

REPORT ON HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL SUPPORT TO THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR

PORTFOLIO RESPONSIBILITY: COMMUNITY SERVICES AND CORPORATE STRATEGY AND FINANCE

CABINET

13TH JULY, 2006

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

To advise Cabinet of responses received during the consultation process on the Strategy Framework and proposals to take the Framework forward.

To seek approval for proposed arrangements for Council funding for support, advice and representation (infrastructure) services for the Voluntary and Community Sector in Herefordshire.

Key Decision

This is not a Key Decision.

Recommendations

THAT

- a) Herefordshire Council adopt the Strategy Framework as attached (Appendix 2);
- b) the Community Regeneration Team take the lead in developing a more detailed Action Plan and implementing the Strategy Framework across the Council; and
- c) Cabinet endorse the principles set out as a basis for negotiations with the members of the Herefordshire Infrastructure Consortium on service level agreements for future years.

Reasons

The 2004 Review of Council support to the Community and Voluntary Sector highlighted the need for a Council strategy for Voluntary and Community Sector Support. National government policy is that the Voluntary Sector be supported to deliver public services, encourage volunteering and social enterprise and build stronger communities.

Considerations

1. A key recommendation of the Review conducted in 2004 was that the Council produce a coherent strategy for support to the Community and Voluntary Sector,

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
Nina Bridges, Community Regeneration Manager on (01432) 260624

setting out its priorities and role in engaging with the sector. Consultants were commissioned to produce such a Strategy Framework, working with the Community and Voluntary Sector and Council officers. The draft Framework was approved for consultation by Cabinet on 17th November 2005. The consultation period ended in May, with the following methods of consultation used:

- News releases drawing public attention to the Strategy and consultation,
 - The Strategy Framework made available on the Council website in full (“Have your say” section), and in hard copy or alternative formats on request.
 - An explanatory letter, summary sheet and some background information was sent to all organisations registered with the Voluntary Sector Assembly, together with an invitation to comment on the strategy document and/or attend the consultation event at the Town Hall on 4th April 2006.
 - A successful consultation event was held on 4th April, chaired by Cllr Stockton, with 40 representatives from the Voluntary and Community Sector.
 - A separate briefing was held for members of the Herefordshire Infrastructure Consortium on 27th April 2006
2. There was generally a very positive response to the consultation exercise. The questions and comments raised at the consultation on 4th April are attached as Appendix 1. A detailed letter has also been received from the Alliance, which has been responded to. No comments were received as a result of the consultation exercise on the Council’s “have your say” section of its website. One emailed response was also received from a representative of a Parish Hall.
3. The key feedback from the consultation exercise can be summarised as follows:
- A general desire for improved communication with the Council. Those that attended the event on 4th April welcomed the opportunity for such a dialogue with senior officers and members from the Council. Respondents also requested clarity in terms of who to contact on voluntary sector issues within the Council;
 - Issues around the commissioning of Council services and how the Voluntary and Community Sector can be involved in this process;
 - How the recommendation of a single gateway for small grants will operate;
 - The need for more support to community groups and volunteers as well as greater co-ordination and simpler application processes across all funding bodies.
 - Consistency between the Council’s Strategy Framework and the Herefordshire Infrastructure Consortium Strategy, together with implementation using Compact principles;
 - An action plan for taking the Strategy forward, linked to long term investment.
4. As a result of the above, the summary document of the Strategy Framework (attached as Appendix 2), which was circulated as part of the consultation has not significantly changed, apart from some initial wording (highlighted). The feedback from the consultation will however influence the implementation stage.

5. Following adoption of the Strategy Framework by Cabinet, this document will be publicised throughout the County, and respondents thanked for their input into the consultation exercise. It is proposed that the Community Regeneration Team within the Adult and Community Services Directorate, take the lead in developing a more detailed Action Plan and implementing the Framework across the Council. This will be dependent on resources being freed up to fund a post of Voluntary Sector Liaison Officer, who will act as the central point of contact with the VCS, a clear message from the consultation exercise.

Issues with regard to funding of Infrastructure Support

6. A major theme of the Strategy Framework is the Council's commitment to investing in support and development services for the Voluntary and Community Sector. At Cabinet on 17th November 2005 it was agreed that the existing funding arrangements to Age Concern, Community First, Herefordshire Voluntary Action and Community Voluntary Action Ledbury and District would be maintained, pending final adoption of the Strategic Framework and agreement of the Infrastructure Consortium Business Plan. It was anticipated that during 2006, the Herefordshire Infrastructure Consortium members would move towards a joint business plan for infrastructure services across the County, and that the Council would be able to contract with them on this basis. Since then, the Consortium has engaged consultants and has drawn up a strategy document which is at the final draft stage, with a Delivery Plan in development. It is clear from this that Consortium members are moving towards greater joint delivery, but a detailed joint business plan is unlikely to be produced for at least a year. Following discussions at officer level with the Consortium, it is proposed that the Council set out its priorities and indications of available funding for 2007/8 and future years, and enter into discussions with the Consortium about allocation of resources, in order to have a coherent plan for Council-supported services from April 2007 onwards and a 'jigsaw' of Service Level Agreements with individual organisations, with robust monitoring arrangements to establish value for money and integrated delivery of services. This is viewed by the Consortium as an achievable outcome and a valuable step towards more integrated arrangements in the future.
7. Principles for negotiations on Service Level Agreements for Infrastructure Support are proposed as follows:
 - a) The funding made available for Infrastructure support for 2007/08 is the sum of that currently offered by the Council to CVA Ledbury and District, HVA, Community First for specialist and general infrastructure support for all information, support and advice services including training for local Voluntary and Community Sector organisations.
 - b) Service level agreements with VCS organisations for direct service delivery would be subject to the implementation of the recommendations on SLAS made in the Voluntary Sector Review 2004.
 - c) The current service level agreements between Children and Young People's Services and Herefordshire Council for Voluntary Youth Service and between Health and Social Care and the Alliance and Age Concern would be left outside this process in the short term, although discussions will take place with these Council directorates and their partners as well as Infrastructure Consortium members to explore the potential to move towards greater integration with other services.

The funding allocated for (a) above is therefore £166,410.

8. The Council's priorities, for infrastructure support to the Voluntary and Community Sector will be based on the Strategic Framework, and other relevant strategies, such as the Community Strategy, the Community Development Strategy, the Community Involvement Strategy, Social Enterprise Strategy.
9. The SLAs will be drawn up based on the recommendations of the Voluntary Sector Review 2004, with particular emphasis on demonstrable Quality Assurance of services, value for money, principles of inclusion, integrated service delivery between organisations, with clear and discrete areas of work. In line with good practice and national government policy, a commitment to longer term funding is proposed, moving towards a 3 year service level agreement based on an integrated business plan for infrastructure support.

Legal and Financial Implications.

Service Level Agreements are legal documents. Following the Voluntary Sector Review 2004, a checklist has been drawn up by Legal Services to form the basis of any contractual arrangements.

The proposal within this report to move to longer term funding for Infrastructure support, and more specifically to 3 year funding, would have implications for the Council's budgetary management, but is in line with national government policy.

Risk Management

Failure to progress the implementation of a Voluntary and Community Sector Support Strategy may affect the credibility of the Council across the sector and in terms of local government performance, as well as its community leadership role. Any SLAs will be managed in accordance with robust performance management arrangements. In order for the Community Regeneration Team to take the lead in taking forward the Strategic Framework, both Corporate and Customer Services and Adult and Community Services are working to free resources to fund the post of Voluntary Sector Liaison Officer.

Alternative Options

There are no alternative options identified for the first two recommendations of this report.

The Council could identify its requirements in terms of infrastructure support and tender this work, but this may be counter productive and could damage the relationship that the Council has built up with the Infrastructure Consortium.

Consultees

The Voluntary and Community Sector in Herefordshire. See page 2 of this report for more detail.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Questions and Answers from Consultation Event on 4th April 2006

Appendix 2 – Summary of Strategic Framework

Background Papers

Review of Herefordshire Council Support to the Community and Voluntary Sector – November 2004

A Voluntary and Community Sector Fit for Purpose – Defining the Role of Herefordshire Council – Consultation Draft