



# **Local Resilience Action Plan**

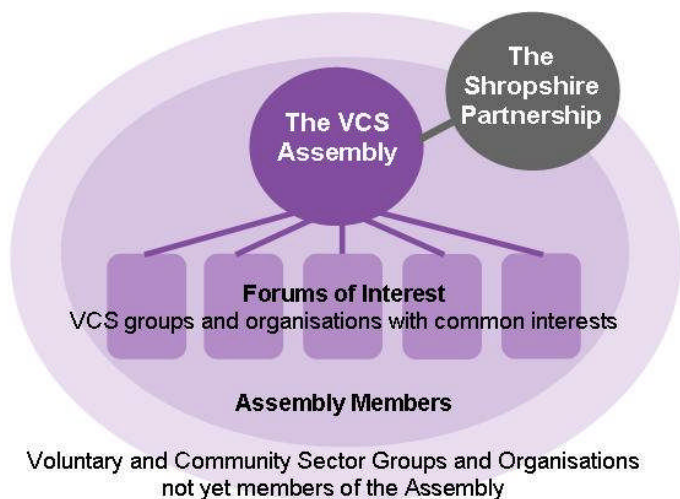
**June 2009**

## Introduction

### Shropshire Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly

The Shropshire Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Assembly enables VCS organisations to come together to discuss common issues, develop shared strategies and plans and support each other in delivering services to a range of vulnerable and priority groups within in the county. The Assembly supports joint working with public sector bodies such as the Shropshire Council and Shropshire County Primary Care Trust. Any VCS organisation can become an Assembly member. All members are invited to an annual meeting and are regularly kept up to date with developments through the website, information bulletins and the Assembly newsletter. The structure of the Assembly is shown in the diagram below.

**Figure 1 Shropshire VCS Assembly Structure Diagram**



The Assembly is led by a Board. The Board is formed of representatives from different VCS Forums of Interest and includes representatives from the Shropshire Partnership's area partnerships (North, Central and South). The Board meets at least 4 times a year (with task groups meeting more frequently) and is essential in ensuring common issues, projects and initiatives (such as work to consider the impact of the recession) are taken forward at both the national and local levels.

Forums of Interest have been developed as VCS organisations have come together to discuss and address common issues. Forums of Interest may:

- deliver similar activities/share aims
- provide common types of service
- target similar client groups

Forums of Interest currently in place are:

- The Health and Social Care Forum
- Shropshire and Telford VCS Mental Health Forum
- Disability Forum
- Visual Impairment Forum
- Children and Young People's Summit
- Community Based Transport Forum
- Shropshire Infrastructure Partnership
- VCS Training Consortium
- Visual Arts Network

New Forums of Interest are developing as the Assembly becomes more established.

There are more than 250 Assembly members. Table 1 displays the type of client/service user groups that Shropshire's Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly members work with. A high proportion work to provide health and social care services and to support people whose circumstances or mental and physical health may make them more vulnerable. Many Assembly members work with multiple service user groups. Some groups are very small working within specific community locations and some are larger countywide bodies which may be affiliated to well-known national Charities.

With its coordinating role, the VCS Assembly Board has recognised the fact that the current recession is impacting upon the sector in many different ways. In March 2009 the VCS Assembly Board decided that a specific piece of work was required in order to better understand and respond to the impact of the recession. This local action has since been supported by the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA). NAVCA's framework for developing a Local Resilience Action Plan has been used to produce this document.

**Table 1 Type of service users supported by VCS Assembly members**

<b>Type of service users</b>	<b>Number of Assembly Members</b>
Adults	50
Adults with learning difficulties	27
People using health and social care services	38
People with disabilities	40
Those with sensory impairment	28
Mental Health service users	21
People in need of housing	3
Children and Young People	93
Older People	27
People whose circumstances make them vulnerable/disadvantaged	33
Farmers/people working with the environment	7
Ex armed forces personnel	6
Local businesses	17
People using sport facilities	2
Charities/voluntary organisations	25
Statutory organisations	8
Special interest groups	8
Shropshire residents	19
Residents of a particular community/geographical area	38
Other	4

## **The recession**

A recession is a period of general economic decline specifically defined as a decline in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for two or more consecutive quarters. GDP fell by 1.5 % in the final three months of 2008 and by 0.6% in the previous quarter. As a result a UK recession was announced on the 23 January 2009. Although the UK met the criteria of a recession in 1991, the current economic decline is the most significant since 1980. By January 2009, 1.92 million people were out of work. Among the causes and impacts of the recession the UK has seen a slowdown in the construction industry, a mortgage 'crisis', a rise in fuel prices, the collapse of financial institutions and the rise of company closures.

## **What impact can the recession have upon the VCS?**

Understanding the impact the recession can have upon the Voluntary and Community Sector at a national level can help place the experiences of Shropshire VCS groups and organisations into context.

Nationally, the VCS will be affected by the recession in a different way to other sectors because of a number of factors including:

- a dependence on charitable giving and statutory sources of income;
- a reliance on support from within the sector (e.g. grant making bodies);
- a reliance on investment income; and
- the size of most VCS organisations and groups – many are small and don't have reserves to see them through lean funding periods.

VCS bodies of different sizes will be affected in different ways. Resilience is often linked to size and presence (e.g. large, well known, established charities have previously survived recession well). Large charities have the resources to support strategic planning, service development/adaptation, and often have financial reserves to fall back on.

The sector's total income does not necessarily decrease in economic downturns. While in previous downturns, some charities reported decreases in income, approximately an equal number reported increases, with the other third reporting no change. This leads to the conclusion that organisations experience downturns differently with some possibly benefiting from more targeted funding and giving by beneficiaries. Responses therefore may need to be individual and targeted to reflect different experiences of organisations.

Sub-sectors fare differently. In the last recession some parts of the sector in the UK saw an increase in income, such as international aid and faith-based organisations. Other areas of work (including housing, general social services, community and economic development and the arts), saw needs (unemployment, homelessness, poverty) grow more severe whilst income fell.

The impact of the downturn on need for VCS services will be uneven, both sub-sectorally and geographically; levels of need are likely to change in both areas. It is likely that there will be a higher need for welfare services, advice and counselling (e.g. debt, housing, employment), but a lower demand for fee-charging leisure and cultural activities (e.g. theatres).

The impact on the unpaid workforce is mixed. While there also may be a potentially larger pool of volunteers, there are costs associated with volunteering to both the volunteers themselves (e.g. transport), and organisations (e.g. training and management). Without organisational support (such as reimbursement of expenses) volunteers tend to drop off, and as the costs associated with volunteers rise, organisations' capacity to use them is reduced.

The recession can have a mix of positive and negative impacts upon voluntary and community sector groups and organisations. National research collated and reported by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) has been used to summarise impacts as negative and positive below: (Source: Third Sector Foresight <http://www.3s4.org.uk/drivers/economic-downturn>)

#### Negative impacts

- An increasing number of people requiring support:
  - More people out of work
  - More people experiencing debt
  - More people suffering from stress and associated mental health problemsThere will likely be a higher need for welfare services, advice and counselling (e.g. debt, housing, employment).
- It is likely that corporate giving will fall.
- Funding from government may fall - evidence from other recessions is that income from government fell - leading to an even greater need to demonstrate and deliver efficiency and value for money.
- Investment and legacy income will be affected by the falling value of assets (equities, bank deposits, property) and lower interest rates.
- Falling investment income will impact upon trusts and foundations and evidence suggests that many may reduce grant-making.
- VCS staff may face the threat of redundancy.
- Lack of available funding to cover volunteer expenses may reduce the number of people able to fulfil their unpaid roles.
- Social tension can be experienced to some degree as competition for resources increases.
- People will be more careful with their spending, reducing expenditure of non essentials such as luxuries and leisure. This could have an impact on some part of the sector.
- Smaller VCS groups and organisations and those who are not as well established are likely to be most vulnerable within a recession. National research concerning economic downturns suggests that the strong get stronger and the weak get weaker. Larger organisations typically have wider resources to draw from (including reserves) and a more specialised workforce (including fundraisers and volunteer co-ordinators) who can respond to shifting needs.

- There is a danger that groups providing more specialist services to vulnerable people in the most remote/rural locations, or those working with the hardest to reach could be affected to a significant degree. This type of service provision is likely to be most costly.

#### Positive impacts

- An increasing number of people requiring support (this can be positive and negative depending upon the service and available capacity). There will likely be a higher need for welfare services, advice and counselling (e.g. debt, housing, employment).
- Although unemployment will rise, and cause problems for service users, it can also lead to a potentially larger pool of volunteers, some with professional and specialist skills that can support and benefit VCS organisations.
- Skills gaps and shortages previously experienced within some areas of the VCS may ease as there is more competition for jobs.
- It is possible that some contracts and funding arrangements may be negotiated at a longer term as awareness over the potential impact of uncertainty within a recession increases.
- There will be an increase in beneficiaries for some organisations. Evidence from other recessions suggests that charitable giving does not fall but that donors focus on causes they already support.
- There is likely to be an increase in spending for Charity shops.

## The local impact of the recession

### The impact of the recession in Shropshire

One of the methods of assessing the impact of the recession in Shropshire is to consider key out of work benefit recipient numbers for the former Shropshire District and Borough Council areas. The key out of work benefits consist of: Jobseekers Allowance, Incapacity Benefit, lone parents and other income related benefits. This information relates to National Indicator 152 which is the key Worklessness indicator for Shropshire's Local Area Agreement. It is reported nationally more than 7 months in arrears; the most up to date published information is for August 2008 which was published February 2009.

**Table 2 National and Regional Benefit Claimants**

	No. of people claiming key out of work benefits (August 2008)	Working Age Population (2007)	No. of people claiming out of work benefits (August 2008) as a % of Working Age Population
Great Britain	4,383,065	36,832,475	11.9%
West Midlands	466,019	3,557,398	13.1%

*Source: Worklessness Action Group (WAG) Briefing Note, April 2009*

**Table 3 Shropshire Benefit Claimants**

	No. of people claiming key out of work benefits (August 2008)	Working Age Population (2007)	No. of people claiming out of work benefits (August 2008) as a % of Working Age Population
Oswestry	2,400	23,900	10.1%
Shrewsbury and Atcham	5,140	57,100	9.0%
North Shropshire	3,180	35,400	9.0%
South Shropshire	1,900	23,300	8.2%
Bridgnorth	2,300	30,700	7.5%

Source: Worklessness Action Group (WAG) Briefing Note, April 2009

Tables 2 and 3 suggest that Shropshire has a lower proportion of working age people claiming out of work benefits than the regional and national averages with the highest proportions in Oswestry, North Shropshire and Shrewsbury & Atcham areas. Further comparison of numbers of people claiming key out of work benefits for the Shropshire Council Areas and the West Midlands and Great Britain in August 2008 is set out in the table below. The Shropshire average for the proportion of people claiming key out of work benefits as a percentage of the resident working age population is 8.76%.

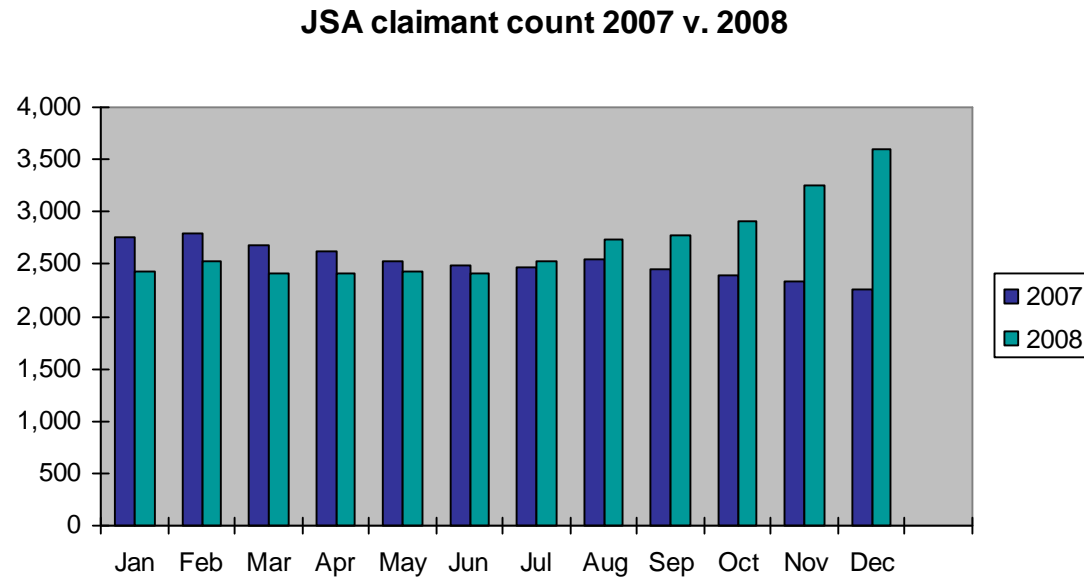
**Table 4 Numbers of people claiming key out of work benefits August 2008**

	Number	% resident working age people
West Midlands	-	13.1%
Great Britain	-	11.9%
Oswestry	2,400	10.1%
North Shropshire	3,180	9%
Shrewsbury	5,140	9%
Bridgnorth	2,300	7.5%
South Shropshire	1,900	8.2%

Source: Worklessness Action Group (WAG) Briefing Note, April 2009

Another source of data concerns numbers of Jobseeker's Allowance Claimants. Jobseekers Allowance is reported monthly in arrears. This provides a more up to date picture of activity in terms of people claiming out of work benefits. The following graph demonstrates the significant increases in the number of JSA claimants in Shropshire since June 2008. This is in contrast to the 2007 data which shows numbers claiming Job Seekers Allowance steadily decreasing. The March 2009 total for Shropshire was 5122 people against a total of 3592 in December 2008, an increase of 1530 (43%).

**Figure 1 Shropshire Job Seekers Allowance Claimants**



Source: Worklessness Action Group (WAG) Briefing Note, April 2009

**Table 5 Shropshire Job Seekers Allowance Claimants**

Area	August 2008 no. JSA Claimants	March 2009 no. JSA Claimants	% increase
Oswestry	470	890	89%
North Shropshire	590	1,048	78%
North Area	1060	1938	83%
Shrewsbury and Atcham	880	1,747	98.5%
South Shropshire	270	566	110%
Bridgnorth	430	871	103%
South Area	700	1437	105%

Table 5 sets out the number of JSA claimants for the former and District and Borough Council areas of Shropshire, as identified on the Office of National Statistics NOMIS system. The shaded rows provide a total for the three areas now covered by Shropshire’s Area Partnerships. The South area has seen the greatest increase in Job Seekers Allowance claimants followed by the Central area.

Shropshire Council’s Fairer Charging Welfare & Income Team has also collected evidence concerning the impact of the recession in Shropshire. During the financial year 2008/09, the team saw an increase in referrals of 27%, a 177% increase in children’s centre service referrals and a 228% increase in self referral. Key issues identified by the team are that more young families are concerned about job losses and wish to identify opportunities for claims. People previously not accessing claims are taking greater steps to understand their entitlements. Other issues included more people facing salary cuts and more men feeling unable to pay their child maintenance payments. The Fairer Charging Welfare & Income Team raised £3.05 million in extra benefits for service users in 2008/09 – a 45% increase on 2007/08 figures.

One of the key areas of concern within Shropshire is the mounting level of debt faced by many people and the importance of ensuring that they have ready access to good professional benefit and debt advisory services. It is important to consider the partnership work that has taken place in Shropshire to respond to these issues (see Shropshire's Response to the Recession).

### **The recession and Shropshire's Voluntary and Community Sector**

Work to understand the impact upon the VCS in Shropshire has predominantly been focused around two key pieces of work, a VCS Recession Survey and a VCS Recession Workshop. The VCS Assembly Board has led both pieces of work with independent facilitation for the workshop provided by NAVCA.

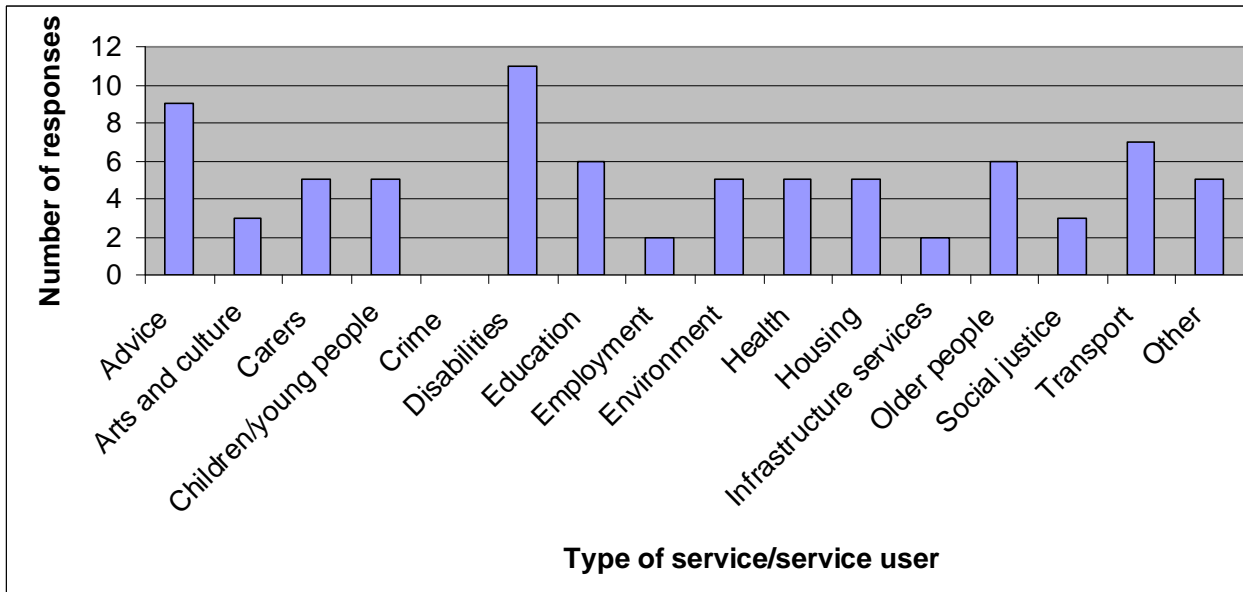
#### The VCS Recession Survey

All 258 members of the Shropshire VCS Assembly were encouraged to take part in the recession survey and over 290 individuals were contacted using Assembly mailing lists in order to ensure that all groups and organisations were aware of the opportunity to highlight their views and experiences and any concerns they may have as a result of the recession. In total 29 completed questionnaires were completed (a 9% return rate). Although the survey sample was small, the completed questionnaires were very thorough and contained a wealth of information.

It is possible that many local VCS groups and organisations have not yet experienced the impacts of the recession and therefore felt unable to contribute to the survey. Key findings from the survey are highlighted below but a more detailed report is available as a separate document.

Analysis of the survey sample suggests that responses were received from a good mix of larger and smaller groups and organisations and that the main areas of focus/service provision reported by the survey sample were working with people with disabilities and providing advice (this is reflective of the wider Assembly membership). Figure 2 displays the range of service types/ client groups receiving support from the VCS groups involved in the recession survey.

**Figure 2 Type of services provided/ service users groups supported**



The survey results show that the recession has not yet had an impact on volunteering in Shropshire.

Some groups had experienced a slight increase in volunteers due to more people being out of work and wishing to contribute to their communities, but others had seen a slight loss of volunteers.

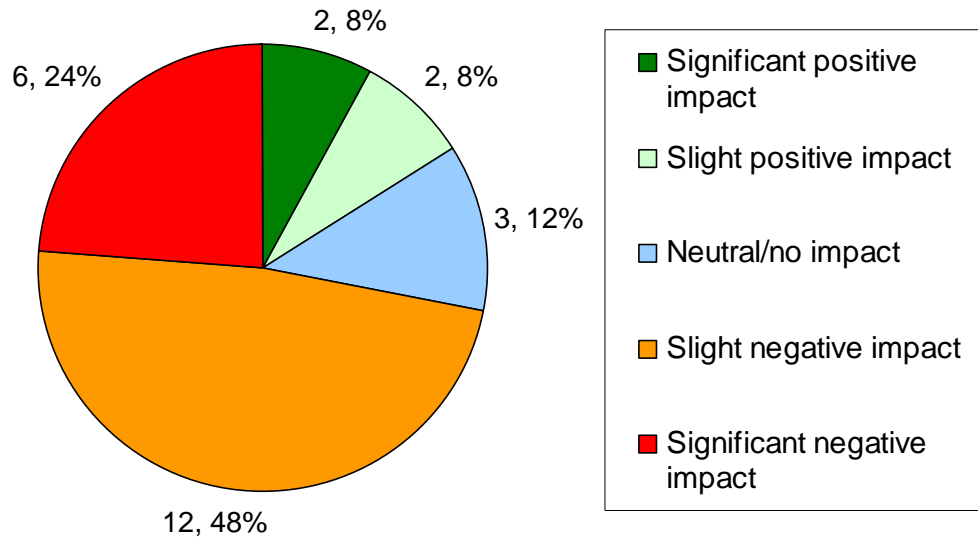
The main impacts of the recession reported by the survey respondents are summarised below:

**Impacts**

- Uncertainly over future funding
- Uncertainty caused by Unitary Council
- Harder to fund raise
- It is a difficult time in which to raise funds
- Low interest rates affecting savings
- Staff members leaving for financial reasons
- Increases in fuel, food and utility costs
- Increases in staffing costs
- Rise in cost of services and maintenance fees
- Loss of discounts

Overall the recession has reduced income and to a lesser extent prompted an increase in expenditure and levels of work. The most noticeable issues reported by the survey sample were decreases in the levels of charitable donations, decreases in the value of investments and a loss of grant funding from local sources. The overall impact of the recession is summarised in Figure 3. Most survey respondents felt the recession has had a negative rather than positive impact. 18 of the 29 respondents believe the recession has had a negative impact on their group/organisation. 4 even consider their organisation at risk of failing.

**Figure 3 Overall impact of the recession**



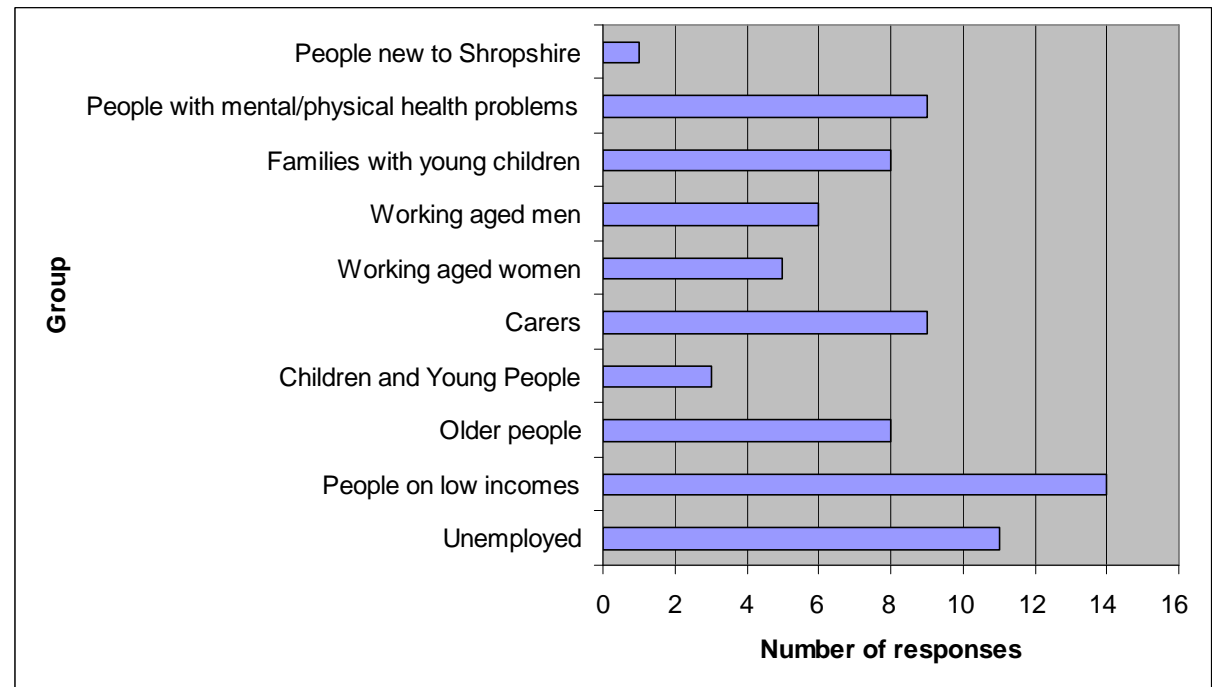
The recession survey also sought to determine the impact the recession was having upon the communities and groups served by the VCS in Shropshire. Many of the groups and organisations involved in the survey had seen significant increases in the demand for their services. 23 of the 29 respondents believe they have seen increased vulnerability among groups within the community. Those affected most were considered people on low incomes and the unemployed. Figure 4 displays those groups within the community and using VCS services who have been most affected by the recession.

One of the main changes seen in the people using VCS services was an increase in the number of people who are out of work. Other key impacts on the community are summarised below:

**Impact on the community**

- More people in need of help and support
- People already vulnerable most affected
- More complex issues/multiple needs
- More people struggling to meet basic needs:
  - Family finances
  - Housing
  - Employment
- Health impact – depression/anxiety/stress
- Competition has increased (for example competition for work)

**Figure 4 Groups most affected by the recession**



The survey was also used to try and gain an insight into the actions local VCS groups and organisations have been using to manage the impact of the recession.

Actions responding to the recession:

- Changes in referral systems
- Increased signposting
- Additional service provision
- Careful financial management
- Increased fund raising activities
- Making cost savings
- Redundancies/ increased staffing levels
- Risk management/ planning

It is clear that a range of support is required from the VCS Assembly Board in responding to the impact of the recession on Shropshire's Voluntary and Community Sector. Types of support include:

- Providing a voice – raising key issues at both the local and regional levels
- Partnership working with the public sector
- Tackling funding issues (such as working to support the funding element of the Compact)
- Evidencing needs and pressure points
- Supporting 'in sector' collaboration
- Working with support bodies to feed back on sector needs e.g. training

The VCS Recession Workshop

A VCS recession workshop has formed the second key tool in developing an understanding of the impact of the recession in Shropshire and the work that can take place in response to local issues. Facilitated by NAVCA, the workshop included:

- Presentations:
  - Shropshire Council's Welfare & Income Team
  - Learning, Employment and Training Services
  - Shropshire Community Council
- Case Studies from:
  - Landau Ltd.
  - South Shropshire Furniture Scheme
  - Citizens Advice Shropshire
- Group work

The workshops covered:

- Emerging needs and challenges faced
- Actions for inclusion in the Local Resilience Action Plan
- Key priorities

The results of the workshop are highlighted within the section (key recession issues for Shropshire's VCS).

## Responding to the recession

### Shropshire's Response to the Recession

Three key partnership groups are working to manage the impact of the recession in Shropshire:

- **Shropshire Business Board** - The Board comprises ten business leaders and a number of representatives from business support organisations including the Federation of Small Business, Shropshire Chamber of Commerce and Enterprise and the regional Development Agency, Advantage West Midlands. The Business Board was established to provide private sector-led advice to Shropshire Council on economic development matters to ensure business views are taken in to account when developing economic policy.
- **Economic Recession Committee** – The Economic Recession Committee is working with local partners and regional and national agencies to ensure that the Council is helping to provide and co-ordinate initiatives to help lessen the effects of the current economic recession. The Committee and its elected members maintain an overview of the situation in Shropshire. The Committee has considered topics such as benefit maximisation for Shropshire People and a Recession Action Plan for the County.
- **Worklessness Action Group** – Through the Local Area Agreement 2008-2011, the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) is tackling worklessness (Outcome LAA 21). A multi-agency team (The Shropshire Worklessness Action Group (WAG) seeks to tackle barriers that the long term unemployed face in terms of accessing jobs, training and employment at a very local level in Shropshire's most employment-deprived communities. The WAG consists of wide range of partners from across the statutory and voluntary sector. It maintains close links to 6 Neighbourhood Employment and Skills Plan areas.

Neighbourhood Employment and Skills Plan areas (NESP's) cover 5 wards in Shropshire - Oswestry (Castle), Ludlow (Henley), Shrewsbury (Harlescott Grange, Sundorne, and Meole Brace), plus a rural NESP. Each NESP area devised projects to bid for Learning 2 Deliver funding:

- Ludlow Rockspring – providing advice and support via a community venue, including a debt advice and signposting project.
- Shrewsbury – awareness raising, myth-busting.
- Oswestry – support to attend training, mentoring etc.

The Worklessness Action Group (WAG) has worked to map out 'worklessness journeys' in Shropshire. The process has been used to focus discussions with area partnerships and with WAG members to improve communication with target groups and to work together to provide cohesive support and guidance to unemployed people. Looking at experiences of service users and customers living in Shropshire the group hopes to determine:

- barriers to people progressing into employment,
- the trigger points at which after joining a programme of support they drop out
- reasons why people drop out, and
- establish what might help them complete the journey into work.

Planned activities of the WAG cover a wide range of actions, examples include:

- The development of simple signposting/a route map that all partners can use to identify options and opportunities.
- Establishment of links between different types of interventions.
- Work with GPs to support people on long-term sick and appropriate referral to enable them to continue in employment.
- Awareness raising with partners around issues such as permitted work e.g. can be up to 16 hours a week for 52 weeks but needs a GP note identifying that the work being carried out does not contravene the eligibility for their Incapacity benefit.
- Work with Registered Social Landlords and Supporting People to support workless households.
- Links to the Connections to Opportunities programme

Connections to Opportunities is led by Advantage West Midlands to tackle the issues of economic exclusion caused by worklessness. An invitation was sent out to the Voluntary Sector Assembly by the Shropshire Partnership in February to invite expressions of interest in taking part in delivering the Connections to Opportunities programme. 12 initial expressions of interest were received from organisations engaged in delivering worklessness related activities within Shropshire. Work continues to develop a collaborative model to engage voluntary sector organisations and to establish an innovative and sustainable delivery mechanism. Key elements of the model include:

- Identifying barriers to engagement and participation and providing specialist support.
- Ensuring the provision of seamless interventions, which are built around the individual not the service provider.
- Providing a menu of support activities and interventions tailored to the individual.
- Establishing delivery consortia of third sector providers to encourage collaborative working between delivery organisations.

Work is also continuing to take place through Shropshire's Joint Team Benefits Partnership. Partners include Shropshire Council's Fairer Charging Welfare & Income Team, the local Pensions Service, Citizens Advice Shropshire (CAB), A4U and Shropshire Jobcentre Plus. The aim is to bring together all of the advice agencies in to make services more widely available to people, make best use of our resources by avoiding duplication of effort, and provide a more holistic advice service. Access to the Joint Team is advertised via one

phone number which connects the caller to the Customer Service Centre. Customer Service Centre staff members then make a referral to an appropriate partner. This is particularly helpful for people who have had no previous contact with the benefit system.

A variety of initiatives have been used to support people in accessing benefits. Examples include:

- Work with social work teams who are able to respond quickly and refer people affected by loss of work.
- Provision of support within Children's Centres.
- Provision of one stop shops in venues around the County – advice concerning benefit and employment issues.
- Promotional work with schools, SureStart venues, pharmacies and other local services.
- Referral of those unable to pay Council Tax for benefits checks.
- Improved advertisement of available jobs.
- Work with Registrars who are able to offer referrals for people whose circumstances have recently changed due to a birth or death.

Shropshire's Learning, Employment and Training Services has also been working to respond to the recession locally. The service offers pre employment support and in employment training among other sources of support such as advice, guidance and job search skills. A Response to Redundancy programme has been implemented that aims to support the newly redundant aged 18 years and over.

Much of the work underway in Shropshire has been highlighted within the Economic Recession Committee's Action Plan. Key actions include:

- The publication of website information for residents and businesses concerned about the recession.
- Research work to better understand local issues.
- Work with West Midlands Regional Task Force.
- The establishment of Shropshire Council targets to improve payments.
- Support via a Business Rates Deferral Scheme.
- The provision of Procurement events and information resources offering targeted to support suppliers and contractors.
- A Recruitment and Redundancy Support Group
- Investigations into the potential to introduce a Shropshire Council Apprenticeship Scheme.
- Training homelessness staff to provide support within housing services.
- Partnership working between Supporting People and Citizen's Advice Shropshire focused on support to avoid evictions.

## Key recession issues for Shropshire's VCS

The VCS Assembly's recession workshop highlighted a number of key issues for the sector and these are outlined below:

### Sector issues

- The impact of the recession is more hidden in a rural area such as Shropshire and identifying the issues is a difficult task at this stage.
- As the recession increases pressures upon the Sector there is an identified need to consider rural issues/ rural proofing in order to avoid working to implement initiatives and practice successful elsewhere but possibly inappropriate in a rural county like Shropshire.
- The need for strong Information, Advice and Guidance Services (for example CAB, A4U etc) able to provide early intervention and signposting.
- Shropshire's infrastructure bodies have recently faced significant problems and pressures. Although these problems are not caused by the recession, pressures on budgets could reduce support to local infrastructure just at the time when demand is increasing and Shropshire needs to develop more sustainable, long term support.
- The Government agenda is currently very focused on mergers and collaboration within the VCS. There is an awareness that big isn't always better. It is not always appropriate to partner up and impose shared procedures. Bigger sometimes means more risk. It is important to take steps to preserve culture, ethics and individual specialisms. There is also an awareness that collaboration is very time consuming initially but that, in the longer term, a focus on common aims and outcomes for service users can generate service improvements.
- Although mergers and collaborations need to be appropriate and carefully organised there is a need to consider different models of working in order to respond to the recession. Support from partnerships within the sector and multi-sector partnerships may help to enable responses to the recession. There are issues around capacity and coordination support for partnerships.
- The VCS is aware of the need not to duplicate services and to look for appropriate opportunities to delegate/work together.
- Many VCS groups and organisations are finding it hard to afford back office functions, investment in IT, finance support etc. Sharing resources and systems could provide a solution.

- Information sharing is always a top issue for the Sector and the recession has again brought this to the fore and highlighted a need for continued improvement in the sharing of information.
- Statutory Agencies appear to be expecting more for less. This has generated increasing concerns around:
  - Exploiting volunteers
  - Competition from national providers and services in tendering opportunities and a need to encourage contracts to stay local.
  - Working to ensure quality services rather than quantity provision. There is increasing pressure to meet targets.
  - Ensuring funding covers all costs - full cost recovery issues.
  - Working to avoid a loss of contact time with service users – this is part of what makes VCS services special and effective.
- The recession has increased concerns among VCS groups and organisations over threats to independence. Diminishing choices, increasing pressures and a stronger more focused steer from national Government (for example around a limited set of national indicators) threatens the sectors individuality by making innovation feel like a risk.
- The current working environment feels much more political.
- An increasing need to demonstrate the value of the voluntary sector. Highlighting issues such as the fact that the sector is often much better at engaging with people, building trust and developing longer term relationships with service users.
- The Sector displays strengths in identifying emerging needs often having access to/collecting very up to date information. This is not always being used effectively by Statutory Agencies.
- There is scope for the Sector to be much more involved in Strategy development – a way of responding more effectively to recession issues.
- The recession has increased levels of concern among Board Members and Trustees who are often not fully aware of or confident in carrying out their responsibilities. Financial responsibilities are a common current concern. Some VCS groups and organisations are losing trustees as a result of these concerns.
- New national schemes aimed at finding employment and providing training and work placements are not suiting all VCS groups and organisations. For example:
  - The short term nature of placements means individuals could not complete a course of training with the CAB (a much longer process than the time allocated).

- Job outcome funding does not place resources in the most appropriate places. Funding should follow the person rather than stop at the initial provider.
- There is a need for freedoms and flexibilities rather than rigid national requirements.
- New models of service delivery such as personal budgets where service users are able to choose their service providers may be a way of working in the future. This generates issues for VCS groups and organisations in understanding theories and policies and in working to meet future demands.

#### Issues for service users/ the wider community

- Many more service users are presenting to VCS services with mental health issues. There is a strong correlation between those affected by debt and those experiencing mental health problems. VCS bodies don't know where to signpost (there appears to be a gap in the provision of preventative and low level mental health services) and feel under pressure because they are not specialists.
- Retired and older people are experiencing impact of the recession fairly acutely. Problems include:
  - An impact on health (caused by some older people trying to save money by cutting back on food and heating expenditure).
  - Older people losing money due to interest rates falling on their savings.
- The unemployed and those on low incomes are experiencing some of the most significant impacts of the recession and these groups are growing in number as employment opportunities reduce and some employers are reducing working hours and salaries (often measures to avoid redundancies).
- The low skilled find themselves more vulnerable due to increasing competition for work.
- People are not spending as much on leisure. There is a need to try and prevent loss of income by keeping tourists at home, spending on local services and suppliers. Opportunities include more innovative use of local buildings and new social events such as 'come dine with me' parties.

## **VCS Priorities**

Of the issues highlighted above identified priorities are:

- Taking action to highlight the uniqueness of the VCS and the contribution it makes within Shropshire.
- Improving data gathering and research – highlighting emerging vulnerable groups and service users.
- Maximising opportunities for VCS involvement in Strategy development.
- Working to better understand gaps in services and how they may be addressed.
- Improved information sharing within sector and with other services
- Opportunities to improve signposting to other VCS groups and organisations
- Implementing signposting arrangements for those with low level mental health needs
- Provision of support for trustees and governance training
- Lobbying (where appropriate) for funding to follow the person/service user.
- Planning for future risk - high skilled people are now taking lower level jobs but will move on as soon as the economy stabilises and leave a gap.
- Working with commissioners to overcome concerns about contracts going out of county.
- Focusing attention within Shropshire communities where a culture of not wanting to work exists. Implementing positive opportunities and dealing with issues early to avoid crisis.

## **Beating the Recession – A workshop for larger VCS organisations**

On June 25 the Community Council of Shropshire led a workshop for larger voluntary sector organisations in Shropshire to consider the methods that can be implemented to respond to the recession at the local and organisational level (such as organisational health checking). One of the key elements of the workshop was to consider opportunities for collaboration and models for partnership working. The Capacity Builders Modernisation Fund Programme was also explained and promoted. A key outcome of the workshop was that the session highlighted a desire among larger VCS organisations to work collectively to identify ways of responding to joint concerns such as:

- Competition from national organisations within tendering processes.
- Demonstrating added value of local knowledge among commissioners and budget holders.
- Lack of eligibility for funding aimed at smaller groups and the existence of funding gaps.
- Recognising the strengths and weaknesses of collaboration, when to pursue opportunities and factors to consider such as legal issues and responsibilities.
- Shared support and opportunities for working more closely with, and engaging, other larger voluntary sector organisations based in Shropshire.
- Further strengthening current working arrangements which support signposting and information sharing.

Please see action plan, sent under separate cover as appendix 2