

Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Response to Brighton & Hove City Council's Budget Proposals 2025/26

Produced by Community Works (February 2025)

Introduction

We acknowledge the Council's very challenging budget position for 2025/26, and the task of again managing a large shortfall. We are grateful for the scaling back of savings to VCS-delivered services, following receipt of additional government funds. We also appreciate the efforts made this year to find alternative funding and delivery models, and Cllr Taylor's meeting with Community Works Reps in January which gave the chance to feed back.

Although many of the proposed savings to VCS organisations have been reversed, others remain. This paper sets out the voluntary and community sector's comments in relation to the proposals. The VCS remains committed to collaborating with the Council and other agencies to mitigate the impact of the reduced budgets we all face, to secure external funds and maximise the use of available resources.

About the VCS

Voluntary and community organisations serve community needs across all protected characteristics and across the lifespan. They provide services and support to people who face economic challenges, mental and physical ill health, discrimination, disadvantage and abuse and other complex life circumstances.

VCS organisations operate cost-effectively. Smaller organisations are largely run by part-time staff and some entirely by volunteers. The VCS continues to struggle with rising costs and demand, minimal/no contract uplifts and diminishing funding from all sources. Charities are ineligible for the National Insurance Contributions compensation grant afforded to local authorities, placing extra pressure. Retaining a strong VCS in Brighton & Hove and wider Sussex prevents problems deepening, increases the chances of meeting residents' needs, and advances council priorities and aspirations for our area.

General comments on the budget

Prevention: Some of the remaining savings affecting VCS-delivered services are to preventative work. VCS services help to prevent problems occurring or worsening by providing people with advice and support, opportunities to develop skills and resilience, and safe spaces to come together and ease isolation. Applying savings to prevention work will have an impact in the medium term, with increased complexity of cases, more

likelihood of crisis and increased demand and costs. We would welcome closer working with the Council on prevention e.g. greater VCS involvement in co-designing strategies and services to make use of available resource.

Mitigations: The VCS is willing to work with the Council next year to explore the impact of proposed savings and ways of mitigating the detrimental effects. We'd welcome these conversations at an early stage. We'd also welcome more clarity in next year's papers around any mitigating actions agreed with partners e.g. the NHS and VCS organisations.

Equalities Impact Assessments (EIAs): We would welcome the Council introducing a more coordinated 'best-practice' approach to producing EIAs to provide a more accurate and meaningful view of impact. This might include training/ refreshers for officers, collaboratively produced EIA reports with groups of officers working together and/or with the VCS, and sufficient time to complete EIAs so that impact can be properly understood.

Commissioning processes: We would welcome more attention to how potential savings are communicated to VCS providers, and more consistency across council departments in this regard. We would appreciate early conversations wherever possible.

Cumulative impact: The cumulative impact of budget savings to the VCS must be understood when drawing up proposals. Withdrawal of support simultaneously by BHCC, the NHS and neighbouring local authorities threatens the survival of services and organisations. We request closer working between statutory partners/funders so that cumulative negative impact can be identified and mitigated where possible.

Comments relating to specific budget areas:

All comments relate to the Families, Children and Wellbeing directorate.

Thriving Communities Investment Fund We appreciate a solution being found by using Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to mitigate the 10% saving this year. There is concern that CIL funds are being redirected away from wards/neighbourhoods, where they may be needed to boost local assets such as green spaces. Although not engaged to date, the VCS would welcome involvement in a discussion around possibilities, risks and impacts. We would also like to work with the Council to explore whether other resources could be shared with the VCS e.g. access to training, meeting and event space, I.T. solutions.

The Youth-Led Grants Programme This programme has shrunk to the extent that it's now almost unviable. However, the small grants enable youth organisations to fill budget gaps and the programme allows young people to have a voice and influence over resource decisions, as is their legal right (see UNCRC – Article 12). We would welcome consultation with youth-led organisations to find other ways of involving young people in participatory

budgeting across the Council's programmes e.g. CIL, Fairness Fund... to retain the ethos of the Youth-led Grants Programme.

Youth Homelessness Prevention YMCA Downslink has been given notice that funding for the Youth Advice Centre (YAC) will cease in June. YAC has been operating for 30 years and is a one stop advice shop for 13 to 25-year-olds, especially those experiencing multiple difficulties, disadvantages and vulnerabilities who are the hardest for statutory services to engage with. YAC staff receive referrals from the Council as they are respected throughout the city for their expertise in supporting traumatised young people. Last year, YAC supported 1,066 young people. The cessation of Council support makes the service's future uncertain. The saving also signals a shift from prevention to crisis support and so is likely to increase demand and costs to the Council over the longer term. We request that the Council addresses how youth homelessness prevention work can be retained.

HIV Prevention (reduction to work delivered by the VCS & to the Fast Track Cities programme). It is unclear whether this saving has been reversed via additional government funds. VCS organisations undertake HIV prevention work with communities who might not otherwise be reached by statutory services. Brighton & Hove is part of the international Fast Track City initiative to achieve zero new HIV infections, zero preventable deaths and zero stigma by 2030. The funding to VCS organisations enables delivery of targeted messaging and education to prevent people from getting HIV, ensure those who get HIV are tested and promptly diagnosed, and prevent onward transmission. Sustaining Fast Track City work is crucial to meeting these goals.

Comments on savings / changes to council services

Savings to support services There is concern that any savings applied to council mental health, social work, adult social care and public health services will mean reduced support that could increase vulnerability to mental and physical health challenges and could present a risk to life for some people. Conversations are welcome on how to coordinate support across sectors to mitigate these risks.

Libraries As the Council has noted, there is significant potential for libraries to strengthen their role as community hubs, which may help to generate funding to retain them. We request strategic consideration of libraries' role in delivering area-based plans e.g. use by Integrated Community Teams to bring partners together around reducing health inequalities and improving health outcomes in specific areas; or for delivery of other funded programmes of work within the city. The VCS would welcome involvement in consultations around the closure of community libraries. Any research used to inform the decision would also be helpful to see referenced in future papers.

Parking: The freeze in parking charges potentially reduces the funds available to the Council for supporting active travel (cycling, walking) and bus use. The VCS would welcome exploration of other opportunities to make the city more accessible and equitable to those who don't have cars or prefer to use other forms of travel.

Strengthening the partnership approach

As reductions to council services are being made, the VCS would welcome a move to greater partnership working to make most use of the resources within the city. The VCS has proven ability to draw in external funds to help deliver the Council's strategic priorities. Recent examples include the new £1.3m Climate for Communities programme led by the Trust for Developing Communities, which significantly contributes to the Council's circular economy work; and the Food Use Places partnership bid, securing £1.2m and led by Brighton & Hove Food Partnership. Community Works Reps, and individual VCS organisations, add value to meetings and help to shape decisions, policies and strategies. We bring insight into and evidence of community need and impact and can offer alternative solutions. We look forward to enhancing this partnership within the coming year.

For further information please contact:

Jess Sumner, CEO

Community Works

ceo@communityworks.org.uk