

Good morning everyone,

It's great to see you here today.

Last year, I was asked by Trustees to talk about what the future might hold for the local voluntary sector and how we support our communities.

Most of what I mentioned then, is still true today.

In the past year, the rising cost of living has continued to put pressure on families and individuals.

This has affected both the public and voluntary sectors as we work hard to meet the growing needs of those affected.

The global issue of refugees and asylum seekers is still ongoing, and our sector plays a crucial role in providing support and integration opportunities.

Isolation and loneliness, made worse by the pandemic, still remain significant issues. As the needs of our communities change, creating a sense of belonging and empowerment is essential.

Volunteers are the lifeblood of our communities, and the way people want to volunteer is changing.

Therefore, at Communities 1st, we want to support the sector in being able to offer flexible and diverse volunteering opportunities.

Climate change is one of the biggest challenges we face, and at Communities 1st, we're excited to be working in partnership with WENTA to support the sector and take steps towards a net-zero future.

This year has seen big political changes, so we've worked hard to ensure our members' voices were central to the 'What We Stand For' policy statements in your packs today.

These statements reflect the stance of our local voluntary sector on issues like the cost of living, digital divide, health, equity, and the environment.

With Labour now in government, their promises, especially those related to fairness, health, and community support, address many of the issues we focus on in the voluntary sector.

We've just written to local politicians and plan to start engagement activities, inviting our members to discuss these important topics with local representatives.

At Communities 1st, we've made some significant achievements over the past year.

In October, we successfully obtained the Matrix accreditation for providing high-quality Information, Advice, and Guidance (IAG) across all our services.

I'm really proud to announce that last week we achieved the Local Infrastructure Quality Accreditation (LIQA) for the services we provide local charities and community groups. Both of these accreditations last for 3 years.

We've also expanded our training programmes for the sector, covering areas like business planning, full cost recovery, bid writing, and safeguarding.

Volunteering remains at the heart of our work. Being part of the national 'Vision for Volunteering' initiative has helped us create a more inclusive and supportive environment for charities, community groups and their volunteers.

We've facilitated volunteering for diverse groups, from asylum seekers to young people, and promoted best practice in volunteer management in partnership with other Volunteer Centres in Hertfordshire through the Valuing Volunteer Management accreditation scheme – or better known as the six point promise.

Our health and wellbeing initiatives in Hertsmere have also expanded. Our health awareness events engaged over 1,100 people.

We increased our Better Days hubs to 41 locations, providing support services across five districts.

Another milestone was our merger with Para Dance UK in October last year. This merger ensures the continuation of inclusive dance programmes, promoting physical activity and social inclusion for people of all abilities.

I'm sure we're all looking forward to experiencing some inclusive dance after lunch - I'll be joining in, but don't expect any expert moves from me!

Finally, looking forward, partnerships and collaboration are vital for maximising our sector's impact.

We're proud to work in partnership with around 20 local charities and faith groups, facilitating over £250,000 of income to them, and strengthening our collective ability to serve our communities.

So, in conclusion, I believe the voluntary and community sector has more to achieve now than it did a few years ago.

By addressing various challenges, from the cost of living to social inequality, our sector can continue to be a driving force for positive change.

At Communities 1st, our goal is to support the sector and our communities in seizing opportunities, overcoming any challenges, and building a future where no one is left behind.

Thank You!! 😊