

State of the Sector Report 2018



“Charities are the eyes, ears and conscience of society. They mobilise, they provide, they inspire, they advocate and they unite.”

Select Committee on Charities, 2017¹



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Introduction: why we need a thriving voluntary sector

Charities and voluntary groups are essential to the cohesion and survival of many communities throughout the UK. They are “a central facet of society”², often forming the backbone of communities in rural and urban areas alike, and any changes to their situation often has a direct impact on those they help.

The support they provide, the impact they make, and their importance to society has been measured extensively, for example:

- *They are needed*: half of all households in the UK have used a charity service in the past month²
- *They are vital*: 9.3 million adults have been given emotional support and 18.3 million given legal advice/ support by charities³
- *They are indispensable*: the voluntary sector contributes around £15.3bn to the UK GVA⁴

This report aims to give a snapshot of the sector in the UK, with particular reference to Buckinghamshire, to help individuals, organisations and relevant bodies work together to build the voluntary capacity in the county.

It also identifies a number of key challenges which arise from substantial developments currently taking place on a national and local level.

“We are living through a time of profound economic, social and technological change and the environment in which charities are working is altering dramatically.”

- *Select Committee on Charities, 2017*¹

A snapshot of the voluntary sector in Buckinghamshire

The voluntary sector in Buckinghamshire has shrunk slightly, in terms of numbers and income, since 2017. Volunteering numbers are estimated to have remained the same as 2017 levels with around 175,000 adults in the county volunteering every year.⁵

Vital statistics:

There are over 4,000 charities and community groups in Buckinghamshire:

- There are 2,484 registered charities in Bucks⁶, a slight decrease of -0.84% from 2,505 in 2017
- There are approximately 1,785 unregistered voluntary groups in Bucks⁷
- The majority of Bucks charities are very small: 80% of Bucks charities have an income of under £100,000 pa⁶
- Over half of Bucks charities (57.6%) have an income of less than £25,000, unchanged from the previous year⁶
- More than one in ten (12%) of Bucks charities have an income of £1,000 or less⁶

Financial affairs:

The bulk of money going to charities in Buckinghamshire is held by only a few large organisations which tend to operate beyond the county's borders. In general, the average income of charities in Bucks has decreased from last year:

- Bucks charities have an estimated total income of nearly £946 million (£945,989,829) in 2018⁶
- Less than 1% of the charities in Bucks (0.5%) receive a fifth (21%) of the total income of charities in Bucks⁶
- The average income of charities in Buckinghamshire decreased by -3.4% from £394,417 in 2017 to £380,833 in 2018⁶
- Estimated total charity income from micro, small and medium sized charities in Bucks is estimated at £229 million⁸

Individuals remain the largest source of income for the voluntary sector⁹ and, in Buckinghamshire, local people are continuing to give to local charities (i.e. charities operating in Buckinghamshire) at levels similar to previous years:

- Total individual voluntary giving in Bucks is estimated at approximately £102 million; of this £102 million, an estimated £38 million is given to local charities in Buckinghamshire⁸

Volunteering headcount:

- The NCVO's Civil Society Almanac 2018 states that volunteering rates remain high: over a fifth of people over the age of 16 formally volunteer at least once a month⁹
- Volunteering numbers remain roughly the same, in line with national trends⁵, with approximately 175,000 adults in Buckinghamshire volunteering at least once a year
- 81% of the voluntary sector in Buckinghamshire experienced an increase or stable levels of volunteers (37% increased) from 2017 to 2018¹⁰

“Community networks and voluntary sector capacity is not consistent in all areas across the county”

- BCC and Buckinghamshire Clinical Commissioning Group¹⁴



Key statistics, challenges and opportunities

“The social care system is facing a dangerous combination of severe funding constraints and rapidly increasing demand”

- Age Concern, 2017¹¹

1. Growing demand for services: the voluntary sector is needed

The voluntary sector is needed: demand for services provided by charities has risen significantly and people who use charities are using them more frequently². It is expected the trend towards social prescribing (i.e. the practice of linking patients in primary care with sources of support within the community) will only increase the pressure on local providers.

With the majority of charities in Buckinghamshire being very small, this trend is even more pronounced at a local level as services provided by small charities are more likely to be delivered within their community¹³.

How the voluntary sector is used:

- 9 in 10 UK households have used a charity at some point² and 40% use a charity at least monthly (up from 34% in 2016)²
- Fewer households are using charities but, those who are, are using them more frequently and are using more of them²
- 18% of households that have contact with charities are doing so at least once a week (compared to 14% in 2016)²
- There is a lack of awareness amongst service users: one in three people do not realise the services they use are provided by charities²

Hotspots for the voluntary sector:

- The most common charitable activity is social services provision, both in terms of number of organisations and spending⁹
- Levels of deprivation have a clear impact on the types of charity service that households access: those from the most deprived backgrounds are more likely to turn to charities that provide support or advice²
- Women and younger people are more likely to have used a charity in a personal capacity in the last 12 months (75% women vs 65% men, and 78% of 18-24 year olds)²

- Households with children are more likely to have used a charitable service and to use these services more than adult only households²
- Levels of need and demand for services provided by the voluntary sector varies across Buckinghamshire: there is a huge imbalance in wealth with very affluent pockets as well as communities which rank in the top 10% of deprived areas in the UK¹⁴; highest demand for Early Help and social care services comes from the urban centres of Aylesbury and High Wycombe¹⁴; and life expectancy varies widely between different wards¹⁵, for example life expectancy is 5.8 years lower for men and 7.2 years lower for women in the most deprived areas of South Bucks than in the least deprived areas¹⁶.

Current demand for services:

- The demand for services from small local charities increased by 57% between March and May 2018 alone, and demand has increased by 147% since June 2013¹²
- Over half of small charities describe their services as being delivered within their community¹³; and many are dealing with more complex needs¹⁷
- The voluntary sector often provides the type of support which is no longer available centrally: 1 in 8 older people in the UK now live with “some level of unmet need with vital everyday tasks”¹⁸, a situation which may worsen with an aging population – for example, Buckinghamshire’s population is set to increase over the next 12 years by 39% for over 65 year olds and 78% for over 85 year olds¹⁴
- 90% of Buckinghamshire charities and community groups experienced an increase in or static demand for services last year (58% increased)¹⁰. This should be looked at in a wider context: Bucks County Council is experiencing significant pressure on costs and increase demand in Adult Social Care; it is the lowest funded County Council and first County to lose all Government Revenue Support Grant by 2018/19¹⁹

Impact of loneliness on future demand for services:

- The growing levels of loneliness place extra demands on adult social care services, particularly those supplied by the voluntary sector such as befriending, social events, transport schemes; for example, 76% of GPs report that one to five patients a day visit them because they are lonely²⁰
- The cross-sector ‘loneliness agenda’²¹, together with the move towards a model involving social prescribing and the delivery of social care services by Bucks communities¹⁴, will cause demand for many services provided by voluntary groups to rise dramatically

- Currently 32% of 65+ year olds in the UK live alone²², often a key trigger for loneliness, and it is predicted that there will be over 20 million people aged 60 or over by 2030²³

Challenges and opportunities...

“ Being embedded in their local communities means small charities have an acute understanding of the communities in which they work, and are better able to meet the real needs and priorities of the area. ”

- FSI Charity Index, May 2018¹³

The increased demand for services supplied by the voluntary sector is not new but the rise in loneliness and greater social prescribing clearly will cause demand to climb.

In addition to this, North Buckinghamshire will see large scale housing development along the East-West axis in the coming years due to the Oxford to Cambridge Expressway, East West Rail and HS2. This will change the demographics of existing populations and create new settlements, potentially swamping services offered by local charities and community groups.

Local charities and other voluntary groups are ideally situated within their communities; this advantage should be nurtured so that services are tailored to local needs ensuring the most effective use of available resources.

To help both those providing services tackling loneliness as well as commissioners, the ONS has published guidance for measuring loneliness so that it can be tracked at a local level. This will make it possible for groups to both illustrate the impact of their work and make an effective case for investing in loneliness prevention²⁴.

Collaboration may offer local groups a more effective way to use available resources; a survey of a sample group of Buckinghamshire voluntary groups found there is an appetite for collaboration with 44% being interested in joining a local network to help identify partners to collaborate in service delivery¹⁰.

See also ‘Sector focus: Resilience - social cohesion and wellbeing’

2. Securing funds: challenging funding environment

Smaller charities have been hit particularly hard by the change in funding over the last decade and “continue to face a challenging commissioning environment²⁵”. The fluctuating financial environment has had a direct impact on income levels: for example the UK wage growth falling behind inflation³, rising house prices and donors being financially squeezed have all affected individual giving.

National trends:

- Total value of public sector grant-making to the voluntary sector has fallen dramatically – from £6bn in 2003 to just £2.2bn in 2013³
- Donations from individuals continue to be really important with almost half of the sector’s total income coming from individuals⁴; however, those who say they have donated to charity in the last three months has dropped from 76% in 2010 to 68% in 2017³
- Many older people remain heavily dependent on savings and, with lower interest rates reducing their income, they have changed their charity donation habits³
- Younger donors and potential supporter groups are spending higher proportions of their income on rent or saving for deposits, and therefore have less available for additional expenditure such as charity donations³
- Research has shown that “trust matters to donation behaviour”: four in ten people feel their trust in charities has decreased in the last two years – many of these say they now donate less money because of this and, out of those who still donate, they are less likely to donate regularly²⁶
- Earned income (i.e. money raised through trading) is the strongest area of growth for small charities with 23% of charities reporting an increase¹²
- There is a shift in funding criteria with funders looking for evidence of the beneficiaries being part of the development process for new services as well as the positive impact on the end user²⁷

Buckinghamshire funding trends:

- The three main sources of income for the Bucks voluntary sector continue to be through donations, grants from trusts and foundations and charges for services (in descending order)¹⁰
- Income levels for 76% of Bucks charities and community groups has increased or stayed the same in the past year (44% increased)¹⁰

- Funding is considered to be the greatest challenge for the Bucks voluntary sector over the next three years (73% of responses)¹⁰
- As with previous years, Bucks charities and community groups would like further help to support their funding activities: support with grant applications and bid writing (48%); help demonstrating need and understanding outcomes in terms of funding applications (35%); help with community fundraising (31%) and support in developing corporate relationships (28%)¹⁰
- There is significant interest amongst Bucks organisations to work towards getting corporate sponsorship (49%) with an additional 22% already doing so¹⁰

Challenges and opportunities...

“ We recommend that public sector commissioners should have regard for the sustainability of the organisations which they commission to deliver services and that realistic and justifiable core costs should be included in contracts. ”

- Select Committee on Charities, 2017¹

Collaboration offers an opportunity for small voluntary organisations to balance funds with increased demand for service – for example, half of charities are expecting to be working in partnership with more charities within the next three years²⁸.

Buckinghamshire voluntary organisations should take up the opportunity to register with *Bucks Funding Search*, a searchable database of funding opportunities open to local groups. This is a free resource which is funded by Bucks County Council and allows users to tailor their searches – register at <https://www.idoxopen4community.co.uk/bucksfunding>.

Other suggested channels to help increase income includes taking on a trustee with experience of fundraising and developing earned income opportunities.

The Select Committee on Charities has also recommended that core costs, longer-term contracts and more resources for volunteer managers should be taken into consideration by commissioners¹.

See also ‘6.2 Marketing and messages’ and ‘Sector focus: Cause over brand – need for transparency’

3. People: getting the right individuals involved

The staffing of the voluntary sector appears to be stable though increased demand has heightened workload and pressure on small charities, particularly those providing social care¹².

Volunteers play a crucial role in delivering voluntary sector services; there has been a consistent growth in volunteer numbers within the UK voluntary sector with a total increase of 42% since June 2013¹².

Furthermore, research has shown that there is often a skill shortage at trustee level, such as digital, marketing and fundraising, which has a direct impact on good governance and strong leadership.

General trends:

- Research has found that many small charities are at a disadvantage in terms of human resources as four out of five smaller charities (income under £100,000) have no staff or volunteers; here, trustees exercise both governance and executive functions²⁹
- Workload remains the biggest challenge facing small charity leaders with 36% reporting that workload was their greatest concern (March-May 2018)¹²
- Small charities are diversifying the way they deliver services: more volunteers are supporting small charities with direct services than ever before¹²
- Whilst jobs in the charity sector are generally less secure compared to the public and private sectors, there are good retention rates of staff and volunteers³⁰

Paid staff facts:

- 35% of the total voluntary sector workforce is employed in social work charities⁴
- The local voluntary sector has low numbers of paid staff: 88% of local charities have five or fewer full-time employees³⁰
- Buckinghamshire mirrors the national trend with stable staff numbers within small charities¹²: 69% of Bucks charities and community groups stated that staff levels increased or remained stable from 2017-2018 (25% experienced an increase)¹⁰

Volunteering facts:

- The value of formal volunteering in the UK is around £22.6bn³¹
- Over a fifth of people over the age of 16 formally volunteer at least once a month, with those in the 65-74 year age bracket more likely to volunteer regularly (32%) and those aged 26-34 least likely to volunteer on a regular basis (15%)⁹
- Women are more likely to volunteer (informal and formal) than men, as are adults living in rural areas than those living in urban areas³²
- Those who are 'economically inactive' are more likely to volunteer regularly (29%) than those in employment (22%)³³
- The most common motivation for volunteering is wanting to improve things or help people³⁴
- The most common barriers to volunteering are work commitments, wanting to do other things in their spare time, and looking after children³⁵
- 81% of the voluntary sector in Buckinghamshire have more or the same level of volunteers (37% increased) from 2017 to 2018¹⁰; however, 53% of Bucks voluntary sector feel volunteer levels are stretched or over-stretched with only 5% feeling they have adequate cover¹⁰
- A quarter of Buckinghamshire charities and community groups (26%) say they actively target specific demographic groups when recruiting volunteers. They were most likely to approach potential volunteers through a combination of personal contacts (66%), the organisation's website (53%) and social media (48%)³⁶
- The vast majority of Bucks voluntary groups found that time commitment from volunteers was long term (over 3 months)³⁶
- Nearly a quarter (23%) of Buckinghamshire charities and community groups say their volunteers are involved in roles that require the use of their professional skills for example marketing, communications, IT, business development and legal³⁶
- The growth in demand in services and pressure on funding sources has focused attention on increasing volunteer numbers: recruitment and retention of volunteers is again identified as the second greatest challenge being faced by Bucks charities and community groups (37% of responses)¹⁰

Trustee facts:

- Recruitment of skilled trustees in general continues to be challenging and there is also a call for greater diversity of trustees within the UK's voluntary sector

- From 2017 to 2018, over half (57%) of Bucks charities and community groups had static or increased numbers of trustees (22% experienced an increase); however, 44% felt trustee levels are stretched or over-stretched¹⁰
- Reflecting this trend, the recruitment/retention of trustees or committee members was identified as a major challenge by a quarter of Bucks charities (26%)¹⁰ and over a third need help to do this (35%)¹⁰

Challenges and opportunities...

“ Funders need to be more receptive to requests for resources for volunteer managers and co-ordinators, especially where charities are able to demonstrate a strong volunteer base. ”

- Select Committee on Charities, 2017¹

In times of economic pressure, cut backs and growing demand for services, volunteering-involving organisations need to think innovatively to attract volunteers and to deliver their services.

Charities and voluntary groups could look at their ‘volunteering offer’, creating a range of volunteering opportunities to overcome barriers, for example offering micro-volunteering opportunities to those who have work commitments but could volunteer on an adhoc basis from home³⁵.

Supporting this and in light of the cross-sector focus on loneliness and wellbeing in major public health forums, volunteering-involving organisations should highlight the benefits of volunteering – such as meeting new people, social interaction and learning new skills – in their volunteer recruitment activity.

Similarly, ways to collaborate and share a volunteer base could be explored as well as alternative channels through which to recruit volunteers such as through speaking engagements, national databases (do-it.org, Reach Volunteering), Mix 96 jobs’ section³⁵.

The planned major housing and transport developments in Buckinghamshire will bring significant population growth and a potential source of new volunteers. For ideas on volunteer recruitment, visit <https://communityimpactbucks.org.uk/volunteering/we-need-volunteers/how-to/>

See also ‘Sector focus: Strong leadership – governance and diversity’



4. Changing landscape within Buckinghamshire

4.1 Mass housing: impact on existing communities and development of new

Buckinghamshire is facing significant change and large-scale development with the addition of 40,000 new homes and potentially 100,000 individuals as outlined in the three emerging Local Plans. On top of this, the Oxford to Cambridge Arc formed by the East West Rail project (from Bicester to Bedford, and Aylesbury to Milton Keynes) and the Oxford to Cambridge Expressway (with the preferred route going across the Vale, north of Aylesbury) will bring an additional wave of housing to north Bucks in particular: one million new homes are to be built across the Oxford – Milton Keynes – Cambridge Arc by 2050.

This scale of development and construction will have a huge impact on existing communities and new residents may also feel isolated, perhaps lacking knowledge of local services or social connections within the community.

Challenges and opportunities....

The increase in population could put existing services provided by local voluntary groups under great strain. However, the new residents could be seen as a potential source to expand their volunteer and donor bases, and the local voluntary groups could help with integration.

Against the backdrop of the development and construction, Aylesbury was awarded Garden Town status in January 2017 with the ambition to create desirable communities in a well-planned, sustainable environment. Garden Town helps to access funding to help build and improve Aylesbury's transport links and infrastructure.

There may also be opportunities to improve community facilities and the local environment by accessing grants from developers and contractors, such as the HS2 Groundwork Community and Environment Fund.

4.2 Changing local government in the county

A new single unitary council within Buckinghamshire will come into effect on 1 April 2020. The transition will take place over the next 18 months with a proposed structure which may devolve more powers to town and parish councils.

Challenges and opportunities....

Whilst there are few details at this stage, there may be opportunities for more local funding support from the proposed Community Boards/Hubs in addition to funding from a single county-wide council. It would be beneficial for local charities and community groups to follow developments closely and get involved with the Community Boards/Hubs once set up.

4.3 Transport crisis: hitting the isolated in the community

Access to various transport schemes in many parts of Buckinghamshire has been dramatically reduced in the last year: the closure of the Royal Voluntary Service's volunteer driver scheme in August 2017; the cessation of the transport service in Buckinghamshire provided by the British Red Cross in December 2018; as well as more local schemes such as the folding of the taxi token scheme used by 120 people in Aylesbury Vale in September 2018. It is also likely there will be a reduction in rural bus services in 2019 following the Rural Bus Survey in the Summer 2018. Evidence of this crisis can already be seen at the Bucks Community Transport Information Hub which receives over 500 calls a year from elderly and disabled people who are unable to get to appointments.

Challenges and opportunities....

There are currently over 40 volunteer car schemes in Buckinghamshire but there is a clear need for more voluntary or subsidised transport schemes, particularly in urban areas – for example, there are currently no voluntary schemes servicing Aylesbury and High Wycombe. The demand for alternative transport schemes will continue to grow with an ageing population.

Any developments in improving transport facilities for Buckinghamshire's more isolated residents will help deal with the growing levels of isolation and loneliness. This is an area that the Buckinghamshire voluntary sector could look for funding with particular reference to the Government's *A connected society: A strategy for tackling loneliness*²⁰.

See also 'Sector focus: Resilience – social cohesion and wellbeing'

5. Other issues

5.1 Brexit

“Withdrawal from the European Union is bound to have an impact on the charity sector, with estimates that the sector receives around £200m a year from the EU.”

- *Select Committee on Charities, 2017*¹

The voluntary sector has not been immune from the uncertainty surrounding Brexit and the Small Charities Coalition has stated their concerns about the impact of a reduction in EU funding on smaller charities¹.

- Under current migration proposals, over 80% of EU nationals who are currently working in the UK charity sector would not be able to after Brexit; this increases to 87% in social and residential care jobs³⁷
- Other policy areas that would affect charities post-Brexit include EU rights and legislation, work content, exchange rates and visas, and access to EU research and medicine³⁸
- Local charities and community groups tend to work with the most vulnerable in society and it is believed it is these people who may be the most affected by Brexit: “in times of economic uncertainty, need increases”³⁷

Challenges and opportunities....

Voluntary sector umbrella bodies are encouraging charities and community groups to find out and understand how their organisation and service users will be affected³⁸ and to ensure they are financially stable to continue to meet the needs of their communities.

5.2 Marketing and messaging

The impact of scandals surrounding several major UK charities in recent years has affected voluntary groups of all sizes: news stories relating to charities are frequently mentioned by those whose trust in charities has reduced²⁶ and over a quarter of charities believe that a fall in trust will lead to lower levels of fundraising income²⁸.

There is a growing understanding amongst the sector of the importance of communication and transparency; the voluntary sector in Buckinghamshire reflects this with over a third (35%) stating that ‘raising awareness of their organisation’ is one of their top three challenges¹⁰. Voluntary groups in the county are in need of support in this area: 31% require marketing support; 24% need social media support; and 11% want public relations support¹⁰.

Challenges and opportunities....

Local groups should build on the evidence that the public trusts local charities more than national or international charities, with 43% trusting small and local charities, but only 29% trusting national and international organisations³⁹. They should also look to bring in marketing expertise, perhaps by securing a trustee with marketing skills.

See ‘Sector focus: Cause over brand – need for transparency’

5.3 Digital

“ While some charities are at the cutting edge of new technology, others have yet to realise its potential with regard to fundraising, volunteering and communications. ”

- Select Committee on Charities, 2017¹

As in past years, the need for the voluntary sector to improve its digital capabilities is still evident. To be able to raise awareness of their organisation and to be accountable, charities should have a website or social media page¹.

The FSI has identified three areas of digital and cyber risk for charities: adequate protection of vulnerable people; ability to evade threats to their financial stability; and ability to deal with reputation and damage to the confidence and trust in charities¹².

Digital knowledge amongst Buckinghamshire charities and community groups needs to be boosted: nearly one in 10 (9%) stated they would like support with ICT issues¹⁰.

Challenges and opportunities....

A digital platform is essential for groups to increase their visibility (and transparency) amongst their current and future service users, donors and volunteers.

Even the smallest of community groups are expected to have an online presence¹ to harness the benefits that the internet and social media offer – for example a 2017 survey found nearly a quarter (24%) of the UK population had visited a charity website in the previous three months³. The Select Committee on Charities has suggested charities recruit a digital trustee¹.



Sector Focus: Strong leadership – governance and diversity

“ This focus on governance, as a means of preventing charity failure and bad practice, should be welcomed by the sector as it will help us in demonstrating to the public, media, politicians and most importantly our supporters and beneficiaries the vital role we play in civil society. ”

- *Small Charity Index, 2018*⁴⁰

The importance of getting the right trustees on board is critical to the effectiveness of a voluntary organisation, its ability to reflect the communities it serves, and its survival.

Research has shown four out of five smaller charities have no staff or volunteers to assist in the running of these organisations²⁹. Everything therefore depends on the small group of people who volunteer as trustees and carry out governance and executive functions.

Direct access to independent expert advice is therefore often limited to fellow trustees. Many are aware of this shortfall: in a Charity Commission survey, trustees reported that they lack relevant legal, digital, fundraising, trading/commercial, and campaigning skills at board level²⁹.

This skill shortage and the direct impact on the governance of voluntary sector organisations has been identified as a key area to be addressed.

As well as the need to provide training and development for trustees¹, it is evident that charity boards are disproportionately represented by older white men¹². Smaller charities tend to be “reliant on a group of dedicated individuals”¹² and the ‘culture change’ required to ensure the voluntary sector thrives “will come from greater board diversity, involving users and harnessing the skills necessary for the modern world”²⁸.

However, getting the right people to lead charities and community groups is not a simple task: over a quarter of the voluntary sector in Buckinghamshire see recruitment and retention of trustees as one of their greatest challenges¹⁰.

Next steps....

“ Good governance is fundamental to a strong charity sector ”

- Select Committee on Charities, 2017¹

Charities and community groups should actively look to recruit trustees with a specific skill set, and to consider areas of expertise which may be lacking such as marketing and fundraising as well look at a specific digital trustee role on their board¹.

To help widen the experience and skills held within a board, Buckinghamshire voluntary groups could use Reach Volunteering, an online database of expert volunteers. Advice, training and coaching opportunities, which are available for leaders and trustees in Buckinghamshire, should also be explored (for more information go to <https://communityimpactbucks.org.uk/leadership/>)

There is also a call for the voluntary sector to implement effective trustee succession plans to ensure the effectiveness of boards.

Sector Focus: Resilience – social cohesion and wellbeing

“ We would like providers to support a shift away from a deficit model of service provision which focuses on having a health condition or the things a person can't do for themselves, to focus on strengths that people have as well as support from wider family networks, friends, neighbours and within the community in which they live. ”

- Buckinghamshire's Health and Social Care Market Position Statement 2018-2022¹⁴

Resilience is seen as crucial to the survival, stability and growth of Buckinghamshire rural and urban communities. The voluntary sector is in a unique position to help; it can increase resilience both on an individual level as well as on a wider community scale.

On one level, local charities and community groups provide opportunities for individuals to improve their own general wellbeing. For example, volunteering not only produces a positive feeling of helping others and being part of a community but also provides a channel to meet new people, increase social interaction, learn new skills which can be used in both a professional and personal capacity, as well as help to improve mental health.

On a community level, local charities and groups are often at the centre of the community and have a unique insight and knowledge of issues relevant to the immediate area¹³. They are ideally placed to respond to changing local needs: they are considered to be both best placed and most trusted in helping the most disadvantaged or isolated in the community². Many provide a social function within society, helping to alleviate loneliness, a key focus for the Government and many cross sector bodies²⁰.

However, there is a wide variation in levels of need across the county¹⁴ as well as an inconsistent level of coverage provided by community networks and voluntary sector services¹⁴.

Next steps...

Our Mission: “ To make the best use of the resources available to help the people of Buckinghamshire lead fulfilled lives.”

– Buckinghamshire County Council⁴¹

Local charities and community groups in Buckinghamshire are already tackling isolation, supporting social cohesion and helping to build stronger communities. Their experience, knowledge, infrastructure and trusted position in local communities is a huge resource which should be used in efforts to strengthen the county’s neighbourhoods.

Whether it is in developing community networks, local transport solutions or good neighbour schemes, or working with communities of interest as well as geographical communities¹⁴, the voluntary sector is uniquely placed to support community life.

Sector Focus: Cause over brand – need for transparency

“...people now trust charities no more than they trust the average stranger they meet on the street. It is vital, in my view, that we understand why that is the case – and work together to change what’s gone wrong so we can put it right.”

Baroness Stowell of Beeston, Chair of Charity Commission⁴²

Recent scandals involving large well-known charities have had direct repercussions on voluntary groups across the country.

There is evidence of a direct correlation between the public profile of these large charities, confidence in the sector and funding. As a result, improving the ‘public profile of the charity sector’ was seen by sector leaders as the second most important thing in helping the charity sector increase its impact in society, second only to ‘more funding’²⁸.

However, it is not just a case of voluntary groups needing to promote themselves more. There is a call for the voluntary sector to centre their messages on their ‘cause’ or purpose rather than on their ‘brand’ – to take ‘an audience lens rather than a product lens’⁴³.

Public trust has also been found to be highest on issues related to outcomes and integrity³. Charities and community groups should therefore make sure their communications focus on the impact they are having, and tell their audiences why and how they carry out the work they do²⁸.

Over a third of Buckinghamshire charities and community groups see ‘raising awareness of their organisation’ as one of their main challenges for the future, and significant proportion would like further support in marketing, social media and public relations activity¹⁰.

Next steps...

“Public expectations go beyond mere compliance with charity law; they also expect high standards of conduct. They want charities to be accountable...”

- The Charity Commission for England and Wales²⁶

Whilst public trust in charities has recovered from 47% in 2015 to 60% in 2017³ and local charities are trusted more than international ones⁴⁴, there is still more that local voluntary organisations can do. By being transparent about how they spend money, highlighting their positive impact, demonstrating good governance and placing their ‘cause’ in the centre of all communications, it is possible to improve trust and confidence amongst supporters and beneficiaries.

Conclusion

“ It [the Strategy] recognises that government can't make that change alone, and sets out a powerful vision of how we can all play a role in building a more socially connected society. ”

- DCMS, 2018²⁰

In general the voluntary sector in Buckinghamshire has a positive but realistic outlook: from a survey of local charities and community groups, all believed their organisation would exist in 12 months time but only 74% felt they would exist in five years¹⁰. Securing adequate funding and sufficient numbers of volunteers are challenges now and will continue to be in the foreseeable future.

This situation should be considered in the context of the current movement to tackle loneliness and isolation, improve social cohesion and encourage communities and local networks to provide greater levels of social care. With communities taking on more responsibility to provide services which are no longer maintained centrally, the demand on many charities and community groups will increase and may become unsustainable.

Funding bodies and commissioners (including the new single Unitary Authority) would be advised to take advantage of the unique insight, experience and access that many have with their beneficiaries and look to support them in a sustainable way.

Similarly, voluntary groups would be advised to continue to look for ways to collaborate and to be more appealing to potential donors and volunteers through greater transparency and visibility, through strong leadership from a skilled trustee base, and the ability to demonstrate the impact their services have on their beneficiaries. They should also look for opportunities which arise from changes in local government, housing and transport developments.

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“ Charities face greater operational and environmental pressure than ever before, but their principle is enduring and charities have always helped society through periods of upheaval. ”

- Select Committee on Charities, 2017'



Community Impact Bucks,
6 Centre Parade,
Place Farm Way,
Monks Risborough
HP27 9JS

www.communityimpactbucks.org.uk

With thanks to Dr John May and Rachel Fisher

-  @CommunityBucks
-  @CommunityImpactBucks
-  Community Impact Bucks
-  0300 111 1250

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