

Divisions Affected - All

CABINET – 19th July 2022

Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy

Report by Corporate Director for Customers, Organisational Development and Resources

RECOMMENDATION

1. **Cabinet is RECOMMENDED** to approve the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Strategy for 2022 – 2027.

Executive Summary

2. The Council has developed a five year Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) strategy to set out our commitment to support a sustainable sector, through co-production with the VCS, district and city council colleagues and Oxfordshire County Councillors.
3. The scope of this corporate strategy is to strengthen our relationship with the sector as a whole, and ensure that over the coming years we continue to build on partnership working for the benefit of our residents. Individual service delivery, contracts and grants are out scope of this strategy.
4. The strategy has five priorities and a number of underpinning commitments that were agreed through a VCS and public sector co-production working group, based on the input from externally held workshops, attended by members of the VCS. The priorities are:
 - Collaboration and Networking
 - Volunteering and Social Action
 - Capacity and Skills
 - Supporting a Sustainable Sector
 - Reducing Inequalities

Background

5. Oxfordshire County Council recognises and values the critical work the local VCS does across Oxfordshire, and the positive impact this has on residents.

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Local Government alone cannot create flourishing people and communities, and the local VCS provides a vital contribution to help achieve this.

6. Collaboration with and across the VCS notably increased during Covid-19, with new groupings of the sector coming together regularly to tackle problems collectively – sharing knowledge and in some cases resources, in ways and at a pace that has not previously been seen. This has included a new level of engagement and collaboration with the statutory sector. There is considerable ambition within the VCS to retain this new culture to drive efficiency, flexibility, and responsiveness.
7. In 2021 the Policy team set up an internal officer working group to consider the future scope of the VCS Infrastructure Contract, which following extensions expired in March 2022, with a Funding Agreement in place for 22/23. However, initial conversations highlighted a broader opportunity and the appetite to collaborate on a cross organisational VCS Strategy that would allow the consideration of the Council's relationship with the sector and commissioning of services as a whole.
8. The internal working group comprises of representatives from Adults and Social Care, Public Health, Children's Services and Cultural Services and is led by the Policy and Strategy team.
9. Following this, in September 2021 Cabinet approved the development of a VCS strategy, to be co-produced with the sector. With the aim to consider the Council's commitment to the sector, and analyse and align relationships and funding – to create a clear and cohesive strategic approach across Oxfordshire as a whole.

Response to People Overview Scrutiny Committee

10. At its June 2022 meeting, the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the draft Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy.
11. **Recommendation 1: That the Council undertakes specific additional consultation with smaller voluntary sector groups to ensure its proposals support their needs also.** The Council will continue to regularly engage and consult over the next five years with the local VCS. As a part of this, we will reach out to groups that the Committee felt were less represented in the previous engagement and consultation stages.
12. **Recommendation 2: That the Council uses the forthcoming work by the consultation and engagement team to seek informed views on children and young people on the draft voluntary sector strategy.** The Council will seek to engage the views of children and young people on the voluntary and community sector strategy, as part of the consultation and engagement team's workstream. For instance we will explore engaging children and young people on the Reducing Inequalities element of the strategy through the first sounding board event in September, which will focus on EDI.

13. **Recommendation 3: That the Council assures itself that the draft strategy does not deprioritise the needs of young people over older people.** The Council has sought to ensure that the wording in the strategy is reflective to cover all service areas equally. The strategy is designed to be a document that impacts all service areas' relationships with the VCS, to achieve a cohesive Council-wide approach. An internal working group including representatives from Children's Services, Adult Social Care, Public Health and Cultural Services fed into the development of the strategy and will continue to meet regularly over the next five years to proactively review the framework and enable services to deliver tangible outcomes.
14. **Recommendation 4: That the Council investigates the reasons behind the difference in spending on commissioned services for adults and young people, and investigates whether the difference in approach means opportunities for better services or value for money are being missed.** This recommendation is noted and work is underway outside the scope of the strategy to consider spending across the voluntary and community sector.
15. **Recommendation 5: That the Council amends its draft strategy to prevent the impression being given that the needs of children and young people are of lesser priority than older people.** The strategy has been reviewed to provide all encompassing language and to remove any inadvertent perceived prioritisation of service areas or residential groups.

Scope of Strategy

16. The Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy is a five-year strategy with a vision to enable a strong, diverse and vibrant VCS across Oxfordshire, to help deliver positive change for our communities. It aims to strengthen the relationship between the Council and sector and ensure that over the coming years we continue to build on partnership working for the benefit of our residents.
17. Individual service areas and Council contracts and grants are out of scope and will be reviewed in parallel to the implementation of this strategy.
18. The strategy aims to support the entirety of the local voluntary and community sector, from small informal groups, to larger more established charitable organisations, as well as organisations working in urban and rural areas of the County. The Council recognises that our residents are best supported when the community eco-system around them is supported, and we acknowledge that this is comprised of many varying groups and organisations that face different challenges and have different needs.
19. The strategy is a high-level document which allows for flexibility over the coming years as the sector and Council's needs change. However, it will be underpinned by a framework which will ensure meaningful changes are implemented and monitored. It is intended that services will be able to put

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forward their own actions that will contribute towards the ambitions of the strategy, as well as a central oversight within the Policy team that will allow for coordination of actions at a corporate level that will spread across services.

20. The progress of the strategy will be monitored yearly by Oxfordshire Stronger Communities Alliance (OSCA). A partnership group that represents the interests of the voluntary and community sector in Oxfordshire, and is jointly chaired by the Cabinet Member for Public Health and Equalities, and the Bishop of Dorchester.

Internal Engagement

21. Co-production and engagement have been central to the development of the strategy, in recognition that it will not achieve its aims unless there is full internal and external buy-in.
22. Alongside the input of the internal officer working group, the Policy team has attended and engaged with all DLTs, ensuring that the strategy is relevant to all directorates and service areas.
23. Member engagement has also been vital, with a Cabinet VCS Strategy Sub-Group created enabling cabinet members to oversee the development of the strategy as a whole. The group is led by the Cabinet Member for Public Health and Equalities, and also attended by the Cabinet members for Children, Education and Young People's Services, Climate Change Delivery and Environment and Adult Social Care.
24. Furthermore, the Cabinet member for Public Health and Equalities, supported by the Policy Team, attended the 2022 January round of Locality meetings to gain input and understand from members the issues the VCS were facing in their local areas.

Co-production with the Sector

25. The voluntary and community sector have been integral to the development of the strategy, and are the primary audience and stakeholder of the strategy.
26. In December 2021, we held two workshops with the sector to gather evidence about their challenges and priorities, as well as understand how they would want to work in co-production on the strategy. The workshops were aimed at anyone volunteering or working for a VCS organisation, with an open link to sign up in order to reach as many of the sector as possible. Over 90 different representatives registered for the workshops, ranging from very small volunteer run community groups, to larger nationally affiliated charities. District and City Council colleagues also took part and were an important part of the conversation.

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27. Feedback from the workshops demonstrated there was appetite within the sector to be more closely involved in the co-production of the strategy. A VCS Strategy Co-production External Steering Group was set up to take forward the development of the strategy. All representatives that registered to attend the initial workshops were encouraged to put forward their interest in joining, with 10 in total coming forward. District and City colleagues were also invited to be part of the group, to ensure the strategy was in alignment with their priorities.
28. The VCS organisations represented were:
- Active Oxfordshire
 - Age UK Oxfordshire
 - Alzheimer's Society
 - Asylum Welcome
 - CAG Oxfordshire
 - Community First Oxfordshire (CFO)
 - One-Eighty
 - Oxford Neighbourhood Watch
 - Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action (OCVA)
 - Oxfordshire Mind
29. The VCS Strategy Co-Production Steering Group agreed to work with the Policy team to co-produce recommendations and commitments for the strategy. The agreed Terms of Reference for the group highlighted this work would be developed through:
- Agreeing the elements of co-production and drafting of the strategy.
 - Outlining challenges and identify key priorities for improvement in ways of working between the VCS and Council.
 - Producing recommendations and proposals for consideration for the VCS Strategy, that will be implemented over the coming years.
30. Following a presentation of the feedback from the December workshops and the sector's challenges, the group agreed on the five priorities, Collaboration and Networking, Volunteering and Social Action, Capacity and Skills, Supporting a Sustainable Sector and Reducing Inequalities. The group, representing the wider VCS, then met between March and May to discuss and agree the commitments that sit underneath the priorities.
31. In May, a four-week consultation was launched on the co-produced priorities and commitments on the Let's Talk Oxfordshire Platform. The consultation was primarily aimed at and promoted to the voluntary and community sector and has also been shared with members, however it was also displayed openly on the public Let's Talk website.
32. The consultation closed on the 12th June, with 45 responses. Overall, the feedback was supportive of the priorities and commitments. A full consultation report is included in the annexes.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

33. The strategy has been developed with the 2022-2025 Strategic Plan priorities and commitments in mind. There is a commitment under the strategic priority to prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents, to develop an enhanced long-term support offer for our voluntary and community sector partners. This strategy, alongside our ambitions for the long-term provision of the VCS Infrastructure Contract, will help to deliver this.
34. Furthermore, there are strong themes throughout the strategy that build upon the commitments within the priorities to support carers and the social care system, tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire, put action to address climate change at the heart of our work as well as the overall aim to work in partnership to achieve our vision.

Financial Implications

35. There are no immediate financial implications resulting from the strategy, the strategy has a long-term approach with a framework to follow. Many of the commitments, especially those sitting under creating a sustainable sector, have the potential to allow the Council to explore cross service delivery on some service areas and pooling of contracts.
36. Furthermore, any future project or programme proposals to support the VCS and the delivery of the strategy that requires budget or funding will be developed by the lead service and taken through the relevant sign off process

Comments checked by:

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Legal Implications

37. There are no legal implications arising from this report

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Equality & Inclusion Implications

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38. The VCS by its very nature engages with the most vulnerable in our communities. Over the past couple of years, there is new consideration in the VCS of their role in promoting equality and of the diversity within the sector itself. Therefore, one of the priorities within the strategy is 'Reducing Inequalities'.
39. Although reducing inequalities is vital in all of the priority areas of the strategy, it was felt that a dedicated priority to proactively tackle this area would lead to stronger actions. Partnership working with the VCS in this area will be pivotal in helping reduce inequalities across Oxfordshire.
40. An Equalities Impact assessment has been drafted to support the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy. No negative equalities implications have been identified.

Sustainability Implications

41. There are no negative climate action implications from the strategy. Within the priority 'Reducing Inequalities' there is a specific commitment to continue working with the VCS to address the effects of climate change and promote the circular economy, in order to reduce negative impacts on people living in areas of higher deprivation. This is in recognition of the need for us to work closely with the VCS, including the Climate Action Groups, to affect change in this area.
42. A Climate Impact assessment has been drafted to support the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy. No negative climate implications have been identified.

Risk Management

43. The creation of the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy is intended to build upon the strengthened relationship with the local VCS since the Covid-19 pandemic. The strategy also looks to build their capacity and resilience, therefore aiming to reduce risks to the sector, which in turn would reduce the risks of services they deliver to residents.
44. By not creating a Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy, there is a risk that the local sector may not feel like a valued and listened to partner. Furthermore, there is a risk that the Council's approach to the sector continues to be disparate and inconsistent.
45. To reduce any risks that the strategy would not recognise or address the challenges the local VCS is facing, co-production, engagement and consultation was vital throughout the production of the strategy.

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Annex: Annex 1 – Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy 2022-2027
Annex 2 – Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy Consultation Report

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July 2022