

Voluntary and Community Sector  
**Infrastructure Investment Plan**  
2004-2006



**BEDFORDSHIRE & LUTON VCS INFRASTRUCTURE CONSORTIUM  
Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Investment Plan 2004-2006**

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# BEDFORDSHIRE & LUTON VCS INFRASTRUCTURE CONSORTIUM

## Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Investment Plan 2004-2006

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Consortium is a diverse group of Local Infrastructure Organisations serving equally diverse communities within Bedfordshire and Luton. It offers core services within key areas of activity namely;

- a voice for the interests of local groups and the promotion of the sector
- the facilitation of links between organisations and with other stakeholders
- the promotion and supporting of best practice
- the provision of leadership
- technical support (ICT, human resources, marketing, finance etc.)
- the recruitment of volunteers

Integrated services are delivered in each of the four local unitary/borough/district authority areas (although different models apply in different localities) and we believe these are the most effective way of delivering local infrastructure services (both generalist and specialist) to local voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations. Specialist youth and rural infrastructure services at sub-regional level complement and enhance the Consortium's ability to meet the needs of local communities.

### Key Challenges

An analysis of the context in which the Consortium operates and the needs of front line VCS organisations provides a diverse picture of local needs. Key challenges facing the Consortium and its constituent members are:

- continuing to map local VCS organisations, identify their needs and getting feedback from the sector;
- improving its communication with front line VCS organisations and extending the reach of infrastructure services to non-users;
- improving the skills, knowledge and attitudes of front line VCS organisations, particularly in respect of community development, funding and volunteering;
- enabling VCS organisations to increase their capacity by promoting the benefits of, and opportunities for, volunteering to the public at large and recruiting additional volunteers;
- enabling VCS organisations to have an effective voice;
- developing collaboration and strategic working as a VCS Infrastructure Consortium;
- embedding quality through benchmarking and meeting quality standards;
- securing the resources needed to sustain, develop and improve local infrastructure services.

### Vision

Our long-term vision for the VCS Infrastructure Consortium is:

A VCS Infrastructure Consortium able to develop effective joint working that enables Local Infrastructure Organisations to support the diverse needs of the voluntary and community sector in Bedfordshire and Luton.

Our long-term vision of the voluntary and community sector is:

A vibrant, effective, sustainable and inclusive voluntary and community sector where all individuals and communities are empowered to play a full part in local voluntary and community action and where local voluntary organisations and community groups:

- identify and make planned responses to community needs through effective voluntary and community action;
- have the skills, knowledge, structures and resources to fulfil their potential;
- develop and implement good practice in governance, service delivery, volunteering and as an employer (where appropriate) and are committed to continuous improvement of quality in all aspects of their work;
- recognise diversity, provide equality of opportunity and enable participation from all sections of the community;
- respect and value volunteers for who they are and what they contribute;
- have a high profile within local communities and with local opinion formers;
- feel supported by local VCS Infrastructure Organisations as effective local development agencies able to meet their needs and represent their interests.

### **Strategic Aim**

To sustain and improve the overall provision of infrastructure supporting the diverse needs of the voluntary and community sector in Bedfordshire and Luton and provide effective mechanisms for the delivery of generic and specialist infrastructure services.

### **Strategic Objectives**

- To increase collaboration and strategic working between VCS Infrastructure Organisations on policy, information and services.
- To promote awareness and understanding of the roles and services of the Consortium and its constituent members amongst all rural and urban voluntary organisations and community groups so that they can better connect with our services.
- To strengthen our targeting of hard to reach groups to ensure equal access to information and services.
- To increase the capacity of local communities by improving people's community development, volunteering and fundraising skills.
- To increase access to, and the take-up of, a known and diverse range of sustainable volunteering opportunities.
- To enable local voluntary organisations and community groups to establish an effective voice in response to the needs and interests of local communities.

The Consortium's vision will not be achieved in one or two years. It will require a determined effort over a period of around ten years on the part of members of the Consortium, the local voluntary and community sector, funders and others. The activities outlined in this Investment Plan are about taking the first steps towards achieving this vision over the next two years.

## BEDFORDSHIRE & LUTON VCS INFRASTRUCTURE CONSORTIUM Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Investment Plan 2004-2006

### INTRODUCTION

This Infrastructure Investment Plan (IIP) sets out the strategy for modernising and equipping Consortium members to improve their effectiveness, strengthen the support provided to voluntary organisations and community groups (including the hard to reach), build community capacity and develop volunteering within Bedfordshire and Luton, in a way that will sustain continuing activity.

The Consortium also identified three key principles for the overall investment programme, namely:

- **Embedding quality and improving reach** – frontline voluntary organisations and community groups to have better access to support in such areas as ICT, governance, financial management, etc.;
- **Modernising infrastructure** – the creation of a local Infrastructure Investment Plan that relates to those prepared regionally and nationally; the promotion of collaboration and partnership at all levels and the development of integrated/centralised support services;
- **Driving up activity in key service areas** – increased engagement of the voluntary and community sector in service delivery within the Government's priority areas of Health and Social Care, Crime and Community Cohesion, Education and Learning, and support for Children and Young People.

### MEMBERSHIP OF THE CONSORTIUM

The Bedfordshire & Luton VCS Infrastructure Consortium was formed in January 2004 and has since been expanded to include all voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations identified in the GO-East list of organisations (published 24 February 2004). Its members are:

Bedford Race Equality Council  
Bedford Volunteer Bureau  
Bedfordshire and Luton Council for Voluntary Youth Services  
Bedfordshire Funding Advice Bureau  
Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity  
Mid Bedfordshire Council for Voluntary Service  
North Bedfordshire Council for Voluntary Service  
Voluntary Action Luton  
Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire

Bedford Race Equality Council (BREC) were invited to join the Consortium at an early stage and have been kept informed at all stages of the infrastructure planning process. Individual Consortium members (and others) have also briefed and encouraged the organisation to participate. BREC's contributions, views, investment priorities and knowledge of the sector have been sought but unfortunately the organisation has consistently failed to attend meetings, provide information requested of it, meet deadlines or to communicate with members of the Consortium.

A representative of MENTER (the regional BME infrastructure organisation) has been involved in the latter stages of the process and members have found this to be most useful, with the organisation's contributions informing the development of this IIP.

Appendix A gives full contact details of each Consortium member and letters confirming their involvement.

It has been agreed by the Consortium that Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire will act as the main contact for the Consortium, the contact details of which are:

Name of Contact: John Gelder

Address: Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire  
Bossard House  
West Street  
Leighton Buzzard  
Bedfordshire  
LU7 1DA

Telephone: 01525 850559  
Email: john@action-southbeds.org.uk

The Consortium has been convened and chaired by the Director of Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire with the Business Support Manager of Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity providing notes of Consortium meetings. Consortium members have taken forward specific pieces of work, relating to the infrastructure services provided by their own organisation, and driven forward other work relating to the preparation of the Plan. A consultant has been used to facilitate meetings. Proposals included in the Plan will have been agreed by the governance structures of our respective organisations and have been developed in line with local Compact commitments.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In its deliberations the Consortium has considered key Government documents on local voluntary and community sector (VCS) infrastructure and community capacity building (see Appendix B). Consortium members have mapped the current VCS Infrastructure Functions (based on the list identified in GOEM documentation) including:

- Generalist Infrastructure (CVSs and others)
- Volunteering Infrastructure
- Rural Infrastructure
- BME Infrastructure

This work has taken account of local diversity and the needs of particular groups, including young people, black and minority ethnic groups, rural communities and those socially excluded. It has also considered the particular needs of smaller organisations and a rural dimension to cross cutting issues such as volunteering and community capacity building.

The needs of front line VCS organisations are at the heart of this strategy. The Consortium has developed a strategy based on existing evidence available from its constituent members. This has included organisational Strategic/Business Plans and their respective consultations; training needs surveys, annual user surveys, user feedback from training workshops/courses; and a stakeholder consultation on the role, function and priorities for a local integrated infrastructure organisation.

It has also sought (and will continue) to expand its knowledge of the range of local voluntary organisations, community groups and volunteer-involving organisations that exist across Bedfordshire and Luton so that the sector as a whole can benefit from the delivery of infrastructure functions and services arising from the proposed investment.

Consortium members have also had discussions with key stakeholders (mainly local authorities, Primary Care Trusts and the Learning and Skills Council) about the role, functions and development priorities of local infrastructure organisations, including those provided by statutory organisations. The aspirations and connectivity of local Community Plans, the impact of the Milton Keynes and South Midlands Sub Regional Strategy and the planned housing growth, and other

regional strategies have also been considered. The views of MENTER and the Bedfordshire Rural Affairs Forum have also been considered and included in the IIP. Work arising from this Infrastructure Investment Planning process will feed into a review of funding for Bedfordshire Infrastructure Organisations being undertaken by Bedfordshire County Council.

The strategy focuses on the need for consortium members to improve their effectiveness in meeting the needs of VCS organisations and enabling them to improve their capacity to deliver services to their users.

## **CORE INFRASTRUCTURE FUNCTIONS**

Local VCS Infrastructure Organisations provide the following core functions:

### **1. A voice for the interests of local groups and the promotion of the sector**

- Acting as a conduit for the local VCS by involvement with a wide variety of other agencies [*e.g. Local Strategic Partnerships, Health Authorities and Primary Care Trusts, Police, Education, Learning & Skills Council, Local Authorities*].
- Liaising with local, regional and national funders and raising awareness of local issues [*e.g. ESF Co-Financing, Lloyds TSB, Lottery*].

### **2. The facilitation of links between organisations and with other stakeholders**

- Maintaining a comprehensive database of local voluntary organisations, community groups and other agencies.
- Providing regular, timely and interesting information dissemination and exchange [*e.g. up-to-date information on government initiatives, regional events and publication of a Directory of Local Groups*].
- Promoting partnership, collaborative and cross-sectoral working [*e.g. Compact, Bedfordshire Rural Affairs Forum, Local Strategic Partnerships*].

### **3. The promotion and supporting of best practice**

- Promoting and supporting good governance.
- Providing advice and support to VCS organisations on the implementation of quality assurance systems and working to achieve further quality standards in-house [*e.g. Investors in People, PQASSO, Volunteer Development Agency Quality Mark, ACRE Good Practice Quality Standards*].

### **4. The provision of leadership**

- Acting in a liaison role with statutory and other agencies in partnership groups, to ensure that key information can be disseminated to the wider sector [*e.g. strategic funding related to Objective 2, Investing in Communities etc.*].
- Contributing and responding to public policy debates and other issues affecting the VCS.

### **5. Building the capacity of organisations and individual staff/volunteers**

- Providing outreach and one-to-one advice and guidance to voluntary organisations, community groups and parish councils on a range of organisational, management and development issues.
- Providing an ongoing training programme across Bedfordshire and Luton aimed at developing the management skills for voluntary organisations and community groups [*e.g. financial, project development, HR issues, fund-raising, governance*].

- Providing funding advice to VCS organisations through one-to-one advice sessions, web-sites, emails, newsletters, workshops and access to small grants funding [*e.g. grant access via Global Grants Partnership, Local Network Fund, Community Chest Grant Scheme*].

## **6. Technical support** (ICT, human resources, marketing, finance etc.)

- ICT support through one-to-one training, free internet access to local VCS organisations.
- Direct support services [*e.g. payroll, professional accountancy support, professional legal advice surgeries, one-to-one consultations, financial package development*].

## **7. Recruitment of volunteers**

- Building the capacity of volunteer-involving organisations to recruit, manage and retain volunteers.
- Developing and brokering volunteering opportunities.
- Extensively promoting volunteering and local volunteering opportunities [*e.g. job centres, libraries, community centres, schools, business, youth groups, Millennium Volunteers Scheme local environmental projects*].

## **ASSESSMENT OF CONTEXT AND NEED FOR INFRASTRUCTURE SUPPORT**

### **Local Infrastructure Support**

Mid Bedfordshire Council for Voluntary Service, North Bedfordshire Council for Voluntary Service, Voluntary Action Luton, and Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire all operate as Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS) committed to strengthening the effectiveness of the local voluntary and community sector by developing, enabling, promoting and supporting voluntary and community action. They seek to achieve this through advocacy; capacity building activities; the exchange of information; the provision of training, advice and consultancy; and by working in partnership with others.

Mid Bedfordshire Council for Voluntary Service, Bedford Volunteer Bureau, Voluntary Action Luton, and Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire all operate as Volunteer Development Agencies committed to enhancing the provision of volunteering opportunities, promoting volunteering and developing good practice within volunteer-involving organisations in their respective localities. Voluntary Action Luton, Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire, and Bedford Volunteer Bureau meet and work together with other Volunteer Development Agencies from the Bedfordshire & Hertfordshire Volunteer Development Agency Forum.

Mid Bedfordshire Council for Voluntary Service, Voluntary Action Luton, and Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire all operate as single integrated local infrastructure organisations. North Bedfordshire Council for Voluntary Service, Bedford Volunteer Bureau, Bedfordshire Funding Advice Bureau work closely together to provide a similar range of co-located generalist and specialist functions from the Bedford Centre for Voluntary Service.

Bedfordshire Funding Advice Bureau and Mid Bedfordshire Council for Voluntary Service work together to provide funding advice in Mid-Bedfordshire. In Luton and South Bedfordshire funding advice is currently provided through the Community Funding Initiative, a joint initiative between Voluntary Action Luton and Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire. Voluntary Action Luton and Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity both act as local grants administrators.

Bedford Race Equality Council works with the other infrastructure organisations in Bedford/North Bedfordshire to meet the infrastructure needs of local BME communities. Voluntary Action Luton also provides some infrastructure functions to, and works with, Luton's large BME communities.

The four Councils for Voluntary Service have worked together collectively for a number of years and already work collaboratively on issues of common concern, the Compact and through joint funding bids, for example with the Learning and Skills Council Bedfordshire and Luton.

Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity is a countywide organisation that is involved with in-depth grass-roots work with individuals and communities. Its role is also to act as an independent advocate for rural issues, by influencing local and regional policy. It seeks to achieve this by:

- providing direct support and services to individuals and local communities;
- promoting and supporting voluntary action in rural communities;
- adopting a wide perspective, embracing social and economic objectives;
- supporting those in greatest need, and for the emerging needs of the wider general public;
- seeking co-operation and co-ordination amongst voluntary and statutory bodies at a county level;
- acting as a representative body to provide a link between national agencies and local communities/organisations.

Bedfordshire and Luton Council for Voluntary Youth Services (BLCVYS) is the coordinating body for voluntary youth organisations across Bedfordshire and Luton. It gives support in the areas of policy, advice, training and representation and strives to ensure that the work of these organisations achieves the recognition and support it deserves. It also acts as the link between its member organisations and local government. BLCVYS works alongside Bedfordshire and Luton Connexions Partnership helping to deliver its programme to young people across the county.

Many of the Consortium members work together closely through other sub-regional structures and partnerships, for example the Bedfordshire and Luton Global Grants Partnership, Compact, Bedfordshire Rural Affairs Forum. There is also shared representation on bodies such as the Learning and Skills Council, The Learning Partnership and the Bedfordshire Local Strategic Forum. Consortium members also have extensive links with regional infrastructure services (e.g. COVER, MENTER and Rural Action East) and other regional bodies, such as GO-East, EEDA and East of England Rural Affairs Forum (EERAF).

The Consortium believes it is important to build on what currently exists and to respect the individual governance arrangements of existing Local Infrastructure Organisations. Integrated services are delivered in each of the four local unitary/borough/district authority areas (although different models apply in different localities) and provide economies of scale in the delivery of infrastructure services. We believe the existing arrangements the most effective way of delivering local infrastructure services (both generalist and specialist) to local VCS organisations. Specialist youth and rural infrastructure services at sub-regional level complement and enhance the Consortium's ability to meet the needs of local communities.

The Consortium recognises that its constituent members can work more closely together in order to secure additional investment, learn from and develop good practice, secure better value for money and bring additional benefits to local VCS organisations. Working with and supporting local voluntary organisations and community groups is at the heart of this work.

## **Strengths and Weaknesses of VCS Infrastructure Services across Bedfordshire & Luton**

### ***North Bedfordshire***

The Infrastructure Organisations located in North Bedfordshire work with diverse communities in Bedford and the surrounding rural fringe, serving a population of 147,913. They work in close liaison and partnership offering core services to over 550 local VCS organisations, including volunteering, funding advice, support, development, liaison, representation and strategic partnerships. Support services include affordable meeting room and equipment hire and hot desk facilities, free internet facilities, legal surgeries and accountancy help. Development work cuts across capacity building with new and emerging groups, from a wide variety of different

communities, to consensus building workshops with larger, more established organisations. The CVS delivers an extensive training programme and takes a lead in VCS quality assurance development and support in North Bedfordshire.

There is also a good working relationship with a wide variety of other agencies, both VCS and statutory, and all the Infrastructure Organisations endeavour to provide strong communication links via newsletters, information leaflets, Exchange Forums and other networking opportunities.

Due to large numbers of emerging BME groups, often from within the refugee and asylum seekers community, there is a need for more specialised development work and a greater spread for information and resources. ITC systems and strategies are weak, particularly in the area of website development. Additional resources in this area would enable the infrastructure organisations to increase their marketing capacity, rural/urban outreach and create better links with all other sectors of the community.

### ***Mid Bedfordshire***

Mid Bedfordshire CVS provides integrated infrastructure services across a largely rural area with a population of 121,031. It provides an effective voice for the voluntary and community sector in Mid Bedfordshire on forums such as the Local Strategic Partnership. It is, however, difficult to represent the diverse range of organisations that undoubtedly exist throughout the district, as the sector still needs to be fully mapped.

The publication of a *Directory of Volunteering Opportunities* last year, the hosting of these opportunities on the organisation's own website and signing up to the National Volunteering Website at [www.do-it.org.uk](http://www.do-it.org.uk) have enabled the CVS to develop its Volunteering services.

The CVS provides funding advice, training, networking events, development work, a small library and a website. However, the organisation's capacity and lack of a comprehensive database of local VCS organisations limits the extent to which it can promote these services and respond to any increased take up.

The provision of technical support (ICT, human resources, marketing, finance etc.) is particularly weak and an area where staff development and capacity is needed. Additional training in areas such as fundraising and development work, and accreditation as a PQASSO mentor/trainer, are also needed.

### ***South Bedfordshire***

Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire provides integrated infrastructure services across a mixed urban/rural district with a population of 112,627. These services include volunteering, information, funding advice, training, development and partnerships. Its Volunteering services are limited but effective; there is, however, a need to further promote volunteering and recruit more volunteers to meet local needs – this is difficult given the current lack of capacity.

A database of some 750 local voluntary organisations and community groups is maintained, along with the publication of a bi-monthly newsletter and occasional Information and Resource Sheets. There is a need to expand the database to include more hard to reach groups and to design and develop our own website. A key priority is the promotion of the organisation's services, volunteering and the work of the sector. There is also a need for research into the community capacity building of new communities in advance of the planned housing growth. The Funding Advice service needs expansion to provide a comprehensive South Bedfordshire-wide service. Demand far exceeds current capacity and there is an ongoing and increasing need to keep up-to-date with information on sources of funding and to work with local groups. Voluntary and Community Action promotes good practice and provides technical support on a wide range of issues through its training programme, consultancy and development support work with

VCS organisations. Accredited training is being developed and there is a need to provide additional support to those undertaking such training.

Liaison, representation and partnership working is strong, with good links established with the Local Strategic Partnership, local authorities, other statutory providers and local partnerships. Some work to enable local VCS organisations to advocate and represent their interests directly is undertaken but additional capacity is needed to enable this to be more effective. There is also a need to increase the involvement of the VCS in local partnerships, multi-agency working and discussion of key issues that affect the sector.

### ***Luton***

Voluntary Action Luton provides integrated infrastructure services across the Unitary Authority of Luton, serving a very diverse population of 184,390. It manages a diverse range of services such as community enterprise and network development, a Community Empowerment Network (an Assembly of 550 VCS organisations), the Community Funding Initiative (a one-stop-shop/ stakeholder pot of small grants for VCS organisations), a Volunteer Bureau and a Community Business Resource Project. Core staff provide support services to groups on financial and IT matters, a regular monthly newsletter to over 550 VCS organisations and delivery of a training programme through its own training facility. Voluntary Action Luton manage a Resource Centre and provides affordable office rental to eight small voluntary organisations; however, the demands of building management are many, layered and have constant capital cost implications.

Demands on the organisation to deliver key support services to a range of minority ethnic and other special interest groups is intense. There is a real need for a successful website that would enable the interlinking of key services and provide accessible documents for VCS organisation development, e.g. governance support, funding information, training programmes, volunteer bureau services, volunteer toolkit accessibility. The current demand for a support service on Health and Social Care, as well as Carer, issues has significant local development needs, but little or no funding.

### ***County-wide Voluntary Youth Services***

Bedfordshire and Luton Council for Voluntary Youth Services (BLCVYS) provide a voice for over 20,000 young people through 28 independent voluntary youth organisations across the sub-region. BLCVYS is also a member of the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services and sits on the executive of Voluntary Youth Services for the Eastern Region (VYSER) as well as Luton and Bedfordshire Connexions Local Management Committees. It also works closely with the Rural Affairs Network.

Services provided by BLCVYS include funding advice and workshops, infrastructure development training, advocacy and 'start-up' advice and help. We also provide the vital link between voluntary youth organisations and local government. BLCVYS works with other groups providing counselling on issues such as teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, and youth offending.

A great deal more development work still needs to be done in rural areas in order to make 'young people friendly' facilities available but due to lack of capacity this is a slow process. Another key priority is the creation of a website that provides an easily accessible one-stop shop on youth issues.

### ***County-wide Rural Services***

Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity works from three locations around the county. It provides both direct support and a range of services to individuals, communities and other local organisations. Like other VCS organisations it has to access funding as and where it can.

BRCC embraces the use of Parish Plans as a way of identifying rural needs. They are acknowledged by the Local Strategic Partnerships as a key driver in supporting the community

planning process. However, this activity is currently poorly resourced and this needs urgent attention.

Community capacity building in small under-resourced communities is dependent on support organisations being able to provide active long-term support through community development workers. Funding for this type of work is usually short-term in nature.

Sustainable long term, locally accessible funding is a therefore key issue. Active consideration must be given to the development of the social enterprise activity as one way of generating some funds for the support of VCS organisations across the county. One area where this could be promoted is in the area of training/development and learning, both for VCS Infrastructure Organisations in terms of planned staff development and a similar activity to support front line/smaller VCS organisations in improving their performance.

There is an urgent need to encourage greater participation in local democracy. This is particularly important in the context of young people and their potential involvement. This in turn will lead to greater community capacity to engage in community planning.

## **Current Capacity**

The Consortium has given some thought to the issue of current capacity within Local Infrastructure Organisations. This has been a difficult area to tackle because so many issues affect the capacity of an organisation to deliver infrastructure services. These include:

- the capacity, foresight and experience of governing bodies;
- the capacity, experience, knowledge, skills and leadership capability of the chief officer and staff;
- the amount of strategic funding received from local authorities and whether it is an annual or longer term commitment;
- the level of other/project funding an organisation is able to attract and the amount of time the chief officer is able to spend on such matters (compared with service delivery, organisational management and capacity building etc.);
- the degree to which trustees and the chief officer feel able to take risks (sometimes dependent upon financial reserves);
- the accounting and financial practices of the organisation;
- the environment in which an organisation operates and the extent to which that is understood and managed;
- the local population and the number of VCS organisations operating locally;
- the number of full-time equivalent paid staff (and volunteers) within an organisation or delivering a service.

It has not been possible to collect and analyse data on all these factors. A brief analysis of the current full-time equivalent staffing levels within Local Infrastructure Organisations revealed a number of anomalies but gave a broad indication of capacity as 6.00 staff in North Bedfordshire, 2.70 in Mid Bedfordshire, 5.70 in South Bedfordshire and 16.00 in Luton. BLCVYS had 1.00 FTE member of staff and BRCC 34.00 staff involved in a broad range of infrastructure support and wider rural work.

The capacity of an organisation also impacts on its ability to provide equitable support across their area and to target marginalized groups. All infrastructure organisations require additional capacity in order to provide more equitable support and to target marginalized and hard to reach groups.

The Consortium has concluded that there is insufficient capacity (be it staff, funding or other resources) to deliver, develop and sustain a *comprehensive service* across the sub-region. All concerned are working to increase the capacity of their organisations and the Consortium recognises that working together can increase certain elements of that capacity, as will additional resources.

## **Addressing Rural and Urban Social Exclusion**

There are specific factors that have a direct bearing on the development of an effective voluntary and community sector in rural and in urban areas. Within rural areas these include:

- isolation and access, including poor transport links, greater travel needs/costs, fewer information points, etc
- fewer service outlets, high costs of delivering services and the need to develop different approaches to service delivery;
- fewer opportunities and facilities for young people to meet and associate;
- higher levels of community involvement and self-help are required or expected in order to make services viable;
- small communities with few potential volunteers and a lack of 'critical mass' (although the incidence of volunteering per head of population is higher than in urban areas);
- higher numbers of voluntary organisations and community groups than in urban areas (5.6 per 1,000 head of population compared with 2.6 in urban areas);
- low levels of networking and support between groups and communities;
- hidden social deprivation and low awareness of equal opportunities and diversity issues.

Within urban areas specific factors include:

- higher levels of social deprivation and of people on benefits;
- lower numbers of voluntary organisations and community groups than in rural areas (see above);
- lower levels of volunteering than in rural areas (see above) with participation lowest where deprivation is highest;
- higher levels of crime and disorder, and fear of crime;
- higher levels of poor housing and reduced life expectancy in the poorest wards.

The development of voluntary and community action, including volunteering, is important in rural areas and urban settings, both in their own right and as a significant underpinning to effective service delivery. Different approaches may need to be considered and delivered. The Infrastructure Investment Plan incorporates proposals that highlight opportunities to maximise positive service delivery outcomes for rural (as well as urban) areas.

## **Local Authorities and LSPs**

All Consortium members develop and maintain supportive relationships with local statutory and public sector providers. This manifests itself through local joint working on, for example, community development issues, safer communities, health issues and patient involvement, learning and skills development; involvement in local Partnerships and the Compact; and through strategic funding to Consortium members.

Local Infrastructure Organisations currently have clear commitments from a range of funders, including the Learning and Skills Council, regeneration partnerships, local and regional trusts, the Community Fund and all local authorities across Bedfordshire and Luton. Bedfordshire County Council is currently reviewing the strategic funding provided to Local Infrastructure Organisations and this IIP will feed into that process. Some second tier local authorities recognise the value of local infrastructure services and have increased their financial support, while others have failed to recognise the value of sustainable investment in such services. All Local Infrastructure Organisations recognise the need to maintain an effective ongoing dialogue with local funders in order to secure and maintain local investment.

Bedford Race Equality Council, Mid Bedfordshire CVS, North Bedfordshire CVS, Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire and Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity are all members of Local Strategic Partnerships, playing a key role in their management and delivery. Voluntary Action Luton provides support to the Luton Assembly (of local voluntary organisations

and community groups) which represents the sector on the Luton Forum (LSP). The work of the sector features strongly in local Community Plans and all play a vital role in ensuring these are delivered.

Bedfordshire and Luton Council for Voluntary Youth Services provide support to the Connexions Partnership and have strong links with the County's Life Long Learning services and youth workers.

### **The Needs of Front Line VCS Organisations**

Research by Local Infrastructure Organisations shows a diverse range of needs by a diverse range of voluntary organisations and community groups. These needs change as organisations move through their organisational life-cycle. They can also change quite drastically as staff, volunteers and trustees move on, leaving an organisation bereft of skills and knowledge it once took for granted. The needs of front line VCS organisations can also vary because of their particular client group(s), service(s) or activity(ies), and capacity.

In general, the evidence has shown that organisations and groups describe their needs as being:

- effective communication (they need to receive information that has been distilled, is relevant to what is happening locally, and informs them about what resources are available to enable them to do their job better);
- information on funding sources; advice and support in making successful applications;
- opportunities to promote what they do and influence potential clients, opinion formers, funders and volunteers;
- more trustees and volunteers (and how to recruit and retain them);
- networking, learning and skills development opportunities;
- access to information, advice and guidance on a range of organisational, management and developmental issues (when they need it);
- premises, ICT and payroll/finance services.

Front line organisations often struggle to prioritise their long term development needs over and above immediate demands for resources to meet the needs of service users. Local Infrastructure organisations, through their experience of working with such organisations recognise additional needs, not always perceived by organisations as a need or priority (at the time). These include:

- advice and guidance on reviewing, developing or changing governing documents and on developing good practice in governance;
- developing appropriate employment policies and effective practices;
- developing organisational policies, such as equal opportunities, child protection, working with vulnerable adults, health and safety etc.;
- developing and implementing financial controls, budgets and systems;
- developing strategic, business and delivery plans and using these as tools for the organisation;
- undertaking organisational health checks and/or working towards quality standards;
- contributing to local partnerships and working more collaboratively with other organisations.

### **Key Challenges**

Key challenges facing the Consortium and its constituent members are:

- continuing to map local VCS organisations, identify their needs and getting feedback from the sector;
- improving its communication with front line VCS organisations and extending the reach of infrastructure services to non-users;
- improving the skills, knowledge and attitudes of front line VCS organisations, particularly in respect of community development, funding and volunteering;

- enabling VCS organisations to increase their capacity by promoting the benefits of, and opportunities for, volunteering to the public at large and recruiting additional volunteers;
- enabling VCS organisations to have an effective voice;
- developing collaboration and strategic working as a VCS Infrastructure Consortium;
- embedding quality through benchmarking and meeting quality standards;
- securing the resources needed to sustain, develop and improve local infrastructure services.

## **VISION**

Our long-term vision for the VCS Infrastructure Consortium is:

A VCS Infrastructure Consortium able to develop effective joint working that enables Local Infrastructure Organisations to support the diverse needs of the voluntary and community sector in Bedfordshire and Luton.

Our long-term vision of the voluntary and community sector is:

A vibrant, effective, sustainable and inclusive voluntary and community sector where all individuals and communities are empowered to play a full part in local voluntary and community action and where local voluntary organisations and community groups:

- identify and make planned responses to community needs through effective voluntary and community action;
- have the skills, knowledge, structures and resources to fulfil their potential;
- develop and implement good practice in governance, service delivery, volunteering and as an employer (where appropriate) and are committed to continuous improvement of quality in all aspects of their work;
- recognise diversity, provide equality of opportunity and enable participation from all sections of the community;
- respect and value volunteers for who they are and what they contribute;
- have a high profile within local communities and with local opinion formers;
- feel supported by local VCS Infrastructure Organisations as effective local development agencies able to meet their needs and represent their interests.

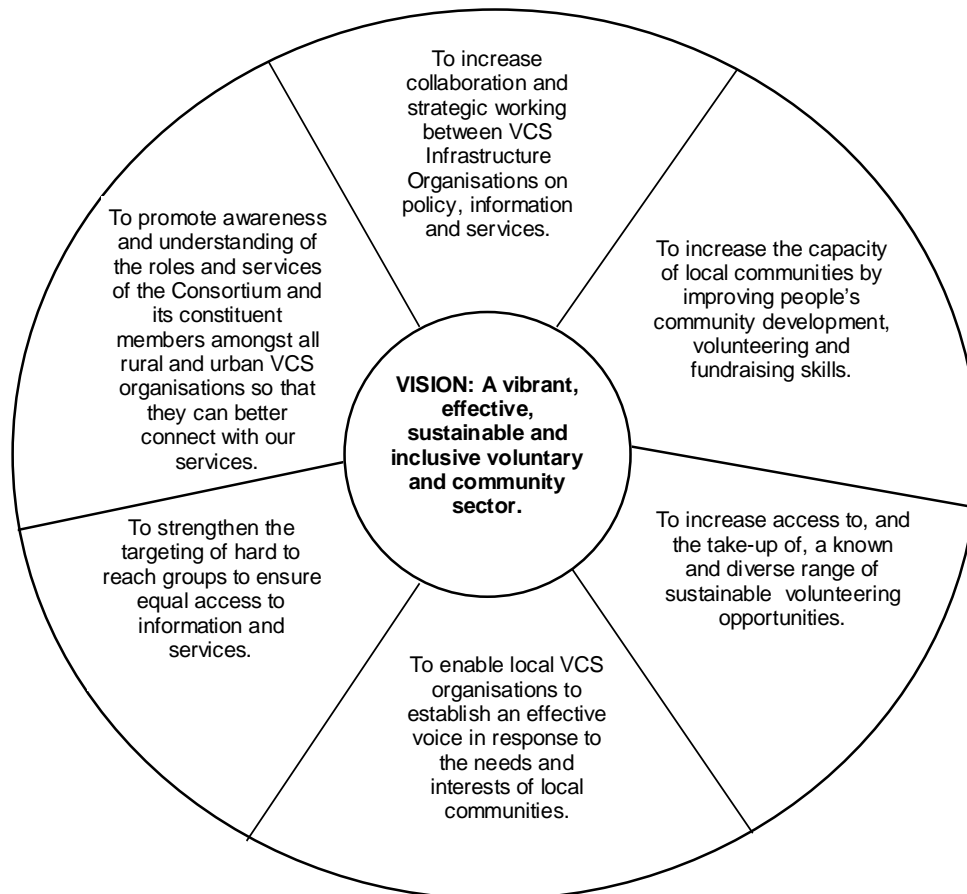
This vision will not be achieved in one or two years. It will require a determined effort over a period of around ten years on the part of members of the Consortium, the local voluntary and community sector, funders and others. The activities outlined in this Investment Plan are about taking the first steps towards achieving this vision over the next two years.

## **STRATEGIC AIM**

To sustain and improve the overall provision of infrastructure supporting the diverse needs of the voluntary and community sector in Bedfordshire and Luton and provide effective mechanisms for the delivery of generic and specialist infrastructure services.

## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

The Consortium has developed six Strategic Objectives. Although each represents a discrete area of work it is essential to recognise that they all interrelate. Activities in one area will impact on the activities of other areas, and thus all will contribute to the vision of a vibrant, effective, sustainable and inclusive voluntary and community sector.



## PROPOSED ACTIVITY AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

### Increasing Collaboration and Strategic Working

Consortium members have valued the opportunity to work together to research and develop this IIP and believe it has added value to the work they undertake as individual organisations and collectively. By continuing to work in partnership Local Infrastructure Organisations will be able to:

- engage in wider consultation of the IIP and its proposed activities;
- implement the IIP;
- collaborate more effectively;
- share good practice to establish benchmark services;
- meet recognised quality standards and targets for performance improvement;
- enhance the provision of infrastructure services to local VCS organisations;
- overcome gaps in services and clearly identify any remaining gaps in provision.

In order to achieve this more effectively (outside of the initial IIP process) the Consortium needs to undertake the following key activities:

- refine the purpose of the Consortium and consider future working methods;

- identify and consider how other bodies providing infrastructure services to the VCS should relate to the Consortium;
- develop a formal partnership agreement;
- identify and secure the resources needed to deliver the strategic objectives and actions set out in the IIP;
- develop detailed implementation plans (including outcomes, costs and milestones) and commission work as required.

There is also a need for some Consortium members to modernise their governance structures by becoming incorporated. Local Infrastructure Organisations also recognise need to modernise the way in which support is provided to local VCS organisations. The Consortium recognises the value of integrated and co-located infrastructure services in modern premises accessible to VCS organisations. Some significant progress has been achieved in this respect but more needs to be done. The use and development of VCS resource centres has enormous benefit to local VCS organisations but also incurs considerable capital and revenue costs, as well as building management demands, that need to be addressed.

The Consortium will continue to meet regularly to oversee future investment, review progress of the IIP, monitor outcomes, identify and evaluate lessons learned, and incorporate good practice into Consortium members' mainstream activities. Consortium meetings will enable members to identify unintended outcomes, blockages to implementation and share good practice from each other. The Consortium will also be able to examine VCS infrastructure work disseminated by regional and national exemplar projects (e.g. VCS mapping, quality standards, accreditation) and utilise the support and development offered through the proposed National Hubs of Expertise.

### **Promoting Awareness of the Consortium and its Members**

To facilitate cohesive working the Consortium has identified the need to raise its awareness, profile and identity amongst VCS organisations and partners. Initially, this should focus on promoting a greater understanding of the role of infrastructure organisations: who they are; how they can be accessed; and what happens where.

The Consortium believes that to achieve this a common identity must be forged that can provide a single gateway from which local infrastructure services are readily identified, thereby reducing confusion about where to go for advice and support. A joint website with a basic portal that could direct visitors to the infrastructure services provided by Consortium members and host details of the Consortium's joint endeavours (e.g. the current training programmes). It could also provide a facility to enable local VCS organisations to have their own web page on site and host a message board/chat room as a way of capturing current issues affecting the sector and as a tool to stimulate debate. A web site would also provide opportunities for supporting volunteer-involving organisations in managing volunteers.

One of the key methods of communication with the VCS is through regular newsletter distribution. A single point website development would be an opportunity to establish common newsletter pages and other common services to which the localised pages might be added via the individually linked sites, using a common format.

A joint website will enable VCS organisations and individuals to:

- use of a common route to identify local infrastructure organisations and understand their link in the provision of infrastructure services across Bedfordshire and Luton;
- be sign posted to resources and providers of infrastructure services within their locality and elsewhere across Bedfordshire and Luton;
- access common information such as the central section of a newsletter for all VCS organisations;
- access pro-forma documentation;

- share, and participate in discussion of, good practice;
- feel empowered through access to information.

A common sector identity will also provide a common point of access to the sector for local authorities, statutory bodies and others working at a sub-regional level.

The key activities will be:

- to develop a detailed design brief and management specification for a joint website and each organisation's own website;
- to commission specialist provider(s) to design and build the websites;
- to build on the *Broadband for Bedfordshire* ICT exemplar project (funded by GO-East through the VCS Infrastructure Investment Early Spend Fund).

### **Targeting Hard to Reach Groups**

Currently the CVS and other infrastructure organisations maintain individual contact databases. This work has varying degrees of sophistication and coverage within the geographic areas. Database development on geographic areas allows for active contact with local VCS organisations and is the easiest way of keeping databases up to date. It provides a clear understanding of the local picture and is key to developing appropriate services for local VCS organisations. There is a need to complete mapping of VCS organisations in some areas and to consider how other gaps in the infrastructure impact on the services available to client groups.

There is a need to expand our databases of voluntary organisations and community groups through further desk research (e.g. internet sites, directories, parish newsletters, local newspapers) and through the sharing of information. There are many hard to reach groups within BME communities, urban neighbourhoods and in rural localities that are not easily identified through desk research. Intensive networking and on-the-ground research is required to identify these groups so that they can be included in local mapping and databases, receive information and secure access to infrastructure services.

Personal contact with representatives of newly identified organisations and groups will be essential to ensure the information gleaned is accurate and to build a relationship that facilitates their involvement in developing and accessing infrastructure services.

We could also link databases (in a secure way) to the design and development of our websites. Building in links to VCS organisations' own websites would also help with promotion and networking of the sector.

The Consortium needs to gain confidence in the use of databases for wider purposes in addition to extracting targeted mailings e.g. developing a research function, the development of performance indicators and using it as a tool for consultation and feedback.

Regular information empowers the sector to become actively engaged with forums and networks, to identify with whom they might develop partnership ideas and to find out how their voice can be heard. These may all be partially facilitated via an effective database.

The key activities will be:

- to expand our databases of voluntary organisations and community groups through further desk research (e.g. internet sites, directories, parish newsletters, local newspapers);

- to develop actions for capturing information on, and engaging with, voluntary organisations and community groups (including youth and hard to reach groups) within BME communities, urban neighbourhoods and rural localities;
- to link databases (in a secure way) to the design and development of our websites;
- to extend the reach of infrastructure services to non-users and hard to reach groups;
- to build on the *Broadband for Bedfordshire* ICT exemplar project.

## **Developing the Capacity of Local Communities**

The Home Office and DEFRA reviews of community capacity building identify four key components for community level infrastructure:

- a physical hub or base for individual collective community activity;
- at least one representative network and inclusive forum or network;
- access to generic community capacity building workers; and
- easy access to small grants;

Many communities have at least one physical base from which to operate. Other Strategic Objectives contribute to the second of these key components and we plan to address the other two under this particular Strategic Objective.

We believe there is a need to increase the level of community development skills that exist in local communities. Access to our own generic community capacity building workers or those of other agencies contributes to this increased level of capacity but to make a real impact we need to increase the community development skills of local community leaders, residents and volunteers. We also need to sustain and improve (in some areas of the sub-region) our capacity to provide easy access to small grants.

Information on funding sources and the requisite skills needed to access funding are vital if community groups are going to be able to develop the services and/or activities needed to meet the needs of the communities they serve. Achieving more sustainable funding practices within VCS organisations will also enhance the sector's ability to bring about increased community capacity.

Some members of the Consortium already work together to deliver training to VCS Organisations throughout the sub-region through a single Learning & Skills Council contracted programme. Similarly, members of the Consortium work together to provide funding advice and support to VCS Organisations in different parts of the sub-region. This is providing key lessons in joint and collaborative working, and ensures complementary services whilst avoiding duplication in delivery. Sharing ideas and working practices is helping to develop best practice.

We need to develop accredited, alongside none accredited, training of portable modules to meet the needs within VCS organisations for community development, fundraising and volunteering skills. These will utilise the national occupational standards for Community Development Work, the Management of Volunteers and for Fundraisers, and the Certificate in Community Volunteering, with accreditation development provided by ASDAN and the Open College Network.

The key activities will be:

- to create a more effective and skilled workforce within the voluntary and community sector by improving people's community development, volunteering and fundraising skills;
- to provide a programme of training workshops/courses that lead to accredited learning and qualifications;

- to provide information, advice and guidance to community leaders and trustees that enables them to access funding for the benefit of local communities;
- to build on the *Broadband for Bedfordshire* ICT exemplar project by providing local VCS organisations with free internet access and access to web-based resources.

## Volunteering

Local VCS organisations struggle to get enough volunteers to deliver or manage their services. Known shortages exist in getting drivers for community transport initiatives (particularly in rural areas), trustees and management committee members, parish councillors, befrienders, advocates and advisers/mentors. There is also a need to recruit community activists and actively engage people from local communities in a range of community involvement initiatives – volunteering and active community involvement in its widest sense.

This Strategic Objective will build on tried and tested methods of volunteer engagement and develop new and innovative methods of inter-acting with potential/new volunteers. Existing volunteers will use their social networks to recruit new volunteers by providing the inspirational and key motivating factors that can persuade others to get involved. Local community involvement events will be used to get more people engaged in community activity, including those who do not traditionally get involved or who are difficult to reach.

Consortium members (undertaking a Volunteer Development Agency role) need to work with local volunteer-involving organisations to ensure that they have fully identified their volunteering needs and prepared information that attracts new volunteers. This information will be promoted on websites; through local *Directories of Volunteering Opportunities*; regular news releases/articles and printed promotional material.

A range of promotional material designed to encourage volunteering generally, from specific communities and for particular types of volunteering needs to be developed. This would outline the benefits, key motivating factors and *tell the story* of local volunteering. Displays in community centres, supermarkets, libraries and town centres; road-shows and volunteering fairs; street events, fetes and inter-active community activities will promote volunteering and motivate people to take up local opportunities. Approaches to estate agents and new housing development sales centres will promote volunteering to new residents looking to integrate themselves into new or existing communities.

One-to-one information, advice and guidance to individuals will enable them to identify their skills, knowledge, experience, interests and self-development needs. Appropriate opportunities will then be identified and introductions/brokerage made. Volunteers with additional support needs will be supported through careful consideration of their circumstances and, where appropriate, accompanied visits to organisations.

The key activities will be:

- to work with local volunteer-involving organisations to increase the number, range and quality of local volunteering opportunities;
- to support local volunteer-involving organisations in their recruitment, retention and management of volunteers;
- to market and increase awareness of the range and diversity of local volunteering opportunities and the benefits to be gained through volunteering and active community involvement;
- to increase the numbers of potential volunteers seeking, choosing and taking up volunteering opportunities through local Volunteer Development Agencies;

- to target volunteering publicity and engagement activities at groups and/or individuals that are under-represented in volunteering, are socially excluded, have extra support needs or unusual skills;
- to use innovative, tried and tested outreach methods to engage with potential volunteers and bring about the above.

### **Enabling VCS Organisations to have an Effective Voice**

VCS organisations, and the communities they represent, desire to have an effective voice. This voice – or rather these voices – need to be heard within the sector, by statutory bodies, funders, potential volunteers and other opinion formers. There needs to be discussion of a range of public policy and other issues affecting the sector; of the needs of local VCS organisations and how these are met by Local Infrastructure Organisations; of local Community Plans, and of local public services (e.g. through Patient Involvement Forums). There are increasing demands placed upon the voluntary, community and public sectors to consult on a wide range of issues and to involve local communities.

There is a need to encourage greater participation in local democracy, particularly at parish level and amongst young people, and in the development of parish, neighbourhood and local area plans.

Gaining an effective voice requires effective communication, publicity and consultation skills. Seeking out the views of local VCS organisations, including BME groups, young people, those in rural communities and other hard to reach groups can be difficult and time consuming. The consortium will build on other work identified within the IIP – e.g. promoting awareness, website development, database expansion and targeting of hard to reach groups, skills development and recruiting volunteers for advocacy work and Patient Involvement Forums – to enable the sector to gain an effective voice(s).

The Consortium and its constituent members also have a role in representing the sector and local communities in terms of being a voice, but currently lack a consistent and cohesive approach to identifying the views of the sector on relevant issues. The diversity of views is recognised and the Consortium has the ability to bring these diverse views together, which might bring broader benefits to all. Working together will enable local VCS organisations to gain a common understanding of how to ensure that their views can be represented.

Key activities (in addition to those connected to other Strategic Objectives) could be:

- to host website discussions and posting information briefings on issues of interest to the sector;
- to organise briefings, seminars, networking forums and consultation events on issues of interest to the sector;
- to develop mechanisms for building dialogue with key people from local VCS organisations;
- to promote and enable local communities to develop and participate in parish/neighbourhood planning processes.

### **Implementation**

This IIP takes a strategic approach to the development of local infrastructure services. Measured outputs, outcomes, milestones and costs will be developed when the parameters of funding opportunities are known as we expect to have to tailor these to funders' criteria.

Front line VCS organisations will continue to be engaged in the process through their membership of VCS Infrastructure Organisations' trustee boards, user feedback and surveys, training needs surveys and other consultative mechanisms.

The implementation of these Strategic Objectives and the suggested activities will be dependant upon external funding becoming available, whether through funding awarded to the Consortium from the Government's VCS Infrastructure Funds (DEFRA and ACD), funding sought and applied for as a Consortium or by individual Infrastructure Organisations, and/or the pooling of existing resources (where feasible).

Consortium members will continue their existing dialogues with local authority funders about future funding needs and work arising from this Infrastructure Investment Planning process will feed into a review of funding for Bedfordshire Infrastructure Organisations being undertaken by Bedfordshire County Council.

Members of the Consortium are already working together on bids to the Investing in Communities programme and there may be opportunities for Consortium-wide bids in the future. Similarly, some Consortium members are working together on delivering training and already receive funding from the Learning and Skills Council Bedfordshire and Luton. Additional LSC funding opportunities (such as ESF Co-Financing) may enable the Consortium and/or its members to develop or extend this work.

Consortium members are continually seeking out and identifying opportunities for funding to sustain and develop or extend their work. Where such opportunities are found to match the Consortium's Infrastructure Investment Plan joint bids may be made. Some investment priorities will require sustained funding beyond March 2006 and these will either need to be funded through an organisation's existing funding streams or, more likely, require new funding. Our collective awareness of local and regional funding streams will enable new funding to be applied for.

## **Monitoring and Evaluation**

The Consortium will continue to meet regularly to set and monitor milestones, review progress of the IIP, monitor project outcomes, identify and evaluate lessons learned, and incorporate good practice into Consortium members' mainstream activities. Consortium meetings will enable members to identify unintended outcomes, blockages to implementation and share good practice from each other. The Consortium will also be able to examine VCS infrastructure work disseminated by regional and national exemplar projects (e.g. VCS mapping, quality standards, accreditation) and utilise the support and development offered through the proposed National Hubs of Expertise.

An important aspect of future monitoring and evaluation will be the collection of data and feedback from front line VCS organisations benefiting from the actions proposed in this investment plan. Greater use of user feedback and surveys will be needed. This will enable Local Infrastructure Organisations to provide evidence of the extended reach of their infrastructure services; particularly to smaller organisations, hard to reach groups and marginalized communities; and increases in volunteering opportunities, volunteers, the take up of learning and skills development opportunities etc.

The evidence collated will inform, focus and re-direct the energy of Consortium members to meet the long-term vision set out in this Infrastructure Investment Plan.

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(Letters from Consortium members, confirming their involvement, have been supplied separately.)

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**KEY DOCUMENTS IN CONSIDERING THE DELIVERY OF VCS INFRASTRUCTURE SERVICES**

In its deliberations the Consortium has considered key Government documents on local VCS Infrastructure and community capacity building, including:

*Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure – A Consultation Document*, published by the Active Community Unit September 2003.

*Community Capacity Building and Voluntary Sector Infrastructure in Rural England*. Published by DEFRA as a Policy Paper in June 2003 and as a consultation document in September 2003.

*Developing a Skills Strategy for the Voluntary and Community Sector in England*. A consultation document published by the Voluntary Sector NTO on behalf of the Active Community Unit in October 2003.

*Strategy for Performance Improvement in the English Voluntary and Community Sector*. A consultation document published by the Quality Standards Task Group on behalf of the Active Community Unit in November 2003.

*Building Civil Renewal*. A consultation document published by the Active Community Directorate in December 2003.

*Working Together – A Strategy for the Voluntary and Community Sector and the Learning and Skills Council*. A consultation document published by the Learning and Skills Council in December 2003.

*Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Early Spend Programme 2003/4*, published by Government Office East December 2003.

*Capacity Building and Infrastructure Strategy Programme Rural Preparatory Programme Specification & Advice to Partnerships* published 16 January 2004 by DEFRA and circulated by Government Office East in February 2004.

*County Consortia Guidance Paper*, published by Government Office East 11 June 2004.