



Northumberland

County Council

CABINET

9 OCTOBER 2018

VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR (VCS) SUPPORT SERVICES COMMISSION

Report of: Paul Johnston, Executive Director of Place

Cabinet Member: Cath Homer, portfolio holder for Culture, Arts, Leisure and Tourism

Purpose of report

To advise Cabinet of the outcome of the consultation process associated with the Council commitment to cease the VCS Support Services Commission from the end of March 2019.

Recommendations

Cabinet are requested to consider whether, in the light of the feedback from the consultation process, they want to proceed with the ceasing of the VCS Support Services Commission from the end of March 2019.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the “We want to be efficient, open and work for everyone” priority included in the NCC Corporate Plan 2018-2021. Within the “Our Operating Principles” section, specific reference is made to: “ *We also appreciate that our networks of parish and town councils, and voluntary and community sector organisations are best placed to deliver certain services and activities. We will work with both to ensure that community-led solutions and approaches are taken forward.*”

Key issues

The commission represents the only generic financial support (£137,000) the Council offers to VCS infrastructure organisations to provide advice and support services across

the county. In February 2018, as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan, the County Council approved, subject to the undertaking of a consultation exercise, that this countywide commission would not be continued.

This consultation has now been undertaken and the feedback clearly confirms that this resource supports the delivery of a number of activities that are valued by the Voluntary and Community Sector.

On this basis, it is fair to say that the removal of this Commission could have a negative effect on the Council's relationship with the VCS and would result in opportunities to further develop the delivery of services and activities delivered by the VCS to be missed or underexploited.

In terms of looking at alternative options in reducing the scale of the existing Commission, it is considered that to maintain any form of coherent support service, the annual value of the contract could go no lower than £100,000.

BACKGROUND

Context

1. Since Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), the Council has commissioned one countywide contract that seeks to deliver support to the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS). The current contract was last awarded to NCVA in 2014 for a 3 year period and is valued at £137,500 per annum.
2. The current approach of maintaining a countywide commission has:
 - represented best value for money ensuring maximum focus on frontline services and resources
 - ensured that a whole county picture of the state of the sector is retained and good practice can be effectively shared and where there are gaps/issues initiatives and solutions can be transposed
3. In February 2018, as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan, the County Council approved, subject to the undertaking of a consultation exercise, that this countywide commission would not be continued. In order to facilitate this consultation process, the existing commission contract was extended for a further year until the end of March 2019. However, as the commission includes the employment of staff, the Council needs to advise the current operator of any reduction or removal of funding by no later than 1 November 2018, to allow sufficient time for the associated HR processes to be undertaken.

Consultation Process

4. The Council worked with the VCS Assembly to make as many people, organisations and town and parish council's aware of the consultation and used a variety of means to encourage people to respond. This included, websites, social media, attending Assembly and Network meetings, local radio and online TV station. Meetings were also held with the following audiences:
 - VCS Assembly Executive
 - Area Networks
 - Members - through the VCS Liaison Group
 - Key Stakeholders e.g. Northumberland Sport
5. The Consultation period lasted for 8 weeks from 8th January to 2nd March and in all asked 14 questions including given room for general comments and suggestions. 85 responses were received, these came mainly from VCS delivery organisations, but also some individual responses and 4 parish and town council's. Although not a huge

number it is double the response we had to the previous consultation in 2013/14.

6. From the responses, it is clear that the most valued activities that the Sector would like to see continue are:
- the further development and strengthening of the Assembly as an effective influencer;
 - the coordination of the VCS input the County Council's VCS Liaison Group;
 - the holding of regular Funding Fairs;
 - ongoing generic support and advice, signposting and networking via ebulletins; and continued support for volunteering.

The implications of not renewing this Commission

7. The discontinuation of this Commission would effectively cease the Council's financial support to the generic work of the VCS and would significantly reduce, if not stop, the ability of the sector to come together through the existing VCS Assembly. This would subsequently reduce the value of the VCS Liaison Group as the ability of the sector to present share information and present representative views would be limited.
8. There would remain some scope for County Council staff to provide advice on funding and governance to individual VCS organisations but this would be on a reactive basis with insufficient capacity to signpost the wider sector via ebulletins. The current level of support to promote volunteering would also cease.
9. It is fair to say that the loss of this Commission could have a negative effect on the Council's relationship with the VCS and would result in opportunities to further develop the delivery of services and activities delivered by the VCS to be missed or underexploited.
10. In terms of looking at alternative options in reducing the scale of the existing Commission, it is considered that to maintain any form of coherent support service, the annual value of the contract could go no lower than £100,000. This also reflects the fact that there is currently a dearth of external funding opportunities to support this type of VCS infrastructure support - although any such opportunities will continue to be explored

11. This level of resource would specify the following:

- the continuation of a refreshed VCS Assembly that embraces wider engagement and participation with the Council to influence emerging policy and better align the delivery of related services and activities
- the continuation of a more effective VCS Liaison Group that better mirrors the equivalent Liaison Group for parish and town councils in terms of defining and strengthening areas of collaboration and shared interest
- the continued development and expansion of the asset-based community centred approach currently being applied within public health to improve well being across the county whilst maximising the contribution of existing resources embedded within our communities
- the continuation of a tailored range of support services to VCS organisations targeted at funding advice; volunteering, networking and information provision - with the continued development of online services for training and communication exchange

12. However, the implications of this are that the annual financial saving will reduce to £37,000 at a time when the Council is facing significant challenges in setting a sustainable budget that protects frontline and statutory services.

IMPLICATIONS

Policy	The Council seeks to promote and support the continued development of a vibrant, independent and sustainable Voluntary and Community sector that will work in partnership with the Council and other partners to ensure the best outcomes for individuals and communities of place, interest and identity in Northumberland.
Finance and value for money	The consultation undertaken to assess the value of the Commission suggests that VCS organisations would welcome the continuation of a number of key activities that it supports.
Legal	None
Procurement	If the Commission is renewed, the subsequent procurement will need to take place in November/December 2018 to allow sufficient lead-in arrangements to be put in place
Human Resources	None for Council but the present Commission provider requires to let staff know the position on their contracts by 31st December 2018

Property	None
Equalities	(Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/> This will be undertaken for consideration by OSC/Cabinet
Risk Assessment	None
Crime & Disorder	None
Customer Consideration	The removal of the Commission may have an impact on the provision of support services to all VCS organisations operating in the County
Carbon reduction	None
Wards	ALL

Background papers:

None

Report sign off.

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

	initials
Monitoring Officer/Legal	LM
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	BS
Relevant Executive Director	PJ
Chief Executive	DL
Portfolio Holder(s)	CH

Author and Contact Details

Janice Rose
Economic and Inclusion Policy Manager
janice.rose@northumberland.gov.uk
01670 624747

Tony Kirsop
Community Regeneration Manager
tony.kirsop@northumberland.gov.uk
01670 624744

Appendix 1:

Headline Feedback from the consultation on the future of the Council's VCS Support Services Commission

High satisfaction with existing services

All services scored high levels of satisfaction. The more “niche” services of Trustee Training and Support for Volunteer Management were the lower scoring service (but still around 75% satisfied)

Generally range of services are what people want

There is a high level of satisfaction amongst users of services with the range on offer. In particular online services and the e-bulletin, funding fairs and funding support, the VCS Assembly work, and the streams of volunteer work including training, fairs and the database were all valued.

Relative value of the activities supported by the Commission

The table below lists in priority order, the activities supported by the Commission that those who replied to the consultation most valued.

Networking opportunities
Funding fairs
Feed in to VCS Liaison Group
Training courses
Ad hoc funding advice
Funding training sessions
Signpost other agencies
Engage with Town & Parish Councils
Web-based resources
Produce e-bulletin
Promote good practice
Improve volunteer resources
Improve engagement with other sectors
Local volunteer database
Influence future strategy
Volunteer fairs
Ad hoc governance advice
Volunteer management training
Address issues that affect all sectors
Organise 2x Assembly events
Increase Assembly membership
Management committee training
Engagement of Health in Assembly
Health-checks for volunteer organisations

VCS Assembly

Satisfaction with and awareness off the VCS Assembly were much increased and mostly very positive. However there is still work to do in communicating effectively and work needed with the Council to support the weakest area of being an effective influencer.

Option for Delivery of the Commission

There is little appetite for change to how the commission is delivered with one countywide commission being clearly preferred. This does ensure maximised resource for delivery and variations across the county can be understood and addressed.

Budget

Not unsurprisingly the majority response wanted current levels retained with also support for increase but there was also a recognition that times are difficult.