

WASHINGTON AREA COMMITTEE**30th June 2022****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 2021/22, identifies some of the challenges and issues facing the local VCS sector and also the successes of organisations, and the priorities which will shape future delivery of services and activities.
- 3.2.1 This report also contains some key statistics 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 ACVSN

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Appendix 1: Annual Report of Washington Community & Voluntary Sector Network 2021/22

Annual Report 2021/22 of Washington Community & Voluntary Sector Network (VCSN)

Introduction

This report has been written in order 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 2022/23.

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
- 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 Representatives for Sunderland City Council's Area Committee will also represent the VCS Network in the development of the Sunderland VCS Alliance in addition to other opportunities where full engagement with the VCS networks is required.

The Network is supported by the Area Arrangements Team and holds regular meetings, provides an information sharing service via the Sunderland Voluntary Sector Alliance 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.

In addition Washington Area Committee has regularly confirmed its support and commitment to the Network and the local VCS organisations, both small and large. Where appropriate the Area Committee is keen to facilitate partnership working for any funding opportunities it may publicise, with the VCS often targeted for specific Calls for Projects.

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 influence the delivery of Committee's Delivery Plan via working with the Washington Area Committee to identify issues, solutions and also joint priorities which meet the needs of the local community.
- Washington Area Committee has supported **27** organisations awarding **£28,292** through Community Chest for a range of activities
- A number of Area Committee funded projects have been developed and delivered during 2021/22 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:
 - Neighbourhoods and Environment – Area Committee continues to champion a partnership with our VCS to deliver a number of environmental and neighbourhood initiatives. Clean & Green Local Action grants help small groups to deliver environmental improvements through local action and the Clean & Green Volunteer Project supporting a number of VCS organisations and CAs
 - Community Inclusion – Improving community buildings funding has seen a number of local VCS organisations supported to repair or refurbish their buildings to increase the delivery of community services and activities
 - Community Inclusion – the Washington Individual Support Project, led by ShARP, received additional funding to continue providing much needed advice, information and support to residents in acute crisis
 - Community Inclusion – the Washington REACT Project delivers employability support to Washington's long term unemployed and harder to reach residents, managed by Community Opportunities. Together with CLLD funding Area Committee funding will support this service until 2023-24.
 - Community Inclusion - VCS Support & Training for smaller groups is delivered through this project which has been in place for more than 3 years. Led by Community Opportunities, the VCS Support Officer has delivered numerous training courses, DBS checks, governance advice and support, and helped establish new groups in the area
 - Supporting Young People – 2021/22 saw nearly 4500 young people supported and engaged through 3 x young people's projects led by the VCS – Washington Outreach Project (Sunderland Youth Consortia and ODYPP), Washington Safe Care Project (Washington MIND) and Positive Activities Projects - Area Committee supports work with young people and local organisations through programmes of positive activities across the holiday periods with Oxclose and District Young Peoples Project, Springwell Village Community Venue, Community Opportunities and the Little Onion Club.
 - Supporting Young People – more than 1000 young people have benefitted from the Washington Can Do project – either via school groups and youth councils, or through youth groups.
 - Supporting Young People – Sunderland Culture and Washington MIND have joined together to deliver a new 'Creative You' project that has just started and will be the focus for emotional well-being through 'creativity'.
 - Health and Well Being – Cook Well Live Well Grants have supported our VCS organisations develop and deliver food-based activities that support families and children in improving health. The aim of the project is to use new 'cook well' skills to equip people with the knowledge and tools to make healthy choices to 'live well'.
 - Health and Well Being – Washington Healthy Lifestyles Project delivered for more than 4 years by the Washington Millennium Centre provides a range of support, guidance and information to aid residents make 'healthy lifestyle' changes. Originally focused on addressing long term chronic conditions the project has evolved to meet the needs of the local community
 - Heritage and Culture – NE Business Innovation Centre have partnered with a number of Washington based heritage partners to deliver a joined-up approach to

delivering the Washington Heritage Strategy, working with Heritage Sunderland Partnership, and supporting the smaller heritage groups and organisations to be partners in promoting the Washington 'offer'. Key to this new, two year project is involving local residents and using heritage and culture to deliver the Area Committee's priorities such as building capacity, skills and knowledge, employment and improvements to the area.

Of the circa £850,000 Area Committee investment via its Neighbourhood Fund and the Neighbourhood Investment Capital fund, during 2021/22 (SIB), more than 66% has been either awarded to the VCS or aligned for the VCS to deliver.

Washington Area Committee has confirmed its commitment to supporting the local VCS where it can and has for some time ensured the Area Committee funding opportunities are targeted in the first instance to support collaborative working to deliver joint priorities.

Washington Area Committee is aware of capacity issues with many local organisations but where an organisation has indicated a willingness to help deliver a key priority, the Committee and relevant officers will work as flexibly as possible with those organisations to help meet any targets, milestones and agreed outcomes.

As evidenced above the local VCS continues to work well with the public sector partners and organisations and with other VCS organisations. However, it should be noted that both the Council/public sector and the VCS are constantly under pressure with regards to cuts in funding, changing priorities and criteria of external funders, and the need to deliver more with less. The pandemic has placed additional pressures on both the Sector and the Council to provide additional support and services – and that pressure continues. We now have the Sunderland VCS alliance established to support the Sector

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 being able to balance the need to deliver core services with taking on new work and partners – some of whom may require additional support to not only work differently but to work together.

The role of the smaller, grassroots organisations should not be underestimated. Many of these organisations do not appreciate the value of the services or activities they deliver to local residents. The Washington Area Network and the Washington Area Committee are fully committed to supporting the smaller groups and helping them grow – if they want to. 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 – a role being picked up by the Sunderland VCS Alliance.

Sunderland VCS Alliance

The Sunderland VCs Alliance Offer was established after consultation with the wider VCS through the Networks and is established to:

- Provide an Independent Strategic Voice for the sector
- Secure additional resources and capacity by
 - Attracting external funding
 - Making better use of community facilities
 - Working differently to deliver services
 - Avoiding duplication of provision
 - Work in partnerships with strategic partners and anchor institutions for the benefit of the VCS by facilitating collaboration and maximising Social Value

On an operational level this has resulted in the appointment of a Community Support Worker to each of the 5 areas of Sunderland. These posts are 'fixed term' posts funded through CLLD and Council to support capacity building. The Community Support workers are working through the VCS representatives of the areas, resulting in:

- A clear partnership to working with the wider voluntary sector and supporting needs at a local place-based level. This is especially relevant in terms of the smaller organisations.
- A major area of work has been that of supporting existing groups to recruit and attract volunteers. This has included Community Association Management Committees, residents' and Friends groups. This has also coincided with the necessity to increase membership and engagement in activities to ensure they are sustainable.
- The Alliance has developed a relationship with a number of private corporate businesses and with Sunderland City Council resulting in an undertaking for employees to engage and support the requests from local facilities, for example decorating a community association and maintenance to a local bowls club.
- Stronger governance and sustainable business models have been key areas with a number of community associations, residents' groups and small CICs supported. This has helped to focus the delivery, identify where they can support community needs and develop a more sustainable model whilst building capacity.
- Organisations have also been supported to access a range of funding opportunities and this has included assistance with the application process, developing and adopting relevant policies and procedures to support these, safe-guarding, risk assessments, DBS checks, and relevant insurance.
- Access to training has also been provided on a no cost basis.

Funding continues to be a pressure to many organisations and the Alliance has as part of its offer to draw funding into the sector to distribute to meet identified needs. This has resulted in and investment from the Community Renewal Fund which was a direct response to local need identified via the Area Networks. This has increased opportunities in the voluntary sector and to address an ageing workforce. The programme commenced in January and will continue for a period of eight months. In Washington, 5 organisations have undertaken to offer paid placements to local people.

The Community Support Worker has also provided 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 more recently, the Queens Jubilee fund – more than 30 local groups and organisations were awarded a grant for Queens Jubilee activities.

Advice and support is also being provided to address the ongoing needs of communities and linking to both current and future potential funding streams and social prescribing. This has also engaged organisations to undertake an evaluation of their services including looking at partnership work and has raised awareness in relation to becoming more sustainable and moving away from a reliance on short term funding.

The Alliance has carried out a training survey following an initial launch event. Key areas were identified by the VCS sector and training is currently being rolled out in response. In June and July 2022 training relating to social intelligence and funding will be taking place. This will be followed by sessions on governance, volunteering, social media, digital access and first aid. Digital access has been identified as a priority to enable local groups to engage and feel confident. A number of local groups have been directly supported to apply for grants to acquire hardware ranging from lap-tops, desktops and tablets with some also accessing funds to install wi-fi.

Sunderland City Council (SCC) has supported and facilitated the Area Networks via the Area Arrangements Service. Regular 'area' Network meetings are organised and this service leads on developing the Council's relationship with the Voluntary and Community sector, responsible for identifying and maximising opportunities to work together to strengthen community resilience and capacity. The service also supports the relationship between Area Committee/ Neighbourhood & Community Board, and the VCS to maximise residents influence over local service delivery through regular reporting to the Area Committees and involvement in the delivery of the local area priorities. Together with the Sunderland VCS Alliance, the council is also committed to ensuring the

sector benefits from strategic programmes and approaches – e.g., Community Wealth Building Strategy, Social Value, managing and supporting volunteers and volunteering

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 volunteer and volunteering to deliver many of the projects, activities and initiatives for the benefit of the local community.

“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”. This was a quote from the last report - and remains true now.

The Washington VCS has a long history of working together although 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.

2021/22 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. A number of small-scale projects and organisations have successfully built new partnerships working together and providing a range of activities and services for users and residents. In particular, the sector and local residents came together to support the most vulnerable during the pandemic, with the Area Hubs leading on co-ordinating support – shopping, prescriptions, befriending and regular phone calls, and organising local volunteers. That work continues through the collaborative approach now embedded in locality working.

Success stories from the Network members for 2021/22

- The Area Hub and the Health Partnership established to provide support for vulnerable residents during the pandemic continues to provide much needed support and co-ordination of services – Community Opportunities, Washington MIND, ShARP and Washington Millennium Centre
- A variety of events at different venues delivered by VCS organisations across Washington – Christmas Events and Celebrations, Mining Heritage Fayre, Bonfire and Fireworks Evening, Washington Illuminations, Washington Village Christmas Festival, Springwell Village Family Fest to name a few
- Expanding the use of community buildings – new user groups and activities
- Refurbishment and capital improvements for community buildings
- New relationships between the sector organisations and businesses
- Success of Clean and Green Programme which includes volunteering, community clean ups and a number of community groups leading on improving green spaces and places.
- More activities programmes delivered for young people across Washington.
- A range of ‘partnerships’ established with a number of organisations working together and supporting smaller groups and organisations
- Recent events (Covid) identified how the Council / Area Committee were able to work alongside local projects to identify and support those local residents most in need.
- The establishment of working relationship with the Sunderland VCS Alliance via the Area Network Representatives and the support delivered by the Community Support Worker

Challenges facing the sector

- Ensuring that smaller, usually volunteer lead grassroots organisations are able to participate in the work of the Area VCS Network remains a priority for the Network. We need to continue to develop appropriate ways for smaller organisations to get involved and be engaged.
- Need to grow volunteers who can step in and support some of the more ‘aging’ committees and governance structures of VCS groups and organisations

- Funding and fund raising has been identified across the board as a key challenge. Many of the larger organisations highlight the need for longer term funding to support core costs as organisations struggle to deliver more with less and to sustain core interventions that have worked whilst responding to the shorter-term opportunities which come along.
- Changing landscape of funders and funding strategies – less money available and competing priorities
- Increased demand - organisations are also struggling with trying to continue to deliver services to more people and having the time to seek additional funding to support the organisation going forward.
- Sustaining the programmes and activities that are proving to have a positive impact but have been piloted using short term funding.
- Longer term sustainability business planning – being able to future proof organisations
- Meeting the ever-changing needs of the local community – continue to be able to support staff/workers to deal with clients with higher levels of need and more complex issues. More and more local residents need help and whilst the local VCS are willing to try and help as many as possible, the challenge is the capacity of organisations and their staff.

Priorities for the Washington VCS

- Promote the Network and Alliance role in being key to supporting smaller grassroots organisations to grow and develop and be informed and engaged at whatever level they require
- Improve the use of community buildings to help sustain VCS organisations who contribute to delivering key services and activities for the local community
- Longer term sustainable funding for many organisations is required especially for those pilot initiatives which have proven to be successful – Time 2 Care, Washington Healthy Lifestyles
- Development of meaningful partnerships and collaboration and identification of joint priorities which contribute to Washington Area Committee's future plans and priority setting

The next 12 months

- The strengthening of the links between the Sunderland VCS Alliance and the Network organisations
- The Alliance has consulted with the VCS sector to influence and inform the emerging independent model. Workshops were held in each area as well as a city wide one. Key to the future of the Alliance will be the involvement of the VCS in ensuring they shape what is required to effectively support sustainability. Conversely the Alliance can be representative in terms of enabling a more equitable access to empower organisations from the smallest to the largest.
- Continue to roll out the Sunderland VCS Alliance 'offer' to meet some of the challenges identified by the Sector
 - Promoting funding opportunities
 - Carrying out tailored grant funding searches for your organisation
 - Critical friend: Checking over a funding application, before it's submitted
 - Sourcing statistical information, evidence of need and strategic fit to help with identifying a gap in service, development opportunities or securing funding
 - Business planning to increase income and service offer
 - Supporting organisations with their financial and governance standards relevant to their legal structure, as an example access to templates of policies and procedures
 - Volunteering: Advertising, recruiting, training and DBS checks. The Alliance is the key lead for recruiting, supporting and helping sustain volunteering – previously identified as one of the key challenges for smaller groups
 - Marketing and publicity such as setting up a Facebook page, website, blogs

- Learning from others and sharing good practices via e-bulletin and learning events
 - Training and taster sessions
 - Management Committee support and advice, for example, role of a Chair, managing grievances, etc.
 - Networking, Area events and partnership work via Area Networks
- Continue to support the local VCS organisations with Area Committee funding opportunities, targeted in the first instance to support collaborative working to deliver joint priorities.
- VCS partners continue to be supported to provide a one stop service to residents within each locality