

Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Commission Report

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

March 2022

Useful information

Ward(s) affected: All

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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, needy, 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, the VCSE sector and other agencies/organisations will undoubtedly continue to play an important and perhaps more enhanced role within peoples' lives. We saw this recently, when agile and able VCSE groups and organisations of all sizes came to the fore during the pandemic to work in partnership with the Council and others.
- 1.5. 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.
- 1.6. 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 manner.
- 1.7. 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.
- 1.8. This report provides an overview of the work so far to establish that improved understanding and provides an outline of the likely key priority themes for the strategy.

2. Current VCSE support and engagement

- 2.1. Despite diminishing Government grant, 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. It is likely that the amount spent through commissioned activities has reduced somewhat over the last decade or so, though it is also likely that this is still a sizeable amount.
- 2.2. That said, the Councils ability to provide grants and other financial assistance to VCSE organisations has changed over the years, 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.
- 2.3. 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).
- 2.4. 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.
- 2.5. 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.
- 2.6. 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.
- 2.7. 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).
- 2.8. 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 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.

3. VCSE Engagement Strategy - Research Approach

- 3.1. 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.
- 3.2. Though this work has been disrupted by the COVID pandemic, we've now recommenced our efforts to collect the information, evidence, and knowledge together so that we are able to develop the strategy.
- 3.3. We've 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 a number of ways.

Primary research - dialogue sessions

- 3.4. More than a dozen "open dialogue sessions" were held in 2018/19, 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 would phone them. If they were not contactable by phone, we sent an invitation by post – sometimes hand-delivered.
- 3.5. The meetings were promoted through 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.

Primary research - asset mapping

- 3.6. With the assistance of the city council's Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping team, we developed a visual representation of the registered addresses of VCSE groups and organisations.
- 3.7. We sought to establish if this was also where they delivered services, alongside such questions as whether they owned their premisses, rented it from the city council, were sole occupant or shared it with other tenants. This was the first time that we have been able to visualise the geographical distribution of VCSE groups and organisations ward by ward, throughout the city.

Primary research – internal stakeholders

- 3.8. 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.
- 3.9. 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.

Primary research - one-to-one interviews

- 3.10. A series of one-to-one interviews was held 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.
- 3.11. 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.

Primary research - topic sessions

- 3.12. 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.
- 3.13. 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.

Citizen Space survey

- 3.14. 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.

- 3.15. 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
- 3.16. 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.

Secondary research - online & electronic sources

- 3.17. We took a closer look at the strategies of several 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.
- 3.18. 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. 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

- 3.19. 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 Leicester City Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).

4. Areas of interest – pledges and actions

- 4.1. A number of pledges and actions will form the bedrock of the strategy. These pledges and actions will be developed and informed by all the research that we have done so far and will drive our relationship with the local VCSE and make clear the role that we are able to play in the future.
- 4.2. When they are drafted, they will:
- Address and respond to what we understand to be the position of the sector locally, regionally, and nationally
 - Respond to emerging views, issues, and themes captured during our engagement sessions
 - Will most likely be a mixture of activities that seek to understand matters further before determining a more definitive course of action, together with those that deliver immediately
 - Seek to reposition the Council as an enabling organisation, one that seeks to engage with and listen to the VCSE, and where it can play a coordinating role for the good of our communities
 - Be geared around the strategy being an iterative one i.e., as progress is made, the various pledges and actions are updated
- 4.3. Initial findings from the research suggest that we would be best to concentrate our pledges and actions around the following topics or emerging 'priority' themes:
- Civil society
 - Culture change
 - Data and insight
 - Digital transformation & social media
 - Finance and funding
 - Infrastructure support
 - Partnership and collaboration
 - Volunteering
 - Business engagement
- 4.4. It is currently our intention that the strategy, which was intended to be a 5-year one, will include an outline pledge for each of the areas of interest, aided by a number of deliverable actions within each theme. These pledges and actions will have to be deliverable within the scope of our current resources. It is also our intention to work collaboratively with the VCSE sector, partners, and other stakeholders as we create delivery plans for each of the pledges. We will be looking for VCSE organisations to play a role in improving and strengthening the sector in a coordinated fashion.

5. Next Steps and Timeline

- 5.1. We aim to launch the VCSE Engagement Strategy in April 2022 and welcome any contributions the Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Commission wish to make in that regard, particularly in relation to the priority themes that have been identified.