

Medway Voluntary and Community Sector Survey

August 2019

1. How do you view the current financial sustainability of the voluntary and community sector in Medway as a whole?

There is a wide range of responses from the 40 organisations that participated in this question, ranging from poor to good. However, the vast majority was a negative response, with language such as poor, fragile, vulnerable and challenging the most common response. The overall message was that there is genuine concern for the long term sustainability of the organisations involved and the sector as a whole. The survey suggested the situation was particularly hard for smaller organisations.

The rationale offered was due to a distinct lack of funding available for the sector, but increasing costs. When funding has been available the short term and non-reoccurring nature of the funds was cited as an issue, along with competition between the sector for any available finance.

Once again smaller organisations were cited as being at most pressure as they particularly lacked the resource and sometimes financial skills to make successful bids.

2. How would you assess volunteering levels within the sector?

The sector again had a wide range of responses to this question but a much more even split with equal number rating the levels poor, ok or excellent. A number of references were made to smaller organisations and specific community groups finding it harder to recruit, than larger national charities.

Barriers to volunteering that were identified include increase paid working hours and more older people providing childcare for grandchildren, reducing the amount of people available to volunteer. Another barrier was also the potentially lengthy sign up process to become a volunteer, this includes processes such as DBS checks and statutory training.

There was a need stated for the council and other public bodies to better acknowledge the crucial role that volunteers play and consider how they can better support them and their organisation, with suggestions like free training. Suggestions also include council workers offering volunteering time and better promotions of volunteering opportunities.

3. How would you assess the current relationship between the voluntary and community sector and Medway Council?

There is a wide range of feelings about the relationship between the sector and the local authority, ranging from poor to a couple rating it as excellent. The balance of response is very mixed, with suggestions that the relationship is quite inconsistent between individual departments and part of the organisation and the wider sector. There are some excellent partnership working examples given and some suggestions of how the relationship can be improved. An example of this offered was the VCS Better Together Consortium, and the Rough Sleeper Initiative.

Barriers to a productive relationship include a high staff turnover at the council making it hard to build trust and establish close working, the council being slow to make decisions. Two sector organisations also stated the need for the sector itself to consider how they can best grow this relationship and consider their own leadership skills and experiences.

A significant number of responses also indicated that organisations felt a sense of frustration that the work they did was not necessarily valued nor was the sector understood. Suggestions to improve this include improving communications, engaging the VCS in more decisions and establishing a more formal commitment to work better together. This would help all parties to ensure the VCS was in the best possible position to support residents in the local system.

4. What can Medway Council and other public agencies do, to better support the sector to deliver its objectives?

Suggestions include

- Establish a sustainable funding model for the sector
- Establish a formal document to demonstrate the council's commitment and recognition of the sector and a commitment to working together
- Ensure all future VCS contracts are not short term and consider how local organisations can be prioritised
- Support with recruiting new volunteers
- Support organisations with free training
- Establish ways to ensure small organisations are better supported, potentially with a mentoring service
- Consider a single officer contact to better facilitate communication with the sector
- Allow the sector to benefit from the council's buildings and outside spaces
- Ensure future strategies and plans are co-designed with the sector
- Review business rates and provider assistance with other overhead costs
- Facilitate internal communications within the council so more employees know about the sector and individual organisations
- Support VCS organisations events and attend activities
- Introduce feedback loops with the council and sector so both can stay updated with their relative progress

5. Please let us know what community and voluntary sector organisation you represent

The responders that stated their organisation were:

- Age UK Medway
- Rainham Bereavement Friendship Groups Q.A.V.S.
- The Net Community Hub
- One Big Family
- The centre for Independent Living Kent
- The South East Gender Initiative / Medway Gender & Sexual Diversity Centre
- Transgender, Non-binary, Intersex / LGBTQ+
- Healthwatch Medway
- Medway Foodbank
- Improving Mental Health Provision CIC
- Medway Diversity Forum
- The Friends of the Wisdom Hospice Limited
- Megan CIC
- Not for profit independent befriending service
- Medway Parents Support Group for ADHD
- Kent Association for the Blind (KAB)
- Medway VCS Leaders Group
- Medway Inter Faith Action
- Health Action Charity Organisation MBE (HACO)
- FASD Awareness South East
- Medway Neurological Network
- wHoo Cares
- Medway Youth Trust
- St Nicholas Church, Strood
- Tillskills LTD (Mooreskills)
- Action with Communities in Rural Kent
- Medway Voluntary Action
- Making Miracles
- Carers FIRST
- Halpern Charitable Foundation

Other contributing sector organisations offered the groups they support and area of focus, rather than the name of their own organisation.