

# **COMMUNITY ACTION: MK**

**Report of the Inquiry into the Impact of Volunteering on  
Community Wellbeing  
June 2015**

## Foreword from Sheila Thornton, Chair of Community Action: MK

As the leading infrastructure organisation in Milton Keynes, the work of Community Action:MK is key in promoting and strengthening the voluntary and community sector; nurturing, challenging and celebrating good practice.

As the Hub for Volunteering, it is a privilege for us at Community Action: MK to work with colleagues across Milton Keynes' community, business and public sectors, as an enabler, broker and catalyst for improvement.

We will use the report of the Volunteer Commission as a springboard for improving our services, with an expectation that we, in Milton Keynes, can achieve the aspirations captured in the strategic recommendations. Community Action:MK cannot do it alone through, and we look forward to continuing old, and making new, partnerships along the way. Thank you to all those groups and individuals who have contributed to the work of the Commission; your time and effort has created the foundation for the next phase of robust action planning and delivery.

## Executive Summary from Jon Bright, Independent Chair of the Commission

I applaud Community Action MK for setting up this Commission of Inquiry into Volunteering. This is a good time to take stock for a number of reasons.

### **Reduction in public services**

Under most political scenarios, investment in public services will continue to reduce over the next 5 years. At the same time, demand for care and health services is set to increase, driven mainly by a rapidly ageing population. The statutory sector is likely to look to community support (via informal and formal volunteering) to help improve outcomes for the elderly and reduce demand on public services (such as preventable hospital admissions). Milton Keynes – with its Cooperative Council – is keen to work with the VCSE sector to face these challenges together.

### **The importance of prevention**

There is evidence that preventive services can work and volunteering is invariably an essential element of these. Prevention / early intervention can reduce the substantial 'down-stream' costs of responding to problems that become crises. New approaches to investing in preventive services via outcome-based commissioning and social impact bonds will have implications for how we recruit, train and deploy volunteers.

### **Professions and problems**

We need new ways of tackling the so called 'wicked problems'. We may have reached a limit of what the classic welfare model can achieve. New approaches are being developed that include greater involvement of communities and more responsibility devolved to individual clients. One example might be co-production of health care in which professionals and community volunteers work together to improve health outcomes.

### **Community resilience and well-being**

A smaller state means communities will need to do more to meet their challenges. This means looking at what people can do to help each other. We may be asking more people to volunteer in some form or

other (to release untapped riches). Research suggests that one of the many advantages of more people volunteering will be an increase in community and individual well-being.

### **A route to paid work**

Many people-especially younger people and who those disadvantaged in some way-look to volunteering as a pathway towards paid work. This needs a quality brokerage service and staff to support these volunteers to ensure they are deployed effectively, trained and supported.

So where does this analysis leave us? The majority of support for others is undertaken informally and many would not consider themselves to be 'volunteers'. There is also formal volunteering in which people commit to a specific role with particular organisations over a particular period of time (as part of a process of service delivery). We need to encourage more of both. We should invest in volunteering as a way of providing mutual support, preventing problems happening in the first place and responding to those challenges that cannot be prevented.

This suggests we should think about re-inventing volunteering so it is no longer 'nice to have' but a core element of health care, community safety and individual and community well-being. Re-define volunteering so it is seen as something everyone can do rather than there being a group of people who give and those who receive. Encouraging a larger number of people of all age groups and backgrounds to make a contribution, either informally or formally and improving and modernising our approach to incentivising, recruiting, training, deploying, supporting and acknowledging volunteers.

The Commission's report sets out some ideas for taking these ideas forward. It has been a pleasure chairing the group. I would like to thank its members who have given freely of their time and experience and the many people who have given evidence to us.

## Strategic Recommendations

1. Volunteering should be developed as a strategic force for change in Milton Keynes as we move to becoming a cooperative borough
2. Volunteering should be recognised for its role in improving health and wellbeing and reducing inequalities in health
3. Every resident needs to have an opportunity to volunteer so that the number and diversity of people volunteering is increased
4. Good practice and quality standards in the recruitment, training and retention of volunteers should be maximised
5. All forms of volunteering should be championed including Employee Volunteering, specialist and pro bono support, ad hoc and micro volunteering.

## Defining volunteering

At Community Action:MK we work to the principles endorsed by the United Nations, recognising volunteering as an activity that should:

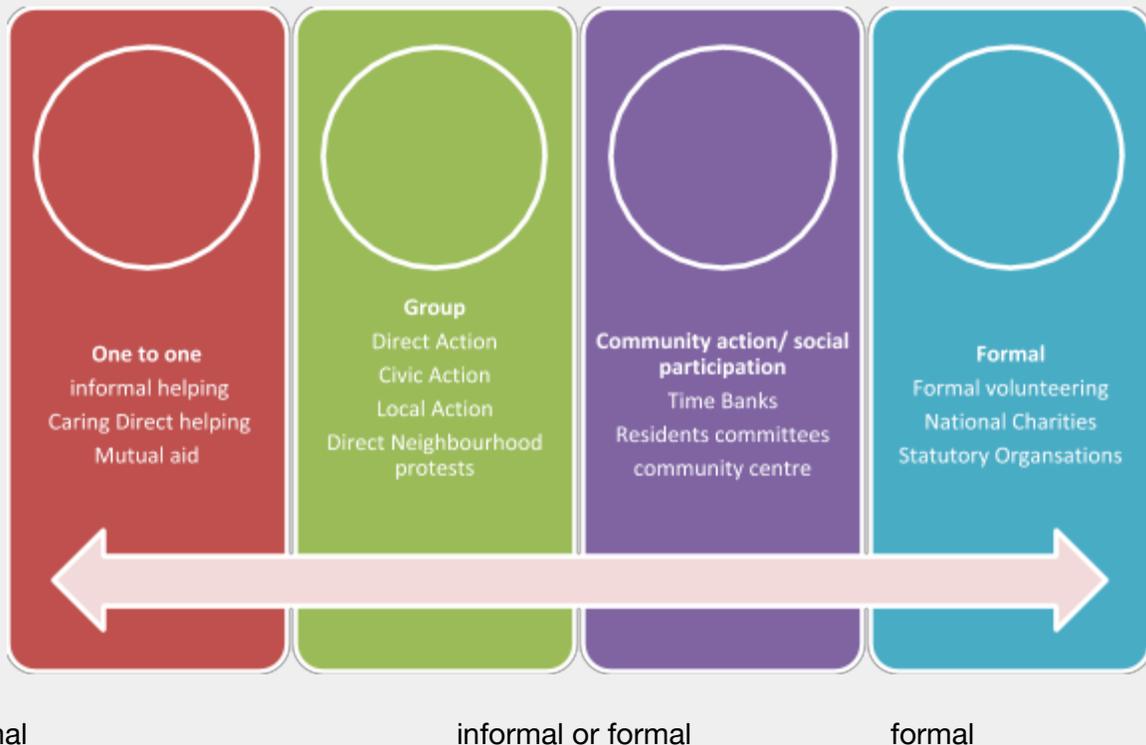
- Not be undertaken primarily for financial reward, although reimbursement of expenses may be allowed.
- Be undertaken voluntarily, according to an individual's own free-will.
- Be of benefit to someone other than the volunteers, or to society at large, although it is recognised that volunteering brings significant benefit to the volunteer as well.

## Formal and informal volunteering

Formal volunteering takes place in organisations ranging from a small community group to major national charities. Informal volunteering, refers to a wide range of mutual help and co-operation between individuals and communities including babysitting, checking on a neighbour and involvement in faith groups. It is very difficult to quantify the value of informal volunteering as many would not necessarily refer to themselves as volunteers.

We recognise that both formal and informal volunteering contribute positively to active citizenship and participation. Woolvin 2010 proposes a spectrum to help us understand the different ways people participate in society, 'shaping positive social norms in their everyday lives'.

This spectrum can be used to communicate the wide-ranging positive contribution all forms of volunteering make to the enhancement of social capital, social inclusion, community cohesion and active citizenship. The level of resources required for the recruitment, training and support of volunteers increases as you move from left to right across the spectrum.



### Why an inquiry into the impact and benefit of volunteering on community wellbeing?

In mid 2014 Community Action: MK set up a commission of inquiry into the impact and benefit of volunteering on community wellbeing as part of the implementation of our recently agreed Volunteering Strategy, Inspiring Volunteers in Milton Keynes, Building on Success 2014 - 2019. The Board of Trustees wanted to provide an opportunity for cross sector discussion on how we might work collaboratively to improve the impact of volunteering in MK taking into account the national and local context.

### National Context

Some argue that the UK is experiencing the deepest reduction in the size of the state since WW2. Public spending reductions are likely to continue whichever parties win the 2015 election. This is driven largely by a wish to reduce the deficit and, for some, to reduce the size of the state and subcontract public services to the private or VCSE sector. Although contested, most commentators think this process will continue as the Welfare State settlement is 're-set'. Public spending reductions post 2015 are expected to be deeper even than those in the last Spending Review.

At the same time, demand for care and health services is set to increase, driven mainly by a rapidly ageing population. The scale of this challenge is not widely understood. The statutory sector is looking to the VCSE to generate a level of community support (via informal and formal volunteering) that will improve outcomes for the elderly and reduce demand on public services (such as preventable hospital admissions).

### The report 'A Better Offer' warns:

- UK charities urgently need to step-up preparations for the future – 'without adapting, charities may find a large part of their voluntary workforce deserting them'.
- 'Super boomers' could be the next generation of charity volunteers, but face unprecedented pressure

to work longer and care for their families, with childcare a major burden reducing the time available to help charities.

- With volunteering by older people currently valued at £10bn a year, charities face an uncertain future unless they make a more compelling offer to potential volunteers.
- New survey data shows that larger charities seem to be weathering the storm – for now.

[http://www.ilcuk.org.uk/index.php/publications/publication\\_details/a\\_better\\_offer\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_volunteering\\_in\\_an\\_ageing\\_society](http://www.ilcuk.org.uk/index.php/publications/publication_details/a_better_offer_the_future_of_volunteering_in_an_ageing_society)

People Helping People - NESTA's report on the future of public services:

[http://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/people\\_helping\\_people\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_public\\_services\\_wv.pdf](http://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/people_helping_people_the_future_of_public_services_wv.pdf)

### **The Commission Approach**

A panel of Commissioners was recruited:

Jon Bright - Independent Chair

Gamiel Yafai - Diversity Market Place & Vice Chair Community Action: MK

Alison Fischer - Rep of VCS Health and Wellbeing Reference Group, BLMK

Christine Pearce - Centre for Integrated Living

Sue Frossell - Consultant in Public Health, Trustee at Community Action:MK

Additional members joined for the evidence sessions:

Cllr Liz Gifford - MK Council Cabinet Member for Community Services

Sheila Thornton - Chair, Community Action:MK

The whole process was observed by Carol Jackson-Jarvis PhD, Lecturer in Management, Open University Business School who provided reflections and insights after each session which helped Commissioners clarify their thinking and provided a framework for organising the evidence.

### **The Process**

Commission members met on 6 occasions to discuss a broad range of research based evidence from the UK and abroad, consider written evidence and take verbal submissions from invited witnesses (see list at end of report).

## Findings

Five main themes emerged from the analysis and discussion of the plethora information, research and evidence considered by the Commissioners. A summary of each is given with an indication of the focus of the Commissioners discussions and, most importantly, a thematic overview of the evidence collected in the witness sessions

### 1. Community resilience and wellbeing

A smaller state will require communities to be better equipped to address their own challenges. This involves focussing on the opportunities and assets in a community and looking at what people can do to help each other (eg via Time Banks). Skilled advice and support is essential. Reduced public spending and increased demand suggests that we will be looking to larger proportion of the population to volunteer in some form or other (to release untapped riches). Research suggests that one of the many advantages of more people volunteering will be an increase in community and individual well being.

#### 1.1. In discussion commissioners considered:

- Peer support, the new generation of timebanks, alternative currencies, reciprocity and mutual help.
- How will Milton Keynes Council's Co-operative Council decision impact volunteering?
- The need to better understand the gaps in volunteering provision.

#### 1.2. Themes emerging from the witness sessions:

- interconnections between individual, organisational and community level wellbeing
- difficulty of measuring wellbeing outcomes
- aim to keep people well and therefore not needing public services
- importance of thanking volunteers, showing they are valued
- potential to tell stories more widely to celebrate volunteering

### 2. The importance of prevention

There is much evidence that preventive services can work and volunteering is invariably an essential element of these. Prevention / early intervention can reduce the substantial 'down-stream' costs of responding to problems and improve outcomes. However, there have been significant problems in scaling up successful approaches and integrating them within the mainstream systems of social care and criminal justice. This is due to many factors, the most significant of which is a lack of long term planning by government and cross party commitment to developing preventive policies in a systematic and rigorous way.

#### 2.1. In discussion commissioners considered:

- Scaling and SROI specifically in relation to volunteering
- How volunteering impacts on the individual in relation to prevention

#### 2.2. Themes emerging from the witness sessions:

- many organisations shared an aim to keep people well and therefore not needing public services
- Diversity of motivations to volunteer
- importance of fun and enjoyment, as well as the motivation to give something back, contribute to

the community

- significance of the social aspects for volunteers
- volunteer / service user boundary may be permeable for some
- difficulty of working with those who are compelled to volunteer
- desire to do something completely different
- skills development - employability
- skill or interest match e.g. love of nature, experience of book-keeping

### 3. Professions and problems

We need more innovation in tackling the so called 'wicked problems'. We may have reached a limit of what the classic welfare model can achieve. New approaches are being developed that include greater involvement of communities and more responsibility devolved to individual clients. One example might be co-production of health care in which professionals and community volunteers work together to improve health outcomes. There are similar approaches in criminal justice.

#### 3.1. In discussion commissioners considered:

- What is meant by greater involvement of communities? Links between volunteering, social action and community ownership.
- Co-production and further exploration of it's implications
- Organised joint working around innovation

#### 3.2. Themes emerging from witness sessions:

##### Collaboration, cooperation, partnership:

- different models of collaborative working, both in-sector and across sectors, may emerge to meet the needs of local communities and of the external environment
- different aspects of the external environment may be more or less significant for different organisations
- the Council as an enabler, not a provider
- Infrastructure organisations as facilitators
- the introduction of collaboration models takes time to embed and require cultural changes within organisations in both the voluntary and public sectors

##### Evidence:

- problem of identifying 'what works' in volunteering and how we know
- evidence which measures outcomes presented as key to future public spending
- limitations of current data - across sectors
- what is the vision against which evidence or measures can be presented?
- What is the value of volunteering and how do we know? How is that value similar to or different from value generated through public services?

##### Volunteer roles:

- witnesses suggest a variety of roles are more likely to engage the individual volunteer and a diversity of volunteers
- large organisations can provide this variety themselves
- specialist roles are important to organisations and can provide a match with volunteer skills and interests
- provide opportunities for skills development and progression to employment

**Time:**

- Time pressures on individuals but also in terms of timescales for organisational and inter-organisational change e.g. policy changes, new areas of work and new ways of working
- Infrastructure support and/or working together may help address time constraints
- its a positive resource in terms of the early retired population, but time commitment needs 'reward', and increasing numbers of volunteers with time on their hands needs to be actively supported and managed

**4. 'What works'**

There is a substantial amount of evidence of what works and what doesn't. The Government has just set up 4 'What works' centres to ensure policy is informed by evidence from evaluations and research. Knowledge of what works and how to make 'what works' work in different situations needs to be made available to community organisations and those who advise them. The aim would be to ensure volunteer effort is deployed in ways most likely to make an impact.

**4.1. In discussion commissioners considered:**

- How do we create volunteering programmes that attract social investment?
- What's the role for infrastructure organisations?

**4.2. Themes emerging from witness sessions:****Quality:**

- value of learning from others, mentoring, advice (and challenge) for managers of volunteers
- possibility of sharing quality systems
- importance of volunteer management to ensure quality
- relationship between quality and provision of a 'safe' environment for volunteering
- ensuring quality has a cost, but also payback in terms of recruitment and retention

**Training and recruitment retention of volunteers / reputation:**

- emerges as something of a virtuous circle in some witness statements i.e. we recruit well, we put effort into retention, and our reputation increases, therefore we recruit well....
- recruitment needs very active approach to ensure the right person in the right place. This is not simply an administrative process

**Brokerage role:**

- proactive, challenging, supporting
- facilitating networking, learning from each other, collaboration
- facilitate approach to corporates to promote good practice and avoid duplication
- specialist recruitment

**Volunteer management:**

- volunteers need to be managed and supported - this has a cost
- management by volunteers may mean that opportunities are limited by capacity / availability
- in addition to specific volunteer manager roles, a whole organisation approach engages volunteers, supporting volunteers within specialist teams within the organisation
- sustainability and succession - how to build on the enthusiasm and commitment of individual staff
- managing the relationship between paid staff and volunteers - the importance of clarity of expectations, but also the sense of being one team

**Scale:**

- questions / ideas about how to scale-up good practice
- some organisations dealing with greatly expanding scale, while others work at a very local / micro level

**5. Challenges that emerged****For the Cooperative Borough**

- What is the value of volunteering and how do we know? How is that value similar to or different from value generated through public services?

**For the Relationship between sectors**

- A difficult underlying question. Perhaps a need for cultural shifts for some in both the voluntary and public sectors. Importance of not simply replacing public sector jobs with unpaid workers, Blurring the sector boundaries, or each sector doing what it does well?
- Expressed by one witness as 'How are we going to do what is best for MK together?'
- political context - awareness of coming election; local govt financial settlement

**For volunteer involving organisations**

- How to ensure the voices of volunteers are heard. Several witnesses indicated they have volunteer stories, either in files or in grant applications, which tell a story about the transformational value of volunteering. Can these stories be told at a wider level?
- Negative impacts of volunteering - avoiding the potential for groups to become closed or exclusive; avoiding the sense that volunteers are simply cheap labour, replacing paid staff; challenges of working with unwilling volunteers e.g. referrals from Job Centre Plus
- How is duplication and competition to be minimized?
- Ways in which processes can be enabling or obstructive e.g. application for rates relief, and the ways in which the Parish processes draw people into volunteering with a focus on meetings rather than doing

**For infrastructure support**

- How to address the needs of the diversity of volunteer-involving organisations. Witness statements demonstrated a difference between the needs of large organisations for brokerage - which may relate to quite specialist advice, or recruitment of specialist volunteers, and those of smaller organisations, where there may be a need for support and advice around basic recruitment and support functions

## Recommendations

### 1. Volunteering should be developed as a strategic force for change in Milton Keynes as we move to becoming a cooperative borough

#### Rationale

Volunteering contributes positively to the economic, physical and social fabric of society. Volunteering also works to build social capital contributing positively to achieving the following outcomes:

- More people have strong and supportive friendships and contacts to draw upon
- More people have community connections
- More people who experience inequality influence decisions that affect their life or community

These outcomes work to develop vibrant communities in Milton Keynes where citizens are actively involved, fostering feelings of trust and respect. Volunteering provides individuals with an opportunity to operate in environments they might not ordinarily be exposed to encouraging interaction, tolerance and appreciation of different cultures and perspectives. Volunteering strengthens local networks helping people to feel more embedded within their local community, contributing positively to the social fabric of Milton Keynes.

Studies have demonstrated a strong correlation between high levels of social capital and low levels of violent crime, lower mortality rates and improved educational outcomes. The Marmot Review 'Fair Society, Healthy Lives' documents that neighbourhoods where there is less voluntary / unpaid work are perceived to be less safe with less socialising and trust in others. Additionally research has demonstrated there is a strong inverse relationship between levels of voluntary membership and crime (Putnam 2010).

#### What could be done to achieve this:

Demonstrate the character of active citizenship across MK's communities by:

- identifying where volunteering is regularly occurring and where there is unmet need
- agreeing the costs of infrastructure support for ensuring good quality volunteering contribution and experience
- recognising, and celebrating the life-changing influence that volunteers can have on community members
- evaluating the impact of volunteering on the organisations that involve them

Identify the preventative role that volunteering and volunteers provide i.e. if services were not delivered by volunteers, how much this would cost the public purse in real terms and what infrastructure would be required. This could be undertaken through:

- identify mechanisms for measuring the social value of volunteering
- using SROI (or equivalent) identify the preventative contribution of both volunteers and volunteering
- identify where volunteers contribute to alternative delivery models

## 2. Volunteering should be recognised for its role in improving health and wellbeing and reducing inequalities in health

### Rationale

There is a social gradient in health with people experiencing more positive health outcomes the higher their position on the social ladder. Reducing inequality across the gradient is a matter of fairness and social justice. Volunteering is by its very nature an inclusive activity, providing people across the gradient with an opportunity to participate, tackling social exclusion and enabling people to contribute positively to civil society.

Volunteering has a positive impact on the health and well being of individuals. It provides people with the opportunity to socially integrate with others, establishing social contacts and networks fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness to wider society. This in turn contributes to the health and wellbeing of an individual, combating feelings of loneliness and isolation. People develop networks of support which they can draw upon in times of difficulty.

Volunteering has a positive impact on the psychosocial well being of an individual, positively influencing the perception of self and social integration. Volunteers gain a sense of satisfaction, feeling good about themselves recognising their volunteering participation as a positive way to spend their time. It provides people with a sense of purpose and has been identified as a protective factor in older people working to increase self-esteem and self-efficacy, contributing productively to the aging process. The value of social interaction is reinforced by research from Number 10's Behavioural Insight Team which documents that being lonely in old age will propel you more quickly to the grave than smoking.

Individuals with mental health problems can often be passive recipients of services, volunteering provides service users with the opportunity to give something back, citing it as highly beneficial for their wellbeing and recovery. The increased well being of an individual has an indirect impact at community level as individuals are empowered to participate and become more actively involved in their community.

### What could be done to achieve this:

Volunteering should be promoted by the health and social care community as a route to improving health and well being by:

- utilising volunteering in a co-production model to support citizens in improving their health
- developing a promotional campaign across care and health professionals

## 3. Every resident needs to have an opportunity to volunteer so that the number and diversity of people volunteering is increased

### Rationale

There is a social gradient in volunteering with greater numbers of individuals formally volunteering from higher socioeconomic groups. In an effort to close this gap it is important to recognise that people rarely go from a situation of no involvement to one of active engagement, the process is more gradual. People move along a 'ladder of

involvement' from one off acts of helping a neighbour to a regular commitment with a voluntary organisation. Recognising and understanding the enablers and inhibitors that influence how an individual might move between different types of activity through their life course will help to identify opportunities for levelling up participation across the gradient (Woolvin 2010) Volunteer involving organisations need to take greater consideration of how and why people get involved in volunteering to ensure participation rates increase and opportunities are made available to ensure people with protected characteristics have equal opportunity to volunteer

#### **What could be done to achieve this:**

- ensure that fully accessible information on volunteering opportunities is universally available in a variety of forms to ensure the widest possible reach across MK communities
- provide support for volunteering organisations to engage a diverse population of volunteers
- champion new and alternative models of volunteering e.g. timebanking, micro volunteering, digital volunteering, ad hoc volunteering etc.
- increase the number of volunteer opportunities for individuals from underrepresented groups

#### **4. Good practice and quality standards in the recruitment, training and retention of volunteers should be maximised**

##### **Rationale**

An active and supported volunteering infrastructure is essential to support and encourage volunteer involvement while simultaneously ensuring the provision of a wide range of volunteering opportunities. Maintaining supply and demand is influenced by an individual's motivation and ability to access suitable volunteering, however the volunteering landscape is also driven by numerous other factors including the state of the economy, demographics, education and migration patterns

An obstacle often cited by organisations to involving more volunteers is not having the capacity to recruit volunteers or resources to pay a staff member to manage volunteers. While volunteers give their time freely, volunteering as an activity is not cost free. This strategy recognises that volunteers need to be recruited, trained and supported in their varying roles to ensure they have a positive experience and contribute positively to their work outcomes. Furthermore to reduce the gradient in volunteering opportunities need to be inclusive and open to all.

#### **What could be done to achieve this:**

VIOs need to be supported to build their capacity and efficiency to ensure increased ability to recruit, train and support volunteers by:

- having access to a range of resources, management information and consultancy options that can provide support
- increasing the capacity to provide a central hub for volunteer recruitment, training and management to MK groups
- developing a local Investing in Volunteers quality award that can be rolled out to assure volunteers that the host organisation is 'volunteer ready'
- develop a mechanism to provide bespoke training to the VIO community to enhance and respond to volunteer management training needs

Thank you to the following organisations who took part in the Inquiry -

- Milton Keynes Council
- Buckingham Canal Society
- Pre School Learning Alliance
- University of Northampton
- Advantage Africa
- Bletchley Park Trust
- Sustrans
- MK Dons SET
- Open University
- Centre for Integrated Living
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Age UK Milton Keynes
- The Secret Garden
- The Parks Trust
- Westbury Arts