

Towards Developing a Thriving Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy

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A VISION FOR THURROCK

Thurrock's Sustainable Community Strategy states that:

'We want Thurrock to be at the dynamic heart of the Thames Gateway, a place of ambition, enterprise and opportunity, where communities and businesses flourish and the quality of life of local people is continually improving'.

In order to achieve this vision, partner organisations have agreed the following five priorities. Thurrock Council has adopted the same priorities to inform its corporate plan:

1. To improve the education and skills of local people
2. To encourage and promote job creation and economic prosperity
3. To ensure a safe, clean and green environment
4. To provide high quality and accessible public services
5. To build pride, respect and responsibility in Thurrock's communities and its residents.

A cross sector initiative called the Partnership Improvement Programme ran from February – June 2010 to help improve a joint understanding of the voluntary, community and faith sector in Thurrock. The joint vision proposed from the Partnership Improvement Programme stated that:

"We share a commitment to improving outcomes for all residents of Thurrock in a time of severe financial constraint. As a group of senior personnel from across the public and third sectors we recognise that improving cross sector partnership working is a crucial element of this. We will therefore develop an action plan to improve cross sector partnership".

Objectives agreed through the Partnership Improvement Process, alongside findings from a number of research and engagement events since January 2009, have informed the design of this strategy.

More than ever, with decreasing resources and increasing demands on public services, new ways of working with communities are needed to ensure the voice of the most disadvantaged is not lost; and that every opportunity to use available resource and community assets is capitalised. This strategy aims to ensure that the voluntary, community and faith sector working in Thurrock experiences a supportive environment that nurtures and recognises every effort to meet community need.

INTRODUCTION

Definition of voluntary and community organisations

The Third Sector? Voluntary and Community Sector? Non Government Organisations? Or Civil Society?

Given the debate over the language used to describe the voluntary sector, it is little wonder that so much confusion exists over what the sector is and isn't!

The voluntary and community sector is remarkably diverse, consisting of a large number of independent organisations. In Thurrock alone there are thought to be around 500 voluntary sector organisations! Many local organisations have been established over twenty or more years. Some respond to more recent needs in the borough. It is this huge range, in terms of scope, size and activity that gives this sector its unique strengths and qualities. The sector includes a very diverse range of organisations including some or all of the following components:

- Voluntary organisations
- Registered Charities
- Community groups
- Tenants and residents groups
- Faith groups
- Housing Associations
- Most co-operatives and social enterprises (provided profits are retained for the benefit of the members or community served)
- Most sports, arts and heritage organisations
- Grant making trusts
- Private clubs which are non-governmental.

Common features of all include:

- Are 'value-driven' – that is, that are primarily motivated by the desire to further social, environmental or cultural objectives rather than to make a profit per se; and
- Principally reinvest surpluses to further their social, environmental or cultural objectives.
- Are committed to reflecting user need and involve users in their governance arrangements and subsequent work plans

Thurrock's Compact includes the faith sector in recognition that many of the activities provided by faith organisations are for the benefit of all communities

Why A strategy for supporting the environment for a Thriving Voluntary and Community Sector?

Given Thurrock's Vision, it is clear that a strong, vibrant voluntary and community sector is needed to help meet community need in the most effective way possible.

This strategy has been developed in recognition of:

The importance of the voluntary and community sector to strong and active and empowered local communities

The third sector provides many services beyond the remit of local government that support the quality of life in Thurrock.

The value of the voluntary and community sector to responsive and effective local government

Voluntary organisations often have links into parts of the community that statutory agencies can struggle to engage with. Those closest to understanding real need are often best able to help agree holistic solutions to complex problems. This is especially relevant when considering the needs of vulnerable or disengaged communities.

The value of the assets that a strong voluntary and community sector bring to an area

Local intelligence, volunteer capacity, access to external funding, the management of buildings, community equipment, and a commitment to improving a local area are just some of the reasons why local government has an interest in securing a strong, mutually beneficial relationship with the voluntary sector

The value of local government to voluntary and community organisations

Local government can be influential in shaping the environment in which voluntary and community organisations work. This influence might be through, for example, partnership working, funding, consultation or through the way they commission and procure services.

BACKGROUND AND WHERE WE ARE NOW

National Survey into a 'Thriving Third Sector'

The 2008 National Ipsos Mori Survey which measures the satisfaction level of third sector organisations in relation to the Nation Indicator 7 (NI7) target identified Thurrock as having the lowest score in the country at 8.8%. This compared with the national average of 16.3% of registered voluntary organisations believing that Local Government in their area played a positive role in creating the environment for a thriving third sector.

National evaluation of the survey results identified that one of the key factors behind a high score was the strength of partnership working and influence that local voluntary sector organisations held with local statutory bodies.

Examination into the low score in Thurrock highlighted a number of issues with regard to the impact on the degree of influence that Thurrock Voluntary and Community Sector organisations perceived that statutory bodies have on their success. These are explored in the following pages.

An NI7 Action plan has been established between the Council for Voluntary Service with Thurrock Council in partnership with the Community Involvement Board of the LSP. A number of activities and actions were agreed that would contribute to and inform the development of a Thriving Voluntary & Community Sector Strategy, and ensure improvement against any future Mori Survey. Action included:

- A Partnership Improvement Programme
- An improved funding framework
- Commissioning/procurement capacity building programme
- Compact awareness training

A key component for improving the NI7 is the development of a Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy. The key objective of the strategy is to examine the barriers to an environment that supports a strong voluntary sector, and to support and enable third sector organisations to grow and become sustainable.

The partnership that has developed with the statutory sector and Thurrock voluntary and community organisations has enabled specialist support and wider engagement with marginalised groups to be achieved. It would be wrong to think that all is broken with respect to cross sector relationships, and this strategy aims to reflect some of the best practice evident in the borough.

The following headings provide an overview of practice up to June 2010.

Thurrock's Compact.

Thurrock Compact is an agreement between the public sector partners of

Shaping Thurrock (LSP) and Thurrock Council for Voluntary Services on behalf of the wider sector. The aim of the Compact is to improve relationships, decision making, service outcomes between the public, voluntary, community and faith sectors for the benefit of all communities.

Thurrock was one of the first boroughs to agree a framework for ensuring a positive relationship between Local Government and the voluntary and community sector. Although 'Different Strengths' was not called a Compact, it set the foundations for a number of initiatives to develop a mutual understanding around the value of positive relationships.

Thurrock's Compact can be viewed by following the link: <http://www.shapingthurrock.org.uk/communities/content.php?page=compact> As well as setting out the agreed values we aim to uphold when working together, the Compact also has a number of codes intended to promote best practice in joint working in the following areas:

1. Consultation, involvement and engagement
2. Partnership working
3. Resourcing, procurement and commissioning
4. Equalities and diversity
5. Volunteering and active citizenship
6. Community groups

Examination into the reasons for Thurrock's low NI7 score suggests that more work needs to be done in embedding the concept and principles of the Compact into all service areas.

Two seminars have been held for public sector and voluntary organisations on understanding the Compact and exploring ways of working that would incorporate the principals of the Compact. Further training events are being arranged to embed an understanding of the Compact.

Thurrock Council for Voluntary Service has secured support from the National Centre for Voluntary Services to help increase buy in to the Compact as a framework for positive cross sector relationships. Training and networking events are planned for July 2010 to help engagement into this strategy.

A Compact Champions group was established by Thurrock Council to increase awareness and embed the Compact protocols within each of the Council's Directorates. Individuals from different departments were provided with training and support to enable them to be able to ensure that the principals of the Compact were being followed. The development of a local dispute procedure is being explored.

This strategy aims to build on the Compact, and does not replace the commitments made in that framework.

The Support and Development Needs (Infrastructure needs) of the Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector in Thurrock

Following the NI7 results, research was carried out by Thurrock Council for Voluntary Services (TCVS) on behalf of the Compact Monitoring Group on the support and development needs of the voluntary and community organisations. This was completed in October 2009. The research demonstrated that there is a wide spread belief that voluntary, community and faith organisations play a crucial role in the development of stronger communities across Thurrock. However there is a need to provide specific support in a number of practical ways.

Some of the key recommendations from the report included the following:

- A dialogue should be started between commissioning agencies and the community and voluntary organisation to facilitate better understanding of the context of public service delivery and capabilities, and the capacity of voluntary, community and faith organisations through this dialogue.
- Individual voluntary & community organisations should seek to inform themselves about local priorities and commissioning procedures
- Voluntary sector infrastructure organisations should ensure that they preserve the integrity and independence of their support to voluntary and community organisations. This cannot be achieved if they find themselves competing with their members for contracts.
- Commissioning agencies should follow clear process and procedures which should be consistently applied throughout their organisations.

Value for money

Due to the existing economic climate and the need for substantial public funding savings, the emphasis of ensuring value for money is a key focus for the public sector. The importance of retaining and developing a sustainable voluntary and community sector as a stakeholder and partner in improving the quality of life for local people is pivotal to this.

The measuring of the full value that voluntary and community organisations bring through the provision of support and direct delivery of services will need to be calculated.

The voluntary sector is very much in favour of more effective evaluation of contracts to ensure that the true outcomes of a piece of work are captured and shared across services. A commitment to capturing value for money has implications on the way services are commissioned, and contract managed.

Grant funding

Thurrock Council through its corporate grant making programme is currently providing core funding and support to voluntary and community organisations to 11 organisations above £10,000, and 6 small grants under £2000 each. Two organisations are supported by budgets separate to the grants programme, but the total amount grant funded in 2009/10 amounts to £624,833.

Core funding was provided by an initial 3 year Service Level Agreement, extended by a one year funding agreement in 2010/11. The ultimate decision making body for all applications received is the Council's Cabinet.

The corporate Voluntary Sector Grants Programme is open to organisations working across the borough. Community Forums – volunteer committees working in a specific geographic community – are provided with separate funding to support area based work. These budgets can support area based community groups, as well as local improvements.

Proposals to decrease funding to voluntary organisations in the financial year 2010/11 led to much positive dialogue around the need for a new relationship with the third sector in Thurrock.

A number of grants are provided by different departments in the Council and the PCT for the delivery of a range of services by community and voluntary sector organisations.

There is however little join up or understanding of the synergy between the grant making function of the Council, and the many other funding streams – whether small grants, or commissioned services, in the Council or Partnership structures. The total value of funding provided to voluntary sector – including national as well as local organisations – is estimated to be around £5million across all Council Directorates. This lack of join up between individual arrangements has contributed to the lack of understanding about the role and potential of the voluntary and community sector in Thurrock.

A review with regard to the grants programme has run along side the development of the Thriving Third Sector strategy. Much of the consultation needed to help agree the outcomes for the future Grants Programme is to be held in July and August 2010. The outcomes will be fed into this strategy prior to a public consultation period in the summer.

Commissioning

A key concern expressed by the voluntary and community sector is the need for a more equal playing field for organisations who want to bid to deliver local services.

A number of commissioning capacity building programmes are being developed to establish a joint understanding of commissioning and a future commissioning process.

The National Centre For Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) are working in Thurrock to develop a bespoke joint sector capacity building programme that will be delivered to Commissioning Officers and voluntary and community sector organisations. The programme will assist in developing a mutual understanding of commissioning and to identify how voluntary and community organisations could contribute to shaping future services.

A number of workshops on Designing Out Disability have been delivered by Thurrock Disability Partnership group and TCEN.

Likewise, the Children's Workforce Development Trust through Thurrock CVS and Thurrock Council has provided a number of capacity building training opportunities to help voluntary sector organisations be better placed to tender to deliver services that meet the aims of the Children's Plan.

There is however no agreed framework for commissioning with voluntary and community organisations within the council or with the other statutory sector bodies.

Thurrock Local Strategic Partnership

Shaping Thurrock is the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) for Thurrock. It has been established since 2002 and is currently reviewing new protocols and structure. Shaping Thurrock aims to bring together various partnerships including public, private, voluntary, community and faith sector organisations, to improve the quality of life for local people in Thurrock.

The Shaping Thurrock Partnership is the key forum where Third Sector Organisations have representation on the Executive Board. The LSP has played a key role in enabling Third Sector organisations to influence decisions on the delivery of the Sustainable Communities Strategy and the Local Area Agreements and National Indicators. As some of the mechanisms that agree local targets are reformed, it will be important to keep the role of the LSP with regard to influence in mind.

Influencing priorities

Thurrock Council has established in partnership with voluntary and community organisations a Community Engagement Toolkit which sets out the methods to be implemented to maximise involvement in the decision making process. A Community Engagement Strategy is being designed, with much input from the voluntary and community sector via the Community Involvement Board of the LSP.

Many organisations however feel that a more supportive environment is needed to help voluntary and community sector organisations share the intelligence they hold with the service managers who influence commissioning plans. Better dialogue is needed where voluntary sector organisations feel listened to, and where appropriate engagement mechanisms ensure messages are

communicated and captured.

The Community Involvement Board of the LSP

There are a number of related issues that have also been identified by the Community Involvement Board (CIB) that need to be addressed through the Strategy. A clear indication of the role of voluntary and community organisations from the council in not only service delivery but in developing and influencing policies and the shaping of future services is considered key. Important areas that have been identified, and that the strategy will aim to clarify included:

- Thurrock Council's vision for developing, supporting and sustaining local voluntary and community organisations.
- The recognition of the benefits and contribution that voluntary and community sector organisations deliver in meeting the vision for Thurrock.
- The re-affirming of the commitment to strategic partnership working.
- A commitment to address the support needs of both small and larger organisations to assist in their growth and future sustainability.
- A clear transparent framework for funding, including commissioning services.
- A model that can be used to utilise the expertise of voluntary and community organisation in developing local services.
- The need to develop a model for recording and monitoring the Social Investment on Return (SIOR) that voluntary and community sector organisations provide when delivering services.

Together, these three factors culminated in Thurrock Council agreeing to lead on a Thriving Third Sector Strategy to help ensure a corporate understanding around issues relating to the voluntary and community sector.

Thurrock Council are keen to ensure a more consistent approach across partners – and within agencies – to how they work with the voluntary, community and faith sector in Thurrock. Likewise, the sector itself needs to improve how information about the sector is accessed so that partners can have a better dialogue with the right partners. Creating an environment for a thriving voluntary and community sector will be a key focus for the council and its statutory partners. This will involve supporting the third sector to become sustainable. This may require a cultural change and the development of different ways of working for some public sector departments.

Partnership Improvement Programme

Given the gap in cross sector relationships captured above, the IDeA were approached to offer a Partnership Improvement Programme in Thurrock.

Senior staff and representatives from across voluntary and statutory organisations, including the Portfolio holder for Communities, Libraries and Cultural services, were supported in examining the aspirations for cross sector working in Thurrock, alongside the barriers to making this happen. An Improvement Action Plan will be agreed from this process, helping to focus attention on three core objectives:

- 1: To make effective use of the skills, expertise and knowledge of the VCS within partnerships to benefit Thurrock's Communities
- 2: To clarify and improve Partnership processes
- 3: To agree a modernised approach to resourcing and resource management for the Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector in order to better meet local need.

The action plans agreed through the Partnership Improvement Programme, alongside the learning gained from joint commissioning training and the review of the Grants Programme will be captured in this strategy and subsequent action plan.

DRIVERS FOR CHANGES

National Government

The Coalition Government has made clear its commitment to finding different delivery models for future service provision. The Coalition Government clearly sees a potentially increased role for the voluntary and community sector. The newly created Office for Civil Society within the Cabinet Office aims to make it easier to run a charity, social enterprise or voluntary organisation; get more resources into the sector and make it easier for sector organisations to work with the state.

The vision for the Big Society is that communities will have more say over how public services are run, and empower ordinary people to take responsibility for solving problems and improving lives in communities. Voluntary Sector organisations will be key to helping this vision become a reality.

The Need to Reduce Public Sector Spending

Unprecedented savings are being made to central and local government budgets. This is likely to impact on voluntary sector organisations in a number of ways including reduced opportunities for funding support, and increased competition over the resources made available through funding streams be they grants or commissioned services.

Local government will however need to consider new ways of working to ensure needs are more effectively captured and met. Better engagement with communities – including voluntary organisations that are closest to target communities is one way of achieving this.

Local Priorities

Locally, the Council has set out its commitment to increased community engagement and supporting strong, cohesive communities. It has also stressed the need for effective performance management to help inform funding decisions.

DEVELOPING A THRIVING VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR STRATEGY

Set out below are the objectives that were identified as areas that will need addressing:

- The embedding of the Compact principles and protocols within the statutory sector.
- Improved cross sector partnership working.
- A model for enabling voluntary & community organisations to be able to influence policies and service delivery.
- The support and development available to voluntary and community organisations – usually through a member led infrastructure organisation
- A transparent and consistent process for procurement, commissioning, monitoring and evaluation of contracts.
- A commitment to the need to support voice and specialist provision for some communities at risk of exclusion and falling between service interests

ACTION PLANNING AND NEXT STEPS

A number of engagement opportunities are still to be concluded before the objectives and supporting action plans and be finalised. Once this process has ended, the strategy will be updated and put to public consultation.