

Voluntary, Faith and Community Sector Support Strategy 2021-2026



Foreword

The Borough of Brentwood has had a rich and active voluntary sector for many years, with many community groups, charities and social enterprises delivering a range of vital services to support our residents. The sector contributes valuably to society and the economy, providing a range of employment and harnessing skills, time and resources of funders, volunteers, and external organisations for the benefit of the local communities. We have ambitious plans to deliver our corporate priorities by 2025, and this will only be possible by working with key partners, including the voluntary, faith and community sector.

In my time as Chair of Community and Health Committee, I have had the pleasure of attending community and voluntary-based events, meetings, and initiatives, plus working directly to support the sector. I have seen first-hand the incredible, positive impact the work of the sector has on communities, particularly those who are vulnerable. And this has never rung truer than throughout the pandemic, where thousands of people were supported with essential living tasks. This had a hugely, positive impact on the quality of life for so many people who felt reassured and continued to be connected to their communities.

The Borough Council is fortunate to have a strong and meaningful relationship with the Voluntary, Faith and Communities Sector and thanks must go to a number of organisations and representatives who have helped to shape this document. As we come through the pandemic, it is timely to review our support to ensure it is directed in the right places and in the right way to enable and prepare the sector to adapt to ever-changing landscapes.

Over the next 5 years, this strategy aims to provide the right conditions to allow the growth of a resilient and sustainable sector that works both independently and collaboratively to deliver key priorities and create a brighter future for all.

Cllr Cliff Poppy, Chair of Community and Health Committee

Purpose of the strategy

Brentwood Borough Council is committed to improving the quality of life for our residents by working to ensure that all members of our communities, particularly those who are vulnerable, feel included, supported and safe. We have a thriving and diverse voluntary, faith and community sector (VFCS) that plays a vital role in supporting the growth of the Borough.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the incredible work that the sector undertakes to support the most vulnerable people in our communities. We saw a steep rise in the creation of hyper-local support groups and a huge number of people wanting to volunteer to deliver aid to the many people who needed it.

The Borough's 'Corporate Strategy 2025' outlines our promise to continue 'Developing our Communities'. We are committed to:

- Keeping Brentwood safe
- Investing in community facilities to support a growing population

- Supporting, strengthening and sustaining communities
- Encouraging residents to lead active, healthy and fulfilling lifestyles

Our vision is for the Borough of Brentwood to have a strong, active, resilient and sustainable VFCS that is recognised for its role in delivering and shaping local services and valued for the wider social, economic and environmental contribution that it makes to the Borough of Brentwood.

This strategy will outline the Borough Council's relationship with the VFCS and will determine ways in which we can strengthen and develop it to be more responsive and flexible, to enable effective support where it is most needed, whilst making the best use of resources to deliver high quality, value for money services.

The strategy has been coproduced with support of local VFCS organisations and key partners, including partner authorities and commissioned services. It is underpinned by other relevant strategic documents, including:

- Brentwood Health and Wellbeing Strategy
- Essex Compact
- Essex Faith Covenant
- Community Safety Plan
- Leisure Strategy
- Asset Strategy
- Social Value Policy
- Procurement Strategy

An annual action plan will be produced separately and regularly reviewed and monitored to allow for updates.

The Voluntary, Faith and Community Sector (VFCS)

The borough has a wide and diverse range of not-for-profit organisations that deliver socially-driven activity, whose purpose is to support our communities. They are uniquely placed at the heart of neighbourhoods to positively impact local people and improve quality of life.

VFCS organisations vary in size and level of service delivery. Types include:

- Registered charities
- Community, sports, heritage and culture groups
- Faith organisations
- Community associations
- Social enterprises and co-operatives
- Informal, non-constituted groups

VFCS organisations are an essential partner in shaping and delivering services and support to our residents and have been doing so for many years. In particular, the sector has a distinct role in delivering early support and preventative opportunities that reduce the risk of residents needing higher level intervention, and as such are an invaluable partner whose work greatly supports that of the Council and other public services.

Volunteering

Although some VFCS organisations have employed staff, many rely on volunteers to support delivery of their services.

Volunteering has significant social, health and wellbeing benefits, promoting community cohesion and helping to bring pathways to employment. Pre - pandemic, 45% of volunteers were aged 65 and over, with 44% being from higher socioeconomic groups. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a national call for volunteers saw a steep increase in both formal and informal volunteering with younger age groups being the most prominent due to older groups needing to shield. The majority of those offering to volunteer were still from higher socioeconomic groups with those from the most deprived areas seeking more help. This shift in increase of volunteer involvement, particularly by younger age groups during the pandemic, was facilitated by the opportunity of more free time, home working and furlough.

Numbers of volunteers increased due to a common cause, with people motivated by supporting their communities and having sense of purpose, which positively impacted on their wellbeing. Some barriers to participation were reduced with lower skills requirements. The rise in informal volunteering opportunities, such as acts of kindness, was notable, with 47% of those who volunteered doing so informally, carrying out tasks such as checking on neighbours and helping with shopping.

Research on volunteering during the pandemic in Essex suggests that the hyper-local volunteer groups were quicker to identify the needs in their community, however more flexible training was needed to support volunteers and groups to have the skills and confidence required to carry out tasks and have sustainable roles. As we move into the recovery phases of the pandemic, volunteering opportunities need to be flexible with clear communication and direction using a variety of delivery methods. Longer-term support roles by volunteers for those affected by the pandemic need to be determined, with skills being utilised more effectively, volunteers being acknowledged and respected to step away when they wish.

Sources:

- NCVO, Time Well Spent, 2019
- A look at volunteering during the response to COVID-19, GOV UK, 2021
- Volunteering Discovery, Developed through the Volunteering Tactical Coordination Group (VTCG): An Essex County Council Collaboration, 2020

Role of the Council

The Borough Council has had a long-term positive relationship with the Voluntary Faith and Communities Sector, providing both staff and finances to support its development, through the delivery and commissioning of initiatives, organisational support, and allocation of premises and associate subsidiaries, such as affordable rentals and discretionary rate relief.

The Council directly commissions 3 key organisations, runs 2 discretionary funding programmes and leads the delivery of health, wellbeing and other workstreams within the community to broker partnerships to address inequalities.

As a commissioner, the Council has a key role in working closely with the sector to gain valuable insight to shape services and drive delivery of priorities forward.

Consultation and findings

From May – July 2021 the Borough Council undertook a review of the local VFCS and its role in supporting it. This was undertaken through a variety of methods, including lengthy discussions with commissioned services and external VFCS developmental organisations, plus surveys with sector networks. Discussions and surveys were designed to ascertain what the strengths of the local landscape are, where additional support is needed and what priorities there are for the community moving forwards through pandemic recovery stages.

Strengths and challenges

Despite the ongoing impact of challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector remains active and resilient. There is an appetite for collaborative working, where organisations have identified that working together has helped them to strengthen their service provision. The community hub model that was initiated during the pandemic response was highlighted as a useful mechanism to share needs and concerns, with leadership, facilitation and promotion from the Borough Council appreciated and valued. The model enabled the Borough Council and its partners to identify the most vulnerable in the community and work to address inequalities collaboratively.

Funding remains a challenge for many organisations. There is lack of awareness of funding streams across the sector, and many organisations require guidance and support to make applications or tender for commissioning opportunities. Flexible and longer-term funding is needed for organisations to be able to deliver against priorities, with support for core funding included. Greater partnership working could identify similarities in service provision across organisations and allow for collaborative bids.

Despite many organisations successfully adapting services, there is a need for greater support with new ways of working, including access to digital infrastructure and resources. Affordable and accessible premises and spaces remains a challenge. With lack of resources and a greater reliance on volunteers, there are concerns around recruiting, retaining and upskilling volunteers and staff to continue delivery of existing and additional services necessitated by the pandemic.

How we will support the VFCS over the next 5 years?

Following the review, consultation and meetings with stakeholders, the Council has identified 3 key areas of focus to enable it to have a fully supported and sustainable VFCS to support our local communities:

Commissioning and funding

- We will commission services that align with strategic priorities and deliver value for money and quality services.
- We will offer flexible and longer-term funding to enable sustainable planning and delivery against a clear outcome framework

- We will maximise social value commitments through contracts

Building capacity

- We will provide leadership and encourage collaborative working across the sector, providing opportunities for sharing best practice, key information and initiatives to enable organisations to grow
- We will take an asset-based community development approach to our support, working at a hyper-local level to listen to organisations, maximising strengths and opportunities
- We will raise the profile of organisations, engaging businesses and brokering new partnerships.
- We will support organisations to embed resilient business plans, encouraging innovation of income generation.
- We will identify opportunities for shared resourcing and promote joint working through commissioning and funding programmes
- We will encourage greater co-production of services, engaging and involving people at the heart of communities.

Supporting infrastructure

- We will prioritise upskilling of organisations to enable them to effectively bid for money
- We will maximise our assets by exploring community asset transfer opportunities
- We will build on the community hub approach, identifying ways to share assets and services
- We will support digital engagement, equipping the community to adapt to new ways of accessing services
- We will promote, support, and acknowledge inclusive volunteering, building pathways to employment and upskilling volunteers to undertake tasks confidently.

Whilst the 3 key areas of focus have been identified, there needs to be a robust and clear outcome framework to ensure that this strategy is deliverable and successful in achieving the Council's objectives. These outcomes will ensure alignment with the other key strategies for the Council, including health and wellbeing outcomes, social value delivery and the Council's corporate plan objective.

A 5-year, flexible action plan will accompany this strategy to outline the operational plan to deliver its objectives, roles and responsibilities of the Council and its key partners.