

Community and Voluntary Sector Scrutiny Spotlight Review

The task group request the Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet to endorse and adopt the recommendations below.

Recommendations

1. That Devon County Council schedules a briefing on the implications of the Welfare Benefit reforms for all Councillors and extends an invitation to MPs and District Councillors. This should happen in late October or Early November
2. A clearer overview of the voluntary and charitable sector. As part of this the Devon Community Directory should be updated to include a short description of each organisation's purpose and aim and then all members should receive a copy. This should also be included in the induction process for new members.
3. Working with partners the Council should explore ways to be proactive in order to provide access and support for online applicants.
4. Regarding commissioning services from the community and voluntary sector the Council should adopt the following principles:
 - ◆ Proportionality in the commissioning process (e.g. for smaller projects have a simpler and shorter application)
 - ◆ Contracts should be longer in duration (3 – 5 years) to enable organisations greater opportunities to plan their services
 - ◆ Recognition of the social value of providing services locally
 - ◆ Recognising the social value of volunteering

Background

The Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee held a spotlight review on the 14th September 2012 to gain greater insight into the trends that have shaped the community and voluntary sector as well as to explore potential developments, challenges and Devon County Council's on-going role. The meeting was chaired by Councillor Brian Greenslade, and attended by the following members of the committee: Councillors Paula Black, Gordon Hook, Andrew Moulding, Vanessa Newcombe, Barry Parsons and Saxon Spence. The Cabinet member for Environmental and Community, Councillor Roger Croad also attended.

The meeting was attended by representatives from Living Options Devon, Devon CVS and Devon Citizens Advice Bureaux. The Committee would like to thank them for their attendance and valuable contributions.

- Living Options is a charity that works to empower those with disabilities.
- Devon Association of Councils for Voluntary Service (DACVS) works to support the voluntary and community sector to develop and improve its contribution to the lives of local people in Devon.

- Citizens Advice Bureau helps people resolve their legal, money and other problems by providing free, independent and confidential advice.

Findings:

1. Awareness.

It came to light early in the session that awareness was a key issue; both awareness of all of the community and voluntary groups that exist and exactly what they do as well as awareness of how the Council currently works with them. This is a particular issue for Councillors who do have very strong links with some charities but may be unaware of others. The spotlight review heard that 50% of Devon residents could not name a local charity.

From a Council perspective there is the need to establish a gateway to enable comprehensive access to all community and voluntary groups in order to identify the most appropriate group to help. The infrastructure organisations in the Voluntary and Community Sector are working towards this, but it will evolve over time.

One avenue of information is the Community directory however, many Councillors are not aware of it. Even if they are, they would generally need to know the name of the organisation they were looking for. There is the opportunity to further develop this important resource, but this tool alone will not enable the clarity of access to all organisations. <http://www.directory.devon.gov.uk/kb5/devon/directory/home.page>

2. Funding

There have been significant changes to the way in which funds are provided from a local authority. Traditionally the model was one of grant funding; however there has been a significant shift to a commissioning approach and a stronger emphasis on outcomes. The benefits of this approach are about achieving value for money and using a competitive tendering process to find the best service to achieve specific outcomes. However the spotlight review has heard that there are also benefits from grants, which allowed specific (e.g. local) services to be provided with targeted support. In either scenario the importance of the social value brought by local organisations should not be underestimated.

Community and Voluntary groups are also impacted upon by the current financial climate. There has been a reduction in personal giving. Combined with the changes to funding there are significant challenges faced by third sector groups. Each organisation has to find the core funding to support the set up and day to day running, this may not always be reflected in the funding available for specific projects. Without a secure core funding provision, the sector has limited opportunities for securing project funding. Larger organisations will be more favourably placed to respond to the commissioning model.

3. Changes to welfare benefit

The sector is anticipating a significant impact from the changes to the welfare benefit system. The proposals, outlined in the Welfare Reform Bill, include:

- A single universal credit to come into force in 2013
- Tax changes to enable people to keep more income
- Changes to the disability living allowance
- More details of the back-to-work programme
- Those refusing to work facing a maximum three-year loss of benefits
- Annual benefit cap of about £26,000 per family
- Review of sickness absence levels

In addition there are also changes to the eligibility criteria for Legal Aid. This is particularly significant for the Citizen's Advice Bureaux, current provision allows for six to eight specialists in Devon giving specialist debt, welfare benefits and housing

advice. However with the anticipated changes the work remaining within the scope of legal aid is likely to only be sufficient to maintain one post. Work is underway with a number of district councils to retain some of the capacity. However it is inevitable that experience will be lost.

Indications suggest that the application process for benefits will be complex and there is an assumption that applications will generally be made online. Support for this process will generally be online as well. There are particular concerns around this as with reduced support there are likely to be an increase in errors in application. The spotlight review heard that mistakes in applications may result in a £50 fee. Finally once the award has been made there are suggestions that there will not be a right of appeal because the process is anticipated to be transparent.

There are real concerns over individuals accessing the support which they will need. The library service in Devon currently offers the first half an hour of internet time free, and then charges £2 an hour. There are plans to implement 'Free Friday' where access is free all day. However the spotlight review suggested that this may lead to the library service being overwhelmed on a Friday and suggested looking at having an hour's access time free all week.

4. Localism/volunteering

The review group identified the importance of keeping services local and valuing the contribution of local people as volunteers. There have been changes to the volunteering landscape, with a significant increase in younger men undertaking volunteering as a route to return to work. The spotlight review would like to draw attention to the key role the voluntary sector plays in getting people back to work.

Conclusions and Actions

1. From a Council perspective there is the need to establish a gateway to enable comprehensive and clear access to all community and voluntary groups whilst prioritising the most appropriate. This work should go beyond the community directory, and work underway to reorganise the infrastructure of the voluntary and Community Sector.
2. There should be strategic alignment between community and voluntary organisations and the county council in order to ensure that organisations are working towards similar outcomes.
3. There needs to be greater recognition of the social value of volunteering.
4. It is highly important that community and voluntary sector retain independence from local authorities. The sector needs to keep its national and local voice to lobby and the ability to be independent and critical.
5. The Corporate Services Committee is invited to the forthcoming Devon Strategic Partnership workshop on the 9th November. which will include a report back from a partnership sub group that has been looking at the likely implications of the forthcoming welfare reform changes, and possible actions we can take to ameliorate them.

Electoral Divisions: All

Cabinet Member: Councillor Roger Croad

Local Government Act 1972: list of Background Papers: Report to Committee on Thursday 28th June 6. Working with Voluntary and Community Sectors

http://www.devon.gov.uk/index/councildemocracy/decision_making/cma/cma_report.htm?cmadoc=report_sc1220.html

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