

From: Roger Gough, Leader of the Council
Mike Hill, Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services
David Whittle, Director of Strategy, Policy, Relationships and Corporate Assurance

To: **Cabinet 24 June 2021**

Subject: **Revising the draft Civil Society Strategy and Support to the Voluntary Sector 21-22 and beyond.**

Classification: Unrestricted

Future Pathway of Paper:

Electoral Division: Countywide- all divisions affected.

Summary:

This report is intended to provide an overview of the infrastructure support to be put in place for the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) for 2021-22 and a roadmap for the future support offer and revision of the draft Civil Society Strategy.

Recommendation(s):

For Cabinet to:

- 1) Note the contents of the report
- 2) Agree the proposals set out for the support offer to the sector 21-22
- 3) Agree the proposed roadmap for the revised Civil Society Strategy and future support offer to sit alongside this.

1. Background

- 1.1 Kent County Council made a commitment to adopt a new Civil Society Strategy¹ (CSS) in 2019 and formal consultation on the draft strategy began in February 2020, running until April. However, the events of the pandemic overtook, and it was agreed to pause the final development of the strategy and concentrate on Covid response and recovery. Since this time, a great deal of work has taken place with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to improve partnership working and engagement. Whilst the commitments in the original draft strategy remain relevant, it is right to reflect on the significant impact of the last year and therefore we are setting out a proposal to revise the draft strategy.
- 1.2 The Interim Strategic Plan agreed by County Council on 10 December made a commitment and reference to supporting a strong Civil Society and the Voluntary sector as a core part of that. It is our intention, as outlined in this report, to put interim plans in place for this financial year (21-22) to provide the much-needed support to the sector whilst

¹ By Civil society we mean all those individual, informal, and formal groups and organisations that operate outside of state control and for the primary purpose of social good.

revising and then adopting the strategy, with a longer-term model of support developed to deliver against the strategy objectives.

- 1.3 The budget allocation for support is £700K p.a. and whilst both a Civil Society Strategy and infrastructure support offer to the VCS is not a statutory responsibility it remains a significant political priority that has only strengthened in the last year. Many Councils do continue to fund support to the sector; however, KCC's support offer is unique in its scale. The intention of our infrastructure support budget is to help to build a sustainable and resilient voluntary sector and to support civil society it is not to create dependency or dictate the direction of activity. The details are set out in Figure 1.
- 1.4 It was agreed in 2019 by the Director of Public Health that a proportion of this support funding would be allocated from Public Health in recognition that a vibrant and sustainable voluntary sector supports the strategic aims of Public Health. However, it was also agreed that the Civil Society Strategy must set out the principles and objectives of any future infrastructure support to the sector and therefore the budget for the support is held by Strategy, Policy, Relationships and Corporate Assurance (SPRCA) as the strategy owners.

2. Infrastructure support 2021-22

- 2.1 Although the CSS has not yet been fully developed, many of the objectives within the draft have continued to be delivered against and the infrastructure support proposed for this year is based upon both the intentions of the CSS and extensive engagement with the sector over the last year. **Whilst we have developed a proposed interim support offer for this year (Figure 1), we are proposing to develop this into longer term arrangements once the CSS is agreed. We are therefore proposing that the funding to support the strategy is in place for the duration of the Strategy, over the next 3 years from 2021-24.** The following sets out the support that will be put in place by the summer 21. In some cases, elements have already begun.

Figure 1:

Supporting the Social Sector to be sustainable and maintain its independence		
Objectives	Identified Need	Delivery Mechanism
Improving VCSE Engagement and Partnership Working	An effective, strategic engagement mechanism between KCC and the VCS that is representative and supports the partnership work seen during Covid.	VCS Strategic Partnership Board VCS Steering Group
Business and organisation development to build Sustainability	Access to a range of support to help improve the sustainability of the VCS and support organisations to adapt post Covid.	Strategic Recovery Fund
Empowering Neighbourhoods and Resilient Communities	Access to innovative and flexible funding to support community led projects. A co-ordinated and properly resourced volunteering infrastructure across the County.	Crowdfund Kent Volunteering Infrastructure

Engagement and partnership working with the VCS.

- 2.2 A key focus of the draft CSS was to improve engagement and partnership working with the VCS. Within Kent there is no single infrastructure body that is representative of the sector and we have for many years looked to develop a model which enables the County Council to have strategic engagement with the sector.
- 2.3 Over the last year, the VCS has played a vital role in supporting our communities both informally through social infrastructure but also in providing services funded by the County Council. It is for this reason that a Voluntary Sector Recovery Cell was established as part of the recovery architecture under the Kent Resilience Forum during the early part of the pandemic. This was chaired by Josephine McCartney as Chief Executive of Kent Community Foundation, a grant making organisation, with a range of representatives from the sector on the cell. The cell produced an impact assessment and action plan outlining the necessary actions to support recovery, and these were fed into the overarching Kent and Medway Recovery Strategy and action plan.
- 2.4 It was the creation of this cell and the subsequent recovery actions that were developed, which has led to the development of an improved architecture for partnership working and engagement with the VCS. We have now established a VCS Strategic Partnership Board, and this met for the first time in January. It brings together representatives from KCC, the District Councils, NHS Kent and Medway CCG and the voluntary sector. Chaired by Mike Hill as Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services, with a standing invite for Roger Gough as Leader; this is an informal KCC board. The Board is intended to provide a vehicle to deliver the actions, involving statutory agencies, that were identified by the recovery cells in relation to the VCS, provide a forum for strategic discussion between the voluntary sector and statutory partners including key strategic issues impacting on the VCS in Kent and its resilience. It will also provide an opportunity for early engagement with the VCS on the development of strategy and policy.
- 2.5 Alongside this, a VCS Steering Group has been established by Josephine McCartney as legacy to the VCS recovery cell and Josephine provides the link between the Partnership Board (as the VCS rep) and the wider Steering Group. This Steering Group has representation across the VCS and members of the group act as champions for the beneficiary groups or communities they represent; they are not there to represent their own organisation's interests. The purpose of this Steering Group is to ensure that the recovery actions are taken forward, to lobby effectively on issues affecting the most vulnerable in our society at both a local and national level, represent the issues facing people in Kent and the sector. It is also to provide the strategic engagement mechanism with the Strategic Partnership Board to inform strategy development and key areas of work across the County Council, where the VCS is a key partner.
- 2.6 It is our intention to build upon these partnership arrangements and to develop a longer-term mechanism by which engagement with the VCS can be funnelled. That is not to say that we will not consult or engage outside of these arrangements but that we have a trusted source, that is representative of the sector (in so much as it can be) by which we can gather information, intelligence about the sector and have a two-way, honest communication channel on strategic issues. This includes ensuring that we can engage the VCS in KCC strategy development in a meaningful way. With a County the size of Kent it is difficult to create a single vehicle for this engagement, especially one that can be truly representative. However, a trusted place that the sector recognises as advocating on its behalf with the County Council is a step in the right direction and has been welcomed. **It is therefore proposed that we look to continue to review the current Steering**

Group and Partnership Board relationship over the next year and consult with the sector on how this model can work most effectively over the longer term. This could include funding a piece of work to evaluate and consult on a future model. We will also continue to look at how we engage with the sector more widely, through engagement networks, which were previously run twice a year pre Covid; these were large scale events and in person.

Business and organisation support- Strategic Recovery Fund

- 2.7 In response to the findings of the VCS recovery cell impact assessment and to deliver against the recovery action plan, a new Strategic Recovery Fund for the voluntary sector was launched in December 2020. This was administered by Kent Community Foundation (KCF) who had the expertise and resources to get this fund up and running quickly and support organisations in their application. This fund provided small grants ahead of the new financial year for organisations to access expertise and support to adapt to the “new normal” post Covid 19. The fund was very successful, and 74 organisations were awarded grants totalling c£400K, with the average grant around £5K.
- 2.8 From conversations with other funders and from our own funding arrangements, we know that business and financial planning and strategies can be a weakness in the sector, as many organisations do not have the time or capacity to prioritise these areas. The intention of this fund was therefore to provide the headroom to develop longer term strategies that will help improve the sustainability of organisations, a key objective in the draft CSS.
- 2.9 Alongside this we wanted to gather information from this fund to establish where organisations go to get support and the type of support that they need. Previous attempts to work with a single support organisation have not proved effective in meeting the diverse needs of the sector and therefore we have moved to a demand led model, where we fund organisations directly to access the support, they need rather than prescribing the providers of the support. Feedback from the fund was that most organisations used local organisations to support them, and the support required was for organisational/business review, marketing (inc. social media) and digital support.
- 2.10 There are a range of options to explore on how we could meet these support needs in the future. Potential future options could be a framework of providers, based on the feedback of the fund, where KCC purchases support on behalf of VCS organisations or a similar grant scheme where applicants must use providers off the framework. This will take some time to develop, and we do not yet feel we are in a position to create the best framework to meet the sector’s needs. Furthermore, we are also in discussion with National Lottery Community Fund about potential opportunities to develop infrastructure support in partnership and have shared the findings from this fund. We therefore wish to develop this model further over the next year before putting in place more permanent arrangements.
- 2.11 However, what is most important is that we support the sector over what will be a financially difficult year and do not delay funding and support being available. **We are therefore proposing that we work with KCF to develop a second round of the Strategic Recovery Fund grant programme for this financial year, which will open by September. We will revise elements of the fund based on feedback from round 1 but also from the on ongoing engagement with the sector we are undertaking regarding recovery. Whilst we are likely to repeat a similar criterion for the grant programme – access to organisational and business support, funding advice, digital support, and expertise, we will also look to support organisations wishing to access training and leadership skills development. This is particularly important given the impact of the last year and that there will have been significant changes in charity leadership roles and staffing.**

Supporting Social action -Volunteering infrastructure

- 2.12 Another focus of the draft CSS was the importance of supporting social action and volunteering; recognising the significant contribution this makes to our communities. During Covid we have seen the incredible response from volunteers locally in supporting those who are shielding and isolated or indeed in supporting the Covid response and recovery alongside statutory agencies. The local intelligence and reach of our volunteer centres became a vital resource from the very early stages of the pandemic. Whilst KCC has funded volunteer support in different ways over the years and many volunteer centres receive funding from their local district councils, one of the key findings from the VCS recovery cell was the gap in a co-ordinated and properly resourced volunteering system.

Recovery Cell Action: Volunteering

Lead: Ashford Volunteer Centre

Establish a coordinated and properly resourced volunteering system across the county working with the volunteer centres/bureaus, building on good practice. To be informed by the lessons learnt from COVID-19 and the increased participation in volunteering seen during the crisis.

- 2.13 During Covid Ashford Volunteer Centre have taken the lead on bringing together the volunteer centres across Kent to look at how they can co-ordinate their work across the County and to share intelligence. They have also worked with the Lord Lieutenants Office to further develop and co-ordinate a Kent Volunteers website, which pulls in volunteering opportunities across the districts, and this has been developed alongside the volunteer centres. This work is the starting point for developing a less fragmented process to volunteering across the County and that enables people to easily find and advertise volunteer opportunities.
- 2.14 The success to developing a sustainable volunteering infrastructure across a County the size of Kent is to work with the local volunteer infrastructure and not seek to override or duplicate it; we have seen the strength of this over the last year. Volunteering needs to be local but there is also a need for standardised approaches to ensure quality and access to volunteering opportunities. There is also an ambition to have a strategic view and engagement mechanism with the volunteering infrastructure across the county. **We are in the very early stages of this development, but we are proposing to grant fund a pilot by the summer, which will look to work with the volunteer centres to develop a volunteering system that provides KCC with a strategic lead to engage with on volunteering and to gather intelligence and data on volunteering across the County, which is currently not routinely available to KCC. This will also seek to build upon the digital platform already developed and look at how online resources and information can be provided through this in a consistent way. However, it will also importantly look to develop a local volunteer network, which will support local volunteer organisations with their volunteer management and networking. We propose to work with Ashford Volunteer Centre as the lead, as they have actively taken this role during the last year but for them to work alongside the other recognised volunteer centres across the County to develop this work programme.**
- 2.15 We will evaluate this pilot alongside the volunteer centres and look at the best model for ensuring a sustainable infrastructure across the County longer term. Given the benefits of volunteering are felt across all statutory partners we will seek to engage partners through the Strategic Partnership Board on this also.

Empowering neighbourhoods and community resilience- Crowdfunding

2.16 In March 2021 we launched CrowdFundKent, working in partnership with the crowdfunding platform Spacehive. This is a pilot over 2 years, and we have allocated £500K to this fund as part of the Covid Recovery funding Helping Hands Scheme. This funding is in addition to the allocated £700K infrastructure support budget.

The projects KCC will support within the Fund must meet the following broad objectives:

- Supporting community action in Kent, particularly activities that are focused on supporting people who are facing financial difficulties or who are isolated as a result of Covid.
- Supporting community assets and venues in Kent, that contribute to our local communities and local connections, improving wellbeing.
- Helping to maintain the volunteering offer/social action we have seen during the pandemic post Covid 19.

2.17 It was our intention to explore crowdfunding when developing the CSS and we began some initial conversations with Spacehive about piloting a fund. A focus of the CSS was to support small grass roots organisations and civic activity or social action. The community response to the pandemic and the ability of informal networks and social infrastructure to respond quickly, only strengthened this. As a result of Covid, additional funding was able to be allocated to this pilot leading to a much bigger fund and CrowdFundKent is the largest crowdfund on the platform. Spacehive work primarily with local authorities and there has been an increase in funds that have joined since Covid-19.

2.18 The virtual launch was very successful with almost 300 attendees and we have had an overwhelmingly positive response to the Fund. The first round has now closed, and we have had 35 verified pitches to date. 28 of these projects clearly met our criteria and have been campaigning on our microsite. Some projects did not meet our criteria or required more information before we could consider them; however, all projects that have pitched will be able to Crowdfund on the site regardless of whether they eventually receive pledges from KCC. The Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services has now approved the proposed pledges following officer assessment. We are looking to pledge in the region of £100K across the 28 projects, however the total cost of projects is c.£550K, so this relatively small investment will leverage significant funding into the County.

2.19 There has been a good spread of projects from across the County, the majority for this round came from Thanet. A further funding round will take place in the summer by late June running into September, however the pilot will continue for another year. Our intention at this time and dependent on reviewing the success over the next year, is to then allocate some of the infrastructure support budget to this on an ongoing basis, albeit a much smaller fund than we have been able to put up this year. The benefit of crowdfunding is of course that we are only one backer, and our funding can go much further by leveraging other funds. However, it also puts the emphasis on community led projects- the community needs to back it to make it a success. Projects that we pledge against should have at least 20 other backers.

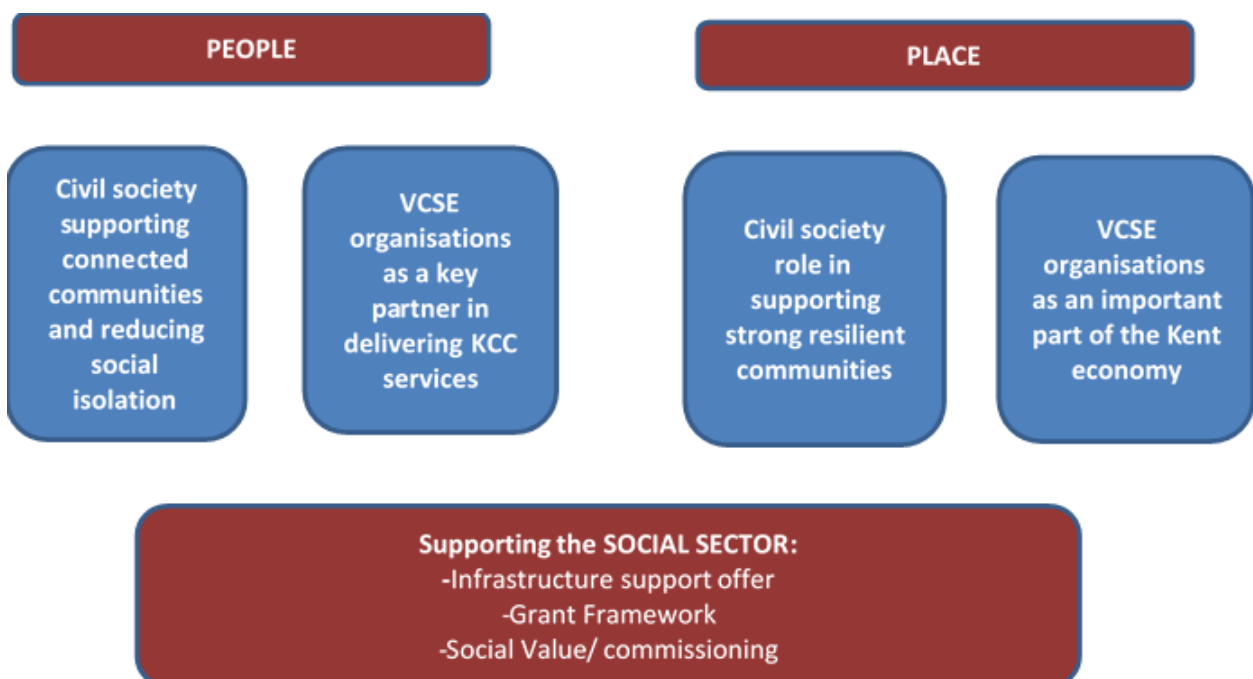
2.20 There is also an option for Members to use their Member Grants to support Crowdfunding projects. In the first instance we expect this to be a particularly good fit for the additional Member Support Grant allocated for Covid Recovery (Helping Hand Scheme) and we are, working with Member Hub support to put this in place. We will also be holding an all-Member briefing to give more detail on this later in the summer. We will be providing regular newsletters to Members to give an overview of the projects we have pledged

against and linking to the project pages on the CrowdFundKent website. It is our intention to increase the crowdfunding movement across Kent and for other funders and partners to come on board; we have had positive conversations with the district councils to this effect.

3. Road map for revising the Civil Society Strategy

- 3.1 Whilst many of the commitments of the previous strategy still stand, the significant impact of Covid and the challenges it has brought must be reflected upon and we will therefore be revising the strategy over the summer and autumn. The immediate priority as stated is to ensure that the support offer is in place for the VCS; however, the revised strategy will underpin the longer-term support offer and future strategic relationship with civil society and the VCS as a core part of that.
- 3.2 The focus of people, place and supporting the sector (*figure 2 below*) are still broadly right and arguably have become more relevant post Covid; however, the financial impact of Covid, the challenges it has brought to both our commissioned parts of the VCS, which deliver KCC services, and the wider sector cannot be ignored. The sector has adapted and changed as we all have, and it is right that we consult again on what the sector believes the priorities are. The strategy will remain a strategic and visionary document, it was never intended to prescribe the detail of every relationship and interaction with the sector but some of its ambitions are likely to have shifted.
- 3.3 **It is our proposal that we work with the Strategic Partnership Board and Steering Group to inform the development of the revised strategy and to take this to consultation by the autumn. Previously we undertook a 10-week formal consultation, and we are proposing to reduce this given the previous consultation but more importantly that we will have worked with the engagement mechanisms we now have in place to help shape the strategy from the start. In this sense the consultation will be ongoing throughout. The revised strategy is therefore likely to be consulted on during September and then be taken to Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee and Cabinet for approval and adoption not before November; dates are yet to be finalised (once committee dates for the year ahead are agreed).**

Figure 2



4. Next steps

- 4.1. If the proposals set out in this report are agreed, we will work to develop the various elements of the infrastructure support offer by the summer to ensure this is in place as soon as possible. The findings of these interim arrangements will be used to inform the support offer from 2022 and when the Civil Society strategy is finalised and endorsed.
- 4.2 The importance of local connections and social infrastructure in supporting people during challenging and difficult times has been seen across our communities over the past year. A three-year strategy will recognise this important contribution and the role that civil society plays in creating a sense of place and community. The support offer underpinning the strategy, will help to build back resilience in the VCS and a more sustainable social infrastructure to ensure there continues to be a vibrant Civil Society in Kent.

Recommendations:

For Cabinet to:

- 1) Note the contents of the report
- 2) Agree the proposals set out for the support offer to the sector 21-22
- 3) Agree the proposed roadmap for the revised Civil Society Strategy and future support offer to sit alongside this.

5. Contact Details

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