**Summary of responses to the engagement paper ‘Camden Council and Camden’s Voluntary and Community Sector: Investing in a Sustainable Strategic Relationship’**

In December 2014, Camden Council started talking to local voluntary sector organisations about how to develop a more strategic relationship with the sector in the light of large reductions in the funding which the Council receives from central government. This conversation was also with a view to agreeing a new investment and support programme for the sector from 2016-2017.

After several events with voluntary organisations, and in response to requests from the sector for options to consider, an ‘engagement paper’ was presented for discussion from May to July 2015. The options in that paper were not mutually exclusive. Respondents were asked to think about which aspects of the options might combine well, and suggest alternatives. The aim was to gather a variety of views to inform a single synthesised proposal which will be formally consulted on in autumn 2015.

**1. Who responded to the engagement paper?**

One hundred and six people from eighty-four organisations responded. These organisations have incomes ranging from under £10,000 to over £1.6m. Of these, 71% currently get Council funding as a part of their income.

**2. The four options presented in the engagement paper, and responses to them:**

Views varied widely, with different types of organisations tending to support different ideas. Strengths, challenges and opportunities identified by respondents for each option are summarised below. For details of each option, and the full responses, see [our website](https://consultations.wearecamden.org/culture-environment/camden-council-and-camden-s-voluntary-and-communit).

**2.1 Option A:** Similar to the Council’s current Voluntary and Community Sector Investment Programme (a combination of project and non-project funding) but with less money.

**Strengths:** Ensures a diversity of old and new, large and small, and generalist and specialist organisations by combining the benefits of stable ‘core’ funding and flexible project funding. Allows the Council and the VCS to respond to new needs.

**Challenges:** Perceived inequity in the level of access which different organisations currently have to Council departments. Also perceived inequity in the way in which ‘core’ funding and rent relief is currently distributed.

**Opportunities:** Possible improvements to the current programme include fairer, more transparent ‘core’ funding and greater opportunities for smaller organisations not currently in receipt of funding.

**2.2 Option B:** Only non-project funding (e.g. ‘core’ funding for community centres).

**Strengths:** Mainly about the importance of ‘core’ council funding in ensuring a sustainable sector, as it is difficult to get this from other funders.

**Challenges:** A key concern was that only having ‘core’ funding would disadvantage small, new and less established organisations and inadvertently stifle innovation.

**Opportunities:** It should be possible to design a fairer system for ‘core’ funding with a wider set of criteria, so thematic as well as neighbourhood organisations can benefit.

**2.3 Option C:** ‘Collective impact’ model where partnerships are developed and funded around borough-wide or local challenges or themes**.**

**Strengths:** The opportunity to work with other organisations (not just the VCS) on common issues.

**Challenges:** Potential bureaucracy in developing ‘backbone’ organisations to oversee each challenge, which could also be seen as the Council trying to play less of a role. Respondents also generally felt that this option would favour large organisations, and there was concern that ‘backbone’ organisations would reap an unfair competitive advantage. There was a strong view that if this option was developed, ‘core’ funding would have to stay alongside the thematic partnership work so as to ensure continuity of non-thematic organisations.

**Opportunities:** The chance to unlock other funding sources and other council and non-council commissioning, beyond the funding held by the Council’s Communities and Third Sector team.

**2.4 Option D:** Like Option C but with a specific budget devolved to each partnership.

**Strengths:** As with responses to Option C, working on a specific issue and demonstrating collective impact could be exciting.

**Challenges:** Similar to responses to Option C. Who would choose the priorities on which partnerships would work? Would partnerships be equitable? Would time-limited partnerships around chosen topics recreate the ‘ills’ of short term project funding but on a larger scale? Option D might be less bureaucratic than Option C, but might also be very complex to administer.

**Opportunities:** A combination of options B and D,balancing ‘core’ and flexible funding with this kind of partnership approach, could be beneficial.

**2.5 Alternative suggestions**

Alternative ideas were submitted by Voluntary Action Camden, C4 (Camden Community Centres Consortium), individual community centres and others. Suggestions included criteria for funding, such as VCS organisations managing council-owned assets, providing facilities for other organisations and bringing in other money. Some felt that small project funding was important as a ‘temporary bridge’ to enable small organisations to become sustainable.

There were also proposals to refocus the Council’s Communities and Third Sector team to help make the Council more joined-up in its approach to the VCS and to help improve Council commissioning and procurement. For example, to make commissioning more VCS-friendly and take more account of social value. Suggestions to improve commissioning included giving preference to local providers, giving the VCS information on tenders early on so that they can help identify priority needs, and making tenders specify whether TUPE applies, to avoid the VCS wasting time on applications.

Suggestions regarding a possible ‘Revolving Fund’ to help organisations grow included that it would only be of use to organisations who were large enough to easily pay back the loan or had a reliable income-generating model. Some suggestions also focused on the engagement and process, for example proposing that a cross-sector group meet to discuss the synthesised proposal which will be published for consultation at the end of September.

**3. Other strong themes in the feedback not tied to any particular option:**

**3.1 We need an approach that fosters flexibility and innovation**

People said the Council needs a mix of funds and approaches to reflect the diversity of the sector. There was a view that a properly supported sector can contribute to outcomes but needs more clarity from the Council about which outcomes the Council considers to be most important.

**3.2 We need an approach which values ‘core’ funding**

Alongside flexibility and innovation, stability through ‘core’ funding was seen as probably the most important issue. However this was mainly said by those already get such funding, and a lot of concern was raised about the fairness of how this funding is currently allocated.

**3.3 We need an approach based not on history but on need, outcomes and impact**

Much of the perceived unfairness in Council funding was put down to history – for example, rent relief tending to be given to the occupiers of a building rather than being based on need or impact.

**3.4 We need an approach that makes space for smaller organisations and thematic organisations**

A key concern was that ‘core’ funding alone (or overly restrictive criteria for it) would squeeze out small organisations who haven’t benefitted from that funding to date and thematic organisations whose funding isn’t linked to a particular building or neighbourhood.

**3.5 We need an approach that recognises the Council needs to change too**

There was strong feeling that while funding arrangements are important, the real opportunity is in changing the way the Council works with local voluntary organisations. Such as creating a more equal partnership when identifying need, choosing priorities and delivering solutions. There was also a strong view that the Council has work to do to make the way it commissions more VCS-friendly (beyond the specific pot of Communities and Third Sector funding).

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