

3. SPARK

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Purpose of the Report

This report seeks the approval of District Executive on the future funding of SPARK –Somerset (previously South Somerset Voluntary and Community Action) for the 2017/2018 financial year.

Public Interest

SSDC supports SPARK to ensure that:

- a) Voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations (VCSE) across South Somerset are able to access free, impartial and expert advice from within the sector.
- b) The voluntary community and social enterprise sector is properly represented,
- c) There is a development body that promotes the need for and ways of delivering, services in the sector, to help some of the people most in need
- d) A range of objectives in our Council Plan are met

Background

Set up in 1981, SPARK is part of a national network of Councils for Voluntary Service (now commonly called Voluntary & Community Action) that traditionally have existed at a District level. These are civil society, development organisations whose main purpose is to support the work of other organisations in the VCSE. This type of organisation is also known as VCSE Infrastructure. It is a registered charity and company limited by guarantee.

Its role includes:

- Representing the views of members to statutory bodies and others
- Helping new initiatives to develop and new organisations to form
- Providing advice and information on all aspects of running and managing the organisations they work with, including recruiting volunteers and accessing sustainable funding or generating income
- A leadership role within the sector, encouraging organisations to work together in collaboration and partnership

SPARK has worked closely with our Financial Services team to provide evidence of the organisation's ongoing sustainability for both its core activities and its direct services.

At the 4 February 2016 District Executive, grant funding of £74,260 was approved for SPARK for 2016/17. The decision to fund followed the outcome of a review of SPARK's performance that was conducted between the months of March and December 2015.

The purpose of the review was to inform the council's priorities in relation to the voluntary sector's support needs and to establish how this will be funded from the 1st April 2016.

It was carried out with the full co-operation of, and in close collaboration with, SPARK's trustees and staff.

The results of the review were reported to DX at the December 2015 meeting and were instrumental in giving members the confidence to renew the funding. In February 2016, a new Outcomes based Service Specification was drawn up for 2016/17 against which SPARK's performance has been monitored.

SPARK Activities 2016/17

2016/17 has been marked by a significant upturn in SPARK's profile and ability to support South Somerset's voluntary and community sector. Under the leadership of the new manager SPARK has been driving forward with a programme of service improvements whilst also seeking out new business and therefore diversifying their income streams to supplement our core funding.

- 1) Following the takeover of Mendip Community Support (SPARK's equivalent organisation supporting the VCS in Mendip and Sedgemoor) a full rebranding exercise was undertaken, with what had been SSVCA's Voluntary Sector Support Service now becoming SPARK, to better reflect its now expanded area of benefit.
- 2) As part of the rebranding SPARK has significantly improved its communication with and offer to the local VCS. Of particular note are the new website, much improved e-bulletins and recent addition of a range of training courses.
- 3) **Website** - SPARK now has a brand new, fresh and intuitive website with a vastly improved range of information and resources available to groups and organisations. Further improvements are in hand including the provision of a library of downloadable resources such as model constitutions, policies and other fact sheets. <http://www.sparksomerset.org.uk/>
- 4) **Weekly e-bulletins** – comprising of an alternating Funding Bulletin and General Bulletin, these provide current sector news and information on legislation, funding, events and opportunities for local VCS organisations. They also provide a vehicle for local groups to promote and profile their own events and services. These regular bulletins are supplemented with other emails, surveys and more targeted reminders or campaigns. The overall effect is that the sector receives regular, consistent and high quality information from SPARK placing them as the organisation of choice for support needs in South Somerset.

"Thank you very much for such a useful funding bulletin. I really appreciate the 'at a glance' format. From the talk on funding we know how important it is to go in by the funder's door, rather than trying to drag them through our door."

- 5) **SPARK Training** - Introduced in the late autumn of 2016, SPARK has now been running a series of very well attended training courses for trustees and staff of local groups. Courses have been arranged to meet the needs expressed by local groups and cover both issues of governance and day to day operational practice. Topics(past and future) include:-
 - Budgets, management accounts and cash flow forecasting
 - Data Protection for fundraisers
 - DBS (Safeguarding)
 - Writing good funding applications

- Preparing Annual Reports
 - First Aid
 - E-marketing and newsletters
 - Introduction to Social Media
- 6) **DBS** - With the acquisition of Mendip Community Support, SPARK is now able to offer groups and organisations in South Somerset a full DBS checking service. As a 'Registered Body' with the Disclosure and Barring Service, Spark can;
- Offer dedicated support to deal with queries by phone, email or in person
 - Check completed applications and send them to the DBS.
 - Monitor and track all applications on an applicant's behalf and notify them when the Disclosure has been released.
 - Provide training on request, helping groups complete their applications ensuring a smooth process from start to finish.

The DBS service is a significant addition to SPARK's portfolio of services meaning that South Somerset groups are now able to benefit from an enhanced service.

"Compass Disability Services is an employer of over 50 staff and provider of independent living services. We have a need for a reliable, professional and cost effective DBS service. We have worked with Spark over the past four years to provide this service and continue to be very happy that our needs are being met."

- 7) **Volunteering** – SPARK continues to provide support for individual volunteers and volunteer seeking organisations across South Somerset. They promote available volunteering opportunities via the national Do-it website, through their own database, on the website, in the local press and also through their social media channels.

In addition to the brokerage service SPARK also provide best practice advice and guidance to the volunteer involving organisations registered with them. These services include policy writing, recruiting, retaining and managing volunteers. They also facilitate Volunteer Coordinator meetings, where groups come together to network, share and support each other.

Planned improvements to the volunteering brokerage service include the introduction of a brand new bespoke searchable volunteer database that will provide a much more effective local tool than either their existing offer or the Do-it website. This new database will also enable them to gather much better performance management data on the Volunteering service. This is due to go live in March 2017.

The Volunteer database is part of an overarching new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tool that Spark are introducing that will enable them to better capture and report every business interaction they have with their users.

SPARK is also developing 'place based' local volunteering brokerage. A bespoke service is being developed in Frome and funded by Frome Town Council. Similar opportunities are also being explored in South Somerset.

- 8) **Group support** - this is provided by the dedicated Voluntary Sector Advisers. They are the initial point of contact for groups and organisations needing information, advice or support and can advise on anything from starting up a community group through to achieving long-term sustainability. Support includes providing free organisational 'health checks' and advising on

the best way forward. The adviser can also help groups navigate and access the other SPARK services which they may require e.g. recruiting volunteers, free funding searches and DBS.

To ensure that the Group Support work SPARK undertakes complements rather than duplicates the work of our Area Development Service, SPARK's manager has met with each of the Area Development Teams, clarifying SPARK's particular areas of focus and specialism and enabling cross referral between our two organisations as appropriate.

The following four brief examples illustrate well the variety of groups SPARK work with and range of issues around which they can provide support.

Henhayes Centre - Crewkerne

In the summer of 2016 SPARK had a series of meetings with the Henhayes Centre in Crewkerne to discuss their future financial viability and governance arrangements. As a result of these meetings, they worked with Henhayes in submitting a bid to the Somerset Community Foundation. This bid was successful and provides The Henhayes Centre with a resource to look at a review of current governance arrangements, and a major funding bid for a Project and Fundraising Officer. SPARK continues to provide support to the Henhayes Centre in these areas.

Yeovil ADHD Group

In January 2017 SPARK met with representatives of Yeovil ADHD. The group wanted advice on delivering a regional conference in terms of marketing and funding. They were able to provide this support and - as a result - the conference will be held in the spring of this year. From this initial contact SPARK is now in discussion with Yeovil ADHD about providing further support.

Stoke Hill Farm - Wincanton

Stoke Hill Farm is a small working farm just outside Wincanton. The owner wants to be able to open up the farm for environmental education purposes to school children and specific groups of adults. SPARK has had various meetings with the owner throughout 2016/17 and has provided support on fundraising, legal structures, networking and marketing. The farm has recently been successful in securing some funding and SPARK are working with them and English Nature for Science Week in March 2017.

Iminster De Fib Group

SPARK provided support to a new group in Iminster who have been fundraising to provide a defibrillator for the town. SPARK provided practical support to them including advice around setting up a new group and establishing their Constitution and good governance.

"Spark has signposted volunteers to us, provided mentoring, chaired meetings to offer advice or guidance, and promoted our work at various functions. They've even got us national coverage in the printed press through their extensive social networking! This barely touches on the help they've provided over the years too. On top of being a valuable resource, the team have proven themselves to be personable and friendly. There is a genuineness to their 'want to help' that is quite rare. Their service is invaluable and one we can't recommend enough."

- 9) **Networking** – SPARK provide opportunities for groups and organisations to come together to learn, network and explore the opportunities to work together more collaboratively. It achieves this through a programme of thematic VCS Forums. Forums themes have included, the importance of values, business planning, funding applications and opportunities, DBS as well as guest speakers from Children in Need, Somerset Community Foundation and the Lottery

"The Forums are very well organised and informative, a great way to network – not sure what you could do better!"

- 10) **Accountancy Services** – this is a new service currently in development which is being created in response to a need articulated by a number of smaller groups. SPARK will employ a community accountant who can prepare statutory and management accounts, provide a book keeping and payroll service and offer advice and support on a wide range of financial good practice as it affects charities and the wider voluntary sector. This will be a service offered on a paid for, but affordable basis. The post will also provide SPARK with its own bookkeeping and financial management requirements thus achieving savings on their management costs.

In addition to these core activities SPARK have also been involved in the following during the course of the year.

- Negotiating and securing funding from Symphony and the IPC to fund a Community Partnerships Coordinator post, which is helping to bridge the gap between health and the voluntary sector
- Organising jointly with SSDC the South Somerset 'Let's End Loneliness' conference.
- With the Community Council for Somerset and Engage, successfully bidding to the Transform Foundation for an £18k grant to develop a new website that will provide a single point of access (a portal) for any group or organisation in Somerset that is seeking help and support. It will be called '**Make it Happen**' and will direct individuals and groups to the infrastructure organisation best placed to help them, based on geography or their particular needs. This is anticipated to drive more business to SPARK.
- Partnering with other local organisations, SPARK are in the process of bidding for two County-wide contracts, that will support and complement their core business
- Partnering with Somerset Rural Youth Project to look at how they can support the National Citizen's Service.

In their role as providing a 'Voice for the Sector' SPARK also engages in strategic arenas on behalf of the sector, for example,

- with the CCG at board level regarding their future commissioning intentions;
- In discussions with Yeovil Hospital regarding the role the VCSE can play in supporting early hospital discharge;
- Key member of the County-wide VCSE Strategic Advisory Group
- Engagement with the Office of Civil Society (DCLG) and Somerset Chamber of Commerce to discuss the development of employee supported volunteering, and
- Supporting SCC in community engagement events across the Districts, to improve communication and develop better ways of working between the statutory and voluntary sectors, particularly in relation to commissioning.
- As a member of the SST Strategy Group and as Chair of the SST Healthy Communities group

State of the Sector Survey and Report

One of the key requirements of the 2016/17 SLA has been the production of a South Somerset 'State of the Sector' report to inform SPARK's future service planning and to include:-

- An analysis of sector's economic impact
- An analysis of the sector's health and needs

Through membership of the Somerset VCSE Strategic Forum, an opportunity presented itself to undertake this research as part of a county-wide Health of the Sector project. In addition financial

contribution from SSDC's core grant to SPARK, match funding was made available by the Somerset Community Foundation, Community Council for Somerset and Somerset County Council.

The findings from this research will help inform the review of our working and funding relationship with SPARK that we are proposing takes place during the 2017/18 financial year.

'Share, Celebrate, Grow - VCSE State of the Sector Report 2016'

Summary of key findings

A diverse sector – with gaps

- 130 organisations, with a diverse range of charitable purposes, contributed to the survey; one third of these operate in South Somerset.
- 68% of respondents are 'micro' and 'small' organisations
- 47% of respondents (the largest category) provide social, recreation and leisure services; by contrast 0.9% and 1.8% respectively provide immigration and child care services
- Gaps: Young people, people with mental health problems, and those on low incomes were identified as groups for whom services are currently inadequate

Rich in optimism and in commitment to meeting needs...

- 19% expected the current year's income to exceed that of the previous year, 46% expected it to be about the same
- 48% plan to maintain their level of services in the coming year while 35% plan to increase their level of services
- 61% are currently working in partnership with other organisations, and more plan to do so. Key reasons - alongside improving services - include cost savings, efficiencies and increasing funding opportunities

...but many on a 'sustainability knife-edge'

- 59% said the volume of demand for their services has increased,
- 42% said the complexity of issues faced by clients has increased and 39% said it had stayed the same
- 76% expect their income to remain 'about the same' or to decrease during 2016-17
- 43% expect to break even financially during the current year, 25% expect their outgoings to exceed their income
- 52% said the availability of funding has decreased over the past three years,
- 65% said that 'funding and sustainability' are priority areas for training and support
- Parish and town councils are key to the sustainability of many local community groups and charities.

Funders' priorities are proving counter-productive

- Core running costs are the most difficult to raise - severely limiting fund-raising capacity. 61% put salaries at the top of the list of funding-raising challenges
- 78% put funding and sustainability at the top of 4 main challenges facing them in the next 2 years;
- 65% (84) of organisations have no paid full-time workers, 24 of these have 1 or 2 part-time workers
- 32% of all respondents are operating with no paid staff at all

Members may be concerned that by now working across 3 Districts this could dilute Spark's focus at the South Somerset level. This however has to be set against both the added value this brings (e.g. the addition of the DBS service brought about by taking on the services of Mendip Community Support) and their ability to sustain a viable service by achieving economies of scale. By monitoring

delivery against targets we are safeguarding our investment, whilst also opening up possibilities to work with them differently as Transformation is implemented.

Performance Monitoring

Under the terms of the Service Level Agreement Performance monitoring is undertaken twice a year through submission of a 6 monthly report and a formal review meeting.

The interim 6 month contract monitoring meeting was held with the Manager and Chair of Trustees of SPARK on the 14th November 2016.

The following table provides a comparison of performance against the SLA requirements in the financial year 2015/16 with the first six months of the 2016/17 financial year. For illustrative purposes a sample of performance data has been presented here from what is otherwise an extensive suite of reporting requirements. Due to the introduction of a new Service Level Agreement for 2016/17 direct comparisons are not available in all cases.

As SPARK are currently in the process of migrating all their performance data to their newly procured CRM, this has prevented us from presenting more up to date data than that produced for the six monthly reporting requirements.

As a requirement of their 2016/17 SLA, SPARK has developed a methodology to be able to better report the impact of their work. It is proposed, therefore, that SPARK is invited to attend Area Committees in 2017 to present on their work and how it benefits the sector in South Somerset.

Given the limitations of using quantitative data for performance monitoring, the current suite of reporting requirements will be reviewed when producing the 2017/18 SLA ensuring that the monitoring requirements are useful and add value. Along with the improved management data that SPARK's new CRM will be able to provide, we will also look at much greater use of qualitative outcomes and narrative that better demonstrate the work of SPARK and its impact on people's lives.

Work Area	2015/16	Comments	2016/17 Half Year	Target (Where relevant)	On Target RAG	Comments
Group Support	34 groups	<p>Areas covered include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting up a charity, • constitutions • organisational policies • funding • volunteering • governance • HR • PR and marketing. <p>New groups that were helped to start-up included</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mental health group • three Arts groups • Men in Sheds (tackling loneliness and isolation amongst older men) • special educational needs group • self-help group for service families 	32 groups supported	50 groups supported	G	<p>Of these,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 requested specific funding advice and the remainder required more general support, including advice on start-up, governance and volunteers.
Networking & Training events	<p>4 VCS Forums</p> <p>2 training events</p>	<p>112 participants in total across all 6 events.</p> <p>95% of participants rating the forums and training events as useful</p>	<p>4 VCS forums</p> <p>Launched a new Training Programme with sessions planned for December and January</p>	<i>Minimum of 6 opportunities provided for the sector to develop knowledge and skills</i>	G	<p>60 participants. 100% of participants rating them either excellent or good</p> <p>Sessions on</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DBS • Funding Applications • Budgets, management accounts & cash-flow • Introduction to Facebook and Twitter

Work Area	2015/16	Comments	2016/17 Half Year	Target (Where relevant)	On Target RAG	Comments
Information & Communication	128 e-bulletins published and circulated	Bulletins provide information, advice and guidance on a self-serve basis. 100% of recipients indicated that they found the e-bulletins useful.	63 e-bulletins published and circulated New website soft launched	<i>Minimum of 24 e-bulletins published</i> <i>Website launched by July 2016</i>	G R	Bulletins now alternate weekly between a funding bulletin and more general bulletin Website delayed due to take over of Mendip Community Support & rebranding exercise
Volunteering	432 new volunteers seeking volunteering opportunities registered. 84 volunteers successfully placed		148 new volunteers seeking volunteering opportunities registered 28 volunteers successfully placed	<i>450 volunteers registered</i> <i>100 volunteers placed</i>	R R	Volunteering figures have been significantly down in this period due mainly to organisations using the 'Do It' national volunteering website. However, this trend is now reversing as the Do It offer is unable to deliver the service organisations require. In response a bespoke volunteer database is being developed for South Somerset based on a successful system developed in Plymouth that has led to a 100% increase in enquiries. SPARK is also developing 'place based' local volunteering brokerage. Following an initiative in Frome, and funded by Frome Town Council, similar opportunities are also being explored in South Somerset.

Work Area	2015/16	Comments	2016/17 Half Year	Target (Where relevant)	On Target RAG	Comments
Volunteering cont'd	<p>122 new volunteering opportunities with volunteer seeking organisations registered</p> <p>35 new volunteer seeking organisations with volunteering opportunities registered</p>		<p>39 new volunteering opportunities with volunteer seeking organisations registered</p> <p>13 new volunteer seeking organisations with volunteering opportunities registered</p>	<p>110 <i>Volunteering opportunities registered</i></p> <p>50 <i>new volunteering organisations registered</i></p>	<p>R</p> <p>R</p>	<p>Volunteering figures have been significantly down in this period due mainly to organisations using the 'Do It' national volunteering website. However, this trend is now reversing as the Do It offer is unable to deliver the service organisations require. In response a bespoke volunteer database is being developed for South Somerset based on a successful system developed in Plymouth that has led to a 100% increase in enquiries.</p>
	<p>3 Volunteer managers peer support sessions run.</p>		<p>Held 4 volunteering promotional events</p> <p>2 Volunteer co-ordinators peer support sessions run.</p>	<p><i>Up to 4 local volunteering promotional events held.</i></p> <p><i>Facilitate up to 4 volunteer managers meetings</i></p>	<p>G</p> <p>G</p>	<p>SPARK continues to work closely with CHAC to provide support to their volunteers on a weekly basis.</p>

Work Area	2015/16	Comments	2016/17 Half Year	Target (Where relevant)	On Target RAG	Comments
Impact	Secured £6k		Worked with regional Infrastructure organisation, South West Forum, to Develop methodology to report impact of work.	<i>Impact report presented to SSDC District Executive Committee</i>	G	Impact report will form part of the SPARK final end of year report (anticipated May 2017) and will be reported to members later in 2017.

Key

Categories	Colours <i>(for further detail please refer to Risk management strategy)</i>
R = Reputation	Red = High impact and high probability
CpP = Corporate Plan Priorities	Orange = Major impact and major probability
CP = Community Priorities	Yellow = Moderate impact and moderate probability
CY = Capacity	Green = Minor impact and minor probability
F = Financial	Blue = Insignificant impact and insignificant probability

Council Plan Implications

Funding SPARK assists the council deliver on the following values and priorities in the 2016-21 Council Plan.

Values

- Working with partners to improve services, efficiencies, resilience and influence.
- Supporting people and communities, enabling them to help themselves.

Priorities

- Actively manage assets and resources to ensure the best financial or community return.
- Support communities so that they can identify their needs and develop local solutions.
- Work with partners to achieve economies, resilience and influence.

Carbon Emissions & Adapting To Climate Change Implications

None

Equality And Diversity Implications

Working with the voluntary sector is one of the Council's means of providing services to hard to reach groups and engaging with communities who otherwise find it hard to access public services. Supporting the VCSE increases community engagement and participation. All groups supported by SSDC are required to have an Equalities Policy
