



Draft submission to HBC from HCN/HVA

Dear Kim and Colin,

Re: Budget Consultation Submission

On behalf of Hastings Community Network thank you for participating in our joint annual meeting to discuss the budget and corporate plan. Members really welcomed the informative overview which Cllr Fitzgerald gave and the candour with which the questions and debate was approached.

I know that detailed notes were taken of the questions and points but there are some wider strategic issues we would like to emphasise in this submission particularly relating to:

- collaborative partnership work between HBC and the VCSE sector;
- inward investment;
- access to services and addressing “digital poverty”.

We hope that these observations are helpful in assisting the HBC set its budget and future corporate priorities at what is a challenging and critical period for our local community.

Collaborative partnership work between HBC and the VCSE sector

We appreciate the work undertaken by the Council in response to COVID and the impressive joint work which was conducted by partners working together as part of the COVID Community Hub. We welcome the Council's decision to review and learn from the cross-sector work undertaken during the crisis and the lessons which can be drawn from it. We agree that it is important to take the ethos of partnership and address the challenge of how it can continue into the recovery phase.

We made the point that over some years many of the community facing officer roles within the Borough Council have diminished. This presents a challenge about how the Council can retain good connections with the community; obtain intelligence about trends and issues and consult in a meaningful and creative way. This is an area where we feel that collaboration will be key. HCN has assets and structures to do that effectively and “reach” into communities. Recent local research undertaken looking at the impact of COVID on Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities has highlighted a need to ensure that communities who may be – or feel – more marginalised are engaged in a meaningful way.

Contact between the VCSE sector and the Council takes place on a number of different levels but it is felt that a more strategic conversation is needed at which HCN can engage at a senior level. Whilst liaison can take place on a project-by-

project basis, we are requesting that the Council identify a named HBC officer and an elected Cabinet member to lead the strategic dialogue with the sector and be a point of reference. It is felt that this would be a way of continuing dialogue and identifying opportunities for collaboration. It is also important that the Council are regularly briefed on the issues which will affect the sector over the next period.

The challenges for everyone around funding are going to be huge in the next few years. From the point of view of the HCN Executive we would like to not become inward looking: the outward engagement we have with the voluntary sector is important at this time. The voluntary sector brings in funding and the support people locally. The budget that the voluntary sector brings in matches that of the Council.

The LSP, which has recently been postponed and cancelled, is a good platform for that cross-sector working so it is important to recognise the importance of that continuing. It is going to be vital to have an identified person from the Council to continue this work. This will give us the opportunities for greater success

Inward Investment

HCN welcome the potential investment offered by the Town Deal and work collaboratively with HBC offers to present the strongest possible case for Hastings and create structures which can represent the VCSE sector effectively. Whilst this work is at a preparatory stage we feel that open, transparent and creative engagement will be key in ensuring local buy-in from residents.

Access to services and digital poverty

Over the course of many years the Council has changed many of its methods of working to have its first points of contact online. We recognise that this is part of a national trend of "digital by default" but feel that a strategic approach is needed to actively acknowledge and combat digital poverty.

HCN has been looking at digital poverty for some time, including the extent to which it is an issue for Hastings. The HCN Executive sees this as an area for collaboration. We have been working with. We also have a Digital Inclusion Working Group and CAB have a Digital Inclusion Officer who is putting together a framework with other groups. We acknowledge the Council's comment that whilst some initiatives have been pursued this does not constitute an entire strategy and we would be keen to continue this discussion. We have a shared interest to ensure that services remain accessible and any digital divide affecting local people is mitigated.

We hope these comments are helpful and look forward to further dialogue around these issues.

Yours sincerely

Carole Dixon
Chair
Hastings Community network