

Communities Strategy

2017-2020

Devon County Council

Foreword

We all want to live in a better, kinder world.

Where everyone feels safe, connected, and looks out for one another. Where people care about their local community and take pride in their environment. And where no-one is left forgotten, feels lonely or isolated.

Well, it starts with each of us.

Devon is so lucky to have many strong and active communities, a vibrant voluntary sector, and so many individuals prepared to stand up to give their time and energy to make this a better place.

This enterprising community spirit is the backbone of the county. When people come together and all pull in the same direction then things change and great things can happen.

As a County Council we know that on our own we simply can't do all the things we would like to meet the needs and aspirations of local people and communities. Nor do we have all the answers.

The same is true of all our public bodies.

That is why we all need to work more closely with local communities and the voluntary and independent sectors to find new ways to help meet some of the big social and environmental challenges we all share.

This strategy is a first step in setting out how we aim to do this and to offer support to stimulate opportunities particularly to help people better connect with their community and those around them.

Together, we are Devon, and it's down to all of us to show how much we care.



Roger Croad

Cabinet Member for Community, Public Health,
Transportation and Environmental Services

Preface

I am delighted that the Council has developed this piece of work reflecting its ambition and priorities in working across Devon’s communities. I hope that this will be helpful to people, communities and organisations.

In forming this strategy, the Council is aware it is part of a much larger system. We do not, and will never have, all the answers, and must recognise our role alongside a wide set of partners.

We know that it is difficult to write or deliver something in this space that is perfect. This is especially true with regard to the roles we might all play in helping communities, in all their diversity, to flourish.

Communities are complex, layered and ever-changing.

The Council is committed to understanding what matters to people and their communities and I believe it is part of our role and duty to help build collaboration and capacity.

This strategy is a starting point and a direction, not a detailed map –but it’s a start that needs greater involvement from the Council, our partners and communities and aspects of this will take time.

By working together we will initiate different ways of thinking and opportunities for new collaboration across Devon to better meet the needs and ambitions of people and communities.



Phil Norrey

Chief Executive, Devon County Council

VCSE introductory statement

These are uncertain times. The very nature of the relationship between ‘public’ services and our communities and how these are delivered is being questioned at a fundamental level. As a result we are all being asked to change our approach to the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ at an unprecedented rate. We are in no doubt that if we do not actively collaborate in meeting and leading this change then the traditional models of public service delivery may not help the most vulnerable become more resilient and better supported as part of their communities.

Over the past few years Devon’s Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) has striven to meet these challenges. The Sector now employs 4.9% of Devon’s working population. Devon has more Registered Charities per 1000 people than the UK as a whole with an estimated 59,000 volunteers giving over 115,000 hours of their time each week equating to an annual value of £74 million. *Third Sector Overview of Devon 2016 (DeVa)*

Communities, voluntary organisations, socially-minded enterprises and individuals across Devon deliver a huge diversity of work, activities and support thus making a vital contribution to the wellbeing of the citizens of Devon. Devon’s diverse mix of urban and rural communities is reflected in our eclectic mix of Voluntary and Community Organisations (VCOs): from larger County wide groups to the many hundreds of small groups based within and serving their local community, covering all aspect of life and underpinning resilience.

We are working in new ways to foster a more inclusive, more connected, more participative, and more just communities and to unlock people’s desire and ability to improve the communities whether that is a community of place, of interest or of identity. It is more important than ever that the VCSE sector and public and private sectors work collaboratively with our communities in making the best use of our strengths to enable the people of Devon to enjoy a better quality of life.

We welcome that DCC has recognised the need, through this strategy, to place communities at the heart of all they do, and we look forward to working together as an equal, strategic and tactical partner in both the planning and delivery of new ways of working. It is the VCSE sector which has consistently demonstrated it can reach and engage with local communities: helping even those most often overlooked to speak up, contribute and take the lead. We look forward to working closely with our statutory sector colleagues to find new and innovative ways of contributing to making our communities even better places to live.



Diana Crump

VCSE Representative, Devon Strategic Partnership

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Why do we need a Communities Strategy?

Our society is facing a set of unprecedented political, economic and social challenges. Rising to meet them will require the contribution of many different actors, and no one service, organisation or person will be able to address them on their own. One of the essentials for tackling the most complex and pressing of these challenges will be the transformation of the relationships the public-sector has with its people and communities.

Devon has enormous strengths, including energetic, skilled and knowledgeable people, thriving community and voluntary groups, an outstanding environment and resourceful businesses. To help us positively meet the challenges we face, we need to identify, unlock and develop capacity within our organisational system, more widely with our partners and also, most importantly, within individuals and communities.

We all have a shared responsibility for our future, and the council must ensure it works in a way that encourages and enables a strong, cohesive society that is empowered to work collectively to strive for a better way of doing things. We cannot just carry on as we always have... the consequences of us just doing 'more of the same' are negative, and significant.

What is a community?

Communities come in many different forms and can be defined by any shared characteristic or value, such where they live, their gender-identity, faith or ethnicity. Each person in Devon will usually belong to many different communities, each with their own issues and needs, but also skills and assets. This creates a complex web that requires flexible ways of working to harness the energy of individuals and communities, whilst making sure guidance and support is provided where needed.

What is our vision and how will it be delivered?

Our vision for Devon's communities to have *"Flourishing people and communities that are strong, kind, compassionate and safe."*

[Seven Action Areas](#) to help us start us moving in the right direction have been identified. These are areas that conversations have shown are important, and for which evidence or guidance suggests actions are likely to be effective. These Action Areas offer some practical first steps, but by no means cover everything that must be done. Further work is required, from all of us, to collectively shape the best way forward.

As well as the seven Action Areas, this strategy describes [four Guiding Principles](#) that must underpin everything we do if we are to realise our vision. They will be used to 'sense check' the activities we carry out in delivering our Action Areas to ensure positive progress is made.

Ours is a vision that we hold equally for everyone, and efforts must be made to ensure it is delivered in a way that does not disadvantage vulnerable and marginalised groups. The comprehensive needs assessment and equality impact assessment that informed this strategy describe some of the factors that have, and should continue to be considered to ensure inequalities reduce, not increase. These documents can be viewed on our website (www.devon.gov.uk/communities).

Our vision

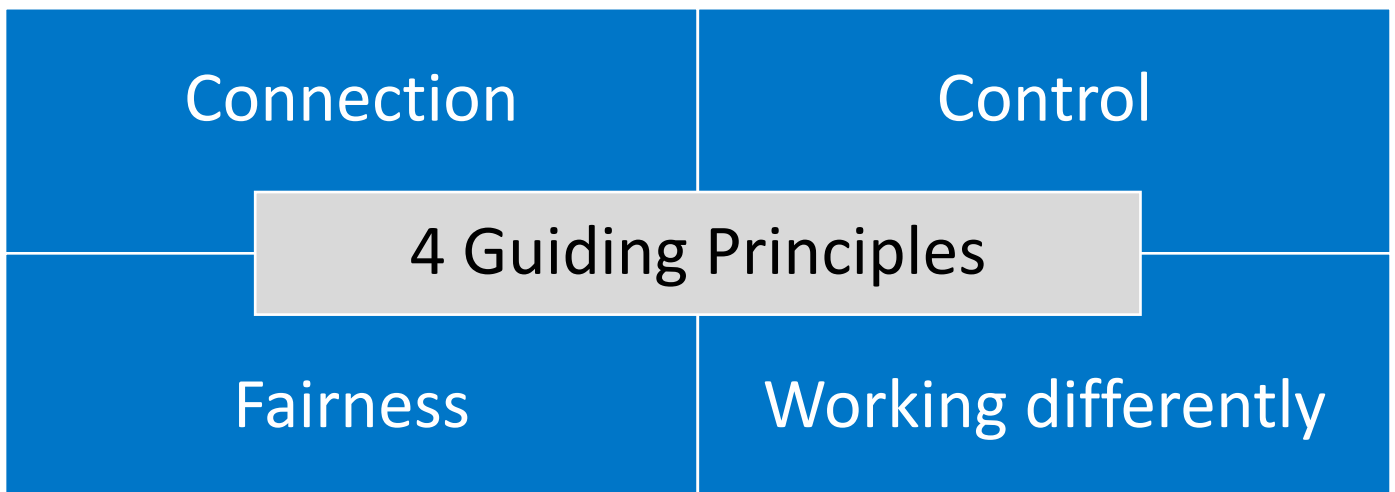
“Flourishing people and communities that are strong, kind, compassionate and safe.”



4 Guiding Principles

Four closely related Guiding Principles run through the core of our strategy, and must underpin everything we do if we are to realise this vision. They are strongly associated with the seven Action Areas, and should be at the forefront of our minds when designing and delivering our activities. They will help to build and unlock our collective capacity, enabling people's needs to be met in the most appropriate, sustainable and fair way.

For each of the Guiding Principles, statements have been provided describing our aspirations for our communities and for the Council. It is hoped that this will add 'colour' to our vision, painting a picture of how we intend work, and the type of society in which we hope to live.



Connection

Connected, resilient and safe communities

Communities that...

...live in a physical and social environment that enables people to have the time, space, confidence and desire to develop strong, caring relationships with one another.

...reach out to all their members, supporting one another and recognise diversity as a strength.

...are connected to decision-making processes and to outside resources that it can influence positively in reaching their shared outcomes.

A council that...

... understands the role it plays in encouraging and enabling communities to connect.

...has a workforce and elected members who reach out to communities, connecting them with, and supporting them to have influence over the things that matter to them.

...works more collaboratively and compassionately with communities, the voluntary sector and the wider public sector to co-produce place-based services.

Control

People and communities being empowered and in control

Communities that...

...understand their needs and aspirations, recognise and use resources within the community to meet these needs, and know where to look for additional support when required.

...defines themselves, then self-determines their future, and is then able to administer their path for the inclusion of everyone within it.

A council that...

...recognises people's strengths, which can and should be used to support both themselves and each other, and empowers them to do so.

... firmly places people and communities at the heart of decision making, enabling them to have power and control over the things that affect them.

...makes it easy for people to find the information, advice and support they need, at the time it is needed.

Fairness

Everyone treated fairly and equally

Communities that...

...recognise their diversity as a strength, acting as advocates for their most vulnerable and disadvantaged members, enabling them to have a voice

...will celebrate their togetherness but respect individual differences in a way that harnesses the best and not the worst in people.

...actively demonstrate humanity and challenge discrimination.

A council that...

... acts as role models for a fair and compassionate society and nurtures inclusive ways of working.

...ensures that changes to services do not discriminate against or disadvantage marginalised or vulnerable groups, and seek to reduce inequalities.

Working differently

Doing things differently, efficiently, effectively

Communities that...

...are open minded and open-hearted to new ways of thinking to address problems and challenges.

...feel supported by themselves and others to try doing things in different ways, to become more effective, efficient or to meet challenges that have previously seemed too difficult.

...are happy to grab hold of opportunities together, for their collective good.

A council that...

...recognises that the risks of inaction are often greater than those of taking action.

...will listen and work closely with communities and partner organisations, taking a place-based approach to services that prioritises holistic benefits over the needs of individual organisations.

...seeks to collaborate with people, communities and organisations, harnessing and being led by local energy and embracing innovation.



7 Action Areas

Seven Action Areas have been identified to help achieve our vision. They do this by aligning to one or more of our Guiding Principles. For each Action Area we have described why we are focusing on these areas, what we want to achieve and what actions we will be taking.

Action Area 1:	Volunteering
Action Area 2:	Community spaces
Action Area 3:	Communications and engagement
Action Area 4:	Role development
Action Area 5:	Data, intelligence and evaluation
Action Area 6:	Commissioning
Action Area 7:	Businesses and the economy

Action Areas

Action Area 1: Volunteering

What is the current situation in Devon?

Devon has high-levels of volunteering and almost twice as many registered charities compared to the national average. We have enthusiastic and skilled voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations that have extensive experience in developing and promoting volunteering activity. Excellent examples of volunteering initiatives can also be found within the public-sector.

There is currently a lack of oversight and co-ordination of volunteering activities in Devon. This is likely to result in inefficiencies, inequalities and a system that does not make it easy for people interested in volunteering to understand all the options available to them.

What does the evidence say?

Volunteering should form part of the bedrock of community action. It works best when it is driven by, and flexible to, the needs and interests of the

volunteer. Some types of volunteering are more beneficial than others, with the best evidence being for peer-support roles.

Under the right circumstances, volunteering can have positive benefits for the volunteer as well as the recipient of the volunteering support. The key to effective volunteering is to collaborate locally, and go where the energy is.

What would we like to change?

We would like to develop a more co-ordinated approach to volunteering in Devon that enables expertise to be shared and makes it easier for people interested in volunteering to find opportunities.

We would like to be flexible in our approach and promote opportunities that offer the greatest positive impact, focusing on the interests of individuals rather than the benefits to individual services.

We will...

- Work with the community and voluntary sector to better co-ordinate volunteering activities in Devon
- Promote types of volunteering that are likely to have the greatest impact

So that...

... more people can find volunteering activities that match their interests and skills, and has the greatest positive impact for everyone involved



Action Area 2: Community spaces

What is the current situation in Devon?

Both Devon’s District Councils, who have planning responsibility for housing and employment development, and Devon County Council, who have a key role in providing supporting infrastructure and services, have a strong influence over the spaces in which we live.

Current planning processes must balance a wide-range of economic, environmental and social factors. Work is already underway to develop the working relationship between planners and health services, but less money and an increasing need to build more houses means it is more important than ever to make it as easy as possible for planners to make well-informed decisions that prioritise community health and wellbeing.

Devon has a lot of buildings and spaces available for use by communities, although these are often not very visible to the public, and many are under-used. Identifying venues to meet particular needs, such as disability access, is currently harder than it should be.

What does the evidence say?

Designing and building the spaces where we live, work and play to be accessible and inclusive can help improve community togetherness and wellbeing. As such, local planning authorities should ensure that community health and wellbeing is considered in local and neighbourhood plans and in planning decision making.

Having access to public spaces plays a vital role in developing community cohesion.

What would we like to change?

We would like to see a closer working relationship between planners, health, and communities, influencing planning policy and decisions to create cohesive and healthy communities.

We would like to raise people’s awareness of the public spaces and facilities that are available to them, helping them get hold of information about how they can be used and how suitable they are for people with specific needs. This work will complement the national ‘One Public Estate’ programme that aims to get more from public-sector assets.

We will...

- Support all members of local communities to make maximum use of their local community spaces
- Continue to raise the level of support and input provided by health services and communities to planning authorities, making it as easy as possible for them to make planning and development decisions that prioritise community cohesion and wellbeing

So that...

... the places where we live help us to connect with one another and live happy, healthy lives.

Action Area 3: Communications and engagement

What is the current situation in Devon?

Over recent years, there have been unprecedented pressures on public-sector services, both in Devon and nationally, requiring them to change the way they interact with the communities they serve. There is a strong shared hope between local public-sector partners for communities to become more empowered, engaged and independent, but the way in which this is communicated is not always consistent. It has also been noticed locally that the way in which language is used, and the interpretation of some words and phrases is different between the public and voluntary sector. There are examples of where these inconsistencies have resulted in confusion of roles and expectations.

The media through which we communicate is also important. Services are increasingly becoming digitalised, and with around a third of people not feeling confident or able to access information online, it is essential that their needs are considered when sharing messages and information.

What does the evidence say?

Guidance suggests that communications and engagement should be planned collectively, describing what it is hoped will be achieved and describing the role of communities in this. Special consideration should be given to the needs of vulnerable or isolated groups, recently established communities, those with low literacy or learning difficulties, and people who do not use digital or social media.

What would we like to change?

We would like to develop closer working relationships with public and voluntary sector organisations, and with communities, to agree a clear, shared narrative on how we can all work together to meet people's needs.

We will work with the voluntary-sector and communities to ensure that these messages are accessible to everyone, through a range of media.

We will...

- Work closely with partners and communities to develop a shared language and set of messages that can be shared with the public

So that...

...people, communities and organisations better understand each other and their objectives

Action Area 4: Role development

What is the current situation in Devon?

In Devon, work is needed to develop the roles we play in community development at both an organisational and individual level.

There are some excellent local examples of partnership working between the public-sector and the voluntary and community sector. However, the roles these organisations can play, and how they interact with one-another to help meet the needs of people in Devon is not always clear.

The public-sector in Devon employs tens-of-thousands of staff who have a lot of contact with the public. Whilst some of these staff receive training on how they can help develop the new relationship that is needed with communities, much more could be done to help maximise the impact they have.

Many local organisations have staff that are working in community development roles. The nature of these roles, and how organisations work together to support community development is constantly evolving.

We also have a large number of elected members at Parish, Town, District and County level. Providing better support for councillors to engage with and support their communities would help to empower communities to influence the decisions that affect them.

What does the evidence say?

Guidance suggests that the public-sector should work with the voluntary and community sector as a 'system partner'. Where possible, this should involve including them in strategic processes and local decision-making structures, co-locating staff and sharing electronic infrastructure and information. It also recommends a cross-sector approach to workforce development.

Roles that support the interface between the public-sector and communities are also advocated for, although the effectiveness of different types of roles can be variable.

What would we like to change?

We would like to change the way that we work with our public and voluntary-sector partners, moving towards increasingly co-produced, place-based ways of working with shared objectives and performance measures.

We would like people working in frontline services to become more effective at identifying and making the most of opportunities to collaborate with residents, empowering them to become more in control and resilient.

We would like elected members who, supported by a range of tools and information, are able to be catalysts, facilitators, advocates and conveners for the communities they serve.

We will...

- Work closely with partners and the public to clarify and develop the roles we play in supporting and enabling Devon's communities
- Develop role-specific support material to help staff and elected members develop the role they play in connecting communities to the public-sector and enabling community development
- Develop and co-ordinate roles whose primary focus is community development

So that...

...there is a clear, shared understanding of how we can work together to support communities, with everyone having a clear role they feel empowered to fulfil

Action Area 5: Data, intelligence and evaluation

What is the current situation in Devon?

Working effectively with communities to develop engagement and resilience is an essential priority for a range of local public-sector services, and there is a strong desire to develop an evidence base of how this can be done. There is also a need to improve the availability of information and resources for the public-sector, the voluntary sector and communities, in a way that enables them to be effectively used to meet people's needs.

It is recognised that we must evaluate the impact that community development initiatives have on our services and on society more broadly. At present, many community development initiatives do not include reliable evaluation measures, and there is a lack of reliable survey information about how people living in Devon feel more generally about their lives and communities. As a result, evaluation of community development initiatives is often very difficult, if undertaken at all.

What does the evidence say?

The needs assessment conducted ahead of this strategy outlines the evidence base for community development initiatives. Whilst there is a strong and broad evidence base showing that community development initiatives can be effective, there is no one-size-fits-all approach and local circumstances have a strong influence.

Guidance recommends that the public-sector, voluntary-sector and communities recognise, share and value each other's knowledge, skills and experience. To develop the evidence base and support place-based initiatives and outcome monitoring, statutory and non-statutory partners should work together to develop robust data sharing protocols, shared data platforms and shared measurement systems.

Evaluation of community development initiatives is complex and challenging. Evaluation measures of community development projects should be agreed collectively, at an early stage.

What would we like to change?

To develop the evidence base, and the argument for continued investment in the community development approach, evaluation of individual initiatives, and more general 'place-based' evaluation is required.

We would like to work more closely with our partners and communities to ensure shared outcome measures are agreed at an early stage of all future community development initiatives. We would also like a better understanding of the thoughts and opinions of Devon's communities, both now and in a few years' time, so we can see if our shared efforts have made a difference. We would like communities to quickly and easily access the resources that are available to them, both within and outside their community, to ensure their needs are met in the most appropriate way.

We will...

- Develop a shared process to improve community access to information regarding self-help and community support
- Develop and use a framework to ensure evaluation measures form part of all community development projects, and are agreed at an early stage with all stakeholders and communities.
- Design and conduct a robust community survey, that can be repeated at a later date, to show change over time

So that...

- ... we have a better-informed system with a greater capacity to meeting people's needs in the most appropriate and sustainable way
- ... we have the information we need to continually learn from our experiences, responding to feedback to shape how we do things in future to achieve the greatest overall good

Action Area 6: Commissioning

What is the current situation in Devon?

Several different public-sector organisations in Devon fund voluntary and community sector services and social enterprises. At present, this is not very well co-ordinated, and we don't have a very good understanding of how much money is flowing to different areas of the sector. As a result, there are likely to be inefficiencies and inequalities within the system that we are not aware of, and opportunities to maximise inwards investment may be being missed.

The way in which services are funded is still quite traditional, and we have not yet embraced some of the modern ways in which initiatives can be funded, for example through supporting crowd funding initiatives.

The public-sector is also responsible for commissioning a broad range of other, more general, services for the public. Whilst the main purpose of these services will vary, almost all of them provide an opportunity to do things in a way that benefit communities, through the way in which they are commissioned and delivered. At present, not enough consideration is given to how services develop social value and local capacity.

Another challenge that currently faces public-sector commissioning is balancing the often-urgent priorities of individual teams and services with the need to achieve the greatest overall good. We are increasingly trying to work together to jointly commission services, taking a 'place-based' rather than narrow perspective.

What does the evidence say?

Guidance relating to commissioning aligned closely with local opinion, highlighting the need for working more closely with partners. It encouraged the use of shared commissioning platforms and funding models, driven by social value and asset-based principles, and designed to help us work together to achieve shared outcomes.

It is recommended that the public-sector ensures procurement processes are collaborative and place-based, and do not un-necessarily disadvantage smaller, local voluntary sector organisations.

What would we like to change?

We would like to develop a better understanding of where funding for the voluntary and community sector in Devon is being spent, working with our partners to ensure it is allocated in a fair and equitable way. We want more flexible and accessible ways of providing funding for the things that people care about most.

We would like to address the serious under-utilisation of the opportunity public-sector services has to use their services and contracts to utilise and develop skills and capacity within Devon's communities. Wherever possible we would like to take a 'whole-systems' approach to funding services, leading by example and shifting our centre of gravity from our organisation to the individual and wider population.

We will...

- Develop and share a centralised oversight and co-ordination of Voluntary and Community Sector commissioning activity, supporting the sector to optimise inwards investment
- Develop an offer to public-sector commissioning services to help them shape policies and processes to have a greater emphasis on social value
- Review and promote new innovative commissioning models and approaches (such as crowd funding) and encourage social enterprise

So that...

... we have a strong voluntary and community sector, connected to the funding they need and empowered to provide fair, equitable support to the people of Devon

... public-sector services that harness and build on local capacity, helping communities to become more empowered and resilient

Action Area 7: Businesses and the economy

What is the current situation in Devon?

In Devon, wages are typically lower than those seen nationally, and the wage gap between the least and most well off is increasing. Several local initiatives seek to support and upskill our workforce and reduce barriers to work, particularly for people with disabilities and learning difficulties.

The council is supporting funding initiatives aiming to help communities prosper economically. These include improving access to broadband in remote areas, developing the economies of coastal communities and the stimulation of rural social enterprise by working with community-lead development action groups.

There are good local examples of Voluntary and Community Sector infrastructure organisation working with local businesses, for example to develop impact volunteering opportunities, and this is something that should be encouraged and supported.

What does the evidence say?

Community development initiatives work at individual, community and organisational levels. At an individual

level, a wide range of characteristics can influence a person's ability and desire to contribute to their community, including self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-management and confidence.

Helping to build financial resilience and reduce economic inequalities is likely to reduce the number of people 'just about managing', enabling people to have a greater ability to be active community members

What would we like to change?

We would like to see improved wages and greater wage equality in Devon, resulting in a reduction in health inequalities and greater financial security and resilience for everyone.

We would like more businesses to implement corporate social responsibility strategies, developing partnerships with the voluntary and community sector that allow staff to contribute to communities in an impactful way.

We would like to extend our role in stimulating social enterprises, harnessing local energy, helping community initiatives to become self-sustaining.

We will...

- Work with Voluntary and Community Sector infrastructure organisations to develop partnerships between businesses and the voluntary and community sector
- Support key employers to provide staff wellbeing at work packages that contribute to community development

So that...

...more people in Devon are managing comfortably and have the time and resources they need to be active community members.