

# Neighbourhoods & Culture Commission

---

## **Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise (VCSE) Sector Engagement Strategy Update**

Date of Commission meeting: 7th September 2023

**Assistant City Mayor for Communities, Adult  
Learning, Jobs & Skills**

**Lead officer:** Andrew Shilliam, Head of the City Mayor's  
Office and Customer Support Transformation

---

**Useful information**

- Ward(s) affected: All Wards
- Report author: Andrew Shilliam, Head of the City Mayor's Office
- Author contact details: 0116 454 0131 / [andrew.shilliam@leicester.gov.uk](mailto:andrew.shilliam@leicester.gov.uk)
- Report version number: V1



Leicester  
City Council

## 1. Summary

- 1.1. Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector organisations play an increasingly vital role in our city. The sector has long been a valued partner of the City Council as well as many other public sector organisations in Leicester. Likewise, the VCSE in Leicester also benefit from closer working relationships with the private sector and some long-standing arrangements exist in that regard.
- 1.2. The groups and organisations that make up the VCSE in the city provide support to the some of the most deprived and underserved people, families, communities, and neighbourhoods. They also enrich our lives through their promotion of the arts, culture, education, the environment, festivals and events, heritage, sport, and tourism.
- 1.3. The VCSE sector provides a great deal of the energy, impetus, and momentum to our social capital – helping make Leicester an attractive, dynamic, and progressive place to live, work, study, and visit.
- 1.4. As Local Government budgets and resources continue to shrink, residents will inevitably look elsewhere for support. VCSE and other agencies/organisations will undoubtedly continue to play an important and perhaps more enhanced role within peoples' lives as a result.
- 1.5. We saw some very localised examples of this when VCSE groups and organisations of all sizes came to the fore during the pandemic to work in partnership with the Council and others.
- 1.6. The relationship between the Council and the sector has changed over the last decade or so. Because of the cuts to our budgets and therefore our services, we can no longer be called upon by the VCSE to be the funder of first choice in the same way that we once were, and therefore we must cultivate a new, mutually beneficial relationship with the sector.
- 1.7. The need to recognise the value of the impact of VCSE organisations, together with the need to reset our relationship is clear. So much so that the Council is committed to establishing a strategy to engage with our local VCSE in a more coordinated and meaningful manner.
- 1.8. The strategy is intended to make clear how the Council intends to engage with the VCSE, what role the Council can play in ensuring that Leicester has a vibrant, strong, and sustainable VCSE sector, and how that can be achieved within the current environment. Developing and maintaining a better understanding of the sector is fundamental to that goal.
- 1.9. This report provides an overview of the work so far to establish that improved understanding, provides an outline of the likely key priority themes for the strategy, and outlines each of the draft pledges related to each of these priority themes as they are drafted right now.

## **2. Recommendation(s) to scrutiny**

- 2.1. That the Neighbourhoods and Culture Scrutiny panel review and comment on the draft pledges as they are currently proposed.
- 2.2. That the Neighbourhoods and Culture Scrutiny panel note the proposed timeline for the launch of the strategy.

## **3. Supporting Information**

- 3.1 The medium-term financial outlook for the Council is the most severe we have known in our time as a unitary authority. We are facing restricted Government funding at a time of increasing costs, which will continue to result in painful spending cuts. A decade of austerity and reduced Government grant, between 2010 and 2020, has seen Council services other than Social Care reduced by 50% in real terms.
- 3.2 Despite this, the Council continues to directly commission VCSE organisations for the delivery of a variety of different services and activities across a number of Council departments.
- 3.3 That said, our ability to provide grants and other financial assistance to VCSE organisations has changed, in part because of our diminished budgets but also due to the need for transparency, for more equal and fair access to funding opportunities, and the responsibility to demonstrate value for money.
- 3.4 Until recently the Council commissioned Voluntary Action Leicestershire to provide infrastructure support to VCSE organisations operating in Leicester. This arrangement had three elements to it – (1) generic infrastructure support, (2) support to enable Adventure Play based VCSE organisations to become self-sufficient, and (3) support to health based VCSE organisations (on behalf of the Leicester City Clinical Commissioning Group).
- 3.5 This was a mature arrangement to extend non-statutory support to the sector, cost £140k annually, was in place for a number of years, and was extended more than once. This support was available to all VCSE organisations in Leicester and was not based on any assessment of need.
- 3.6 However, as part of the spending review process at the Council, this commissioned arrangement was always considered to be time-limited and one that was always intended to end. Once so, any financial savings resulting from the end of the contract contributed to the Council departmental savings required to balance the Councils overall budget.
- 3.7 As we have moved away from this generic and more blanket based approach to providing infrastructure support, we've looked more closely at how we might enable VCSE groups and organisations to help themselves by accessing support and information that is increasingly much more freely available.

- 3.8 In recent years, our experience is certainly that more 'self-serve' information has become available and free to access, so that VCSE groups or organisations can help themselves. Some of that can be found through the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO).
- 3.9 Of course, some organisations may need more expert, detailed, or specific advice and assistance, particularly those fledgling organisations (by age, size, or experience). If that is the case, rather than directing organisations elsewhere for support, we have put in place a needs assessment process that we would work through with each organisation as they approach us. That way we can assess and then tailor that support accordingly.

### **VCSE Engagement Strategy - Research Approach**

- 3.10 Given the various changes that have occurred over the years, especially regarding the context within which we operate, the Council made a commitment to develop a strategy that would refresh our relationship with the sector and make clear the basis upon which we would work in future.
- 3.11 In progressing the development of the VCSE Engagement Strategy, we've attempted to speak with a range of different stakeholders and interested parties to get a fuller understanding of the sector nationally, regionally, and more locally.
- 3.12 Though this work was disrupted by the COVID pandemic, we've now completed this information gathering stage and the information, evidence, knowledge and opinions that were gathered been reviewed and assessed.
- 3.13 We used a mixed methods approach to this work, using primary and secondary methods, a wide variety of sources, and engaged with internal and external stakeholders. Crucial to this is the voice of the sector and as such VCSE organisations have been actively engaged in several ways.

#### Dialogue sessions

- 3.14 More than a dozen "open dialogue sessions" were held in public venues around the city. Every ward was included, and invitations were sent to every VCSE group and organisation in those wards whose contact details we held. If the invitee had no email listed, we contacted them by phone. If they were not contactable by phone, we sent an invitation by post – sometimes hand-delivered.
- 3.15 The meetings were promoted by other means, such as Voluntary Action Leicestershire's (VAL) regular e-newsletter. As well as allowing us to meet many individuals face-to-face, this activity allowed us to verify contact information for every VCSE sector group and organisation possible, which helped deepen and strengthen all other parts of this process.

#### Internal stakeholders

- 3.16 We made efforts to gather as much information as available about our current relations with VCSE sector groups and organisations across the authority, in part through an officer reference group, in part through direct conversations with colleagues at the level of Directors and Heads of Service.

3.17 The information included details of commissioned services; service level agreements; grant-aided work and other forms of engagement and support. This process allowed us to start to get a better understanding of the total spend of the city council on the sector and which service areas this involves.

#### One-to-One interviews

3.18 A series of one-to-one interviews took place with individuals from thirteen groups and organisations, considered to be some of the larger and more prominent VCSE organisations in Leicester, seeking their views regarding the potential benefits, outputs, and outcome of our intended strategy.

3.19 Recurring themes from these interviews included: infrastructure support; expanding partnerships; differentiated forms and sources of funding, tendering and contracts; attracting younger people into volunteering; capacity building, including investing in staff, sharing skills and assets; meeting rooms, culture change – feeling valued; and educating LCC staff and others on the VCSE contribution to the city.

#### Topic sessions

3.20 We arranged a series of online update and topic sessions and invited the VCSE sector to each of these. Eventbrite bookings were arranged for two meetings on each topic plus a questionnaire, offering groups and organisations the opportunity to get involved, share their expertise, opinions, and views.

3.21 The six topics were informed by our research up to that point and focused on what we understand to be some of the more prominent priority areas. These topics were (1) finance and funding; (2) partnership and collaboration; (3) civil society; (4) infrastructure support; (5) and volunteering.

#### VCSE survey

3.22 The survey intended to explore the extent to which local groups and organisations had accessed the various forms of infrastructure support commissioned by the City Council, and – if they had – who had provided it, how it was delivered, if they found it useful, whether they would recommend the city council and which of the forms of support they valued most.

3.23 Out of the fifteen forms of support most recently offered, respondents collectively ranked them as follows:

1. Income generation
2. Organisational strategy
3. Business planning
4. Marketing and outreach
5. Financial management
6. Set up and management
7. Recruiting and retaining volunteers
8. Responding to challenges, needs and opportunities
9. Social media
10. Maximising benefits of volunteers

3.24 Five services ended up outside the top ten ranking. They were (1) keeping up to date with VCS issues; (2) measuring, demonstrating and understanding impact; (3) underserved communities; (4) protected characteristics; and (5) social value.

#### Other VCSE strategies & information

3.25 We took a closer look at the strategies of a number of local authorities around England who we considered to work closely with the VCSE in their respective areas, seeking good practice in how they were engaging with and supporting their local VCSE sectors. We were particularly interested in content of the strategies of those local authorities which shared some characteristics with those of Leicester: post-industrial economy; university towns/cities; political complexion; elected mayor; elite sports teams.

3.26 We also gathered information from national agencies directly involved with the VCSE sector, most significantly the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) – of which Leicester City Council enjoys public sector membership, the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) and Locality.

3.27 We looked to several relevant think tanks also, including the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR), The New Social Covenant Unit and the Voluntary Sector Studies Network (VSSN), and reviewed a number of sector specific podcasts, including “Bridges to the Future” (RSA), “Giving Thought” (Charities Aid Foundation), “NHS England and NHS Improvement Podcast” (NHS England), “Third Sector” (Third Sector), “Transforming Our Futures” (Globalnet21).

#### Other public sector stakeholders

3.28 We liaised with colleagues at Leicestershire County Council about our common interests in engaging with the VCSE sector in both city and county. We had many similar conversations with the then Leicester City Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).

### **Areas of interest, pledges and actions, strategy timeline**

3.29 Initial findings from our research suggested that we would be best to concentrate our pledges and actions around the following areas of interest.

- Civil society
- Culture change
- Data and insight
- Digital transformation & social media
- Finance and funding
- Infrastructure support
- Partnership and collaboration
- Volunteering
- Business engagement

3.30 These areas of interest have been refined further, resulting in the development of six pledges, each with a small number of deliverable actions (Appendix A), and focus on the following final areas of interest:

- Organisations in our Civil Society
- VCSE – insights, importance, and impact
- Funding and the VCSE
- Infrastructure support and the VCSE
- Volunteering
- Businesses and the VCSE

3.31 The pledges and actions:

- Have been developed and informed by all the research that we have done so far.
- Will drive our relationship with the local VCSE.
- Are geared around refocusing our role, reconnecting to the VCSE, and rebuilding our relationships.
- Make clear the role that we can play in the future.

3.32 The pledges and actions seek to:

- Improve our understanding and awareness of the issues faced by the VCSE sector in Leicester.
- Identify clearly the VCSE groups and organisations that we directly work with now and should do in future.
- Help us to better understand the role these groups and organisations play, and services they provide for Leicester.
- Broker better relationships between VCSE groups and businesses for mutual benefit.
- Reinforce and uphold the importance of civil society in Leicester.
- Champion the important role of the VCSE sector, both within and outside the council.
- Improve communication between the council and the VCSE sector.
- Gather and use data and information about the local, regional, and national VCSE sector.
- Provide more targeted support to smaller, fledgling, or newly established VCSE organisations.
- Provide tailored and needs based infrastructure support.
- Be more organised and coordinated across the council in engaging with the VCSE sector.
- Improve and promote volunteering in Leicester.

3.33 We're currently working to the timeline for finalising and launching the VCSE Engagement Strategy:

<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
Neighbourhoods and Culture Scrutiny Meeting	7 <sup>th</sup> September 2023	To provide an update on the research so far, an outline of the key priority themes/areas of interest, and to review, consider,



			and seek feedback on the current draft pledges.
	CMB Presentation	Mid-Sept 23	To present final VCSE Engagement strategy to CMB, prior to the go-live date.
	Discussion with VCSE Stakeholders	Mid-Sept 23	To share with VCSE stakeholders the proposed strategy in advance of the launch and allow them an opportunity to comment/input as required.
	VCSE Engagement Strategy go-live	Oct-23	To make live the strategy in a 'soft' manner, through a news release and by making the pledges and actions publicly available via <a href="http://www.leicester.gov.uk">www.leicester.gov.uk</a> . This could be followed by an in-person event for the VCSE Sector to hear about the strategy and delivery plan.

#### 4. Background information and other papers:

4.1 A selection of some of the key documents that have been considered and informed the current thinking around the VCSE Engagement Strategy:

- Civil Society Futures - [Civil-Society-Futures\\_Civil-Society-in-England\\_small-1.pdf \(civilsocietyfutures.org\)](#)
- NCVO UK Civil Society Almanac - [UK Civil Society Almanac 2021 | Home | NCVO](#)
- NCVO The Road Ahead 2021 - [Introduction - The Road Ahead 2021 | NCVO publications | NCVO](#)
- Levelling Up – The Role of Charities & Volunteering - [UK Civil Society Almanac 2021 | Home | NCVO](#)
- Bristol VCSE Strategy - [Into a New Era 2019-29 by Voscur - Issuu](#)
- Croydon VCS Strategy - [Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy 2019-2023 \(croydon.gov.uk\)](#)
- Tower Hamlets VCS Strategy - [PowerPoint Presentation \(towerhamlets.gov.uk\)](#)
- Kingston VCS Strategy - [vcss-strategy-2014 \(kva.org.uk\)](#)
- Locality Powerful Communities, Strong Economies - [REPORT \(locality.org.uk\)](#)

#### 5. Summary of appendices:

Appendix A – Draft Strategy structure and proposed text

**6. Is this a private report (If so, please indicate the reasons and state why it is not in the public interest to be dealt with publicly)?** No