

## WASHINGTON AREA COMMITTEE

16<sup>th</sup> March 2017

### REPORT OF WASHINGTON AREA COMMUNITY VOLUNTARY SECTOR NETWORK

#### 1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The report provides an update with regard to the Washington Area Community and Voluntary Sector Network

#### 2. Background

- 2.1 To develop the capacity and influence of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) across the City, Area Networks have been established and delegates represent each Area Network at Area Committee taking forward issues on behalf of the whole VCS in the area and reporting back, providing a two-way flow of communication.
- 2.2 Washington Area Network delegates will present a report to each Area Committee meeting informing Members of activity, progress, issues and concerns of the sector.

#### 3. Washington Network Annual Report

- 3.1 In Washington the VCS is made up of a wide range of organisations ranging from independent local branches of national charities through to small, totally voluntary, community groups. Collectively these organisations provide Washington residents with a wide range of local services, activities and opportunities and have a significant role within community life here. The Washington Area Network Annual Report 2016/17, attached as **Annex 1**, contains a range of case studies which both demonstrate the diversity of the VCS organisations operating in Washington and the range of services and support they provide, highlighting how they make a difference to residence lives.
- 3.2.1 This report also contains proposals and next steps for the coming year to encourage collaboration with Area Committee to deliver shared priorities. The Washington Area Network is developing a collaborative approach, developing a Washington Volunteering Plan and is considering how to co-ordinate much needed resources particularly for the 'grassroots' organisations in the area. This 'community planning' will also consider capacity to deliver and support needs of organisations as well as recognising the level of support and/or information sharing that different groups require.

#### 4. Recommendations

- 4.1 Members are requested
- To note the contents of the report and consider the opportunities and issues raised by the Washington ACVSN

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#### Appendix 1: Annual Report of Washington Community & Voluntary Sector Network

**Annual Report 2016/17 of Washington Community & Voluntary Sector Network (VCSN)**

Report prepared by Network Representatives: Jacqui Reeves (Washington MIND) John Rostron (Washington Millennium Centre) Bryan Beverley (Washington Trust).

**Introduction**

This report has been written by the three area representatives who represent the views and experiences of the voluntary organisations, large and small, with or without staff support, that deliver services to the communities of Washington.

To ensure that as many different organisations' as possible have had the opportunity to influence this document, the representatives have used a range processes which have been created in partnership with network members and local authority staff. The different methods for gaining the views and experiences of the wider network group have included:

- Monthly Washington network meetings
- Implementation of sub groups which have been facilitated by the Washington network and supported by VCS groups and organisations
- A detailed questionnaire which has been circulated across the VCS within Washington and its findings have been collated by the Washington network representatives
- The constant, and invaluable, discussions we have with VCS partners and our experience of being part of the sector itself and delivering services.

During the past 12 months the Washington Area Network has constantly considered the question of how best to engage the wider sector. Understandably, a VCS as diverse as that which operates within Washington requires a range of engagement processes and communication systems to be in place. Reaching out to the widest range of organisations remains a high priority for the Washington Network going forward.

**The challenging and rapidly changing environment the Washington VCS operates within**

There can be little doubt that currently the VCS and its statutory and public partners are operating in the most challenging of times. Unprecedented levels of budget reductions by a range of public bodies, including local authorities, service withdrawal or significant reconfiguration, greater levels of competition for grants and other funding, higher operating costs and increasing administration requirements all contribute to the range of challenges VCSOs face on a daily basis.

Whilst of course the voluntary sector does not operate within a vacuum, this report seeks to maintain its focus upon the sector itself and how changes in other sectors impact upon it, and how it responds to the challenges subsequently created. The VCS in Washington has a long and successful history of working with its public and statutory partners and is committed to this mutually beneficial relationship. However, for these relationships to continue to flourish going forward, each individual partner will need to understand, perhaps more than in the past, how their activity positively and less positively impacts upon the other.

For example, in the questionnaire recently collated by the Washington VCS Network Representatives, many VCSO's based within Washington understandably raised concerns relating to local authority budget reductions and, of course, how these might impact upon

the sector collectively and within specific projects. There is concern from VCS organisations that there is a wider perception that the voluntary sector is somehow able to fill many the gaps left by other partner service withdrawals or reductions. There is a strong feeling that the wider expectation of the VCS capacity needs to be kept realistic – the VCS needs to be reassured that there aren't unrealistic expectations held. The VCS feels that this is needed to ensure that the public understands what public services are available and, equally as importantly, where they are not.

The role of the smaller, usually volunteer lead, community groups should not be underestimated. These organisations are delivering important local community services and support high numbers of residents. As the environment changes, in terms of more competition for local financial resources, then these groups will be less able to respond to a rapidly changing environment and thus may become more vulnerable than might have been the case historically.

The world of local volunteering is also rapidly changing. As local communities develop their own responses to the situations caused by the removal or reduction of services (either resulting from state or VCS budget reductions) then volunteer roles will need to change. For example, environmental volunteering will need to increase with volunteers undertaking activity which historically was in the remit of the local authority or other land managers. Research undertaken to support this report indicates that whilst volunteers remain committed to supporting local service delivery, there is also a strong view that they don't want to be seen as a direct replacement for others' service level changes but instead want to bring added value.

It can be argued that the VCS has, throughout time, functioned within an ever changing environment and this is accepted. However, VCS partners in Washington, like elsewhere, are concerned, as the pace and level of change currently being experienced is unprecedented. Washington VCS Network partners do feel that we are, perhaps, in a more positive position than other parts of the city given the good relations we enjoy and the mutual desire held to continue to develop the Washington Network.

### **Linkage to Area Committee Priorities – how the Washington VCS Network reflects these in its delivery**

The priorities of the Washington Area Committee are divided into two specific groupings, namely people and place. The People Board, one of the two formal sub-groups of the Area Committee, is responsible for overseeing the activity and priorities relating to people. The Place Board has the same function focused upon the place priorities.

The People focused priorities are:

- Health and wellbeing – focusing upon self-harm, healthy living and green spaces
- Social Care – including such projects as the Home from Hospital initiative
- Community Inclusion – Area Network Support, maximising volunteering and supporting the delivery of youth services.

The Place priorities are

- Environment and Green space - continue to develop and deliver neighbourhood improvements - linking to volunteering work and the local community, using green space to improve health and well-being, and identifying opportunities to support the management of parks.
- Community leadership and engagement - continue to utilise and promote the Members' community leadership and community engagement role through a range of physical and environmental initiatives

- Heritage and Culture - Generate opportunities to use local heritage and culture to attract match/external funding to maximise potential and for a positive impact on the community. Also to ensure the Washington offer can influence the city wide approach to heritage and culture and how those services can be tailored to meet the needs of the local community.

The VCS in Washington significantly contributes to the above priorities both in terms of its own day-to-day service delivery and, in more recent times, by work funded by the Area Committee either to individual projects and, increasingly, collaborative funding of partnership activity. The clear link between area priorities and Area Committee funding opportunities is very much welcomed by the sector and it is hoped that such an approach will continue. However, the sector recognises that it is short-sighted to concentrate only upon Area Committee funding and as has already been said earlier in this document alternative funding streams will need to be identified and pursued.

One such massively important potential opportunity of note is the Community Led Local Development Strategy (CLLD). One of the primary principles of this funding, for which the local authority is the lead partner, is that of “a bottom up approach” in terms of developing the overall strategy. The VCS in Washington holds a unique insight into a range of issues which effect communities and equally we have a unique relationship with the wider community. Therefore, the in-depth involvement of the VCS in both the developing of the CLLD strategy and subsequent responses to agreed priorities is fundamental.

Community-led Local Development must be community led by Local Action Groups, and implemented through integrated area based Local Development Strategies. The preparation of the strategy must actively involve the local community and this process should be described in the strategy.

Community-led Local Development must not be imposed from the top down. It is not simply a process of converting existing strategies into a Local Development Strategy or drawing together a group of existing local activists to form a Local Action Group. It is essential to involve a cross-section of the targeted local community in the development and management of the strategy and in finding solutions to local issues

The work of the VCS in Washington demonstrates that it is ideally placed to encourage local communities to develop integrated bottom-up approaches, and identify and deliver solutions, in circumstances where there is a need to respond to local challenges. Therefore, it is felt extremely important that the Washington Area Committee, with its many connections to the council's and other strategic partners' decision making processes, will continue with its clear support to the sector and help ensure that significant opportunities are not missed locally.

### **Activity of sub-groups – collaborative working and supporting volunteering**

As part of this approach during 2016/17 the Washington Area Network has introduced two working groups which provide the VCS in Washington the means to explore issues in more detail than would be possible at monthly meetings. The new working groups have looked at and considered issues which are important to the Area Committee and form part of its list of priorities.

The first working group has looked at ways in which the VCS in Washington can work in a more collaborative way. The Collaborative Working group has met 3 times in the last 4 months to look at how collaborative working can be developed further and to identify potential opportunities. The work will continue and the group will meet when needed and

the organisations have made a commitment to work more closely together and to build on the collaboration that has already taken place. An example of this activity making a difference is a recent joint project delivered between the Foundation of Light, Washington MIND and the Washington Trust who worked together with a much smaller organisation, Washington Support Group for Men, to secure grant aid from three large regional external funders to deliver a significant men's health and personal wellbeing programme.

The second working group has looked at volunteering which is fundamental to the VCS. The Volunteering Working Group has considered a range of issues relating to volunteering matters including areas of economies of scale such as volunteer recruitment, training, support and development. Additionally, the group is also exploring joint fund-raising via collaborative grant applications for projects which could not be delivered by individual organisations in isolation. Much of the activity of this group has focused upon how the larger and stronger VCS organisations can provide support to the smaller, usually volunteer lead community groups, in terms of volunteering.

### **Washington VCS bidding and delivering projects collaboratively**

The VCS in Washington has a long history of working together though it is accepted that the smaller local groups have less experience of this approach. The sector has embraced the Area Committee's desire to encourage and support collaborative working.

It has been demonstrated that even the most collaboratively focused work requires a lead agent to be in place. The degree of collaboration work will vary upon the nature and focus of the work, time restraints and number of partners involved. It is acknowledged that not all organisations will have the capacity to act as a lead agent and therefore we should not worry that some organisations take on this role more than others.

The increase in collaborative working has achieved a range of benefits for both the sector and the Area Committee. Firstly, collaborative bidding reduces competition and the associated administration that multiple applications would require. Secondly, collaborative working allows projects to be delivered by collectives which individual VCS organisations could not deliver in isolation. Thirdly, and this is an area that we would hope to develop in the near future, an increase in collaborative bids to external funders which build upon the experiences of the bids to the Area Committee. Finally, collaborative bidding and project delivery in Washington has supported the inclusion of smaller organisations which have benefitted from working in partnership with bigger VCSO's.

### **Looking forward**

It is accepted that the last 12 months have been extremely challenging for the VCS and its partners such as the City Council and that trend is very likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Therefore, it has never been so important for partners to continue to work collectively to address mutually agreed issues and deliver collective outcomes/responses. The past year has demonstrated that the local authority and VCS are placed in the best position possible to achieve the individual aims when working collectively and it is hoped that this mutually beneficial relationship will continue to flourish. This is not to say that further development and dialogue is needed nor that either partner should become complacent.

The Washington Area Network is an important mechanism for communication, joint planning, consultation and joint work between the local authority and local VCS. However, there are other significant partners delivering within Washington whose links to the network need to be improved so that they too are able to work in a more joined up way.

Therefore, it is hoped that during the next 12 months' work is undertaken to improve the links between the Washington Area Network and the wider state and statutory sector.

The VCS is a fundamental local deliverer of important local services. However, caution is required regarding the perceived capacity of the sector as there is a growing feeling that there is an assumption that service gaps created by the budget reductions of other partners will be filled by the sector. Therefore, managing expectation appropriately is an important process for the Network to continue to advocate.

In last year's annual report, the challenge of ensuring that smaller, usually volunteer lead grassroots organisations were able to participate in the work of the Area VCS Network was identified. Whilst some progress has been made (see collaborative working) it should continue to be a priority of the partners to develop appropriate ways for smaller organisations to get involved. Of course not all will want to do this but for those which do there should be an easy to engage pathway.

### **In Conclusion**

The VCS in Washington is keen to support the work of the City Council (and other strategic partners) as an equal partner, whose unique perspective, understandings, relationships with the community and inherent principles are valued and respected. Equally, our unique challenges, capacity limitations and potential services reductions also need to be acknowledged and factored into wider plans.