

WASHINGTON AREA COMMITTEE

16th March 2023

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. The Washington Area Network Annual Report (2022/23) identifies some of the challenges and issues facing the local VCS sector and the successes of organisations, and the priorities which will shape future delivery of services and activities.
- 3.2 This report also contains some key information relating to the Washington Area VCS Network itself.

4. Recommendations

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

Contact:

1. Sylvia Copley, Area Network Representative s.copley@shineyadvice.org.uk
2. Shirley Gillum, Area Network Representative shirleygillum@communityopportunities.co.uk
3. Jemma Hutchinson, Area Network Representative jemma@washingtonmind.org.uk

Appendix 1: Annual Report of Washington Community & Voluntary Sector Network 2022/23

Annual Report 2022/23 of Washington Community & Voluntary Sector Network (VCSN)

Introduction

This report has been written to highlight the views and experiences of the voluntary organisations that deliver services to the communities of Washington and are members of the Washington VCS Area Network.

In addition, there has been an opportunity for our local VCS to identify the key priorities of the sector and inform the Area Committee's Delivery Plan and new priorities for 2023/24.

A variety of methods have been used to gain views and experiences of the organisations:

- Washington network meetings
- A detailed 'Taking Stock Survey' which has been circulated across the VCS within Washington along with the Washington VCS Network questionnaire
- Discussions between VCS partners.

Washington Area Network constantly considers how it can best 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 Washington VCS Area Network role

The Voluntary & Community Sector Network aims are:

- To develop the capacity, support and influence of the VCS across the City, through open communication and partnership working.
- To work together to build relationships within communities and between communities and local services and activities.
- Recognised route of Council engagement with the VCS within each geographical Area
- To work together to develop and share good VCS practice.
- To provide up to three delegates to represent the geographical area's VCS at Sunderland City Council's Area Committees, influencing strategic policies and priorities that affects local communities and the VCS. The delegates will represent the whole VCS in their geographical area at the Area Committee rather than their own organisational interests.

The Network is supported by the Area Arrangements Team and holds regular meetings, provides an information sharing forum and encourages dialogue, networking and collaboration. It is also utilised to maximise the opportunity to have a constructive dialogue and 'way of working' between the Council and wider VCS organisations including opportunities for the sector to be consulted where appropriate on the Council's plans and strategies.

Links with the Washington Area Committee

Washington Area Committee has regularly confirmed its support and commitment to the Network and the local VCS organisations, and community inclusion via the VCS remains a key priority for the Committee.

- 3 delegates represent the VCS at Washington Area Committee and represent the whole of the sector at committee – and not their own individual organisations
- The Washington Area Committee Chair (or Deputy) co-chairs the Area Network to ensure and encourage collaboration
- The Network is also given an opportunity to support and contribute to the delivery of Committee's Delivery Plan to identify issues, solutions and joint priorities which meet the needs of the local community.
- Several Area Committee funded projects have been developed and delivered during 2022/23 in partnership with the local VCS organisations – helping to meet and deliver not only the Area Committee priorities but also those of the local VCS organisations:

The local VCS continues to work well with a range of partners, and it is more important than ever that the emphasis be on developing a collaborative approach and sharing best practice, promoting innovative and new models of working, and understanding the growing pressures on organisations.

The role of the smaller, grassroots organisations is important and many of these organisations do not appreciate the value of the services or activities they deliver to local residents. The Washington Area Network is fully committed to supporting the smaller groups and helping them grow. The Taking Stock Survey recently circulated is one way of not only identifying all the good work that is being delivered, but also looking at the needs and gaps and the support needs of the smaller VCS organisations and groups.

Washington Community Support Worker – Sunderland Voluntary Sector Alliance

The Washington Community Support worker from the Sunderland VCS Alliance has continued to work closely with the VCS in Washington to support their sustainability, resulting in:

- A grassroots-based level of support to meet the needs of smaller organisations and/or emerging locally based ventures.
- Supporting the recruitment of volunteers to increase membership including management committees, resident groups local activity-based groups resulting in increased engagement and enabling more resilient and sustainable organisations.
- Provided a range of groups with volunteer support to carry out a range of activities requested by groups. These have more recently included overhauling a garden area and planting over a hundred trees at a local riding school, decorating the external and internal areas of a local community facility and laying repurposed flooring at a local community association.
- The increased resilience of organisations through support with developing their models of governance, policies and procedures to promote sustainability and access additional community needs.
- Organisations continue to be supported to access a range of funding opportunities. Applying, developing, and adopting relevant policies and procedures to support these, safe-guarding, risk assessments, DBS checks, and relevant insurance are all areas which are supported both on a group basis as well as through locally based funding workshops.
- Access to training has continued to be offered on a no cost basis

Funding continues to be a pressure to many organisations and there is also more demand on funders which has led to organisations working in partnership to apply jointly to access grants and offer a collaborative way of working which supports additional outcomes. Six of the twelve warm spaces established as part of the Sunderland City Council Warm Spaces Initiative were directly supported by the Washington Community Support Worker to develop partnerships and apply for funding. This has supported groups to maintain their provision and offer a wider range of opportunities for residents to access and to be signposted to a range of partners on a need led basis.

The Community Support Worker has continued to provide support to individual organisations to access various opportunities offered by the Washington Area Committee including Improving Community Assets, Community Chest, Clean and Green Local action, Positive Activities and the Queen's Jubilee. This has including supporting groups to utilise and access the new online forms and processes. As a result, there has been an increased level of provision and buildings are more fit for purpose enabling increased usage and supporting wider community needs.

The impact of the cost of living and related energy costs have impacted on several organisations and support has been provided by the Community Support Worker to access relevant funding streams to enable groups to countenance these impacts. These have included working in partnership with the council and local funders to enable groups to access energy audits and Breez and Empower grants. These have supported groups to improve and replace old lighting, windows, heating systems and install energy saving and lower carbon efficient products such as solar panels and led lights. As well

as contributing to the low carbon agenda these will help to reduce energy costs and enable groups to be more sustainable.

The Community Support Worker has continued to develop training to meet the needs of the VCS and has also worked in partnership with a range of training providers. These have included digital training and awareness sessions to support the increased use of the wi-fi and digital equipment that is now available across a range of provision in Washington. Safeguarding and carrying out DBS checks for voluntary sector organisations has been a key area of development as many groups have increased their capacity through volunteers, new committee members and/or meeting new community needs.

Collaborative working and supporting volunteering

Previous Annual Reports presented to Area Committee have identified the commitment the sector has to collaboration and partnership working but also on the reliance on volunteers and volunteering.

2022/23 has seen a variety of partnerships developed or in development to deliver key projects and opportunities for joint working and support has been identified at the Network meetings. Additionally, several new groups have joined the network, these include larger organisations offering health and wellbeing and access to increased learning opportunities across Washington, community church projects and smaller enterprises such as CIC's developing community provision and access to arts promoting wellbeing.

Success stories from the Network members for 2022/23 –

- 12 Warm Spaces established across Washington supporting community organisations and local residents during the cost of living crisis.
- Increased availability of community activities and access via signposting to other partners to support individual needs relating to areas including debt management, benefits availability and health and wellbeing activities – growing the social prescribing service offer in Washington.
- A variety of events at different venues delivered across Washington – Christmas Celebrations, Mining Heritage Fayre, Bonfire/Fireworks Evening, Washington Illuminations, Washington Village Christmas Festival, Friends of Usworth Park to name a few
- Expanding the use of community buildings – new user groups and activities including the development of Mickey's Place to offer a new community café facility and a space for other groups to support their members.
- Refurbishment and capital improvements for community buildings – Columbia CA are undertaking a major refurbishment whilst others including Building Blocks, Transforming North East and Harraton CA continue to improve their respective facilities
- New relationships between the organisations and businesses including those which have emerged as a result of Warm Spaces and health and wellbeing activity
- Success of Clean and Green Programme which includes volunteering, community clean ups and community groups leading on improving green spaces and places including Harraton CA, Friends of Usworth Park and a host of local residential areas and local parks.
- The over whelming success of the Washington Village in Bloom group of volunteers winning four major awards – Gold in the Village and Best Village category in Northumbria, Best in Show overall across an area covering Berwick to the North Yorkshire moors and as the Northeast entry to the UK National Competition winning the Gold Award. This was complemented by the volunteers who make up the Friends of Trinity Church in the village winning the special Church category.
- More VCS partners worked together, and local schools and youth providers ensured there was an increase in the delivery of activities for young people across Washington including the use of the Ten10 bus (funding of which was supported via Crowdfund Sunderland)
- A range of 'partnerships' established with several organisations working together including Rickleton Chapel and Rickleton residents developing the facility into a more sustainable and accessible community provision.

Challenges facing the sector –

Small, mainly volunteer led groups, still need to be offered support and the Area VCS Network will continue to address this as a priority and encourage and develop mechanisms to provide more accessible opportunities for them.

- Volunteers are the key resource for organisations to continue and develop VCS groups.
- The cost-of-living crisis has impacted on a range of levels both in terms of raising funds and the funding available particularly to support longer term initiatives.
- The requirements of funders have changed, or requirements are more specific with an increasing demand on evidencing partnership working. More organisations are working together but this also means there are more demands on a small number of organisations to increase their capacity.
- Impact of delivering services to meet current demands without the necessary resources being available including funding and the recruitment and retention of staff and volunteers.
- The sector continues to respond to the demand of short term-based funding and the delivery of successful projects within these remits but there is a need for a longer-term strategy to attract long term funding beyond these.
- Organisations need to become more sustainable and resilient through effective business plans which will support their future development.
- The VCS continues to meet and address the continued and increased needs of the community – in particular, those presenting with a wider and higher level of needs and complexities. These present issues to organisations in both in terms of their capacity and staff i.e., space, training, awareness.

Priorities for the Washington VCS – The next 12 months

- There is a need for the VCS to continue to be supported through the Network to ensure the ongoing support and development of grass roots organisations are maintained at their chosen level of participation and engagement.
- Support VCS organisations to continue to develop their activities and programmes, enabling them to access opportunities including funding to improve their existing assets.
- To build sustainability, resilience and capacity in the VCS, offering support to recruit and retain staff and volunteers particularly noting the impact of the cost-of-living crisis of available volunteers/workforce.
- To address and identify the future workforce needs of the sector to meet the ongoing demands, increased levels of support and areas of complexity that they are facing. Work with partners to develop effective strategies and resolutions including training and working in partnership with other organisations.
- A commitment to working with partners, the network, and other relevant bodies to source long term funding to continue activities and programmes that have proven to be successful. I.e., Positive activities, HAF, Healthy Lifestyles, Debt management.