

PAST REVIEW UPDATE (VOLUNTARY SECTOR RESPONSE TO THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC)

Committee name	Corporate, Finance and Property Select Committee
Officer reporting	Kevin Byrne, Head of Health and Strategic Partnerships
Papers with report	None
Ward	All

HEADLINES

The focus for action with Voluntary and Community Sectors (VCS) has shifted from emergency food provision and support towards encouraging greater take up of vaccines and working within communities to ensure health messages are clear and understood.

Foodbanks continue to see demand but at lower levels than during the compulsory lockdown periods. Former operating models have been reintroduced, such as referrals to foodbanks by partners for collection of emergency food, rather than delivery.

The community hub has evolved to respond to new challenges in supporting residents most in need. The Council announced its core grants programme 2022/23 in December 2021; this programme reflects the Committee's recommendation 3, that VCS be supported to deliver services and to provide support and guidance for groups to increase resilience.

RECOMMENDATION: That the Committee notes the content of the report.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

At the end of 20/21 a review was undertaken by the Corporate Services, Commerce and Communities Policy Overview Committee looking at the Voluntary Sector Response to the Covid 19 Pandemic. Several witnesses were interviewed from across the sector and there were 4 recommendations made and agreed:

- 1. That Cabinet acknowledges, appreciates and recognises the response that all organisations across the voluntary sector have provided to meet the needs of residents throughout the pandemic/lockdown periods;*
- 2. That Cabinet recognises the pro-active steps taken by the Hillingdon Community Hub/Council Officers to manage and co-ordinate resources across a number of voluntary sector partners, including Hillingdon4All to achieve a strong operating model;*
- 3. That Cabinet continues to review and provide voluntary sector grants to enable key voluntary sector partners to continue to deliver services required by Hillingdon residents. In addition, that Cabinet looks to provide practical, operational and logistical support and guidance to enable VS partners to increase resilience going forward; and*

4. *That Cabinet agrees to deliver outbound communications, including through Hillingdon People, that provide information to all residents (including children and young people under the age of 16) so they can access information about key voluntary sector services, such as mental health/Hillingdon MIND. Furthermore, to support the dual purpose of such communications to assist in recruitment of volunteers across the Voluntary Sector.*

CURRENT SITUATION

Community Champions Programme

With funding up to March 2021, the Council worked with H4All to recruit over 30 Community Champions from within communities to deliver health messaging. Our feedback had shown that there was a need to reach into those communities where trust in statutory agencies could be preventing the take up of vaccines. Our programme of engagement has included:

- Community meetings, with over 200 invitees, have been held monthly for over a year now with clinical experts present to provide guidance, support and advice with an opportunity for community organisations to ask direct questions to pass on factual knowledge.
- Work with Schools /Brunel University and Faith groups has been undertaken, building the relationships, providing information as requested and attending meetings.
- 30 Community Champions recruited from across the Borough who have been working with the NHS out in the community delivering Covid vaccination messaging.
- A Vaccine Transporter bus supported by staff from NHS, LBH and the community champions is targeting the 10 Lower Super Output Areas through to March 2022 to encourage vaccine take up.
- Communications are widely advertising the Vaccine centres and the Transporter bus and access to it via Council social media pages, community groups spreading the messaging, faith groups advising members about access and venues and community champions active on the days, handing out leaflets and directing residents to the bus.
- Increasing the recruitment drive for 40 additional Community Champions to continue the messaging of vaccine uptake to protect communities.

Foodbanks

The number of requests for food parcels has decreased. Referrals from the Community Hub were at a high of approximately 70-80 a week in November 2020 but now total approximately 40 a week. Residents are asked for their main reason for seeking emergency food. The overriding need remains those on low income (43%) with effects of benefit changes and delays next (19%). 17% cite sickness/health as the main reason.

Both Hillingdon Foodbank and the UB7 foodbank continue to support residents. Hillingdon Foodbank has ceased routine delivery of food parcels in favour of the standard referral process and collection from one of its sites across the Borough. Hillingdon Foodbank received a one-off grant for 21/22 to help support the organisation with its development, to expand services and to look at bringing in additional income. A final monitoring report will be undertaken in June 2022 to understand how effective this grant has been.

The UB7 Foodbank is working at a higher capacity sees this continuing due to the need for support due to cost of living impacts. This is in line with what the Trussell Trust are predicting nationally. UB7 have also now reached into Heathrow Villages and parts of Hayes as demand has grown. Bell Farm Christian Centre also has two dedicated community champions delivering health messaging.

Hillingdon Community Hub

The Community Hub continues to work alongside the Hillingdon PPE and Food Hub based at Ruislip Young People's Centre, offering residents support with a variety of services.

The dedicated Community Hub telephone enables residents to access information relating to financial and or emotional support. These include Foodbank referrals, signposting residents to services offered by both Hillingdon and Voluntary Sector Partners, supporting residents wishing to apply for the Household Support Grant and other grants available. The Community Hub also manages the track and trace process for positive COVID cases within Hillingdon, including arranging face to face visits when necessary.

The PPE and Food distribution Hub manages the collection and delivery of PPE to all schools, nurseries, unpaid carers, personal assistants and internal Council departments. The team continues to deliver food supplies to our homeless residents who have no recourse to public funds. In extreme emergencies the team will also deliver emergency food parcels to individuals or families who are unable to access a Food Bank immediately.

The management and distribution of Lateral Flow test kits is also managed by the PPE and Food hub team, delivering to Libraries, Children Centres, Heathrow Hotels and local religious establishments.

The Household Support Grant is another strand of work that the PPE and Food Hub team are carrying out; this includes the distribution of meal vouchers to over 11,000 vulnerable children during the school holiday periods.

Voluntary & Community Sector Development

The review recognised the importance of the VS and communities and that locally based voluntary organisations and community groups are vital to the health, wellbeing, and social fabric of neighbourhoods and communities. Many groups have had to adapt their provision to a constantly changing landscape, needs and circumstances and continue to do so. They have used their position of trust within communities to support vulnerable people where they are needed most. The most active areas include food supply, physical and mental health, social isolation and domestic violence.

Mental Health needs are reported as rising. As we are coming out of the pandemic measures, the impact on Mental Health is becoming more evident with: -

- Lack of confidence to engage and resume "normal" activities
- Physical health decreasing due to isolation

- Increased anxiety about future variants and the impact

The transformative capacity of the VCS organisations within the Borough to support communities (and the local economy) to start to recover from the challenges of the pandemic is limited. Funding available is often targeted, making grant applications harder, and work is redirected to those most vulnerable clients hardest hit by the pandemic. In addition, the reliance on volunteers to carry out crucial roles is still evident, but many volunteers were lost during the pandemic, so most groups are undertaking recruitment drives for volunteers. This has been aided by Hillingdon People having dedicated space for the voluntary sector. Recovery will take several years as adaptations, confidence, and new ways of delivering services are developed.

Specifically, the Council has allocated a grant to H4All to develop its support of the wider voluntary sector and its capacity to recover. This will include reviewing ways of working, funding strategies and governance to help groups to rebuild and plan their future and will work alongside the legacy offered by the Community Champions work.

Post recovery implications

As highlighted nationally there is a backlog in elective surgery and other health services; this is likely to be further challenged as people are faced with poorer physical health than pre-pandemic and then lacking “trust” to come back or resume pre-pandemic activities. The reliance on digital intervention has grown (where possible) and this has created a “safety zone” for those who are cautious about re-engaging.

Digital interventions have also created huge possibilities in looking at how services are delivered and have been beneficial in reaching those during lockdown to try and ease the isolation; it is noted that many want this method to continue. There is a balance to be found between having that digital connection without increasing further isolation and decreased physical activity.

With the creation of digital interventions comes the financial cost to providers and residents coupled with access to digital technology and digital skills. There are several projects looking at this supported by the Council and partners to better understand impact and need.

Financial Implications

None arising from this report.

Legal Implications

None.