

## **Scrutiny & Overview Committee – 22 April 2024**

### **Feedback from meeting with Community and Voluntary Sector Organisations**

At its meeting scheduled for 22 April 2024 the Scrutiny & Overview Committee will be reviewing the Council's relationship with the voluntary sector. To inform its consideration of this item, the Committee invited community and voluntary sector (CVS) organisations to attend a virtual meeting on 16 April 2024 to provide feedback on their experience of working with the Council. Twelve different organisations were represented at the meeting. What follows is a summary of the key issues raised during this meeting: -

- Whilst some CVS organisations reported good individual relationships with councillors and officers, voluntary groups found that interacting with the Council as a whole was generally difficult and frustrating. Delays of months and even years were reported, even when voluntary groups were asking to help without resource. Whilst everyone on the call acknowledged the difficult circumstances the Council found itself in, improving basic communication would be an important step forward
- There was common agreement from the organisations at the meeting that it was their impression that the Council viewed its relationship with the sector in a dysfunctional 'parent – child' manner, which was preventing the exploration of opportunities for partnership working on a more equal footing. This also contributed to the view that the Council did not seem to fully appreciate the work of the sector or the value it delivered to the borough, particularly when at the same time the sector was receiving a growing number of referrals from the Council.
- Although the reset meetings with the Executive Mayor had worked well initially, these had been running for a year without a new vision for the Council's relationship with the sector being produced. It was accepted that the financial position of the Council was likely to remain challenging for the foreseeable future, but this should not prevent a positive, long-term, strategic vision being developed. It was also highlighted that some organisations in the CVS were not aware of the Reset meetings and as such felt overlooked.
- There appeared to be a lack of long term planning, with decisions taken to address the financial challenges in the short term, without any understanding or consideration for the potential impact, which may cost the Council more in the longer term.
- It was accepted that the financial position of the Council meant it was unlikely that it would be able to offer new grant funding, but at the same time the financial challenges for the sector were dire. Although there may be external funding sources available, these often tended to be oversubscribed and the

application process could be resource intensive. It was acknowledged that the Council was making an effort to share external funding opportunities, but these were not always relevant to the sector, who works in very different areas.

- Similarly, while raising awareness of available Council contracts was appreciated, more support could be provided for CVS organisations to submit bids, as they often lacked the experience and resource required to prepare effective bids.
- There was widespread concern about how the asset disposal process had been managed, with it highlighted that there had been a lack of engagement with organisations and no opportunity to explore potential alternative options. This had created unnecessary upset and concern for the organisations involved.
- It was questioned whether better use could be made of the Community Infrastructure Levy to provide funding for the sector.
- It was also questioned whether the Council had sufficient resources in place to enforce the social value clauses within its larger contracts. If these were managed effectively it could provide additional opportunities for the sector.
- It was confirmed that there had been no engagement with the organisations present at the meeting on the development of the Council's Transformation Strategy to explore potential opportunities for the sector arising from this work.