

DEVELOPING DEVOLUTION WITH OUR COMMUNITIES

Realising the potential of decentralisation through
the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector

ABOUT VSNW

Founded by the sector in 1997, Voluntary Sector North West (VSNW) is the regional voluntary sector network for the North West. Our purpose is to ensure that the voluntary and community sector (VCS), in all its diversity, plays a full part in shaping the future of the region.

The North West has always consisted of five subregions and of a stark mix of economic success and marginalisation. Via our members and networks, we are in contact with over 20,000 groups working with communities right across the region.

VSNW's work has historically had three core elements:

- **General support for the sector bridging national policy and local implementation.** An important part of this role has been about how we can be a system leader and create change, always within the context of the membership, networks and relationships that make VSNW possible.
- **Supporting the sector's role in creating social and economic impact,** driven by the need to create effective economic strategies and delivery for our communities. This has typically been a sub-national agenda.
- **Supporting the sector's role in the future of health and social care.** As a founder member of Regional Voices, and a Department of Health NHS England VCSE strategic and Public Health England partner since 2010, we have been described "as the glue that holds the programme together".

VSNW Principles for supporting sector engagement in devolution and system change

While it is clear that we must enable learning from one area to be shared, we know - from our devolution work - that we need more than one answer to the challenges and opportunities posed by devolution and local system change more broadly. The answers for Manchester city centre do not transpose to Cumbria's Alston Moor.

Different areas have different challenges, different assets and different working cultures. We believe that a top-down framework is not the answer for localities and their voluntary, community and social enterprise groups (VCSE). This is more about having the right process that works for people and partnerships.

We also believe that we need to create collective answers as a sector. There won't be one answer but we do need a set of answers, coherently presented with the right business cases and with potential for impact and scale that plays to our sector's strengths. We can't do this one group at a time any more.

We know that the answers we need are in the hearts and minds of our sector and our communities. We need to create the right space for creativity, informed action and a focus on our communities to help drive change. We have to listen intelligently like never before.

This document outlines the organic conversations and discussions that we have begun to have. We recognise the need to develop new answers as the devolution agenda unfurls and as more areas begin to engage. What is clear is that groups need support identifying the right answers based on increased knowledge of the changes that are taking place. VSNW has been working to ensure this happens while at the same time enabling the VCSE to play an important role in the journey of devolution.

DEVOLUTION: THE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

Devolution has happened at a fast pace; many exciting developments have taken place that have transformed our governance at a local level to enable more responsive and innovative public services. This provides the potential platform from which to tackle entrenched disadvantage, drive social change and deliver inclusive growth, while at the same time refreshing local democracy.

The devolution agenda has enthused many politicians and professionals, but it is fair to say that it has not always had the same reaction within communities. Many people, who are enthusiastic about local social action to improve their neighbourhoods or provide support to their communities, have become disengaged from formal politics - whether this is Whitehall or the town hall can sometimes make little difference. Devolution has the potential to address this deficit and strengthen productive local partnerships that can underpin transformation.

Devolution is based on the recognition that there are no blueprints for how communities work, and that these decisions are best taken closer to the place where they have an impact. For us that means communities of place and identity.

At VSNW, we feel that there is still much potential that can be realised with our communities. Decentralisation is currently being driven by local government and public agencies, but there is a significant gap in terms of how devolution has connected with communities to draw on the enthusiasm, insights and imaginations of a wide range of people who will be able to provide further energy to the process.

The next step of the devolution experiment involves supporting and empowering new forms of collaborative approaches, which enhance local control through devolving power further to enable citizens and communities to help shape their own future. This has not yet been delivered, but the potential is significant.

We see major potential for devolution to address inequality and tackle entrenched disadvantage at a scale that will have considerable impact. This can be achieved through:

- Social change driven by communities sparked by VCSE trust and energy;
- Growth strategies that are responsive to the challenges facing communities in everyday life;
- A re-invigoration of democracy that connects citizens to service design, delivery and accountability;
- Reimagining the role of VCSE groups in communities and across emerging geographies.

The VCSE sector is well situated to support collaborative discussions and actions around these in order to drive the development of a devolution agenda that is more inclusive, democratic and socially just.

The kaleidoscope of devolution has yet to settle. There are bold aspirations and plans, but the practicalities have not yet been fully worked out. As the leader of Manchester City Council, Sir Richard Leese, said at our annual conference: "We're all making this up as we go along.... join us and make it up with us."

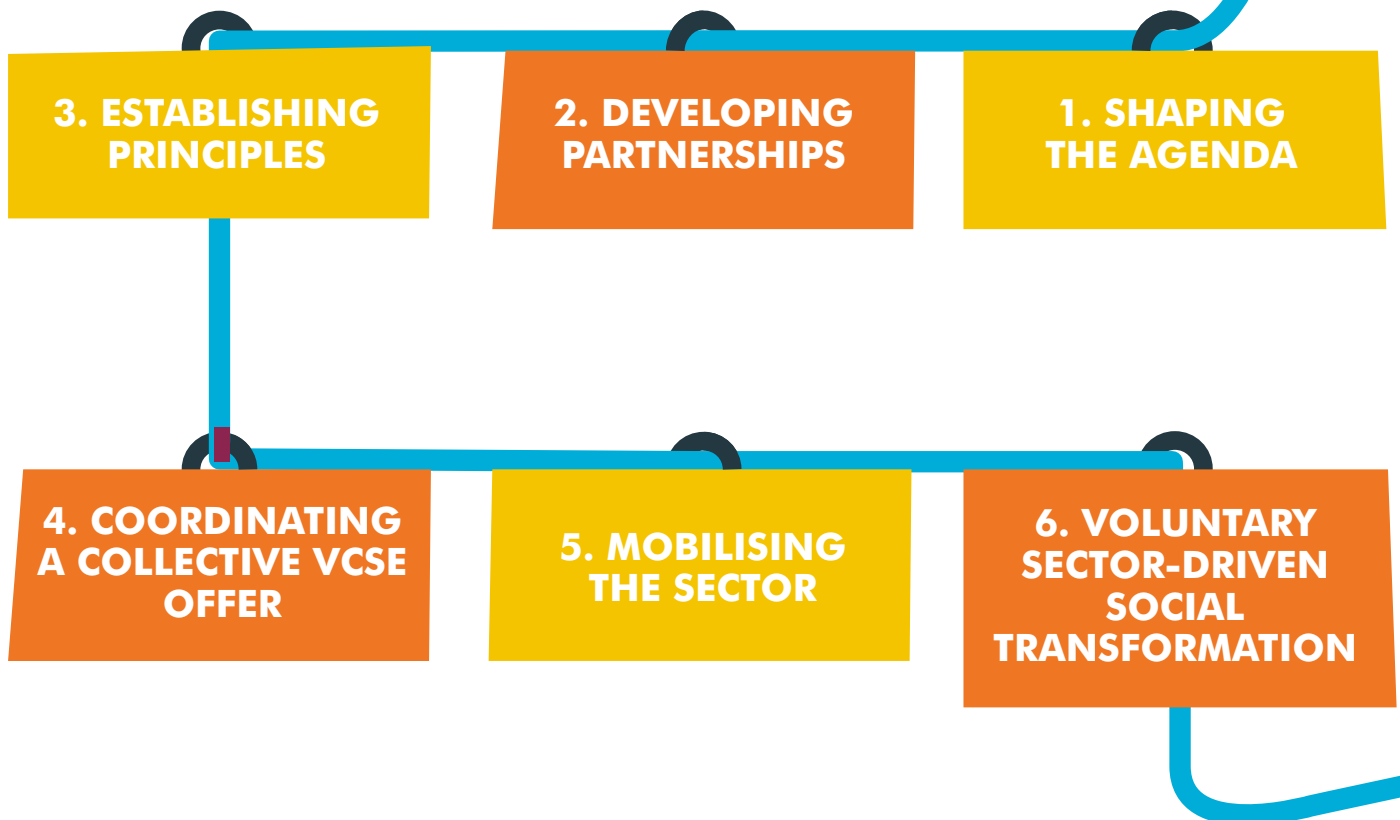
The VCSE sector will be crucial partners, if supported effectively. VSNW have begun to do this already, and below we show six case studies that provide an indication of the activity that has been taking place in the North West. We have strived to ensure that the devolution discussions have been inclusive and positive in order for the VCSE sector to be able to participate in the cooperative endeavour of maximising the opportunities that decentralisation presents.

CASE STUDIES OF VSNW'S DEVELOPING DEVOLUTION APPROACH

VSNW has led and supported a range of activities designed to involve the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector in the development of devolution. The aim is to make sure devolution - and the transformation of public services - works for communities.

Together these case studies provide an insight into some of the practical steps needed to ensure the full potential of devolution is realised in partnership with an engaged, cooperative and action-orientated voluntary, community and social enterprise sector.

VSNW'S DEVELOPING DEVOLUTION APPROACH



1. SHAPING THE AGENDA

Devolution, Our Devolution – Perspectives on the Meaning of Devolution for Voluntary and Community Groups

The devolution agenda remains obscure and complex to many people, especially those working in the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector. While the formal devolution referendum in Scotland happened, with the VCSE in Scotland driving key debates about poverty, community and inequality, the first deals were being made in England. The sector in England was disengaged structurally, culturally and emotionally, suggesting that the enthusiasm in Scotland and all the energy that was generated would not touch England.

The voluntary, community and social enterprise sector had not had the chance to engage, debate and develop an understanding about what devolution might mean, and how we might react and engage. VSNW wanted to start discussions and get people thinking before the bullet whistled past and the opportunity to be involved at the moment of ignition was lost.

We asked a number of leading academics, think tanks and VCSE leaders to write about the role of the VCSE sector in devolution and published them in Devolution, Our Devolution.

VSNW started discussions - events, workshops, articles, one-to-one discussions across the North West at a time when the leading sector journal, Third Sector Magazine, was rejecting articles about devolution as "not of national relevance or interest to the sector". In 2015/16 we held or spoke at over 90 workshops with just under 3,000 people attending. We recognised the importance of unfolding policy developments and the potential that it holds for the VCSE sector to spark real social change in our communities.

The publication featured a series of think-pieces to spark imaginations, considerations and reflections - exploring the potential role of the sector in devolution, how devolution will happen and how the VCSE can become involved and ensure that communities are properly engaged. It was an important intervention in the debate and has influenced the thinking of many leaders in the sector.

Through setting a cautious, but positive tone and informing the sector of the potential, we have been able to shine a light on the ambitions and possibilities of devolution and the position of the VCSE within this - setting firm foundations for an engaged sector to connect more meaningfully in their local devolution discussions and developments.

Yes, at times, devolution as it currently exists in England may not feel relevant to our sector - but that's because we haven't engaged and shaped the agenda. In the North West, we think we have started to do that.

"...the people of the North deserve better than they are currently getting and the discussion as to how this can be achieved needs to happen now to minimise the suffering we see every day"

**Dil Daly, Age Concern
Liverpool & Sefton**



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2. DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS

VSNW has drawn on our many years' experience of working across the footprints of city-regions and combined authorities to start to draw together partnerships that are focused, productive and open to sharing learning beyond their immediate localities.

Our driving principles for developing partnerships are based on *catalytic and connected* leaders linked to a coherent, accountable structure, giving the opportunity for broad, sector driven engagement and influence.

Following the report VSNW produced on *'The Implications of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority for the VCFSE'*, we first recommended, and - with the full support of key local voluntary sector agencies - co-hosted the launch of VS6, Liverpool City Region's lead VCFSE partnership. VS6 is collectively able to connect with over 8,000 organisations across the city-region and across a broad range of policy agenda.

In Greater Manchester, we developed the GM VCSE Devolution Reference Group. This was originally established as a 'coalition of the willing', seeking to influence devolution in Greater Manchester for the benefit of communities (place and identity) and to articulate our sector's current and potential role. It is now recognised as part of the GM health and social care devolution work architecture, and is linked into the wider reform and economic agenda. This group will play an active role in developing a Memorandum of Understanding with Greater Manchester Combined Authority, inform the development of future Commissioning Strategies, support VCSE secondments into the health devolution and reform teams, and drive fuller sector engagement.

The vision of the GM VCSE Devolution Reference Group is to eradicate inequality in a generation's time. It's objectives are:

- To champion VCSE engagement in devolution across Greater Manchester by promoting the vital role the sector plays in working towards a more equal society
- To act as a point of contact for those working within Greater Manchester devolution and Greater Manchester's VCSE sector
- To share information and opportunities, operate transparently and think beyond individual organisations
- To promote positive change and collaboration within the VCSE sector through devolution
- To create a social movement for change that empowers the communities of Greater Manchester

New landscapes have emerged in recent years, and voluntary, community and social enterprise sector partnerships need to be re-configured. With our many years of experience in bringing together organisations across different geographies, VSNW is able to lead these discussions and developments of partnerships through an objective and supportive approach. This has provided the space for partnerships to articulate themselves and define their collective vision and understand the shared aspirations that are needed to provide the foundation of meaningful cooperation.

3. ESTABLISHING PRINCIPLES

Each region will buy in to devolution in different ways, and it is important that principles are established with a cooperative ethos and from a grounded approach that involves different partners in the process from the start.

In Liverpool City Region, VSNW has supported organisations to come together to explore a draft, common set of principles that can provide a solid foundation for developments to come. This has involved talking through some of the basics that people need to know in order to ensure that the ask is realistic, and that the offer is deliverable. Participants might well be aware of these different things, but it is important to establish a shared understanding at the beginning so that nobody is left behind and everyone participates on an equal footing.

To be clear this is not to establish local principles for VCSE engagement but for the future of the devolved area. The aim is to shape collective ambition.

From this, the next steps are to develop a coalition of organisations, with a clearer and collective understanding of the opportunities that devolution provides, and what the offer of the VCSE can be to partners.

It also provides the basis for a better understanding of how to connect the wider sector to discussions and to begin to articulate a shift in focus and purpose for the sector moving forward: what should be protected, cherished and nurtured and what needs reforming, refocusing and re-imagining? Devolution and system change offer the potential for a far more serious, mainstream, invest-able conversation about the role of all sectors in a place.

Draft Principles for a City Region

1. Local by default

- Devolution is about shifting power and responsibility away from central structures and help create better answers. Individuals and communities should feel empowered by the process.
- The right activity at the right geography is essential but ultimately the relationship with and impact on communities is the key test for devolution.

2. Growth for communities

- Growth-focused answers to the future of the region are important but we need to connect the big economic ideas to local, community-changing initiatives
- By developing solutions with communities, we can generate economic growth that will build resilience and resourcefulness

3. A 'family' of partners

- If we want radical change, we need to think radically. A new era of trust and co-operation is vital if we are to overcome the significant challenges facing the region
- That means all partners - business, local government, VCFSE, academic, and everybody else - coming together and focused on community-centred (and led) change.

4. Healthy, happy, ambitious people and communities

- How we will become more productive, innovative and prosperous
- Ultimately, this should be the real goal of any region

4. COORDINATING A COLLECTIVE VCSE OFFER IN GREATER MANCHESTER DEVOLUTION

A group of VCSE leaders wrote, with GMCVO's support, to the Leaders of Greater Manchester's City Region about developing a programme of engagement with the sector. The letter, which has been extremely well received, has sparked a substantial shift in partnership working.

It is impossible for anybody to be able to fully represent such a diverse sector, but it is important to be able to communicate with policy-makers in a collective and coherent voice. This requires some working out, and through our process, we developed a clear shared understanding of the following questions:

- What is the sector asking for from devolution?
- What are the key messages that the sector wants to get across?
- What can the sector offer?
- What are the sector's local strengths?

Through this, VSNW were able to coordinate a collective letter with a very clear and concise message. The letter outlines five proposals from the sector looking at:

- Developing a set of partnership principles (Memorandum of Understanding)
- To help drive culture change
- The sector's role in engaging with communities
- Driving innovation in the sector in order to drive sustainable change
- A VCSE Strategic Partners Programme

The letter was backed by over 500 local VCSE groups. It led to a series of VCSE-facilitated, award-winning conversations with marginalised communities (105 events). In ten weeks, via the VCSE sector's networks, 1,387 of the 'hardest to reach' were directly involved in thinking through Greater Manchester's Sustainability and Transformation Plan (GM's Health Devolution plan).

Developing a coherent voice is a necessary foundation for the VCSE to be able to develop dialogue with the architects of devolution. Through establishing leadership, thinking through issues and developing common principles, the VCSE is able to coordinate much wider inclusion into the discussions that are happening around devolution. This has proved to be successful, with many further follow-on discussions taking place as the ideas and energy is cascaded to the wider sector.

The offer and ask letter to Greater Manchester's leaders has been described as

"... a template for VCSE involvement in devolution across England"

**Duncan Tree,
Volunteering Matters**

5. MOBILISING THE SECTOR:

Making decentralisation make sense locally

VSNW has run a workshop with local groups in Sefton, drawing on our knowledge and experience of working in different areas across the North West, in order to communicate the ideas and opportunities of devolution for local audiences to be able to engage productively.

This included providing an introduction to the broader picture of devolution, translated in a more accessible way for local groups and connected to specifics about the Liverpool city region, and the local area in particular.

Participation from local VCSE organisations and councillors was shaped around the following points:

- What is the vision for your community over the next twenty years?
- What are the barriers that are currently blocking this?
- How can your organisation help us to get there?

This approach has been designed as a way to remove preconceived ideas of what is and is not possible and establish a way to move beyond the immediate interests of individual organisations. Groups begin thinking about collective action and collective purpose. The central focus quickly becomes - moving beyond daily, reactive working - finding medium and long term answers for communities and beneficiaries; echoing VCSE discussions and contributions in Scotland's devolution debates.

Through starting with a dream vision and then matching this with the existing architecture where possible, we have developed a method of being able to encourage transformative thinking and communicate the sense of potential and excitement about devolution in a way that dry policy documents are not able to do, but which is possible within the developing devolution arrangements.

Through creating a shared vision and exciting local organisations, we are able to consider the practical barriers that exist within the architecture of devolved governance, and support local organisations to be able to evaluate their positions within this and how they might get involved at different levels.

Devolution becomes a conversation about what the sector could and should contribute. All, importantly, attuned to local challenges, opportunities and knowledge.

As stated, we are still early on in supporting the development of locally-appropriate new models for VCSE delivery. However, we are beginning to see significant new VCSE activity looking to create new developments in how:

- The sector can drive greater community engagement in shaping implementation (GM Community Conversations)
- The sector can draw on its networks in order to increase community involvement in health improvement (Cancer Champion Social Movement - case study on next page)
- Ambitions for driving inclusive social and economic growth (VS6 Partnership)
- Developing commissioning and procurement systems (Co-design and Social Value models)
- Driving greater understanding about community-centred approaches to health and wellbeing (Realising the Value and Jane South's family of approaches)
- Developing community-driven models of social prescribing
- Co-facilitating the emergence of a "People's Plan" (GM People's Plan)

6. VOLUNTARY SECTOR-DRIVEN SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Our work on devolution is not rocket science. It is reliant on relationships, the sector's expertise and on creating spaces for new thinking. The process we are developing:

- Builds new relationships and partnerships
- Is founded upon fundamental principles
- Focused on change
- Focused on a commitment to the relationship between VCSE organisations and their communities.

The purpose, for us, is to develop VCSE-driven strategies that create lasting transformation for the benefit of communities. And we think we are getting there; the Greater Manchester Cancer Champion Social Movement, and its development, is an example.

As part of a 24 hour workshop partly designed to build trust and collaboration (and very much led by local partners with VSNW), VCSE leaders in Greater Manchester (GM) committed to 'eradicating inequality in a generation's time'. The main collective headline delivery offer developed to achieve this was: VCSE-levered social movements.

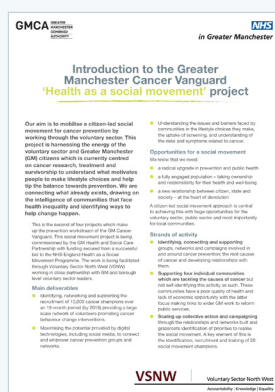
The delivery model was co-designed, via VSNW, by the GM VCSE Reference Group (linking to sector expertise), the Health Devolution team and the GM Cancer Vanguard.

Throughout the design process, principles played a pivotal role: build on what exists, support those to be engaged to define their social movement, use the capacity to campaign positively, and put hope in people and communities to find the best answers.

The initial delivery phase draws on the Reference Group's knowledge and relationships with the 100 plus self-identified cancer charities operating locally, and will seek to engage with these groups and their networks of volunteers and other champions. We will support these groups to develop their vision, their campaigns, their social movement.

However, we also know that the project needs to build relationships with communities and support campaigns that can address barriers to healthier lives. In other words, help develop earlier prevention activity that may not see itself as cancer prevention. We will target communities that identified barriers to healthier lives as part of the GM Community Conversations, that have high rates of cancer incidence and low levels of economic activity.

The goal is to connect health devolution, via communities, with an economic agenda: we know there is an intrinsic relationship between health and economic inequality and believe this is fundamental to successful devolution..



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DEVELOPING DEVOLUTION FURTHER

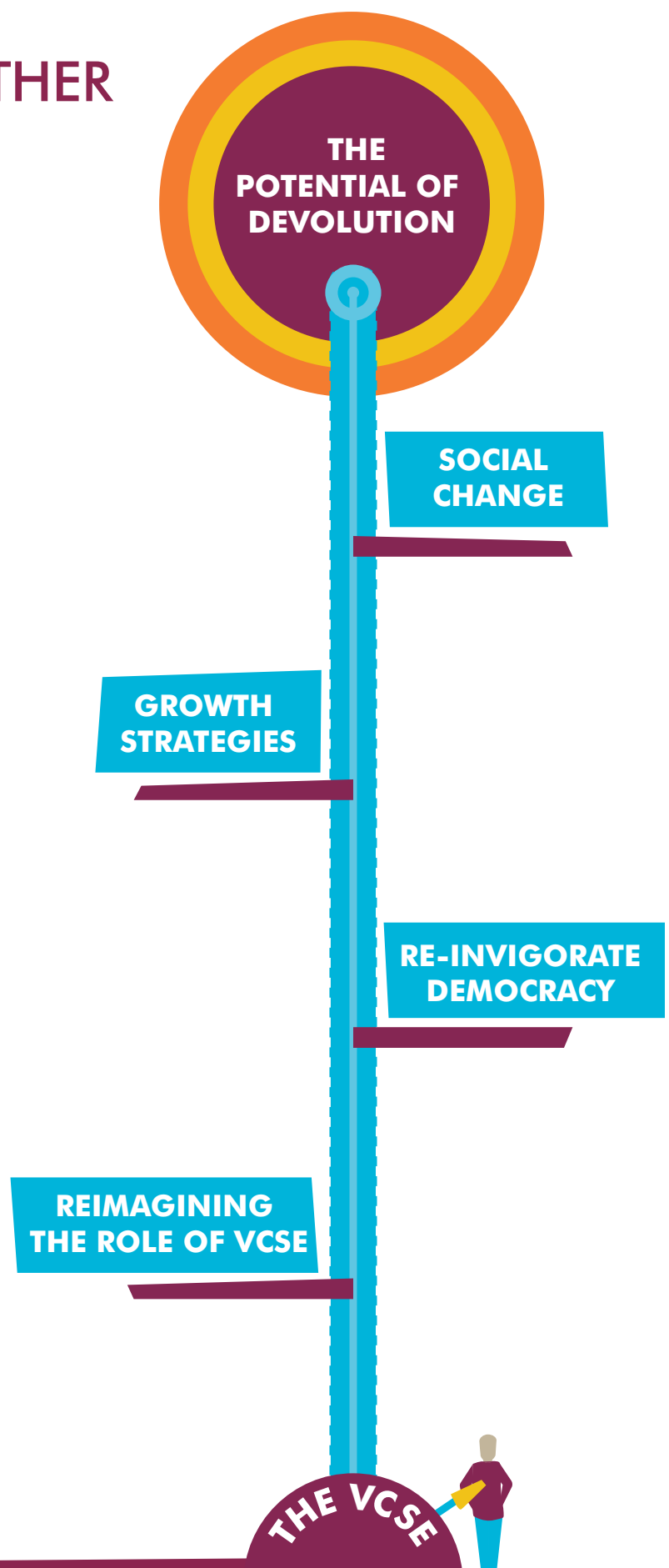
Devolution offers the opportunity to think more strategically about the collective role of the sector, and of partners, in addressing inequality and entrenched disadvantage. Devolution is the trigger to think afresh about the big local fundamental challenges and to think how we might collectively address them with zeal, purpose and civic acuity.

The key elements of our work to date with local partnerships is exploring the following themes:

- Reimagining the role of VCSE groups in communities and across emerging geographies;
- A re-invigoration of democracy that connects citizens to service design, delivery and accountability;
- Growth strategies that are responsive to the challenges facing communities in everyday life;
- Social change driven by communities sparked by VCSE,

The role of the VCSE sector in making this happen is crucial. There are many thousands of staff and volunteers who could be strong partners in catalysing transformation and ensuring that this is connected to communities. The VCSE sector understands the many diverse communities, the range of different problems, and most critically, the assets that exist within our communities that often remain unrecognised.

The potential to re-imagine how public services work and deliver real systems change together with communities could be truly transformative, and we look forward to continuing the journey.



VSNW is the regional voluntary sector network for the North West. Our purpose is to support a connected and influential voluntary and community sector (VCS).

Besides working for a well represented sector, our main areas of work include co-ordinating VCS health and social care networking and policy and developing a progressive and socially just vision of the role the VCS can play in local economies.

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Voluntary Sector North West

St. Thomas Centre
Ardwick Green North
Manchester
M12 6FZ
Tel: 0161 276 9300
Fax: 0161 276 9301
Email: devolution@vsnw.org.uk

