

## **BUSINESS SUPPORT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**2 JULY 2020**

### **VOLUNTARY SECTOR TASK GROUP**

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#### Summary

This report asks the Committee to consider the final report of the Voluntary Sector Task Group. The report also provides Members with an update on activity in the voluntary sector and the Council in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

#### 1. Budget and Policy Framework

1.1 Under Chapter 4 of the Constitution (Part 5 – Overview and Scrutiny Rules - paragraph 21.1 (xviii), each overview and scrutiny committee has the responsibility to appoint time limited Task Groups to undertake in-depth reviews within the overall programme of reviews agreed each year by the Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee and to make recommendations to the Council and Leader and Cabinet as appropriate. The topic of this review is within the remit of this Committee.

1.2 The recommendations arising from the review are consistent with the Council's Policy Framework.

#### 2. Background

2.1 In June 2011 the Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to exercise a more pro-active role than previously in prioritising the programme of in-depth scrutiny review work. This followed a Council decision that a maximum of three reviews or themed meetings can be undertaken annually across all four Overview and Scrutiny Committees, in light of shrinking capacity across the organisation. This represented a shift from the previous position of multiple Task Groups, with no fixed timelines, running at any one time.

- 2.2 In line with best practice, the Committee also decided to adopt a more systematic approach to the selection of topics, with nominations submitted by each Committee, taking into account suggestions and advice from Directors.
- 2.3 This review was not part of the programme of in-depth scrutiny reviews approved by Members in November 2017 but was agreed by this Committee in August 2019 following discussions between Members and representatives of the local voluntary sector. From the start the intention was for this review to be more of a lighter touch than previous scrutiny reviews.
- 2.4 The Membership of the Task Group comprised Councillors Buckwell (Chairman), Etheridge, Maple, Murray and Tejan.
3. Scope of the Review
- 3.1 The Task Group agreed the following key lines of enquiry:
- i) Consider national guidance on building an effective partnership between the statutory sector and the voluntary sector.*
  - ii) Review best practice and learning from elsewhere, including Compacts and sustainable funding models.*
  - iii) Review feedback so far from the Voluntary Sector to the survey commissioned by the Business Support O&S Committee and discuss extension of the survey to other Groups as deemed appropriate plus possible further discussion with those Groups.*
  - iv) Consider the impact of voluntary sector initiatives in Medway reported to the Business Support O&S Committee since April 2018.*
  - v) Review the issues and action identified by the Business Support O&S Committee on 22 August 2019 to further strengthen partnership working between the Council and the Voluntary Sector recognising that work is needed to improve the strategic oversight of commissioning and interaction with the voluntary sector across the Council is beyond social care and health/public health.*
  - vi) In light of the creation of a Medway and Swale Integrated Care Partnership, consider how volunteers could be aligned to support the work of the Partnership to deliver better outcomes for people with long term multiple health problems. Partnership working between the Council and the Voluntary Sector recognising that work is needed to improve the strategic oversight of commissioning and interaction with the voluntary sector across the Council is beyond social care and health/public health.*
4. Methodology
- 4.1 The methodology adopted by the Task Group is set out in its report (Appendix 1).

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations of the Task Group

5.1 The Task Group have made seven recommendations which are aimed at helping the voluntary sector by strengthening the relationship between the Council and the sector, examining the issue of sustainable funding and using some of the tools already available to the Council (i.e. S106 contributions and procurement) to provide additional funding and resources for the sector.

5.2 The recommendations of the Task Group are set out in full in the Appendix.

5.3 The Task Group concluded its review at the end of February 2020 and therefore this report was written before the current coronavirus pandemic took hold. The report would have been presented to the April meeting of the Committee, but this meeting had to be cancelled due to the pandemic.

## 6. Update on Voluntary Sector Activity since March

6.1 As part of the COVID 19 emergency response, the Council established a Voluntary and Community Sector Cell that was led by the Council's Public Health team. The cell had the following priorities:

1. Establish a community support hub that assisted residents with accessing food, prescriptions and social contact, working in partnership with third sector groups who had the same ambition
2. Co-ordinate voluntary sector organisations efforts to support residents negatively affected by COVID-19
3. Co-ordinate individual volunteers offers to support residents negatively affected by COVID-19
4. Support voluntary sector organisations who have experienced a large increase in demand due to COVID-19
5. Support existing voluntary sector organisations to maintain their long-term viability due to COVID-19
6. Pool collective insights so that potential scams are identified and reported to correct authorities

### Medway Council Coronavirus Support Hub

6.2 The Council established a Coronavirus Support Hub to support the most vulnerable residents on 24 March 2020. The core priorities were to support people with food and shopping, medicine and prescriptions, and social contact. The service was mainly staffed by redeployed public health staff and within 8 weeks the service had:

- Delivered 3,191 seven-day food parcels, equating to over 100,000 meals for vulnerable residents.
- Supported more than 200 residents with prescription collections, largely linking them with NHS volunteers.
- Linked 46 people with befriending services.
- 226 onward referrals for services such as mental health support, debt advice, social care and housing advice.
- The sport and leisure service added a home shopping support service in April and within 6 weeks were supporting over 300 residents with their weekly food shop.

- 6.3 This service will continue to be in place until deemed unnecessary by the Council leadership team.

#### Voluntary Sector Support Services

- 6.4 The community support hub was a system wide effort. Local charities, faith groups and community groups provided invaluable support to residents throughout the emergency period. Without their support council services would have been overwhelmed and residents would have experienced major difficulties accessing essential supplies and loneliness. The combined support that these groups provided to over 8,000 residents includes:

- More than 1,000 food parcels, resulting in over 20,000 meals
- 4,000 befriending calls to residents
- 500 shopping trips conducted
- 150 prescriptions collected
- Other tasks that were supported include linking up pen pals, zoom parties, gas and electric card top ups, daily activity packs and community challenges

#### Sector Insights and Feedback

- 6.5 Due to the scale of the emergency, the local authority played a more active role in the sector co-ordination but worked closely with MVA during the emergency period. This close collaboration allowed us to respond quickly and effectively communicate between the council and sector organisations, demonstrating the value in having an infra-structure contract. One of these key tasks were the sector surveys that MVA undertook, including asking what the sector was able to continue doing during lockdown, what the sector needs were including the need for additional volunteers, and what the level of financial need was. This feedback directly fed into the cell response and future plans. Highlights from the survey showed:

- A major reduction in charitable donations due to reduced fund-raising opportunities was threatening the existence of a large number of organisations
- concerns that national funding solutions would be slow to come through, heightening the sector's concerns
- Some services were experiencing a major peak in demand for services, due to the effect of the lockdown period
- Some third sector groups were not as digitally resilient as some private and public services, due to a lack of digital equipment and literacy

#### Kent Community Foundations Funding

- 6.6 To address some of these immediate concerns, the Council donated £50,000 to the Kent Community Foundation (KCF) Coronavirus Emergency [Fund](#). The focus of the Fund was to offer community organisations funding to deal with emerging issues in the community affecting vulnerable people as a result of the continuing threat of COVID-19. As of mid-May, the fund had supported a number of Medway organisations:

- 33 applications have been approved to Medway based organisations (14.8% of Kent total)
- Medway based organisations have received £97,723 of grants awarded (12.2% of total)

- A further 23 grants totalling £73,527 have been awarded to organisations who have described their area of work as either Kent and Medway, or countywide.

#### Bid writing training

- 6.7 In April the Government announced £370 million for smaller charities, including through a grant to the National Lottery Community Fund. In order to give Medway groups the best possible chance of being successful with their bids, the Council worked in partnership with Medway Voluntary Action to commission and promote three online training sessions on how to write a successful application.

#### Medway Voluntary Community Sector 'Better Together' Consortium

- 6.8 During COVID-19, this partnership has been actively supporting the communities of Medway, the Council, NHS Kent and Medway CCG, despite seeing a huge increase in demand for their business as usual services. Outputs include:

- Consortium members have been using their links to reach out to 'Hidden Carers', to find minority and seldom heard groups including the Roma community
- Healthwatch Medway are collating people's experiences and the impact of COVID-19 on all aspects of life and inequalities. They have published reports on the impact on care homes and one coinciding with deaf awareness week
- CAM are supporting the Housing 'Homeless' initiative with white goods/furniture. They have also been offering benefits advice to Universal Credit claimants and a further advance, subject to eligibility. They also continue to provide debt, employment, and housing advice to the self-employed and people who have been furloughed or made redundant
- Carers FIRST and Kent Association for the Blind (KAB) are ensuring their service users, adult and young carers and the visually impaired, have not been are not socially isolated, by supporting their health and wellbeing. Regularly contacting service users, either by befriending calls and groups, online or virtually. They have also been delivering shopping and medications to the at 'risk groups. Young carers are embracing virtual peer support groups and virtual young carers assessments
- KAB have carried out a number of essential socially distanced home visits and are working on a rehab video to demonstrate strategies for clients and their carer's. They also developed guidelines for visually impaired people, on how to safely socially distance and to resume a socially distant outdoor mobility

#### Immediate commissioning work with sector

- 6.9 In addition to the KCF administered small grants scheme, some third sector groups have been commissioned to support the council and Medway residents with tackling social isolation. A partnership has been established between Age UK Medway and Nucleus Arts to identify and support 400 older residents with daily activity packs to combat loneliness and boredom, supported by local artists to make the activity packs as interesting and engaging for service users as possible and use various art forms to improve people's wellbeing. The investment to local artists will also provide a much needed boost to the creative economy.

## Volunteering sign ups

- 6.10 In addition to the NHS Volunteer programme, MVA have also led on recruiting and deploying local volunteers. Approximately 230 volunteers were assigned to various volunteering roles, including supporting the Befriending service and local faith and community groups with a wide range of tasks to help residents. The Council used the NHS volunteers to predominantly support residents with routine prescription collections.

## Communication

- 6.11 Effective communication was identified as a critical issue between the sector and the Council and NHS at the onset of the emergency period. A strategy group including the local authority, NHS partners and MVA met virtually every week to discuss and agree the priority issues, risks and opportunities for the health and social care system, residents and the third sector. In addition, an operational group of third sector organisations was established to share intelligence and resource. The primary purpose of this group was to bring together all organisations who were supporting residents with food supplies. It was apparent that organisations were also supporting with other essential issues such as medicine collection, social contact and a wide range of other tasks, so the group became an opportunity to link resource to need. MVA co-ordinated a weekly virtual meeting which enabled any third sector organisation to discuss issues, share resources, and offer other peer support mechanisms. This group fed back challenges and opportunities of the sector as a whole to the weekly strategy group meetings. MVA had a central role in the organisation of Medway Council's COVID response and kept the sector fully informed of all response initiatives, thereby supporting the effective working practice of both sectors. MVA also shared information on COVID response funding opportunities and national initiatives which helped maintain the morale of the sector.

## Legacy of strategy and operational group

- 6.12 The Council would like to continue to build on the excellent working relationships that were established during the emergency period. All voluntary sector organisations who have supported with the emergency food service, have been actively encouraged to join the newly established Medway Food Partnership whose role is to support the system wide challenges of healthy eating and food poverty. Partners working with wellbeing issues such as social isolation will also be invited to join the already established Medway Social Prescribing Network. In order to keep positive and regular communications between the Council and the third sector during the recovery phase of the emergency, MVA will continue to host regular virtual sessions with all sector organisations primarily to identify and feedback challenges and opportunities for the sector, and continue with its remit to support the sector in the anticipated on-going and challenging times for organisations. Themed sessions will allow a system wide conversation about the following core population health and wellbeing priorities: obesity, child health, social isolation, housing/homelessness, economy & employment, arts & culture and COVID 19 & emergency planning.

## Recovery

- 6.13 Medway's Covid-19 Recovery Plan has identified the Community and Voluntary Sector as a strategic priority for recovery. It is a standalone cell alongside other

strategic priorities such as the economy, health & social care, infrastructure and children & young people. The Kent Resilience Forum has also established a cell focusing on the voluntary and community sector so a representative from Medway Council will link with this group to share intelligence and resource. The Medway cell will be led by the Public Health team but made of a working group from a wide range of services, as well as representatives from the local third sector. This will allow regular dialogue with the wider voluntary sector and for key priorities to be shared by the sector, council, NHS and wider Medway system.

#### Lessons learnt

- 6.14 The third sector are able to gauge an immediate feel for what residents need, during an emergency and what peoples' priorities are.
- 6.15 The third sector response to people and organisations needs is swift, potentially due to reduced regulatory constraints as experienced by public sector bodies.
- 6.16 Regular communication between the third sector, council and NHS is critical at all times and especially during an emergency period.
- 6.17 An infrastructure organisation is a major asset in terms of formal communication, delivery of support and harnessing the strengths of the wider voluntary sector.
- 6.18 Designated officers within the council who have strong links with the voluntary sector and the opportunity to ask and answer questions is essential for rapid mobilisation of services.
- 7. Accessing Support - the Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector during Covid-19
  - 7.1 On 2 June the Local Government Association published a briefing (Appendix 2) for councils and their community and voluntary sector partners on the role and contribution of the community and voluntary sector and the use of volunteers in local and national responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 8. Risk Management
  - 8.1 There are no risks arising from the report. However, adoption by Cabinet of the recommendations would lead to various options being explored and, at that point, any risks would need to be assessed.
- 9. Financial implications
  - 9.1 One of the recommendations from the Task Group is that Cabinet identifies the resources needed to establish a single point of contact in the Council to liaise with the voluntary sector.
  - 9.2 The work of the Task Group was supported by Democratic Services and officers from the Public Health team.
  - 9.3 There is a small budget held by Democratic Services to meet the cost of any visits, stakeholder events or expenses incurred by expert witnesses associated with the review. The National Council for Volunteering Organisations were invited to attend a

meeting of the Task Group and their fee was £390 for consultancy advice and travel, met from the budget referred to.

## 10. Legal implications

10.1 Medway Council has a legal obligation under section 149 Equality Act 2010 to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality, and foster good relations between those with a protected characteristic (pregnancy and maternity, age discrimination, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnerships, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation) and those who do not share it. To assist the Council in fulfilling these legal obligations a Diversity Impact Assessment is attached to the report of the Task Group.

10.2 There are no other legal implications arising from the recommendations. However, officers may need to consider the legal implications of some recommendations as the proposals are developed.

## 11. Recommendations

11.1 The Committee is asked to:

- a) consider the report and recommendations made by the Voluntary Sector Task Group set out at Appendix 1 and agree to recommend it to Cabinet;
- b) note the update on activity within the voluntary sector and the Council since March 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and;
- c) agree that a report on progressing the actions agreed by Cabinet be submitted to this Committee in January 2020 and that this update be given in the context of the latest situation with regard to the Council's Covid-19 Recovery Plan.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1 - Report from the Voluntary Sector Task Group  
Appendix 2 - Accessing Support, the role of the voluntary and community sector during Covid-19 (Briefing from the Local Government Association)

Background Papers:

The background papers relied on in producing the report from the Task Group are set out within the main report.