

# VCSA Annual Assembly 2017

## Event Summary



### Context

On Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2017, Shropshire Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly (VCSA) held their ninth Annual General Meeting. Over 60 representatives attend from voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE) organisations alongside a number of officers from the public sector including Shropshire Council, Shropshire CCG and the University Centre Shrewsbury.

The Shropshire VCSA Annual is an opportunity for VCSE organisations to come together to discuss the highlights of the previous year, discuss relevant topics and issues and determine the priorities for the year ahead.

### Welcome from VCSA Board Chair

Rachel Wintle, Chair of the Shropshire VCSA welcomed all to the meeting, gave a brief outline of the agenda for the event, and specifically welcomed guest speaker Helen Rice from Advising Communities.

Rachel shared the key achievements of the VCSA and reinforced the importance of the sector in local projects, pilots and working groups; Rachel described the VCSE as the golden thread and it is important that there are sector representatives involved in important conversations going forward.

### Achievements of the VCSA

<b>Representation on working groups</b>	<b>Social Prescribing</b>	<b>STP and Health Partnerships</b>	1. Representation on working groups: there are VCSA Representatives on 35 working groups across the public sector.
<b>Big Conversation 2016/17</b>	<b>Change and Compact Group</b>	<b>Town and Parish Councils</b>	2. Social Prescribing: VCSA are supporting the pilot project to ensure success, try a new approach and seek new partnerships with stakeholders.
<b>Campaign Work</b>	<b>Social Inclusion Work</b>		3. STP and Health Partnerships: VCSA contributed to initial research and plan and are represented on the STP Neighbourhoods Group.

are impacts on the sector.

4. Big Conversation 2016/17: Shropshire Council undertook work with VCSE organisations to work with hard to reach groups in Shropshire.
5. Change and Compact Group: VCSA Board members working to influence change and highlight potential
6. Town and Parish Councils: Growing relationships and working more closely together.
7. Campaign Group: supporting Shropshire Council in highlighting the impact cuts to services would have on the most vulnerable and preventative services
8. Social Inclusion: excellent investment in to the VCSE, which is helping to support people toward employment and volunteering opportunities.

Rachel explained that the VCSA Board members represented the Assembly on different groups and forums where many conversations are happening and the VCSE have an enthusiastic can do approach in Shropshire. Strong networks and relationships have been created through the Assembly and there is always a positive attitude. Rachel thanked the VCSA Board and Forums of Interest for all their continued hard work.

## **Quick Fire Partner Updates**

### **Shropshire Association of Local Councils (SALC)**

David Beechey, Chair of SALC provided a brief update. The national Association of Local Councils are encouraging local memberships to work more closely with stakeholders and partners in order to:

- Promote healthy activities in local communities
- Provide facilities for youth and older people
- Encourage the take up on allotments which promotes a healthy lifestyle through growing your own produce
- Support the management of local nature reserves and grow volunteer bases to do so
- Continue to provide community transport opportunities
- Support local libraries and the takeover of such assets and support local leisure facilities such as swimming pools

SALC would also like to encourage some smaller local councils to form clusters in order to provide greater support to each other and the community.

### **Marches Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)**

Sonia Roberts, VCSE Representative on the Marches LEP Board spoke to attendees about the key activities the Marches LEP were undertaking. Local Enterprise Partnerships were introduced about 6 years ago to act as a conduit between local, regional and national partners. There are 39 Local Enterprise Partnerships in England.

The LEP Board have responded to a Government Green paper and have suggested areas to maximise impact e.g. agritech.

The Marches LEP is also key in connecting the county to the Midlands Engine and there are big pieces of work taking place around infrastructure.

The European Structural Investment Fund is currently being delivered in the LEP area and the LEP are looking at how they are able to match fund more money for future projects. The funding has currently helped in Employment and Skills, Social Inclusion, the rural agenda and apprenticeships.

Money is given to the LEP from national Government which is called a Growth Deal, 83 million is available in Growth Deal projects; £22 million has been awarded in the latest growth deal. The Growth Deal will help enable over 8000 new homes, 16,000 new jobs, 1500 new apprenticeships and 140,00 business having access to super speed broadband.

The Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) is currently being refreshed and is publicised on the LEP website; this plan shows the strategic direction of which way the Marches LEP will be going and partners and stakeholders will be asked to feed in. Sonia stated that she felt the plan did not have much emphasis on the VCSE sector and she encouraged VCSA Members to highlight this when the consultation is available.

### **Clive Wright, Chief Executive Shropshire Council**

Clive Wright provided an update as local elections had taken place the previous week. The Conservative group had appointed a new leader, which was due to be confirmed at full Council on the 18<sup>th</sup> May 2017. Clive state that sometimes "fresh eyes" are a positive if you can look to do something in a new and different way. Clive then went on to discuss what the new leadership will look like and what they will do to help both Town and Parish Councils and the VCSE in Shropshire. The new leadership want the Council to be more outward looking, creates things that people value and for elected members to be more engaged in communities and work.

Shropshire Council will also look to support businesses; what businesses do we want and need in the county. There will be a focus on agritech, food and smaller businesses and ensuring the right employment in the market towns.

The Council will reach out more to localities and gain a better understanding of areas, acknowledge aspirations for communities and see how the Council can better support them.

## **Helen Rice – Advising Communities**

### **Presentation Title: The Changing Landscape – Finding Opportunities In A Difficult Funding Environment**

Helen gave the Annual Assembly attendees a brief background about herself before starting her presentation. Helen has worked in the voluntary sector for around 20 years and her passions include social change. She started at the Charity Commission on a graduate programme and went on to work for Big Lottery Fund. After this Helen moved on to work for Community Matters supporting business planning, law etc. and then moved on to be Director of Social Change. Nine years ago, after Community Matters closed down; Helen is now the Director of Advising Communities.

Helen then described some issues, which the VCSE are facing which would sound familiar to many of the VCSEA organisations in attendance. The issues included:

- Increase in demand for services
- Support from Local Authorities is changing and there is reduced support from other public sector bodies
- Adult Social Care Crisis in regard to funding
- Capacity crunch – not enough hours to do the work
- Larger contracts
- Government grants at an all-time low

There are also some new opportunities for VCSE around health and wellbeing and community based work is bringing VCSE organisations closer in to the delivery of these. Advising Communities have their own Social Prescribing service.

Advising Communities use Whatsapp to discuss innovative ideas with entrepreneurs from different skills background. There are changes happening in the world, increased mental health issues, housing problems, ageing and illness, homelessness, lack of funding and there are small changes, which can be made to support prevention.

Advising Communities have created a mental health app as it is important for people with mental health issues to feel connected and this will prevent more symptoms that are difficult. If organisations can connect people to the appropriate primary service then it is less likely to have an impact on secondary services. The organisation also use a “wellbeing advisor” who acts as an advocate and is able to attend GP appointments with patients.

Helen expressed the importance of going through all the ideas until you get one that works. The ideas which are good are funded and you cannot do it on your own, working together is key. There are emerging markets and there needs to be a focus on what is coming tomorrow, not now and how problems can be solved. Helen then asked attendees to work in groups, discuss the emerging issues in Shropshire and how they can be solved.

Feedback was as follows:

- Obesity: encourage the change in lifestyle, intergenerational play e.g. playground for adults and children
- Connectivity – people living isolated lives and need to find ways around this, simple solution could be encouraging people to talk to each other more.
- Divides in communities due to local politics causing problems – need more community cohesion, “spreading the love opportunity”
- Social isolation – introduce many micro solutions to tackle this issue e.g. transport, IT.
- Help people find a connection to their local community
- Cost of property and rent is increasing and homelessness is growing in Shrewsbury. Small solution could be having a place to charge a mobile phone so that homeless people can keep in touch, find information etc.
- Ensuring people feel accepted in the community – community recycling, knocking on a neighbour’s door etc. to ensure that communities are sustainable for the future.

Helen then finished her presentation by sharing the story of how Advising Communities was formed – a small idea, which was, build up from nothing. The Blackfriars Advice Centre in London was just £5000 from insolvency and due to close when Helen and her small team took over. They gained support from funding organisations including the national lottery and developed language services, paid for immigration and employment services and provided employment opportunities and new pathways to employment by developing people’s skills. They used staff skills to gain income and engage with new people via fundraising events and changed the name to Advising London a few years ago. The organisation did further brokering work and started to charge for some services. When Community Matters went into administration, Advising Communities were able to take over the work and ensure success.

## **Ann Harris – Big Lottery Fund**

### **Presentation Title: Supporting Great Ideas – Big Lottery Fund: Funding Priorities**

Ann Harris gave some background about her role at the Big Lottery Fund; Ann focuses on seeking out local intelligence, ensure the right projects are funded in the right areas and build on strengths in the community. Ann covers Shropshire, Herefordshire, Telford and Wrekin and Worcestershire.

The Big Lottery Fund (BLF) are the biggest funder in the UK, are looking for responsive funding and they are currently in a transitional period exploring important areas which are common to funding themes. The majority of BLF grants go to local charities; there are grassroots community activities and strategic programmes, which address specific challenges. Awards for All and Reaching Communities have a responsive grants programme and the offer is currently being improved. Reaching Communities funding guidelines have been improved and updated already and Awards for All guidance will be changing in the early summer. Awards for All funding will also be able to be applied for online. BLF are looking to modernise the application process, be more collaborative, work with partners more, have more conversations locally and encourage those who have not applied for funding to do so.

The BLF strategic plan is a response to feedback received from communities, questions will be tailored more closely to what information is needed in an application. The funding will go to the best ideas and not necessarily the best application; use local knowledge and ensure issues being tackled are understood at both a local and national level. BLF are looking to listen to communities, support their strengths and empower people through their funding awards.

Ann told attendees that BLF are updating the website to make it more user friendly. Local intelligence is important to BLF are influences decisions made within the organisations. They will be supporting local relationships with organisations and partners, work with more funders and support collaborative working within communities. They are looking for information from local organisations on what makes a positive change in local communities and what supports relationships and brings people together. There will be a focus on places and spaces; what is supporting their sustainability, are they virtual or physical? Early action will also be a key priority, BLF want to support the action, which empowers people to fulfil potential and encourage preventative work. All of BLF's fund priorities are interconnected and projects could be strengthened if people formed relationships and build on projects. Evidence of need is important. Only 15% of applications make it through to the second stage as processes are very competitive. It is still a requirement for Social Enterprises to have three directors.

## **Handover of Chair**

Rachel reflected on her role as Vice Chair and Chair of the VCSA Assembly over the past few years, although a difficult role it is important and the voice of the Assembly is heard and involved. Early conversations are happening with key partners, consortia contracts are happening and challenges around this have been overcome. Expectations of the chair role have grown including responsibilities, governance and accountability; it is hard to recruit people into these roles and support is needed, in the future support networks for chairs or trustees is needed.

Rachel handed the role of VCSA Board Chair over to Chris Child. Chris thanked Rachel for her work over the past few years and support in role of Vice Chair.

## **Chris Child – VCSA Review**

Chris explained to attendees that there have been a few changes for the VCSA and all members have been asked to help the Board in completing this work. The VCSA review has emerged as a result of funding cuts and that officer support for the VCSA, the Board and Forums of Interest has unfortunately been reduced due to internal changes at Shropshire Council. The review will focus on the VCSA being fit for purpose and sustainable in the future. The VCSA is the voice of the voluntary and community sector in Shropshire and there is a need to clearly reflect the diverse nature of the organisations. Last year a small task group carried out work including speaking to other VCSE assemblies from outside of the county, conducting a survey and meeting with public sector partners.

Over the past year, there has been some challenging but positive discussions and the VCSA Board members have been committed to discussing these challenges with Forums of Interest and networks to gain feedback and thoughts from the wider membership. Chris discussed the value of the VCSE in Shropshire including points around the independence in perspective and purpose, a diverse representation of all interests and communities

and it encourages resilience and efficiency. The Shropshire VCSA also has well-built relationships with partners including the public sectors, partners, beneficiaries and service users and is well respected across the county.

Chris then spoke specifically about the Shropshire VCSA, why we have it and why it is important. The role of the Assembly is to be a voice for the sector and to say what matters to the VCSE in Shropshire. Chris encouraged attendees to remember that the Shropshire VCSA has no money or budget and the resources are the Board members and the wider membership.

The VCSA Board acts as the voice for the sector in Shropshire, issues and challenges are identified and the Board is reactive to these, 11 Forums of Interest are still strong and meeting regularly.

Chris asked that each table discuss what the VCSA means to organisations, how organisations would like to be represented, how do we spread the word about the Annual Assembly and encourage others to join.

The key points from the feedback included:

- Respect the voice of the sector and of the VCSA Board
- Ensure communication within the sector
- Training for members to be empowered to deliver the message of the VCSA
- What does the VCSA really stand for and how can we share this message
- Understanding the purpose of the VCSA and sharing messages about our achievements
- Better use of Social Media
- Have a strategic vision and forward thinking
- Recreate a knowledge hub around the needs of the sector
- Reach more “out of the bubble”
- Improve representation e.g. connecting housing, energy etc.
- Identify the gaps
- Look at how Board meetings work and are they productive
- Have actively engaged Board members
- Share messages of VCSA with Forums of Interest
- Collate information about issues – encourage members to fill out surveys or find another way to get back information on issues.

Chris Child thanked all who attended the event and encouraged attendees to keep up the energy and enthusiasm they had shown throughout the morning.