



# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT REPORT

## VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR REVIEW

Community engagement activities in 2019

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# PURPOSE

This report presents the learning from a series of events and activities from October to December 2019 with members of Kingston's Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS). It offers three themes identified and proposes some ways forward.

The vibrant and diverse Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in Kingston play a huge part in supporting the local community. There are around 742 charities with a combined income of £262m. These groups play a vital role in understanding and meeting the needs of the local community. The VCS is both of the people – led and delivered by local people (or those with a close relationship to Kingston) – a significant proportion of whom do so voluntarily; and for the people – embedded in local communities to meet emerging needs and gaps in local provision. This is why strengthening the relationship with the VCS is a strategic priority for the Council.

**“ KINGSTON WILL BE A VIBRANT, DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE BOROUGH, WHERE RESIDENTS ARE ACTIVE, EMPOWERED, ENGAGED AND ABLE TO REMAIN INDEPENDENT AND RESILIENT ”**

**-ROYAL BOROUGH OF KINGSTON  
CORPORATE PLAN 2019 - 2023**

In 2014 Kingston moved to a funding approach for the VCS which was characterised by formal tendering. The perception shared across the local VCS is that the change negatively affected the sector and its relationship with the Council, despite the creation of a 2013 Compact and 2014 Partnership Strategy. The VCS review was therefore identified as a corporate priority by the Council to further explore this discontentment and to identify opportunities for improving the future relationship.



# ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

- In total, seventy-five VCS groups were in contact during the engagement, with a variety of sizes, funding models and governance structures.
- Kingston Council Neighbourhood Managers distributed flyers inviting members of the VCS to events on 54 local notice boards
- A dedicated email address, [voluntary-and-community@kingston.gov.uk](mailto:voluntary-and-community@kingston.gov.uk), was created. Targeted emails were sent, such as to members of the Kingston Strategic Partnership as well as to all groups awarded a Community Grant in 2018/19.
- Officers attended a variety of VCS networks to give information and listen to insights. This included the Kingston Interfaith Forum, Kingston Let's Talk October events in Surbiton and New Malden, Chief Officers Network, Children & Young People Network, Health & Wellbeing Network, Kingston Strategic Partnership, and Active and Supportive Communities Network.
- A survey was created in close collaboration with Kingston Council's Commissioning team, available online and with paper copies available in all Kingston libraries. It was open from 18 Nov 2019 until 19 Jan 2020 and promoted by Kingston Voluntary Action. The Commissioning Framework survey was completed by 14 VCS groups, 7 Social Enterprise groups, and 4 self-identifying 'Others' who contributed to VCS questions.
- A series of polls online at the Kingston Let's Talk portal had 33 anonymous responses.
- The Communications team used the social media application Twitter to share information about events. This was reshared by Kingston's Chief Executive.
- Google+ pages were used to disseminate information, namely via the Corporate Leadership Group, Kingston Councillors Group, and Kingston Commissioning Group.

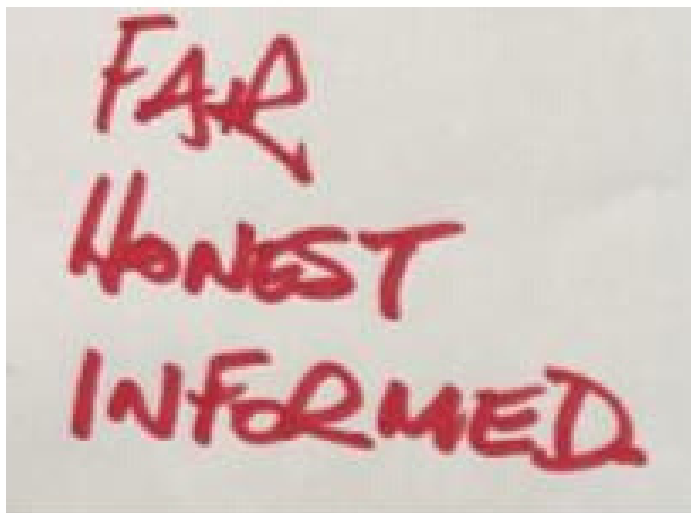


# FACE TO FACE SESSIONS

Face to face sessions were created to better understand the real life experiences of the Kingston VCS, so as to identify strengths and weaknesses of the current Council approach, particularly around funding. The discussions with the VCS also helped to frame the nature of the future desired relationship between it and Kingston Council.

Sessions involved staff from across the council and were intended to have a spirit of co-design, with a transparent and collaborative approach. Elected members were unable to participate due to pre-general election restrictions but helped to circulate information to local groups.

Sessions took place across the borough, in all 4 wards. Each evening session had a corresponding daytime drop-in session to allow for more involvement. The only event with low pre-registration numbers, in Chessington, did not go ahead but officers were at the Chessington Hook Centre for the daytime drop-in session.



## 13 Nov 2019: Roundtable Kingston United Reformed Church

- Stephen Evans, Director of Communities at the time, fielded a range of questions. There were many questions around better joined up working, in particular, with local faith groups, with the Public Health team, Achieving for Children and the NHS.
- Sarah Ireland, Corporate Director at the time, updated participants on plans to introduced a three year 'Kingston Together Fund' and discussion followed on the tangible impact of this. There was much consensus on the need for proportionality going forward, and some mention that Neighbourhood grants should be kept largely the same.
- Discussions were facilitated by PPL's Katie Lansdell on the relationship between the Council and the VCS. No group said the relationship was satisfactory. One group wrote (below) that they want the relationship to be: "FAIR, HONEST, INFORMED".
- PPL also facilitated discussions on 'shared language'. Some groups with long-term working arrangements with the council expressed dissatisfaction at being asked to discuss terms like "outputs/outcomes" as they saw this as patronising. However, groups who had never received council funding, such as a local Residents Association, were happy to discuss all terms and this led to conversation on wider context around the words.
- It became clear that there are huge differences between groups and one cannot speak for all: for example, the different approach between those already funded and those not, their experiences, perspectives and understandings.



## **5 Dec 2019, 'Funding for Best Outcomes' New Malden Library**

- Louise Footner, Assistant Director for Culture, Communities and Engagement, discussed the funding context. Discussion on potential for more sector collaboration: Louise mentioned her work on community hubs.
- Mirela Lopez, Corporate Head of Commissioning and Procurement, presented work on Social Value & ethical considerations. VCS urged Council to make plain and explicit what needs to be demonstrated & how it will be measured, for example, the value of volunteers' time.
- Stephanie Royston-Mitchell, Community Safety and Resilience Principal, led an activity on the nature of meetings. VCS insistent that Council officers should consider how, as well as what, subjects are discussed: with appropriate tone, balance of formal/ informal, with some 'thank yous', via both face to face and email, consistent and open communication, support throughout the relationship not just when reviewing KPIs formally every few months which feels like an interrogation. Use of positive wording, eg "How can I help you to demonstrate that...?"
- Miriam Smith, Corporate Head of Service Commissioning for Early Intervention and Prevention, Adult Social Care and Community Housing, led an activity on group working. Some requests for time to absorb the information presented, but initial thoughts on need for proper sharing of information across organisations; 'lead' group often shoulders disproportionate amount of admin costs/ time supporting others. Consensus that 'alliance' model not appropriate: requires high level of trust between parties which seems lacking.
- Nicola Marven, VCS Project Officer, asked how VCS hear about funding. Clear that VCS value local leadership of KVA to share information. However, Council website information is not clear; application process is too complex and time consuming; competition for funding is challenging to navigate. Ideas on alternative local funding eg supermarkets green discs.

## **10 Dec 2019, 'Planning Decisions' Surbiton Library**

- Sophia Severin, Corporate Change Manger, presented information on internal decision-making processes, e.g. Commissioning Governance Board. VCS keen to help with decisions: already help with JSNAs. Could they legally participate in evaluation panels and moderation? To be confirmed.
- Sanja Djerić-Kane, CEO of Kingston Voluntary Action, presented a VCS perspective on Assets, noting high Social Return on Investment for VCS. Participants then mapped some assets in Kingston: strong consensus that the skills and values of local individuals was underestimated - many give time already as volunteers, but perhaps VCS would benefit from skill exchange or similar. Also many institutions not usually engaged, e.g. faith groups, sports clubs, adult colleges, etc.
- Nicola Marven, VCS Project Officer, discussed needs, noting that 80% of Council's spend with VCS groups was via the Adult Social Care department to support vulnerable residents. Many did not consider the 'needs' of the council, could not name council priorities. Groups spoke on specific needs of specific groups they worked with: younger people, older people, Korean people, etc. However one common theme: they wanted to give every group more autonomy to choose how they would respond to local needs themselves. Support for better partnership working repeated.

## **16 Dec 2019, 'What's Next?' Rose Theatre**

- Sophia Severin, Corporate Change Manger, shared a summary of 9 themes 'heard' so far. Nicola Marven, VCS Project Officer, asked participants to prioritise 4 themes most important to them, and then offer tangible ideas on how improvements could be carried out. Participants added another theme: Seed funding, and desire to have collaboration with experts to help groups grow through mentorship.

# RESULTS

A significant portion of the Commissioning Survey aimed to elicit attendees' response on eight specific principles. These proposed principles were being tested by Kingston's Commissioning team as part of a new approach and Framework they wished to introduce.

14 out of 16 VCS respondents said that they agreed with the eight principles of the draft commissioning survey. Many of these principles are linked to ideas of better collaboration, such as those around innovation, co design and developing diverse markets.

As one respondent put it, "The principles are fine - it's how they are applied that matters."

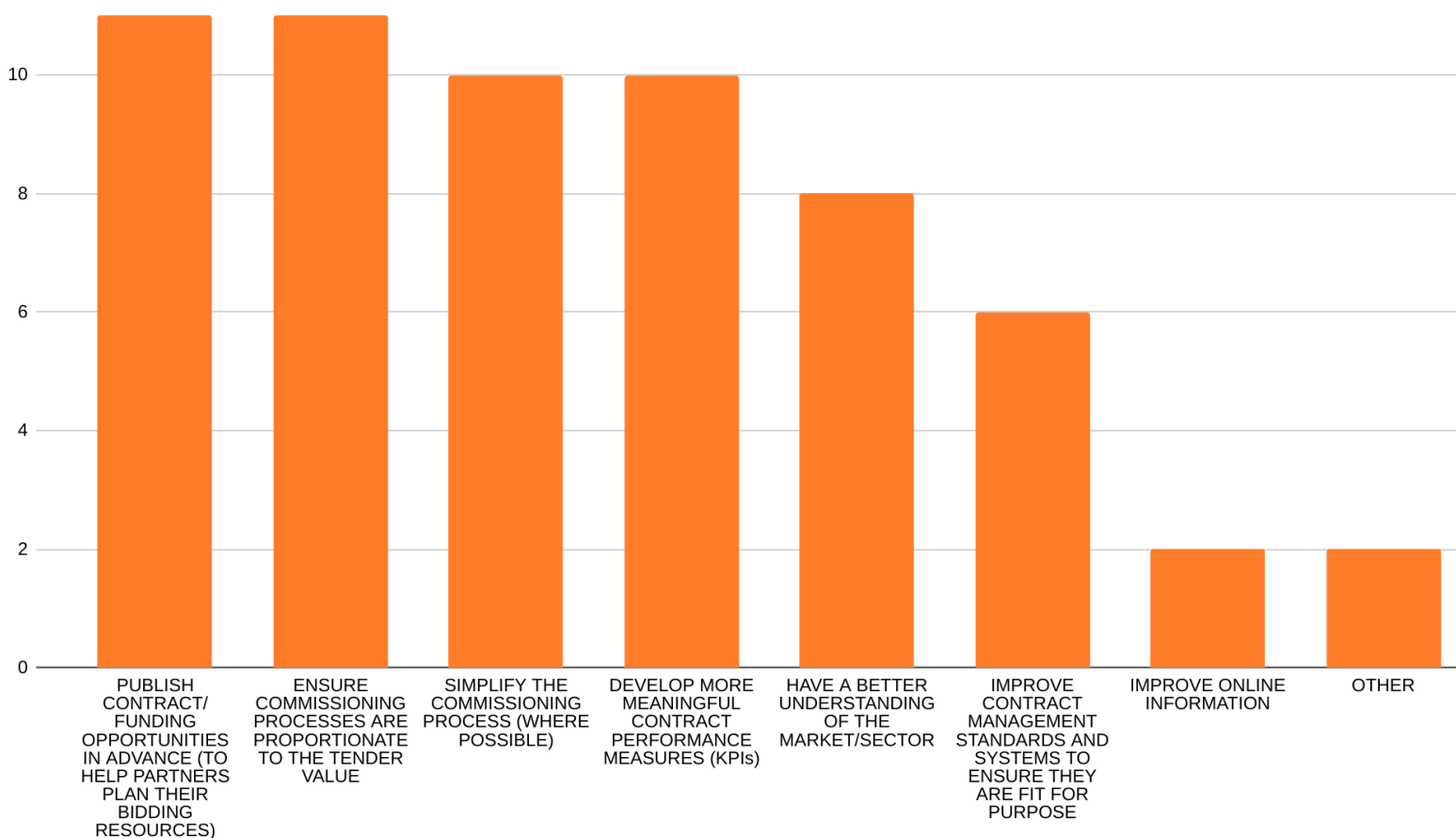
The 8 principles tested in the Commissioning Survey to inform a new approach:

- Evidence based approach
- Developing diverse markets
- Encouraging innovation
- Achieving social value
- Co design
- Risk awareness
- Asset based
- Value driven

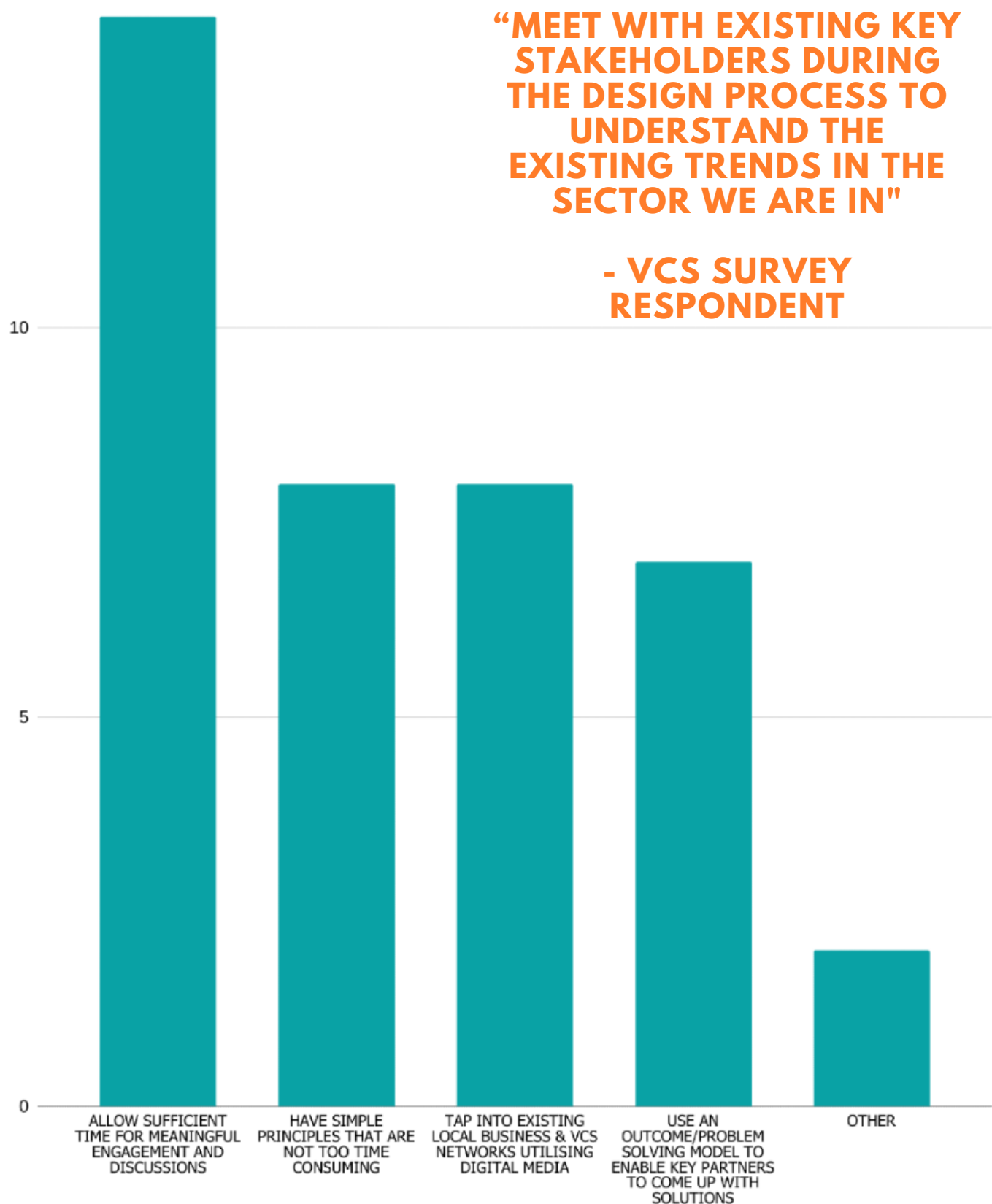
On the 22 January 2020, the Council received a report from Kingston's Chief Officers' Network, a network of many VCS Chief Executive Officers. The report, 'View from the VCSE', set out their vision for the VCS in Kingston and stated the outcomes the Network would like to see as a result of this review. These fall into three categories: a renewed relationship of equals with the Royal Borough of Kingston (and with other local statutory/public sector organisations); investment in the sector for the long term; and valuing the VCS as a contributor to 'place shaping'. These have fed into the findings & recommendations here.

The importance of clear and transparent information was reflected in Commissioning Survey. In answer to the question, 'What's your experience of doing business with us? How we can improve?',

<sup>12</sup> one of the most popular answers was simply to have better funding information. (Below.)



The importance of relationships was reflected in many responses to the Commissioning Survey. For example, the answers to Question 15 (shown below) show that, by far, VCS respondents thought that the most important way to involve a wide range of voices in solution design processes was to allow sufficient time for meaningful engagement and discussion. A comment from this question has also been included here.





In the final face to face session, nine themes were presented as ideas continuously 'heard' by participants, and these were agreed:

#### **"Before" decision-making:**

- Listen to us about our needs
- Listen to us about insights on community
- Leverage the power of business

#### **"During" decision-making:**

- Don't make us hunt for funding information: make it easy & clear
- When applying for funding: Social Value is our bread & butter so ask
- Help us work together in groups & partnerships

#### **"After" decision-making:**

- Relationships take time: Evaluate our progress with us
- Don't waste time of our amazing staff and volunteers - just ask quick questions regularly and informally
- Have suitable physical spaces.

The group was invited to add other topics to the twelve if they chose, and accordingly a tenth topic was added: 'seed funding'.

The participants were invited to select 4 most important themes and recommend specific actions. These are below.

#### **1. Relationships take time**

- Evaluate our progress with us - Joint problem solving- value expertise of VCS
- Consistent commissioning lead - Underpinned by good relationships based on trust; honest conversations; understanding pressure; structured meetings to clarify problems and solutions; informal settings; Lack of understanding: we don't have services; Clear communication
- Review by themes - shared info to ensure services aren't duplicated - No commissioning silos

#### **2. Listen to us about our needs as VCS groups**

- Listen to us- VCS and commissioners in two way conversations - JUST TALK TO US! - Being respectful- good communication- building trust through good communication
- Shared local data to inform decisions - Better understanding of how VCS operates!- governance, Boards VCS Board? Feedback? How compare with other Councils?

#### **3. Social Value is our bread & butter so just ask**

- Acknowledgement of work VCS does - Capturing 'added value' process as part of contract management which needs to happen consistently- monitoring visits - Capture monetary value of work VCS does - Formula to calculate cost of VCS and reduced costs to statutory services (work KVA + networks) Social value= more defined/measured now - Give guidance also to what looking for

#### **4. Help us work together in groups & partnerships**

- Resource- support lead co-ordination, additional development/funds
- Incentives to collaborate- clarify value added
- Apply/co-produce bids in a Gov scale e.g. refugee funding
- Trust takes time to build- Fear of disclosure of confidential info
- Utilise resources, skills appropriately

Featured to the left:

A 'wordcloud' of words written on flip charts at co-design sessions. The more frequently a word is used, the larger it appears. ('VCS' and 'RBK' have been deleted.) The top 20 words which feature in this 'wordcloud' reflect the focus on funding: needs, funding, need, value, support, good, Kingston, local, money, spend. The next 20 words seem to reflect the importance of relationships: groups, understanding, KVA, people, can, services, better, commissioners, communication, community.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1 ENCOURAGE A MORE EQUAL PARTNERSHIP



- Dedicated resource set aside for working with the Voluntary and Community Sector and managing the Kingston Together Fund
- Workshops held for RBK officers and VCS members on both effective communication and effective collaboration
- Commitment to work with the Kingston Strategic Partnership to develop a refreshed Voluntary Sector Strategy
- VCS collaboration at early stages of service delivery decision-making to be formalised: Commitment to explore ways of embedding VCS input into the analysis of needs (and strengths) and the setting of local priorities
- Where funding is agreed, the Council to work collaboratively with VCS partners to co-create performance measures
- The Kingston Together Fund to be developed to ensure management is proportionate to size of funding with more flexibility and the ability for VCS to adapt in response to changing local needs
- To consider the development of a variety of funding models to allow for the commissioning of VCS for different purposes and to further support innovation

## 2 ENCOURAGE MORE TRANSPARENCY

- All Council funding opportunities open to the VCS to be clearly published in a timely and accessible manner
- An annual impact report of Kingston Together Fund investment with VCS published
- Each department to hold and update annually a list of VCS groups relevant to their service area
- In line with the new Commissioning Framework, a clear list of criteria to measure Social Value and ethical considerations during procurement to be created in one clear document with accessible language
- As part of the Kingston Together Fund development of a comprehensive commissioning support offer

## 3 ENCOURAGE STRONGER SECTOR COLLABORATION

- VCS Partnership Officer to work with VCS to support the growth and development of informal VCS networks to share ideas and learning
- Support for the effective working of consortia and other partnership arrangements supported by clearly written guidelines to dispel any myths and fear of disclosure of confidential information





# EMBEDDING LEARNING

A programme of work has been created to deliver the outcomes of this review and to ensure that officers across the Council contribute to its success.

During the engagement period, a regular point of feedback from the sector was the impact of the loss of established relationships with the Council and the lack of a focal point within the Council. As a response the Council has created a new post dedicated to developing the relationship with the sector, that of Voluntary and Community Sector Partnership Officer. Recruitment is due to begin soon.

Both Finance and Commissioning teams are already working to innovate new ways that funding mechanisms for the VCS can be made more open, transparent and collaborative. Investment in the VCS will be reported annually as part of the new Kingston Together Fund in order to demonstrate impact.

Further engagement and co-design will take place to shape the new model and intentions. The overarching principles emerging from this review, alongside proportionality and pragmatism, will remain at the core.



A number of other pertinent issues were regularly raised as part of the co-design process including: the importance of taking a collaborative approach to reviewing the approach for Neighbourhood grants; the need to bring forward the community asset phase of the review and; the need to support more effective community engagement in the setting of local priorities for children and young people.

Therefore it is clear that during the second stage of engagement more emphasis on partnership working will be required. To this end it is hoped to involve colleagues from groups such as Kingston Strategic Partnership and Achieving for Children.

## NEXT STEPS

# THANK YOU

We would like to thank the many staff members and volunteers who gave their time to attend evening sessions, daytime drop ins, complete online polls and surveys and meet with us. Your insights and expertise has been invaluable.

Many thanks also to the many Kingston Council staff members who gave up evenings to be involved in these discussions.

Further background reading can be found at:

- The 2013 Kingston Compact and 2014 Kingston Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy
- Policy and Finance Committee papers, 2 July 2015: 'Corporate Grants Programme -- Moving to a Commissioning Approach'
- 2018 Online presentation by Kingston Voluntary Action, at <https://prezi.com/view/uYmYuiPJPhdRrcNzxuRs/>
- The Kingston Chief Officers' Network 2019 report, 'Achieving for the Community,' and 2020 report, 'View from the VCSE'

Photo: The Charter Quay Bridge Over The Hogsmill River (c) 2014 Jim Linwood

