



Community Infrastructure Levy Neighbourhood Fund

Assessment Pack – May 2025

Volunteer Centre Hackney (26104)

COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE LEVY NEIGHBOURHOOD FUND

Volunteer Centre Hackney (ID 26104)

Amount requested: £296,831

Amount recommended: £246,479

Purpose of grant request: To deliver two 2-year strategic programmes - Community Befriending for residents experiencing loneliness and isolation and Volunteering Brokerage to increase volunteering opportunities and grow and strengthen the City of London's voluntary community sector.

Type of cost: Revenue

Ward(s) benefitting: All

Neighbourhood Area(s) benefitting: n/a

The Applicant

A registered charity (1068104) established in 1997, Volunteer Centre Hackney (VCH) promotes volunteering and skills-sharing, and engages in capacity building for effective volunteering in the borough of Hackney, as well as providing leadership and best practice guidance on all issues relating to volunteering. VCH aims to build social cohesion, boost mental wellbeing, improve employment outcomes for residents and reduce social isolation through delivery of a range of services that support people to build their skills, confidence and wellbeing through coming together and sharing their time supporting organisations and activities in the community. 'Volunteer Brokerage' is VCH's core service, matching local people with organisations that need people to help deliver their work. Since 1997 VCH has supported 22,000+ residents to share their skills, knowledge and experience through volunteering within their community and provided over 500 organisations with volunteer recruitment support. VCH's 'Step Up' is tailored brokerage, supporting people with mental health issues to participate in volunteering and employment. 'Together Better' and 'Our Place' are place-based resident engagement programmes on estates and GP practices. 'Community Befrienders' matches volunteers with socially isolated residents, providing a crucial social lifeline through face-to-face visits. 'Community Health Champions' is a partnership with Public Health, to recruit and train residents to share health messages. 'Neighbourhoods/MATCH' are resident engagement and co-production partnerships with the NHS to engage residents to co-design service improvements. VCH holds the nationally recognised Volunteer Centre Quality Accreditation mark for best practice in delivering volunteering infrastructure services.

Background and detail of proposal

VCH is seeking initial two-year funding to launch 'Community Befriending' and 'Volunteering Brokerage' programmes for the City of London. Dr Roger Greene's 'Social Isolation in the City of London' report (2019) identified that approximately 31% of social housing residents in the City of London experience forms of loneliness and social isolation. Residents aged 65+ in the majority of City of London wards are at considerable risk of loneliness (English Longitudinal Study of

Ageing). Furthermore, City of London residents with caring responsibilities are at particular risk of loneliness (Health and Wellbeing Peer Research 2021-22). There are 496 unpaid carers living in the City (Census 2021), and unpaid carers are amongst people experiencing the most severe to moderate depression. 30% of carers say their mental health is bad or very bad (Carers UK State of Caring 2022). This research has informed key priorities in the City of London's recently published Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-28 - namely 'increasing social connection and reducing isolation' and 'improving mental health' – and also the City Carers Strategy 2023-27 which prioritises 'improving carers' health and emotional wellbeing'.

VCH's Community Befriending (CB) programme will support City of London residents and carers experiencing social isolation and poor mental health, through providing companionship and support to engage with, as well as links to, meaningful local activity. VCH will recruit, train and support volunteer Befrienders, and match them to at least 80 isolated City residents, in particular unpaid carers, living with complex mental and physical health issues which have a significant detrimental effect on their ability to socialise and feel part of their community. Matched according to their interests, languages and experiences, Volunteer Befrienders will provide weekly in-person visits, providing practical and emotional support and encouragement to their befriender to work together towards agreed goals, including leaving their homes, attending community groups, taking public transport, going for walks, or just having conversations with another person. Through initial assessment and through Befrienders alerting VCH to arising issues, the programme will also support the prevention of further physical and mental health deterioration from providing practical advice on how to obtain support with a Personal Independence Payment or preventing someone's eviction through housing advice, to contacting the community mental health team when someone is not taking their medication or is having suicidal ideation. The programme will work with people from all over the City of London, but will pay particular attention to the east where the Portsoken ward has been identified as amongst the top 20% in the country for levels of deprivation, and people in the north end of the Cripplegate Ward who are at high risk of loneliness. (Age UK Loneliness Maps).

Over the pilot two years, VCH expect to improve the mental health and increase social connections of at least 68 of a cohort of 80 City of London residents building the resilience of service users and improving their quality of life enabled through the formation of trusting long-term relationships. Whilst Social Prescribing and City Connections services can support people with information on community activities, the new Community Befriending service will support isolated residents who need longer term encouragement to overcome mental health difficulties, language and mobility barriers in order to engage. Training for Community Befrienders will include boundaries, active listening and communication skills, dementia awareness, lone working, confidentiality, mental health, processes for raising concerns and how to alleviate negative thinking. VCH will also offer monthly reflective clinical supervision for Community Befrienders and make regular calls to both parties.

Through experience of running a Community Befriending programme in Hackney, VCH knows that many befrienderes will be 'housebound', through physical disability or poor mental health, most are likely to be older people and include residents with

dementia. Drawing on this experience Befrienders will support service users to engage with services and activities that improve mobility and wellbeing. Developed in consultation with the City Carers Community, the Community Befriending programme will also specifically target the City's carers, who struggle with isolation and poor mental health through the provision of volunteer "sitters" allowing precious respite (2-3 hours) for the main carer whilst their loved one is supported. VCH is exceptionally well placed to deliver the Community Befriending programme having strong relationships with local services that will act as referral agents (Adult Social Care, Occupational Therapists, City and Hackney Carers Centre, Age UK East London and Age UK City, Toynbee Hall, City Connections, IMAGO - Carers Support Service, City Advice) and the Neaman GP Practice, where VCH delivers 'Together Better' social prescribing and has established City Health Champions.

VCH's second strategic initiative is to support the City's emerging Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) through the establishment of Volunteering Brokerage to support City residents and CoL Corporation workers to find, apply for and sustain volunteering activities that will benefit both them as individuals, and strengthen their community. The benefits of volunteering are multiple. It connects people with each other and with their local community, builds confidence and wellbeing, and leads to greater resilience. Organisations that rely on volunteers gain a much-needed resource to help deliver their services. The result is stronger and more cohesive local communities based on mutual support, with programmes that meet community needs. Individuals who volunteer benefit from improved wellbeing, mental health and self-confidence.

VCH will support both City based community groups to develop new volunteer roles for residents and CoL Corporation employees, provide volunteer management guidance and work with VCSquared Network. Outreach for volunteer brokerage will be undertaken at libraries, community centres, shops and markets and VCH will deliver estate-based resident-led volunteering by linking with Residents Associations. Support will be tailored so that any resident or CoLC employee, whatever their background, skills and circumstances, can meet their own personal goals and pursue interests. As part of its facilitation of the service, VCH will develop a database of City-based volunteering opportunities, and offer support to residents and CoLC employees to secure suitable and appropriate placements. Over two years, VCH will support at least 200 volunteer placements (75 in Year 1, 125 in Year 2) in City of London across an estimated 45 community organisations.

The new proposed Volunteer Brokerage service has been developed in consultation with the City Corporations' Volunteer Manager to integrate the new offer. Key opportunities include: advertising City Corporation volunteer roles on the brokerage database, supporting volunteer management best practice, and actively promoting roles such as Youth Parliament and City Youth Forum through targeted marketing. The new Volunteering Brokerage programme will be open to all residents, but will offer additional 1:2:1 brokerage support to those who need it such as residents with mental health issues. VCH will work closely with VCSquared Network (a CILNF funded VCS development programme delivered by Hackney CVS, to map and support City community organisations) who VCH will support with volunteer recruitment and management – a vital next strategic step in developing the capacity

and resilience of the City's VCS services and activities.

Value for Money

VCH's pilot programmes will lead to significant long-term positive social outcomes reducing the social isolation of vulnerable City residents by engaging them in activities across the City's growing VCS offer itself strengthened through the development of a strong volunteer pipeline that increases the capacity of the VCS services and activities offered. In purely economic terms the 200 volunteer placements are estimated to provide 18,200 volunteer hours (average 6 month placement for 0.5 days/wk) worth £252,070 (if paid at London Living Wage). By working through VCH, City participants will have access to VCH's separately funded 'Step Up' programme that can offer personalised support to volunteers with mental health difficulties, including wellbeing workshops, employability skills and training; VCH's 'Together Better' programme of peer support groups, arts and crafts, walking and gardening sessions; and VCH's 'Our Place' programme that supports residents on estates to lead their own community activities. The programmes will benefit from best practice developed through VCH's delivery of similar services in Hackney, associated training and database infrastructure. The programme will add value through preventing situations worsening, hospital admissions or incurring large repair or care costs through Community Befrienders encouraging service users to address deteriorating health issues including suicidal thoughts and practical housing issues, which they may be ignoring.

Financial Information

VCH's services and related income has been growing with annual income increasing to £1,136,460 in 2023/24 and a surplus of £30,285. VCH income is largely restricted generated from a range of contracts and grants including contributions from Hackney Council, Public Health, National Lottery Community Fund, North East London Integrated Care Board alongside contributions from business partner The Depository Trust & Clearing Corporation. At end March 2024, VCH held unrestricted funds of £113,769 slightly below their stated reserves policy to maintain reserves at a minimum of 15% of annual costs. Management accounts for 2024/25 and future projections show a small increase in reserves. There are no concerns in relation to financial viability of the organisation for the duration of the grant.

| Year end as at 31 March | 2024 Signed Accounts £ | 2025 Management Accounts £ | 2026 Budget £ |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Income & expenditure: | | | |
| Income | 1,136,629 | 1,197,843 | 1,166,213 |
| Expenditure | (1,106,344) | (1,226,494) | (1,209,181) |
| Surplus/(deficit) | 30,285 | (28,651) | (42,968) |
| Reserves: | | | |
| Total restricted | 142,478 | 100,287 | 47,625 |
| Total unrestricted | 113,769 | 127,309 | 137,003 |
| Total reserves | 256,247 | 227,596 | 184,628 |
| Of which: free unrestricted | 113,769 | 127,309 | 137,003 |
| Reserves policy target | 165,952 | 183,974 | 181,377 |
| Free reserves over/(under) target | (52,183) | (56,665) | (44,374) |

Recommendation

VCH is seeking funding to launch two new bespoke programmes for the City of London to address social isolation and improve the mental health of older residents and those with caring responsibilities and to build a strong volunteer network for the City. Both programmes are strategically important for the City of London. The Community Befriending programme, through its focus on addressing social isolation and improving mental health will substantially contribute to the delivery of the City's Health & Wellbeing Strategy 2024-28. VCH's Volunteer Brokerage programme is also of significant strategic importance, given it will be instrumental in strengthening and ensuring the sustainability of the City's Voluntary & Community Sector. Through a separate CILNF application the City has established the VCSquared Network bringing together voluntary and community organisations working in the City of London and those interested in bringing their services to the City of London. VCH's Volunteer Brokerage is the next step in developing this sector providing local volunteers to increase organisational capacity to meet City based demand for services and activities. The proposal strongly meets the CILNF priority to address the needs of people from disadvantaged backgrounds, minoritised communities, older people, and those living in poverty firstly by supporting City residents who are identified as isolated to access activities and services and secondly through volunteer development to increase the capacity of the organisations delivering these services. Funding is recommended as follows:

£246,479 over 2 years (£122,105 Year One; £124,374 Year Two) to deliver two 2-year strategic programmes - Community Befriending for residents experiencing loneliness and isolation and Volunteering Brokerage to increase volunteering opportunities and grow and strengthen the City of London's voluntary community sector.