

## **Feedback report – Community Engagement and Participation Strategy**

### **Overview**

The Community Engagement and Participation Strategy has been developed in alignment with, and shaped by, our understanding of the priorities and needs of the local Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS).

### **Learning and listening**

In order to develop the strategy, a comprehensive exercise was undertaken to understand and evaluate the key touchpoints with the community across the council, investigating the ways in which the organisation carries out a wide variety and range of engagement with the community. Within this, the council's relationship with the voluntary sector and role in community development was examined. A social consultancy was engaged to offer insight and advice on best practice and to support the review by undertaking a period of listening and discovery, hearing from a range of people individually and in groups, including the Elected Mayor, Deputy Mayor and Portfolio Holder for Community, other Cabinet Members and senior officers. Within this research, day to day feedback provided by organisations to service areas across the council was heard. A variety of approaches by other local authorities and recommendations from bodies such as the LGA were also reviewed.

Consultation on the draft Community Engagement and Participation Strategy took place during June-August 2023 and was open to the VCS across the borough. This included:

- an initial stage of detailed pre-engagement with partner organisations
- consultation involving an interactive presentation and discussion session
- an online survey that was open for a six week period.

### **Timeline**

- Feedback session with W3RT – 1 June 2023
- Feedback session with Watford Community Housing Trust – 5 June 2023
- Feedback session with Citizens Advice Watford – 8 June 2023
- Feedback session with Home Start Watford -13 June 2023
- Feedback session with Pump House Theatre – 15 June 2023
- Presentation and interactive feedback session with 40 attendees at the council's Community Network Event – 19 June 2023
- Survey emailed to attendees of the Network Event
- Survey shared by the CVS on LinkedIn and in their newsletter
- Member briefing, including a request for the survey be shared with their networks
- Request to community centres to share with groups and organisations using the centres
- Survey emailed to groups and organisations in WBC contact lists
- Survey responses up to 22 August 2023

### **Participation**

49 organisations participated in the consultation, representing charities, not for profits, sports clubs, community interest companies delivering across a wide range of areas in the borough.

A full list of participating organisations is detailed at Appendix 1.

### **Key areas**

The areas in focus were:

1. The aims and ambition of the strategy
2. The strengths and challenges of Watford's VCS
3. Barriers to engagement
4. New ideas and opportunities

### 1. The aims and ambition of the strategy

The consultation found a very positive response to the strategy, with participants responding that the emerging strategy:

- Clearly aligns with their own objectives
- Conveys appropriate ambition
- Resonates with the feedback they have raised with the council, particularly around making connections within the VCS in Watford
- Sets out an excellent vision and ambition

### 2. The strengths and challenges of Watford's VCS

#### Strengths

- A consensus that Watford is well served, highlighting pride in the strength and culture of the local VCS
- Watford has a very positive and active local VCS, delivering a huge amount for Watford's community
- Organisations are generally very supportive of one another and there are good example of collaboration
- Councillors play a vital role in engaging at the local and neighbourhood level. As community leaders and community advocates, they can be the closest to the community voice, often acting as the first point of contact
- Existing initiatives deliver value, such as the council convened Cost of Living Forum and the CVS' Volunteer Fair
- There are exemplary relationships between the VCS and council
- Voting at the Community Network presentation particularly identified the following key strengths: collaboration, closely followed by partnership, passion, and knowledge

#### Challenges

- Accessing funding and recruiting volunteers were set out as the biggest challenges faced by organisations
- Collaboration, although found to be a strength, also came through as a challenge in that it can be difficult to juggle resource constraints with making and building upon connections
- Premises were also raised, with organisations seeking space but the cost of rent / leases a challenge

### 3. Barriers to engagement

- Time constraints and logistics make attending events a challenge
- Smaller organisations may find it more difficult to be part of the wider fabric of the local VCS – particularly when also delivering services in other areas with limited resources

- Some areas of the VCS may not be aware of help and connections that the council can facilitate – feedback suggested considering how to raise awareness of funding available, strategic initiatives involving the VCS, and other ways the council can support organisations
- Within the VCS, visibility of organisations was raised as a barrier to collaboration and networking, with suggestions for signposting or a directory

#### 4. New ideas and opportunities

- The council to continue to facilitate and coordinate – helping the VCS to share resources, skill sets and focus on issues together
- Continue to deliver valuable forums like the Cost of Living Forum, which is well instigated and intended. Meetings like this are successful where there is a draw for organisations to attend, they have something in common
- Organisations requested a source of signposting or a directory to help understand the other organisations delivering across an area or needs, for example when trying to help a family in crisis
- Support with data, for example delivering packs of information such as the Census data
- That consistency of approach is key to reach hard to reach groups – build on connections made
- The VCS is often asked their opinion which is very positive, but make sure this is easy and accessible, and make it clear the value of sharing feedback
- Suggestions of creating a Watford VCS Festival (or Health & Wellbeing Day or other themed events) showcasing the great things that already happen
- Continue network event, share wins and barriers
- Continue to focus on and find ways to amplify voices of those less often heard with e.g. homeless

#### Direct feedback on the strategy

- Broaden the focus to include more on socio-economic context – opportunities and ambition for the residents and community of Watford, and the value of investing in residents so that they stay and become economic drivers in Watford – helping them to contribute to the economy of the town.
- Strengthen focus on collaboration and creating opportunities to network/collaborate with diverse range of conversation
- The wording ‘influence the decisions which affect them’ should be reconsidered – We should be enabling VCS to influence decisions that make maximum impact for residents, extending their impact rather than things that impact them as organisations. They are more ambitious than join in and contribute – they want to create positive change for people and individuals whether through influencing policy or direct work that they do.
- Add ‘safer’ to aspirational characteristics relating to the town

#### **How this has shaped the strategy**

The feedback received has helped us to shape the final strategy, ensuring that feedback is reflected in its aims and translates through into the themes and actions.

It has helped us to ensure that we fully understand the challenges, opportunities and strengths of the VCS and correctly reflect these in the strategy.

The clear alignment found during consultation underlined that we are taking the right steps in this approach, and we will continue to ensure that we hear and take action upon feedback raised.

## **Appendix 1**

Our thanks to the following organisations for their engagement and participation in the consultation:

- Impactful governance
- W3RT
- Watford Womens Centre
- Herts Schools Outreach
- Citizens Advice Watford
- Veterans Support Group Abbots Langley
- Watford Muslim Youth Centre Trust
- Watford Jazz Junction
- Bobath Centre
- Rennie Grove Peace Hospice
- Home-Start
- Dan Tien
- Herts Inclusive Theatre
- Small acts of kindness
- Mediation Herts
- Ascend
- Church of Seventh-day Adventists/One Vision
- Random café
- Watford Blind Centre
- West Watford Community Association
- Building Heroes
- MCR pathways
- Raise - West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals Charity
- Chamber of Commerce
- Pump House Theatre and Arts Trust
- Ngorli
- Positive Bright Minds
- Mencap
- Cathartic
- Watford FC CSE Trust
- West Herts Sports Club
- Croquet Club
- Garston Ladies FC
- Watford Palace Theatre
- One YMCA
- West Herts ABC
- Imatter Health and Wellbeing Support CIC
- Herts Mind Network
- Watford Community Housing Trust
- Watford Table Tennis Club
- Watford Cycle Hub
- Watford Writers
- Watford FC Trust

- Shopmobility
- Watford Town centre Chaplaincy
- Mediation Hertfordshire
- Music24
- New Hope
- RefillAbell