EAST STAFFORDSHIRE BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT COVER SHEET

		To be marked with an 'X' by Democratic Services after report has been presented
Title of Report:	Scrutiny Review of Supporting and Engaging Communities	
Meeting of:	Scrutiny (Community Regeneration, Environment and Health and Well Being) Committee **25th January 2022**	
	Corporate Management Team	
	Leader and Deputy Leaders	
	Cabinet	

Scrutiny Committee Review Final Report

Title: Scrutiny Review of Supporting and Engaging Communities

Scrutiny Committee: Scrutiny (Community Regeneration, Environment and Health and Well Being) Committee

Committee Chair: Cllr Wileman

Sub-group Members Leading Review:

- Cllr Clarke
- Cllr Hussain
- Cllr Legg
- Cllr Gould

Is the Report Confidential?   No
If so, please state relevant paragraph from Schedule 12A LGA 1972: N/a

SECTION 1: COMMITTEE'S REPORT

1. Scrutiny Review of Supporting and Engaging Communities

1.1.   Background / Context

1.2.   In March 2020 the country entered a nationwide lockdown in response to the global spread of COVID-19. With the introduction of lockdown many individuals and community groups mobilised to support and assist the most vulnerable in their locality. Existing charities shifted their resources to respond to the crisis and many new resident groups sprang to life in a bid to support each other. The first lockdown eased in the summer of 2020 only to be resurrected again in November with COVID cases rising. Once again, community groups and charities have been at the forefront of the response to this second lockdown.

1.3.   Moving beyond the second lockdown, there is the distinct possibility of a third (or severe restrictions) which may impact negatively upon the residents and businesses of East Staffordshire. This scrutiny review seeks to look back at the previous lockdown downs and explore the lessons that have been learned, how community groups are engaged with, what improvements could be made, the role played by communities in responding to the virus and how can volunteer momentum can be maintained.

1.4.   What are the core questions the review is seeking to answer?

- What lessons have been learned from the first lockdown that have been implemented for the second? What improvements can still be made?

- What can be done to maintain the momentum of volunteering which has been generated in response to the pandemic crisis?

- How are the community responses to the virus managed and how do organisations link in with local people?

1.5.   What is the purpose of the Review (in one sentence)?

1.6.   To understand how, during the pandemic, communities have been engaged with and what has been done to support them through these unprecedented times.

1.7.   Scrutiny approach

1.8.   Interview Burton Albion Community Trust as the lead organisation for the third sector response to the pandemic in East Staffordshire.

1.9.   Interview Support Staffordshire to determine the extent of their role throughout the pandemic

1.10.   In scope

1.11. The engagement of communities throughout the pandemic and what can be done to provide further support in the future; based on lessons learned in the early days of the pandemic.

1.12. Out of scope

1.13. Communities can be engaged with through a variety of methods. Beyond the scope of this review was the Council's general use of social media platforms to interact with the public/community groups. Furthermore, the review confined itself to the time period associated with the lockdowns and the onset of the pandemic.

2. Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

2.1. The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns presented many challenges to community life including physical and mental health. Throughout the pandemic it became clear how important social connections and local communities are when responding to these challenges.

2.2. Data released by the ONS[1] during the first lockdown demonstrated that 64.1% of adults felt other local community members would support them if they needed help during the coronavirus pandemic and over three in four adults (77.9%) said they thought people are doing more to help others since the COVID-19 pandemic started, compared to 67.9% prior to the pandemic.

2.3. Additionally, over one in three adults (37.5%) said they had gone shopping or done other tasks for neighbours.

2.4. As well as community support and goodwill, a range of organisations have responded to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Not only established organisations such as local authorities and charities but informal organisations and individual volunteers, each of whom have been pivotal in the response.

2.5. This report will focus on the formal response to the pandemic and explore the role of Support Staffordshire and Burton Albion Community Trust through interviews with key personnel from each organisation.

3. Support Staffordshire

3.1. Support Staffordshire is a representative body who provide support to the voluntary sector, therefore the committee felt it was vital to understand what support they provided to voluntary organisations during the early stages of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns.

3.2. Support Staffordshire developed a close working relationship with the Council and in the early days of the pandemic the key themes they focused on were: access to food; food poverty; prescription delivery; and tackling loneliness, isolation and mental wellbeing.

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[1]
https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritain/23april2020#coping-whilst-staying-at-home-and-community-support-networks

3.3. Support Staffordshire revamped their website, providing a central point of contact for offers of help from volunteers and organisations. More broadly, Support Staffordshire moved to encourage highly localised support and mutual aid.

3.4. By early April, working with county and district councils, Support Staffordshire set up a safety net for residents in need of help who couldn't or hadn't accessed local support. This meant anyone calling the county emergency hotline could be passed through to a locality or district for ongoing support once the County Council had met the immediate emergency need.

3.5. With the large geography of the county, Support Staffordshire jointly decided with Staffordshire County Council that attempting to route the anticipated huge demand through a bottle neck wouldn't work and as a result a dispersed model was introduced. Working closely with the council and districts they supported and initiated a four-layer response as follows:

- Encouraging Neighbourliness – By providing web content, templates and social media, Support Staffordshire were able to provided localised support at street level.
- Mutual Aid – Support Staffordshire quickly moved to support Mutual Aid Groups with advice and practical help on safety, safeguarding, funding, volunteer management and much more. There are now circa 80-90 mutual aid groups operating at a variety of levels covering areas ranging from estates to towns.
- District/VCSE Leads Network - By early April, working with county and district councils, most areas had established a safety net for residents in need of help, who couldn't or hadn't accessed local support. In East Staffordshire, Burton Albion Community Trust were the VCSE lead.
- County Emergency Response – Staffordshire County Council took formal responsibility for all urgent emergency demand coming into their contact centre, dealing with urgent food needs before passing through to the district/VCSE sector to establish sustained provision.

3.6. Key Statistics across Staffordshire (April – June 2020)

3.6.1. General statistics from Support Staffordshire:

- 1,967 Covid volunteers came forward to Support Staffordshire, with 78% of those signposted to opportunities.
- 87,098 unique views of Support Staffordshire Covid webpages
- 312 organisations contacted for support
- 264 news stories shared
- 140 forum participants at 18 online forums
- 117 participants in 15 Covid training sessions
- £1.85m inward investment supported

3.6.2. Across Staffordshire, VSCE District Leads supported to undertake

- 5,034 weekly food deliveries
- 6,001 prepared meals delivered
- 2,846 prescriptions collected
- 1,594 befriending calls

3.7. Support Staffordshire are focusing on digital inclusion which includes provision of equipment and to support those who do not have access to high speed broadband.

3.8. Across the county the overwhelming majority of mutual aid groups want to continue in some format. There are various challenges including the development of knowledge and skills of those involved, many of whom have volunteered for the first time in this sort of role.

3.9. Building on the momentum around volunteering locally and responding to the request to develop a systematic approach nationally, Support Staffordshire are developing plans to provide support and resilience within the VCSE sector.

3.10. In their presentation Support Staffordshire discussed the challenges organisations face when trying to source funding and in the current climate much of the funding opportunities available are COVID specific.

3.11. There has emerged a role for VCSE organisations that act locally. These groups can be defined as anchor organisations and Support Staffordshire will be exploring how they can work with these groups more collaboratively.

3.12. Throughout the early stages of the pandemic a number of community groups established themselves on Facebook and whilst this did provide a good support mechanism for a number of people it did present some challenges.

3.13. The lack of governance or structure in how a Facebook community group may operate meant it was sometimes difficult to engage with the leaders. Support Staffordshire identified two pages in Uttoxeter as good examples where Support Staffordshire were able to link in with the group. In some instances the informal community groups who appeared on Facebook have become established formal groups.

3.14. Moving forward, Support Staffordshire are reviewing their use of digital to provide support and access to groups who can't meet face to face. They will continue to provide digital interface for volunteers and try to maintain volunteering opportunities. Support Staffordshire will also focus on collaborations between organisations and seek to continue to foster these relationships.

3.15. Reflecting on the impact of the pandemic, Support Staffordshire have confirmed that established organisations continue to offer excellent support to their beneficiaries across a range of services. A lot of organisations increased their volunteer capacity during this time to satisfy demand accordingly, supported by Support Staffordshire. Volunteer fatigue was an issue for some groups during 2020. These organisations remain strong and determined after a very challenging 22 months and their enthusiasm to support their beneficiaries and those in need in the community is not only evident but in abundance. Demand for Support Staffordshire services and support remains high.

3.16. A number of the new groups that emerged to help those in need at the start of the pandemic were supported by Support Staffordshire to 'formalise' and develop their group continue to operate now to support their communities, across both rural and urban areas. Others ceased to operate following the second lockdown when demand had reduced, but were prepared to step up again if approached for support. Some that were predominantly social media based groups have kept live pages, but their focus has changed and are no longer focusing on emergency response.

4. Burton Albion Community Trust

4.1. Burton Albion Community Trust (BACT) are the Voluntary Community & Social Enterprise lead for East Staffordshire. At the outset of the pandemic the football club made a conscious decision to embed themselves within the community in response to the pandemic.

4.2. The football club offered its facilities to local authorities so they could be used a community asset. The football club has been used as a:

- Covid-19 testing centre
- Pop up centre for wider community testing
- Vaccination Centre
- A facility in the stadium for midwives to provide pre/post-natal checks to ensure continuity in this area of medical support.

4.3. Where possible, BACT have continued to deliver their core services including a school programme for key worker children and key community walks and wellbeing programmes. They have provided emergency parcel support for those in the community who were in need, allowing local people to connect with one another.

4.4. In addition to emergency parcel support, community parcels have been sent to people who are isolated and living on their own. These packs include crosswords and other puzzles to try and help people remain mentally active.

4.5. Burton Albion Community Trust have developed a central contact database and a formalised referral pathway to partner organisations is now in place to ensure people are directed to the right organisation. In addition, there is an improved connection to smaller and informal groups, all of which helps ensure that the right help is being given to people in our community. The offering provided by BACT is now location specific i.e. just for East Staffordshire.

4.6. As with Support Staffordshire, BACT have experienced a dramatic increase in the number of volunteers, all of who have different areas of expertise and experience. In response to the increase in demand and volunteers, BACT are developing a connected exit strategy. This includes:

- Creating a formal recruitment pathway and retainment process
- Recognising the value of volunteers and the roles they play in supporting the community.

4.7. BACT have recently confirmed whilst there was a natural reduction in volunteers when some restrictions were lifted, the momentum has not been lost. BACT feel there are still a significant number of volunteers in various roles across their work.

4.8. There is a now a much stronger referral process through BACT however there is ongoing considerations as to how they consult with the community and make contact with those people who do not know about the organisation and the support they offer.

4.9. Moving forward BACT will continue to network with local organisations and focus on the local community. Whilst activity is spread across East Staffordshire there will be a focus on key areas within the borough.

5. Summary

5.1. The pandemic and the lockdowns created a number of challenges not only to the health and wellbeing of the population but presented both social and economic challenges to the voluntary sector.

5.2. There is still an appetite to volunteer in East Staffordshire and both Support Staffordshire and BACT discussed future plans when interviewed by the Scrutiny sub-group. Therefore it is recommended that a Member Briefing is arranged with both Support Staffordshire and BACT to brief members on how Councillors can support both organisations and get involved.

5.3. In addition, it is clear that there are a host community groups and volunteering opportunities in the VCSE sector therefore the committee feels a regular volunteer forum, where members and voluntary groups can meet to discuss volunteering opportunities, will be welcome.

5.4. The group felt that members can support and get involved from both the perspective of understanding what services organisations can provide to our residents, but also what support ESBC provides to voluntary groups. This would ensure members continue being, and further become, the conduit for dialog and support between the voluntary sector, ESBC and residents.

5.5. In the discussion with Support Staffordshire, it was highlighted organisations face some challenges when trying to source funding and in the current climate much of the funding opportunities available are COVID specific. We feel it is appropriate to take this opportunity to review ESBC's voluntary grant schemes or supported schemes to ensure the general funding and support available are flexible to support the local context and need.

5.6. Finally, the group felt it will beneficial to members, community groups and the public to improve how we communicate volunteering opportunities. Therefore we will be recommending that we review how we signpost to volunteer organisations on our website and including a regular item in the member briefing to highlight any opportunities for volunteering.

6. Recommendation(s)

6.1. Hold a Member Briefing with Support Staffordshire and BACT to provide an update on community groups and volunteering in East Staffordshire and how members can support and get involved.

6.2. Scrutiny to invite Support Staffordshire to Scrutiny meetings to provide an annual update on their work, the state of volunteering in East Staffordshire and check on ESBC's role in supporting the voluntary sector.

6.3. Hold an annual volunteer forum/market place style event to encourage engagement opportunities between voluntary groups & members.

6.4. An annual update to the relevant Scrutiny Committee on ESBC's role in supporting the voluntary sector.

6.5. Review ESBC's voluntary grant schemes or supported schemes to ensure the general funding and support available are flexible to support the local context and need.

6.6. A regular item in the member briefing to highlight any opportunities for volunteering.

6.7. Review signposting of volunteer organisations on the Council website.

SECTION 2: OFFICER CONSIDERATIONS

7. Financial Considerations

This section has been approved by the following member of the Financial Management Unit: Lisa Turner

7.1. There are no financial issues arising from this Report.

8. Legal Considerations

This section has been approved by the following member of the Legal Team: Caroline Elwood

8.1. There are no legal issues arising from this Report:

9. Background Papers

12.1 None.

10. Equalities and Health

10.1 **Equality impacts:** The subject of this Report is not a policy, strategy, function or service that is new or being revised. An equality and health impact assessment is not required.

10.2 **Health impacts:** The outcome of the health screening question does not require a full Health Impact Assessment to be completed.

11. Human Rights

11.1 There are no Human Rights issues arising from this Report.

12. Sustainability(including climate change and change adaptation measures)

12.1 Does the proposal result in an overall positive effect in terms of sustainability (including climate change and change adaptation measures) **N/A**