



The VCSE East Sussex Alliance Conference 2022

Introduction

Participants

Voluntary and community groups, as well as statutory partners, from across East Sussex were invited to the VCSE East Sussex Alliance Conference, Maps and Dreams, on 20 April 2022. Invitations were extended mainly through existing Alliance networks and mailing lists, as well as social media.

Fifty people, representing 25 voluntary and community groups, county council and district councils, attended.

It took place at Uckfield Civic Centre and was spread over an afternoon and evening.

The conference was divided into two parts.

Part I: Building strength and resilience across the sector through partnership and collaboration, focused on services across East Sussex around the following themes:

- Social isolation and loneliness
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Equality, diversity and inclusion

To help the discussion and capture the voices of delegates there were four questions:

Dream: What needs to happen in order for the sector to build resilience and to work more effectively and efficiently?

Map: How do we get there?

Travellers: Who do we journey with?

Travel: Next steps?

Participants were invited to contribute to the co-opertition wall, where participants could register wants and offers in terms of collaboration.

Participants were asked if they felt if we were living with Covid or in Covid recovery. The majority felt we are living with Covid. Comments included: "Need to rely on the science" and "On a treadmill catching up with the lockdown backlogs".

Three videos were selected to show at the start of the conference which were representative of the three main themes. Video links can be found within the report under the theme they represented.

Stalls from 12 organisations were placed around the conference room so that participants could learn about their work and activities in more depth.

A short film, Together We Can: Together We Do explained the role of the Alliance in East Sussex

To view the video click [here](#).

A speaker set the scene about the voluntary and community sector in East Sussex and was followed by speakers on the three themes. The CEO of ESCC followed to talk about cross-sector partnership working. The speakers were then followed by workshops.

Part II: How could we collectively support young people to engage in and strengthen the VCSE sector? This took place in the early evening and involved some of those who attended the earlier session plus a group of young people from a local school.

Two films were shown for context (see below) and two speakers talked about young people and mental health and youth voice. The workshop was done in the form of an Open Space session with participants suggesting ideas for discussion which were then grouped into three themes: Involving young people in volunteering, digital involvement of young people in voice, and involving young people in an Alliance conference.

Participants then moved around the space contributing to the discussion on each topic, before moving on when they felt they had contributed everything they had to say.

PART I: Building Strength and resilience across the sector through partnership and collaboration

The VCSE in East Sussex

The contribution and value of the VCSE sector in East Sussex

Katie Turner, Head of Research, Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR)

A summary of the social and economic contribution that the estimated 3500 voluntary and community groups make to East Sussex.

See <https://www.ivar.org.uk/publication/east-sussex-vcse/> for the full report.

Addressing loneliness and isolation

VIDEO: Addressing loneliness and isolation in older people from minoritised ethnic groups

Older people from minoritised ethnic groups are more likely than others to experience social isolation and loneliness. Age/ageism, migration-related processes, health and socio-economic inequalities and racism/discrimination all intersect to produce these outcomes. This video reports findings from a four-phased mixed-methods study which revealed that community-based groups tailored to fit with aspects of participants' identities that they value and that provide opportunities to connect based on these identities help to reduce their social isolation and loneliness.

To view the video click [here](#).

VIDEO: Two sides of the story | Share That You Care | Carers UK and British Gas

There are over 6.5 million unpaid carers in the UK. This short film shows the impact that caring can have on people's lives, and how talking can help.

To view the video click [here](#).

SPEAKER: Jenni Lloyd, Collaborate CIC

Community wellbeing: connected people & places

A systems approach to loneliness in East Sussex: insights & recommendations

An overview of loneliness and isolation in East Sussex covering the extent and breadth of the problem and some possible solutions. Key outcome: Loneliness is everyone's business – it can occur in any part of the community and there are multi-faceted problems and solutions. Every organisation needs to help in tackling it in a collaborative way.

For the full slides see Appendix 1.

Loneliness and social isolation workshop

The workshop looked at some of the recommendations from the loneliness work, recognising that there are a lot of recommendations and it can feel overwhelming to try and do something.

Language is also important so that everyone understands what loneliness means if we talk about connection and connected communities.

And they also shared some of the activities that are already ongoing in the county that can be potentially formed into a pattern. For example, the Making it Happen programme which is working in 17 communities and creates some kind of foundation for other things to happen around loneliness. In addition, there are links between loneliness projects and opportunities for community hubs across the county.

Suggested action point: Building on existing programmes

What are the existing programmes which can be built on to support more connected communities?

Mental health and wellbeing

VIDEO: Question Everything: How did lockdown deepen the UK mental health crisis?

At the Lockdowns Summit, child psychologist Dr. Zenobia Storah answered this question. She highlighted that the population was already in a state of a mental health crisis at the beginning of the pandemic. Fear-based messaging from the government, and extraordinary confinement rules which went against everything we know to be healthy, amplified this crisis significantly. She emphasizes that regular social interaction and contact are essential for our health and our survival.

To view the video click [here](#).

VIDEO: Working Minds campaign partners

We're calling for a culture change across Britain's workplaces where recognising and responding to the signs of stress becomes as routine as managing workplace safety. To develop the campaign so far, we have been working with partner organisations including Mind, Acas, Mates in Mind, Civil Engineering Contractors Association, Composites UK, the Homecare Association, the Farm Safety Foundation and Lifelines Scotland. We'd like to invite you to find out more information and to get involved by becoming a Working Mind champion.

To view the video, click [here](#).

SPEAKER: Neil Blanchard, CEO, Southdown

VCSE role in Transformation of East Sussex Community Mental Health Services

Presentation on the redesign of community mental health services through the VCSE Mental Health Transition Team and the implications for the VCSE through improved services and the strengthening and increased capacity of the VCSE sector.

For the full slides see Appendix 1.

Health and wellbeing workshop

The workshop discussed the idea of the Mental Health Network (highlighted in Neil Blanchard's presentation), which is a great opportunity and for which the voluntary sector in East Sussex has obtained £50,000. Participants talked about how to build resilience and best practice, as well as representation and what that means on the ground. It also unpacked what the implications of the

mental health network means beyond a simple network and how it will work on the ground. That process can be fed back through the Alliance.

Suggested action points: Mental health network

- How can organisations feed into the process and receive feedback on progress?
- Alliance to set up – how? How often?

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

SPEAKER: Tacye Turner, Services and Projects Coordinator, Diversity Resource International

Working with Black And Minority Ethnic carers across East Sussex

Presentation on DRI's work with carers from black and minority ethnic groups over the last year. DRI has worked with Care for the Carers on engaging with carers from minority ethnic groups who, for a variety of reasons, face barriers to receiving the support they need. Through bilingual advocates, DRI in conjunction with Care for the Carers has created space for carers from minority ethnic groups access support, both from services and peers.

To view the video, click [here](#).

Equality and inclusion workshop

The discussion ranged around what the sector probably needed to do itself before starting to look at the local authority and that it would be useful to undertake an audit about where the sector currently is. One of the big conversations was how do we get seldom heard voices heard within the county.

Somebody offered a good benchmarking tool that we organisations could look at to determine if it will be useful across the sector. This also involves looking at mechanisms

as well as equality impact assessments, how they work and how they might work better, ensuring that people are consulted so that mitigations are addressed within those areas. EIAs are written, but how are they followed through and how are those impacts actually assessed and addressed?

The Alliance could start taking a lead as far as the quality is concerned.

Suggested action points: EIAs

- What does a good EIA process look like?
- How could the Alliance support the sector to improve the process?

Working in partnership across the sectors

SPEAKER: Becky Shaw, CEO of ESCC.

Presentation about the importance of strengthening collaboration and partnership across the sectors to benefit communities in East Sussex and ESCC commitment towards building a stronger VCSE sector.

For the full slides see Appendix 1.

Dream: What needs to happen in order for the sector to build resilience and to work more effectively?

Participants were asked to identify what worked for the sector during the pandemic in terms of resilience and efficient working. These are things we need to do more of and ensure they become embedded in our work and practice.

Suggested action point: lessons learned

Understand what made the process of adapting to changed circumstances easier and what were the barriers.

Adapting to new circumstances

Participants said that in the first lockdown, VCSE organisations adapted quickly to the restrictions and adapted activities and services to the changed circumstances. Organisations learned to work more flexibly and efficiently.

Suggested action point:

Ensure that across the sector, VCSE organisations have access to IT and that staff have the training to use it. Who should take this forward?

Organisations quickly found new ways of communicating, networking and connecting differently, understanding that in order to deliver services effectively under such circumstances, they needed to collaborate and work together. For example, across the county, virtual networks were set up to co-ordinate delivery of food and aid.

Groups across the county pivoted to delivering services differently, setting up phone support lines for those living in isolation or with mental illness and distress. Mental health charities offered phone and virtual support, sometimes on a daily basis, while others offered doorstep entertainment and delivery of activity packs alongside food.

Zoom, WhatsApp and social media played a key role in changing service delivery. Organisations reported an increased confidence in using digital communications and apps.

For those unable to deliver any kind of service during the first lockdown, the pandemic provided a space and time to reflect and plan which was beneficial to those organisations.

Suggested action point: building on relationships strengthened during pandemic

Create a plan for maintaining cross-sector relationships.

Working collaboratively

Existing working relationships were strengthened during the pandemic. Notable was the partnership between local authorities, VCSE and NHS to create community hubs. VCSE organisations were treated as equal partners and the sector gained increased recognition for the part it played as the sectors worked together and worked around differences.

The sector saw a large increased need across a number of areas, including mental health, support with safe delivery of food and essentials, and social support.

The mental health impacts on staff and volunteers should not be underestimated, with an increasing sense of desperation amongst staff and public.

Suggested action point:

Recruiting and retaining volunteers needs resources devoted to it. We need to address recruiting younger volunteers and people representative of all sections of the community.

During the first lockdowns there was a great deal of fear, which those organisations supporting vulnerable people had to help them manage. Some vulnerable groups were not recognised initially, making them feel undervalued. Face to face contact was stopped overnight and closure of support services from all sectors left people stranded and frightened.

Workforce challenges such as IT, literacy and the availability of volunteers, made responding to heightened demand difficult.

Map: How do we get there?

- More networking
- Share good practice/learning
- Listen
- Involve/include representatives from those concerned
- Trust each other
- Collaborate
- Constantly challenge
- Look at ourselves (the Alliance members) – benchmark
- Increase pressure to do more EIA and consultation

Travellers: Who do we journey with?

- Everyone across voluntary and statutory sector
- Users of organisations

PART II: How could we collectively support young people to engage in and strengthen the VCSE sector?

SPEAKER: Ed Peasgood, Youth Participation Worker, East Sussex Community Voice and Participation Worker, ESCC Children’s Services

Children and Young People’s Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing. What is happening in East Sussex?

A number of projects to support children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing, including Village to Raise a Child, Youth Inspect and Advise Group, Self-harm Needs Assessment, Youth Cabinet Mental Health Campaigns and other.

For the full slides see Appendix 1.

SPEAKER: Shannon Payne, Youth Community Development Lead, Sussex Community Development Association

Information about Youth Voices in Newhaven: Our Voice Matters.

For the full slides see Appendix 1.

Open Space Session

Volunteering: How can young people be better involved?

Questions:

- Why isn’t it easy already? What would make it easier?
- What are the barriers?
- Who needs to take responsibility?

No. 1 priority – make it easier for voluntary sector to offer opportunities for young people in the first place.

Motivating young people

Young people need to see action as a result of being actively involved and not just tokenistic participation.

Advertising the wellbeing/holistic benefits to taking part other than career related.

Action points:

- Discussion with the sector and young people about volunteering opportunities.
- Work with sector to understand what adjustments are needed to get younger people involved.
- Look at organisations locally and nationally which are working well with young people.

Changing what volunteering means

Different age groups want to get involved in different ways. Some want to be more active, other less so, so tailored activities.

Advertising for volunteering experiences that encourage a bring a friend option, so the whole idea is, if you're not overly confident or daunted by going to a new place, you can take a friend.

Address 'powers that be' so can make voluntary opportunities for young people more available.

A volunteer passport can be used to make it to move between organisations.

Questions:

- How do we make it more accessible to all?
- Who will have the conversations with schools?

Bringing opportunities into the schools

Deeper learning days – bring in voluntary sector to schools to discuss opportunities they have for young people.

Raising awareness of spectrum of volunteering.

Advertising volunteering experiences that encourage bringing a friend.

The Alliance needs to work out a way collectively to streamline the process and provide opportunities. For example, a process like the Duke of Edinburgh award could be developed by the Alliance.

Who needs to be involved?

Careers and pastoral leads in schools.

VCSE organisations in geographical areas need to take a lead. Can be quite time consuming to get hold of the right people in schools because they have limited time.

Digital involvement of young people

The questions addressed in this discussion were, through a digital lens : 1. What did it mean to have more young people involved in voice work and 2. What it means for young people to be better involved in the Alliance?

Online involvement

The Alliance conference could have had some sort of hybrid (digital and face to face) engagement via Zoom or Google Meet.

Being online means you can just keep it anonymous. You can keep your camera off, you can choose whether you put your name up. You can even choose just three minutes before that you are not going to engage. It avoids that kind of daunting aspects of walking into a room which it is quite adult-led and conference-like with rows of chairs and speakers at the front and probably quite intimidating for anyone.

Questions:

- Does the Alliance want to meaningfully engage with young people?
- What systems and processes are available to do so and what new would be needed?

So, the people/organisations involved in this would either be an Alliance member with a particular expertise in digital/hybrid or possibly engaging with young people who are studying within that area and might do it as part of their learning or as a placement. It might also be possible to have young people delivering that part of the conference which might make it more accessible for other young people to be involved.

Promotion

Schools have a good email system in East Sussex and are happy to email opportunities to pupils. The young people in the group said this was an effective way for them to hear about things.

Young people are no longer on Twitter, but do use WhatsApp and Instagram as well as physical spaces where young people are en mass – for example school settings.

Apart from IT, posters on walls work as well as trusted adults within their life encouraging them to get involved.

Finally, they discussed a 360 experience where you go into an immersive experience. Introductions could be made to each organization through that medium.

Simplified messaging also helps with young people who have previously fed back that they don't need everything to be big and shiny, but rather 'what it says on the tin' – what is happening and how they can participate.

Venues and places

If young people potentially aren't coming to conferences and events, organisations should think about going to them. Apart from digital engagement and online platforms, other places to go are youth clubs and groups. Looking at working with youth workers and project leads would be a useful way forward in this.

Other venues outside of education might be sports clubs and uniform groups etc. It was noted that it might actually be good for young people to be talking about issues that might be a bit sensitive or might be a bit difficult for them to talk about while they're actually doing an activity rather than a focused meeting.

Communicating with decision makers

There was discussion about the advantages of young people going into a conference full of adults who have the power to make decisions and to have those young voices in the back of their heads when they are making decisions that really do affect children and young people.

Alternatively, it may sometimes be more appropriate for young people to be in a safe space with very few adults, so that they can really open up in a peer led approach.

What would attract young people to an Alliance conference?

- Venue and timing.
- Uckfield is not a very accessible place for young people to get to from across East Sussex.
- School holidays had just finished and exam season had started, both which make it not an ideal timing for young people.
- Topic.
- What is the attraction? It was felt that the Alliance had not really said what the purpose of the conference was from the perspective of young people.
- Emphasised that people (of all ages) need to talk about things they feel passionate about.
- So we talked about pitch days or pitching for possible funding.
- This is the first time we've talked about doing a youth event, so that may be a question for the Alliance to think about. How do we do youth engagement better?

Travel: Next steps?

What next steps do the Alliance want to implement?

Feedback from the conference

A summary of the feedback forms (19 completed) is in Appendix 2.