Michael Fletcher
Michael Garrod
Michael MacKinnon
Michael Millage
Michael Upton
Moira Burton
Moira Goodey
Morningthorpe Parish Council
Mr. Barry Capon, Good Work Norfolk and Waveney Industrial Mission
Mr. Chris Sharp
Mr. D Saunders
Mr. David Orr, Norwich Stroke Survivors
Mr. George Hayes

Mr. J Rampling
Mr. John Knight
Jonathan Clemo, Norfolk RCC
Mr. Nick Craig, Henderson Trust
Mr. R S Rathbone
Mrs H Melandri-Street
Mrs. E Riches
Mrs. Jenny Parsonage
Mrs. Jill Gaul
Mrs. Pat Holtom
Nick Manderfield
Nicola King
Nigel Brigham
Nikki Morris
Paddy Bennett
Patricia Goose
Paul Ryall
Pearl Elvin
Peter Hoult
Philip Search
Rachel Cole
Rebecca White
Richard Laxon
Richard Mickleburgh
Roger Willis
Ros Brown
Sadie Harvey
Sharon Hearsum
Steve Wiseman
Sue Spooner
Sylvia Batchelor
Tim Cara
Toni Rhodes
Tony Ogden
Tony Vale
Tony Yates
Val Taylor-Rowe
Yolande Russell