



Report to Cabinet

Date:	2 March 2021
Title:	Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE) Strategic Framework
Relevant councillor(s):	Cllr Gareth Williams
Author and/or contact officer:	Claire Hawkes, Service Director Localities and Strategic Partnerships
Ward(s) affected:	All
Recommendations:	To approve the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector Strategic Framework included at appendix A.

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 The launch of the new Buckinghamshire Council on 1 April coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The local response highlighted the strong partner relationships that exist in the county with the Voluntary Community Social Enterprise sector. Our response showed how swiftly we could collaborate, adapt services, and embrace new ways of working under immense pressure. It also demonstrated the need to think differently, creatively, and be innovative in the ways that sectors work together. New, stronger alliances have been formed with a focus on protecting our vulnerable residents, and a common goal to work together for Buckinghamshire. It is vital that we continue to collaborate effectively at every level to build stronger, safer and more resilient communities and improve health and wellbeing.
- 1.2 The framework seeks to demonstrate the value Buckinghamshire council has for the sector and the importance of strategic collaborative working. It aims to provide a high-level guide for partnership working with the VCSEs and act as a springboard for discussions around the needs of our communities.
- 1.3 There is a need to be responsive, flexible, and adaptive to changing needs - this will not be a static document. It will be underpinned by an action plan, co-produced with sectors and partners, and will continually evolve. The VCSE Recovery Board will be the key vehicle to drive the development of the action plan.

2. Content of report

- 2.1 Buckinghamshire has a diverse Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSEs) with established links with all legacy councils. VCSEs are widely recognised for their fundamental role in strengthening communities, in delivering shared priorities and offering referral pathways through signposting, prevention or early intervention. The sector can be agile, often flexing far quicker than statutory organisations and are in a unique position of trust which offers invaluable insight and a different perspective.
- 2.2 The Council (all legacy councils, shadow council and as a new unitary authority) have spoken many times about the value of the sector. Relationships were accelerated during the pandemic with the sector being instrumental in the community response. We saw how it was possible to swiftly collaborate, adapt and embrace new ways of working.
- 2.3 The pandemic highlighted the community spirit right across the county. Local 'pop up' support groups now join the more established not for profit organisations to further diversify the voluntary and community sector offer. It signalled an appetite for volunteering when the offer is appealing and a new way of looking at community resilience.
- 2.4 No single organisation can solve complex problems. Close working and a culture of genuine partnership has been crucial to understanding and meeting communities' needs during the crisis and will be for recovery and renewal phases to come. New and stronger alliances have been formed united by a common goal of protecting vulnerable residents.
- 2.5 The VCSE Recovery Board was established as one of the four thematic partnerships set up for tackling the long term social, economic and environment challenges arising from Covid-19 pandemic in the county. It brings together senior officers from key organisations to provide invaluable insight and planned response. This group represent distinct aspects of the very diverse sector and help to drive forward thematic discussions, understand the wider VCSE landscape with its changing fragility and risks as well as maximising the collective impact of recovery opportunities. It quickly become evident that this model of working (not predicated on funding) has significant value. The sector's diversity is a great asset but makes it very hard to engage strategically with, there is often duplication and missed opportunities.
- 2.6 The VCSE Recovery Board enables a space for those strategic conversations, for healthy challenge and call to action within the sector. The board has a guiding principle of taking a pan-Bucks system-wide approach where there is 'no wrong door'. It is hoped that the board creates a legacy of working well together and the

model continues long after the pandemic. Several board members are committing resource to help strengthen communications across the very diverse sector, map the new the informal local community support offer which will add to community resilience and develop strong links with community boards.

- 2.7 The partnership approach during the pandemic has been seen both nationally and locally as exemplary. The VCSEs comment how they are feeling valued as a strategic partner and looking forward to continuing to work with the Council to support Buckinghamshire to be a great place to live, work and grow up in. Other statutory partners are also welcoming the new mature collaborative relationship with the VCSE sector.

Approach to developing the strategy

- 2.8 The VCSE Recovery Board and the officers from the Localities service hosted a workshop in August coalescing a group of VCSE leaders keen to be involved in the codesign. A significant number were interested, seeing this as a positive statement of partnership intent from the new unitary council, with the chair posting afterwards on social media “in 30 years I have never seen such a can do attitude”. The session clarified why now was the right time for a strategic framework and statement of intent for future working. Not only is there a forming of a new council to be the catalyst for new approaches but it would build on the energy seen during three lockdowns and send a message around the need for strategic collaboration on the recovery response and renewal of communities.
- 2.9 The workshop explored approaches other councils had taken; some had quickly produced short high-level documents showing a snapshot of intended key areas of focus whereas others took years to come to fruition with considerable engagement and detail which risked losing the essence of the original ambition.
- 2.10 The framework is intended to be a statement of intent to help show the new council values the sector both the traditional sector and the new community groups seen in the pandemic. It is intended to be a helpful ‘coat hanger’ for other policies, developing culture change and a springboard for discussions. The framework will also help leverage external funding into the county as it provides the evidence of commitment to collaboration which is often asked for.
- 2.11 The Voluntary and Community and Social Enterprise Sector Strategic Framework (appendix A) has three deliberately very broad aims:
- Build Collaborative Partnerships
 - Develop a strong Voluntary and Community Sector
 - Grow a Legacy of Volunteering

- 2.12 Each aim is very broad to allow a flexible and creative approach to be taken. The framework gives further explanation and hints at the types of activity under each theme. The VCSE Recovery Board partners felt it was important that it offers a broad basis for discussion. As the community board model develops and recovery plans unfold it will be helpful to explore with the sector and communities what these aims mean at a community level.

3. Other options considered

- 3.1 Whilst not having a strategic framework is an option, the council has highlighted on numerous occasions the value it places upon the VCSE sector and the need for innovative collaborative approaches.

4. Legal and financial implications

- 4.1 No legal implications. The VCSE strategic framework is not linked to funding requirements. The council wishes to have a good partnership with the VCSE including a relationship that is not predicated on funding.

5. Corporate implications

- 5.1 The Strategic Framework relates to all four key priorities in the Buckinghamshire Council Corporate Plan:
- strengthening our communities
 - improving our environment
 - protecting the vulnerable
 - increasing prosperity

6. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

- 6.1 The Cabinet Member for Communities and Public Health has been heavily involved in the VCSE Recovery Board and supported the summer workshop.
- 6.2 In November the Localism and Communities Select Committee received an update on the approach and outline of the plans. The committee welcomed the co-designed approach taken and the three broad aims. They stressed the importance of building on the partnership work seen during the pandemic and reiterated the value placed on the sector. The committee also welcomed the VCSE Recovery Board focusing on monitoring the VCSE landscape highlighting that the sector would be critical in the recovery phase, yet it too would have been impacted by Covid and health checks should be both on communities and the sector. The committee were supportive of

the proposed approach especially the plan around a volunteering model that is forward thinking.

7. Communication, engagement & further consultation

- 7.1 The Localities service plan includes several briefings to ensure all members are aware of the work being undertaken both in the service, key themes emerging from the VCSE Recovery Board and financial assistance. VCSE organisations are critical partners and feature heavily in all community boards.

8. Next steps and review

- 8.1 Following discussions at Cabinet, the next steps include engagement sessions to help understand what success looks like and develop an action plan that will underpin the strategy and provide the much-needed road map to focus collaboration and energy. Given the current climate it is critical that this is responsive, flexible, and adaptive to changing needs as such the action plan will not be a static document but continually evolve. A VCSE Recovery Board workshop will look at the engagement plan with a view to holding conversations with the wider sector, to take place during March/April with a view to having the first draft action plan completed by the end of April. In addition, an engagement session will be held for the Senior Leadership Team to ensure service directors are able to feed into plans, explore connections and identify next steps.

9. Your Questions and Views (for key decisions)

- 9.1 If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report please get in touch with the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider please inform the democratic services team. This can be done by telephone 01296 382343 or email democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk.

