



Report to Somerset County Council 2015/16

Supported by

Somerset Community Foundation
Yeoman House, Bath and West Showground,
Shepton Mallet. BA4 6QN
justin.sargent@somersetcf.org.uk www.somersetcf.org.uk
Registered Charity No 1094446 Company No.4530979



Introduction and Background

1. Following the 'Transforming Local Infrastructure' investment in Somerset's VCSE sector, there was a widely recognised need for an on-going mechanism to improve the level and quality of strategic coordination and communication between the public and VCSE sectors.
2. TLI funding supported a detailed review of current practice and of good practice from other local authority areas, both led by Somerset's VCSE infrastructure organisations.
3. It was concluded that a single part-time coordinator to provide a link between the public sector, infrastructure organisations and the wider VCSE network was the appropriate model, building on the strengths of local organisations but, essentially, providing a single point of contact. This led to the Somerset VCSE Strategic Coordination Initiative.
4. The terms of reference for the Somerset VCSE Strategic Coordination initiative were to:
 - a. Act as a vital communication link and improve information flow and understanding between the public sector and the wider VCSE by:
 - i. facilitating and supporting meetings, particularly of a Strategic Voluntary Sector Forum ;
 - ii. disseminating information from national developments and the local Public Sector to the VCSE and vice versa, particularly through existing geographical and/or thematic groups;
 - iii. keeping abreast of public sector commissioning intentions / arrangements and tendering opportunities and disseminate the information to the VCSE; and
 - iv. Developing a website and other communication channels to promote and celebrate work being carried out and obtain feedback.
 - b. Help build capacity within the local VCSE sector to work with the local Public Sector by:
 - i. Facilitating and signposting VCSE organisations to sources of help to build capacity to bid successfully for, and deliver, services. This may include governance, financial management, business planning, and impact reporting.
 - ii. Supporting the development of up to 3 new partnerships within the VCSE sector to deliver public sector priorities.

- c. Advise the public sector on measures and opportunities to engage the local VCSE sector.
 - d. Maintain current and accurate records of all work carried out and provide monitoring and evaluation on the outcomes of activities for the public sector.
5. A financial statement is provided at Annex 1.

A. Governance, management and funding

6. The formal governance of the project is provided through a quarterly steering group with representatives from SCC and Somerset Community Foundation (SCF) officers.
7. SCF is responsible for appointing and managing the VCSE Strategic Coordinator. Liz Simmons was appointed to the role by SCF in March 2015 on a self-employed consultancy basis, based on time commitment averaging 2 days a week throughout the year.
8. Funding is provided by SCC to support the project, with contributions from other key infrastructure organisations as set out in Annex 1.
9. Contributing partners meet quarterly as an 'Advisory Group' to help inform the activity and direction of the initiative. In addition to the steering group members, the Advisory Group includes:
- a. Engage West Somerset
 - b. Mendip Community Support
 - c. South Somerset VCA
 - d. CHYPPS
 - e. Community Council for Somerset

B. Activity

10. From the outset a plan of work was agreed between SCC and SCF although it was recognised that flexibility was needed to adapt to unforeseen opportunities and to take account of lessons learned in practice. For this reason, not all of the original plans have been achieved but new activities have been introduced.

Somerset VCSE Strategic Forum

11. The VCSE Strategic Forum is the cornerstone for delivering the aims of the initiative. The Forum brings together leading local VCSE organisations and public sector bodies to:

- a. Improve communication and liaison between the sectors
- b. Provide accountable representation of the VCSE sector to inform policy debate
- c. Cascade information from the public sector to the wider VCSE sector, and vice versa.

12. There are quarterly Forum meetings organised by the VCSE Strategic Coordinator, and regularly attended by over 25 individual representatives of VCSE and public sector organisations. At the meetings there are presentations from internal and external speakers, opportunities for debate and information exchange.

Working with Infrastructure Organisations

13. The VCSE Strategic Coordinator has worked closely with local infrastructure organisations, supporting their development and coordination, and, in particular in response to external opportunities that have arisen.

Working with the Public Sector

14. A substantial amount of time and effort has been placed on liaising with commissioners in SCC and in the Clinical Commissioning Group, representing the VCSE Forum and creating opportunities for better communication and engagement.

Other activities

15. Other key activities include:

- a. Visit to Devon and liaison with Cornwall with respect to their VCSE coordination models.
- b. Supporting VCSE coordination around the ESF/Building Better Opportunities fund.
- c. Supporting the merger between South Somerset VCA and Mendip Community Support.
- d. Convening VCSE organisations to discuss the potential for a campaign based around 'Loneliness'.

C. Key Achievements

Somerset VCSE Strategic Forum

16. The Forum has been successfully established with good representation across most geographies, sectors and areas of interest. Four¹ quarterly Forum meetings have been held providing excellent opportunities for information exchange and two-way discussion between sector representations. Although difficult to measure, it appears that the Forum is also contributing to a growing understanding and trust between the sectors.

17. The topics covered at Forum meetings have been:

- a. The strategic role of the VCSE sector
- b. Outcome-Based Commissioning
- c. The role of infrastructure organisations
- d. New models for adult care
- e. The Symphony Project
- f. Development of a Social Enterprise network in Somerset
- g. Updates from Cabinet Office
- h. Somerset Choices
- i. Big Lottery priorities
- j. Heart of the SW LEP priorities
- k. Ending Loneliness in Somerset
- l. Somerset Together Programme
- m. Integrated personal commissioning
- n. The role of the Police and Crime Commissioner
- o. The VCSE sector in Cornwall

18. The opportunities provided in each of the Forum meetings to allow people from different sectors to debate key issues has been very useful, both in terms of directing the initiative but also building more trust and understanding between the sectors, reflected in the sustained good attendance of the meetings.

19. At the April 2016 Forum, participants (VCSE and public sector) were asked to review the first year of activity. The feedback showed:

¹ A fifth was held in April 2016

- a. 92% of respondents felt the initiative was improving the links between the sectors
- b. 92% of respondents felt the initiative was enabling the VCSE sector to engage in strategic decisions
- c. 82% of respondents agreed that the forum improved networking and created opportunities for collaboration

(More detail is provided at Annex 2)

ESF/Building Better Opportunities Funding

20. The VCSE Strategic Coordinator played a critical role facilitating a process for local VCSE organisations to interview potential lead partners for the bid to the ESF/BBO programme, supported a number of VCSE organisations in their consideration of whether to become involved, and circulate updates to interested parties during the application window. The outcome of bids submitted is still pending (decisions are due 6 May 2016).

Somerset Together Programme

21. The VCSE Strategic Coordinator has created an opportunity for the VCSE sector to contribute to the CCG's Somerset Together Programme, leading to a proposal to use the Forum, and in particular infrastructure organisations, to engage with the wider VCSE sector in Somerset in the development of commissioning intentions. The outcome of the funding proposal is currently pending, but VCSE engagement in the process is already underway with recognition that VCSE costs should be met.

22. A health sub-group has been established as an advisory group to Somerset Together, with four local VCSE organisations involved.

Other activity

23. There has been a considerable amount of other meetings, information sharing and representation on behalf of the VCSE sector by the VCSE strategic coordinator that are too numerous to capture in this report, but they include:

- a. Working with Big Lottery to increase number and quality of application to Reaching Communities programme, with potential to play an important brokerage role in the future around strategically important programmes.

- b. Interviews with 12 VCSE organisations on their experience of SCC procurement practices leading to a report to SCC. SCC has responded and is in further discussions to identify ways to improve understanding of the processes and issues, possibly through future masterclasses.
- c. Convening 15 VCSE organisations to an 'end loneliness' meeting in order to build consensus around a suitable approach to working with the public sector.
- d. Engagement with Mental Health Hub.
- e. Raising awareness of the Shepton Mallet health campus development.
- f. Meeting with Police and Crime Commissioners office.
- g. Various Adult Social Care VCSE meetings.
- h. Supporting SSVCA and MCS in their merger to increase the effectiveness of the infrastructure offer in the east of Somerset.

D. Conclusion

24. There has been considerable progress in building stronger links between the public and VCSE sectors as a result of the investment of SCC and local infrastructure bodies. As a result, there is better understanding between the sectors, their respective roles and how each can contribute better to shared goals. Consolidating this into policy, process and practice will take time, but the model of operating a relatively modest programme over a sustained period should achieve this.
25. The Forum meetings in particular have been essential for building relationships and recognising areas where the VCSE sector can be an equal partner to the public sector in the achievement of outcomes.
26. The VCSE Strategic Coordinator has used this as the platform for engaging a wide range of partners within and beyond the public sector, giving them a focal point for communication to and with VCSE organisations. This can be seen in the work with ESF/BBO, Somerset Together, Big Lottery and around the loneliness agenda.
27. While the tangible outcomes of the initiative are largely yet to be seen, there is considerable evidence that the initiative will help create new and better opportunities for the VCSE sector and help the public sector engage with local VCSE organisations and benefit from their unique role, perspective and positioning in Somerset.
28. Looking ahead, the Forum will remain the cornerstone of the initiative, but opportunities are emerging to:
 - a. Increase the breadth of representation in the Forum and also identify representatives for key countywide forums and committees.
 - b. Develop relationships with other funders.
 - c. Support collaboration between infrastructure organisations and articulate their 'offer'.
 - d. Coordinate VCSE engagement with Somerset Together.
 - e. Continue to support VCSE engagement in SCC procurement processes.
 - f. Explore VCSE training and development opportunities and organise a masterclass.
 - g. Investigate scope to raise the public profile of local VCSE organisations.