

Why a voluntary and community sector investment strategy?

Our corporate Fairer Westminster strategy is committed to creating an equitable city in which community and voluntary sector organisations are empowered to succeed.



Westminster's voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations play an essential part in helping people live happy and healthy lives, as well as preventing acute problems from developing in communities. Our VCS strategy has this understanding at its core.

Westminster's voluntary and community sector has more than 200 organisations actively providing services and activities throughout the city.



As a council, we want to create a landscape that is built on mutual trust, inclusion, prevention and sustainability. This strategy positions our role in supporting VCS organisations to thrive in Westminster, and frames investment in multiple ways. It sets out key priority areas that have been identified through a series of conversations and engagement sessions with VCS stakeholders. It also highlights the principles and actions that lie at the centre of each priority.

OUR VISION

To play a committed role as a council to strengthen partnerships, policies and resources that enable the VCS to succeed.



To work consistently in an integrated and equitable way across sectors to effectively meet local need.



To have a stable, thriving and wide-reaching voluntary sector in Westminster that reflects, serves and empowers local communities.

OUR PRIORITIES

Invest in **strategic partnerships**



Invest in **capacity building**



Invest in **space**



Invest in **impact measurement**



Invest in **processes and systems**



Investing in capacity building

Strengthening resource, leadership and resilience in small and medium sized organisations & supporting the sector to diversify

We are committed to help small and medium sized organisations develop and strengthen their skills, abilities and resources. **We want to see these organisations stabilise and have the opportunity to grow**, while maintaining the high-quality services and activities that are most needed in Westminster.

Within this context, we recognise that many organisations of this type lack cash flow and reserves, and lack the time and/or skills to secure substantial funding and keep on top of administrative tasks. They may also struggle with maintaining consistent quality due to resource limitations and low staff retention, and may miss out on opportunities to network and participate in training sessions.

We also recognise that Westminster has an underrepresentation of organisations led by and for people from Global Majority communities (Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic) and other marginalised groups. Organisations run by these groups are also disproportionately smaller (with lower annual turnovers) than average. **Both the council and the wider VCS value the importance of organisations being led by people with lived experience and people who can reflect and relate to those who use their services.** As Westminster City Council has declared itself an anti-racist organisation, we are striving to build equity in capacity building and access to resources.

What we can do:



Build fundraising capacity across small and medium organisations and provide targeted support.



Develop a core funding approach that helps to build sustainability and resilience in the local VCS, and that works particularly to develop capacity in small and Global Majority led organisations.



Offer VCS access to professional training that are already available for council staff.



Encourage and support the sector to move people with lived experience into positions of leadership.



Enhance the work of One Westminster to link professionals with VCS organisations. Also enhance support with training such as fundraising, bid writing, evaluation, financial management, and performance management.



To build expertise and capacity within the sector to support communities to achieve their health and wellbeing goals and support the delivery of local initiatives addressing health inequalities.

Investing through relationships and partnerships

Harnessing collective power, voice and resource

We strive towards a more closely connected way of working with the VCS across the council. We want to make sure that VCS expertise is respected and incorporated in strategic decision-making and that the sector is supported in its wider campaigning and policy work that align to Westminster's values. **We also believe in the potential to boost funds and resources for the VCS by encouraging strategic relationships with other institutions.**

There is scope to be better connected with other foundations and anchor institutions that fund and support the sector, or who have the potential do so. **Building these relationships means being able to share intelligence and coordinate funding efforts, ensuring that resources are effectively targeted.**



What we can do:



Set up a 'Westminster Funders' network that meets on a quarterly basis and increase pool-funding options with other VCS funders.



Encourage council services to partner up with local VCS organisations, through a buddy/mutual mentoring scheme.



Enhance collaboration between the Business Community Partnership and One Westminster in increasing direct investment from businesses to VCS organisations and projects.



Better exploit our geographic location to make an impact on national issues and connect strategically with VCS campaigning organisations based in Westminster.



Work with our Responsible Procurement team to encourage a culture of putting local VCS organisations first when it comes to buying services.



Support the development of the North Paddington Programme, galvanising active involvement from community organisations.



Create a map of council contacts across services for external use.



Explore staff secondment opportunities between sectors.

Investing in impact measurement

Measuring what matters

We want to measure the collective impact that the sector has in the city. Equally, we want to understand and measure the impact of our role as a funder and partner to the local VCS. Collecting and analysing a breadth of information is an important part of understanding impact and effectiveness of a provided service or activity.

We want to think innovatively about how we can capture and measure what is most meaningful and promote stories that demonstrate the impact on local people's lives. By doing this, we will also be producing an evidence base for the sector itself, which can act as a valuable tool for future practice and fundraising efforts.

What we can do:



Use community insights and council collated data on VCS grants and contracts to track the scope of VCS investment and understand the reach and gaps of VCS provision.



Promote VCS organisations within the council and with external funders through comms and social media support to create digital content demonstrating their impact.



Encourage longer-term funding from council departments so that VCS work has an opportunity to have an impact.



Reduce the council's tendency to implement outcomes-tracking for short-term funded VCS projects.



Invest in qualitative ways to measure the impact of the sector, including evaluation and deep dives into particular funding areas.



Consider innovative ways to track long-term impacts, for example, through community research programmes that follow and collect the stories from residents who engage with multiple VCS services over a series of years.



Investing in processes and systems

Clear, consistent, and accessible council processes

We want to ensure that there is clarity and consistency across the various programmes and funding streams in the council, so that VCS organisations can benefit from these opportunities in a straightforward and accessible way. **We also want to ensure that when these funds are awarded, we are proportionate** in the way we carry out due diligence and the monitoring of projects or services being delivered.

What we can do:



Have all competitive grant programmes sit on one single landing page on the Westminster City Council website.



Create a standardised application template and implement its use across the main grants programmes.



Create a set of standardised compliance guidelines for grant programme leads so that there is consistency and proportionality in the level of due diligence that VCS organisations are required to comply with.



Create a set of monitoring and reporting guidelines for people responsible for handling grants that are proportionate to small, medium, and large size grants and centred on understanding the impact of the work.



Create a set of guiding principles that clarify to council staff when to award a grant and when to issue a contract.



Have a public forward plan of open procurement processes so that local organisations can plan for bidding opportunities.

Investing in space

Improving policies around premises and leases

Having space to work and deliver is an essential requirement for any organisation to run effectively. Not having access to such space is a barrier for some VCS organisations in Westminster, and addressing this is a critical part of supporting them to prosper. Where there is control or ownership of assets, it is critical that we act as an enabler for VCS organisations wanting to access them, and do this in a way that prioritises safety and affordability for local organisations.

What we can do:



Review and agree on a consistent approach for longer term rentals for the larger community spaces (ie. a community asset transfer policy).



Explore options of 'meanwhile' rentals (where a space is not being used for a set period of time) to fill space available on a temporary basis for VCS activity.



Ensure allocation of VCS space, aligning with the development of the community hubs initiative.



Explore free use of council meeting rooms to VCS groups where possible.



Develop viable maintenance contracts for council premises used by the VCS.



Publish VCS rent policy in an easy access version online.

