

**Kent County Council**



# Society

**Strategy for Kent 2021-2024**

Supporting connected communities  
and a sustainable social sector in Kent

**Executive Summary**

## Definitions and Terminology

### What do we mean by civil society?

By civil society, we mean all those individuals, informal and formal groups and organisations that operate outside of state control and for the primary purpose of social good. Whilst we recognise that private business can be socially motivated, this strategy focuses on those organisations that do not distribute profits and are not part of the statutory sector.

Whilst the VCSE or 'social sector' as we refer to it, is at the heart of a strong civil society we believe the terminology of civil society is important in establishing that social good happens outside of the state and in many different forms. This is not always through the traditional organisational structures, such as registered charities that we have referred to as the social sector. It also includes the more informal and often un-constituted community groups and individuals taking an active role in their local community, to improve their local area or champion a particular cause with a primary aim of delivering social good.

### Social sector

We have used the term 'social sector' in this strategy, where referring to the 'sector' as opposed to organisations

We also wanted to broaden out the definition of 'voluntary sector' to recognise the important contribution that social enterprises make to our local communities. Whilst fundamentally different from charities they share the objective to complete a social mission.



## Introduction

This strategy recognises the role of civil society in Kent and sets out how Kent County Council (KCC) will work to support a strong and vibrant civil society across our communities. This strategy replaces our Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) policy agreed in 2015 and is the first Civil Society Strategy for KCC.

We originally developed and consulted on this strategy in early 2020, just before the Covid-19 pandemic. We subsequently decided to pause the development due to Covid and allow time to reflect on the challenges and impact of the last year. However, we believe that the importance of this strategy has only grown in the last year. Not only because of the incredible response we have seen from our communities, voluntary organisations, and local people but because of the undeniable impact the pandemic has and will continue to have on us as individuals, communities and as organisations and the need to recognise and respond to that.

Prior to this we had seen the publication of the first Government Civil Society Strategy. The national strategy shift informed our decision to broaden out the VCS policy into a new Civil Society Strategy, however, 'Civil Society' also allowed us to recognise the contribution of both the registered charities and voluntary organisations but also the many informal groups and individual volunteers who play an important role in our communities. This also reflected the conversations we had with the sector since the publication of the VCS policy.

This direction still feels right; we have seen evidence of the resilience and innovation that exists both within the social sector and when our communities or 'civil society' come together. This strategy we hope celebrates that civic activity and community spirit and sets out our ambitions for the County Council's relationship with Civil Society in Kent.

Finally, but importantly this strategy sets out how we will support the social sector, not only through our funding practice such as our approach to grant funding but also through our funding of infrastructure support to the sector. .

The KCC Civil Society strategy is an important document for the authority, reflecting the crucial role the social sector plays in achieving strong and resilient communities across our county. It is also a key strategy in delivering against the outcomes of the Council's [\*Interim Strategic plan\*](#).

## Aims and objectives of this strategy:

- ① a recognition of the contribution of civil society in Kent and the VCSE (the 'social sector') as a core part of that
- ② a commitment to supporting civil society to flourish
- ③ a commitment to a strategic relationship with the social sector that recognises its diversity and goes beyond those that have a financial relationship with the Council
- ④ a commitment to build on the partnership working we have seen over the last year between both public sector partners and the social sector, which recognises the sector as an equal partner
- ⑤ a commitment to support the social sector to be sustainable
- ⑥ a commitment to safeguarding the independence of VCSE organisations.

## How will this strategy be used?

- to shape our relationship with civil society in the future and the social sector as a core part of that
- to provide a framework to guide the approach to the Council's engagement with the social sector
- to provide consistency in our approach to grant funding to the social sector
- to shape our commitment to an offer of support to the social sector, and the principles which underpin it including fair funding.



How will we measure our progress and success?

We will have succeeded when:



## Chapter 1

# People

Whilst civil society is independent of the state a proportion of the social sector is an important provider of publicly funded services to individuals on our behalf. However, the role of civil society in supporting people is broader than that; it often provides that wider safety net, supporting people in our communities outside of state support



During our consultation people described civil society as ‘people coming together to support each other, ensuring our communities are inclusive’. It is through the social action of individuals within our communities that social connections are often created that are vital to improving our wellbeing.

This strategy does therefore recognise the sector’s role in delivering public services, something which has grown in the last 20 years, but it does not solely focus on this. Whether delivering public services or providing more informal support, we know that over the last 18 months this support has been vital for many people that have been particularly impacted by Covid and will continue to feel the longer term impacts more than most. This includes people with learning disabilities, care home residents, informal carers, those in low paid employment, vulnerable children, people in the justice system, people with mental health conditions, people living in poverty and Black and Minority Ethnic Groups.

Community groups and VCSE organisations have been a lifeline to many over the last year and will need to continue to support communities to build back, whilst many charities will offer the more formal services to people dealing with the longer-term impact on their lives.

Integral to a thriving civil society are also the countless individuals who volunteer, whether this is by setting up and running activities that bring people together, championing the needs of their local community or serving as trustees. The volunteer effort during the pandemic has been monumental, whilst many volunteers had to shield, new volunteers stepped up and the volunteer infrastructure played a central role in supporting those shielding in Kent as well as in the vaccination effort, which continues. However, the role of volunteers is not something we should only celebrate during a crisis; volunteers are the backbone of the many community organisations that exist day to day. We want to ensure that people are empowered to take part in their communities going forward in the same way they have over the last year.

### What KCC will do

This strategy sets out our commitment to support the social sector and civil society to ensure that it can continue in the many ways it supports people in our community; our support offer sets this out in Chapter 3. However, this strategy also sets out the relationship we want to establish with civil society in Kent; one that recognises the diversity of the sector and empowers individuals to be active in their local area and to continue the civic contribution we have seen during the pandemic.



## Chapter 2

# Places

Civil society enhances the places we live in. It provides opportunities for diverse communities to meet, it celebrates the history and heritage of our local areas, creates social networks through shared spaces and activities that people value. A sense of place and identity is important to people. People want their local area to be thriving and the physical spaces and community assets are an important part of this and often cared for or run by local organisations and volunteers

However, the social sector also makes a significant contribution to the local economy, creating vibrant and diverse places whilst reinvesting back into their communities. Registered charities and social enterprises are a significant employer in Kent, whilst the significant contribution of 19,000 volunteers (across major, large and medium sized organisations) and the financial value of this should not be overlooked.

Civil society has the ability to connect people across our communities, it is this informal infrastructure that sprang into action at the start of the pandemic and was able to swiftly respond. We have seen that building resilience is very often best achieved at the local level and civil society plays an important role in tackling important issues such as social isolation and loneliness. What makes communities resilient is as diverse and complex as the communities themselves; whilst the state plays a role in this it is also the myriad of local organisations, community networks and trusted engagement channels, the community leaders, and local volunteers.

We also know that very often the most effective and responsive support for young people is embedded in their local communities; through both uniformed youth services such as the Scouts, to open access youth services and more informal community organisations, all supporting young people into positive activities. We know that the best outcomes for all will be achieved by empowering and working alongside our communities and those who are active in supporting the young people within them.

### What KCC will do

We will ensure the voice of the social sector is heard within the local economy as a significant contributor. When we talk about growth in Kent this must be inclusive and hearing the voice of the social sector will help us to achieve





this, many of the people these organisations represent are amongst the most disadvantaged in our communities.

This strategy seeks to highlight and celebrate the variety of community assets and resources that exist within Kent, but it also sets out a commitment to support them. This includes through our support offer to the social sector set out in Chapter 3 but also working across the County Council in a way that recognises and seeks to support our communities to be resilient. This means working in partnership and collaborating both internally and externally with partners and civil society itself to best meet the needs of our communities and to ensure that individuals can be empowered to play an active role in their local area.



## Chapter 3

# Supporting the Social Sector

This strategy is not just a document, it is our future commitment to supporting the social sector as a core part of civil society. In this chapter, we set out the range of ways we will do this, including through our investment in infrastructure support with an agreed budget over the 3-year life of the strategy. Whilst not a statutory requirement, this is a political priority for the County Council and there is budget commitment for ‘infrastructure support’ over the life of this strategy.

### Objectives of KCC support for the social sector:

- **Establishing a strategic relationship with the social sector- so that it can effectively engage and influence.**
- **Enabling a sustainable, diverse, and independent social sector in Kent, which can grow and develop.**
- **Enabling a coordinated, properly resourced, and sustainable volunteering system across the county.**
- **Creating the right conditions for small community organisations to respond to communities’ needs and for communities to be empowered.**

### Why this is important

We know that there are many strengths in the sector and not all organisations will require support. That is why our funding will be a contribution to infrastructure support; to support organisations where additional support is **needed** against the objectives we have set out. Our support is not intended to create dependency or to be paternalistic but to play a role in supporting a sustainable and independent social sector and vibrant civil society in Kent.

Kent has a diverse and large social sector spanning across 12 districts, made up of micro and small local organisations and larger organisations that may cover multiple geographical areas. There is not one single organisation that can advocate for or support such a diverse sector; however, we are committed to developing the right model of support that works for the needs of Kent



organisations. This will involve working with organisations that currently provide that support in a way that is sustainable and creating new ways of supporting the sector, where gaps in support are identified.

### **What KCC will do**

For 2021/22 we have allocated funding to respond to immediate needs post Covid, informed by engagement with the sector and the Action Plan developed by the VCS Recovery Cell. However, we will use the learning from these interim arrangements to help us shape the ongoing support offer and the funding mechanisms we use to deliver it be that contract, grants or a hybrid of arrangements. Thereafter the committed budget to support this strategy will be used to deliver against the objectives set out over the life of the strategy.

## **Our infrastructure support offer**

### **Establishing a strategic relationship with the social sector - so that it can effectively engage and influence**

#### **What KCC will do**

- Work with the established VCS Strategic Partnership Board to deliver an effective engagement channel on key strategic issues where the VCS and Civil Society have a clear role, based on the principles of mature and open dialogue
- Work with the Board to advocate for and better understand the challenges of the social sector in Kent alongside partners
- Evolve the VCSE Steering Group to ensure it is an effective, representative body for the sector including for small, local organisations and enables effective communication between KCC and the social sector on strategic issues.
- Look at ways in which we can embed wider engagement and collaboration with Civil Society as we evolve the Steering Group model, including working with other partners such as NHS and District Councils to support and tap into local forums.

## **Enabling a sustainable, diverse, and independent social sector in Kent, which can grow and develop**

### **What KCC will do**

- **Make a contribution to funding business support for organisations that need it, this will include access to support on:**
  - Governance and organisational structures (including for new organisations)
  - Digital skills
  - Leadership training
  - Funding strategies, accessing different income streams and financial controls
  - Organisational/business plans and strategies

The best mechanism to deliver this will be informed by our evaluation and impact reporting on the Strategic Recovery Fund, which we have established for 2021/22 and our ongoing engagement with the sector and VCSE Steering Group.

## **Enabling a coordinated, properly resourced, and sustainable volunteering system across the county**

### **What KCC will do**

- **Invest in a Volunteering Infrastructure pilot for 2021-21, led by Ashford Volunteer Centre this will:**
  - Deliver support in the recruitment and retention of volunteers and access to good advice and guidance on volunteering across the County
  - Develop a sustainable model of volunteering infrastructure, that ensures a consistent level of support across the county and leverages funding from a range of sources
  - Evaluate the pilot to inform future funding for volunteering infrastructure.

## **Creating the right conditions for small community organisations to respond to communities' needs and for communities to be empowered.**

### **What KCC will do**

- Provide a contribution for organisations to access business support as outlined to enable organisations to grow and diversify
- Deliver the CrowdfundKent pilot (set to run until the end of 2022), which is aimed at supporting local organisations and projects that are backed by the local community
- Evaluate the impact of this pilot to inform our future support to community organisations and projects to ensure that our communities are empowered.

## **Fair Funding as an enabler to a sustainable social sector**

### **Why is this important**

Our infrastructure offer is one way of supporting the sector, but our own funding practices must equally support not destabilise the sector. If these are right, then it will enable continued diversity in those that deliver services funded by the Council but also help to ensure our grants and contracts are accessible to a wide range of organisations, without creating dependency and threatening the independence of some organisations

Whilst this strategy is not a commissioning document nor is it focused solely on the relationship with providers of services funded by the Council, the significance of KCC's spend with VCSE organisations means it is an integral part of our relationship. How we fund and the process and decisions we make as a Council ultimately do impact a proportion of the sector and represent a significant amount of sector income as the role of the sector in providing directly commissioned services has increased. It is also true that our approach to commissioning and funding helps to set a tone for our relationship and partnership working with the sector and it therefore needs to be in line with our wider strategy.

## What will KCC do

- Adhere to the principles of Best Value Duty
- Continue to embed our grant framework and ensure that grants are accessible, transparent and not creating dependency
- Look at how the commissioning model should develop in the future to ensure that commissioning has a greater emphasis on locality, collaboration and encourages diversity. This includes looking at support, timely engagement and proportionate processes to enable greater access to public procurement
- Commit to undertaking work to better understand the risk and issues within the existing commissioning model. This work will involve both KCC and engagement with sector representatives. This work once undertaken will be reported to the VCS Strategic Partnership Board and VCSE Steering Group.

## Reviewing this strategy

We will use the framework set out earlier in this strategy to measure success and progress; we will report on this annually. This will be shared with Cabinet, P&R Cabinet Committee, the Strategic Partnership Board (VCS) and the VCSE Steering Group.

We will commit to a full review of the strategy by the end of 2024.



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