

**Re: VCSE sector and the Coronavirus pandemic – Public Sector Commissioning and Procurement**

16 March 2020

To:

Penny Germon, Neighbourhoods and Communities Service Manager, Bristol City Council  
Keith Houghton, Community Resources Manager, Bristol City Council

Dear Penny and Keith

Further to the Mayor's briefing on Coronavirus and our own work with the sector, I'm writing to you specifically about commissioning and procurement as I know this is one of the areas being considered by the Bristol multi-agency response team. Voscur appreciates and fully supports the Mayor's approach and we are actively working with colleagues and partners to assist the VCSE sector's response to the pandemic.

We are aware that many VCSE organisations in the city are reviewing their risk registers and business continuity plans in order to mitigate the anticipated impacts of COVID-19 on their workforce, services and organisational sustainability. In general, organisations are bracing for reduced workforce and increasingly complex presentations, particularly from people and communities that were already vulnerable and disadvantaged. In that context, we are also aware of some emerging concerns relating to commissioning, procurement and contract/performance management. In summary these are:

- **Current contracts** – many VCSE organisations are in service contracts that were put in place before the pandemic. As is often the case with services to the person/community, many services rely on face-to-face delivery. One of our members has recently heard that non-essential visits to one of their settings (a care home) have been cancelled. While the provider is changing the form of service delivery, their contract requires a specific number of face-to-face sessions. The performance manager of another organisation's contract referred to the government's advice (not to cancel mass gatherings), rather than the spirit of the Mayor's One City approach. Advice and guidance around this issue would be welcomed by groups as the current inconsistent approach is causing concern.
- **Live commissioning/procurement processes** – organisations are also expressing concern about the capacity to engage with current processes, while the workforce is affected (self-isolation, illness) or re-deployed into service delivery.
- **Imminent commissioning/procurement processes** – participating in commissioning processes requires dedicated time and commitment from bidders. One of our members, for example, is about to participate in 3 separate public procurement processes that are expected to go live in March/April. This, alongside their Coronavirus response, is likely to affect their capacity to engage in those processes. This is likely to be the case for other bidders; we note that smaller organisations will be more affected by such challenges. The short-term impact on processes

could be market failure/drop-out; long-term impact could be the loss of provider diversity and sub-optimal service design.

- **Commissioning/procurement processes delayed prior to COVID19** – some organisations are due to hear about the revised timeframes of recently delayed processes. Another Voscur member, for example, is expecting to hear about a delayed process and is becoming concerned about their capacity to respond to the pandemic, deliver service and swiftly respond to the new commissioning process – all while, managing the workforce uncertainty as the existing contract end date looms.

The circumstances outlined above present some challenges to VCSE organisations' abilities to participate fully and focus on people and communities. We would like to suggest, and discuss with you, the following system flexibility;

1. **The targets/KPIs of existing contracts (services to the person/community) are relaxed for Q4 2019/20 and Q1 2020/21.** This would allow providers to respond according to what is possible and practical to ensure that their services meet the changing needs of communities, for example, redirecting resource to local priorities rather than contractual targets.
2. **The timings of live and imminent commissioning/procurement processes are extended/delayed.** This would allow significant breathing space in the system so that VCSE organisations are able to focus on their communities and participate fully in future public service delivery.

We are raising what we consider to be systemic challenges brought about by the unprecedented situation we all now find ourselves in. We would very much appreciate a response that can be shared openly with our members and the wider the sector. This we believe would provide reassurance where needed and strengthen Bristol's collective response to the pandemic by supporting organisations to re-focus work and services where needed. We hope that you will also see this as an opportunity to further demonstrate close and effective partnership between Bristol City Council and the VCSE sector.

Yours sincerely



Mark Hubbard  
Head of Partnerships and Commissioning

Cc: Cllr A. Craig – Deputy Mayor (Communities, Equalities and Public Health), Bristol City Council

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