

<b>LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN</b>	<b>WARDS:</b> All
<b>REPORT TITLE</b>  Themed Debate - We Make Camden Together: Camden's voluntary and community sector's role in building safer, stronger communities through collaboration and shared purpose in challenging times	
<b>REPORT OF</b>  Cabinet Member for Voluntary Sector, Equalities and Cohesion	
<b>FOR SUBMISSION TO</b>  Council	<b>DATE</b>  19 <sup>th</sup> January 2026
<b>SUMMARY OF REPORT</b>  This is the background report for the Full Council debate being held on 19 <sup>th</sup> January 2026, on Camden's voluntary and community sector.  During the debate, the Council will hear contributions from representatives of Camden voluntary and community sector organisations.  <b>Local Government Act 1972 – Access to Information</b>  No documents that require listing have been used in the preparation of this report.  <b>Contact Officer:</b>  Caroline Kennedy, Director of Participation, Partnerships, and Communications 5 Pancras Square, London, N1C 4AG, <a href="mailto:caroline.kennedy@camden.gov.uk">caroline.kennedy@camden.gov.uk</a>	
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>  The Council is asked to consider the report.	

Signed: Kathryn Myers, Interim Executive Director of Corporate Services



Date: 7 January 2026

## **1. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND**

- 1.1. Camden benefits from a strong, diverse, and dynamic voluntary and community sector (VCS). The VCS in Camden has a decades-long track record of mobilising community action, helping to tackle poverty and inequality, building communities' feelings of belonging and cohesion, and supporting residents who are most vulnerable to social and economic exclusion. This track record reflects the anti-poverty, anti-inequality, and anti-discrimination movements that have stimulated and nurtured the growth of much the VCS. Camden's VCS strengthens the social fabric of the borough and plays a vital role, through shared endeavour, in realising the shared vision for the future of our borough, as set out in We Make Camden.
- 1.2. For the purposes of this report, the term "VCS" will encompass voluntary and community sector organisations, faith groups, social enterprises, formal and informal volunteering operations, and social action groups.
- 1.2 The VCS in Camden comprises over 2,400 locally focused groups and organisations, ranging from grassroots social action groups to established charities. Approximately 80% of these VCS organisations and groups are micro-organisations or small organisations, with incomes of less than £100,000 per year. As a whole, the sector provides a strong community voice, and VCS leaders reflect the diverse communities of Camden.
- 1.3 Camden's VCS benefits from many long-standing organisations who are deeply embedded in Camden's neighbourhoods and who have rich local knowledge and expertise in their fields, as well as a high number of new and emerging groups that reflect Camden's dynamic culture of people associating to strengthen communities and create access to opportunity. The VCS also benefits from relatively high levels of grassroots activity, volunteering, and youth engagement. The Mayor of London's Civic Strength Index scores Camden highly for the level of community activity.
- 1.4 VCS organisations across the UK are facing severe challenges, and this national trend is also evident in Camden, with many of Camden's 2,400 groups experiencing major challenges. There are two broad categories of challenge for VCS organisations, which shape the context that these organisations operate in.
- 1.5 The first kind of challenge for VCS organisations relates to the social and economic challenges that the communities that they support experience. VCS groups are often closest to Camden's communities and hold trusted relationships, and so many groups are experiencing increasing demand for services and increasing complexity of presenting need that reflects rising need in society. The rising level and complexity of need has been driven in large part by the rising cost of living. The State of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Camden 2024 report, appended at Appendix 1, highlights that 54% of VCS groups experienced increased demand due to the cost of living, with many groups having to focus on 'critical' rather than

‘preventative’ support, reduce services, or cut back services in order to cope with rising demand and more complex need.

- 1.6 Camden’s VCS groups have played an essential and highly valued role in building community cohesion in the borough. However, continuing to do so and maintaining community cohesion has been especially challenging in the current international context. Conversations with VCS groups and faith communities have highlighted the rise in hate crime, feelings of increased vulnerability among many communities, and a rise in community tensions. These developments have placed increased pressure on VCS groups, and especially faith-based organisations.
- 1.7 Many VCS groups also experience organisational challenges. Financial challenges are very significant. The Charity Commission has reported in recent years that charities’ costs are growing faster than their incomes, resulting in real terms declines in spending power, and those in Camden are not an exception to this. For the VCS, opportunities for flexible, core, unrestricted funding are scarce, and the duration of the funding is often limited to a short period of time, which limits capacity to respond sustainably to rising levels of need within communities. A range of factors have negatively affected the VCS’ usual income streams, including reduced individual giving and an increasingly competitive funding landscape. The State of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Camden 2024 report highlights a trend whereby an increasing number of VCS groups and organisations are predicting deficits and/or running out of reserves.
- 1.8 VCS organisations also face workforce challenges including recruitment and retention of skilled staff and volunteers, reduced capacity for staff and volunteer development, pay and progression challenges, and increasing levels of need for staff and volunteer well-being support. The economic climate exacerbates these issues by making it increasingly hard for the VCS to offer competitive salaries to attract staff and increasingly hard to retain volunteers in a context where people now have less time or flexibility. Both established and new organisations struggle to increase their staff numbers to levels required to effectively support communities. Moreover, many VCS groups have challenges securing affordable premises within which to operate and face rising running costs for the premises that they are able to operate, including energy and utilities bills. Section 2 of the report sets out how Camden Council has worked with the VCS to enable organisations to navigate these challenges, and others.

## **2. CAMDEN COUNCIL’S PARTNERSHIP WITH THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR**

- 2.1 Camden Council has a long-standing commitment to empowering the VCS to thrive, serve our local communities, and achieve ever greater impact, while respecting its autonomy and independence. In recent years the Council has sought to fundamentally shift the relationship it has with the VCS towards a model based on a partnership of trust, collaboration, and shared purpose. The Council’s ambition is to move to an approach based on ‘power with’ rather

than 'power over'. This recognises that a strong, sustainable, and independent sector is vital for our shared ambitions.

- 2.2 Camden Council and Camden's VCS have a long history of working together to support Camden's communities. The Council commissions VCS organisations to deliver public services at a value of approximately £50 million per annum and over 100 VCS organisations operate from Council premises. The Council and the VCS mobilised effectively together during the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis to protect residents from harm and ensure access to necessary advice and support.
- 2.3 Camden Council has developed plans with the 42 VCS organisations who are part of the We Make Camden VCS Investment Programme 2024-31 to empower the sector and build its resilience. These initiatives address five key areas that are critical to the sector's resilience: funding; organisational support; data, insights, and impact; collaboration; and community spaces. These, together, represent a shift towards shared power and shared purpose.
  - 2.3.1 In terms of funding, the Council's commitment to the sector is underpinned by its long-term VCS Investment Programme 2024-2031, which provides over £4.1 million in grant funding per annum to a diverse range of voluntary, community and faith organisations. This includes the Community Partner Fund, which provides seven years of unrestricted funding to 37 organisations who are deeply rooted in Camden's communities, as well as funding for Camden's Advice Network and a range of small grants through the We Make Camden Kit, the We Make Camden Project Fund, the Cohesion Fund, and the Resilience Fund. Providing multi-year, unrestricted funding alongside a series of small grants creates a more diverse ecosystem of funding, enables the VCS to respond flexibly to community needs.
  - 2.3.2 In terms of organisational support, the Council partners with VCS infrastructure organisations to ensure provision of advice, support and training on VCS strategy and management.
  - 2.3.3 In terms of data, insights, and impact, the Council is seeking to create opportunities for VCS organisations to share stories of impact through evaluation training and initiatives including the annual We Make Camden Summit. The Council is also sharing data through its open data platform and the annual State of the Borough report to help VCS organisations make sense of community needs.
  - 2.3.4 In terms of collaboration, the Council recognises the importance of spaces for VCS organisations to share and connect. The Council supports partnership networks and forums that create shared awareness, collaboration, peer support, and networking, including the Camden Advice Network, the Interfaith Network, the Food Partnership, C4, the Borough of Sanctuary Network, regular Equalities and Community Strength Forums and Neighbourhood-based community networks.

- 2.3.5 Finally, in terms of community spaces, Cabinet agreed the Community Spaces: Voluntary and Community Sector Rents and Leases Policy in January 2023, which introduced a new social value lease for organisations in specific council community spaces that recognises the social value of VCS organisations running community spaces through discounted rent. This policy offers VCS organisations leases with less onerous repairing obligations and social value rent discounts, which have contributed to the shift in working relationships between the Council and the VCS. The first lease under this policy awarded a vacant works site to Camden Food Bank and the Council is continuing to implement it. The Council is also investing in repairs and maintenance to support community spaces to be well maintained, well-used, and accessible.
- 2.5 Camden Council and Camden's VCS have established long-term partnerships to tackle the borough's most pressing issues. The Camden Advice Network brings together key advice providers to build Camden households' financial resilience, and Camden's VCS also continues to play a variety of important roles in making progress towards the goals of Camden's Missions.
- 2.6 The Camden Interfaith Network brings together residents, faith and community organisations from across the borough and provides space for open learning, dialogue and collaboration among Camden's faith communities. The Council works with members of the interfaith network to provide support and reassurance, especially in times of challenge. This commitment to interfaith work provides a strong symbolic commitment to shared values with trusted community leaders, demonstrating that people can come together in solidarity, despite difference.

### **3. IMPACT OF THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR**

- 3.1 The VCS in Camden has emerged from a range of movements that challenge and tackle inequality, poverty, and injustice. The impact that VCS organisations make to the lives of communities in Camden can be understood in those terms, encompassing advancement of equality, opportunity, and living standards, and creating connections and cohesion.
- 3.2 Camden's State of the Borough report for 2025 highlights that Camden benefits from levels of belonging and trust that are broadly in line with the average for London boroughs, that Camden residents express greater pride in their local area than Londoners generally, and that most Camden residents agree that their area successfully brings people from diverse backgrounds together. These findings suggest that Camden benefits from strong foundations, but that there is further progress that the Council and the VCS can make together.
- 3.3 The evaluation of the first year of Camden's Community Partner Fund, which is appended to this report at Appendix 2, highlights the impact that 37 local organisations that have been awarded this unrestricted funding have had. In

the first year of the seven-year fund, the 37 organisations have worked with 140,000 residents and mobilised 2,425 volunteers. The evaluation report also sets out strong evidence that community centres and the activities being provided by these organisations are creating connections and belonging in neighbourhoods and supporting happier and healthier communities.

- 3.4 The evaluation report sets out how the Community Partners are achieving impact for our communities in line with the shared vision for our borough articulated in We Make Camden. Across the 37 Community Partners, a huge range of activities and services are being delivered, from youth clubs and employment support that support the youth mission, to breakfast and lunch clubs and food growing projects that support the food mission, neighbourhood-based projects that support the estates mission, and community empowerment and support services that support the diversity mission. The case studies set out in the evaluation report show the powerful contribution of the Community Partners to supporting community strength, increasing belonging and creating connections among Camden residents and communities, and supporting people to tackle the challenges of poverty and social exclusion.
- 3.5 The Camden Advice Network continues to have a highly positive impact for Camden's communities. Each year, the organisations that comprise the Camden Advice Network support an average of 10,000 residents and raise approximately £10 million per annum in benefits and financial gains. Since its inception, the Camden Advice Network has collectively written off over £1.8 million in debt. Long-term funding of Advice partners helps to enable them while to secure an additional £2 million annually in match funding.
- 3.6 The VCS plays a significant role in supporting Camden residents to access economic opportunities that help them to live well. The Community Partner Fund evaluation report highlights examples of how residents – and especially young people - have been involved in volunteering and social action while building skills and pathways to employment. The 37 Community Partners collectively employ more than 400 people.
- 3.7 The Camden Interfaith Network's regular events enable faith representatives to develop shared understanding of how communities are feeling, and how local, national and global events impact Camden residents. A survey of the network's neighbourhood coffee morning attendees found that 88% of attendees made a new connection with someone they hadn't met before and 100% of respondents met some of a different faith or background.

#### **4. COMMITMENT TO THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR**

- 4.1 Camden Council has a strong long-term commitment to ensuring that the borough has an empowered, resilient, sustainable, and independent voluntary and community sector. We Make Camden, our shared vision for the borough, was built collectively with our community and Camden's VCS as we recognise that the VCS has a vital role to play in improving the lives of Camden residents and creating a fairer borough for our communities.

- 4.2 The Council is committed to designing and implementing policies and projects in partnership with the VCS that align with recognised good practice. The Council's relational funding approach, which prioritises building good relationships with VCS organisations, supporting partners through challenges, and providing space for reflection and learning, is recognised as good practice and the evaluation of the Council's Community Partner Fund has found that this approach is welcomed and appreciated by VCS partners. The approach draws on the Institute of Voluntary Action Research's vision and guidance for open and trusting grant-making and became a case study in the government's Civil Society Covenant.
- 4.3 The Council is committed to working in partnership to address the challenges that VCS organisations face. Recognising the need for investment in the VCS workforce to support the resilience of the sector, the Council has invested Apprenticeship Levy funds in provision of a two-year postgraduate Systems Thinking and Leadership course, in partnership with the University of Birmingham's Leadership Institute, to a cohort of staff from local VCS organisations, several of whom are being supported to participate by bursaries that cover the costs to their organisations of their participation.
- 4.4 In the spirit of shared purpose and shared endeavour, the Council remains firmly committed to working in partnership with the VCS to ensure community cohesion in our borough and to tackle all forms of hate and discrimination. The partnership between the Council and the VCS will remain central to our borough's culture of solidarity and our shared efforts to build confidence and reaffirm that there is no place for hate in our borough. The Council's £60k per year investment in the Cohesion Fund recognises the importance of this.
- 4.5 The Council is committed to developing its practice in partnering with the VCS. The Council's ambition is to make further progress in shifting the relationship that the Council has with the VCS towards one of collaboration and partnership, where the Council enables the VCS to achieve shared purpose.

## **5. Comments of the Director of Finance**

The Director of Finance has been consulted and his comments are contained in the body of the report.

## **6. Legal Comments of the Borough Solicitor**

The Borough Solicitor has been consulted on this report and encourages the continuation of strong governance and regular reporting on key projects, policies, initiatives and funding by the Council to support, empower and work in partnership with the VCS community.

## **7. Environmental Implications**

There are no proposals that have environmental implications.

## **8. Appendices**

Appendix 1. State of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Camden 2024

Appendix 2. Community Partner Fund, 1<sup>st</sup> Year Evaluation Report

**REPORT ENDS**