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| Cabinet 25 November 2020 |  TOWER HAMLETS |
| Report of: Sharon Godman – Divisional Director Strategy, Policy and Performance Will Tuckley – Chief Executive | Classification: Unrestricted |
| Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy 2020-2024 | |

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| Lead Member | Councillor Candida Ronald, Cabinet Member for Resources and the Voluntary Sector |
| Originating Officer(s) | Mark Waterman - Strategy and Policy Manager, Emily Fieran-Reed - Senior Strategy and Policy Manager |
| Wards affected | All wards |
| Key Decision? | No |
| Forward Plan Notice Published | 15 July 2020 |
| Reason for Key Decision | The recommended decision has been reviewed as not meeting the Key Decision criteria. |
| Strategic Plan Priority / Outcome | <p>It covers the following outcomes from Priority 1, Priority 2 and Priority 3 of the Strategic Plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People access joined-up services when they need them and feel healthier and more independent (Outcome 3) • People live in a borough that is clean and green (Outcome 5) • People feel that they are part of a cohesive and vibrant community (Outcome 8) • People say we work together across boundaries in a strong and effective partnership to achieve the best outcomes for our residents (Outcome 10) |

Executive Summary

Tower Hamlets Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Strategy is a co-produced partnership document. The council has worked in partnership with VCS organisations in the borough, led by Tower Hamlets Council for Voluntary Service (THCVS), and with Tower Hamlets Clinical Commissioning Group (THCCG) and Tower Hamlets Homes (THH), to develop a strategy for the voluntary and community sector for Tower Hamlets for 2020-2024.

The proposed new VCS Strategy will be a successor to Tower Hamlets VCS Strategy 2016-2019. The emphasis is on the council, in conjunction with its statutory and private sector partners, enabling and facilitating the VCS to work together and to develop its potential to fully respond to local needs.

The key focus of the VCS Strategy will be on achieving positive outcomes for residents of Tower Hamlets, supporting the VCS to play a key role in the recovery process for COVID-19 in the borough and in the post-pandemic world. The VCS made a significant contribution to the response to the pandemic in Tower Hamlets, providing services to housebound, socially excluded and vulnerable residents. The VCS Strategy aims to build upon the good practices that the VCS has already demonstrated, particularly during the pandemic, and to support the VCS to provide services that are fully responsive to local residents' needs going forward.

The VCS Strategy will have three priorities:

- Better partnership working within the voluntary and community sector
- A more resilient and sustainable voluntary and community sector
- Improved partnership arrangements across sectors

Recommendations:

The Cabinet is recommended to:

1. Agree the Tower Hamlets Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy 2020 – 2024, including the actions and outcomes under each priority.

1 REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS

- 1.1 The council is passionate about the voluntary and community sector and the critical role it plays in supporting residents. The council and its partners, want to work with the VCS in Tower Hamlets to enable it to develop its services and strengthen its resources to enable it to achieve better outcomes for residents of Tower Hamlets and play a key role in the recovery process from COVID-19 in the borough. The VCS Strategy contains the Council's commitment and ambition around the VCS.
- 1.2 The vital importance of the VCS to Tower Hamlets has been witnessed in its role in responding to the pandemic in the borough, delivering services to vulnerable and socially excluded residents and securing volunteers to help deliver these services. This contribution from the VCS creates an impetus for the council to work with its partners to ensure a strong and vibrant VCS in the borough, particularly in the context of the challenges that the VCS faces as a result of the pandemic.
- 1.3 The success of the VCS in responding to the pandemic reflects the underlying strength of the sector in Tower Hamlets and its track record in delivering

responsive and effective services, particularly to marginalised communities. In addition to delivering services the VCS plays a wider role in the borough, bringing communities together, developing relationships between people and making Tower Hamlets a place that people are proud to live in. The VCS will play a vital role in the recovery from the pandemic, but its importance to the borough goes beyond the pandemic and the recovery process.

- 1.4 The aforementioned challenges to the VCS include the need to have sufficient resources to be in a position to be able to deliver effective services to local residents. The VCS Strategy aims to support the sector to develop and widen its resources in a number of areas – funding, volunteering, premises, digital skills and equipment.
- 1.5 A key focus of the VCS Strategy will be on partnership working, including:
 - the council and its partners working to support the development of partnerships between VCS organisations
 - cross-sectoral partnerships to respond to the needs of residents in the borough.

2 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 2.1 Do not develop a new VCS Strategy for Tower Hamlets and continue to adhere to the principles and focus of the VCS Strategy for 2016-2019. This is not a viable option as there is a need to revisit our approach, with an increased emphasis on enabling and facilitating the VCS to develop its potential, rather than on the council being seen as directly responsible for developing the VCS. This is particularly important when taking into account the strength of the VCS, as witnessed in its key role in delivering services to Tower Hamlets residents during the pandemic, including the delivery of innovative services, such as the COVID-19 Volunteering Hub and the Emergency Food Hub.
- 2.2 Furthermore, different priorities for and demands upon the VCS have emerged since the introduction of the last Strategy, many of which have been highlighted by the pandemic – e.g. increased demand for digitally-based services. There is a need for a new VCS Strategy with a partnership focus, concentrating on new priorities and actions in response to these priorities.

3 POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 The VCS Strategy addresses the key objective of the Tower Hamlets Plan 2018-2023 – **tackling inequality by building a strong, inclusive and fair borough**. It does this by supporting the continuation and development of a thriving VCS that enriches the life of the borough, promotes community cohesion and provides social opportunities and support to all sections of Tower Hamlets' population, including socially excluded communities. The Strategy supports the four key themes of Tower Hamlets Plan:

- **A better deal for children and young people: aspiration, education and skills**
- **Good jobs and employment**
- **Strong, resilient and safe communities**
- **Better health and wellbeing.**

3.2 The VCS Strategy also addresses Priorities 1-3 of the Tower Hamlets Strategic Plan, particularly the following outcomes:

- **Outcome 3: People access joined up services when they need them and feel healthier and more independent**
- **Outcome 5: People live in a borough that is clean and green**
- **Outcome 8: People feel that they are part of a cohesive and vibrant community**
- **Outcome 10: People say we work together across boundaries in a strong and effective partnership to achieve the best outcomes for our residents.**

4 DETAILS OF THE REPORT

- 4.1 By voluntary and community sector (VCS) we are referring to the VCS in its widest sense as defined in page 9, Appendix 1 of this report.
- 4.2 The council has worked in partnership with a range of VCS organisations in the borough, led by THCVS, and with THCCG and THH to develop the VCS Strategy.
- 4.3 In engaging the sector on the strategy, we have held a number of dedicated events and focus groups prior to the pandemic, which all VCS organisations registered with THCVS were invited to. There has been further consultation with the VCS post-pandemic. All of this consultation is summarised in page 1 of **Appendix 2 - Response to Issues Raised Through Consultation for Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy**. THCVS, particularly through its Chief Executive Officer, Peter Okali, has also carried out consultation work to develop the VCS Strategy, through discussions with VCS organisations, including at VCS partnership meetings and forums.
- 4.4 The VCS Strategy was initially scheduled to appear at Cabinet in July 2020, but this process was postponed due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The priorities of the VCS Strategy, which are outlined in Paragraph 4.7, were

identified as priorities before the pandemic commenced and would thus be priorities if it had not taken place. However, the pandemic has confirmed and highlighted the importance of many of these priorities, with the VCS response centring on many areas relating to the priority areas of the VCS Strategy – volunteering, obtaining external funding for new services and delivery of digitally based services.

- 4.5 The VCS showed strengths in the priority areas during the pandemic, highlighting areas of good practice that predated COVID-19 – e.g. the borough has a track record of local residents serving as volunteers. However, it was also evident that there were disparities between VCS organisations in terms of their ability to respond to VCS Strategy priority areas – e.g. many smaller VCS organisations did not have the skills or resources to deliver digitally-based services during lockdown. These disparities in VCS organisations’ skills and resources were in place before, but the pandemic highlighted their existence. These disparities reinforce the importance of focusing on the VCS Strategy’s priority areas, in relation to the recovery from the pandemic, the response to the second wave of the pandemic and, just as importantly, in the post-pandemic world.
- 4.6 The consultation process was valuable in establishing the three main priorities for the VCS Strategy. The action points in the Strategy under each of the priorities are in response to issues raised during consultation, as well as local needs that have been identified by partnership work to respond to the pandemic, please see **Appendix 2**.
- 4.7 The VCS Strategy will have the following priorities:
- **Priority 1: Better partnership working within the voluntary and community sector**
 - raising the profile of the VCS in Tower Hamlets, including its digital presence and promotion of its career offer with local people*
 - enhanced communications and joint working between VCS organisations, including via digital tools and management networks
 - establishment of networks of local VCS services, operating on a sub-borough basis.
 - **Priority 2: A more resilient and sustainable voluntary and community sector**
 - development of a volunteering plan to put sustainable volunteering at the centre of the borough, building upon good practices developed during the pandemic and linking volunteers to opportunities in both VCS and partner organisations*
 - improving VCS organisations’ access to buildings, including statutory sector buildings

- the council and other statutory sector organisations providing opportunities for the VCS through commissioning
 - the council and partner organisations obtaining Social Value from procurement processes to ensure that their contractors contribute expertise and resources to small VCS organisations
 - establishment of an external funding strategy for the local VCS, that will support partnership bids for external funding*
 - training and development support for VCS groups run for and led by smaller BAME communities and their leaders
 - enabling VCS organisations with low levels of digital resources to obtain digital skills, through training, and digital equipment, through corporate recycling and funding applications*
 - supporting VCS organisations to develop and implement green action plans to ensure that they operate in an environmentally friendly manner and offer community leadership on green issues.
- **Priority 3: Improved partnership arrangements across sectors**
 - increasing the VCS role in consultation and engagement in order to raise residents' voices, by harnessing the VCS's strong roots within local communities*
 - improved communications and engagement on policy development between the VCS and local statutory organisations to ensure that strategic decisions are influenced by the VCS at a community level*
 - establishing protocols for sharing and use of evidence and data across VCS, and between VCS and the local statutory sector, to inform policy development, decision making and funding applications
 - developing closer working relationships between VCS and statutory and private sectors – e.g. purchasing of services from local VCS organisations, network meetings, business forums
 - local VCS infrastructure organisations and local statutory sector organisations working in partnership to develop resilience planning to support VCS organisations' operational responses to emergency situations
 - cross-sectoral working to promote equality principles in regard to delivery of services to Tower Hamlets residents, building upon work of the council's BAME Commission and the work of Tower Hamlets Inter-Faith Forum.

* Indicates that a sub-priority will be the focus of the VCS Strategy delivery plan in its first year (please see paragraphs 4.9 to 4.11 below).

- 4.8 The VCS Strategy will be implemented through a delivery plan, which will respond flexibly to emerging issues. Some of the VCS strategy's priorities will require further development work, which will be led by VCS Forums. Governance of these forums and their delivery of the strategy will lie with Co-operate. This is a partnership body between the local statutory sector and the VCS. It will be co-chaired by the Lead Member for Resources and the VCS, alongside the Chief Executive of THCVS. Co-operate will take the strategic lead, ensuring that delivery of the strategy's priorities is progressing and that joint working with partner organisations and the VCS is embedded in the Strategy.
- 4.9 The focus of the VCS Strategy delivery plan on raising the profile of the VCS in Tower Hamlets in the first year of the Strategy, under Priority 1, will be specifically concerned with mapping VCS services in the borough. This mapping work will result in a directory of local VCS services which is a necessary underpinning for all the other actions and priorities for the Strategy.
- 4.10 The focus on the three sub-priorities under Priority 2 reflects, as outlined in paragraph 4.4, their high profile in the response of the VCS to the pandemic. They also have an ongoing importance in the recovery process and the post-pandemic world. These sub-priorities focus on securing resources for the VCS to deliver services in response to the latter challenges. A key focus of the VCS Strategy will be development support for VCS organisations who are less well-resourced in regard to sub-priority areas
- 4.11 The focus on the two sub-priorities under Priority 3 reflects partner organisations' need to:
- fully engage with the VCS in order to hear the views and opinions of all borough residents
 - improve their methods for receiving feedback on services and their engagement and consultation procedures for strategy and policy development.
- 4.12 The VCS Strategy has been developed to be delivered within existing resources and should thus have no direct impact on budgets. It is envisaged that resources for the Strategy will come from a range of sources, including:
- external funding secured from partnership bids
 - resources and equipment obtained from private sector organisations via partner organisations' Social Value processes and VCS-private sector networks established by the Strategy
 - volunteering, including employee volunteering from partner organisations.
- 4.13 The Strategy will also be implemented through changes and developments in existing working practices by partner and VCS organisations, which will not

require any new funding – e.g. partner organisations seeking to open up commissioning opportunities to VCS organisations and working more effectively with the VCS on consultation, information and data sharing. It will also support VCS organisations to work together more effectively to save resources – e.g. improved systems for referrals between organisations; management and staff networking to share expertise.

- 4.14 The council is only one partner in the VCS Strategy, with its primary role being an enabling one, including helping to secure the full commitment of partner organisations to the implementation of the VCS Strategy.

5. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out on the proposed Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy 2020-2024. This assessment found that a full Equality Impact Analysis is not required as the proposal is likely to have no or minimal impact on the protected characteristic groups listed in the Equality Impact Assessment Screening Tool.
- 5.2 As outlined in paragraph 4.7. above, the actions to respond to the VCS Strategy's priorities will include:
- training and development support for VCS groups run for and led by smaller BAME communities and their leaders to support community leadership in the borough
 - cross-sectoral working to promote equality principles in regard to delivery of services to Tower Hamlets residents. BAME VCS organisations should be central to this process, as should faith groups which represent BAME communities, particularly those providing services to local residents.
- 5.3 LBTH has set up a BAME Inequality Commission to focus on the promotion of equalities in the areas of health, community leadership and employment. The VCS Strategy can link in with the work of this Commission to support the promotion of more responsive VCS services to local BAME residents, particularly in the areas of health and social care, which is particularly important due to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on BAME communities.
- 5.4 The VCS Strategy recognises the importance of faith groups in responding to community needs during the pandemic, particularly amongst local BAME communities. It recognises the need to support the sustainability of this provision and the need to build on the role of the Interfaith Forum in linking faith communities to wider community support arrangements.

6 OTHER STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no other specific statutory implications relevant to consideration for this report.

7 COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER

- 7.1 This report recommends that the Cabinet agree the Tower Hamlets Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Strategy 2020 – 2024.
- 7.2 Council funding and support to the VCS Strategy will be contained within the budget allocation. In addition, Paragraph 4.12 outlines alternative resourcing methods that could be used to support the strategy.

8 COMMENTS OF LEGAL SERVICES

- 8.1 The Council has the legal power to support VCS organisations in the manner shown in the strategy provided that the purpose of the support is to assist the delivery of the Council's statutory functions.
- 8.2 The Council is able to provide resources and assistance to VCS organisations provided that this is subject to a fair and open process. In the main this means that allocation of grant funding and resources obtained by the Council as Social Value through its procurements should be allocated following some form of application procedure where applicants are assessed on pre-published criteria.
- 8.3 Reference is made to increased procurement of services from VCS organisations. Such procurements must occur in line with the Council's Procurement Procedures and the prevailing procurement law. The key element is ensuring that opportunities are subject to a form of advert and bidders are evaluated against pre-published evaluation criteria.
- 8.4 The Council's legal Best Value duty applies to the activities stated in the strategy regardless of the nature of the support offered or the services purchased by the Council. Therefore, evaluation criteria against which applications and bids are measured should be based upon the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the relevant bids and or applications.
- 8.5 All support should be accompanied by some form of agreement by which the Council can monitor the use of the relevant resources and or manage the relationship with the relevant organisations to also ensure that Best Value is being achieved.
- 8.6 It is likely that the strategy will be implemented by the Council in various projects. Each project will be subject to an Equality Assessment to ensure that the Council complies with its legal duty under the Equality Act 2010. Also, it may be that the Council needs to undertake consultation with affected user groups on a time for time basis, in the event that the Council considers it

necessary in order to properly understand impact on service users who have a protected characteristic.

Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents

Linked Report

- None

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – Tower Hamlets Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy 2020-2024
- Appendix 2 - Response to Issues Raised Through Consultation for Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy

Background Documents – Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements)(Access to Information)(England) Regulations 2012

- None

Officer contact details for documents:

- N/A