

VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR COMMISSIONING FRAMEWORK TASK GROUP

24 May 2012

Present: Councillor Aron (Chair)
Councillors Brandon, Greenslade, Johnson, Joynes and Martins

Also present: Councillor Crout, Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Community Services
Councillor Connal

Officer: Head of Community Services
Culture and Community Section Head
Commissioning Manager
Committee and Scrutiny Officer

1. ELECTION OF CHAIR

RESOLVED –

that Councillor Jeanette Aron be elected Chair of the Task Group.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

There were no apologies for absence.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised that all Members had been asked to consider their disclosures before being appointed to the Task Group. Any Councillor who had a personal and prejudicial interest in a local organisation was unable to take part in the Task Group.

4. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Task Group received the terms of reference for the review which had been put forward by officers from Community Services.

The Head of Community Services explained the scrutiny suggestions and how officers would like Members to be involved in the development of the new Commissioning Framework. She also outlined the timetable and advised that the final draft would be presented to Cabinet at its meeting in October.

Councillor Johnson referred to the Support for the Voluntary Sector Task Group which had met during 2010 and 2011. There appeared to be a discrepancy with the financial figures quoted for that review, £1.1 million, and those now quoted by the Head of Community Services, £1.6 million.

The Head of Community Services explained that the latest figures included all different types of support for the voluntary and community sector. The previous figures had not included the money set aside for community centres. The new framework would look at all support for the sector, including business rates relief.

It was AGREED that the final report from the Support for the Voluntary Sector Task Group would be circulated to the Task Group.

Councillor Martins asked that Council priority 7 was added to the list of those most relevant to this review. This was AGREED.

Councillor Martins voiced his concern about the size of the review. He felt it could not be rushed. He suggested the review was divided into sections. The first part to meet the initial deadline and the remainder of the work would be completed prior to the final presentation to Cabinet in October.

The Head of Community Services confirmed that the consultation with the Voluntary and Community Sector would take place between July and September. She agreed with Councillor Martins' proposal.

ACTION: Committee and Scrutiny Officer

5. **VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR COMMISSIONING FRAMEWORK – DISCUSSION**

The Task Group received a discussion paper which set out information relevant to the review.

Introduction and Background

The Head of Community Services set out the background to the grant funding process. She confirmed that a Service Level Agreement was drawn up with organisations who received funding. She advised that the report presented to Cabinet at its meeting in December 2011 would help Members to understand the process and how they were graded.

It was AGREED that the Task Group would be provided with a copy of the Cabinet report, an example of a Service Level Agreement and an application form.

Following a Member's question, the Head of Community Services advised that the Council for Voluntary Services (CVS) kept data regarding the number of voluntary and community organisations in the area. The most recent figure quoted was 400. There were 11 organisations in receipt of the three-year grant funding and 84 in receipt of business rates relief. She added that there was no requirement for voluntary or community sector groups to register. The Head of Community Services informed the Task Group that the CVS provided assistance to organisations, which included support and training.

The Head of Community Services advised that some organisations provided a service to other areas as well as Watford.

Councillor Johnson noted that the previous Task Group had recommended more cross-boundary groups should be established.

The Head of Community Services stated that the discussion paper set out six areas for the Task Group to examine –

1. What do we mean by commissioning?
2. What resources are currently deployed to support Voluntary and Community Sector services?
3. What services are commissioned by other bodies?
4. What services should Watford Borough Council be funding the Voluntary and Community Sector to provide as a priority from 1 April 2013 and beyond?
5. What evidence is there that demonstrates the need for services to be commissioned?
6. What can the council afford to fund?

1. What do we mean by Commissioning?

The Head of Community Services stated that the word 'commissioning' could mean different things to different people. A proposed definition was included in the discussion paper.

The Chair, Councillor Aron, referred to the Mayor's Fund and how small groups could apply for a small amount of funding, for example a brownie group applying to get some funding towards the cost of new shed for storage. Since the amalgamation of the two funds and under the criteria for applying for funding, she asked whether a small group could still apply for funds from the Council.

The Head of Community Services explained that the Cabinet report set out the changes to the Mayor's Fund. It had been merged with the small grants fund and then the budget had been halved. This pot of funding would also be looked at in the new Commissioning Framework. During the current financial year applications would be made through the small grants process. Decisions were made by the Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Community Services, Councillor Crout. She added that Councillors and the Mayor could refer people to make an application from that budget.

Councillor Brandon said that the County Council and the Housing Trust had funding that could be awarded to local community groups. He commented that many organisations applied to the different bodies and pooled their funding.

The Head of Community Services advised that the CVS had a Funding Officer who was able to make organisations aware of the different grants available. She suggested that a representative from the CVS could come to a future meeting and provide information on funding streams.

Councillor Brandon suggested that the Task Group might wish to question whether the CVS was aware of the effect of the cuts on different organisations.

The Head of Community Services advised that the CVS was obtaining feedback on the impact of funding changes on voluntary sector organisations and would be able to provide a view on what was happening within the sector.

2. What resources are currently deployed to support the Voluntary and Community Sector?

The Head of Community Services explained that this document set out the different budgets which supported the voluntary and community sector. She stated that there was £732,475 available to support organisations. She asked Members to consider whether they thought this level of support was sustainable.

With regard to community centres the Head of Community Services explained that the support for the centres had been committed for the next few years. She added that there had been a saving following the new arrangements being introduced.

Following a question about Sports Development, the Head of Community Services advised that this was not a statutory requirement for the Council. It did, however, fit in with the partnership work with Three Rivers on health.

Following a number of questions about property issues the Head of Community Services suggested that if Members were interested in individual organisations and how they were charged for buildings, then the Members would need information from Property Services.

The Culture and Community Section Head added that some organisations had historically long leases with specific rent details written into their leases.

The Head of Community Services informed the Task Group that the Sports Development budget was controlled by officers. It helped to purchase support from partnership organisations and governing bodies, for example to enable individual clubs to pay lower rates for training.

A Member asked whether the financial issues with SLM had been resolved. There were voluntary and community sector groups who used the leisure centre facilities.

The Culture and Community Section Head advised that this was outside the scope of the Task Group but would be checked with the Head of Strategic Finance.

The Head of Community Services outlined some of the work carried out with funding from the Arts Development budget; including the pop-up art galleries and Imagine Watford, which the Palace Theatre took the lead role in organising. She confirmed that the Palace Theatre received funding from the Arts Council, which was more than the amount granted by the Council.

Councillor Brandon suggested that organisations who received funding should be asked to set out an action plan on how they could become sustainable in the future.

Councillor Martins felt that previously smaller organisations had been scrutinised but larger ones had not.

The Head of Community Services explained that the next section in the table referred to Discretionary Rate Relief. The guidelines would be reviewed and Members would be provided with details of which organisations received this relief. The Revenues Manager would be invited to a future meeting.

The next section referred to Property Rental. Councillor Johnson asked for details of when the Property Review would be complete. The Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised that she would contact the Head of Legal and Property Services.

3. What services are commissioned by other bodies?

This section set out those areas which were not the responsibility of the Council.

Councillor Brandon commented that although the areas set out in the report were not the responsibility of the District Council, if funding was cut by another body, for example the County Council, this could have a direct impact on services users in Watford.

Councillor Johnson responded that the Council's budget was finite and it was not possible to pick up those who had lost their funding from other bodies.

The Head of Community Services stated that the Council did not have the data, knowledge or expertise to challenge the commissioning decisions of other commissioning bodies but that the way those decisions could be challenged was to ensure that equality impact analyses had been properly carried out by those bodies.

4. What services should Watford Borough Council be funding the Voluntary and Community Sector to provide as a priority from 1 April 2013 and beyond?

The Head of Community Services commented that the important aspect here was to consider what services needed to be delivered and not to focus on individual organisations.

5. What evidence is there that demonstrates the need for these services to be commissioned?

The Head of Community Services referred Members to section 5 in the discussion paper which set out the evidence base demonstrating the need for specific services.

The Head of Community Services acknowledged that Members were interested in the true cost of funding the Palace Theatre, what the Council received in return and the future sustainability of the theatre.

The Head of Community Services advised that if Members had any issues or information requests about the Colosseum contract they needed to contact the Culture and Community Section Head. She reminded Members that the Colosseum contract was not covered by the framework as it was not awarded to a voluntary or community sector organisation.

The Head of Community Services responded to a question about the Purple Flag assessment. The assessment had considered the night time economy of the town and that there was more to offer than pubs and bars, for example the Palace Theatre and the Colosseum.

Councillor Johnson suggested that the advice services sector might be an area that needed more funding in light of the current economic climate.

The Head of Community Services confirmed that Watford Citizens Advice Bureau collated data on the demographics and BME figures related to users of the service. The organisation had been asked to carry out additional work in relation to the community in West Watford following the Council no longer funding the Watford Muslim Community Project.

Following a question from Councillor Brandon, the Head of Community Services advised that access for disabled people related to access to premises and how they moved around once they were in the Town Centre rather than public transport.

6. What can the council afford to fund?

The Head of Community Services asked Members to consider the Council's priorities in the future.

Following a question from the Chair about the three-year programme, the Head of Community Services stated that consideration would need to be given to the length of time funding was granted and whether a sliding scale should be introduced. She confirmed that organisations were currently reviewed throughout the funding period.

Key questions for debate at scrutiny

The Head of Community Services suggested that there were four key questions for Members to consider.

Councillor Martins said that the order of priority he would suggest would be –

1. Infrastructure and support to the voluntary and community sector
2. Advice services
3. Disability – integration into the community
4. Arts and culture / Sports and leisure including Community Centres

He suggested that the Task Group needed to invite a representative from the CVS as they would be able to provide a broad view of the voluntary sector.

Councillor Johnson said that the Portfolio Holder would be welcome to attend the Task Group's meetings as an observer.

It was agreed that the requested documents needed to be circulated to the Task Group to enable Members to decide on the way forward.

The Head of Community Services said that she had recognised that Members wanted one meeting to discuss technical issues including property matters and business rates. This could be programmed in to a meeting in July. Once Members had received the requested documents further questions might arise which could be covered at the next meeting. In addition Members would be able to decide on the questions they wished to ask the representative from the CVS so that a briefing note could be prepared and an invitation to attend a meeting in July could be sent.

Councillor Johnson said that it was important that the representative was not asked the same questions as at the previous review.

Dates of next meetings

Tuesday 19 June at 6.30 pm

Wednesday 11 July at 6.30 pm

ACTION: Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer and Commissioning Manager

Chair
Voluntary and Community Sector Commissioning Framework
Task Group

The meeting started at 6.30 p.m.
and finished at 8.10 p.m.