The State of the Sector Report, published in November 2013, was commissioned to provide an independent piece of research that RCVS, partners, stakeholders and most importantly the wider voluntary and community sector (VCS) can use to inform and influence future work and strategy.

Whilst the report confirms much of our understanding of the current needs and priorities of the local sector, there are some clear areas of work that need attention. As the principal infrastructure organisation representing the local voluntary sector, Richmond CVS is determined to ensure that the key findings and recommendations contained within the report are acted upon and that further opportunities to strengthen and develop the local voluntary sector and cross-sector partnerships are given priority and focus.

We have therefore produced the following response to the State of the Sector Survey and will develop an action plan with our partners by March 2014.
Value of the Sector

The report demonstrates that clearly the VCS is a tremendous asset to the borough and overall is more robust than individual organisations may feel themselves to be! Yet there are issues of concern and areas to work on.

Funding remains the key issue for the majority of groups. The report reaffirms the importance of groups having a funding strategy and looking at opportunities for diversifying their sources of income, especially if they are heavily reliant on one source of income. Of greater concern is the use of reserves for day to day operational requirements and to retain existing staff and levels. RCVS’ Skills and Sustainability Programme (SSP) helps groups to address these issues and to increase their sustainability and we will be reviewing our programme to reflect the report’s findings.

The research identifies a significant number of staff and volunteers within the sector, which is a truly valuable resource that needs to be looked after. Recruiting and retaining volunteers is another priority for voluntary groups and therefore it is important to ensure that service delivery continues to be reviewed to ensure that it meets the needs of organisations. All partners will be keen to respond to this priority and RCVS will work to support the sector in this area.

Partnership Working and Stakeholders

The report has a strong focus on the importance of partnership working and that more needs to be done, both to repair relationships that have been damaged by commissioning processes and to maximise opportunities for the VCS between organisations and with other sectors.

RCVS has started working with statutory partners to refresh the Richmond Compact and this provides an opportunity to increase equality between partners in the two sectors, which was highlighted in the report. It is also likely that partners from other sectors, e.g. education providers and housing associations will sign up which will pave the way for exploring new partnerships, as recommended by the report.

RCVS will explore with stakeholders how they want to engage and involve the VCS in strategic debate and policy development as the report indicated that this was necessary. The report identified a number of areas, including Health where relationships could be improved. RCVS will work with partners to develop and strengthen relationships.

The Voluntary Sector Strategic Partnership (VSSP) requires review and RCVS would like to offer other opportunities for the wider sector to be engaged, for example through thematic forums. These will also provide networking and learning opportunities as will new networks, e.g. the trustee network. The report states that more needs to be done at a strategic level to increase VCS activity with businesses and RCVS will continue to work with partners about how this can be achieved.
Commissioning

The report acknowledges that commissioning has been a high profile topic for the sector even though it only affects a relatively small number of groups but the impact it has on those groups is significant.

RCVS will challenge commissioners to ensure that there is learning from procurement processes and that contracts are monitored appropriately to inform future commissioning rounds. Again, there is a role for the revised Compact here. RCVS will also continue to lobby for the importance of maintaining a small grants programme and for funding pilot projects that can inform commissioning as well as having immediate benefit to the borough.

As part of our development of business partnerships, RCVS will provide opportunities for the expertise and experience of peers and businesses to be available to voluntary groups.

Representation & Voice

The report indicates that stakeholders and the sector would like to see an increase in the amount and depth of strategic representation that gives the sector a voice. RCVS agrees that more needs to be done and we are already developing ways of doing this. It can be difficult to demonstrate tangible outcomes for this work and stakeholders have to keep in mind that the sector is not always interested in the things that they would like to engage them on. Similarly if the sector wants us to represent them, they need to take the time to tell us their views and their concerns.

As well as reviewing VSSP, RCVS will liaise with sector partners to review the range and scope of relevant forums and networks that will further strengthen the voice of the sector.

In line with the national position, unmet needs around the impacts of welfare reform, access to services, housing and living costs are all issues in the borough, especially for vulnerable communities. These are issues that all partners and stakeholders, including local funders need to work together on. Richmond is a prosperous borough but not for all and the challenging economic times are increasing divisions. All partners must ensure the inequality gap does not widen.

Support needed by the sector

In addition to the key areas of support and development outlined above, the report noted that local groups need help with marketing and publicity support to reach a new audience and to demonstrate the outcomes of their work. SSP can provide help with marketing and publicity and in addition from the Spring our new Know Your Impact project will provide further support.

We will work with cross sector partners in 2014 on the action plan to take these themes forward and will report on developments and achievements.