

Prosperous Communities Executive Advisory Panel 24th January 2024

Report Title	Communities Strategy and strategic investment into the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector
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List of Appendices

Appendix A: Draft North Northamptonshire Council Communities Strategy

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. This report introduces the Council's Communities Strategy. It has been co-produced with representatives from across the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector.
- 1.2. The report also sets out the proposed new VCSE strategic grants framework for period of three years from 1st April 2024, which replaces the previous strategic grant arrangements which North Northamptonshire Council inherited from the former sovereign councils.
- 1.3. It also details the proposed new VCSE Infrastructure support arrangements which will be tendered and contracted for three years from 1st September 2024.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. The Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector provides valuable support to people across North Northamptonshire. The range and geographical coverage of organisations in the sector is comprehensive. There are currently 168 VCSE member organisations connected to the VCSE locality-based networks in Kettering and Corby and 200 across Wellingborough and East Northants, many of whom operate successfully without funding from the Council. They range from small volunteer-run community groups to larger

charities, some of which provide very specialised work such as debt casework, mental health counselling, support to victims of domestic abuse, and drug treatment and recovery.

- 2.2. The purpose of this strategy is to emphasise and strengthen the role the VCSE, residents and communities have in delivering the North Northamptonshire Council's Corporate Plan and the Northamptonshire Integrated Care System's Live Your Best Life Strategy, particularly within the context of the new Place-based delivery models.
- 2.3. The Communities Strategy is a North Northamptonshire Council strategy, but it also brings together the key themes which underpin a number of national and local agendas into a co-ordinated framework for effective partnership working with the VCSE. This will be achieved through mutually beneficial relationships between all Directorates within the Council, with the VCSE and Town and Parish Councils, but can also support positive relationships across all organisations, across sectors and with residents and their communities, which will drive innovation, collaboration and meaningful co-production.
- 2.4. The Strategy has five principal aims, for 2024 to 2027, which are to:
 - Emphasise and strengthen the role the VCSE sector, residents and communities have in delivering the Council's corporate objectives, and within the context of the countywide Live Your Best Life Strategy for the Integrated Care System, particularly within the context of the new Place-based delivery models;
 - Develop a co-ordinated vision and framework for effective partnership working on equal terms, and, wherever possible, co-production with VCSE organisations and groups, along with Town and Parish Councils;
 - Set out the Council's approach to financial investment into the VCSE, which promotes sustainability, through access to a range of funding sources, including strategic and small grant giving by the Council; and future infrastructure support into the sector;
 - Strengthen the ability of the VCSE sector to deliver services and connect communities through engaging residents, leading community action, supporting volunteering, supporting people in the most vulnerable situations, and brokering relationships between statutory bodies and communities;
 - Provide a framework to support innovative approaches which facilitate necessary change, given the shifting needs of local communities in the wake of the pandemic and the current economic climate.
- 2.5. The Strategy introduces eight key themes, six* of which will form a significant part of the ask the Council will make of the future providers of the VCSE Infrastructure support contract, which will be tendered for delivery. The remaining two themes will be co-ordinated and delivered by Council officers.

The themes are:

- Capacity Building and back-office support for the VCSE*;
- Funding Support for the VCSE*;
- Co-ordination of VCSE involvement and leadership for the Integrated Care System and the Place Programme*;
- Developing mutually beneficial relationships*;
- Co-ordination and promotion of best practice across the VCSE*;
- Volunteering support, promotion and best practice*;
- Supporting communities to take on assets and services where appropriate to do so;
- Delivery of the VCSE grants programme.

2.6. It is proposed that the new VCSE strategic grants framework for 2024-2027 focuses on the following themes:

- Core cost support to the Community Centres which were supported by the former sovereign Councils;
- Financial Inclusion;
- Community Transport;
- Prevention of Social Isolation for Older People;
- Community Mental Health and Wellbeing;
- Increasing resilience in the VCSE to provide support for vulnerable residents, as identified through the new Support North Northants (SNN) service;
- Promotion and Advocacy for Equalities.

3. Recommendations

3.1. It is recommended that the Executive Advisory Panel:

- a) Consider the draft Communities Strategy and provides comment and feedback;
- b) Notes the proposed VCSE Strategic grants framework and the proposed VCSE Infrastructure support arrangements for the period 2024-2027.

3.2. Reasons for Recommendations:

- The previous strategic VCSE grant arrangements inherited from sovereign Councils end on 31st March 2024 (some have been in place since 2017, pre-Covid and pre-North Northamptonshire Council) and new arrangements are required;
- The previous arrangements for VCSE infrastructure support also come to an end on 31st March 2024 and new, more robust, arrangements are required;
- There has been a huge shift in the strategic context within which the Council and the VCSE are now working, largely due to the

development of the Integrated Care System (ICS) and the new Place-based delivery models, including the Council's Levelling Up agendas for its 'left behind' neighbourhoods, all of which have already resulted in a strengthened collaboration and governance for the VCSE;

- The Place-based delivery models have also brought about emerging priorities from the new Community Wellbeing Forums and Local Area Partnerships (LAPs), and the emergence of the new VCSE-led, whole-system, early intervention service, Support North Northants (SNN), which is providing evidence of need on the ground in communities;
- The work undertaken by the Northamptonshire County Association for Local Councils (NCALC) between 2021 and 2023 which reported on the relationship between Principal and Local Councils, and included approaches to devolution of assets and services.
- In summary a Communities Strategy is required to set out the Council's approach to working with and investing in the VCSE within the context of these strategic contexts.

3.3. Alternative Options Considered:

- 3.3.1 The alternative option would be to not have a Communities Strategy. However, this would not be a recommended approach as the Strategy sets out how the Council wishes to work with the VCSE, as equal partners, recognising the valuable role the sector plays in supporting the communities of North Northamptonshire.
- 3.3.2 It also identifies the key themes for the new VCSE Infrastructure contract and lays the foundation for the Council's new VCSE strategic grants programme, both of which are needed to replace legacy arrangements inherited by the Council in 2021. Without the Strategy the VCSE would not have reassurance about future funding opportunities, nor about the critical support it has stated it requires moving forward, to help the sector to grow, become more sustainable and to attract more inward investment into North Northamptonshire, for the benefit of our communities.
- 3.3.3 A number of options were considered as part of the Council's budget setting for 2024-25, in relation to the future funding envelope for the VCSE Strategic grants from 1st April 2024. This included removing all funding and ceasing the programme, to a variety of proposals which might result in the funding being reduced to a greater or lesser extent. Ultimately the Council's Executive are committed to retaining the funding at the same levels as before, £671,771, whilst recognising that new grant arrangements would be required to replace those that are expiring on 31st March 2024.
- 3.3.4 In summary, not having a Communities Strategy could result in missed opportunities for VCSE organisations to collaborate effectively with one another to share knowledge, expertise and

resource, and for the Council to work in effective strategic and operational partnerships with the hundreds of VCSE organisations which operate locally and add so much economic and social value to the North Northamptonshire economy and social fabric.

4. Report Background

- 4.1. The VCSE provides valuable support to people across Northamptonshire. The range and geographical coverage of organisations in the sector is comprehensive. There are currently 168 VCSE member organisations connected to the VCSE locality-based networks in Kettering and Corby and 200 across Wellingborough and East Northants, many of whom operate successfully without funding from the Council. They range from small volunteer-run community groups to larger charities, some of which provide very specialised work such as debt advocacy and casework, mental health counselling, support to victims of domestic abuse, and drug treatment and recovery.
- 4.2. Over the last 18 months the VCSE across North Northamptonshire has become stronger, largely due to the emergence of the ICS Place Programme. This has seen the VCSE strengthen its collaboration within the sector, and work closely with statutory partners to influence the development of the Place Programme including leadership and co-ordination of the four new Community Wellbeing Forums (CWFs) and seven Local Area Partnerships (LAPs). A new governance for the VCSE has been embedded as part of the ICS, with a strategic Oversight Group reporting into the Place Delivery Board, the four VCSE CWF chairs sitting on the North Health and Wellbeing Board and a wider VCSE Operational Engagement group being established to complement the four locality VCSE networks that already existed.
- 4.3. It has been the ambition of the Communities and Leisure Directorate to develop a Communities Strategy for the Council since Vesting Day. This direction of travel was presented to the Council Executive in a report in March 2022 which outlined the intention to develop a Strategy which would include:
 - Adoption of a corporate commitment to working in equal partnership through co-production;
 - Strengthening the ability of the VCSE sector to deliver projects and connect communities through engaging residents, leading community action, supporting people in the most vulnerable situations and brokering relationships between statutory bodies and communities; and
 - VCSE Infrastructure support arrangements to improve sustainability and increase growth in the VCSE sector, developing fit for purpose, sustainable organisations able to deliver high quality projects with diversified income streams and less reliance on grants, with a more commercial focus and which are flexible and adaptable to change.

- 4.4. The Executive report dated 17th March 2022 secured approval to extend the VCSE strategic grants inherited from the former councils for a further 2 years until 31st March 2024. These grants included funding the former councils committed to VCSE infrastructure support.
- 4.5. The delay in developing this Communities Strategy, whilst not planned, has been fortuitous, as there have been some significant changes during the intervening period, to the strategic context within which the Council and the VCSE are operating.
- 4.6. Not only has the Council adopted its Corporate Plan, it has begun to develop its Vision50 for 2050. The VCSE has an important role to play in helping the Council to deliver almost all of its strategic objectives as they relate to outcomes for our people and places, and also align with the raison d'être for many of our VCSE organisations.
- 4.7. However it is important to ensure that where the Council is grant funding VCSE delivery, the investment is demonstrably contributing to its strategic priorities.
- 4.8. Over the last 18 months the county as a 'system' of partners from across the public and VCSE sectors, has also developed its approach to integrated health and care through Integrated Care Northamptonshire (ICN). A new 10 year Live Your Best Life Strategy was adopted in late 2022, The ambition of this strategy is for residents to 'live their best life' in all aspects: health and wellbeing, education, housing and employment.
- 4.9. The ICS Strategy sets out a collaborative direction of travel for the people of Northamptonshire to achieve a shared vision over the next 10 years to deliver better outcomes for residents throughout their lifetime; from pregnancy to early years, to improved education and employment opportunities, to social connection and better access to health and care services. It also recognises that, like many areas, North Northamptonshire faces a number of challenges which continue to place pressure on the Council and on health and care services. North Northamptonshire faces significant demand from a growing older population and working age adults, as well as the children population. These are happening at a time when operating cost pressures are high, with utility costs rising and people feeling the impact of the rising cost-of-living. It is clear that organisations, and their services, must adapt to ensure that they meet the challenges ahead. Through shared working and VCSE and community involvement, we have the best opportunity to respond to these challenges.
- 4.10. During the latter half of 2022 the ICS Place Programme was developed as part of the county-wide ICS Operating Framework. The ICS approach to delivery is all about connecting strategic decision making, from the Integrated Care Board and the county-wide thematic strategic collaboratives, through to place, utilising the new CWFs and LAPs; and putting communities at the heart of what we do.

- 4.11. The seven LAPs in North Northamptonshire have used LAP profiles, based on a range of Public Health and other data, alongside of local intelligence that LAP members have brought to the table, to identify a number of priorities. The first round of priorities was identified following a series of community events held in the spring of 2023 and the second round was identified in the autumn of 2023. These priorities and the subsequent action plans that have been developed have helped inform some of the new themes for the VCSE Strategic grants programme proposed in this report.
- 4.12. In addition, as part of the ICS Place Programme, the VCSE in North Northamptonshire have introduced a new VCSE-led whole-system, early intervention service, Support North Northants (SNN). Mobilised in the second half of 2023, as a test and learn programme, SNN currently has 12 months seed funding from three different funding partners across the ICS to help the VCSE prove the concept.
- 4.13. SNN is a system-wide collaborative service model with the VCSE, statutory and other agencies to provide co-ordinated earlier intervention and prevention of escalation of issues for adults over 18 and their families. It aims to guide people to the right services, pathways and support networks quickly, and to build greater levels of community resilience by increasing capacity in the VCSE to provide wrap-around support. The key principles are:
- Don't give up on people' and catch people early;
 - Person-centred and strengths-based support, based on holistic assessments;
 - Builds personal and community resilience, invests in and builds capacity within VCSE services to meet identified local needs;
 - Help people to help themselves;
 - Effective use of public and community assets, skills, talents, resources through effective case co-ordination.
- 4.14. A small SNN team of 11 staff has been recruited, hosted across three VCSE organisations, and additional investment has been made into other VCSE organisations to provide key support services which have been identified as gaps early on, such as benefits checks for all SNN service-users, home repairs and safety modifications where needed. SNN is a practical, emerging example of the collaboration within the VCSE and across the sectors, which this Strategy seeks to foster. It is also identifying barriers which prevent residents from Living Their Best Life, which have also informed the new priorities for the VCSE strategic grants programme.
- 4.15. In 2021-22 a cross party Scrutiny Panel was established by the Council to review and understand the underlying data related to the three neighbourhood areas in Corby, Kettering and Wellingborough highlighted as 'left behind'. Engagement activity was undertaken with residents in those neighbourhoods to understand the challenges and opportunities and also to explore the views of partner agencies, including the VCSE organisations, working in those communities. Learning was also considered from programmes already delivered in those areas.

- 4.16. Recommendations were made and a Levelling Up Action Plan has been developed, to both set out the Council's strategic intent to level up these neighbourhoods and so that progress against those recommendations can be demonstrated and tracked. Many of the recommendations relate to how the Council engages and communicates with, funds and problem solves with the VCSE in those neighbourhoods and are therefore relevant to the Communities Strategy.
- 4.17. In 2021 NCALC received Community Renewal Funding to deliver a project aimed to be an investment in communities and place. Along with mapping all assets, functions, services and facilities within each parish, it aimed to start the work towards developing a devolution framework and enhancing the confidence, knowledge and skills of Parish and Town Councils to generate effective business cases to achieve successful bids through the Community Right to Bid process for community assets.
- 4.18. The work towards developing a devolution framework resulted in Local Councils across North Northamptonshire being better informed about and prepared for any future transfer of assets and services. Some of the “nuts and bolts” of devolution were put in place, but the Council through its Statement of Intent was and remains clear that it has not intention to undertake any wholesale devolution of assets and services in the near future. The Statement from North Northamptonshire Council states:
- NNC “understands that the appetite for and capacity of towns and parishes to take on increased roles in local service delivery and place-shaping varies significantly between individual local councils”. NNC “wants to support communities when they wish to take on additional responsibilities; but the Council is not looking to force assets onto towns & parishes. The Community Asset Transfer Policy is there to enable NNC to respond if / when town or parish councils want to explore taking on an asset or service. **The transfer of assets or services is an opportunity and there will be a place-led approach which responds to local demand or aspirations from communities.***
- 4.19. “Listening Events” which were held with Council officers and Councillors went some way to establishing a meaningful dialogue between the Council and the Local Councils in its area.
- 4.20. There is further work to do to ensure that if there are any further transfer of assets and services, the process is well-managed, thoughtful, and fair. This will therefore form a theme for this strategy.
- 4.21. In preparing this strategy, the current VCSE Infrastructure organisations (SERVE and Groundwork Northamptonshire) have engaged with organisations across the VCSE locality networks, and the first North Northamptonshire sector-wide engagement event was held in person at the end of September 2023, where over 100 VCSE organisations were represented. These sessions highlighted the vital role the sector plays in delivering commissioned, grant-funded and voluntary services, often to people in the most vulnerable situations.

The sector is seen as innovative, dynamic, flexible and responsive, making it a key partner in delivering effective and efficient services.

4.22. At the engagement event the sector was asked to consider the following questions, the feedback from which has informed this Strategy:

- What are the biggest challenges facing the VCSE locally currently?
- What are the opportunities?
- What support do you think should be offered under future VCSE infrastructure arrangements?
- If NNC could only invest in a few strategic priorities for the sector, what would they be?

4.23. The North VCSE Oversight Group leaders from the sector have proactively helped to shape this Strategy, by engaging with the VCSE through their networks, specifically to influence the focus for the new VCSE Infrastructure offer. They have offered constructive comment on the initial drafts of the Strategy.

4.24. A series of co-production meetings have also been held with VCSE partners who deliver against the emerging themes identified as priorities for future investment through the VCSE strategic grant funding the Council distributes. These meetings have been open, frank and transparent to inform what needs to be funded and why, what is currently working and why and the challenges and opportunities for VCSE partners to collaborate even more effectively, to ensure the Council can maximise the reach and impact of its financial investment.

5. Issues and Choices

5.1. The current strategic VCSE grant arrangements total £671,771 per annum. It should also be noted that the strategic grant arrangements are not the only grant funding NNC provides to the VCSE. Currently, during 2023-2024 also NNC invests in the VCSE through:

- **Discretionary (Small) grants**, up to £5,000 per grant – £120,000 p.a.
- **Shared Prosperity Funding** – £255,000 in 2023-24 and £400,00 in 2024-25 with a focus on projects which support young people in left behind areas and supporting community/VCSE sector with bid writing and funding support; community mental health & wellbeing; connecting communities to services & services to communities and volunteering in all areas.
- **Shared Prosperity Funding for Rural Communities** £72,000 for 2023-24 and £218,000 for 2024-25.
- **Member Empowerment Fund**- £156,000 p.a.
- **Household Support Fund 4** for 2023-24, £570,00 with a focus on supporting all Vulnerable Households in Financial Hardship through Home Improvements, Food Poverty, Tenancy Support, Benefit Advice and Budget Management.

- **£250,000 COMF funding** in 2023-24 to support the test and learn phase for Support North Northants
- **£129,000 Well Northants Programme** community grants in the three left behind neighbourhoods.
- **Multiply funding** (commissioned by Adult Learning Service), supporting residents with numeracy skills, £273,500 for 23-24.
- There will also be other commissioned contracts from NNC services into the VCSE.

5.2. The investment detailed above, including the current strategic grant agreements totals £1.82m for 2023-2024.

5.3. Part of the current VCSE strategic grant arrangements relate to Infrastructure support to the VCSE by certain VCSE partners. Infrastructure arrangements, normally funded by Local Authorities and delivered through contractual arrangements, include functions such as:

- Capacity building in the sector to ensure back-office functions and governance arrangements are robust and organisations are commissioning-ready should they wish to bid for grants and contracts;
- Improving sustainability and increasing growth in the VCSE sector, developing fit for purpose, sustainable organisations able to deliver high quality projects with diversified income streams and less reliance on grants, with a more commercial focus and which are flexible and adaptable to change;
- Funding and bid-writing support;
- Volunteering best practice;
- Supporting networking, collaboration and co-ordination across the sector and with statutory partners to ensure the VCSE has a voice in strategic and operational decision making through genuine co-production;
- Supporting the sector to promote and enable social and community action; and
- Supporting the sector to demonstrate impact and return on investment and contribute to the social value agendas.

5.4. However, the infrastructure arrangements inherited by the Council from the former sovereign councils are relatively light touch and constitute a total investment of only £58,000 across North Northamptonshire, through two providers, SERVE for Wellingborough and Groundwork Northamptonshire across Corby and Kettering. East Northants currently has no funded Infrastructure support.

5.5. Under the former councils the arrangements were delivered through annual grant agreements. For a Unitary Authority with a population the size of North Northants these legacy infrastructure arrangements are not sufficient nor robust enough to build capacity in the sector as set out above, under the ambitions set out in this Community Strategy.

- 5.6. National best practice is for Councils to formally tender VCSE Infrastructure contracts, to run for at least 3 years, to ensure these contracts deliver against strategic priorities for the Council, as well as meeting the needs of the sector, and to embed collaboration across and strong leadership of the sector into these contractual requirements. It is intended that for the Council that the new Infrastructure contract will have a significant role in delivering the Communities Strategy, with and on behalf of the Council, and with the sector and wider partners.
- 5.7. This assessment of the current situation was evidenced at the engagement session with over 100 representatives from the VCSE where future Infrastructure requirements were discussed at length. There is a huge appetite for collaboration across the sector in North Northamptonshire, but VCSE organisations said they would benefit from additional support for such issues as bid writing support, shared back-office functions such as training and professional development, HR, finance, procurement, legal, insurance and transport, communications and marketing, safeguarding, risk management, volunteer management, sharing resources and best practice, workforce recruitment, development and retention, governance and policy, commerciality and financial sustainability.
- 5.8. The sector also discussed the benefit of an annual state of the North Northamptonshire VCSE report and sharing expertise in demonstrating return on investment, all to help show the impact the VCSE has locally on services and outcomes for communities.
- 5.9. The Council does not have a statutory duty to fund the voluntary sector or commission projects from organisations within it. However, in recent years, financial cuts both nationally and locally have put significant pressure on the organisations within the sector. In some cases, organisations have been forced to use their reserves to continue operating, which of course is not sustainable in the long-term.
- 5.10. It is proposed to tender a new VCSE Infrastructure contract with an annual value of £200,00 for three years from September 2024 at the latest, to significantly support the delivery of this strategy. This, in turn will provide the support to the VCSE that is both needed and has been requested, to enable the sector to continue grow in reach, depth and resilience, to become less dependent on grant funding from the Council in the future and to continue to deliver positive outcomes for our residents and communities.
- 5.11. The Infrastructure contract will be funded from the VCSE strategic grants allocation within the Council's MTFP.
- 5.12. The current strategic grant funding arrangements with VCSE organisations were inherited from the former sovereign councils and involve a mixture of grants, service level agreements and contracts. Some of those arrangements have been in place for some considerable time, since 2017 in some cases.
- 5.13. The current funding arrangements with VCSE organisations created by the sovereign councils were subject to an application process and were awarded

accordingly. Whilst, overall, the current arrangements are performing well, and grant agreements are monitored, they are out of date, offer a somewhat scattergun approach to what services are funded, and where, and as such do not provide the consistency and transparency to which the Council might now aspire. In addition, they do not necessarily reflect the Council's corporate priorities, and are not aligned with other system-wide ambitions for the area such as the 10 Live Your Best Life Strategy ambitions and the emerging local priorities being determined by the Local Area Partnerships.

- 5.14. In early 2022 a review was undertaken of the funding the Council provides to support some of the core costs of some of its devolved community centres, as inherited from the sovereign councils as part of the former VCSE Strategic Grant arrangements. This is in recognition that there is a range of arrangements in place across the Council area in relation to the ownership, management and funding arrangements for community centres.
- 5.15. All centres in the East Northants locality are devolved to either Town or Parish Councils or other community organisations. The former East Northamptonshire Council did not award community grants to any organisations running community buildings.
- 5.16. In Wellingborough all community centres are devolved or have never been owned by the Council. Hemmingwell Community and Skills Centre has recently been formally asset-transferred to Greatwell Homes as it is located on their land. There is a long-term lease in place with a community organisation which runs the centre. Hemmingwell Community Centre receives £10,000 p.a. from the Council towards core costs. Two other centres, Glamis Hall and the Victoria Centre also receive core funding of £10,000 and £11,326 p.a. respectively.
- 5.17. The three devolved centres in the Kettering area, (Crescents Community Centre, Burton Latimer Community Centre and Highfields) do not receive Council funding for core costs. However, there are seven which are still operated in-house by the Communities and Wellbeing service:
 - Ise Valley Pavilion
 - Melton Street Community Centre
 - North Park Pavilion
 - Northampton Road Pavilion
 - Rockingham Pleasure Park Pavilion
 - Rothwell Community Centre
 - Counties Community Centre
- 5.18. They are used by a number of regular hirers as well as one-off bookings, such as for parties or celebrations. Most are regularly hired, however, due to the condition of some of the buildings, usage is limited in some, two of which (Rockingham and Northampton Road Pavilions) are being considered as part of the emerging Leisure Facilities Strategy.
- 5.19. Staffing for the Kettering area centres is covered by the Communities and Wellbeing service via a Community Services Assistant who oversees the

repairs and maintenance of these centres, along with 2 part-time Site Assistants who open/close for hirers and maintain the centres.

- 5.20. The Council continues to look at opportunities to devolve the remaining in-house centres, for example the Counties Community Centre is being proposed for 2024-25. It was previously devolved but brought back in-house when the Community Association folded. A new Community Association is now interested in taking on the running of the centre. There are challenges with further devolution as some centres need significant capital investment in order to bring them up to a standard where they can be transferred to communities, but the Council will continue to explore these opportunities as appropriate.
- 5.21. In 2012 the former Corby Borough Council devolved 12 Council-owned community facilities to community groups, to run on behalf of the council. Leases were agreed at a peppercorn rent and grants were awarded towards the core utility and running costs previously met in house.
- 5.22. These grants were awarded annually and ten of the centres currently receive grant funding support from North Northamptonshire Council as part of the legacy grant agreements taken on by the new authority in 2021. Two of them are sports facilities not community centres*. The Autumn Centre, which receives specific council funding for providing day care services for older people and people with dementia, does not receive a separate grant towards core running costs.
- 5.23. The currently funded devolved community facilities which receive funding towards core costs from the Council VCSE strategic grants allocation are:

Devolved Community Facility	Amount Council Funded per annum
Kingswood Community Centre (Corby)	£17,200
Danesholme Communicare Centre (Corby)	£11,660
Beanfield Community Centre (Corby)	£11,660
Stephenson Way Community Centre (Corby)	£8,660
Ennerdale Community Centre (Corby)	£8,660
Oakley Vale Community Centre (Corby)	£8,330
Arran Community Centre (Corby)	£5,000
Woodsend Bowls Club* (Corby)	£3,240
Corby Olympic Boxing Club* (Corby)	£1,170
Hemmingwell Community Centre (Wellingborough)	£10,000

Glamis Hall (Wellingborough)	£10,000
The Victoria Centre (Wellingborough)	£11,326
Total	£106,906

5.24. Service Level agreements are in place which contain agreed services for each centre which receives a grant towards core costs to deliver, such as:

- Managing the Property for the benefit of all residents within the area;
- Providing access to groups and individuals who wish to hire the property;
- Actively promoting the facilities available at the property to the community;
- The Board should be actively involved in contributing to local community events;
- The Board should foster good relationships with partners, resident groups and the community;
- Maintaining an activity programme and actively encourage new activities to increase the services delivered for all ages and abilities at the Property.

5.25. The Council, as landlord, is still responsible mainly for external repairs and maintenance, as well as fixtures such as heating systems, for which there is a revenue budget of £53,160. The budget is predominantly spent on monthly maintenance checks, minor repairs, fire equipment testing and when required, replacements, gas testing and labour costs. The budget is under pressure most years.

5.26. The community organisations, as leaseholders, are mainly responsible for internal repairs and décor of the buildings.

5.27. Across the Council area, Corby is distinct in that a larger number of community organisations running council owned community facilities have the benefit of a peppercorn rent, as well as an annual grant to contribute to core costs. There are no similar arrangements in either the Kettering or East Northants localities.

5.28. As part of the review into the VCSE strategic grant arrangements the Council has considered harmonising its approach across geographic areas and in line with strategic context outlined in priorities as outlined in section 4 above. This applies equally to investment in community centres as it does to other grant themes.

5.29. There is disparity between the devolved centres where core grants are provided and those in other parts of the Council area which are not funded in the same way. If allowed to continue this could lead to the question of parity of grant funding across the Council, arising to claims from organisations in other geographic areas of the Council and potentially an increased demand for annual revenue expenditure.

5.30. If the Council continues to fund the community centres as it currently does, and Council funding is expected year on year, there is limited incentive for the community associations to improve their business model or to seek other external funding streams. The funding is given for core costs and not against a specific service area or project outcomes, thus paradoxically limiting the council's influence over service delivery. If the Council does not harmonise the funding of community centres, it could lead to a long-term drain on the Council's revenue budget, leading to adverse consequences for other services.

5.31. The proposal to harmonise investment into community centres by removing the core grants to the devolved centres was aired as part of the Council's budget setting processes during late 2022 and early 2023. It was not progressed at this time, but a consultation, by way of a survey and face to face discussions, was undertaken to ascertain feedback on any effect that a cessation or reduction of the grant arrangements would have on the organisations running the affected community centres. Specifically, they were asked:

- What effect, if any, the proposal is likely to have on operating times and services offered at the centre?
- How any likely effects could be mitigated e.g. cost savings, income generation, other external funding opportunities, tapered support etc?
- The level of unrestricted reserves of the organisation e.g. 3 months?
- Whether there are any other unique factors the council should be considering?

5.32. The overall feedback was that a short notice, total withdrawal of grants from the centres would have a detrimental effect, with several voluntary management groups stated that without time to mitigate the potential impact, they may have no option but to cease functioning and hand the keys back to the council. The main factors cited were:

- Low level of reserves and where reserves have been built up, this has taken several years of sustained effort;
- High utility bills, especially where just coming off fixed tariffs;
- Heavy reliance on volunteers, with a potential over reliance on a small number of people;
- Some responsibility for ongoing repairs and maintenance;
- High insurance costs, especially where potential vandalism is a factor;
- Where the only cost reduction is staffing, this is often caretaking staff, without whom there would be a reduction in access to the building and therefore services, and everyday health and safety checks on buildings and appliances;
- Inability to raise prices to cover the extra income needed due to the economics of the area, and the potential of losing trade patronage through overpricing;
- Difficulty of raising external income through lack of resource, not being in a priority area or, where applications are made, the competition for funds within the sector means not many bids are successful or sustained;

- All the centres highlighted the ‘social’ value of their venues and added value of a range of services within the community, often in deprived areas, offering a safe space for people across a range of ages and cultural backgrounds to meet. The impact of loss of local services and access points would be amplified in an already deprived areas;
- In many cases, the centres host or co-ordinate initiatives as a partner to the Council for example, warm spaces, local forum meetings, public health initiatives and are working towards building community capacity and resilience which the Council is trying to promote;
- Organisations pointed out that they act as custodians and users of council buildings that would otherwise be a larger liability to the council beyond any loss of community services and goodwill.

5.33. Having a place where everyone has the best opportunities and quality-of-life is paramount to the vision of North Northamptonshire. Well run and active community centres contribute to the corporate plan by hosting activities which help people live healthier, more active, independent and fulfilled lives; as well as providing efficient, effective and affordable services that make a real difference to the local community and further afield. This was taken into account when considering the option to withdraw or reduce the funding which contributes to the core costs of these devolved community centres, especially as they are largely situated in ‘left behind’ or deprived neighbourhoods.

5.34. It is proposed by the Executive at this time, that the funding which contributes to the core costs of these devolved community centres is maintained.

5.35. A review of current grant allocations to cluster them against themes and assess them against the Council’s Corporate priorities, the 10 Live Your Best Life ambitions, the intelligence emerging from the new Local Area Partnerships and engagement with the VCSE networks has identified a small number of key themes. In addition to the increased investment into VCSE Infrastructure support the following themes are proposed for funding by the Council from the VCSE strategic grants allocation:

- **Financial Inclusion** (benefits checks and advice, debt and money management advice and education, intensive case work for Debt Recovery Orders, IVAs, tribunal support and advocacy);
- **Community Transport** (to contribute to community-led transport offers across all localities for medical appointments and other social and employment purposes)
- **Prevention of Social Isolation for older people** (Support for over 60s to remain independent at home and to be an active part of the local community through practical support to access local groups and activities, Volunteer recruitment and support and outreach services)
- **Community Mental Health and Wellbeing** (co-ordination and use of Community wellbeing champions to support residents struggling with anxiety and low-level mental health challenges to manage day to day activities and access services which are there to support them)

- **Increasing resilience through specific commissions to the VCSE** to provide support for vulnerable residents, as identified through the Support North Northants (SNN) service;
- **Promotion and Advocacy for Equalities** (outreach and promotion campaigns about residents' rights, advice, guidance and casework related to discrimination).

5.36. New project specifications are being co-produced with VCSE providers and expressions of interest will be sought from the sector. New grant agreements will be established to run for three years from 1st April 2024, in recognition that short term funding does not support the sector to efficiently mobilise, then embed projects and develop exit strategies for sustainable delivery.

5.37. Organisations which receive funding will be required to ensure there is delivery across the NNC area, to prevent the postcode lottery which is currently in place. They will potentially be delivered through a lead provider model whereby the Council tenders a project brief and awards a Grant Agreement to one VCSE organisation to deliver against the funding criteria, but that organisation collaborates with others to ensure efficient service delivery across all four North Northamptonshire localities. This will further foster the ethos of collaboration and leadership across the VCSE.

5.38. Rationalisation and streamlining of the current strategic grant programme will allow for more robust oversight of future agreements and therefore service delivery, to ensure NNC is securing best value, impact and outcomes for its investment.

5.39. As part of the Council's Budget Setting process for 2024-25 a series of options in relation to the £671,771 budget for VCSE Strategic Grants were carefully considered by the Council's Executive Members.

5.40. Following review of a variety of options the funding envelope for the VCSE Strategic grants will remain at £671,771 and will be used to:

- Increase investment into VCSE Infrastructure support;
- Harmonise strategic grants into 6 key themes
- Retain funding to all currently funded devolved community centres.

5.41. This is in recognition of the Council's continued commitment to valuing and supporting the VCSE, but new grant arrangements will be put in place for April 2024 for the proposed new grant themes.

5.42. The aims for the Communities Strategy are:

- Emphasise and strengthen the role the VCSE sector, residents and communities have in delivering the Council's corporate objectives, and within the context of the countywide Live Your Best Life Strategy for the ICS;

- Develop a co-ordinated vision and framework for effective partnership working on equal terms, and, wherever possible, co-production with the VCSE groups and Town and Parish Councils;
- Set out the Council's approach to financial investment into the VCSE, which promotes sustainability, through access to a range of funding sources, including strategic and small grant giving by NNC; and future infrastructure support into the sector;
- Strengthen the ability of the VCSE sector to deliver services and connect communities through engaging residents, leading community action, supporting volunteering, supporting people in the most vulnerable situations, and brokering relationships between statutory bodies and communities;
- Provide a framework to support innovative approaches which facilitate necessary change, given the shifting needs of local communities in the wake of the pandemic and the current economic climate.

5.43. The outcomes for the Strategy are:

- Improve sustainability and increase growth in the VCSE sector, developing fit for purpose, sustainable organisations able to deliver high quality services with diversified income streams and less reliance on grants, with a more social enterprise focus and which are flexible and adaptable to change;
- Strengthen the ability of the VCSE sector to deliver services and connect communities through engaging residents, leading community action, supporting people in the most vulnerable situations and brokering relationships between statutory bodies and communities;
- Encourage mutually beneficial relationships across sectors and communities that use smarter ways of working and collaboration to achieve what we cannot alone;
- Provide clarity about the role of sectors in building strong communities;
- Align key themes underpinning current strategic thinking, including place-based working, asset-based community development, devolution of assets and services to communities, shifting the focus to early help and prevention; and shaping demand to reduce costs in statutory services.

5.44. The aims will be delivered through 8 strategic themes:

5.44.1. **Theme 1**

Building quality and capacity within the VCSE sector and providing back-office support to enable sustainable growth, demonstrate return on investment and social impact, maximise resources across the sector, all to achieve positive outcomes for our communities

5.44.2. **Themes 2 and 3**

Building mutually beneficial relationships across sectors, with commissioners of services, and with communities by creating equal

partnerships by promoting co-production and asset-based community development best practice, sharing information, skills, assets and resources, creating spaces to come together, utilising evidence and celebrating success.

5.44.3. **Theme 4**

Innovative income generation and investment into VCSE to ensure financial sustainability in a mixed model and enterprise culture, encompassing commissioning, maximising national and regional opportunities.

5.44.4. **Theme 5**

Developing our people assets, by increasing resident action and taking a strategic approach to volunteering, providing a platform for opportunities, brokerage, data collection and impact monitoring.

5.44.5. **Theme 6**

Developing our physical assets and services through Town and Parish Councils and community involvement and through supporting communities to take on assets and services asset transfer.

5.44.6. **Theme 7**

Co-ordination of the North Northamptonshire VCSE to embed the sector in the ICS and the Place programme, through ongoing leadership and support to Community Wellbeing Forums and Local Area Partnerships and representation at Executive Board level.

5.44.7. **Theme 8**

Co-ordination of investment into the VCSE through the delivery of a range of strategic and smaller grant programmes into the VCSE, based on robust and transparent policies, procedures and governance to include:

- New VCSE Infrastructure contract arrangements, at a £200,000 investment per annum for 3 years, which will play a key role in supporting the delivery of this strategy
- Small (Discretionary grants) grants up to £25,000 per award (£120,000 per annum for 2024-2027)
- Member Empowerment Fund (£156,000 p.a)
- Shared Prosperity Funds (£618,00 2024-2025 only)
- New VCSE Strategic grant arrangements (£471,771 p.a. for 2024-2027) to cover key strategic themes of community transport, financial inclusion, equalities, older peoples' social isolation, low Level mental health support within communities, building VCSE capacity and community resilience as well as continued contribution to core costs of some devolved community centres.

5.45. This Strategy runs from 2024 to 2027 and there are a number of key Council services, partners projects that will drive delivery of the themes, and the elements within themes. For example, the Council will facilitate the VCSE grant programmes under Theme 8 but the VCSE organisations deliver against the grant agreements. Town and Parish Councils will play a lead role, along with NCALC, to help the Council to deliver against Theme 6.

5.46. There is a crucial role for the VCSE organisations as future Infrastructure contract holder/s, to lead delivery of specific themes, namely Themes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7. These include capacity building, funding support, volunteering and co-ordination of the VCSE role within the ICS, to name a few. The details and scale of this contract will be explored and delivered through a robust procurement process.

6. Next Steps

- 6.1. To present the Strategy to Executive for adoption.
- 6.2. To finalise the project briefs for the new strategic grant arrangements and to circulate to the VCSE for Expressions of Interest to be submitted.
- 6.3. To work with legal and procurement to prepare the VCSE Infrastructure contract for tender.
- 6.4. To establish a devolution forum with representatives from Town and Parish Councils.