

Cabinet Monday 6 June 2011

Call-in & Performance Scrutiny Committee Support for the Voluntary Sector Review

Response from the Portfolio Holder

I welcome the Committee's recommendations. They are timely as we will be able to take them all on board as part of our review of current priorities, which we will be carrying out in 2012 before setting the criteria for our commissioning framework for 2013/14 onwards. The current three year funding will end in March 2013. These recommendations reflect much of our current thinking on how we can improve our current arrangements

- 2.1 The Council should explore with Three Rivers DC opportunities for joint funding of cross border voluntary sector organisations and related projects.

We have not explored this to date. We will discuss with TRDC as part of our review.

- 2.2 The Council should provide active support and encouragement to grant funded organisations to share resources such as paid staff and premises. The Council should also encourage joint bids for funding.

This is something we have already discussed with a number of organisations and will continue to pursue. The new resource centre we fund at the Holywell Community Centre enables embryonic and small organisations to share premises and support. The LSP has also funded a resilience officer to work with organisations to become more sustainable, which will include looking at sharing resources

- 2.3 The available grants budget should be split into two streams – one for social and community work and projects one for art and cultural work and projects. Each stream should be defined by a different policy developed through extensive external consultation.

Agreed that we need to change. We will test out this recommendation as part of the review consultation for setting the new commissioning framework

- 2.4 The Council should review its criteria for grant awards to reflect changing circumstances and community needs brought about by the current economic problems.

Agreed, we will do this as part of the review in 2012

- 2.5 The Council should be more specific about the voluntary sector services it wishes to support to limit the number of bidders but increase their chances of being successful.

Agreed, and again something we will be testing as part of the review

- 2.6 There should be fluidity between the Mayor's Community Fund and the Councillor's ward fund where councillors can identify suitable projects for joint funding. In order to ensure some equity in the process each ward should be allocated a nominal £1,000 at the start of the year.

Whilst the Mayor welcomed applications, she would prefer councillors to encourage local communities to apply themselves. Also she would rather not set an artificial limit for each ward which she considered could be disproportionate. Councillors could apply for a grant once their Neighbourhood Forum funds were exhausted.

- 2.7 The task group has raised a number of issues around properties leased from the Council by voluntary sector organisations. The Task Group recommends that the new Overview & Scrutiny Committee, as a priority for its 2011/12 work programme, establishes a task group to review these anomalies and issues.

Prior to 2006 the council had no stated policy on dealing with leasing property to the voluntary sector. This had led to a variety of arrangements including a number of premises being let on full repairing leases, some with market rents some on a peppercorn and some with no formal agreement.

In 2006 cabinet agreed a new policy of transparency. All new leases or renewals would be on the basis of these organisations paying market rents which they would have to fund either through the grant we gave or from their own resources. No more hidden subsidy. Also we would no longer grant full repairing leases as it was apparent that the majority of these organisations did not have the means to undertake their obligations. We would where we could grant internal repairing leases only.

Since 2006 we have been applying this policy when leases have come up for renewal. This means, however, that there are still some premises where the lease is still in existence where the rent is not full market and the organisation still has full repairing obligations. We also still have some long outstanding negotiations to conclude.

As part of the property review we will revisit the policy on the voluntary sector. Scrutiny's help to scope a new policy would assist with this and would be welcome, provided it was done quickly. I think this would be much more productive than reviewing old arrangements which we have already decided must be changed.

- 2.8. The task group decided against including an examination of the likely affects of the Big Society on the voluntary sector in the scope of this review. However, members agreed that this will be a significant factor in the future and recommends that the new Overview & Scrutiny Committee establishes a task group to look at how the Big Society might impact on the voluntary sector and on the Council's grant giving.

I welcome Scrutiny's views on this, which can be fed into our 2012 review