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|  | 2016 | |
| Update of the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy which was adopted in Kingston in 2014 by all political parties, the Clinical Commissioning Group and the Voluntary Sector. | |  |

**Foreword**

Kingston has a long tradition of working with its residents and with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to improve the quality of life for everyone who lives, works, studies or does business in the borough.

The Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy, launched in March 2014, set out the commitment to moving voluntary and community sector organisations from the margins to the mainstream in terms of our contribution to shaping and delivering services and building stronger, more resilient communities.

The Strategy recognises and highlights the particular strengths of the VCS: as advocates for our users, our closeness to communities and what matters to them, our flexibility and creativity, and above all, our role in identifying and dealing with issues as soon as they arise and before a more costly solution is needed. One of the strategies key impacts will be to take forward user centred design for local services.

However, as we are all aware, there have been a number of significant changes in the environment over the last two years including the huge reductions in local authority budgets, the pressing need to change how we do things to be able to deliver high quality services with fewer resources, and the ever increasing demand from a growing, increasingly diverse (and ageing) population. A key response to these pressures has been for the Council to take a Commissioning approach to its service delivery to ensure that every pound is spent as effectively as possible. This has included moving the Corporate Grants budget to Commissioning and refocusing the Council’s activities around Community Outcomes to enable a more joined-up approach to identifying and meeting priority needs. We expect that these changes will result in an increase in the funding and thus increased services being delivered by the local VCS.

The Strategy was a ground-breaking first for Kingston and was welcomed by all, but in the light of these far-reaching changes it seemed timely to review the strategy and develop a revised action plan. These changes will bring many challenges, not the least of which will be how to retain and strengthen the relationships built up over many years with voluntary sector partners in this new environment – something Kingston cannot afford to lose.

The Council and partners, particularly in the Health Service, recognise the social, economic and environmental benefits to the borough’s residents of investing in the VCS and that it is more vital than ever that they are committed to developing and supporting local organisations.

Signed Hilary Garner – Chair of Voluntary Sector Partnership Board and CEO of Kingston Voluntary Action

**Our Voluntary and Community Sector in Kingston**

Our Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in Kingston is extremely diverse and provides services for older people, carers, disabled people, the homeless, refugees and asylum seekers, people with learning disabilities, victims of crime, those living on low incomes, young people and families to name only a few – in other words, pretty much everybody.

Many of these people may be particularly vulnerable but our VCS also provides activities that give people of all ages and backgrounds the chance to enhance their lives whether through improving their health and wellbeing , enjoying arts, cultural, sporting or leisure activities or through enhancing our shared spaces and public realm and providing habitats for biodiversity. Our VCS is also essential to the fabric of the community, supporting local action and democracy, developing social capital and making best use of community assets (people, places etc.).

Kingston Voluntary Action has a membership of more than 400 local voluntary, community and faith organisations whilst the South London CVS Partnership identifies over 300 active registered charities in Kingston with a total annual income of over £50 million. These range from small groups made up entirely of volunteers to quite substantial enterprises with six figure turnovers. Between them our local VCS brings:

* £ millions extra from charitable trusts and our own fundraising efforts into the borough to support local residents.
* Employment and skills development for local people – contributing to local growth and contributing to keeping the local economy buoyant.
* Volunteering opportunities to help reduce social isolation and develop skills
* £ millions in volunteer in-kind contributions

What makes our VCS so special:

* We do more than represent the voice of the community: often we are the local community
* We are close to our users and know what services people want and need and how they want them delivered
* We are flexible and adaptable to needs as they arise and are well-placed to provide early help before problems escalate
* We are often able to hold on to people who may be waiting to access statutory services and who may otherwise be lost
* People frequently prefer to contact a voluntary sector organisation for help than a statutory agency
* We are used to making money stretch a long way and to accounting for every penny

**1. Why do we have a Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy?**

1.1 Surviving austerity, with tightening budgets and increasing demand, is a challenge for everyone in Kingston as elsewhere but particularly for voluntary and community sector organisations. Yet at the same time, our VCS is needed more than ever to help fill gaps left by the reduction or withdrawal of public services previously provided by statutory bodies and to deliver local services that residents want and need. We also play a key role in getting the voice of local communities heard and in supporting local democracy. Sustaining and developing a robust local VCS as key partners in making the vision set out below into a reality is more important than ever to the borough as a whole.

1.2 The strategy can support effective achievement of the Outcome Based Budgeting Framework objectives that has been adopted by RBK and thereby strengthen community cohesion and links whilst making the best use of scarce resources. The key objectives are: People achieve wellbeing; a place where people prosper; a safe and resilient community, a network of engaged communities; a borough that embraces growth; a borough of choice and opportunity; a sustainable borough and a borough with an identity. As can be seen from the action plan to deliver the strategy , these key themes are echoed and evidenced by the work we do together in our community and can readily be extended to incorporate the key objectives of our Statutory partners such as the Clinical Commissioning Group.

**2. The Vision**

The Vision is to have a borough where:

2.1 Our Voluntary and Community Sector is robust, recognised and valued for its role and contribution (economic, social and environmental) in shaping and delivering services that communities want and need across a diverse range of activities and in building resilient and resourceful communities.

2.2 An increasing amount/share of funding through commissioning goes to our local VCS (against national trends of a reducing share reported by NCVO).

2.3 There is a clear shared vision around providing and encouraging innovative ways of making the most of limited resources available, improving service outcomes, meeting local needs, and returning money to the local economy.

2.4 Commissioners from all Statutory Partners are able to benefit from innovative, responsive and accessible local services, knowing that any investment will bring improvements for our communities and our environment, and will reach out to the more isolated and marginalised.

2.5 A strong and experienced contribution by Voluntary and Community Sector organisations to early intervention and prevention, thus avoiding or reducing the need for more complex and costly interventions and supporting and maintaining independence and a good quality of life for everyone.

**3. The changing context: new and greater challenges**

3.1 Much has changed over the last eighteen months bringing new and greater challenges, all of which (and more) will have to be managed if we are to achieve this vision. **These are the reasons why we still need a Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy and action plan that highlights the role and contribution of our VCS and sets out a way forward in changing and difficult times.**

**3.2 Changing role of the state against background of austerity: an ‘enabling’ Council**

In response to ever-tightening budgets, Kingston Council has set a vision to be an ‘enabling council’ that will increasingly rely on outside organisations to deliver services. As part of this the Council has emphasised its commitment to increasing the role of our VCS not just in shaping and delivering services but in supporting the whole fabric of the community through active engagement and support.

3.3 Challenges that the Strategy has to address include:

3.31 how to ensure that our VCS remains robust and sustainable – in the face of governance challenges, financial challenges, management and direction challenges

3.32 the reduction in funding available generally (e.g. external funders such as the Big Lottery) and the emphasis on reducing any duplication (which may challenge organisations that have grown up to represent particular communities)

3.33 how to identify the value (and pay for) early intervention and prevention activities (a key strength of our VCS) that may have a delayed pay-off to the wider society

3.34 maintaining and supporting partnership working

**4. Local investment in our VCS is changing**

4.1 Kingston has changed its approach to grant funding since the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy was first developed. The Corporate Grants Programme has been closed and the budget moved to a commissioning approach (existing grants are being honoured). Annual grants have been retained to support new community initiatives, although these do not allow for any repeat funding.

4.2 Challenges of these changes for the Strategy include:

4.21 the potential loss or reduction of core funding, making it difficult for organisations to develop their services and build up reserves/working capital.

4.22 VCS still dependent on seeking funding elsewhere – will they have the capacity for this?

4.23 Changing relationships and potential loss of partnership working.

4.25 Smaller community organisations (often consisting of only volunteers) may find it difficult to survive and engage in the new process.

4.26 How support for infrastructure capacity building (staff, volunteers and organisations) can be retained and focused.

**5. Commissioning is now the main approach**

5.1 The original strategy emphasised the importance of our VCS getting more engaged in the commissioning process and the importance of commissioners increasing their understanding of the role and contribution of local VCS organisations. Now that this is the main approach, there have been a number of key changes including:

5.11 The development of Outcomes Based Budgeting to identify key outcomes for Kingston’s residents working across services.

5.12 Greater emphasis on joint commissioning particularly with the Kingston Clinical Commissioning Group and Public Health.

5.13 The development of more arm’s length bodies (such as Achieving for Children and Your Healthcare) which is likely to increase and we anticipate will include Local Authority Trading Companies (such as operate in the London Borough of Sutton) which have been recognised as a good model and could achieve great things locally if they are co-owned by Community and Statutory agencies.

5.14 The development of a flexible approach to commissioning our VCS including competitive tenders but also encouraging collaborative working through direct awards (for example through the Active and Supportive Communities Strategy).

5.2 Challenges inherent in this shift to only commissioning include:

5.21 The tensions arising between collaboration and competition – both approaches involve complex risk assessments and difficult decisions, with potential repercussions in terms of relationships and the strength of the local community – governance issues can be complex in collaborative working models.

5.22 Because of their role and contribution as key partners, VCS organisations are not quite ‘just another provider’ – however the reality is that they will be competing amongst each other and with other (outside) organisations for work (including national and regional charities) and dependent on commissioners developing specifications that will not disadvantage them.

5.23 More joint commissioning potentially means larger contracts which may not be easy for the VCS to engage in, except as sub-contractors or as named partners which bring a range of complex challenges. There is also the issue of who pays what into the joint pot and which service manages the process and any subsequent contract.

5.24 The VCS may still have to respond to a range of commissioners and/or individual commissioners may struggle to respond to the links and connections between outcome areas.

5.25 Commissioners may have greater interest in developing their own services and reach rather than working with ‘outsiders’.

5.26 Pressure for community-based services, good signposting and joined up working could lead to vulnerability for providers where budgets are stretched - VCS generally has low margins, lower reserves and lack of access to working capital/development funding.

**6. Hearing the Community Voice: Community engagement**

6.1 The Council is committed to taking forward its intention to develop its role as Community Leader (Renewing Kingston’s Democracy – Putting the Resident into Power – approved at Council in July 2015), a role shared by Neighbourhoods (as local Community Leaders) and Strategic decision makers.

6.2 The twin imperatives of greater community involvement in decision making and local democracy as well as encouraging communities to be more self-reliant underpin the borough’s ‘future proofing’. This focus on resilience includes increased community engagement to achieve better decision-making based on what people really want and need and a strong focus on the contribution of volunteering and the development of ‘social capital’.

For example the ‘Community Voice’ provides a contribution to the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) to give a realistic on the ground picture of what local needs are that can balance the statistical data available.

(Note: JSNA is increasingly seen as the best/only source of local needs assessment which commissioners are encouraged (may be required) to use, which makes it even more vital that the community is able to influence what is in there)

6.3 Our Voluntary and Community Sector is central to all this – our users **are** the community in all its diversity and contributions through volunteering are essential to the kind of local services that may increasingly form the fabric of what it is possible to provide.

6.4 Challenges to achieving this include:

6.41 How to involve smaller organisations in this approach, particularly around localism and the challenge of supporting grass roots activities – their views need to be heard when it comes to their sustainability and particularly their role in supporting volunteers (many small organisations are totally dependent on volunteers). How to support them – the grants programme is helpful but limited to new activities with no repeat funding.

6.42 For Community Leaders and Strategic decision makers to hear the voice and act on it needs resources and clarity of direction – need to be able to manage the tensions between myriad voices

6.43 What happens if some needs are not reflected in Joint Strategic Needs Assessment.

**7. Responding to wider social, economic and environmental context**

7.1 It is more important than ever to recognise that Kingston does not operate in a vacuum and that we need to build local resilience to respond to major pressures nationally and globally. These pressures include economic hardship, sustainability, demographic changes, migration, climate change and environmental decline. Our VCS is well represented in these areas of activity as well as playing a significant part in raising awareness about these issues among their users and beneficiaries.

7.2 Growth is central to the borough’s vision for the future but managing this in the context of the social and environmental needs of the community is a significant challenge.

**8. Building the capacity of our VCS**

8.1 As in the first Strategy a major issue for our VCS organisations is how to build their capacity to rise to deliver services in this new operating environment:

8.11 Challenges to this include:

8.12 Supporting individuals and community organisations (mainly volunteers) to help them better identify and meet the needs of their areas, not just in terms of individual skills but in terms of the structures, resources and policies that are needed to address issues and take advantage of opportunities that arise.

8.13 Enabling VCS organisations to engage in commissioning, to deliver services and to demonstrate impact and value.

8.14 How local infrastructure support should be funded.

**This Strategy sets out how we will jointly continue to tackle these challenges, so that Kingston’s local VCS as key partners can play their full part in:-**

* **Working together better, reducing overlap and providing seamless, cost effective and user-friendly services – the services that residents want and need**
* **Building strong and resilient communities that can weather the challenges we face together where ‘everyone has a say and does their bit’**
* **Building capacity locally, so that our local VCS can take their proper place in contributing to the success of the borough as a place to live, work, study, play and do business in**

**The Strategy:**

The original strategy had three themes: Commissioning, Community Engagement and Communications. We have now reviewed this structure in light of the changed operating environment and the revised strategy builds on the original with the following structure:

* User Centred Design of Services/ Community Voice
* Commissioners and VCS engagement
* Increased investment for our VCS from a range of funders

In addition there are two underlying principles which run through all work streams. They are the use of the Compact which sets out how we will work across the sectors and communications which will make sure that everyone involved knows what is happening, when , by whom and how they can get involved.

For the sake of simplicity and to make sure that the strategy is a living document which drives actions which produces change and benefit, the sections are framed as an action plan. Funding to progress the action needed to effectively implement the strategy will be handled by KVA who will make small grants to organisations who will pledge to undertake specific actions. This will be noted as Voluntary Sector Partnership Board sponsored activity and the VSPB will review progress against targets at their quarterly meetings.

**Section One – User Centred Design of Services/Community Voice**

**We will work to find out and agree who should be engaged in co-production of services. We will devise systems and protocols to gather information and establish policies to manage and balance myriad views. We will also develop and use campaigning systems to influence policies which affect people’s lives to avoid problems arising and to thus avoid difficulties for local people as well as ensuring we are using scarce resources most effectively.**

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| Aims | Activities | Lead | Timeframe |
| Effective systems are set up to capture service users experiences and ideas | 1. Local agencies are asked for information about what they do 2. A log of methods of engagement with service users is set up |  |  |
| Examples of good practice are shared within the community | 1. A small panel drawn from different local groups is set up to assess examples of good practice in gathering user experience with a view to sharing these with the wider community |  |  |
| User Centred design systems are used | 1. Reports are done of engagement with users and lessons learnt |  |  |
| Services are designed with clear reference to user’s ideas and input | 1. Records are kept of how user views have influenced design of services so that agencies can see the benefit of this approach |  |  |
| Barriers to user involvement are identified | 1. A small panel is set up to identify barriers to user engagement to support work on overcoming these barriers |  |  |
| Ways to overcome these barriers are devised | 1. Creative solutions are identified to overcome barriers 2. These are noted in a report and shared in the wider community |  |  |

**Section Two – Commissioners and our VCS engaged with each other**

**We will devise action to find out who the Commissioners are and what they commission and to understand underlying strategies which support contract delivery. We will then make links between Commissioners and providers so that there is the best use of scarce resources so as gaps and overlaps are avoided and complementary services are valued and supported.**

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| Aims | Activities | Lead | Timeframe |
| Commissioners understand the role and contribution of our VCS | 1. A panel will be set up of Commissioners and VCS representatives to identify the level of knowledge and understanding of the role and contribution of the VCS 2. The VCSS document on the impact of the VCS will be updated to reflect current roles and contribution 3. Lead individuals from different sub sectors will make contact with the Commissioner relevant to their sub sector- using the VCSS document to support discussions |  |  |
| VCS know who the Commissioners are | 1. RBK list of Commissioners will be widely circulated (updated 6 monthly) |  |  |
| Commissioners use a flexible approach to commissioning – using direct awards as well as competitive tenders | 1. Sub Sector leads will share Commissioners approach with KVA 2. KVA will keep a log of when direct awards are made and when competitive tendering is used to map Commissioners approach 3. This log will be shared with the wider community as a guide to issues which will influence Commissioners with a view to sub sector leads using this in discussions with Commissioners |  |  |
| Outcomes Based Budgeting (OBB) and joint commissioning are fully developed and operational | 1. The outcomes for OBB will be shared within the community |  |  |
| Protocols are established to address potential conflicts of interest for Commissioners | 1. A working group will be established to explore this issue and devise protocols which will be shared with the wider community |  |  |
| Systems for demonstrating value and impact of work done by the VCS are devised, used and shared | 1. Examples of sharing value and impact will be gathered 2. These will then be shared widely in the community |  |  |

**Section Three – Increased Investment for the VCS**

**We will devise models of working in partnership to maximise our potential for levering in funding to the community. This will include risk assessments, due diligence checks, sub-contracting models, troubleshooting systems, communications on competition protocols etc. We will work to increase early intervention work which avoids problems escalating and therefore makes the best use of scarce resources.**

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| Aims | Activities | Lead | Timeframe |
| Networks are set up to support partnership working with a view to bidding for funds together | 1. Attending the Trustees Network to support setting up working relationships to underpin partnership working and shared bidding for funds. 2. Attending the Chief Officers network to support early troubleshooting on governance, HR and finance issues – particularly in relation to partnership working on funding |  |  |
| Funding sources in addition to RBK are identified and this knowledge is shared within the VCS | 1. Database of funding opportunities kept by KVA used by local agencies to find non RBK sources of funding |  |  |
| Barriers to funding are identified | 1. Group set up to identify barriers to seeking non RBK funds |  |  |
| Creative solutions to overcoming these barriers are devised | 1. Ideas noted to overcome these barriers and a report done and shared with the wider community |  |  |
| A log of funding from RBK to local groups is set up and maintained and shared within the community | 1. Information gathered from RBK and set out in a way that can be easily updated and shared within the wider community |  |  |