

Policy Committee

25 September 2023



Reading
Borough Council
Working better with you

Title	Voluntary & Community Sector Compact 2023 to 2025
Purpose of the report	To make a decision
Report status	Public report
Report author	Gavin Handford, Assistant Director, Policy, Performance & Customer Service
Lead Councillor	Cllr Liz Terry, Lead Councillor for Corporate Services & Resources
Corporate priority	Thriving Communities
Recommendations	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. That the Committee approve the VCS Compact document presented in Appendix 1.2. That, as per section 10 of the VCS Compact, the Committee receive annual updates on the activities of the Compact at future Policy Committee meetings.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. Reading has a vibrant, effective, and committed voluntary and community sector. Reading Borough Council along with the many and varied groups and organisations that make up the voluntary and community sector have the same broad ambition of improving the quality of life for the residents and communities of Reading.
- 1.2. Following an independent review of the working relationship between the Council and the voluntary and community sector, this new Compact document was a specific request from the sector. The Compact has been co-produced over the past six months by the Council and many of the voluntary and community sector organisations from across the borough.
- 1.3. The aim of this Compact is to create and embed mechanisms that ensure our work to improve the lives of our residents and communities is effectively joined up, that our complementary efforts are targeted where they can add most value and that each partner supports the other as much as it can.
- 1.4. The Compact highlights how the Council and the voluntary and community sector will work together, including the shared principles we will follow, the different types of relationships we have, and what each organisation has to offer to improve our joint working for the residents of Reading Borough.

- 1.5. The success of this Compact and the delivery of specific objectives will be reviewed jointly each year by the Council and the VCS Leaders Group, with the results and successes communicated across the borough.

2. Policy Context

- 2.1. Our Vision is to help Reading realise its potential and to ensure that everyone who lives and works here can share the benefits of its success.
- 2.2. Our foundations which underpin our delivery of our vision includes collaborating with others. We are stronger in partnership, and we collaborate with organisations from major corporations to local groups; with the business sector, charities, education institutions, health and social care, the police, faith groups, and the voluntary sector in Reading and across the Thames Valley to achieve our vision for Reading.
- 2.3. We are building on the work done during the pandemic to consolidate partnerships and ensure a stronger network to support the most vulnerable.
- 2.4. Reading has a vibrant, effective, and committed voluntary and community sector. Among the sector's many positive impacts supporting residents and enhancing the town's cultural opportunities, it makes a significant contribution to social inclusion and community cohesion in Reading.
- 2.5. Although the Council and the groups and organisations in the voluntary and community sector are separate, there is a long history of working together in partnership for the benefit of our residents and the Council respects and values the independence of the sector.
- 2.6. This new Compact between Reading Borough Council and Reading's voluntary and community sector sets out the basis for strategic engagement, partnership working and collaboration to deliver our shared ambition of improving the quality of life for the residents and communities of Reading.

3. The Proposal

- 3.1. The aim of this Compact is to create and embed mechanisms that ensure our work to improve the lives of our residents and communities is effectively joined up, that our complementary efforts are targeted where they can add most value and that each partner supports the other as much as it can.
- 3.2. For the Council, a thriving and sustainable voluntary and community sector can directly support the delivery of its vision; for the groups and organisations within the voluntary and community sector, the Council can support it to do what it does best, working in and with their communities.
- 3.3. The voluntary sector in Reading is made up of many hundreds of groups and organisations, from small volunteer social groups to large corporate charities. Their relationships with the Council are varied but all can benefit from closer working and mutual understanding.
- 3.4. The Compact provides a framework for our partnership working, with dialogue and collaboration at its core. We will be fair and honest as respectful partners.
- 3.5. Specifically, the Compact includes details of the following key elements of successful collaborative working between the Council and the Voluntary and Community Sector:
 - Our Shared Ambition
 - How we will Work Together

- Principles Of Our Compact Approach
 - The Relationship Between Reading Borough Council and the Voluntary & Community Sector
 - Our Compact Offer
 - Accountability for the Compact
 - Annual Review
- 3.6. The Compact will cover the period 2023-25, to align with the existing Closing the Gap funding agreements between the Council and voluntary and community sector as well as the Council's medium term financial strategy.
- 3.7. Progress on the outcomes of the Compact working will be reviewed annually by the Council and the Voluntary & Community Sector.

4. Contribution to Strategic Aims

- 4.1. A strong voluntary and community sector is central to Reading being a place where its local communities can thrive and make our town an exciting and diverse place to live and work. Our aspiration is that this spirit of inclusivity and community is carried into every aspect of life in Reading, wherever people live and whatever their stage of life.
- 4.2. Voluntary and community services are often focused on the needs of the most vulnerable and excluded in our communities, ensuring young people, older people and those with long term health conditions or disabilities are supported to live their best lives.
- 4.3. This is why our Corporate Plan prioritises investing in voluntary and community organisations, building relationships, and strengthening the capacity and resilience of the sector.
- 4.4. As a council, we know we are stronger in partnership and we collaborate with local groups; with charities, faith groups, and the voluntary sector to achieve our vision for Reading.
- 4.5. This new Compact document show how the Council supports a strong voluntary and community sector within Reading, and in turn, what the sector can do to improve the quality of life for our residents.

5. Environmental and Climate Implications

- 5.1. There are several voluntary and community organisations who specifically support residents to have more environmentally sustainable lifestyles, including reducing or minimising their usage of energy, or through the recycling or repurposing of items to extend their use and usefulness.
- 5.2. There are also many local voluntary and community sector organisations who focus their activities on the ecological sustainability of the borough, protecting and nurturing animals and wildlife so that it can thrive and continue to play an important role in the lives of current and future residents.

6. Community Engagement

- 6.1. The development of this new Compact document was initiated following a review of the working relationship between the Council and the voluntary and community sector. In producing the document presented within this report, Council officers have

engaged directly with a wide range of local organisations, both collectively and individually to understand their views on working with the Council and how this relationship can improve to support their own organisational purpose and the support provided to Reading residents.

- 6.2. Alongside specific discussions on the development of the Compact, the Council regularly and routinely hosts opportunities for voluntary and community sector organisations to discuss issues which are of importance to them and to provide feedback or points of learning to Council officers.
- 6.3. This engagement has formed a crucial part in the development of a Compact document that reflects the needs and aspirations of the voluntary and community sector at its work with the Council.

7. Equality Implications

- 7.1. The voluntary and community sector within Reading supports residents with all protected characteristics as detailed in the Equality Act (2010). By improving the working relationship between the Council and the organisations within the voluntary and community sector, the Council is enhancing the capacity available to improve the quality of life for everyone in the borough who may face challenges because of their own personal circumstances.

8. Other Relevant Considerations

- 8.1. None to note.

9. Legal Implications

- 9.1. The Compact is a voluntary agreement between the Council and the wider voluntary and community sector. There are no legal implications to note.

10. Financial Implications

- 10.1. There are no additional financial commitments within the recommendations of this report. All activities relating to the finances of the Council are already contained within the Medium-Term Financial Plan.

11. Timetable for Implementation

- 11.1. The activities relating to the VCS Compact document are to be delivered between 2023 and 2025.

12. Background Papers

- 12.1. There are none.

Appendices

1. VCS Compact Document 2023 to 2025

Appendix 1

Reading Borough Council

**Voluntary and Community
Sector Compact**

2023-25

Statement of Intent

We (Reading Borough Council and voluntary and community sector) recognise that achieving better outcomes for Residents will be more successful by working effectively in partnership. This Compact is our commitment to this partnership.

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1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 Reading has a vibrant, effective, and committed voluntary and community sector. Reading Borough Council along with the many and varied groups and organisations that make up the voluntary and community sector have the same broad ambition of improving the quality of life for the residents and communities of Reading.
- 1.2 Following an independent review of the working relationship between the Council and the voluntary and community sector, this new Compact document was a specific request from the sector. The Compact has been co-produced over the past six months by the Council and many of the voluntary and community sector organisations from across the borough.
- 1.3 The aim of this Compact is to create and embed mechanisms that ensure our work to improve the lives of our residents and communities is effectively joined up, that our complementary efforts are targeted where they can add most value and that each partner supports the other as much as it can.
- 1.4 The Compact highlights how the Council and the voluntary and community sector will work together, including the shared principles we will follow, the different types of relationships we have, and what each organisation has to offer to improve our joint working for the residents of Reading Borough.
- 1.5 The success of this Compact and the delivery of specific objectives will be reviewed jointly each year by the Council and the VCS Leaders Group, with the results and successes communicated across the borough.

Reading Borough Council – Voluntary & Community Sector Compact

2.0 Objective

- 2.1 This new Compact between Reading Borough Council and Reading's voluntary and community sector sets out the basis for strategic engagement, partnership working and collaboration to deliver our shared ambition of improving the quality of life for the residents and communities of Reading.
- 2.2 Building on the learning from Compact working in the past, this new Compact will help realise this ambition by embedding ways of working that combine the complementary capabilities and perspectives of Reading Borough Council and the voluntary and community sector to achieve:
- A strong and self-sustaining voluntary and community sector which Reading can be proud of.
 - More strategic alignment between the Council and the voluntary and community sector, recognising its important role in helping to understand priorities and shape service delivery across Reading, but also recognising that we may not always agree.
 - Mutual understanding between the Council and the voluntary and community sector of how each organisation/sector works alongside a commitment to overcome factors that constrain joint working and support each partner wherever possible.
 - Positive engagement and insight into the diverse needs of local people.
 - Better services more tailored to the needs of our residents.
 - A borough where volunteering is encouraged, nurtured, and celebrated.
- 2.3 The Compact will cover the period 2023-25, to align with the existing Closing the Gap funding agreements between the Council and voluntary and community sector as well as the Council's medium term financial strategy. Progress on the outcomes of the Compact working will be reviewed annually by the Council and the Voluntary & Community Sector.

3.0 Context

- 3.1 Reading has a vibrant, effective, and committed voluntary and community sector. Among the sector's many positive impacts supporting residents and enhancing the town's cultural opportunities, it makes a significant contribution to social inclusion and community cohesion in Reading.
- 3.2 Although the Council and the groups and organisations in the voluntary and community sector are separate, there is a long history of working together in partnership for the benefit of our residents and the Council respects and values the independence of the sector.
- 3.3 Since the last iteration of the Compact, the landscape has changed considerably. Local government austerity measures, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, followed quickly by cost-of-living challenges, have had a significant impact on the way in which the Council and the voluntary and community sector work together.
- 3.4 This new version is the third iteration of the Reading Compact, which fundamentally updates the approach from previous Compact agreements and reflects how

circumstances have changed since the last Compact in 2011, and how the Council and its voluntary sector partners have adapted to this change. We have all needed to become leaner and more focused on the activities that matter most to our residents, meaning we will always prioritise putting our efforts into those things that make a practical difference to people's lives.

4.0 Our Shared Ambition

- 4.1 Both Reading Borough Council and the voluntary and community sector share a fundamental ambition to improve the quality of life of Reading's residents and communities. Every single Council service, and each diverse voluntary and community sector activity, ranging from the organisations delivering services in their communities to the individuals giving their time voluntarily in a myriad of different roles, is rooted in this same goal.
- 4.2 The Council and voluntary and community sector's work aims to ensure a more socially inclusive Reading by focusing on those residents and communities who are experiencing many and varied different challenges and therefore not yet benefitting from the town's economic success and growth into one of the most vibrant places in the country.
- 4.3 Both the Council and the voluntary and community sector have a role to play in ensuring Reading can reach its full potential and that everyone who lives and works here can share the benefits of its success, the objective that sits at the heart of Reading Borough Council's Corporate Plan. Neither can achieve this on its own, and our progress towards it will be maximised through aligning our strategic objectives and working in partnership. Through this Compact we will therefore strive to ensure our engagement, processes and activities are aligned in support of our common goals.

5.0 How We Will Work Together

- 5.1 The aim of this Compact is to create and embed mechanisms that ensure our work to improve the lives of our residents and communities is effectively joined up, that our complementary efforts are targeted where they can add most value and that each partner supports the other as much as it can. For the Council, a thriving and sustainable voluntary and community sector can directly support the delivery of its vision; for the groups and organisations within the voluntary and community sector, the Council can support it to do what it does best, working in and with their communities.
- 5.2 The Reading Compact is therefore about promoting understanding, engagement and co-operation between the Council and the many voluntary and community groups and organisations which make up the sector. It sets out the principles of how the Council and the voluntary and community sector work together strategically, to help shape the future of Reading, as well as operationally, at the neighbourhood and commissioning level.
- 5.3 The Compact provides a framework for our partnership working, with dialogue and collaboration at its core. We will be fair and honest as respectful partners,

6.0 Principles of our Compact Approach

6.1 The Compact is based upon the following key principles:

- Reading Borough Council and the voluntary and community sector recognise the complementary expertise that each brings to partnership working, and the value in enabling relationships that avoid undue prescription and in which each partner is trusted to deliver both effectively and efficiently.
- Each partner recognises the resource constraints the other is operating under. The Compact itself cannot create additional resources but is about maximising the use of the resources each partner has available and coordinating and sharing these where there are mutually agreeable opportunities to add value to the outcomes for our residents.
- Resources and collaborative activity will be targeted towards organisations pursuing common aims, and working within the context of the priorities set out in the Council's Corporate Plan
- Relationships will operate at a strategic and place shaping level, as well as at the operational service delivery and neighbourhood level.
- Relationships between the Council and the voluntary and community sector will respect the independence of individual organisations and their right to make and accept responsibility for their actions and decisions.
- Innovation and new ways of working will be encouraged wherever this can bring benefits to the people of Reading.
- Decision making, resource allocation and the provision of support will be as transparent and as consistent as possible.
- As equal partners, we recognise that there will always be learning and opportunities to improve, and we will work together to build on these.
- Within the Council's governance and legal requirements, processes and structures will be tailored and proportionate to minimise the burdens on both the Council and the voluntary and community sector, and maximise capability directed at frontline work.

7.0 The Relationship Between Reading Borough Council and the Voluntary & Community Sector

7.1 The voluntary sector in Reading is made up of many hundreds of groups and organisations, from small volunteer social groups to large corporate charities. Their relationships with the Council are varied but all can benefit from closer working and mutual understanding.

7.2 To help maintain a clear understanding of how to work effectively within this broad range of relationships, the Compact will utilise the Locality Relationship Toolkit developed by the Local Government Association which categorises below the different relationships a local authority may have with the voluntary sector, and examples of the types of activities within each relationship.

Relationship	Summary of Approach	Examples
Shaping Relationships	Formalised structures through which the council engages VCS on strategic direction.	<i>VCS Partnership boards and VCS strategies.</i> Reading Borough Council Social Inclusion Board
Ongoing Relationships	Practical mechanisms for working together on a day-to-day basis.	<i>CVS and other infrastructure, compacts, Community Foundations.</i> Reading VCS Compact
Neighbourhood Relationships	Neighbourhood level structures for local engagement and where powers, funds, or service delivery can be devolved.	<i>Community councils, Area Arrangements, Place Partnerships, Community Networks.</i> Southcote Networking Group
Commissioning Relationships	Working together throughout the commissioning cycle. Planning strategically based on local needs, assets, aspirations, and priorities. Co-designing the services to be procured, and the process for doing so. Monitoring and evaluating based on agreed, meaningful, and illustrative metrics.	<i>Co-design of commissioning strategies and/or services, being part of a public service framework, community asset transfer.</i> One Front Door Project
Delivery Relationships	Local VCS participating in tenders, winning contracts, and delivering local services.	<i>Winning contracts, forming delivery consortiums, participating in alliance contract.</i> Closing the Gap

Our Compact Offer

- 8.1 Reading Borough Council supports a vibrant, independent, and self-sustaining voluntary and community sector within the borough.
- 8.2 As a partnership, we recognise that the voluntary and community sector is the totality of many different groups and organisations across the borough, each with their own identify, purpose and ambitions. As organisations we are grappling daily with the challenges of limited time and capacity, the demands of multiple funders, the need for core funding and ensuring survival, and the limitations of volunteers.
- 8.3 We want to create an environment, supported by our structures and processes, that enables voluntary and community sector organisations to focus on what they do best: working in and with our communities.

Compact Theme	Reading Borough Council offer	Voluntary & Community Sector Offer
Strategic Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whenever possible and relevant, engage voluntary and community sector organisation as part of a process of collaboration on key changes to Council policies and services recognising the knowledge and expertise the VCS has in relation to their client groups • Engage strategically with the sector and how it organises itself collectively • Regular engagement events for the voluntary and community sector with senior officers and senior leaders • Actively encourage volunteering within the borough 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The VCS have established partnerships and alliances across different footprints, for example, Berkshire, Oxford, Buckinghamshire BOB. • Many local VCS organisations benefit from associations with national partners that share expertise and have national influence. • Opportunities for RBC to connect with groups of residents, they might not otherwise have a relationship with. • Opportunities for RBC to benefit from coproduction with community expertise to help design and deliver inclusive services – community research, lived experience. • Access to a rich communication network that caters for disabilities, language and cultural understanding, digital exclusion. • The voluntary sector has knowledge and expertise around their client groups that can inform policy making and coproduction.
Relationships and culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a dedicated role within the Council to support the voluntary and community sector in the borough and provide a single-entry point for voluntary and community sector issues. • Communicate key relevant messages and information regularly to those voluntary and community sector organisations that want to receive it • Encourage operational collaboration with voluntary and community sector organisations where appropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The voluntary sector will organise itself to provide engagement and collaboration opportunities for RBC to connect with groups across the sector and the town. • The voluntary sector will provide a sounding board for RBC through the Reading VCS Leaders. Participation in VCS leaders is open to any voluntary sector leader who offers generous leadership beyond their own organisation and for the benefit of the wider VCS in Reading.

Compact Theme	Reading Borough Council offer	Voluntary & Community Sector Offer
Structure and processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake proportional monitoring for any grants issued or contracts, with advance, and annual, grant payments where possible. Have specific and proportionate bid processes, commissioning monitoring and payment frameworks based on the nature of the services being provided • Recognise the limited capacity of the voluntary and community sector by maximising the value of its participation in Council meetings and reducing the bureaucracy of interacting and transacting with the Council • Encourage innovation and collaboration by providing opportunities for voluntary and community sector organisations to submit joint working proposals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The voluntary sector can transform and mobilise services quickly to adapt to changing circumstances, as highlighted during the pandemic. • Creative solutions developed and piloted through the VCS can be adopted and scaled up, for example, social prescribing.
Capacity and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information and support for voluntary and community sector funding opportunities, including bid writing and business case development • Provide opportunities to voluntary and community sector organisations to explore their accommodation needs, and consider opportunities for improving how local assets are utilised, especially for organisations providing services which directly support the Council's Corporate Plan • Where practical, support voluntary and community sector activities that align with the Council's strategic priorities • Commission specific local services from voluntary and community sector organisations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent joint working has shown that the voluntary sector brings additional funding revenue of £4 for every £1 invested by RBC. • The voluntary sector generates community support and spirit through an estimated 20,000 volunteers who are active in Reading at least once a year. More than 1,000 trustees create and govern charities in Reading bringing skills, experience, and a determination to enrich and improve lives. • The voluntary sector has community spaces, both real and digital, that provide opportunities for collaboration and best use of resources. • Prevention – VCS services are often upstream and effective at preventing or delaying crises in health, social care, and financial circumstance.

9.0 Accountability for The Compact

- 9.1 The successful realisation of the benefits to Reading residents that come from improved joint working between the Council and the Voluntary & Community Sector is dependent on each organisation maintaining their commitment to the principles and activities detailed within this Compact document.
- 9.2 An action plan will jointly be produced by the Council and VCS Leaders to detail the specific activities to be delivered using the Compact principles and offers, with regular reviews.
- 9.3 Delivery of the Council's Offer within the Compact will be managed by the Council's Social Inclusion Board which is chaired by the Chief Executive. Evidence of the success of the Compact will be gathered throughout the year and complemented with an annual VCS Survey.
- 9.4 In turn, the Reading VCS Leaders are committed to positive partnership work and will actively contribute to Compact reviews. The Reading VCS leaders will engage all parts of the sector through partnerships, forums, and surveys to ensure any group that wants to can be heard and participate.
- 9.5 The Reading VCS Leaders will identify themes and examples of positive and negative partnership work to share and discuss at bi-monthly meetings with RBC officers.

10.0 Annual Review

- 10.1 Representatives from Reading VCS Leaders will participate in an Annual Compact review which will be presented to the Council's Policy Committee.