

# **Voluntary Sector Health and Social Care Strategic Engagement Group**

## **1<sup>st</sup> Report to the Forum – March 2017**

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### **Introduction**

The voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector also referred to as the third sector in this document is an essential element of Wiltshire's health and care economy. Throughout recent local history the challenge of improving the engagement of the constituent parts of that economy has been insurmountable. In the light of unprecedented funding challenges and demands on the system a significant body of opinion within the County pushed for one more try at making things work a little better. In the Autumn of 2016, commissioners responded to request from the sector and facilitated an initial Voluntary Health & Social Care Forum. The Forum was set up so as to ensure the third sector were engaged as a strategic partner and at the centre of developing an integrated care and support system for people living in Wiltshire.

### **VHSC Forum Strategic Executive Group**

At an initial meeting of the Forum a Strategic Executive Group (SEG) of three elected representatives from the third sector and senior representatives from the public sector including Wiltshire Council, CCG and Public Health was formed. They were tasked to begin the process of discussion to develop a framework in which both sectors could productively and effectively come together for the mutual benefit of the beneficiaries of services across Wiltshire.

The first members of the SEG were Julian Kirby, CEO Age UK Wiltshire, Geraldine Bentley, CEO WCIL & Jane Windle-Hartshorn, Head of Community Development, Community First

Having been elected by their peers the members of the SEG recognised that they need to be very clear what their function was, and more importantly what it was not.

First and foremost the representatives committed to set their own organisational priorities aside in any meeting. Whilst this was on the face of it a pretty routine position it is particularly important in the VCSE as the nature and shape of the constituent parts of the sector vary hugely. The Executive could not possibly 'represent' each constituent part of the sector, ranging as it does from organisations with no paid staff to those with dozens, some with volunteers, some without, not to mention those with a commissioning relationship and those who might campaign and/or challenge the funding bodies.

Second the members of the SEG were very clear to each other and in subsequent meetings with the commissioners that any discussion about money, contracts and other specific commissioning activity would be strictly out of bounds.

Finally, the lessons of the past indicated progress would be evolutionary not revolutionary. The SEG representatives acknowledged to each other that the inevitable consequence of this would be steady but slow progress. This pace would no doubt generate frustration, even disappointment outside the group but the alternatives were even less palatable.

### **Emerging Themes**

To date two meetings of the Executive have taken place with discussions around evolving a joined up approach for the Strategic Engagement Group to present to the Forum for approval and further recommendations in supporting and developing the role of the Third Sector in Wiltshire. Discussions were initially tinged with a combination of frustration but also optimism. There was a sense of frustration that public services lacking in resources continually fail to understand or fully engage with the voluntary sector. Optimism around the possibilities for outcomes focussed commissioning of integrated services that will go some way to address the frustrations of the sector.

The group agreed that their aim should be to develop a whole systems approach as an integrated model that enables all participants of the sector large or small grassroots to be interconnected, communicate effectively and sharing both information and resources for the benefit of the whole community we serve. It wants to ensure community voices are heard as well as help the statutory partners understand the impact of their decisions on people's lives. The members hoped that if this could be achieved it would be possible to shift the narrative from one of austerity to one of social change that all organisations can buy into.

As a group the SEG want to ensure there is a willingness of local infrastructure organisation's to work with us to redesign and streamline our services and offer of support. By working together the sector and commissioners would seek to create local solutions that work for our communities and to address the challenges of rationalisation of resources. This can be achieved by creating open dialogue to reduce 'tensions', perceived or otherwise, between organisations to support each other with best practice and shared expertise while recognising the value and contribution especially of smaller grassroots organisations who know their local areas and customer base and are treated as genuine contributors to the market place.

The Sector representatives were (are) only too well aware direct financial support is declining while demand is increasing. Most of Sector acknowledges that to meet the needs of the residents of Wiltshire it will need, collectively and individually, to redesign the offer to the public sector. It must look for opportunities to collaborate

and form partnerships without compromising our individual organisational strengths, mission or values. Operating collectively and strategically with a strong voice will support the Sectors collective aim to influence local statutory decision makers.

The Sector is well placed to take responsibility for building relationships, old and new between its constituent parts and for brokering local services. In order to move the discussion on from the abstract to something more tangible a number of areas and models have been explored. These discussions were held under 'Chatham House Rules', to allow full and frank discussions without compromising any organisation or individual

In order to draw these various strands together the Group adopted formal Terms of Reference a copy of which is attached.

### **Future Meetings & Feedback**

The SEG are to meet again in early May when they will set a date and draft agenda for the next Forum details of which will be circulated. Community First will look to create a definitive circulation list for the SEG to utilise for future communication. That same list will ensure that the invitations to the next Forum in the autumn will have a more inclusive attendance.

In the meantime all colleagues in the VSCE are encouraged to make direct contact with the SEG members to raise issues, propose solutions and to contribute generally to the debates. It is crucial that this new initiative does not displace current working practices, relationships and arrangements that 'work'. Instead it should be seen as a mechanism to help overcome those partnership challenges that established arrangements have struggled to resolve.

### **Conclusion**

The formation of the VCSE Forum and its Executive Steering Group can be the start of a new way of working in the county or be 'just another meeting'. It is unlikely to fix the big issues overnight but it has the potential to gently and sensitively ease conflicts, misunderstandings and contradictions. The complexity of the sector is such that it is almost impossible to generate a mechanism that everybody is completely happy with. It is however surely within the ethos of the sector to focus on the things we can agree on rather than the issues we cant. The concluding message is therefore that this approach might not work, but let us not allow it to fail for the want of trying.

Geraldine Bentley

Julian Kirby

Jane Windle-Hartshorn

