A Vision for The Voluntary and Community Sector in Hackney

Consultation Document
August 2017

1. Introduction

Hackney has experienced radical and rapid change over recent years. There will inevitably be further changes in Hackney over the coming years, perhaps even faster in pace, which is why anticipating and planning for these changes is necessary now.

In 2015 the council started a big piece of consultation with people in Hackney, asking those who live and work in the area what they want Hackney to be like. Over 4500 people took part and this has fed into the development of a new Community Strategy for Hackney on which wider public consultation starts next month.

Within this context, a workshop in June 2017 brought together local charities and voluntary organisations to start thinking about the future of the VCS in Hackney and how it will help shape the Community Strategy. Hackney Council and Hackney CVS have worked together to select a mix of groups and organisations for this workshop, ideas from which will be opened up for consultation with the wider sector. The objective of the workshop was to have some time and thinking space away from the day-to-day management and delivery considerations.

Steve Wyler and Caroline Macfarland

This is report from a workshop held on 20th June 2017 at the Tomlinson Centre, London E8. The purpose of the workshop was to gather insights and ideas from a cross-section of Hackney's voluntary and community sector (VCS), to lay the foundation for a forward strategy. Hackney CVS will now use this report to consult more widely across the voluntary and community sector, and Hackney Council will draw on it to inform the Council's wider Community Strategy.

2. The challenges we face together

2.1 Challenges facing the voluntary and community sector

The tightening squeeze on public funding has been accompanied by a dominant contracting culture (prime contracting, payment by results) which is making it incredibly challenging, and costly in administrative terms, for smaller VCS organisations in Hackney to compete successfully.

This is not just about the amount of money available. Funding requirements are having a demoralising and distorting impact, pushing organisations into narrow transactional behaviours and making it harder to take a 'whole person' approach or to do preventative work.

Social investment is out of reach for most, and while many VCS agencies do generate some income through fees and other types of trading, the social enterprise model will only work for some, certainly not all, and if pursued badly can create mission drift and a loss of focus on the beneficiaries who need the services most.

While in Hackney there are still very many people left behind and pockets of very deep poverty, Hackney is no longer regarded as the poorest London borough, and this is making it harder to attract funding from outside.

Thinking about the future, these factors have implications for:

Building relationships.
A huge concentration of corporate wealth exists on the edge of Hackney, but it has proved incredibly difficult to build corporate partnerships which truly benefit Hackney communities. Relationships are demanding and take time, and sometimes deliver little of real value, and many corporates prefer to work in more serious ways with well-known charity brands.

While there are many positive aspects of the partnerships between the council and the VCS, the system of referrals needs to be improved. Often funding does not travel with the referral, or referrals are not appropriate, and as a result VCS organisations can be overwhelmed and the quality of service to people in Hackney suffers.

While relationships among VCS organisations within Hackney are generally collaborative, there are anxieties about sharing ideas and opportunities, and a nervousness that others will 'parachute' in.

Outreach with the community.
Generally, the VCS in Hackney has very poor access to communications and marketing expertise, which could extend its reach and engagement with all communities across the borough and build the recognition necessary to attract investment.

Operational stability.
There is mounting pressure on voluntary sector premises in Hackney, as private sector rents soar and the perception is that public sector landlords increasingly seek commercial returns. This represents a real and present threat to the very existence of the VCS in the borough.

Many VCS organisations are struggling with technological change, both to harness its positive potential, and to guard against its potential for damage to people in Hackney, through better safeguarding for example. Corporate pro-bono support is often inadequate.

2.2 Challenges facing the public sector

There are a number of broader social and economic issues that have implications for local authorities, not least the tension between ongoing austerity and the need for the council to provide services and to support a thriving voluntary sector.

Economic inequality, the rising gap between rich and poor, and benefit cuts also present ongoing challenges. There has been an increase in acquisitive crime and people are concerned that there is a link between the two. In this context we need to think about how we make sure that investment in Hackney trickles down to tangibly benefit local people. It is unclear about whether the increase in global businesses such as those locating in Silicon roundabout are providing employment opportunities, and training and skills provision for local people and the Council has a role to encourage more of this to happen.

Housing provision is a another key challenge, as increased housing costs have led to a lot of people moving out of the area as they are priced out of renting and ownership and this is impacting on the VCS ability to employ people. How Hackney can provide housing for the local workforce is a challenge for everyone, especially in an environment of hostile central government housing policy.

A third set of challenges are linked to catering for needs of a continually changing population, in terms of both demographics and cultures. The generation gap is growing and this means different social needs - such as young professionals struggling with health and well-being. Whilst Hackney residents are generally proud of diversity, the Brexit process might erode trust and cohesion. There are also risks of ignoring the marginalised groups outside of statutory provision such as victims of human trafficking.

These are just some of the broader social issues which provide an important context to which the public sector must respond.

For the Council in Hackney, this will affect ongoing transitions in terms of:

Spending models.
As spending is reallocated from inner boroughs to outer boroughs for services like planning and health, further mergers of services are anticipated. Here there is an opportunity to work with others to manage and pool budgets.

Commissioning frameworks.
These are changing and there will be an increased focus on preventative services. Although there is still a key role for provision by the not-for-profit sector in public services, the social value of these services is often difficult to quantify and recognise in practice.

Public access.
The Council has a duty to ensure people can access appropriate information and public assets such as spaces and venues. Simple and affordable processes are key here.

Ways of working.
The Council will need to ensure it has the right talent and skills in its own workforce and ensure that spending cuts do not decrease morale and lead to more 'gate-keeping'. There is a need to avoid siloed working despite fewer resources, and a potential culture clash between statutory and non-statutory agencies.

3. Shared aspirations for the future

Although there are clear challenges, there are also opportunities to collaborate on positive aspirations and shared goals such as:

Neighbourhood Belonging.

All ages and communities feel a sense of belonging in Hackney. For the VCS, this means working across 'user' demographics and sharing information and ideas to break down barriers between different community groups. We should recognise that building strong relationships and trust in the community is a long term process, but in the shorter term social and community activities are important to develop belonging and community cohesion. We want to ensure everyone has access to community resources and venues, and mixed facilities, and specific needs are catered for. Events such as street festivals should be open to everyone, not just the residents of a specific housing association for example, and we should empower people to work together to celebrate diversity and togetherness.

Education and skills for young people.

The VCS already does a lot to impact on young people's skills, confidence and employability, but we need to demonstrate this better. Our organisations reach people who are not benefitting from statutory education, and we need to advocate for these different types of learning methods.

Responding to an ageing population.

We know that there will be challenges for the future in the health, mental wellbeing and isolation of an ageing population and so considering these issues now is important.

Access and management of property.

There is currently a lack of awareness and public information about how VCS organisations can access the benefits of property, from Section 106 provisions through to social enterprise models of sharing and using assets. Having flexible property leases is also something that would help many organisations. There is a strong appetite from VCS organisations to engage with the property strategy of the Council and other public sector agencies. Tenants halls are one example where property could be used more creatively.

Working across borders.

We want the VCS to work together and with other "sectors" such as the private sector and housing associations. We recognise that the local authority cannot do everything and we would like to rediscover what Hackney has always done well which is to have a strong community sector. By working together we can be more prepared to help people at key transition points, such as for people who are at risk of losing connectivity to the community, women fleeing domestic violence or people moving in or out of the borough. This requires VCS working 'across borders'.

Public awareness of the VCS.

Encouraging more people to get involved is something that unites our organisations. We can work together to signpost and advocate for shared, and different, causes. Together we need to celebrate many charities and voluntary organisations, not just a chosen few.

4. Guiding principles for the VCS going forward

There are a number of guiding principles which voluntary and community organisations in Hackney could work together to achieve.

Walking the talk

We must adopt creative and principled approaches to our own organisational behaviours, including treatment of staff and volunteers.

Empowerment

We must always put people not organisations first, developing a clear understanding of expectations and aspirations, creating space for service users to be involved in design, planning, and delivery, and advancing community involvement in governance and leadership roles.

Good governance

We must increase our effectiveness and efficiency, for the benefit of our communities in Hackney. This includes systematically improving standards and quality, improving transparency, acting now but thinking long term, and always being willing to adapt and change.

Collaboration

We must foster collaboration among VCS organisations and across sectors to better support Hackney residents; adopting an 'equal partners' approach, with all taking responsibility for establishing clear common purpose and building trust, which we believe is the only way for collaboration to succeed. We must develop our willingness to share and this could include ideas, intelligence, expertise, training, staff, volunteers, and funds.

Inclusivity and plurality

We must enable all voices to be heard, not allowing some to dominate. Different groups within the community must be able to play a full part and access the support they need. We must never leave small informal groups behind.

We would like to build common cause with the Council in developing these principles.

5. A united plan for the voluntary and community sector in Hackney – a working draft

The following is a *first working draft* of a 'now-soon-later' plan, developed by participants at the June 2017 workshop. It is recognised that this will need further work, to prioritise and clarify tasks, and to ensure that there is no duplication of effort with existing initiatives in the borough. There will be opportunities to refine and improve the plan in coming months, for example at further forums convened by Hackney CVS over the summer.

5.1 Achieving a healthy and viable VCS

5.2 Delivering services

5.3 Building Community and Self-help

5.4 Reducing inequality

5.5 Providing voice
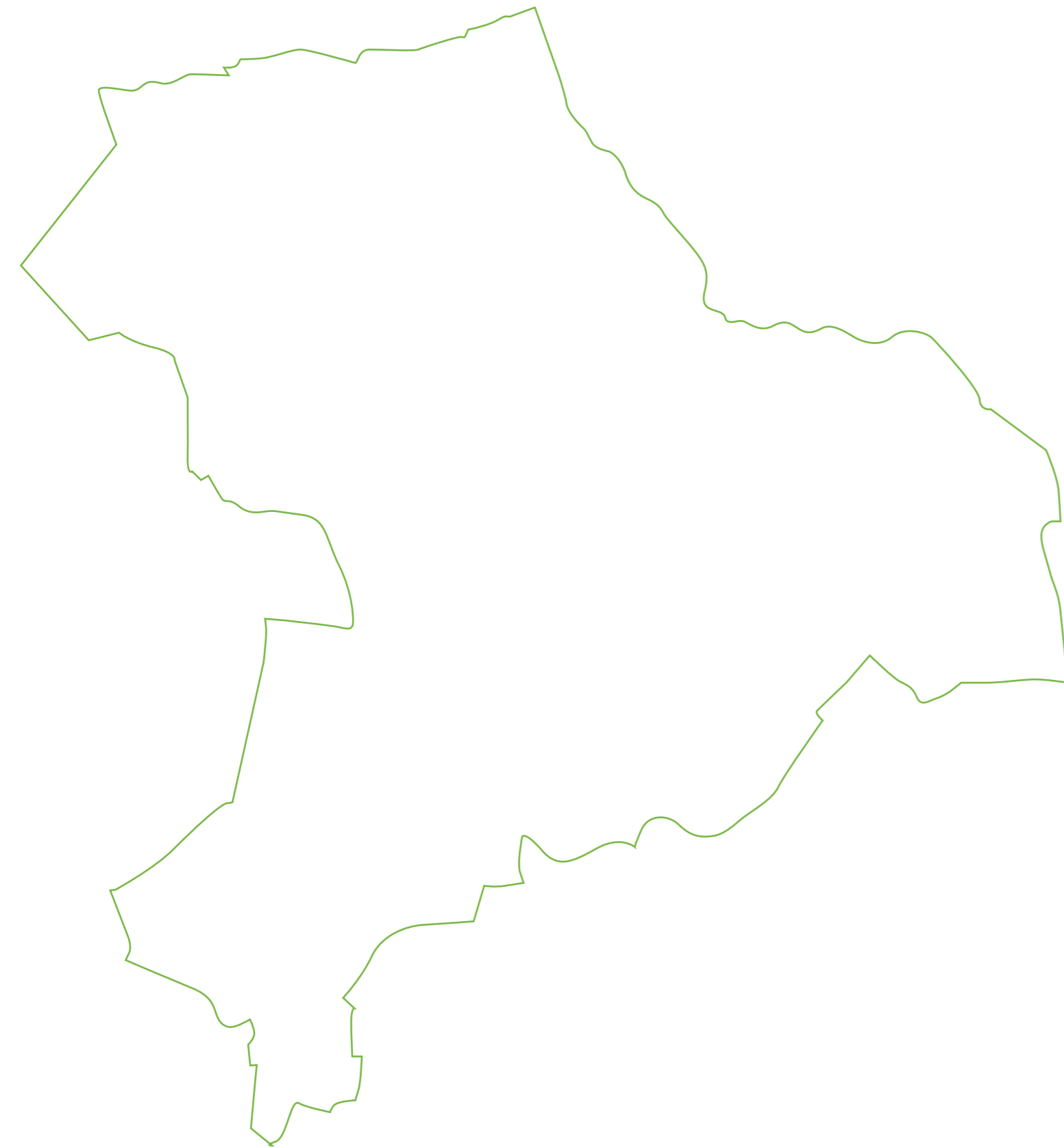
5.1 Achieving a healthy and viable VCS

Now

Soon

Later

This Year

- We will be more proactive in building relationships with others. We will review the thematic and cross-cutting VCS forums meeting that meet regularly, with VCS agencies taking responsibility for agenda and content but with administrative support from the CVS and restructure the networks to meet the current needs of the sector.
- We invite Hackney Council to work with us to explore a common understanding of co-production leading to the establishment of a borough-wide VCS/Council Commitment to Co-Production, and within this explore measures to further enhance VCS/council working relationships, and service design and commissioning policies.
- We invite Hackney Council to work with us to lay the foundations for establishing a borough-wide VCS/Council Property Strategy to address challenges and opportunities of community use of buildings and land. We would like to think about using space – whether temporary office space, empty properties, or co-living solutions – to address the needs of people in Hackney. We recognise that this is a big task but hope that it will be possible to make strong progress over the next two years.
- We ask HCVS to consider how best to work with the VCS to improve support and training for trustees on governance and finance for example.
- We commend the foresight of the council in providing a VCS grant programme in these financially difficult times, and we invite the council to confirm that the commitment will continue.

Next Year

- We expect that the VCS forums would continue to meet, flourish, and build trust.
- We will explore utilising the networks to develop more formal 'action learning sets' to improve our practice.
- We expect, as a result of the joint co-production strategy, to see additional examples of good practice.
- As a joint property strategy emerges, we would expect to attract additional investment to develop community assets.
- We hope to continue to see a commitment to multi-year grant funding from the council to the VCS.

Beyond Next Year

- We expect that enhanced inter-agency relationships and trust will lead to more joint bidding, shared services, and self-help collaborations.
- We would like to see Hackney celebrated as the leading London borough for co-production.
- We would like to see increased community benefits from use of property in Hackney, and consequently a VCS sector able to thrive in changing times.

5.2 Delivering Services

Now

Soon

Later

This Year

- We will establish a collaborative effort across the VCS and with public agencies to better understand current access to services and referral pathways, especially in health and social care.
- We will establish better methods, e.g. an on-line forum, to share information and ideas about how to improve service signposting, and how to reduce own service silos and improve service integration. We will learn from progress made on these areas in other boroughs (e.g. Islington).

Next Year

- We will work to capture the benefits of gentrification, engaging people beyond the usual suspects in activities which improve services for people in Hackney. For example this might include welcome packs for new residents, and an app for connecting people to VCS services.
- We will work with the council to develop funding streams including grants and a wider mix of funders so that funding works better for whole-person service approaches and stimulates innovation.
- We will build up examples of good quality VCS work in Hackney, using this to attract further support into the borough, including pro-bono support and mentoring.
- We will promote the sharing of resources, e.g. building a shared pool of youth workers across Hackney.

Beyond Next Year

- We will work with the council to champion better funding models, including grant funding, and models which reduce bureaucracy, to London-wide funders and the GLA.
- We will develop a shared evidence base, e.g. how many people we work with in aggregate, and improve our collective impact data.

5.3 Building Community and Self-help

Now

Soon

Later

Next Year

- Whilst we recognise that many people we work with are likely to need on-going additional support we will look at how we can shift methods to help people move into self-help and self-agency, to ensure service delivery doesn't create dependencies and instead really empowers people to fully utilise their personal assets and resources.
- We will work to create opportunities for meaningful interaction between people.
- We will work to open up spaces and find neutral venues for community groups.

This Year

- We will be mindful of how we use language to empower people, for example referring to participants not service users.
- We will begin to think about how we can change attitudes within our organisations, and ask ourselves whether we are enabling people to connect with each other.

Beyond Next Year

- We hope to apply self-help solutions to the physical environment such as housing provision and green spaces.

5.4 Reducing Inequality

Now

Soon

Later

Next Year

- We need to find a balance between providing income-generating activities and services for the wider population, and maintaining a focus on less affluent people, who cannot afford to pay the full cost of a service. This might mean payments on a sliding scale.
- We know we will need to diversify and evolve services for different groups, and we can share skills, expertise and networks through new partnerships to do so.
- We should continue to seek sponsorship and other income streams to replace lost public funding for non-statutory services.

This Year

- Our organisations already work to address inequality, but reducing inequality in the future will mean working together more to share skills and provide the opportunities, services and activities which will reach people at specific points of need.
- Many organisations working to reduce inequality will need to start building a longer term strategy around financial sustainability.

Beyond Next Year

- There will be opportunities to secure new sources of public funding if we develop collaborative contracts in areas like education, housing and social care, and demonstrate the unique perspectives we can bring to these issues.

5.5 Providing Voice

Now

Soon

Later

Next Year

- We will find more ways of celebrating the contribution of volunteers.
- Each of our organisations should represent others too, and go beyond self-interest to advocate for who is not in the room.

This Year

- We will start collective communications and outreach, to local councillors and via social media.
- We will build on collaboration and shared channels to champion our expertise, mobilise volunteers, share skills, and signpost people to each other.
- We want to support current and develop new community leaders to work on behalf of the whole VCS. We would like to work with Hackney CVS to find ways to revitalise the Community Empowerment Network.
- We will consider how we empower our service beneficiaries to have their own voice, and share learning on this with each other.

Beyond Next Year

- We want to grow our advocacy role in terms of the long term social challenges such as housing provision and social care.
- We can share learning with each other on how to develop governance models which prioritise and develop the voice of our beneficiaries.

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Nazmun Khanam	Sharp End
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Anthony York	Boxing Futures Ltd
Jo Carter	Immediate Theatre
Jonathan Boux	Inspire Education and Business Partnership
Nicola Butler	Hackney Play Association
Sian Slater	Fellows Court Youth Club
Paula Yassine	St Marys Secret Garden
Caroline Nelson	Choice in Hackney
Lauren Tobias	VCH
Rachel Hughes	Social Action for Health
Janette Collins	The Crib
Claire Witney	Hackney Council
Sonia Khan	Hackney Council
Jackie Brett	Hackney CVS
Steve Wyler	Consultant
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