



Engaging with a Reform UK Local Authority

July 2025

Introduction

The information in this note is drawn from the experience and knowledge of NAVCA members working in areas with newly elected Reform UK councils and councillors. There has been a lot of interest from NAVCA members to learn about Reform UK's agenda and to understand how to respond to it.

General

Newly elected Reform UK councillors may not have expected to be elected, and the group may have no formal organisation such as a leader so there may be a delay in appointments to key positions.

Many Reform UK councillors have limited or no previous experience of elected roles, serving on local [parish or town councils] or in other forms of governance. However, they come from a broad range of backgrounds and experiences including of the voluntary sector.

Reform UK council groups may often be led by or have considerable representation from ex-Conservative councillors with years of council experience.

Initial experience suggests that although Reform UK councillors may have little or no understanding of how a council operates and delivers its services, or the relationships between councils, local infrastructure and the VCSE sector, they do want to learn.

The importance of communities has been a common narrative in Reform UK local campaigns. This is obviously a shared interest with the VCSE and gives common ground to start engagement.

Building Relationships

If you have good working relationships with council officers, particularly at director level, contact them first to discuss the most effective strategic approach to engage with the new councillors, and leader and cabinet if also controlled by Reform UK.

Continue to work with council staff to share information, demonstrate outcomes and impact for local infrastructure and the VCSE, and for mutual support.

Find out what new councillors are interested in.

- What do you want to achieve for communities? What are your outcomes?
- How can we work together to make these outcomes happen?
- This is what local infrastructure and the VCSE can contribute.

- Set up briefings and visits on an on-going basis.

Proactively seek to meet new portfolio holders particularly for adult social care, children's services, public health and communities to introduce the work and role of the VCSE. Aim to turn these into regular meetings.

Work with council officials in relation to addressing potentially difficult issues such as migrant communities, EEDI, net zero etc., and use them to find out the situation and approaches that could be taken by the council, before the VCSE raises these issues with elected members.

Working with LIOs and the VCSE Sector

Keep the local VCSE sector informed as much as possible.

Create opportunities for the VCSE sector to meet together to discuss relevant issues and ask questions.

Plan to demonstrate the impact and value of local infrastructure and the VCSE, and show how they can contribute to achieving outcomes for communities and deliver services. This could include social return on investment, social value, other measures and means of assessment.

Consider creating a voluntary sector manifesto that clearly demonstrates what the VCSE contributes, and what it can offer to help the council deliver its services and outcomes.

DOLGE [Department of Local Government Efficiency] could present an opportunity to show how effective the VCSE can be.

It is never too early to start planning for a retender of contracts, particularly as the current situation suggests these may become riskier.

Initial Experience

Incoming Reform UK council groups have little clarity on policies and objectives with the initial focus on cutting waste and controlling the flags flown on council buildings.

In some councils lots of meetings have been cancelled meaning that funding decisions including those affecting LIOs and the VCSE have been delayed further. There have been a few examples of deliberate delays to decision making, leading to some levels of political inertia.

Some officials have needed to provide additional support for elected members to enable councillors to take decision and do their work. Resourcing these officials with relevant information could prove very useful.

Some new councillors have struggled to understand their statutory duties – something to be cognisant of and to aim for clarity in explanations about the activities and work of the VCSE sector and in relation to service delivery on behalf of the council.

Some council staff are anxious about job roles, with a chilling effect on those working on climate or any aspect of EEDI. In some instances, council officials have had a poor experience such as being told their work is worthless.

Local government reorganisation may run into additional difficulties if new councillors are against any changes.

In one area members' allowances have been removed to save £60K. These allowances were discretionary funds that were usually used by councillors to support community groups and activities e.g. foodbanks, community centres and pensioners' groups etc. This has removed £60K directly from communities. Pointing out these sorts of unintended consequences could be important in preserving these sources of funding.

In one area senior managers have been challenged by incoming councillors yet to be convinced that there is a cost of living crisis or that the funding councils provide can have a meaningful impact.

Immediate Actions

Listen: to new councillors, communities and VCSE organisations.

Keep track of what new councillors are saying and doing whilst not deferring from strategic priorities.

Maintain key relationships: speak to and continue to work closely with council directors, heads of service and officers to look at how to build the understanding of newly elected councillors.

Consider what may need to be reframed or re-expressed in terms of presentation but not strategy or outcomes.

Build relationships with Reform UK councillors wherever possible, particularly in areas that currently have only a few councillors.