

# VOLUNTARY SECTOR STRATEGY – REPORT OF THE PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Cllr Ian Corkin, Chair of the People Overview & Scrutiny Committee  
19 July 2022

## RECOMMENDATION

### 1. The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to —

- a) Agree to respond to the recommendations contained in the body of this report:

*Recommendation 1: That the Council undertakes specific additional consultation with smaller voluntary sector groups to ensure its proposals support their needs also.*

*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.*

*Recommendation 3: That the Council assures itself that the draft strategy does not deprioritise the needs of younger people over older people.*

*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.*

*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.*

- b) Agree that relevant officers will continue to update Scrutiny for 12 months on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations, or until they are completed (if earlier).

## REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000 as amended by the Localism Act 2011, the People Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that the Cabinet respond to a report submitted to it by Scrutiny within two months of the date of being served this report. The Scrutiny Committee accepts service to mean the date of the Cabinet meeting, and not the publication of the agenda.

## INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3. At its meeting on 16 June 2022, the Scrutiny Committee considered the Cabinet Strategic Grants Review report.
4. The Committee would like to thank Councillor Mark Lygo, Cabinet portfolio holder for Public Health and Equalities for presenting the report and answering questions, Claire Taylor, Corporate Director for Customers, Organisational Development and Resources for authoring the report and supporting the meeting, Emily Schofield, Interim Head of Strategy, and Karina Russell, Senior Policy Officer, for also supporting the meeting.

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5. Mark Lygo, Cabinet Member for Public Health and Equalities introduced the report. The Council recognised the value of the voluntary and community sector, contributing to society in ways that local government could not. During the pandemic public involvement in volunteering had increased substantially. 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. The Council, likewise, wished to build, develop and foster these relationships and outcomes. The embryo for this strategy was from an LGA peer review in 2019, with work continuing to develop the strategy from then on. In September 2021 the Cabinet approved the development of a VCS strategy, to be co-produced with the sector. The aim was 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.
6. Co-production and engagement had been central to the development of the strategy, with the Council going above and beyond what would be expected to garner the views of communities across the county. The Council had also directly engaged the district councils in the county, and via them parish councils also. Five priorities and a number of underpinning commitments were agreed through a VCS and public sector co-production working group, based on the input from an externally-held workshop. The priorities were:
  - (a) Collaboration and Networking
  - (b) Volunteering and Social Action
  - (c) Capacity and Skills
  - (d) Supporting a Sustainable Sector
  - (e) Reducing Inequalities
7. The Council aimed to continue to promote and champion the VCS, strengthen partnership working, work collaboratively with the VCS to address long-term challenges, promote the value of social action and volunteering, upskill volunteers and address barriers to volunteering, help with VCS with access to and understanding of data about local communities, and tackle inequalities, including digital exclusion.

8. In response, the Committee devoted significant discussion to i) hard to reach communities and ways in which their views had been sought, and ii) areas of spending on commissioned services and whether these sums accorded with the Council's priorities. On these issues it makes a total of five recommendations.

### **Hard to Reach Groups**

9. One issue raised over the report by the Committee concerns the preponderance of involvement by bigger voluntary and community sector organisations in the more detailed element of the consultation exercise, the working group. The Committee does understand the reason for this: smaller organisations and individuals do have less spare capacity to dedicate, particularly towards strategic consultation. The point is also noted that a preponderance is not the same as complete uniformity, and that an individual and a number of grassroots organisations were able to participate within the working group. Nevertheless, understanding the reasons for this situation does not alter its consequences. The Committee is concerned that it is precisely those who do not have the time to give up to tell the Council about their needs to support and develop the voluntary and community sector whose voices need to be heard.
10. Three important points were made to the Committee at the meeting and are accepted as potentially contributing towards the lean towards consultation with bigger organisations. The first being that the strategy (and its consultation) were developed not from a pre-existing strategy. With plans and foci adapting during consultation, the approach to consultation may not cohere precisely with what would be deemed optimal when viewed retrospectively. The second being that conversations about developing voluntary sector capacity should clearly involve those with the most ability to contribute and build on any opportunities, which clearly bigger organisations do. The third is that the voluntary and community sector traverses a broad swathe from purely voluntary activity, all the way through to services commissioned by the Council, and that the appropriate stakeholders at each end are different. A large section of those the Council works with directly in the delivery of services are indeed bigger organisations. All three lean towards the involvement of larger groups. The Committee's concern, however, is to ensure that there is sufficient opportunity to hear the voices of those who are most in need or work with those most in need and have little support, that any strategy does not preclude them or overlook opportunities to involve them. The Committee seeks assurance that this is the case.
11. The Committee specifically raised questions over how proactive the Council had been in sharing its survey, the least intensive form of consultation. Notably, it has employed established networks to cascade awareness out. This is fine and proper, particularly as part of the reasons for such networks is to facilitate communication between the Council and groups it does not have regular contact with, but it does not address the challenge of ensuring those who do not participate in established networks are targeted. Social media targeting, for example, allows very tightly defined targeting and was not

undertaken. The Committee would welcome greater engagement with smaller, indeed micro or informal groups, to ensure that a full balance of views are represented.

**Recommendation 1: That the Council undertakes specific additional consultation with smaller voluntary sector groups to ensure its proposals support their needs also.**

12. One particular group the Committee is concerned may not have had sufficient opportunity to share their views is younger people. This is not to say that the Council has not engaged younger people; but there is a recognition that informed consultation requires time and effort to ensure that the issues are understood. The Committee welcomes the news that the consultation and engagement team will be working with young people to ascertain their views on particular topics. The Committee feels this is exactly the type of forum that would allow informed consultation, and would like to see children and young people consulted on the strategy as part of the work undertaken by the consultation and engagement team.

**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.**

### **Spending on Commissioned Services**

13. The second issue identified by the Committee shares a similar concern to the previous section, regarding younger people, but expressed within a different context. The report presented to the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee stated that the draft Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy was 'developed with the 2022-2025 Strategic Plan priorities and commitments in mind' and that '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, [and] put action to address climate change at the heart of our work'. Absent from this is any explicit reference to children and young people. A number of other priorities within the Strategic Plan are cited specifically, but not 'opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential'. This gives the perception that there is a hierarchy of priorities and that opportunities for young people do not fall within the top tier.
14. This concern is backed up by other data. In particular, the draft strategy states that 99% of the Council's VCS spend is on contracts, and within that, 78% is spent on adults, vs 12% for children. That represents a spending ratio of six and half to one. The Committee's view is that many of the issues faced by adult social care around capacity and staffing are felt equally within children's social care, and that the needs of younger people can be just as relevantly met by the voluntary sector as those of adults. As such, a greater equivalence of spend might be expected.
15. A number of factors do, in reality, soften the conclusion that children's services are of less of a priority than adults. For instance, the fact that the strategy seeks to support the voluntary sector as a whole means that it has neither a

children or adults focus. Likewise, the fact that Children's Services were consulted and did not feel the needs of children and young people were being deprioritised. And finally, the relative size of the cohorts in need of social care services may distort the spending figures. Nevertheless, the ease with which that conclusion could be reached means there are a number of questions which would benefit from being addressed prior to endorsement of the strategy.

16. The Committee suggests that it is, first and foremost, necessary to review the strategy and seek assurance that it is, indeed, not weighed against the needs and interests of younger people. The second issue requiring consideration is why such a big disparity between services commissioned to the voluntary sector exists between children and adults' services. On the face of it, two different approaches are being taken, and the Committee feels it necessary that this is looked into to ensure that opportunities to deliver better services or drive greater value for money in one or other service is not currently being overlooked. Finally, on the assumption that the Council is assured that the strategy does not prioritise adults over children and young people, that it re-edits the draft strategy to ensure that this impression is not given.

**Recommendation 3: That the Council assures itself that the draft strategy does not deprioritise the needs of younger people over older people.**

**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.**

**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.**

## **FURTHER CONSIDERATION**

17. The Committee does not intend to revisit this topic again specifically in this municipal year. Members will, however, be reviewing progress against any actions agreed to by Cabinet and the Committee would like to be kept up to date, particularly in relation to the outcomes of recommendation 4.
18. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.
19. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

20. Technically, a response made by Cabinet at the September meeting would fall one day outside the legal timeframe for making a response. The Committee is happy to accommodate this if necessary.

Annex: Annex 1: Pro forma template for Cabinet response

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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