

Gloucester City Council

Meeting:	Cabinet	Date:	15 July 2020
Subject:	Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Response to the Current COVID-19 Pandemic		
Report Of:	Cabinet Member for Communities and Neighbourhoods		
Wards Affected:	All Wards		
Key Decision:	No	Budget/Policy Framework:	No
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Appendices:	A. COVID-19 and the Voluntary and Community Sector - A Gloucester Perspective		
	B. COVID-19 Intelligence Gathering Barnwood Trust		
	C. Draft Criteria for the £10k Recovery Fund		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to present the findings of an intelligence gathering exercise about the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic on the VCS in Gloucester, and to set out proposals of how Gloucester City Council can support Gloucester's VCS in moving beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 Cabinet is asked to **RESOLVE** that:

- (1) The findings of the research in Gloucester's VCS Stocktake report as well as report produced by the Barnwood Trust be noted.
- (2) A one-off Gloucester VCS Recovery Funding of £10,000 to small community/grassroots organisations with one-off grants to deal with the financial impact of COVID-19 and support their recovery be approved.
- (3) Authority be delegated to the Head of Communities, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods and Communities, to award grants in accordance with the agreed criteria.

- (4) The introduction of a 'Business Mentor' Scheme, which will broker informal mentoring/advice from businesses to smaller VCS organisations within the City be welcomed.

3.0 Background and Key Issues

3.1 As COVID-19 continues to evolve in society, it is important that we as a city council understand how this is affecting one of our society's most important sectors – the voluntary and community sector (VCS). Gloucester City Council reached out to 17 organisations to invite them to take part in an interview as part of a VCS 'stock take'. The purpose of the interviews was to help Gloucester City Council understand the impact COVID-19 is having on the sector. These organisations form a representative sample of Gloucester's voluntary and community sector, however this is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of all VCS organisations in Gloucester. These sample organisations were agreed upon by Gloucester City Council's Cabinet Members with input from Group Leaders.

3.2 The organisations and charities the Council have spoken to range from small independent community centres, to larger, well known and respected city and county wide volunteering bodies – a full description of each organisation we spoke to can be found in the Appendix. The purpose of this report is to conduct an assessment of how Gloucester's VCS organisations are adapting and responding to the pressures of COVID-19 set out recommendations based on the SWOT analyses conducted. The report (Appendix A) identified the following key findings:

- VCS organisations in Gloucester have adapted well in the short term through implementing stop gap measures and other temporary solutions.
- Organisations are facing struggles, particularly surrounding finances, access to services, technological literacy and ensuring they retain client relationships.
- Changes in demand have varied across the voluntary and community sector - those organisations directly involved in the COVID-19 response effort have seen a notable shift in demand, with increases in some areas alongside changes in the service provisions they offer.
- There is variation in how staffing levels have been impacted by COVID-19, largely dependent on to what extent the organisation has been able to respond directly to COVID-19.
- There has been an increased prevalence of volunteers in the community willing to support VCS operations, along with increasingly creative and flexible ways of working.
- Most VCS organisations have not yet had time to consider the longer-term impacts beyond the immediate issues they are dealing with. Above all, organisations have expressed concern about the loss of face to face contact and the impacts that will have on their organisation and its connections with the community in the longer term.
- Organisations across the sector are looking for greater recognition for their staff and volunteers in the light of the pandemic, to celebrate their contribution and thank them for their hard work throughout this crisis.
- There is a desire for greater coordination across the sector to avoid duplication of effort, and ensure organisations are able to collaborate and learn from each other in their time of need.

- 3.3 From the key findings outlined above the report arrived at five key recommendations for change for the sector which could be supported by the City Council. They are:
1. Support the sector to invest in technology and increase skills, particularly around digital service delivery.
 2. Address food poverty in Gloucester.
 3. Re-examine the form and function of engagement between the VCS and the City Council to further improve communication, networking, advice and support but also facilitate effective links between the sector itself.
 4. Support the VCS in developing employee and volunteer retention strategies.
 5. Increase publicity initiatives and promotional support for the sector.
- 3.4 These recommendations will guide the COVID-19 recovery work of the City Council and inform our engagement with the VCS.
- 3.5 Findings in the Gloucester Stocktake are broadly representative of the findings of a similar report by the Barnwood Trust (Appendix B) which focuses on the VCS within Gloucestershire.
- 3.4 As demonstrated in both reports, VCS organisations have expressed concerns over the financial implications of the COVID-19 crisis, as well as a desire for support in navigating government schemes and following guidelines related to and in response to COVID-19.
- 3.5 The City of Gloucester is fortunate to have an established network of stakeholders specialising in businesses support. The Gloucestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (GFirst LEP) and University of Gloucestershire have both established a number of schemes in the County to support businesses, and by that extension VCS organisations. Two programmes in particular already operate offering similar services to those which would be provided by a business mentor:
- The Growth Hub offers a broad range of business support. Whilst their priority is to support businesses with high-growth potential, all businesses in the County can access their online support, attend networking events, and use their co-working space, free of charge. Depending on whether it meets their criteria, the Growth Hub also has a network of Business Navigators/Business Guides that offer 1-to-1 support.
 - The Start and Grow Enterprise programme (SaGE) offers free advice and support for those starting out in business for the first time, or those businesses less than two years old and looking to grow. SaGE advisors work with those who sign-up to create a bespoke action plan of development based on their needs. They are then given access to free courses, networking opportunities, and the chance to apply for an Enterprise Voucher (a £1000 grant).
- 3.6 It is proposed that contact is made with these organisations for support with the 'Business Mentor' Scheme specifically by offering a clear route of access to support for VCSE organisations. This could be achieved by having the City Council act as an intermediary to pass on details to these organisations as and when requests for support are received. In addition, we will promote volunteering opportunities amongst City Council staff in line with our volunteering policy and the provision of 2 working days of volunteering time for each member of staff.

3.7 In response to the concerns about direct Covid-19 related financial and cash-flow pressures for example as a result of loss of income, we propose to establish a one-off recovery funding that will be accessible to smaller community or grass-roots organisations with one-off grant payments to support cash flow or investments required to secure business continuity or transformation. We will ensure that organisations have exhausted other grants available to them, including local and national funders. Following the format of our COVID-19 community grants, we will devise a simple application process with an assessment process that provides challenge and support and signposting to more appropriate grant making organisations if appropriate. Draft criteria for this one-off fund are attached at Appendix C.

4.0 Social Value Considerations

4.1 Several recommendations will have a direct positive impact on generating social value within the City.

5.0 Environmental Implications

5.1 None directly arising from this report

6.0 Alternative Options Considered

6.1 None directly arising from this report

7.0 Reasons for Recommendations

7.1 The one-off Gloucester VCS Recovery Funding of £10,000 to small community organisations as well as the introduction of a 'Business Mentor Scheme, are based on the key findings across Appendix A and B. These recommendations aim to address the main issues faced by the sector – through providing a stop-gap emergency fund, and ensuring advice and support is available to the sector.

8.0 Future Work and Conclusions

8.1 The next steps will include:

- Sharing the findings of the stocktake report with the VCS and developing a set of actions in response to the recommendations.
- The development and implementation of the Business Mentor Scheme.
- The design and implementation of the Recovery Fund.

9.0 Financial Implications

9.1 The £10k fund will come from the Covid-19 reserve.

(Financial Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report.)

10.0 Legal Implications

- 10.1 None directly arising from this report other than ensuring that the agreed criteria for award is fair and transparent and consideration is given to a simple mechanism to monitor that the funds are used for the purpose for which the grants are awarded.

(One Legal have been consulted in the preparation of this report.)

11.0 Risk & Opportunity Management Implications

11.1 N/A

12.0 People Impact Assessment (PIA) and Safeguarding:

12.1 N/A

13.0 Community Safety Implications

13.1 N/A

14.0 Staffing & Trade Union Implications

14.1 N/A

Background Documents: None