



## Organisation Strength Review

### Introduction

Dorset Community Action was engaged by Rising Voices Wessex to undertake an Organisation Strength Review, which was informed by looking at Rising Voices Wessex's governance and management. The purpose of the Organisational Strength Review is to make recommendations to develop the organisation's governance and effectiveness. Good practice in these areas can have a positive impact on service delivery, enabling organisations to better meet their beneficiaries' needs and organisational goals, as well as develop the organisation's future sustainability.

The Organisation Strength Review involved:

- A desk review of key documents (internal and public);
- A meeting with representatives of the Trustee board covering key aspects of the governance of the organisation;
- A follow up survey with trustees regarding the operation and effectiveness of the trustee board and an evaluation of their own contribution;
- Ongoing dialogue with representatives of the trustee board and request for additional documents, information and points of clarification;
- A survey of volunteers to obtain their feedback and views on the management and communication within the organisation.

Anita Hansen from Dorset Community Action analysed the results of these activities to present in this report, which has been written to inform trustees of the findings and recommendations for action by Trustees to improve governance and management where appropriate.

We would like to thank all Rising Voices Wessex Trustees, staff and volunteers for their valuable input and time, given throughout this review.

### Process

#### 1) Desk Review

A wide range of documents were reviewed including:

- a. Current constitution;
- b. Board papers & minutes;
- c. Annual report & accounts;
- d. Policies and procedures;
- e. Strategy documents & business plan;
- f. Terms of reference.

#### 2) Zoom meetings (undertaken due to the Coronavirus lockdown)

The trustee board was asked for their understanding on performance against the key governance headings including: the aims and objectives of the organisation, finance and



funding, risk management, staff and volunteers, communication, marketing and collaboration and monitoring and evaluation. The questions asked were based on the Charity Governance Code and VCSE Strength Checker.

Follow up emails, additional documentation, and discussion aimed to gain further clarity and better understand actual practice.

### 3) Online Surveys

Steering group members and volunteers were asked to complete an online survey to gather their views about the organisation's management and communication and their involvement.

The online survey was sent to 12 steering group members and 6 - 8 volunteers to explore and identify:

- Any issues Rising Voices Wessex face and the effect on their role;
- How secure Rising Voices Wessex is and any impact on their role;
- Their awareness of Rising Voices Wessex's aims and business / strategic plan;
- The difference Rising Voices Wessex makes directly to its users and the wider community;
- If Rising Voices Wessex is a learning organisation;
- What projects / activities have been most successful and which not;
- The effectiveness of their Trustee Board;
- How good a place Rising Voices Wessex is to volunteer and / or work;
- How well Rising Voices Wessex is managed and;
- How well Rising Voices Wessex communicates.

A second online survey was sent to each Trustee board member to evaluate the Trustee board, and their own individual contribution and effectiveness.

The remainder of this report presents the observations and findings, and makes recommendations for future good practice.

## Executive Summary

Rising Voices Wessex and the Trustee Board has worked hard over the last 7 years to set up, manage and run successful choirs that support its members' health and wellbeing. As recognised in one comment from the volunteer survey:

*"I think that the choir is a fantastic opportunity for people who wish to socialise, sing, laugh, have a bit of fun in a non-judgemental environment. I think that the trustees work incredibly hard to facilitate and maintain the choir's survival."*

The trustees have put in place many of the key processes and practices to support good governance, and Trustees fulfil their duties and responsibilities; setting direction and providing leadership, complying with regulation, managing risks and fulfilling their charitable objectives, and following recommended best practice in many areas.



*“From the first one I attended and henceforth, I have always been extremely impressed by the professionalism shown by team members. The dedication and hard work of the board each in their own way, is to be commended. Meetings are structured, clear, organised and resolve issues. Targets are set and ideas shared, everyone is totally focused on continuing the good work and the benefits we bring to our choir members and community. I am very proud to be a cog in the wheel of RVW.”*

There is some concern amongst trustees of the sustainability of the organisation. Its success to date has largely (though not exclusively) been as a result of the dedication and commitment of the founding members, who are still very much involved. There is a desire to step back a bit, but a concern that some trustees are less engaged and do not actively participate undertaking actions, leaving the bulk of the workload to the same minority and possibly a concern about letting go and what this may mean for the charity going forward.

The Trustees are aware of areas for improvement, which under normal circumstances would be addressed, but with so much uncertainty at present, as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic and the vulnerability of choir members, have taken the view to maintain stability and perhaps now is not the time for change, but for adaptations that preserve the achievements to date.

*“There are some areas of the board structure and working that need a refresh, we are aware of this but currently not making changes due to the need for stability at present.”*

However, based on the review findings, Rising Voices Wessex could enhance its processes and practices that will support its sustainability. Therefore the recommendations identified within this review are suggested amendments to current practice to support the organisation continue to move in the direction it is currently travelling and its sustainability. In summary they fall into three key areas:

- 1) Enhancements to trustee recruitment and induction to help those joining understand what is required of them, the level of commitment expected etc.
- 2) Development of role descriptions or processes for key roles and tasks to support knowledge transfer and continuation of service.
- 3) Develop a simple action plan table to aid delivery and monitoring of strategic aims. Taking the work done to date, in identifying the desired “what to do next” and identifying lead person, deadline dates, success measures, resource requirements including skills etc.

This is primarily documenting much of what is already being done. This will enable and empower others to fulfil their roles and achieve success by providing clarity and shared understanding.

Finally, DCA would like to thank all Rising Voices Wessex Trustees, staff and volunteers for their valuable input and time throughout this review and we trust you find the report, findings and recommendations beneficial.



## Background

Rising Voices Wessex became established following a 2012 conference on Cancer Survivorship at the Bournemouth International Centre run by the (then) Dorset Cancer Network (DCN). Discussion at the conference agreed that singing was a beneficial activity for health and wellbeing and this led to an application being made to the DCN for a project to fund a choir for those affected by cancer – the application was successful with a priming grant that, in a partnership with the Lighthouse Arts Centre in Poole, supported the establishment of a choir, determining the demand for such a choir and undertaking some initial evaluation of its potential benefit.

With local TV (BBC South Today) coverage the Poole choir commenced in the Lighthouse in January 2013 following which there was an attendance of 30-40 participants each week; cultural and practical support from the Lighthouse proved invaluable in the choir's early stages and the initial evaluation undertaken by Dr Jane Oakland, a music psychologist demonstrated psychological benefits to participants; resources, methodology required and time precluded any evaluation of physical benefit. Evaluation also clearly identified the importance of choir being led by an enthusiastic and charismatic Choir Director.

Within 3 years it proved possible to establish a second Rising Voices choir at the Bournemouth-Christchurch end of the conurbation – this was greatly helped by support from Tesco who generously made available its community facility in its superstore adjacent to the Royal Bournemouth Hospital. Although the location had some practical limitations it facilitated the second choir's development while a suitable base for it was found at the New Church in Tuckton.

Progress with the choirs was such that a successful application was made for Rising Voices Wessex to become a registered charity and Charity status was achieved in January 2016.

In the 8 years the choirs have been running, membership has grown with 120 – 140 regular participants. The 3 founding trustees have recruited 4 additional members to the Trustee board and are supported by the commitment and dedication of the Choir Director, accompanist and other freelance professionals. The trustees, particularly the founding members, are concerned about sustainability and ensuring Rising Voices Wessex is in the best possible position for the future. Key members of the organisation are now looking to develop sustainability and succession planning.

The review findings aim to present a “snapshot” of the current position of the organisation and make recommendations for future sustainability, development and growth.

**NB** it is important to note that the review was undertaken during the Coronavirus pandemic which has required charities to be creative and adapt their service delivery to support their beneficiaries or close temporarily. This has also been a time where many beneficiaries and



volunteers have been required to “shield” and self-isolate to protect themselves from the virus, leaving many charities with fewer resources to deliver services. The “lockdown” has also resulted in many planned fundraising activities to be postponed indefinitely, cancelled or moved online, and many grant giving organisations have responded to the crisis by diverting funds to support those most vulnerable and impacted by the virus. This has resulted in a reduction in available funds for many charities both now and for the foreseeable future. Therefore, the current operating environment is uncertain and changeable, and any future plans should be flexible and adaptable. The recommendations within this report are with regard to good governance, and if adopted should underpin the organisation through this uncertainty.