

Our Love Letter to London



Dear Future Mayor,

As you stand ready to pitch your woo to London we wanted to let you know how much we love London; its muddle of streets full of history and modern surprises; its ever-changing skyline; its magnificent green spaces and its scruffy pocket parks; its transport links to everywhere here, across the country and to the world; its food; its diversity, its creativity; its enterprise. Nowhere else provides the riches of art, culture, thinking and experience.

It is not perfect, there are lots of things wrong with it – poverty, inequality, homelessness, crime, especially youth violence, pollution, and oh, how expensive it can be to live here.

But still we love it. And much of the reason we love it is that it has the most vibrant communities, community organisations and charities – London’s voluntary and community sector (VCS).

Take any of our London bus (Elizabeth) or cycle (Peter) journeys and we travel past the evidence of the amount of love and work that active communities, interested individuals, organised (and disorganised) volunteers and charity workers have put into making London great: Youth clubs, theatres, galleries, dance groups, orchestras, gardening projects, walking and fitness groups, projects supporting older people, homeless people, refugees, people with health problems, people wanting to learn new skills or find new jobs, Saturday schools – they are all out there making the London we love.

London’s VCS is at the heart of what makes London great but is perhaps better represented by the body’s nervous system. It reaches to all of London’s extremities, experiences how people are feeling; responds sensitively to needs & desires; reflexes naturally to help or protect or entertain.

At these difficult times for London, still dealing with a decade of austerity, with Brexit, with growing levels of poverty and inequality and with the challenge of the climate crisis ahead of us, we wanted to share our experiences and thoughts as to how the next London Mayor might put London’s VCS at the heart of their thinking, at the

heart of how they can make London a fairer and more sustainable city, of which we can all be justifiably proud.

Every politician, local Councillor, Assembly member, Mayor, recognises the importance of the voluntary and community sector. They see VCS organisations doing great things in their local areas, being as Karen Buck MP once put it the “4th emergency service”¹. But few, if any, then go on to optimise the way they engage to maximise our impact.

To a certain extent, we believe, people take London’s VCS for granted. And to a certain extent that is right. Voluntary and community activity will continue whether or not the relevant politician or statutory body is interested or supportive. Nothing will stop people coming together for common cause.

But we believe this approach misses a trick. We believe, with a better relationship at every level between government bodies and London’s VCS, we can achieve much more². We believe this is particularly true in London. A city we both love, and know well. A city where between us we have held senior roles in London government, in London-wide and local charities as staff and volunteers, as well as worked in the private sector. We know these sectors are inter-dependent; society does not operate in silos.

We set out below what we believe should be the priorities for the upcoming Mayor:

1.



1.

Take a truly strategic approach to engaging London's voluntary & community sector in your approach to creating a fairer and more sustainable London.

Ever since the Mayoralty has existed there has been a piecemeal approach to working with London's voluntary and community sector. London has 20,000 plus charities that employ roughly 300,000 people, about 7% of London's workforce – the same number as work in the finance sector in London - plus innumerable community groups providing economic benefit through volunteering and local spending. At different times we have each led the body, LVSC, which used to bring London's voluntary and community sector together. In that role, each of us had engagement with the respective Mayors and their officials, but never in a way that was truly strategic, across the Mayor's direct and indirect areas of influence.

The closest each of us came was being a member of the London Skills and Employment Board (LSEB)³ in a quasi-representative capacity of London's VCS (we each had to apply in our personal capacities, but our authority and policy input came from bringing the views of the sector to the table). We are pleased to see that its successor, Skills for Londoners, has a place for London Plus (the current infrastructure organisation for London civil society) which Elizabeth was able to take up, albeit briefly, as the organisation's nominated representative.

The Board brought together a good cross-section of London at a strategic level – senior business leaders, London local authority leaders, government, trade union representatives, and us. The LSEB,



+20k

CHARITIES IN LONDON

300k

CHARITY EMPLOYEES

and now Skills for Londoners, was responsible for the strategy for skills and employment, thinking about the levers for change through learning and workforce development and charging members to make and deliver that change. This is a complex process but supported by central and inter-dependent research, consultation and direct input from providers and employers (private, public and VCS) it creates an opportunity for diversity of thought and experience, and chances for big connections that can make the vital difference to an individual Londoner to develop and thrive.

We believe this is a strong approach to replicate in many areas of the Mayor's influence (see 2 below), but that it could also be usefully replicated at an even more strategic level, with a similar grouping of people being brought together to think about the whole of the next Mayor's agenda. This would be similar to approaches in several European countries, many of whom have social & economic councils advising the government⁴. We are calling this the **"Mayor's One London Board"**, comprising representatives from London's business sector, London local authorities, London's VCS, unions and London trusts and foundations. Chaired by the Mayor twice a year it would review key city data, (perhaps in a format similar to Toronto's Vital Signs report⁵ building on data held by City Hall, Trust for London, Centre for London, London Plus and others), suggest priority areas to be addressed, and offer ways of working better together to deliver against agreed priorities, similar to the current Mayor's Business Advisory Board.

Embedding representation of London's VCS at this strategic level would add insight and engagement to these discussions, provide a focal point for key strategic issues from London's VCS to be raised at the highest level and set an example for strategic engagement across all other areas of London government. The Mayor's One London Board would be making sure that all the sensitive nerve endings of the body are communicating in the right way to the brain.

The VCS representative(s) would need to have relevant engagement and accountability mechanisms in place with the wider sector, for issues to be raised and agreed. This came naturally at LVSC as the membership body of the sector, and which set up specialist networks and mechanisms to inform representatives and provide essential feedback loops. This is a role that could be developed by London Plus and build on its existing, close-working relationship with Team London.

2.



2.

Ensure voluntary and community sector involvement in the most top level thematic boards across the Mayor's areas of responsibility.

The Mayor and the London Assembly have a wide range of areas of direct responsibility, as well as wider areas of influence. The structures themselves can be pretty opaque, but we reckon the Mayor has 9 deputy Mayors, 10 strategies across different policy areas, more than 10 different formal strategic level Boards (as well as a range of other boards and advisory groups), and that the Assembly has a similar number of policy related Committees.

We believe that the next Mayor should commit to have a VCS representative on the top level Board of every policy area, with that representation filtered through the structures similar to the practice that existed with the LSEB. Similarly, in conducting their scrutiny functions and reports the Assembly should commit to always have appropriate VCS representatives heard as part of their deliberations.

This sounds, and is, dull and bureaucratic from a structural point of view, but we believe it is vital to get the insight from the voluntary and community sector heard at that top level. To check the bath is the right temperature before you get in, you need the information from your finger tips to guide your actions.

At the moment engagement at this level appears at the best ad hoc, while in some areas non-existent. Just as it makes sense to have a union representative on the TfL Board, surely it would make sense to have a member from London's disability, inequality or sustainable transport charities? Just as you want the Youth Justice Board and local authorities to be represented on the London Crime Reduction Board, surely there would be added value in having VCS representation from, for example, an organisation embedded in the communities most affected by violent crime?

And we suggest one **new board on stimulating philanthropy** across the capital. London has huge disparities in individual wealth and

poverty at a time when we can safely say that government money is unlikely to be flowing untapped into the capital. Yet levels of giving by the very wealthy remain stubbornly low⁶ with most of the UK's richest people giving away less than 1% of their income every year.

We believe the Mayor needs to take the strategic lead on this agenda, working in close collaboration with the Corporation of London, with London's trusts and foundations, with its business leaders, with existing philanthropists, with London's VCS, to develop a truly strategic London-wide approach to stimulating philanthropy across the capital to help London's VCS tackle some of London's most stubborn issues⁷.



3.



3.

Policy backing for London-wide, local and specialist infrastructure organisations to support and represent London's voluntary and community sector.

The importance of infrastructure in technology or transport is always recognised - you need the cable capacity, the rail or road system. In the body you don't just need the nerves themselves, but your bones, skull and membranes to protect the nervous system. It is the same for the VCS. Infrastructure, or support organisations, are vital to keeping the rest of the voluntary and community sector healthy - growing expertise and capacity, hearing and representing views. The evidence shows where there are these support organisations, the rest of the sector is healthier⁸. And we also know that London is currently underserved compared to the rest of the country by local VCS organisations, particularly in outer London boroughs⁹.

To help grow the scale and impact of the sector these support organisations are vital. Just as it is difficult to increase the numbers of people cycling to a station without an increase in dedicated cycle parking, you can't grow the number and impact of the local or specialist VCS without support.

And this infrastructure has been decimated over the last 10 years as a result of the loss of the London Development Agency and the drastic reduction in the grants from London Councils¹⁰.

The introduction of the Roots fund^{11&12} for specialist infrastructure is small scale but welcome; it recognises the Mayor's office cannot work alone, that success hangs on the strength that interdependence brings. We believe a wider partnership to engage and support local and specialist infrastructure is needed to support the Mayor's strategies and programmes at a local and London-wide level.

Do you love London enough to be explicit about your love for our sector?

All relationships have their ups and downs but love and trust has to be built, be negotiated and declared. Whenever you talk about your vision for a fairer and more sustainable London you need to be as absolutely explicit that a vibrant voluntary and community sector is at its heart as we are.

London's Voluntary and Community sector really is its nervous system. It should be engaged strategically across all aspects of your policy influence to make a truly fantastic **One London**.

Endnotes

1. Karen Buck at a conference with London's voluntary advice sector in 2009 called them London's 4th Emergency service".
2. The last government's Civil Society strategy <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-society-strategy-building-a-future-that-works-for-everyone> recognises the important role of the sector, but has been criticised for being light on commitments and little has been done to implement those that are in it. It also uses a very broad definition of civil society, including social enterprises and business
3. The London Skills & Employment Board was the body charged with developing an employment and skills strategy for London. Most references to it have now sadly been removed, although one of its annual reports can be found here <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/4161188.pdf> Note also this interesting answer to a Mayoral question – setting out the need for a VCS representative on the Board <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2008/0024-0#a-88190>
4. These Social & Economic Councils are credited by some, including Tony Atkinson in "Inequality " for delivering lower levels of inequality in those countries. See <https://www.tony-atkinson.com/new-book-inequality-what-can-be-done/>
5. Toronto Vital Signs <https://torontofoundation.ca/vitalsigns/>
6. See Centre for London's report More, Better, Together <https://www.centreforlondon.org/publication/more-better-together-giving-london/>; <https://www.beaconcollaborative.org.uk/charity-begins-and-ends-at-home-for-richest-1000/> and <https://privatebank.barclays.com/news-and-insights/2019/november/barriers-to-giving/>
7. See a more detailed blog on this from Peter here <https://fundraising.co.uk/2016/05/25/stimulating-philanthropy-clear-ask-can-help-new-london-mayor-deliver-objectives/>
8. NAVCA <https://www.theguardian.com/voluntary-sector-network/2013/sep/27/navca-transforming-local-charity-infrastructure>
9. Centre for London <https://www.centreforlondon.org/publication/more-better-together-giving-london/>
10. See LVSC series of Big Squeeze reports starting in 2009 <https://www.vcth.org.uk/files/Big%20Squeeze%20Final%20Report.pdf>
11. The Roots Fund https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/csrf_prospectus_fa.pdf
12. Also note The Way Ahead <https://thewayahead.london/> and A Better Way <https://www.betterway.network/a-call-to-action> both seek to change the systems, share and cede power to work smarter for our communities, for London.

The authors:



Elizabeth Balgobin

Elizabeth has been involved in London's voluntary and community sector long before City Hall was built. Growing up in Hackney she still sees Hackney as home even though she has lived in Haringey (right on the border) for 35 years. Whenever she has to visit City Hall from home it is on the 149 bus, passing VCS groups she has worked with and for, like infrastructure charities Interlink, Hackney CVS and ACEVO, and grass-roots organisations like Hackney Migrant Centre, ELATT, Laburnum Boat Club and Rich Mix. She likes taking buses to see how the villages that make up London are developing and growing; seeing the communities of place and interest making their mark. She is saddened by so much of what was the public realm becoming private land policed and regulated by security guards (she understands the reasons why). She has led and volunteered in organisations covering equality and diversity, housing, health and social care, domestic abuse, alcohol treatment and recovery, migrants and refugees, sustainability, training and regeneration and lots of infrastructure, most recently London Plus and Small Charities Coalition.

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Peter Lewis

Peter has lived in Hackney for over 25 years, having spent a lot of his young life going through London to see his grandmother in her council flat in Croydon. He cycles as his major way of transport, particularly enjoying late night trips across the city quietened of traffic. His regular cycle routes take him past some of his favourite VCS organisations serving Londoners including Hackney CVS & Hackney City Farm, Sadlers Wells, Toynbee Hall, the Place, Trust for London, Greenpeace and the Tate Modern. He has spent most of his working and volunteering life in London on London issues, running London Cycling Campaign and LVSC, working in the Mayor's Office at the GLA, with volunteer roles ranging from Streetdoctors to Crisis to the London Marathon. He is currently CEO of the Institute of Fundraising and on the board of Centre for London and Mike's Table. Having worked in the public, private and voluntary sector, he passionately believes the voluntary & community sector is the nervous system that makes London the fantastic city it is.

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Credit: Design by Hackney-based art director Leticia Credidio at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park studio.