

Presentation notes

I am very pleased to be here today and am grateful for the opportunity to say a few words about the hard work that has been ongoing to strengthen support to our voluntary and community sector. I'd also like to outline the council's vision for the capacity building support in the future.

There has been much talk in the last two years or so of a "big society", of community-led organisations springing into life to deliver services to communities. In Manchester of course, this has been the reality for a very long time. Last year the council provided over £44million to third sector organisations in Manchester through a variety of grants and contracts to deliver services.

As a politician, I'm allowed to make political statements – and I believe that the current government's vision of Big Society is one of volunteers doing for nothing what many of your organisations have been delivering for years. That's impossible – the valuable work that you all do in our community can't be done for free. While we know that cuts are being made to our funding – and there are more, and worse, to come – we have to work together to get through this.

Manchester is fortunate to have a very active, vibrant third sector of which we are very proud and we are also proud of our record of providing support and being responsive to the changing needs of the sector.

The nature of the sector means it is difficult to quantify its true size. The most reserved estimate puts the number of organisations at around 3,000, and the sector spans small, very locally-focussed activities reliant on grant funding as well as large, well established organisations that have complex income streams. Providing support across this range is important and also very challenging.

When in November 2010 we conducted a survey of how infrastructure services were perceived, the message from the broader voluntary and community sector came through loud and clear: the support needs to be more extensive and the delivery needs to be more accessible.

I'm sure many of you responded to that survey and what you asked for most was a comprehensive support service for volunteering in Manchester, closely followed by more bespoke support for on commissioning and simpler, but more effective, ways of engaging with the council.

I want to spend a few moments talking about volunteering specifically. From our perspective, we could see that the role of volunteering in society was gaining

prominence and presented opportunities for Manchester people as well as for the third sector in developing its own workforce.

We have worked very closely with the fledgling volunteering service and had an officer based within the team one day per week. This has brought ideas and expertise back into the council to develop volunteering policies and strategies and has resulted in the adoption of an employer supported volunteering programme within the council.

This will provide council employees with the opportunity to work closely with voluntary organisations to pass on their skills, to develop new skills and to bring a new perspective to both sectors. Conversely, the volunteering service will begin providing services from One First Street within the next few weeks and the refurbished Town Hall Extension when it reopens in 2013.

On commissioning, the third sector has played a key role in delivering commissioned services to residents for some years now. Our aim is to ensure that we can support local organisations from their inception and give them the support to compete on a level playing field with private sector organisations and larger, national third sector organisations either as individual organisations or as part of consortia formed to bid for a specific opportunity.

Effective engagement is key to making all of this work – finding ways to connect service users directly to service planning and evaluation is key to ensuring that services remain responsive to need, particularly for communities where needs change rapidly or are subject to extra pressures. The creation of a third sector assembly, a sustainability hub and an equalities hub will provide an effective but accessible means of engagement. And I welcome these plans and developments.

The process we embarked upon nearly two years ago required many organisations that have competed with each other in the past to co-operate in designing a new set of services and planning their development and delivery. While it has not been easy – and will not always be easy – today's launch represents what we can achieve when we work together.