



**Partnership and Place Overview and
Scrutiny Committee**
December 2010

**Report from the Director of Strategy,
Partnerships and Improvement**

For Information

Wards Affected:
ALL

Progress on a Voluntary Sector Strategy

1.0 Summary

- 1.1 This report outlines the progress on developing a voluntary sector strategy for Brent and the next steps planned. It highlights initial responses to points which have been raised by voluntary sector organisations.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Partnership and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the work undertaken so far to develop a voluntary sector strategy

3.0 Context

- 3.1 A Voluntary Sector Strategy has to take into account a whole range of contextual factors:
- It has to be relevant to a sector made up of a range of different sized organisations with different objectives, many of which argue that the term sector is an artificial classification.
 - It has to take into account public sector cuts set out by the Comprehensive Spending Review. These will not only affect public sector organisations but are likely to have a knock on effect on voluntary sector organisations presently funded by these national and local funding streams.
 - It has to take into account the local administration's priorities set out in Brent - Our Future and the changing national policy context, the detail of which is still being outlined in white papers we expect in the next couple of months.

- It is written against a backdrop of successful voluntary sector activity which has not been publicised as widely as it could have been and some differences of opinion between public and voluntary sector organisations over the years.

4.0 Strategy Development Progress

- 4.1 Several Staffing changes at the Council have meant that the strategy development has been delayed. Work began in 2009 to look at what a strategy might include and an approach agreed with voluntary and community sector representatives. Since then a further voluntary sector strategy planning session has been held and a steering group is taking forward the writing of a draft strategy, drawing on the key points already highlighted by the initial work in 2009 and more recent changes in national policy. The Strategy, Partnerships and Improvement Team have now taken on the work to support the development of a strategy and are in the process of negotiating a realistic timeline, which both allows for the delay already experienced and at the same time consults people effectively. The impact of this will be that budget decisions this year will come ahead of an overall strategy for relating to the voluntary sector but this will not undermine the overall principles and direction of the strategy.
- 4.2 The strategy is intended to be a high level set of principles with a set of actions allowing priority themes to be considered in more detail one by one. This enables the themes to be highlighted and some preferring values and ways of working to be agreed upon, whilst allowing us to respond to the rapidly changing context and break down the work to reach solutions to issues identified into manageable pieces of work. Success will rely upon the work of all the partners. Where the council and voluntary sector organisations are already working to improve their relationship there is also need for consistency from the wider public and voluntary sector.
- 4.3 The Strategy will be developed by the steering group, receive comment from the reading group and the draft be consulted upon more widely. Following this, agreement will be sought from the council Executive and endorsement sought from other public sector partners at the LSP.

5.0 High level themes identified for the Strategy

- 5.1 The discussions so far recognise that a number of aims and objectives are shared by partners. All are working to improve the lives for people in Brent.
- 5.2 However a number of blockages have been identified to doing this effectively as organisations relating to one another at both a strategic and operational level. The focus for the strategy has been on relationships between public and voluntary and community sectors – how they communicate and work together on how to best align the work undertaken by the different sectors for the benefit of residents in Brent.
- 5.3 Key themes arising from these overarching objectives include:

- Communication – shared values, recognition and celebration of roles, engagement, partnership working arrangements, support for the voluntary sector and the role of a CVS
- Coordination of services – borough priorities set out in Brent – Our Future, opportunities to work with public sector partners, approaches to funding, equality and diversity, a voluntary resource centre, property and assets

5.4 The Strategy is seeking to take into account the different roles voluntary sector organisations can have when they work in partnership with the council and other public sector partners e.g. a provider of services, a recipient of grant, a tenant, a strategic partner, a representative of the voluntary sector, an independent lobbying organisation, an organisation whose activity aligns with activity of public sector providers but does not work in partnership with them. Each of these different roles changes the relationship dynamic with the council and other public sector providers and often the ‘wearing of many hats’ makes partnership working complex.

6.0 One Community, Many Voices Event

6.1 A number of questions and points were raised at the One Community, Many Voices Event which relate to the Voluntary Sector Strategy. This report highlights how these feed into the strategy here.

6.2 *How the council works with and helps to develop the voluntary sector*

The council has a long history of providing advice and practical support to the voluntary sector at the request of individual organisations. There are a range of mechanisms for voluntary sector organisations to engage with the council and the intention is to review those relating to partnership working as part of the action plans for the strategy.

6.3 *How the voluntary sector can work better together*

Clearly it is for voluntary and community organisations to agree how they work together within the voluntary sector. It is recognised that the changing financial context will require some organisations within the sector to collaborate to survive. The sector is so large in terms of number of organisations and diverse in terms of size and interest of organisations that voluntary organisations report that joint working can sometimes be difficult within the sector. The communication theme and consideration of roles are both aspects of the strategy seeking to respond to this point where the voluntary and public sectors are working together on projects.

6.4 *How the voluntary sector can help to deliver on borough wide strategies*

The voluntary sector helps to deliver borough wide strategies in a number of ways already. Some are providers of services run on behalf of the council which directly meet a service requirement or borough priority. Some act as voluntary sector representatives on partnership boards highlighting the ways in which the sectors could engage better on borough wide shared objectives. Voluntary and community organisations are also active on a range of forums in the borough such as the voluntary sector liaison forum, area consultative forums. Voluntary sector representatives also input into borough wide strategies by implementing some aspects in ward working projects or providing information to scrutiny on areas they specialise in. One aspect

which has been fed back so far by voluntary sector organisations is their desire to have opportunities to jointly plan or influence service delivery in the borough. This is being taken into account in the strategy.

6.5 *Maximising funding from external sources*

How council funding is allocated and monitored

Taken collectively voluntary and community organisations bring a large amount of external funding into the borough. Voluntary and community organisations are seeking clarity from the council and other public sector partners on what the impact of public sector cuts will be for Brent, be that main programme grant, commissioning of services or in terms of continued opportunities to strategically partner with public sector organisations to successfully win national funding streams specifically for voluntary sector organisations. The evidence base for what funding is brought into the borough and what funding is provided by the council in total to the voluntary sector is not comprehensive and one of the actions from the strategy would be to reach at least a high level mapping of this information to better inform future funding decisions.

6.6 *Promoting volunteering and volunteer responsibilities*

Some parts of the voluntary sector are really excited by the current emphasis on volunteering which appears to be highlighted by central governments big society initiative. However the vast majority of those we've spoken to are also keen to point out the real cost of running a voluntary sector organisation. The emphasis is on celebrating the place for volunteering in society, but also valuing the skills and knowledge of people who work in voluntary sector organisations.

6.7 *What will the Big Society mean for Brent?*

Voluntary sector organisations have stated that they are not clear what Big Society really means. Central government launched the initiative describing big society as doing five things: giving communities more powers, encouraging people to take a more active role in their communities, transferring power from central to local government, supporting co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises and publishing government data. Since then central government has announced the intention to have community advisors, a national citizen service, and greater focus on the role of mutuals, cooperatives and social enterprises. The detail of what this will mean for the borough is as yet unclear until further white papers are agreed as bills in parliament.

As a living document, the strategy can respond to big society better as more detail becomes clear. The council clearly values voluntary sector organisations in Brent, commissioning some services from the voluntary sector and providing support through grant provision, advice, practical support and joint project work. 'Brent - Our Future' clearly sets out the critical role of

public service provision in the delivery of local priorities and the benefits of working together with partners to ensure both improvement and efficiency.

Places for small voluntary organisations to meet

The strategy reiterates the community strategy commitment to a voluntary sector resource centre project, and this project would address this point in part.

How does the council work with faith groups

Based on the 2001 Census

- 48 per cent of residents were Christian compared to 58 per cent across London
- 17 per cent were Hindu, compared to four per cent across London
- 12 per cent were Muslim compared to eight per cent across London
- Two per cent of the population was Jewish
- One per cent was Buddhist
- One per cent was Sikh
- Ten per cent of the local population declared that they had no religion, compared to 5.8 per cent across London.

Though the 2001 census is now out of date, the figures above demonstrate that Brent is a faith based community and faith and belief play a central role in the lives of Brent residents. The council works in variety of ways with faith groups; commissioning activities and services which are delivered by faith groups and working in partnership to deliver objectives. The council has a strong relationship with Brent Multi-Faith forum and the group meets with the council quarterly, included in the meeting is the Chief Executive, and an executive member of the Labour Administration as well as the Head of Diversity and Community Cohesion. This group in particular have supported the council in encourage communities to recycle and supported the emergency planning processes where a number of faith buildings and premises have been identified for use in an emergency.

The Corporate Diversity team have successfully implemented a Building Stronger Communities (BSC) Programme, which involves working closely with Brent Muslim organisations, providing funding and support. The team were able to secure additional funding for the programme which has enabled it to go from strength to strength. The programme has significant community buy-in with community members taking an active role in the Brent Building Stronger Community Board, working in partnership with the council and other stakeholders.

The success of the Brent programme has attracted international interest resulting in visits from MPs, the Ambassador for Iraq and one project was also awarded the title of Best Overall Project in London 2010. The Building Stronger Community Programme also involves inter faith work and Brent has successfully worked with Brent Multi Faith Forum to deliver a cross faith youth cohesion project for the last two years running.

7.0 Conclusion

This report highlights the initial themes emerging in the development of the voluntary sector strategy for Brent, the process to agree the strategy and a response to respond to some of the factor raised at the One Community, Many Voice Event. The main energy should be focussed on the projects which arise from the strategy as these will best enable improvement in relationships between sectors and thus outcomes for the residents of Brent.

8.0 Financial Implications

8.1 There are none arising form this report

9.0 Legal Implications

9.1 There are none arising from this report

10.0 Diversity Implications

10.1 The strategy will highlight the importance of equality and diversity and will be subject to appropriate screening for adverse impact.

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