

Committee: Health and Wellbeing Board

Date:

Agenda item:

Wards:

Subject: Voluntary Sector Stocktake 2013

Lead officer:

Lead member:

Forward Plan reference number:

Contact officer: Ian Beever MVSC

Recommendations:

In order to steer their way forward to manage change, the research highlights the voluntary sector will need:

- A. Support and information to understand the changing policy, legislative and funding environment in which they operate
 - B. Support to fundraise from public bodies, trusts and importantly unrestricted funds
 - C. Support to work collaboratively to maximise opportunities for contracts and funding
 - D. Support to maximise the social capital in the borough through volunteering and local business networks
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1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MVSC commissioned research into the local voluntary sector to provide a barometer of how organisations are responding to change.

Over the last four years a number of factors have had the potential to affect the sector. These include substantial changes to partner agencies, the recession, austerity measures, higher unemployment and an increase in hardship of some communities.

Like our partner agencies, we are committed to ensuring that the voluntary sector in Merton is best placed to respond to changing need. We need to ensure organisations have the capacity to deliver on the greater role they will have to play as part of the reform of public services.

This State of the Sector report aims to provide Merton with an indicator of the strengths and challenges for the sector in coming years. We believe this insight can help all agencies working in the borough direct their resources and support to address the challenges and recommendations in this report.

MVSC owes a great debt of gratitude to its former Chief Executive Chris Frost. Chris was Chief Executive for 28 years and passed away suddenly in her sleep in November last year. The research for this report was completed very shortly before her death.

Merton's voluntary sector, like that of the rest of the UK, has been through some difficult times with falling income from public donations coinciding with a challenging funding environment from local authorities, local and national trusts and other sources.

Many voluntary organisations in Merton are rising to that challenge and doing excellent work within their local communities. This report illustrates the diversity of services provided, and the keen, tenacious commitment with which people at the frontline address both their paid and voluntary work.

According to MVSC's own database there are 594 voluntary, community and faith organisations in Merton at the time of writing up this report.

The sector in Merton is diverse. Organisations serve a wide range of client groups and provide a great variety of different types of services. They vary enormously in size, numbers of staff and volunteers, and budget. While some are constituted and may be registered charities, others are unconstituted, without trustees or formal governance policies or structures. Many cover a very localised geographical area. Others cover the entire borough.

The sector is characterised by a wide range of organisational structures, including a significant number of small unincorporated organisations, but more than half are registered charities.

Voluntary, community and faith organisations within Merton are a vital part of the social capital of the borough. They can be crucial in their ability to reach parts of the community that statutory service providers struggle to serve.

The range of client groups served is wide and diverse, with many organisations serving multiple groups.

This research identifies a pattern of rising demand for services which is set against a surprisingly positive view of how income will change in the coming years. Only about a third of respondents to our survey thought their income would decrease in the coming two years.

However this headline figure hides a situation in which many organisations feel they are spending more time looking for funding than in the past, and this is an area which gives significant numbers of organisations cause for concern.

Organisations seem on the whole happy with the quality and number of trustees, and there is a growing realisation that trustees can be recruited to fill specific roles.

Staff recruitment and retention presents difficulties for some organisations, with salary levels available quoted by some as a root cause of recruitment and retention problems. However volunteering is thriving in the borough.

Just over half of organisations said they use external support in some form or another, and those that do typically use it in a number of different areas.

Infrastructure support and collaborative working are areas which can work very well indeed for some organisations, but others say they can struggle to get a toehold and can feel excluded.

The organisations that took part in this research demonstrated high levels of resilience and optimism about future. Despite funding pressures, increasing demand and the need to change historic ways of working most organisations are rising to the challenge.

2. BACKGROUND

According to figures from the 2011 Census Merton has a population of 202,200.

We asked respondents how many Merton residents they supported or provided services to in the last year. The average number of residents was 1,757 per organisation, with 137,029 residents supported in total.

There are obvious dangers in factoring this figure up to the wider voluntary sector in the borough. It is likely that contacts with many individuals are multiple, and it is not possible to get reliable data on multiple contacts from voluntary organisations themselves. The UK Civil Society Almanac (NCVO, 2012) illustrates the difficulties. It says research on charities shows that 39% of organisations serve up to 50 beneficiaries and extrapolates a beneficiary population across the UK of 125 million – double the actual UK population.

This in no way devalues the power of the numbers. The quality of life of an individual may be enhanced by multiple contacts with different organisations offering them a range of services, just as it may be enhanced if an individual has a single contact organisation.

The value of such contact will vary from individual to individual, and from service to service, and while it is outside the scope of this research to attempt to analyse that value, it was quite clear during our interviews and focus group work that this value exists and is a powerful motivator for many providers.

Merton's voluntary sector includes a number of long established and well respected organisations which deliver services viewed as vital by the service users. A general finding from talking to people during the course of this research is that there's a wealth of knowledge in the sector on a wide range of areas that extend into organisational management and change management, but that perhaps this knowledge is not shared as well or widely as it could be.

Merton has a long history of positive partnership working. This is reflected by the number of Compact Awards the borough has won over the last ten years. The Merton Partnership remains an important platform through which organisations from all sectors work collaboratively. The importance and value of the voluntary sector is reflected by there being representation at all levels of the partnership structure.

Merton Council is committed to working with the voluntary sector, and to exploring new and innovative ways of commissioning services. In recent years, Merton Council has not cut funding to the voluntary sector. In fact, in real terms funding has increased. Certain service areas have experienced recommissioning to ensure services reflect new ways of working and local need. That the total spend has remained untouched bucks the trend of many authorities which have decimated voluntary sector funding.

Merton Council is also committed to retaining a diverse range of funding methods, including grants for the voluntary sector. Unlike other London Boroughs, Merton recognises the flexibility and creativity grant funding enables when compared to tendering.

3 DETAILS

Volunteering is alive and thriving in Merton. More than 94% of the organisations we surveyed use volunteers to help deliver services. In fact, considerably more organisations use volunteers than have paid staff – just 56.3%.

The total number of volunteers engaged with organisations responding to our questionnaire survey was 7739.

Volunteers are involved at all levels and are seen as a key element of the social capital within communities. Organisations in our survey had an average of seven people volunteering on their committee and 63 organisations used between one and 49 volunteers.

There is an abiding concern that organisations which find themselves in difficult circumstances might use volunteers in place of paid staff. We have found that in Merton this is not the case, with the overwhelming weight of opinion among organisations we interviewed strongly against that practice.

We have noted that just 56.3% of organisations we surveyed use paid staff. Of these 21.8% reported staffing increase over the last two years and 16.1% reported a decrease.

During our interviews some organisations reported experiences of difficulty recruiting paid staff. Inability to pay high salaries was often thought of as a barrier to recruiting the highest quality staff. Our interviews included comments regarding their needs to freeze salaries hampering recruitment, and of generally low salaries making it difficult to recruit and then retain staff.

3.1 Conclusions and Recommendations

Funding and fundraising

While organisations appear in general to be confident of their funding situation, with just 32% anticipating a fall in funding over the coming two years, the detailed funding pattern is complex. We found a wide range of funding sources being used, and many organisations telling us they spent time applying for relatively small funding sources, with drains on time both at the application point and later with regard to monitoring and/or reporting. There is always room for more support in identifying sources of funding and putting together applications.

MVSC is exploring new ways of offering fundraising support to local organisations to respond to this need.

Networking

Working collaboratively is increasingly vital if local organisations want to maximise funding opportunities. This particularly applies to small groups. Many commissioning opportunities do and will increasingly require a range of providers to work together. To enable the voluntary sector to respond to this agenda, organisations highlighted the desire for more opportunities to network so they can share knowledge and experience. Networking can be a very useful by-product of other activities such as training provision.

MVSC is launching a new seminar, training and workshop programme for 2014 to enable greater networking. This will be in addition to the existing Involve Network that will see a refreshed format from March 2014.

Volunteering

Volunteering is thriving in Merton, with more organisations in the borough using volunteers than paid staff. However there is scope to increase volunteering and maximise local social capital. The Merton Partnership's Volunteering Strategy demonstrates a commitment to doing this and over the next year there will be a range of interventions to encourage and stimulate active citizenship in the borough.

MVSC is working with Volunteer Centre Merton to ensure support for volunteers and organisations that engage volunteers is sustained and the gateway to support is more accessible.

Trustees

Having high calibre trustees is crucial for a voluntary organisation. Our research suggests organisations are learning more about recruiting trustees for specific roles. Infrastructure organisations such as MVSC and Volunteer Centre Merton (VCM) can support this by helping with practical areas such as identifying need, developing role descriptions and recruitment and interview practices. In addition MVSC can help make the wider community aware of opportunities for individuals to become trustees, and of the personal benefits such roles can bring to people.

MVSC has ensured that promoting becoming a trustee is a core objective in the Volunteering Strategy and there will be a range of activities in 2014 to increase numbers.

Support, training and information provision

About half of respondents said they used external support to help with areas like governance, management and organisational sustainability. The research uncovered a trend for organisations that use external support in one area to use it in others, suggesting that once its value is understood, it is exploited. This is positive for the organisations that have got the message, but those that have yet to take advantage may be missing out.

MVSC is currently strategically reviewing its services and approach. This will see some exciting new development in the coming year, and ensure MVSC is best placed to meet the needs of local voluntary organisations in a changing environment.

Future planning

Voluntary, community and faith organisations have to look towards the future and the development of their services. Organisations identified a number of areas of particular importance in this context. While funding was the standout area identified, significant emphasis was also placed other areas including governance, service delivery models and diversifying the funding base.

MVSC will refine its support and information to ensure voluntary, community and faith organisations are provided with more guidance on reviewing their operational model to ensure it is fit for purpose in a rapidly changing environment.

Grants and Commissioning

Merton Council still offers grants to its voluntary sector. Many authorities have moved to a total tendering model but are starting to realise that grants and commissioning through service level agreements offers more flexibility and the opportunity to work with providers to develop innovative and locally responsive models of working. The London Borough of Merton should retain its grant funding for the sector as part of a portfolio of funding methods.

4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

N/a

5 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

MVSC employed a team of experienced consultants to undertake this research. Each member of the team had previous experience of working with MVSC, and therefore an understanding of the voluntary sector within the borough.

Before the work began, the team worked with MVSC to agree an appropriate approach. The approach adopted was a mix of large scale questionnaire, one to one interviews and in depth focus group discussion.

Questionnaire. An online questionnaire was designed using the popular research tool Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com). The survey was publicised to all voluntary, community and faith organisations on MVSC's extensive database. Several rounds of reminders were issued and there was some telephone follow up to encourage organisations in low response rate groups to complete the survey.

Paper copies of the questionnaire were posted to those organisations without an email address. We achieved an overall response rate of 17%.

Interviews and focus groups. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 organisations and held one focus group in which eight organisations took part.

6 TIMETABLE

MVSC are working with VCM to deliver the recommendations arising from the research and build on the Merton Partnership's Volunteering Strategy through 2015/15.

7 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

Resourcing the voluntary sector is reliant on continued recognition of its value in supporting the delivering of local services and meeting the needs of Merton's residents.

Infrastructure support to assist the sector in managing change and responding to need is currently provided by LBM.

8 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

N/a

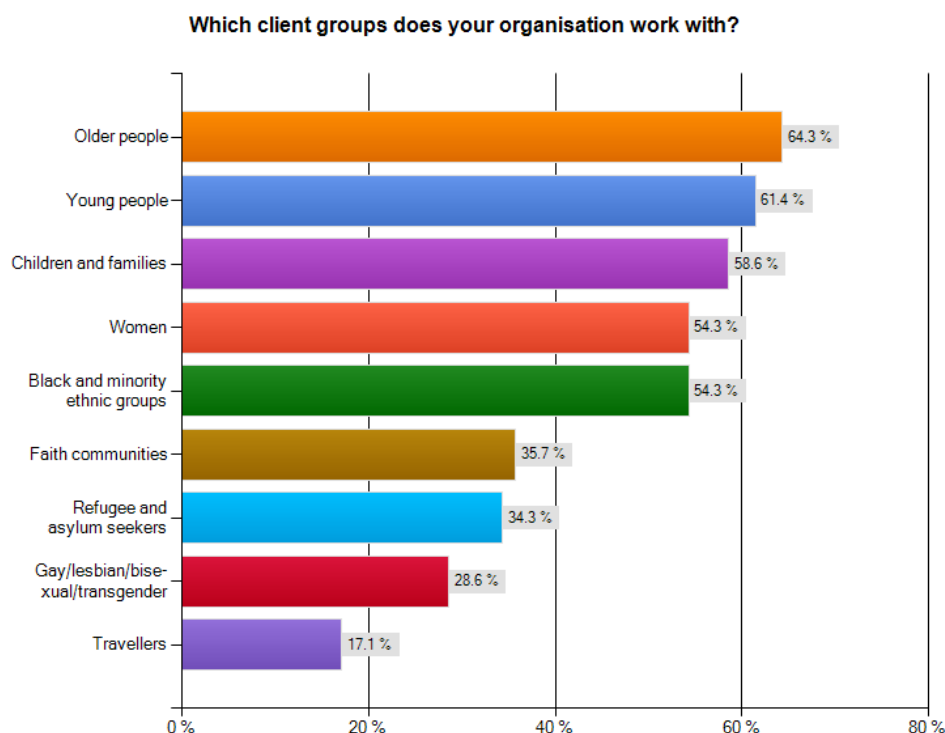
9 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

Merton's voluntary sector is characterised by organisations that work with a wide range of client groups and communities.

The research paints a picture of a voluntary sector that is broad in its scope, with organisations working across a huge range of areas and providing multiple services. For example organisations providing services to clients with learning disabilities may also provide support with transport, arts and leisure, campaigning employment and lifelong learning. This suggests that organisations develop services to meet client need, fill gaps, and be responsive to historic changes in public policy.

The sector tends to work with vulnerable groups so it comes as no surprise that the demographics of our respondents do not closely match those of the borough as a whole. Analysis of our survey results compared with data from the 2011 Census suggests that 58% of our respondents work with children and families, children representing 19% of the population, 61% work with young people who represent 20% of the population and 64% work with older people who represent 12% of the population.

More than half (62.1%) of the organisations surveyed said there had been an overall increase in demand for their services, with a very small proportion (10.3%) reporting a decrease in demand. This compares favourably to Londonwide figures, where 82% of organisations have seen an increase in demand for their services (The Big Squeeze 2013: A fragile state, Phase 5, November 2013, LVSC).



10 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

None

11 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

Some voluntary organisations are key partners in delivering local services for health and social care, including statutory provision.

12 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

- The Voluntary Sector in Merton Report

13 BACKGROUND PAPERS

None