

Kent County Council



Strategy for Kent 2021-2024

Supporting connected communities
and a sustainable social sector in Kent

Foreword

I am delighted to introduce Kent County Council's (KCC) Civil Society Strategy. This replaces our Voluntary, Community Sector (VCS) policy adopted in 2015 and is a key strategic document for the County Council.



We first drafted this strategy in 2019 to recognise the role of civil society in Kent in supporting connected communities and the importance of the informal and formal groups that provide opportunities for people to come together. Since then, we have experienced challenges we would not have foreseen and whilst this strategy has been revised amongst many uncertainties, what we have most certainly seen over the last 18 months is the important role civil society plays in our communities. I am convinced more than ever of the importance of this strategy and the commitments it sets out for the County Council.

I would also like to take this opportunity to highlight the work of the Voluntary Sector Recovery Cell, established at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 as part of the Kent Resilience Forum architecture. This cell, made up of several VCSE representatives, developed an impact assessment and subsequent action plan, which mapped out the steps to recovery and which we have used to revise this strategy post Covid. The establishment of the cell has led to much improved partnership working, which we believe paves the way for a more strategic and mature relationship with the sector. It has also led to the formation of the VCSE Steering Group who have provided invaluable insights in refreshing this strategy.

I need to give special thanks to Josephine McCartney, Chief Executive of Kent Community Foundation, who Chairs the Steering Group and has worked tirelessly as a representative of the sector over the last year, providing a point of contact and expertise on the sector to KCC throughout.

And finally I would like to thank all those organisations and individuals who took the time to contribute to the strategy consultation. Your insights have been invaluable in helping to shape a strategy that will enable us to continue to develop effective partnership working and collaboration with civil society in Kent.

Mike Hill

Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services

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Definitions and Terminology

What do we mean by civil society?

By civil society, we mean all those individuals, informal and formal groups and organisations that operate outside of state control and for the primary purpose of social good. Whilst we recognise that private business can be socially motivated, this strategy focuses on those organisations that do not distribute profits and are not part of the statutory sector.

Whilst 'social sector' as we refer to it, is at the heart of a strong civil society we believe the terminology of civil society is important in establishing that social good happens outside of the state and in many different forms. This is not always through the traditional organisational structures, such as registered charities that we have referred to as the social sector. It also includes the more informal and often un-constituted community groups and individuals taking an active role in their local community, to improve their local area or champion a particular cause with a primary aim of delivering social good.

'Civil society' recognises the important independence of all individuals and organisations when undertaking activities for social good and distinguishes it from the state or the public sector. However, it is not possible to put firm boundaries around civil society, for example, we know that a proportion of the social sector is an important provider of KCC services and in that sense has a relationship with the state. This is though, a minority of organisations; most organisations and activities to deliver social good are not funded by KCC. In part, moving to a civil society strategy was to move away from the narrow view of the past, where KCC's relationship with the social sector has been funnelled through its funding and to recognise the vibrant civil society that exists in many forms across our communities independent of public sector funding.

VCSE

When we refer to organisations in the strategy as opposed to the 'sector' we use the term 'VCSE', which relates to voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations.

Social sector

We have used the term 'social sector' in this strategy, where referring to the 'sector' as opposed to organisations. This is informed by engagement we have undertaken with the sector but also because we believe the term 'voluntary' sector can sometimes undervalue the economic contribution of charities and social enterprises to the local economy. It can also give the impression that the sector can deliver with little or minimal cost.

We also wanted to broaden out the definition of 'voluntary sector' to recognise the important contribution that social enterprises make to our local

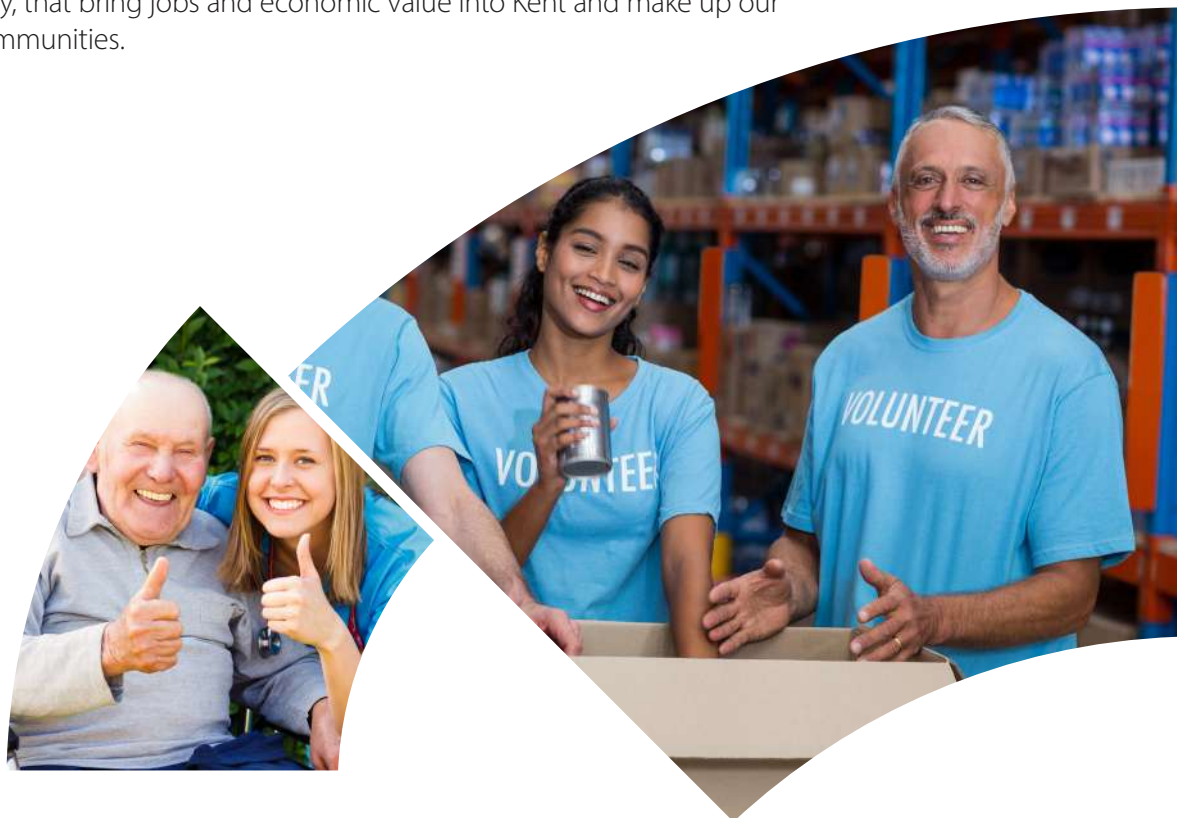
communities. Whilst fundamentally different from charities they share the objective to complete a social mission. The future relationship set out in this strategy, therefore, looks beyond structures of organisations and recognises that a strong civil society, in many forms is central to the concept of 'place' within our communities and makes an invaluable contribution to the Kent economy and society.

Social enterprises have many definitions, but they generally have the following characteristics:

- They have an enshrined primary social or environmental mission (through legal form, governing documents, or ownership)
- They principally direct their surpluses towards that mission
- They are independent of government
- They primarily earn income through trading, selling goods or services.

(Hidden Revolution: Social Enterprise in 2018)

It is also important to point out that whilst there are many charities and social enterprises operating in the KCC area, which are not Kent based, this strategy very much focuses on the local. It is primarily concerned with the Kent based charities, community groups and social enterprises that are part of the Kent economy, that bring jobs and economic value into Kent and make up our local communities.



Introduction

This strategy recognises the role of civil society in Kent and sets out how Kent County Council (KCC) will work to support a strong and vibrant civil society across our communities. This strategy replaces our Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) policy agreed in 2015 and is the first Civil Society Strategy for KCC.

We originally developed and consulted on this strategy in early 2020, just before the Covid-19 pandemic. We subsequently decided to pause the development due to Covid and allow time to reflect on the challenges and impact of the last year. However, we believe that the importance of this strategy has only grown in the last year. Not only because of the incredible response we have seen from our communities, voluntary organisations, and local people but because of the undeniable impact the pandemic has and will continue to have on us as individuals, communities and as organisations and the need to recognise and respond to that.

Prior to this we had seen the publication of the first Government Civil Society Strategy and indeed a shift in areas of the voluntary sector, to more entrepreneurial models of operating – by this we mean diversification of income, trading and incorporating social enterprise models. The national strategy shift and the diversification of the sector informed our decision to broaden out the VCS policy into a new Civil Society Strategy. ‘Civil Society’ allowed us to recognise the contribution of both the registered charities and voluntary organisations but also the many informal groups and individual volunteers who play an important role in our communities. This also reflected the conversations we had with the sector since the publication of the VCS policy.

This direction still feels right; we have seen evidence of the resilience and innovation that exists both within the social sector and when our communities or ‘civil society’ come together. This strategy we hope celebrates that civic activity and community spirit and sets out our ambitions for the County Council’s relationship with Civil Society in Kent.

Finally, but importantly this strategy sets out how we will support the social sector, not only through our funding practice such as our approach to grant funding but also through our funding of infrastructure support to the sector.

The KCC Civil Society strategy is an important document for the authority, reflecting the crucial role the social sector plays in achieving strong and resilient communities across our county. It is also a key strategy in delivering against the outcomes of the Council’s [*Interim Strategic plan*](#).

Aims and objectives of this strategy:

- ① a recognition of the contribution of civil society in Kent and the VCSE (the 'social sector') as a core part of that
- ② a commitment to supporting civil society to flourish
- ③ a commitment to a strategic relationship with the social sector that recognises its diversity and goes beyond those that have a financial relationship with the Council
- ④ a commitment to build on the partnership working we have seen over the last year between both public sector partners social sector, which recognises the sector as an equal partner
- ⑤ a commitment to support the social sector to be sustainable
- ⑥ a commitment to safeguarding the independence of VCSE organisations.

How will this strategy be used?

- to shape our relationship with civil society in the future and the social sector as a core part of that
- to provide a framework to guide the approach to the Council's engagement with the social sector
- to provide consistency in our approach to grant funding to the social sector
- to shape our commitment to an offer of support to the social sector, and the principles which underpin it including fair funding.



How will we measure our progress and success?

We will have succeeded when:



National context

Policy landscape

When writing the first draft of this strategy in 2019, we would not have foreseen a pandemic and the additional challenges this then brought. However, these challenges have also presented opportunities; to rethink the way we work in partnership, how we meet demand, the way services are delivered across the public sector and indeed perhaps made us all re-evaluate what we value. The importance of social connections, our physical assets and green spaces have been strengthened over the last year as too has our sense of community.

We had already seen pre-Covid an increased desire for people to want to influence and have a say in the way services are run and in what happens in their local communities. However, the identification of place and a feeling of pride and connectedness to your local area has become increasingly important particularly as our worlds have shrunk to the very local at times over the last year.

A national civil society strategy

In 2018 the government published its first Civil Society Strategy, this set out a direction for government policy and the intention to strengthen the organisations, large and small which hold society together. It was complemented by the government's strategy on tackling loneliness, which set out how we can support strong connections between people. The Integrated Communities Green paper and subsequent action plan similarly focused on resilient and cohesive communities.

More recently the Prime Minister invited Danny Kruger MP to lead a piece of work to develop proposals on how to maximise the role of volunteers, community groups, faith groups, charities and social enterprise and contribute actively to the governments levelling up agenda. The subsequent report *Levelling Up Our Communities* was published in September 2020 and emphasised the importance of local connections, of empowering local people in their communities and the role of civil society. It also recognised the role of local government as convenor and enabler whilst needing to ensure that this does not inhibit the independent social action we should be supporting.

Financial health of the charity sector

Whilst civil society refers to a much broader group than charities, there is no single database of organisations and the most comprehensive available is the Charity Commission.

What we cannot yet tell is the impact of Covid on the long-term health of the sector. However, research carried out by Nottingham Trent University, NCVO

and Sheffield Hallam University¹ predicts that income from trading is expected to drop more than 17% next year and whilst 47% of respondents said their income had dropped, 31% have reported an increase in total income since last year; reflecting the Covid recovery funding that has been available. However, the extent of the longer-term impact of Covid varies significantly depending on the size, location and type of organisation and the real test will be as recovery funding comes to an end.

In terms of the charity sector's² overall health nationally, we can only base this on the last full set of charity accounts; the most recent data available at a national level is from 2017/18. Therefore, this data does not reflect the impact of the last year and should be read with some caution. This data is provided in *annex 1* of this strategy.

Social enterprise

There has been a diversification in the sector, with some charities setting up trading arms to free themselves from the constraints of public funding. Although charities are fundamentally different from social enterprises, they are both socially motivated. Social enterprises have grown in prominence over the last 20 years and particularly in the public sector landscape in the last decade, but their origins are much older. Social Enterprise UK reports that there has been a significant rise in community interest company (CIC) registration over the last 12 months³. By March 2021, the number of CICs grew to 23,839. There are however, around 100,000 social enterprises and the sector is worth £60bn to the UK economy and employs 2 million people (this includes co-operatives and building societies)⁴. They also estimate that 52% of social enterprises grew their turnover in the last 12 months (2019).

Over the last year despite acute challenges 65% of CIC's are now expecting to retain their position or grow (compared to all SMEs where around 50% expected turnover growth in the last 12 months), and only 1% expect to close (compared to 11% of business as a whole).



1 [NTU-Covid-voluntary-sector-report-May-2021_DIGITAL.pdf \(cpwop.org.uk\)](#)

2 this is based on the 'general charities' definition and does not include those that are not registered charities or social enterprises

3 [SEUK-Year-of-COVID-report-v3.pdf \(socialenterprise.org.uk\)](#)

4 [Build-Back-Britain-Report-February-2021.pdf \(socialenterprise.org.uk\)](#)

Local context

Kent has a vibrant and diverse voluntary sector. **There are over 2,845 active voluntary organisations in Kent with a combined income of over £300m⁵.** The majority of organisations are micro and small in terms of income. In contrast to the national picture, there are no super-major organisations and income is concentrated in medium and large organisations as opposed to major. Charities are distributed unevenly with a concentration in major urban areas across individual districts. Sevenoaks has the highest number of registered charities per 1,000 residents and Dartford the lowest.

In real terms, the sector has seen an income increase of 5.8% since 2014/15, in cash terms, this is an increase of £15.5m⁶.

KCC funds a significant number of VCSE organisations with a spend of around £124m⁷ for a range of services, £7.2 m of this is currently in grant contributions. This is evidence of the significance of the VCSE in providing services and community based activities in Kent and the council is proud to work with the sector in this way as part of a diverse provider base.

Local data on social enterprises are less available, however, work undertaken by the Southeast Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP)⁸, estimated that between 4,500 and 6,300 social enterprises are trading in the SELEP area contributing £2.3bn to the economy. **For Kent and Medway, the estimated number of organisations is between 2,135 and 2,774. 44% of social enterprises in the area state they are improving a specific community and 28% supporting vulnerable people⁹, as their main objectives¹⁰.**

Whilst the challenges of the last year cannot be underestimated a recent survey by Kent Community Foundation¹¹ has found that the confidence of organisations of being in operation in the future is up with 76% of respondents saying they are 100% confident they will still be in operation in March 2022, this is compared to 68% in a previous survey undertaken in November 2020. However, the demand for services has also continued to rise and ¼ of those who said it had increased say they had been unable to meet the demand. The road ahead we know will be difficult and we will inevitably lose some organisations, but the resilience of the social sector in Kent has been clearly demonstrated over the last year more than ever.

5 KCC VCS annual report 2021 based on 'general charities definition, based on those who are registered in Kent and on 2018-19 data, some charities have not filed accounts for this period so data may be incomplete.

6 KCC VCS annual report 2021, based on those organisations which have been registered for the full 5 years and submitted accounts for the full 5 years

7 KCC 2020-21 spend, includes all payments for services and grants to registered charities, community interest companies, industrial and provident societies

8 Social Enterprise – a Prospectus, (2019) South East Local Enterprise Partnership

9 This is based on data from Social Enterprise, 2017, Social Enterprise UK and relates to East Sussex and Kent

10 This is based on data from Social Enterprise, 2017, Social Enterprise UK and relates to East Sussex and Kent

11 [Kent Community Foundation Survey of Kent's Charitable Sector \(kentcf.org.uk\)](https://kentcf.org.uk)

The Kent Partners Compact

The National Compact, the agreement which governs relations between the government and civil society organisations in England and set the direction for local compacts, was last updated in 2010. Since then, the government has committed to renewing its commitment to the principles of the Compact, however, this has yet to happen and feels unlikely to be forthcoming given other pressures.

In the past, our relationship and engagement with the sector were defined solely through the Kent Partners Compact, first agreed in 2009 and which was refreshed in 2012. The VCS policy in 2015 endorsed the principles of the Compact but recognised the need to go beyond this and indeed to review what was now a very out of date document.

The Kent Partners Compact was a partnership document signed by KCC on behalf of public sector partners. This strategy sets out KCC's relationship with the sector and is not intended to speak for our partners.

We believe that the Kent Partners Compact, some twelve years since it was first published does not reflect the current climate. It does not portray how the social sector or public sector has evolved, or the relationship we are striving to establish with the sector, importantly it also does not recognise legislation such as the Social Value Act, 2012, which has been adopted since it was agreed. In the initial consultation on the draft strategy in 2020 of the 69 respondents, 47 agreed that we should close the Compact and include the principles in this strategy. 21 answered 'do not know' and only 1 disagreed.

We have therefore decided to replace the Compact with this strategy as we believe that the principles within the Compact are embedded or sit within legislation such as the Best Value Duty.

KCC is committed to upholding the Best Value Duty and will adhere to the principle of three months' notice on funding decisions as is also set out in the National Compact.

"An authority intending to reduce or end funding (where 'funding' means both grant funding and any fixed term contract) or other support to a voluntary and community organisation or small business should give at least three months' notice of the actual reduction to both the organisation involved and the public/service users".

(Best Value revised guidance 2015)

In essence, the Compact sought to achieve good financial practice, recognition of an independent sector and a relationship that is based on respect and understanding. All of these commitments are fundamental principles and objectives of this strategy. We, therefore, believe the relationship set out in this strategy and the support offer described harnesses the principles of what the National Compact sought to achieve but in a way that is relevant and reflects the current environment.



Chapter 1

People

Whilst civil society is independent of the state a proportion of the social sector is an important provider of publicly funded services to individuals on our behalf. However, the role of civil society in supporting people is broader than that; it often provides that wider safety net, supporting people in our communities outside of state support.

During our consultation people described civil society as ‘people coming together to support each other, ensuring our communities are inclusive’. It is through the social action of individuals within our communities that social connections are often created that are vital to improving our wellbeing.

Social Sector as a provider of services

A small proportion of the social sector in Kent provide services on behalf of the Council. These services are significant and may be supporting children, young people, and older people, and indeed some of the most vulnerable people in our communities.

Whilst the number of charities delivering services in this way in Kent is relatively small against the totality of the sector, financially this is a significant amount of KCC spend, with approximately £124m¹² spent in the VCSE sector for a range of services, support, and community interventions.

The social sector has become increasingly engaged in the delivery of public services over the last 20 years and the relationship between the state and social sector has therefore become deeply entwined. Through community wellbeing and preventative services, the sector plays an important role in supporting older people in their homes and within their local community. The social sector also provides specialist services such as mental health services, services for disabled children, people with learning disabilities and young people through youth services or activities for younger people. They are also a vital provider of specialist drug and alcohol support services. In all of these services the sector often provides the innovative solutions to some of the most challenging issues, which later can later become mainstream approaches embedded by local authorities.



¹² KCC 2020-21 spend, includes all payments for services and grants to registered charities, community interest companies, industrial and provident societies and mutuals.

Demand on the social sector post Covid

The financial impact of the pandemic on the social sector is yet to be fully realised, however we know that demand for support from VCSE organisations has increased over the last year, with the latest survey from Kent Community Foundation showing a 70% increase in demand¹³, whilst resources to meet this have reduced.

We know that in addition to providing contracted services, the sector often provides a 'safety net' outside of state support and that many of the population groups the sector supports will have been particularly impacted by the pandemic. Covid not only had an unequal impact on population health, for example, Black & ethnic minority groups had between 10 and 50% higher risk of death from Covid and Bangladeshi twice the risk of death than White British, but we also know that certain population groups are more at risk from the long-term wider impacts of the pandemic. This includes people with learning disabilities, care home residents, informal carers, those in low paid employment, vulnerable children, people in the justice system, people with mental health conditions, people living in poverty and Black and Minority Ethnic Groups.

Community groups and VCSE organisations have been a lifeline to many over the last year; providing support to people who are shielding and isolated and will need to continue to support communities to build back. Many charities will also offer the more formal services to people dealing with the longer-term impact Covid has had on their lives. The needs in our communities may look different because of the last year and it will take time to fully understand the impact, but the sector is a central part of that wider safety net that supports our communities. It is therefore right that this strategy does not focus solely on the sector as a provider of publicly funded services but also the innovative support and solutions the sector can bring to meet the complex challenges, that sit outside of the local authority's direct remit.

Social responsibility

Integral to a thriving civil society are the countless individuals who volunteer, whether this is by setting up and running activities that bring people together, championing the needs of their local community or serving as trustees.

The volunteer effort during the pandemic has been monumental, whilst many volunteers had to shield, new volunteers stepped up and the volunteer infrastructure played a central role in supporting those shielding in Kent as well as in the vaccination effort, which continues. As an example, during 2020 Ashford Volunteer Centre alone had 796 people who wanted to volunteer and who formally registered for volunteering.

¹³ [Kent Community Foundation Survey of Kent's Charitable Sector \(kentcf.org.uk\)](https://kentcf.org.uk)

However, the role of volunteers is not something we should only celebrate during a crisis; volunteers are the backbone of the many community organisations that exist day to day. We want to ensure that people are empowered to take part in their communities going forward in the same way they have over the last year.

Around a quarter of the population formally volunteer¹⁴ and there is evidence that being involved in volunteering is beneficial for people's health¹⁵. There are around 19,000 volunteers within major, large, and medium-sized charities in Kent. This figure is significant; however, it does not include the many volunteers running the small and micro charities and organisations embedded in local communities. However, to empower people to contribute, volunteering needs to be flexible and innovative so that it fits around different life circumstances. It is also important that we encourage young people to take part in social action or to volunteer particularly as we know that younger adults aged 16-24 years old are at particular risk of feeling lonely more often.

It is very often small groups and organisations that are involved in shaping our local communities. They contrast with the more formally constituted, larger charities and are often completely funded by donations and fundraising and led by volunteers. However, it is this that grounds them in their local communities. They respond to a need for as long as it exists, it is self-defined and determined.

We want to encourage people within their communities to respond in this way and ensure that Kent is a place that supports and values this type of civic activity.

Our offer of support to the sector set out in Chapter 3, is in part therefore aimed at supporting volunteering infrastructure and grassroots, community activities and organisations that evolve organically and the many volunteers who are integral to them.

14 HM Government, (2018) A connected society, a strategy for tackling loneliness. London: Government Publications

15 Public Health England/NHS England, (2015), Health and Wellbeing: A guide to Community-centred approaches



Chapter 2

Place

Civil society enhances the places we live in. It provides opportunities for diverse communities to meet, it celebrates the history and heritage of our local areas, creates social networks through shared spaces and activities that people value. A sense of place and identity is important to people. People want their local area to be thriving and the physical spaces and community assets are an important part of this. The community buildings, activities and green spaces are all part of what makes our local area and have provided much respite over the last year.

Kent is a diverse county, spanning from the North Downs to the East Coast; rural countryside in the Weald to the urban areas of North Kent; traditional market towns and villages to planned garden communities at Otterpool and Ebbsfleet. Kent has a strong identity, but it also has distinct identities found within this large county and it is the connections within these unique places that make a community.

Social sector and the local economy

Increasingly as public service policy requires a collaborative place-based approach, civil society must be part of the conversation. The needs of places can be represented by insights from local communities but also the social sector, which is a significant part of the local economy. This is particularly important in a county the size of Kent, that we can hear from the diverse communities that exist.

The social sector makes a significant contribution to the local economy, creating vibrant and diverse places whilst reinvesting back into their communities. Registered charities and social enterprises are a significant employer in Kent, estimates for the southeast state that there are 44,000-62,000 people employed in social enterprises (this data is not available at Kent level). Meanwhile registered charities in Kent with an income of over £500K, employ around 8,799 people and the sector contributes £300m to the local economy. Many social enterprises employ people who could not work in the mainstream labour market, with 44% of social enterprises nationally employing people from disadvantaged communities¹⁶. They are also more likely to be led by and recruit staff from the BAME backgrounds, although there is still evidence of limitations within the sector¹⁷. The social value of this should not be overlooked especially given the positive impact we know employment has on wellbeing.



Nationally the charity sector spends 86% of its income on charitable activities or their core mission, which in turn creates investment within our local area. For Kent's charities, this means £258m of its £300m income is potentially spent on charitable activities in our communities.

The contribution of volunteers cannot be overlooked, with around 19,000 volunteers in Kent supporting major large and medium-sized charities. However, this does not include the countless volunteers running, very often without paid staff, small and micro-organisations across our communities. The value of formal volunteering is estimated to be around £23.9bn (2016) nationally according to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO). The significant contribution volunteering has as a route to paid employment must also not be overlooked.

It is therefore important that we ensure the voice of the social sector is heard within the local economy as a significant contributor. When we talk about growth in Kent this must be inclusive and hearing the voice of the social sector will help us to achieve this, given that many of these organisations represent and very often employ, those who are most disadvantaged in our communities. We will work through our engagement with partners to advocate for this across the different engagement forums that exist.

Resilient communities – tackling social isolation

If resilience is measured by a community's capability to cope with uncertainty and change, then our communities across Kent have shown great resilience over the last year. We have seen that building resilience is very often best achieved at the local level. What makes communities resilient is as diverse and complex as the communities themselves; whilst the state plays a role in this it is also the myriad of local organisations, community networks and trusted engagement channels, the community leaders, and local volunteers. It is all these that have helped to provide local 'resilience' over the last year but more importantly will continue to do so.

It is often civil society that is closest to the ground and nurtures relationships, it helps to connect people across diverse communities; helping to combat loneliness and social isolation. For an area such as Kent with its many rural communities there are also particular challenges in terms of isolation, accessibility, and connectivity and the active communities in these areas offer important support networks to local people. It is this informal infrastructure that sprang into action quickly during the early days of the pandemic and provided that much needed support to those shielding or isolated. Whilst we knew the importance of this and the detrimental impact of loneliness before, the pandemic shone a light even further into the vital role of community support and the importance of local connections. Whilst formal structures by their nature took time to respond, the informal had already galvanised.

16 State of Social Enterprise, 2017 Social Enterprise UK

17 [SEUK-Year-of-COVID-report-v3.pdf \(socialenterprise.org.uk\)](#)

Social isolation and loneliness are societal issues and can only be combated by a partnership approach - civil society is just one part of the solution. However, civil society is increasingly seen as a central partner in many areas of public policy for example, within the delivery of adult social care and health services. Social prescribing, which refers people to community-based activities and organisations is not a new idea but has seen increasing emphasis within the NHS in helping people, particularly those with long term conditions to stay well or improve their wellbeing. GPs also report that they see between 1 and 5 people a day who have presented mainly because they are lonely¹⁸. Linking people through social prescribing to existing community groups and activities that are inclusive of people from a range of backgrounds, can help to combat loneliness and support people with long term conditions to stay well or be more resilient.

Within adult social care, there has been a focus for some time on the networks of support that exist within communities and the part that plays in creating innovative ways of supporting people. But also, the preventative effect that access to informal support and networks can have on individuals and their need for more formal support.

Whilst these policy solutions rely upon a vibrant civil society, this social infrastructure does not exist primarily to meet the needs of the public sector. There cannot, therefore, be an expectation that it will be able to meet a greater level of demand without access to the right support and a range of funding sources to enable activities and community support to continue to play an important role.

We know there is a broad spectrum of organisations across our communities such as sports and arts organisations and local groups, some of which may be registered charities or social enterprises but all of which provide opportunities for people to connect and support each other. This strategy marks our commitment to working to ensure that we support the 'social infrastructure' in our communities and that we work with partners to tackle social isolation collectively. This also includes working across the County Council in a way that recognises and seeks to support our communities to be resilient; by working in partnership and collaborating both internally and externally with partners and civil society itself.

We have seen now perhaps in ways less visible before, that a thriving civil society is central to supporting people in their communities, when they need it most. We must ensure that we build on this and that the ability for people to act; for organisations and individuals to be empowered to play an important role within our communities, is not reserved for a pandemic and lost as we move forward.

¹⁸ Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness (2017) Combatting Loneliness One Conversation at a time: A Call to Action, London.



Case Study:



Over the last year we have launched the CrowdFund Kent programme, an idea we investigated in 2019 but accelerated due to Covid. This £500K Fund now forms part of our support offer to the sector and was launched in March 2021 and will run as a pilot for two years, which we will evaluate.

This programme has shown the innovation that exists within our communities, the dedication of local people to drive forward projects in their local area and the support that can be galvanised within our communities be that through residents or local businesses in backing ideas that are important to the local community. This fund is not about supporting services directed by the County Council, it is about local ideas and innovation that respond to local challenges or simply bring people together to improve their local area and build community resilience from the ground up. It also enables local people to be involved in their local area by backing and supporting local projects that matter to them.

The role of community assets

The assets within our communities, whether that be physical assets such as community spaces, sports clubs, or activities run by local people, all play an important part in making our communities diverse and in bringing people together. These assets provide a shared space, a place for people from a range of backgrounds to meet and socialise and in so doing provide the connections that help to improve our wellbeing. Often these assets are run by organisations anchored in civil society, owned by the community they are set up to support and developed organically. We want to ensure that communities are empowered to take control to respond to needs within their communities and to take a place-shaping role.

We also know the importance of green spaces and parks for our physical and mental health and wellbeing. These spaces are at the heart of our communities, and we know they are important to local people; they can create a sense of identity to a place and help bring people together to combat social isolation. Very often the local community are the driving force behind these assets, they can be mobilised by community leaders and supported by volunteers passionate about their local environment and we have seen many examples of this in our CrowdFund Kent programme.

We know that many community spaces have been closed during the pandemic and indeed some charities and community groups have chosen to give up

space to save costs. However, there is a need for access to community space as we move back to some face-to-face delivery and as people want to enjoy the activities they previously did. How we utilise assets in the community to enable this alongside using digital solutions is something we will need to continue to explore.

KCC has many pivotal physical assets within our communities and has a community leadership role to play in helping shape places and spaces for people across Kent. *Our Future Assets programme* will support us to reimagine our community services and digital and physical presence in communities, working closely with our partners and creating modern, flexible and sustainable spaces which will contribute to our net zero commitments. We want to ensure that these are accessible and inclusive for local community groups and the social sector, offering a space for people to meet or to use these assets to deliver activities. We will also look at how the KCC estate alongside partners including the social sector, can offer a flexible space to support local community infrastructure and in so doing, offer further opportunities for partnership and collaboration within a community or 'place'.

Community activities and resources for young people

Youth services had already become an increasing priority nationally, however the impact of the pandemic on Children and Young people has reinforced this agenda. Whilst experiences will have varied, the disruption to the lives of young people has undoubtedly been significant over the last year.

The *Kent Reconnect Children and Young People's Programme* invites the whole Kent community to join together to provide a range of exciting and supportive opportunities for children and young people during the period to end of August 2022. This programme is an example of recognising the power of local organisations and communities in bringing young people together, to re-engage alongside statutory partners but also the wealth of skills and resources embedded in our local communities.

Kent has a younger age profile than the national average with a greater proportion of young people aged 5-19 years than England. We know that Children and Young People, especially those vulnerable children and those who have experienced Adverse Childhood Events are more likely to be at risk of a long-term wider impacts of Covid. Now more than ever, we must ensure that our communities provide the spaces for young people to develop their skills, networks, and resilience that are positive for their life chances and wellbeing.

Uniformed youth services such as the Scouts, play an important role for many young people as do open access to youth services and district early help hubs. However, we want to support a diverse portfolio of community-based activities. We know that very often the most effective and responsive support for young people is embedded in their local communities and delivered by trusted people in the local community.

We need to create the right conditions to ensure there is a community-based offer of activities for young people that is led by the community and meets the needs of a diverse population. This must include ensuring organisations that support vulnerable and disadvantaged young people can continue to support them into positive activities, steering them away from negative influences into holistic activities such as art, music, sports. We know the importance of civil society and VCSE organisations in supporting all young people and that the best outcomes for all will be achieved by empowering and working alongside our communities and those who are active in supporting the young people within them.

In addition to the programmes of work underway across the authority aimed at supporting young people, our support to the sector, as outlined in Chapter 3, recognises the need to support a diverse range of organisations in Kent. This will help organisations to grow, sustain community-based activities and support our community assets.



Chapter 3

Supporting the Social Sector

This strategy is not just a document, it is our future commitment to supporting the social sector as a core part of civil society. In this chapter, we set out the range of ways we will do this, including through our investment in infrastructure support, with an agreed budget over the 3-year life of the strategy.

Whilst not a statutory requirement, this is a political priority for the County Council and there is budget commitment for 'infrastructure support' over the life of this strategy. Our [Interim Strategic Plan](#) set out this commitment to:

Develop a support offer for the VCSE which responds to the challenges identified during COVID-19 recovery to help maintain the local VCSE network whilst supporting it to be sustainable and revitalised within a post COVID-19 environment.

We know that there are many strengths in the sector and not all organisations will require support. That is why our funding will be a contribution to infrastructure support; to support organisations where additional support is **needed** against the objectives we have set out. We believe it is important that we contribute to the infrastructure support required by some to help them to adapt and grow to meet the challenges of the future. However, our support is not intended to create dependency or to be paternalistic but to play a role in supporting a sustainable and independent social sector and vibrant civil society in Kent.

Kent has a diverse and large social sector spanning across 12 districts, made up of micro and small local organisations and larger organisations that may cover multiple geographical areas. There is not one single organisation that can advocate for or support such a diverse sector; however, we are committed to developing the right model of support that works for the needs of Kent organisations. This will involve working with organisations that currently provide that support in a way that is sustainable and creating new ways of supporting the sector, where gaps in support are identified.

The support considerations and objectives set out in this chapter are therefore based upon the unique needs of Kent and the ongoing dialogue and engagement with the sector since 2015 and particularly over the last year.



What do we mean by infrastructure support?

The National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA), who are the national membership body for local sector support and development organisations (infrastructure), sets out the following aims for infrastructure support:

- Every community in England benefits from a thriving local voluntary sector, strengthened through excellent local support and development.
- Any person in England that wants to volunteer, start a charity or social enterprise, or create a voluntary organisation has a place to go for good, local, advice and support.
- Our members have a clear voice, effective influence and engaged support amongst key stakeholders, locally and nationally.

We believe that this underpins what we want to create for Kent and the direction set out in this strategy. However, we want to go further than this so that organisations across diverse communities and of different sizes can contribute to a thriving civil society. Our infrastructure offer in this sense is not about simply supporting those who we fund or work with, it is much more than that. It is also not only about organisational support or access to business support, but is about engagement, with the sector having a voice and being able to influence.

Objectives of KCC support for the social sector:

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- ① **Establishing a strategic relationship with the social sector - so that it can effectively engage and influence**
 - ② **Enabling a sustainable, diverse, and independent social sector in Kent, which can grow and develop**
 - ③ **Enabling a coordinated, properly resourced, and sustainable volunteering system across the county**
 - ④ **Creating the right conditions for small community organisations to respond to communities' needs and for communities to be empowered.**
-

Delivering our infrastructure support offer

For 2021/22 we have allocated funding to respond to immediate needs post Covid, informed by engagement with the sector and the Action Plan developed by the VCS Recovery Cell. These interim arrangements are also to reflect that the ongoing support offer will sit alongside the framework set out in this strategy, once agreed. However, we will use the learning from the interim arrangements to help us shape the ongoing support offer and the funding mechanisms we use to deliver it be that contract, grants or a hybrid of arrangements. Thereafter the committed budget to support this strategy will be used to deliver against the objectives set out over the life of the strategy.

Establishing a strategic relationship with the social sector - so that it can effectively engage and influence

During the development of the VCS policy in 2015, the sector told us that they wanted opportunities to network with similar VCSE organisations but also businesses and the public sector. As a result, we established cross-sector networking events twice a year and these were very successful and well attended. When initially developing this strategy in 2019 we wanted to build on this and expand these networks to establish an engagement mechanism that is ongoing and based on mutual respect and allows a free flow of information and exchange of ideas.

However, over the last year our engagement and partnership working has been much improved; a positive outcome of a challenging year. We have put in place forums working with the sector, aimed at improving our engagement with the VCSE and to ensure that engagement is meaningful and timely.

We established a VCS Strategic Partnership Board in January 2021, which is attended by KCC, Districts, NHS Kent and Medway CCG and representation from the VCSE. This Board is an informal board, by that we mean not part of the formal decision making of the County Council but has become a significant and important forum for discussions on cross cutting issues where VCSE organisations are a key partner. This Board was set up to continue the partnership working we have seen over the last year and recognise that the social sector is a key partner. It is starting to enable a flow of information and discussion on key strategic issues from across partners.

The meeting is chaired by the Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services and the Leader of the Council has a standing invite; the Board is focused on providing an engagement mechanism between statutory agencies and the social sector, beyond those we fund or have contractual relationships with. It provides a place to discuss key strategic issues and risks impacting on the social sector and the beneficiaries it supports. It is also a forum for healthy challenge between partners and the sector and provides a space to discuss strategy and plans with a mature and open dialogue.



Alongside this we agreed to establish a VCSE Steering Group, which is chaired by the sector and comprised of representatives from a range of organisations. This sits independently to the Board, but it is intended for the Board to recommend and take items for discussion to the Group and for the Group to highlight issues back to the Board; to enable a two-way communication channel.

These arrangements were put in place as a direct result of the engagement we have undertaken over the last year and whilst much progress has been made and these arrangements are proving very effective, we recognise that they can still be improved.

We do not have one single infrastructure organisation in Kent, which advocates for and engages across the sector; we are working perhaps within an imperfect model or a realistic one given the size and diversity of the County and sector. However, the work we have undertaken over the last year means that our engagement mechanisms are much improved from when we adopted the VCS Policy in 2015 and we are now developing a model that works for the unique needs of Kent. We committed to continuing to work with the Board and Steering Group to consider how this model can evolve alongside our partners such as the NHS and district councils. Particularly, we will work with the Steering Group to consider how it can become more established as an engagement forum for the sector. In response to consultation feedback, we will work with the Chair to evolve the membership and terms of the Group to ensure it is well recognised by the sector and creates an engagement mechanism to the wider sector, extending its reach. Whilst it can never represent a sector that is diverse, and which can never speak entirely with one voice; we can strengthen its representation. The representatives on the Group must be actively sharing information back out and representing the sector, not their organisation for this Group to continue to be an effective mechanism for the County to Council to engage with.

This equally requires us as a County Council to consider how we can support this forum without undermining its independence, recognising the time and commitment it requires from organisations who very often have limited resources; we do not want this to be a barrier to organisations engaging and stifling the diversity of representation.

However, alongside this we want to ensure that through our engagement mechanisms, we can be informed about the range of organisations and activities that people value within our communities, that are driven by local people, and which operate entirely independently. We believe we can have a role in supporting forums where collaboration can take place, with a range of organisations meeting in informal settings this could be in person, but we will also explore the use of digital, taking lessons from the last year.

It is not for the Council to force organisations that are independent to collaborate, but we can have a role in convening and creating the right environment that can make collaboration a possibility alongside partners and

we will work with them to consider how we can best support or tap into local forums.

Organisations have reported that they have pulled together during the pandemic, with 40% saying they had collaborated with other third-party organisations more than they usually would¹⁹ and we want to build on this. This may not be best delivered by the County Council, but we can use our infrastructure budget to help facilitate this and we will consider how best we can achieve this alongside the development of the Board and Steering Group.



¹⁹ [Kent Community Foundation Survey of Kent's Charitable Sector \(kentcf.org.uk\)](https://kentcf.org.uk)

Enabling a sustainable, diverse, and independent social sector in Kent, which can grow and develop

Our offer of support to the sector will enable the social sector in Kent to be sustainable and its independence upheld. Whilst KCC has a role in supporting the sector to achieve this, our support funding will always be a contribution to help organisations to access support at critical times or to help them evolve; it is not on-going support.

We recognise that recent times have been incredibly turbulent for organisations and that to meet the challenges ahead will require organisations to rethink strategies and plans. The importance of organisations being able to access funding through a diverse range of sources is not only important to upholding the sector's independence but also creates more financial resilience.

We recognise the diversity in the sector and that to support organisations to grow and diversify means recognising that the needs are varied and cannot be met by one single organisation. Whilst there are some similarities between social enterprises to Charitable Incorporated Organisations (CIO), to registered charities and community groups, there are also many more distinctions between them. There are also differences in the needs of small to medium to large organisations. Therefore, our support offer in relation to sector sustainability, diversity and growth must reflect the range of needs and be flexible enough to meet them.

We put in place the Strategic Recovery Fund in 2020 and are repeating this in 2021, working with Kent Community Foundation. This £300K Fund (per round) offered small grants for organisations to then buy in support, capacity, or expertise to help them to diversify and adapt post Covid. Access to this type of 'business support' was indeed ranked a priority in the original consultation on this strategy in 2020. This fund is primarily about access to support, to develop organisational and financial plans, to improve digital skills, diversify funding and leadership and board development. The fund is demand led and therefore the range of support that grant recipients access, the organisations they use to deliver support and the impact this has will be used to inform our ongoing support offer and how best this should be delivered. We will also ensure we work with colleagues from across the Council who may also be delivering similar support for example, funding that is available for Business Growth to social enterprises and trading charities.



However, using the information and insights we have to date we expect the future business support element of our infrastructure offer to be focused on access to the following:

Organisational support and development

It is not always clear to organisations who is best to go to for support, and trusted advice, especially advice that is sympathetic to the specific needs of the social sector. This may be for support to set up an organisation, or advice on governance to develop an organisation but also to rethink strategies to develop an existing organisation.

In recent years there has been a focus on 'blended funding', diversifying income through a mix of contracts, grants, and social finance or loans and we recognise that some organisations have embraced this. However, diversifying income requires the time, capacity, and skills of people within organisations to plan business models, identify funding and complete applications or indeed undertake procurement processes. Access to the right expertise to support an organisation through those processes, whether that is taking social finance, a loan or going through a public procurement process can be invaluable.

However, we know that for many organisations time and capacity for their employees to focus on this is an issue and paying for expertise and support may not always be easy to justify when there are pressing demands on budgets. We appreciate that for the smallest organisations in our communities some financial models and funding may never be appropriate, but we also know that many are working with very low or no reserves and are therefore financially less resilient and most at risk of closure. For these organisations access to good organisational and financial advice is even more important as is expertise around public procurement and fundraising.

We also know that for some organisations there are additional barriers to accessing funding, for example the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) recently launched *The Phoenix Fund*, a community-led fund co-designed and co-led by community leaders from across Black and Minoritised groups in England, designed to target groups that had no previous engagement; 65 % of the organisations that applied to the fund had no previous history with the NLCF.

There are both lessons to be taken from this in terms of the way funders ensure their funds are accessible but also the additional and appropriate support that some charities and community groups may need to access funding from a range of sources.

We will therefore embed access to a diverse range of organisational support and advice, including developing funding strategies and diversifying income, in our infrastructure offer.

Leadership skills and training

We know that for organisations to grow or adapt they need strong leadership and that many organisations may have seen changes in their leadership and staffing over the last year. The Trustees and Chief Executives of the many VCSE organisations across Kent need to be able to access the support, mentoring and training they need to drive forward their organisation. They also need to ensure that the organisation is well run, complying with regulation and that effective approaches are in place to support equality, diversity, and inclusion an agenda that has grown in importance particularly over the last year.

Every organisation that delivers charitable activities must also safeguard volunteers, staff members, participants, and donors. Organisations must be run in a way that actively prevents harm, harassment, bullying abuse, and neglect. It is important that all organisations do safeguarding well and that they create a safe environment where everyone is respected and valued. We need to ensure that leaders of organisations can access the support and guidance they need to strengthen safeguarding practice.

We will therefore look at how we can support access to leadership training but also training and support for Board development and this will be informed by the impact monitoring and data we receive through the Strategic Recovery Fund.

Digital

Digital had increasingly become a vital way to transform organisations, making them more efficient. We also know that digital platforms can offer many opportunities and indeed for many small grassroots organisations, social media may have contributed to their set up attracting people to get behind a local cause. However, the use of digital communication channels has become important in the last year, in ways we could never really have imagined.

Technology has proved vitally important in helping people to be connected and to deliver services to beneficiaries. Previously digital skills were not something all VCSE organisations had access to or have previously prioritised but over the last year the majority of organisations in Kent reported that they moved online and 60% state they will continue to do so.²⁰

It is worth acknowledging that not all services will continue to be delivered online; whilst the last year has proved the importance of digital platforms, it has also shown us how much we value face to face and human contact. Indeed, many organisations that reported continuing to deliver online also reported Covid restrictions as a barrier to returning to face to face; once these are lifted many are likely to want to move to in person or at least a hybrid arrangement. However, digital skills are about much more than delivering services online, the use of digital is also a way of engaging supporters, of reaching out to communities and fundraising.

²⁰ [Kent Community Foundation Survey of Kent's Charitable Sector \(kentcf.org.uk\)](https://kentcf.org.uk)

We will, therefore, embed access to digital skills, be that social media support, website development or upskilling staff, as a part of our infrastructure support going forward. We believe that any infrastructure offer to the sector must recognise the need for digital skills and be able to offer that support to VCSE organisations going forward to be effective.



Enabling a coordinated, properly resourced, and sustainable volunteering system across the county

This strategy has set out the many ways that volunteers are integral to civil society and the importance of enabling social action. Whilst the volunteer effort over the last year, be that informal or formal volunteering must be recognised for its incredible contribution, volunteers quietly play an important part in our communities every day. Be that Trustees, those leading small community groups or supporting voluntary organisations in the delivery of support to their beneficiaries.

However, we know that recruiting and retaining volunteers takes time and resources and that the ground swell of volunteer action we have seen will subside. Voluntary organisations often struggle to recruit volunteers, indeed 43% of organisations in the recent Kent Community Foundation survey stated that they would struggle to recruit volunteers in the coming months²¹. Support for volunteers was also ranked a priority by responders in the 2020 consultation on this strategy.

The VCS Recovery Cell Action Plan set out a commitment to look at how we can create a sustainable model of volunteering infrastructure across the County to ensure that organisations can access the support they need to recruit and retain volunteers and that volunteers can find opportunities that meet their needs.

As a County Council we have funded volunteer infrastructure in different ways in the past and many district councils continue to fund their local volunteer centres, where they exist. However, there has not been a consistent offer of volunteer infrastructure support across the County for some time and the model of volunteer centres has changed alongside funding changes. By volunteer infrastructure we mean support to recruit and retain volunteers (volunteer brokerage) and access to the guidance and advice needed to support this.

Across a County the size of Kent we know that there is a need for access to good support at a local level, however the model of support also needs to be sustainable and offer a consistent standard of guidance, resources, and training across the County. It also needs to be able to promote volunteering, attracting volunteers into opportunities across the range of organisations that exist within Kent. It also should be able to capture data in a consistent way to show the value of volunteering.



²¹ [Kent Community Foundation Survey of Kent's Charitable Sector \(kentcf.org.uk\)](https://www.kentcf.org.uk)

We have committed to funding a pilot on volunteering infrastructure across the County for 12 months starting in 2021. This funding will be used to help to develop a sustainable model of support, which encourages volunteering and provides good quality and consistent support and guidance required to effectively recruit and retain volunteers. This pilot will not necessarily mean funding an organisation in every district but will look to develop a local presence across the County in a sustainable way; in some cases that may mean organisations covering more than one area as is the case in some areas currently. It will be a starting point and will build on the good practice that exists, avoiding duplication. The pilot will be delivered by Ashford Volunteer Centre as the lead organisation working with the other locality-based volunteer infrastructure organisations in partnership.

We will evaluate the pilot, and we will alongside the grant recipients review the findings to inform the best way to deliver the model going forward. However, our funding for this pilot and the ongoing model will be a contribution; intended to help leverage funding from other partners and funders in the County or to supplement income models. The value and contribution volunteering infrastructure makes to our communities and the benefits this brings is not isolated to the County Council. We hope we can use the finding of this evaluation to work with partners and other funders to support the model developed going forward.

Creating the right conditions for small community organisations to respond to communities' needs and for communities to be empowered



We want our support to the sector to focus on creating the right environment for civil society to flourish, supporting activities or innovations in our communities, which help to create a sense of place and identity across our communities.

We recognise that community organisations are often small and led by one or two leaders within the local community. These organisations are organic and grow from a need often recognised at the very local level. It is these organisations that can support the diversity in our communities and often represent those that may feel their voice is not heard. These organisations may also provide a place for young people to meet and take part in positive activities or provide people with social networks that improve their lives and wellbeing.

These organisations are not always set within traditional charity structures, they may be micro charities but equally, they may be un-constituted associations and groups. They may also be led by people from diverse backgrounds be that Black and Minority Ethnic groups or by people with the lived experiences of the beneficiaries they support.

Organisations such as these are doing incredible things in our communities but are often operating under challenging circumstances and on the goodwill of volunteers or a very small number of paid staff. We think it is important that we understand the community-led activities and groups that contribute to the quality of life of our residents. The independence of these organisations should not be compromised; we do not want to interfere, but we would like to ensure that the right conditions exist in Kent for people to be empowered to act in their local area. Some of this support may come through the organisational/business support already described or through our engagement channels in the future but we have also been supporting these organisations and activities through our CrowdFund Kent programme.

The Crowdfund Kent programme is a pilot for 2 years and is currently focused on supporting Covid Recovery. The funding for this pilot is currently in addition to our infrastructure support budget.

We will be evaluating this pilot and will use the findings of that evaluation to either expand the CrowdFund Kent programme and embed it in our infrastructure offer or use the learning to develop an alternative way to support community led organisations and activities that support the objectives of this strategy. We will also be continuing to reach out to partners and other funders, including businesses to see how they can support the CrowdFund Kent programme.

Crowdfunding has enabled us to have a greater awareness of activities and projects that are at the micro level, being delivered by local people with a passion for their local area or cause. It has also leveraged significant funding into the County, with KCC only one of many contributors to a project. The projects are not intended to deliver KCC services or to be for the sole benefit of KCC but to support community led and community backed ideas. Crowdfunding projects must be able to show the benefit for the wider community to be successful and this programme has shown the wide community support that does exist for local initiatives. By that we mean the many residents and local businesses that have got behind campaigns and supported initiatives in their local area.



Fair Funding as an enabler to a sustainable social sector

Our infrastructure offer is one way of supporting the sector, but our own funding practices must equally support not destabilise the sector. If these are right, then it will enable continued diversity in those that deliver services funded by the Council but also help to ensure our grants and contracts are accessible to a wide range of organisations, without creating dependency and threatening the independence of some organisations.

Our processes around funding must take into consideration the time and resources it takes for organisations to apply for grants or contracts. Where possible, funding should be over the medium term to allow time for ideas to be tested, embedded and to create some stability. We must also adhere to the Best Value Duty and uphold the principles of reasonable notice periods on funding decisions.

Commissioning

It is through our commissioning process that we should establish and continually assess the best mechanism for delivering and funding services, whether that is grants or contracts or a mix of both. The grant funding framework set out later in this strategy is therefore inherently linked to our commissioning practice.

Our commissioning approach has evolved since the VCS policy in 2015 and we are now looking at how this model should develop in the future to ensure that commissioning has a greater emphasis on locality and to look at how our commissioning can work with communities to build resilience and improve the focus on place. This is in recognition that often the real added value is found at the local level and the need to build more collaborative commissioning arrangements.

Whilst this strategy is not a commissioning document nor is it focused solely on the relationship with providers of services funded by the Council, the significance of KCC's spend with VCSE organisations means it is an integral part of our relationship. How we fund and the process and decisions we make as a Council ultimately do impact a proportion of the sector and represent a significant amount of sector income as the role of the sector in providing directly commissioned services has increased. It is also true that our approach to commissioning and funding helps to set a tone for our relationship and partnership working with the sector and it therefore needs to be in line with our wider strategy.

It is fair to say that there has been some criticism by the social sector of commissioning arrangements, which are often seen to be an overly process-driven, transactional approach with an emphasis on procurement and contract management and this is recognised. This is not just a criticism in Kent; the burden of greater regulation and resources needed by VCSE organisations

to meet the requirements of public contracting, is widely debated. It is a real challenge we cannot simply ignore. We know that good engagement and partnership working can help to overcome barriers to procurement; by developing Market Position Statements and early engagement with providers, including the social sector we can help organisations that are engaged in public procurement to align to our future commissioning intentions and plans, where they choose to do so. We must also continue to work with providers, particularly smaller providers to ensure that our commissioning standards and processes are proportionate and are developed with a greater recognition of the diversity of potential providers in the market. This includes setting realistic timescales for bidders and offering support or signposting to resources where appropriate; this could include accessing our business support funding.

There are also opportunities, perhaps highlighted in the last year to look at better ways of proactively collaborating, taking a more flexible and creative approach to our commissioning, including using a mix of funding mechanisms. We must ensure that we build back better and how we do this alongside key partners in the local Kent economy, such as the social sector will be pivotal to our success.

The last year has also highlighted some of the complicated dependencies, which exist between the social sector and public sector. As parts of the sector have increasingly become a significant contracted provider of public services over the last 20 years or more, there have been longstanding debates about the challenges this may have created in certain parts of the sector but also that some funding arrangements have had a destabilising effect. It is also fair to say that there is dependency in certain parts of the public sector on the social sector to meet demand for services and a real risk if those organisations are no longer financially viable.

Ultimately it is for the Board of an organisation to set their risk appetite, to determine their financial strategy and to decide whether to enter contracts. There have been concerns raised about the budget for contracts, which the social sector feels do not appear to support full cost recovery and sets a false expectation that social sector providers can raise other funding to meet the gap. This is not just a Kent issue, although we have significant expenditure with the sector for the delivery of services, but this is an issue which requires us to work in partnership to understand in more detail. We are committed to looking at the risk and issues within the existing commissioning model as part of our work around our future commissioning model and to better understand the challenges. This work will involve both KCC and engagement with sector representatives. This work once undertaken will be reported to the VCS Strategic Partnership Board and VCSE Steering Group.

Social Value

The Public Service (Social Value) Act 2012 required local authorities to ‘consider’ social value when commissioning services subject to the Public Procurement Regulations 2020. This requirement is linked to a local authority’s duty to consider overall best value, as described, and means that certain public body commissioners must consider the following at pre-procurement:

- How the services they are going to buy might improve the social, economic or environmental well-being of the area
- How they might secure this improvement; and
- Whether they should consult on these issues.

The Council has continued to develop its approach to social value and work is ongoing to ensure consistent guidance and standards across the Council. We are committed to maximising the community benefits of every penny we spend and to improving the economic, social, and environmental wellbeing of Kent, by not simply considering the price of a service, but what can be achieved with the resources available.

We will consider and act to make sure that social value can be enhanced, and equality can be advanced both:

- through the delivery of a service itself, and
- through additional value that a provider might offer in addition to the core requirements of a contract.

However, we also expect our providers to consider how they can be of benefit to the local community through increasing economic opportunities, improving social wellbeing and minimising environmental damage.

- **Local Employment:** creation of local employment and training opportunities
- **Local Economy:** supporting local SMEs and buying locally where possible
- **Community development:** development of resilient local community and community support organisations, especially in those areas and communities identified as having the greatest need
- **Good Employer:** support for staff development and welfare within the service providers’ own organisation and within their supply chain
- **Green and Sustainable:** protecting the environment, minimising waste

In addition, we have now procured a social value platform - the [Social Value Exchange](#), which is an online marketplace used by a number of local authorities to maximise social value in contracts. This tool will enable

commissioners to generate resources into community organisations through our procurement processes, with the opportunity to leverage up to £1bn of the Councils procurement spend to get tailored resources into local community organisations. Work to develop this model within Kent is underway and will include engaging VCSE representatives to help shape how we use this platform in the future.

Grant Framework for funding VCSE organisations:

We know that grants play an important role in supporting organisations within the community in pursuit of their aims, to stimulate the growth of new micro organisations and for developing new and innovative approaches to delivering services.

We created our grant funding framework in 2015 recognising that practice around grants had not always been consistent in the past and grants had sometimes funded historic arrangements that were not seen to be accessible to a wide variety of organisations. Grants had also been used inappropriately in the past for the delivery of services that have then been effectively 'contract managed'. Equally, where grants have been used to support innovation and new projects, there had been little consideration for the longer-term sustainability of existing projects or the infrastructure of organisations themselves, and often with timescales for delivery that are too short.

The grant framework has been welcomed and has been largely successful in providing consistency and transparency in much of our grant funding and improving the way grants are allocated. We have been working hard over the past 6 years in developing our grant framework and have made some adjustments based on feedback to improve practice and we will continue to do so.

We developed our grant framework before the government published its then Grant Standards. These have now been developed into the Government Functional Standard for general grants and the principles we set out in 2015 largely adhere to the principles subsequently set out by the government. However, KCC grant awards are often of lower value than those typical of government and therefore we will continue to take a proportionate approach to applying the general principles. Where significant new grants are undertaken, we will consider on a case-by-case basis if a more rigorous grant business case and process are required.

However, we are also committed to supporting a sustainable funding environment, and to consider a wide range of ways to fund or resource the sector. This strategy aims to recognise the need to support the sector to explore different funding options, however, it will also ensure that our approach to grant funding does not build dependency in the sector and is open and transparent.

In our grant framework we are referring to **General Grants** as defined by the Cabinet Office:

Grants made by departments or their grant-making Arm's Length Bodies to outside bodies to reimburse expenditure on agreed specific items or functions, and often paid only on statutory conditions. These are the grants, which are most closely related in administration to contract procurement, whilst remaining legally distinct.

The grant framework also endorses the principle set out in Managing Public money that:

Grants should not be confused with contracts. A public sector organisation funds by grant as a matter of policy, not in return for services provided under contract²².

More details on our grant framework and the criteria it sets out are found in Annex 2.

22 Edited from Managing Public Money (HM Treasury 2013 with annexes revised 2019) Annex 5.1

Reviewing and Delivering this Strategy

We will use the framework set out earlier in this strategy to measure success and progress; we will report on this annually. This will be shared with Cabinet, P&R Cabinet Committee, the Strategic Partnership Board (VCS) and the VCS Steering Group.

We will commit to a full review of the strategy by the end of 2024.



Annex 1:

National Data on registered charities

The National Council for Voluntary Organisation's (NCVO) Almanac 2020 reports that the income of the sector grew by 2% to £53.5bn in 2017-18²³. Income had also grown for the preceding 3 years. The growth in total income was largely due to increasing income from the public; income from Government also grew after three years of slightly falling income.

Charity size	Income banding (based on NCVO bandings)
Micro	Less than £10,000
Small	£10,000 - £100,000
Medium	£100,000 - £1m
Large	£1m - £10m
Major	More than £10m
Super-Major	More than £100m

In 2017/18, income decreased for micro, small and medium sized organisations nationally but grew for bigger organisations. More than half (£29bn) of the sector's income was generated by major and super-major voluntary organisations – those with an income over £10m. Their share of the sector's income has almost continuously grown from 38% in 2000/01 to 54% in 2017/18. Much of the increase was concentrated in super-major voluntary organisations with an income of over £100m. In 2017/18, the number of super-major voluntary organisations continued to grow from 51 to 56, accounting for 23% of the sector's total income alone. The growth in the income of super-major organisations can be explained by their increased number but also their strategies and decision-making. They include organisations that used to be former government institutions, organisations that have grown through mergers and those that centralised funds where previously they were held internationally. The public continues to be the largest income source for the sector, accounting for almost half of the total income, followed by government.

The sector also makes a considerable contribution to the UK economy. According to the estimation method developed by NCVO and ONS, the voluntary sector contributed £18.2bn to the UK economy in 2017/18, representing 0.9% of total GDP. About 910,000 people worked in the voluntary sector in the UK in June 2019, equivalent to 2.8% of the UK workforce. 23 UK Civil Society Almanac 2020 | Home | NCVO.

²³ [Sector finances - Financials | UK Civil Society Almanac 2021 | NCVO](#)

Furthermore, an estimated 11.9 million people formally volunteered at least once a month in 2017/18. The most recent figures from ONS for 2016 estimated the value of voluntary activity in the UK to be £23.9bn.

Annex 2:

Grant Framework

Under the Local Authorities Data Transparency code, KCC has a duty to publish all grants to the Voluntary and Community Sector on our website through a grants [register](#).

When awarding grants, it is the responsibility of the grant owner (KCC officer) to make sure they comply with these processes, which will enable us to monitor the impact of our funding, ensure transparency and identify the type of grants being awarded across the authority.

What is a grant?

Grants should not be confused with contracts. A public sector organisation funds by grant as a matter of policy, not in return for services provided under contract. Edited from Managing Public Money (*HM Treasury 2013*)

KCC VCS grant standards:

- All VCS grants must be subject to an open application process, if not there must be a record of the decision for a direct award
- All VCS grants must adhere to the standardised definitions
- All VCS grants must be subject to a grant agreement
- All grants must be subject to proportionate evaluation /monitoring framework set out in the grant agreement
- All grants must have a clearly defined grant owner and accountable officer

KCC grant definitions:

Innovation Grants (one off):

- payment for innovations/pilots
- payment to help develop new organisations which will contribute to the Council's Strategic framework and priorities.

Strategic Grants:

- Payments to organisations of strategic importance given under the Local authority's wellbeing power(as provided in the Localism Act 2011) to help the authority to achieve its strategic and supporting outcomes

Grants may be made as direct awards and not through a competitive process but must meet the defined criteria (set out below).

Both Strategic and Innovation grants will be awarded over the three year MTFP period and where possible and appropriate will be awarded on a multi-year basis with payments made annually. KCC reserves the right to refuse multi-year agreements where necessary.

Direct awards:

We recognise that in some cases it may be appropriate for grants to be paid as direct awards and not through a competitive process. In these cases, the grant must meet at least one of the following criteria:

- a) payments made to an organisation which inhabits a unique position or offers a particularly specialist function;
- b) payments made to an organisation which has a track record of excellence in a particular area;
- c) or in the event of market failure.

Where direct awards are made, we require these to be recorded internally.

Applying for grants:

All grant opportunities to the VCS, except the direct awards, will be advertised on the [Community Grants Funding page on Kent.gov.uk](#) in agreement with our Strategy, Policy, Relationships and Corporate Assurance team.

Combined Member Grants:

These will continue to be advertised via the current application process set out on the [Community Grants Funding page](#) and managed by the Member Support Team.

Kent County Council



Strategy for Kent 2021-2024

Supporting connected communities
and a sustainable social sector in Kent