**Report Back to VCSE Alliance/HCNE

Introduction**

Tracey Rose (HCN) and Steve Manwaring (HVA) met with NCVO who had offered an additional session to comment on and discuss the proposed Civil Society Covenant. This briefing note summarises the points which were made by us.

**General Context**

We discussed the general position of the sector and the challenges arising from austerity, the continuing squeeze on public sector finances. How this was affecting VCSE organisations in terms of both risk and capacity as resources are drying up at the same time that need is becoming greater and more complex. The Hastings Facing the Future report was given as an example of how local organisations are seeing the key challenges they face.

**Specific Comments**

The covenant wording is positive and describes where the key relationship between government and the VCSE sector needs to be but is not always reflective of current experience. 2 significant omissions include a specific reference to infrastructure support for the sector and a reference to enabling philanthropy.

 The risks experienced by VCSE organisations in terms of meeting complex needs and safeguarding were highlighted.

 Procurement and commissioning remained a key challenge particularly for medium sized VCSE organisations operating at a Borough or District level.

 Fundamentally there was an issue of respect towards the sector which needed to be worked on. Looking at the ways in which the procurement or tendering process disadvantaged or advantaged different organisations would be helpful.

 Recognising localism and the need to generate opportunities for the sector to engage on local strategies (in many areas the LSP style structures which enabled this had been suspended or discontinued)
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 Public organisations were restructuring in ways which did not always enable good dialogue with the VCSE sector.

 Sometimes there is a lack of knowledge or misunderstandings about the sector and it was sometimes difficult for the economic contribution of the sector in terms of its role as an employer and delivered of professional services harder to convey.

 There is a lack of joined up thinking and sometimes too many layers of decision makers between NHS and Local Government which made commissioning key services more challenging.

 It was important to think through how the covenant would be enacted in ways which make it play out at a local level (is this through a compact style set of agreements or something with more force from above).

The covenant needs to be a living document enabling equal partnership and learning, breaking down perceptions and hierarchy and provide the platform to be able to speak out without fear of reprisals

The analysis of the engagement events will be pulled together over the coming weeks to feed into the consultation process.

**Conclusion**

In a 45 minute conversation it is difficult to do justice to all the issue but we hope that our contribution accurately reflected the conversations and debates we have had at both the Alliance and within our local Community Network Executive.