

THE ESSEX COMPACT

1. Vision

Voluntary and community organisations make a major and literally incalculable contribution to the social, cultural and economic life of Essex. They act as pathfinders for the involvement of users in the design and delivery of services and often act as advocates for those who otherwise have no voice. In doing so they promote both equality and diversity. They help to alleviate poverty, improve the quality of life and empower socially excluded people. The voluntary and community sector also makes an important direct economic contribution to the County. The Voluntary and Community sector in Essex can operate most effectively if it has the understanding and support of the statutory sector, and vice versa.

2. Purpose of the Essex Compact

A 'Local Compact' is a written understanding between the Statutory, Voluntary and Community Sectors and other partners within any given locality about how they will co-operate. It should recognise the contribution Voluntary and Community groups make and acknowledge their independence, and also the moves in central government and wider society towards empowering the voluntary sector and communities.

We recognise that the voluntary and community sector has a vital role in society as the nation's 'third sector', working alongside the state and the market. It is crucial to the governance and wellbeing of communities in Essex as elsewhere, working through engagement of volunteers; promotion of active citizenship; promotion of debate, questioning and new ideas; and providing services. If the Compact is effective, it will support the development of voluntary and community sector capacity, to increase and improve the impact of the sector and benefit Essex people. This is what we are setting out to do.

The voluntary and community sector in Essex is wide-ranging and richly diverse. Despite this, statutory organisations and the voluntary and community sector share many aspirations. These include the pursuit of inclusiveness, dedication to public life, and support for the development of healthy and safe communities. If the two sectors work well together, the people of Essex will benefit: they will be empowered, and will receive better services.

The diversity of the sector in Essex means that while the principles by which statutory organisations should engage with voluntary and community bodies will remain the same, the levels and methods of engagement will often quite rightly differ.

All local public bodies need to have an effective relationship with the sector, including small community groups. We intend the Essex Compact to provide a countywide framework which will complement the existing District and Borough wide Compacts as well as the National Compact and any regional compact, assisting in making roles and responsibilities clearer for Essex-wide and cross-district organisations. We see the district compacts as governing co-operation at district level, the Essex Compact as

applying to wider Essex matters, and the National Compact as governing national compact matters as well as guiding the development of local compacts. Partners should make reference to the most local compact relevant, and move to the next “level up” only if the local compact does not cover the matter in question. Where national programmes are applied locally with some devolved decision-making, first reference should be to the National Compact if rule or principle applied uniformly across the country is at stake, but to the appropriate local compact if the issue concerns local decision-making on devolved matters. The competence of a regional compact should be interpreted in the same way. We recommend that district compacts refer to the Essex Compact just as this compact refers to the national one, and that all levels learn from one another.

3. Shared Principles

We assert that these principles are fundamental to the relationship between statutory sector organisations and the voluntary and community sector:

- voluntary action is an essential component of a democratic society.
- an independent and diverse voluntary and community sector enriches society and is fundamental to its well being.
- all members of the Compact will respect and recognise the independence and values of other members.
- in the development and delivery of public policy and services, statutory organisations and the voluntary and community sector have distinct but complementary roles.
- all members will strive to work with partners to make services excellent.
- all members accept the need to communicate with and listen to other partners
- partnership is effective if it works towards common goals and achieves benefits for service users and communities.
- statutory organisations and the voluntary and community sector have different forms of accountability and are answerable to different stakeholders. But common to both is the need for integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, leadership and inclusivity.
- voluntary and community organisations are entitled to campaign within the law to advance their aims.
- promoting equality of opportunity for all people regardless of race, age, disability, gender, sexual orientation, religion or any other discriminatory or oppressive criteria, and eliminating discriminatory or oppressive practice, is essential.
- Parish and town councils are recognised as an important part of the statutory sector, but with unique roots in local communities.

4. Undertakings by both Statutory Sector and Voluntary and Community Sector

- All partner organisations will appoint a Compact Champion and spread knowledge of the Compact through their organization
- Reach out to and empower underrepresented and disadvantaged communities
- Work to avoid conflict and spread best practice between the different Essex compacts
- Respect the confidentiality of information provided by partners from other sectors, within the constraints of the law and the proper performance of public duties, when given access to it on that basis
- Check all activities and structures involving co-operation with Compact partners, including the Local Area Agreement, against Compact principles
- Implement mutually agreed monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for the Compact
- Establish and implement accessible mechanisms for dealing with complaints
- Support as appropriate training on compact issues, learning from one another
- Recognise training needs of volunteers, people with governance responsibilities in and for relations with the VCS and for volunteers
- Recognise the added value volunteers bring to organisations and ensure they are all valued and thanked for the unique contribution they make.

5. Undertakings by Statutory Sector

To advance a positive relationship with voluntary and community bodies, statutory organisations signing up to the Essex Compact adopt these undertakings:

- recognise and support the independence of voluntary and community bodies, including their right within the law to campaign, to comment on and to challenge policy within the law, irrespective of any funding relationship that might exist, and to determine and manage their own affairs.
- take account of the need for greater proportionality, targeting, consistency and transparency in funding frameworks and to promote strategic funding, enhancing the capacity of voluntary and community organisations.
- recognise the importance of infrastructure to the voluntary sector and volunteering and, where appropriate, to support its development at a county and local level.
- seek to appraise new policies and procedures, particularly at the developmental stage, to identify as far as possible implications for the sector.
- consult the voluntary sector, subject to considerations of urgency, sensitivity or confidentiality, on issues that are likely to affect it. Such consultation should be timely and allow reasonable timescales for response, taking into account the need of organisations to consult their users, beneficiaries and stakeholders.
- take account positively of the specific needs, interests and contributions of those voluntary and community bodies which represent women, minority groups and socially excluded people.

- ensure that statutory sector staff are trained and otherwise informed on the nature and importance of the Third Sector
- undertake regular mapping exercises with the VCS to identify gaps and overlaps in service provision and areas of support needed.
- promote effective working relationships, consistency of approach and good practice between itself and the voluntary sector.
- support and actively develop policies and promote opportunities for volunteering.

6. Undertakings by voluntary and community sector

In developing their relationship with the statutory sector, voluntary and community voluntary sector organisations agree the following undertakings:

Voluntary and community organisations: -

- will maintain high standards of governance and conduct and meet reporting and accountability obligations to funding bodies and users.
- respect and be accountable to the law, and in the case of charities observe the appropriate guidance from the Charity Commission, including that on political activities and campaigning.
- Acknowledge responsibilities and constraints placed on the statutory sector, including the democratic responsibility and legitimacy of elected representatives.
- develop quality standards appropriate to the organisation.
- ensure that service users, volunteers, members and supporters are informed and consulted, where appropriate, about activities and policy positions
- promote effective working relationships with other agencies and across the voluntary and community sector.
- involve users, wherever possible, in the development and management of activities and services.
- put in place policies for promoting best practice and equality of opportunity in all activities, including employment, involvement of volunteers and users, and service provision.

6. Making it Work/Next Steps

The publication of the Essex Compact in itself will not change anything. Positive and lasting change will depend on a number of essential and critical factors agreed on and committed to by all partners, namely:

- maintaining close links with District and Borough Compacts and with the National Compact, to aid cross-boundary working and avoid duplication of effort.

- to review in partnership the operation and implementation of the Essex Compact annually and publish a report detailing achievements, aspirations, issues and amendments
- to embrace the principles of the Essex Compact and promote its adoption by all other partners
- to develop a mechanism to resolve disagreements and complaints between the voluntary and community sectors and the statutory sector which compromise the stated commitments or undermine the spirit of the Essex Compact itself. A policy and mechanism for this will be attached to the Compact as soon as it is completed.

This document is available on request in alternative formats, including other languages.