

North Yorkshire County Council

Corporate & Partnerships Overview & Scrutiny Committee

12 September 2022

Stronger Communities Programme & Corporate Volunteering Update

Report of Assistant Director Policy, Partnerships and Communities

1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To update the Committee on the work of Stronger Communities and the Corporate Volunteering Programme.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Despite the ever-changing landscape of the pandemic over the past 12 months, the community support infrastructure through the CSO network has remained in place since March 2020. Following the national lifting of restrictions on 24 February 2022 regarding self-isolation requirements discussions took place with the CSOs regarding either winding down or scaling back their pandemic response activities. This has resulted in a minority of CSOs winding down their pandemic services in a managed way, however the majority are interested in building on the successful model and developing it further as an effective place based 'hub' that contributes to both prevention and health and well-being services and pressures – such as those experienced over winter months. Financial provision is in place to continue to work with the network of CSOs over 2022 to support them through this transition, however this is non-recurring funding and for this work to continue in the future alternative financially sustainable models must be developed.
- 2.2 In addition to this work, which has been the primary main activity of the programme during 2020 and 2021, following the lifting of restrictions in the spring the programme has also been able to resume pre-pandemic projects and has taken the lead role on a number of new countywide programmes.
- 2.3 A number of new national initiatives have been launched over the past 12 months particularly around alleviating the cost of living pressures being felt by families and residents on low incomes. Stronger Communities are leading on a number of these programmes and work in partnership with others within the Council and externally.

3.0 Covid-19 Pandemic related activities

Community Support Organisation Performance (2021/22)

3.1 Since the mobilisation of the community support model in March 2020, the following activity has been recorded via the 23 CSOs across North Yorkshire to date, primarily facilitated by 216,715 volunteer hours:

- 24,120 prescriptions delivered;
- 37,399 shopping deliveries made;
- 64,134 befriending calls and 34,467 phone check ins made;
- 20,595 transport requests fulfilled; and
- 52,252 meals delivered and 12,053 food parcels distributed.

3.2 As part of the community support offer, CSOs administer the Covid19 North Yorkshire Local Assistance Fund (NYLAF) grant; this was set up as a way of addressing emergency food and utility support needs for individuals and households isolating or shielding across North Yorkshire during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2021/22, the scheme has received 391 applications, and has approved 375 of these (96%), totalling £42,615 of expenditure.

3.3 The work of the CSOs has changed over the past 6 months moving from pandemic response to recovery. Instead of supporting people who were self-isolating or shielding their focus is now on building confidence and independence and helping to remove some of the dependencies that emerged during the pandemic. This includes things such as supported shopping trips, accompanied walks, social events and support groups and activities

3.4 **Future Opportunities for CSOs**

Stronger Communities has also been working alongside the CSOs to identify elements of the model that could be retained and developed further to support the wider well-being and prevention agenda and other health and social care services and pressures including how this could be delivered in a financially sustainable way. A world café event was held in June to explore why the CSO model had been so successful and how we can learn from and build on this in the future. The event was attended by 80 people representing 53 organisations from across the county including CSOs and other VCSE organisations, local councils, partners from other public sector agencies including NHS, police and fire and local businesses.

- 3.5 The event identified the following distinctive features and characteristics that has contributed to the success of the model:
- Locally rooted in place building on existing local assets
 - Collaborative – everyone working to a common purpose
 - Responsive, accessible and inclusive – support available to anyone who needed it
 - Flexible approach and non-bureaucratic
 - Resourced
 - Trusted relationships between CSOs and Council
 - Sense of feeling valued and reciprocity (volunteers)
 - Friendly and supportive
 - Innovative and delivered improvement and change
 - Empowered communities and volunteers
- 3.6 The event went on to identify what other areas of work CSOs could contribute to in the future, these included:
- Improve People’s Physical Wellbeing
 - Build greater Community Resilience
 - Support people to be involved in the regeneration of their communities
 - Build local partnerships and alliances to deliver services
 - Improve Transport, Travel and Connectivity for our residents
 - Reduce pressures on health and social care systems
 - Increase people’s financial resilience and support people experiencing food and fuel insecurity
 - Improve people’s Mental Wellbeing
 - Improve Education, Skills and Work opportunities
 - Improve outcomes for children, young people and families
 - Create opportunities for more people to be involved in place based social action
 - Improve environmental sustainability
- 3.7 Following the event a programme of co-design and joint learning sessions are being delivered to identify the practical steps needed to realise the future opportunities for the CSOs and to identify which of the opportunities are shared priorities.
- 3.8 The funding currently being used to support the CSOs is non-recurring and as such the significant challenge will be to develop financial sustainable options for CSOs in order to become less dependent on public sector grants and establishing diverse income streams – this could include earned income through contracts and charging.
- 3.9 **Covid-19 Community Grants - Recovery**

In addition to the work of the CSOs, Stronger Communities has invested £138,129 in Covid19 Recovery Community Grants supporting 161 projects (2021/22) and to date in 2022/23 has invested £39,885 supporting 42 projects. This investment has allowed communities and small grass roots charities to recover from the pandemic and to re-establish local events and activities in their communities.

4.0 Wider Stronger Communities Programme Work

4.1 The Stronger Communities programme has been able to resume some of its pre-pandemic work over the past six to twelve months; it is also leading on a number of large new national programmes.

4.2 The range of activities the team are leading on - or contributing to - is broad include the following:

- Holiday Activities and Food Programme for free school meal eligible children (DfE funded)
- Household Support Fund - awards to low income households (DWP)
- Homes for Ukraine Programme (Home Office)
- Wellbeing and Prevention investment
- Digital Inclusion
- Cost of living crisis (jointly with City of York)
- UK Share Prosperity Fund
- Mental health programmes (NHS)
- Local Government Reorganisation

4.3 Holiday Activities and Food Programme

Stronger Communities continue to lead on the delivery of this programme, which was launched with the branding of FEAST (Food, Entertainment, Arts & Sport Together) in partnership with Children and Young People's Service (CYPS) and the voluntary and community sector. Coordination of the programme has been undertaken by North Yorkshire Together who in conjunction with a network of locally placed clubs and community organisations, deliver a range of enriching activities over holiday periods. This is alongside a host of online resources being made available for families to enjoy. In December, the Department of Education confirmed funding for the continuation of the Holiday Activity and Food Programme (FEAST) until March 2025 and plans are underway with Children and Young People's Early Help team to deliver the programme over the next three years.

4.4 Household Support Fund

In the last 12 months, the Stronger Communities Team has administered the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) funded Household Support

Fund. Aiming to support those most in need with significantly rising living costs, NYCC have been allocated £7,075,100 over two phases (October 2021 to March 2022, and April to September 2022), with a focus on supporting families and pensioners. This has been structured in to four main areas of provision in North Yorkshire:

- E-voucher direct award – in phase 1, a shopping voucher was made available to 9,400 households in receipt of means tested Council Tax Relief (CTR) with a child under 19. In phase 2, this was broadened, to also include households with a person of state pension age, and working age households with no children in receipt of maximum CTR, reaching 25,000 households across the County. Across both phases, this totals c£5.4million that has been distributed via the e-voucher direct award.
- Warm and Well – a total investment of £495,000 to ‘Warm and Well’ service across both phases to provide energy top up vouchers / direct supplier payments to those in need of support with their energy costs.
- North Yorkshire Local Assistance Fund (NYLAF) – a total investment of £450,000 across both phases in order to uplift the number of applications from two to a maximum of four until the end of September 2022.
- Food Bank Support – 28 grants totalling £295,000 awarded to 17 organisations across the County to increase the capacity of free food supply to those in need between October 2021 and September 2022.

It has been confirmed that Household Support Fund will continue over the winter until the end of March 2023; work on developing the new scheme will commence imminently.

4.5 **Homes for Ukraine Programme**

Following the launch of the national Homes for Ukraine programme, officers from the Stronger Communities team have led on North Yorkshire’s multi-agency approach to ensuring arrangements are in place for host families (sponsors) are approved (home and welfare checks) and procedures are in place to distribute the government funding for sponsors and guests. The approach also supports the many local groups who have set up across the county to help welcome and support the Ukrainian refugees with things such as language lessons, social events and peer support.

4.6 **Wellbeing and Prevention – future investment options**

The Stronger Communities team are working alongside colleagues in Targeted Prevention (HAS) to develop options for future investment in wellbeing and prevention. Pilots are currently underway in Craven and Selby districts following the withdrawal of the existing providers building on the CSO model developed during Covid. The learning from these pilots will help to

inform the investment strategy for the wellbeing and prevention budget over the autumn.

4.7 **Digital Inclusion**

The digital buddies and champions programme delivered in partnership with Citizens Online, libraries, Living Well and community volunteers has proved a vital resource during the pandemic helping people to access online services and stay connected to friends and families. This has been delivered in tandem with the recycling of ICT equipment and devices project '*Reboot North Yorkshire*'. Demand for support to get online continues to grow. The recent roll out of the Household Support Fund highlighted there are still a number of people who cannot access services online. The libraries service alone supported 3000 people to register for the scheme.

As increasing numbers of people feel the impact of the rising costs of fuel and food combined with increasing numbers of services moving on line, or offering more cost effective services to customers who chose online options (eg energy tariffs) the financial penalties and impact on household disposable income will become more significant. Being able to take advantage of cheaper online pricing across a range of goods and services is a valuable tool to reduce household bills. It is vital as we move in to the winter that we can maintain – or increase – the number of people who volunteer as digital champions. Officers are in discussion with partners regarding options to increase capacity in order to be able to support more people and families.

4.8 **Cost of living crisis (jointly with City of York)**

Following the Council's investment of a Defra grant in 2020/21 for a range of community projects that help combat food and fuel insecurity arising out of the pandemic; additional funding has been made available to deliver the Food for the Future programme. This aims to embed local sustainable food support options, which also support beneficiaries to build their levels of confidence and independence. An additional 19 awards were made to voluntary and community sector partners across the County through this programme. The projects will be evaluated over the coming months as part of a joint piece of work with City of York Council that seeks to understand the food and fuel insecurity landscape in the region and identify options for effective interventions.

Stronger Communities have scoped a joint piece of insight work and are working with a range of agencies (such as Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) and University of Sheffield) and local charities and people with lived experience to understand the efficacy of a range of established and emerging solutions in relation to food insecurity. There is also work starting to consider community support in relation to rising cost of energy such as a identifying

'warm spaces' or 'warm places' and developing options on how both the Council and other partners such as the District Councils can work on a coordinated offer.

The theme of this year's upcoming Wider Partnership Conference in September is the cost of living crisis. Workshops will seek to explore some potential options that might be developed to support people and communities across the county.

4.9 UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)

As part of the government's Levelling Up agenda the Council has submitted its proposals for its allocated UKSPF funding. There is a strong emphasis within the criteria for UKSPF on place shaping, community empowerment, engagement and strengthening the voluntary and community sector. The Stronger Communities team are contributing to the development and delivery of the Council's priorities and procedure for this investment programme and in particular in relation to the themes of rurality, accessibility and inequalities.

4.10 Mental health programmes (NHS)

The Stronger Communities Programme has worked in partnership with colleagues in Public Health and the NHS to deliver a range of community led mental health projects since 2019. These include grass roots suicide prevention programmes and other specialist mental health services. As part of the national Community Mental Health Transformation programme, Stronger Communities has recently been invited to support the NHS (and wider system partners) to further develop and deliver community led mental health support through the four cross-sector partnerships. The aim is to build capacity in communities to enable people living with moderate or serious mental illness to live well in their communities.

4.11 Children and Young People

In conjunction with Children and Young People Service (CYPS), the Stronger team is working with the Early Help team from CYPS to develop and deliver a project that seeks to grow community capacity by working alongside and with our communities to stimulate, support and develop activities that enable children, young people and their families to be happy, healthy and achieving.

4.12 Capacity Building

In parallel to COVID-19 community response work, the Stronger Communities Programme has continued to strengthen local community assets and infrastructure; this has included continuing to encourage relationships and collaborations between voluntary and community sector organisations as well as stabilising, and / or building capacity within them if required. The impact of

the pandemic on income and capacity within the sector, together with concerns in relation to rising fuel costs is resulting in concerns about their long-term viability and sustainability. Stronger Communities continues to work with colleagues such as Community First Yorkshire, The Two Ridings Foundation, the Lottery and other partners to identify issues and concerns and develop joint responses. The impact of fuel bills is not yet fully understood but is anticipated that this could have a range of impacts on the VCSE from reducing their opening hours to closure.

4.13 Local Government Reorganisation

The Stronger Communities team are involved in a number of work-streams to support the formation of the new unitary council. The Head of Stronger Communities is leading on the Community Networks strand of the Locality work stream and other team members are contributing to work around communications and engagement, data including voluntary sector funding, community teams and leisure culture and sport. The Stronger Communities teams will be delivering elements of the Let's Talk campaign in partnership with District Councils this autumn.

5.0 Corporate Volunteering Programme Update

5.1 The corporate Volunteer Project relates to all volunteering activity that takes place by members of the community to support County Council services. This includes volunteers who help across many different services from the Youth Justice Service, Libraries, Major Incident Response, Countryside Service and Waste reduction education.

5.2 Sponsored by Stronger Communities the corporate Volunteer Project is being delivered by the Resourcing Solutions Team – HR, recognising the synergies between the volunteer journey and employee journey, whilst acknowledging that there are key differences between the two. The focus for this project is to maximise and optimise the use of volunteers across all council services, creating consistencies in: marketing, recruitment, induction, expenses, training, ongoing support and efficient volunteer processes with the purpose of optimising the use of volunteers and through positive volunteer experience aid retention.

A Volunteer Sub-Group meets regularly to provide a steer for the project, discussing challenges and priorities and inputting into areas of work as they progress. This group comprises of representatives from Stronger Communities and the Resourcing Solutions Team and lead officers from the services that manage volunteers.

5.3 Volunteer numbers

The pandemic impacted on County Council volunteering during 2020 and 2021 but activity is returning to pre-pandemic levels. The number of registered volunteers at March 2022 stood at approximately 4560. This includes people who volunteer their time to support wider council services such as community Libraries and as School Governors.

5.4 Digital Volunteer Journey

The aim is to develop and implement an online process for volunteers to; apply, complete the recruitment process, induction, record volunteering hours and log /claim expenses as currently these are all manual processes. Process mapping, consultation with Volunteer Coordinators and a Project Brief has been developed for this approach and is currently with Technology and Change (T&C) for development and implementation. This is one of the objectives of the project that will release the greatest efficiencies and benefits for volunteers themselves. Whilst we will progress with volunteers digital journey we know and will provision for those volunteers who prefer alternative approaches

5.5 Current focus

The key focus for the Corporate Volunteering Project at the present time is Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and ensuring that volunteer services currently engaged by one of the District, Borough or the County Councils are identified and brought into a consistent Volunteer approach in the new North Yorkshire Council.

To date services that utilise volunteers have been identified in all Councils and the project is currently working with them to transition the approach for recruiting, training, coordinating and supporting volunteers

All policies and procedures relating to volunteers will be reviewed and it will be proposed that all volunteers in the new Council are brought in line with the same Volunteer Policy to ensure the same consistent approach.

6.0 Issues for Consideration

6.1 The update report has described the range of work being carried out by the Stronger Communities Programme. It has also highlighted a number of emerging issues of note or concern. These are summarised below:

- The potential value that locally rooted community organisations, such as the CSOs, can add to a range of other service areas and priorities
- Long term financial sustainability for the community support services and activities as carried out by CSOs
- Impact of rising energy cost on the long term sustainability of wider VCSE sector

- Cost of living issues and the need to identify potential support and solutions such as increased capacity for digital support, warm places & spaces and appropriate help with food insecurity.

7.0 Recommendations

7.1 It is recommended that:

- a) Members note the work of the Stronger Communities programme and considers any further action to address the emerging issues.
- b) Members note the update from the Corporate Volunteering Programme.

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