

APPENDIX 1: MAIN OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY VCS RESPONDENTS ON THE ENGAGEMENT FOR THE VCS STRATEGY

Funding

Some representatives were surprised at the range of VCS funding available and felt that the Council supported the usual recipients. A lack of funding turned potential collaborators into competitors: organisations might come together in partnership bids, but this might not continue into delivery. Lead bidders might not pass funding on.

Suggestions concerning funding included:

- Updating the Council website with funding streams, amounts, guidance, deadlines, support provided, contacts and Croydon Observatory data.
- The Council should provide core funding especially for VCS organisations delivering statutory services.
- Split infrastructure funding from the Community Fund to avoid a conflict of interest between bidding for funding and supporting smaller organisations to bid.
- List not just funding priorities, but localities where services are needed.
- Provide a list of organisations already funded and services provided to avoid duplication.
- Have a process proportionate to the funding involved, offer pre-application chats, bid-writing support and publicise the work of the Invest to Save Officer
- To support collaborative bids:
 - Provide pre-application networking events focussed on each Corporate Plan outcome and invite VCS organisations thinking of bidding for contracts that support that outcome
 - Allow time for partnerships and consortium bids to form
 - Provide access to community hubs
 - Arrange training, a toolkit and mentoring on developing and maintaining partnerships.

Premises

Affordable premises and free event space are major challenges for the VCS and the disappearance of the Community Space was a huge loss. The Council is not considered to be transparent about how and why organisations are allocated premises or receive rent subsidy or rate relief (DRR), when so many others do not receive support. Too much support was allocated on a historical basis. There was a strong call for clear guidelines that are communicated via the web page, so that all organisations have an equal opportunity to apply and understand how decisions are made.

The main suggestions were:

- Develop clear criteria, provide an opportunity to apply, and make time-limited (5 year?) allocations.
- Monitor performance/intensity of use of premises and have mechanism for ending leases in cases of unsatisfactory performance or usage.
- Provide a directory of venues, allowing VCS groups to offer/seek premises.
- Review council leases to allow sharing/subletting and offer some properties as hubs
- Encourage owners of long-term empty properties to offer them to the VCS free

Infrastructure support

Information on funding/commissioning opportunities was identified by survey respondents as the most common type of support being received. Support was also widely received for training, developing consortiums and developing funding bids. Generally, a high proportion of the support received was from Croydon Voluntary Action (CVA) or Croydon Council, particularly for information on funding/commissioning opportunities and for premises (over half said support was received from Council or CVA) and training, developing consortiums and developing funding bids (just under half).

Overall only 50% of respondents stated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the support they receive from infrastructure groups and the council. However, two-thirds of organisations delivering services in New Addington/ Fieldway said they were satisfied or very satisfied. Those dissatisfied or very dissatisfied range between 8% and 16% across the borough, with the highest levels among organisations with borough-wide, north and central Croydon coverage. Organisations delivering services across London or across all or part of the country were the least dissatisfied with support. Some respondents considered that infrastructure groups are not fulfilling their responsibilities. Respondents suggested that there is too little information about available funding; and some specialist interest infrastructure organisations are not promoting the relevant groups.

Some VCS participants at the event said that insufficient support was available, while others said that there was not enough publicity, preventing them from taking up support that existed. Overall, 72% of VCS organisations responding to the survey stated that they had some support needs that were not currently met. However, in organisations delivering services in North Croydon and New Addington/Fieldway, the proportion of stating that they had unmet support needs was higher, at 89% and 92% respectively. Further support needs were identified as:

- Sustainable funding, paid promptly, with sufficient notice of decisions
- Affordable premises
- Capacity building / business planning
- Up to date support contacts
- Advice, information, training and help with bid writing, fundraising and income generation
- Marketing, IT, social media, finance
- Sharing best practice, skills and knowledge.
- Sponsorship – matching VCS organisations with businesses interested in supporting community projects
- Partnership development, facilitation of collaboration.
- Recruitment and training of volunteers
- A peer review process.

There was a lack of knowledge of which VCS organisations deliver what services, with a widespread call for a directory of services. This was seen as having a dual impact:

- increasing risk of duplication and lessening opportunities for partnership
- leaving the public unaware of what is available.

Recommendations concerning infrastructure support included:

- the VCS Strategy should list and set out roles for infrastructure organisations, what the offer is and how VCS organisations can access it

- the Council should ensure that support promised was actually delivered
- a directory of support/training available from the Council and other organisations, supplemented by an email newsletter
- One organisation should be responsible for asset mapping – current arrangements involved duplication and time-wasting.
- Increase the frequency and publicity of training, particularly on bid writing and ways to enable the VCS to become more sustainable
- Capacity building ensuring accessibility for groups that may have a language barrier.

The Role of the Council

The survey and feedback in engagement events suggested that the Council should play a wide role in supporting the VCS sector:

- Facilitating collaboration and partnership, identifying useful contacts / connections
- Promoting the work, services and achievements of the VCS
- Providing access to space and premises that are affordable
- Providing information and signposting
- Recognising the importance and value of the VCS
- Funding
- Capacity building, allowing VCS to draw on advice and expertise
- Proportionate monitoring – with constructive feedback
- Challenging VCS organisations where the governance or services are poorly delivered and managed, or possibly duplicated.

The Council should link Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to the VCS:

- Promote CSR to other organisations in the form of mentoring, sharing skills, access to low cost premises and reusable goods (like IT equipment and furniture) for local VCS organisations, and adopt it as Council practice. Have a webpage to advertise what is on offer.
- Make CSR support of VCS organisations a condition of funding agreements for larger organisations.

In addition to its current practice of enabling access to supply chain opportunities for local VCS organisations through its 'Value Croydon' approach, the Council should encourage local anchor organisations (such as the Police, hospitals and local colleges) to do the same.

Feedback from VCS infrastructure organisations

Interviews were conducted in November/December 2018 with the four infrastructure organisations in Croydon: Croydon Voluntary Action (CVA), Croydon BME Forum, Croydon Neighbourhood Care Association (CNCA) and the Asian Resource Centre (ARC).

Partnership

There was a strong basis for partnership, but no setting for regular coherent VCS-Council dialogue. Council staff turnover was high, so there was limited continuity of knowledge of services or organisations and it was hard for VCS organisations to keep track. A wish was expressed for an equal level of partnership to be offered to infrastructure organisations by the Council.

Recommendations included

- Establish a regular corporate Council-VCS dialogue avoiding multiple separate dialogues, possibly involving Croydon Clinical Commissioning Group and Croydon University Hospital.
- Have a council 'Who's Who Directory' for the VCS
- Provide handovers for new staff about contracts & groups
- Continued partnership work with Council
- Council officers to continue sharing their skills with VCS: media team training on social media, marketing and communication; Communities team training on fundraising.

Funding

The question was how to resource the VCS strategically to ensure maximum impact. If funding priorities were changed after three years, it would be difficult to demonstrate the impact of funding decisions as outcomes were likely to become evident over a longer term (say seven years). It was thought that some funders believe the VCS can deliver services for little funding, ignoring the cost of venue, staff and volunteers. Paying staff low salaries (due to low funding) affects the calibre, skills and length of stay of staff. Organisations worry that social prescribing will overwhelm them with demand unless funding is increased. There was a concern also that One Croydon Alliance would focus exclusively on social isolation and mental health, when older people still need to be taken to the GP and chemist.

The funding climate was seen as fostering competition between VCS organisations, when partnerships and consortiums are more effective. Some organisations were not skilled at winning funding bids, even though their work was good. They needed support. Other funding sources that can be tapped include Government programmes, the Lottery, the Bridge Trust, and the Council's Regeneration Team. However, trusts only fund new projects, not existing work and core costs. They rely on councils to fund salaries. Big trusts and the Lottery are very prescriptive in their criteria: one organisation said 75% of grant applications fail, so they avoided this source of funding.

Recommendations concerning funding included:

- Continue infrastructure organisation's leadership and brokerage between Council and small organisations to give groups confidence and enable them to engage with commissioning and monitoring
- Devolve grants budgets to VCS infrastructure organisations that know bona fide VCS organisations
- Provide a realistic level of funding for the outcomes sought.
- Train up community builders in each funded project, so Asset Based Community Development can continue sustainably
- In recommissioning the Community Fund consider how to maximise investment in Croydon
- Provide time in the commissioning process to set up workshops to develop partnerships and consortiums
- Tap into other funding: government programmes, Big Lottery, Trusts, work with the Council's Regeneration Team
- The Council should consider funding salaries; anonymous funders and non-trust money with no conditions can also help to support ongoing work
- Fund a tiered service to achieve better outcomes for older people in tiers 2 and 3
- The Council should involve infrastructure organisations when planning bids for the community

- Infrastructure organisations would continue to help organisations with funding bids, bid for external funding and earn fees from conducting training.

Monitoring.

Monitoring was regarded as disproportionate to the sums involved and sometimes the new data requests were made after the work had been done, overwhelming smaller groups. Council staff turnover meant that some officers did not know about the schemes concerned and were less effective at challenging performance. The Community Fund did not build in the capacity for infrastructure organisations to evaluate and learn from the schemes.

Recommendations concerning monitoring included

- Designing proportionate monitoring with a VCS organisation after funding has been allocated and before the service starts.
- If monitoring changes during a project, this should be acknowledged and agreed with the group before the relevant period has started.
- Centralise analysts so that an overall picture is achieved, not one by funding programme
- Celebrating the outcomes achieved by Community Fund projects.

Gaps in services

Social care: Croydon has a lot of Tier 1 services but very few Tier 2 and even fewer Tier 3, so there is no scope for transition as a person's condition changes (Tier 1 is for people who are walking, talking and able, with no cognitive impairment; Tier 2 is for those needing some support, walking aid, have had a fall, with early stage dementia or a long term condition such as COPD; Tier 3 is for the frail elderly, at a high risk of falls, housebound, with advanced dementia or incontinence. Possibly there is only 1 FTE service in Croydon: CNCA's complex befriending service)

Mental health: there was not enough early intervention and a suggestion that hospital stays were longer and medication administered stronger for people with BME backgrounds. Croydon BME Forum is working with South London and Maudsley NHS Trust. Mental health and dementia are taboo in Asian society. The ARC is aiming at coproducing services with agencies.

Young people: services should think of all young people, not just those in gangs, and work with them holistically as part of families, friendship networks and school. There was a lack of activities in Purley and Coulsdon.

Domestic abuse and sexual violence, honour killings and forced marriage. The ARC said that women were frightened of being recognised if they used the Family Justice Centre and so they used a discrete drop-in run by ARC.

Locality differences: Partnership work can be seamless in New Addington and North Croydon, but not as strong in other areas, so various approaches are needed. North Croydon has younger, working, less settled population with fewer volunteers, so more paid staff are needed. The South has a more settled population with more retired people and volunteers. They can afford smaller funded groups. They are affiliated with churches that offer premises at a low cost.

Content of the Strategy

The VCS Strategy should be a long term plan with consistent aims, sticking to the Opportunity and Fairness Commission's recommendations. The most important work for strategy is Partnership and Communications. It should recognise the massive VCS contribution to prevention in Community safety; health and wellbeing, social regeneration and localities. The needs of older people should be differentiated. The VCS would like to feel trusted by the Council, with the strategy celebrating the good news of level of volunteering in Croydon.