

Q&As from VCS Strategy event 4th April 2006

Question:

Who were the consultants who undertook the work to formulate the strategy proposals?

Answer: The current proposals are based on a decision by the Council in 2004 to review its relationship with the VCS. The Council decided to bring the independent expertise of these two consultants in, to undertake a review, which was based on the views of not only Herefordshire Council, but was a joint approach to how both the Council and the VCS could work together more effectively in the future. The consultants were Alison Mac Lean and Barbara Parkinson.

Question:

We welcome the proposed scheme, it brings more clarity to the relationship between Council and the VCS. However, it will be important to clarify whom we will have to contact in the future about funding and other issues, and equally importantly, when will it all happen?

Answer:

The consultation period for this strategy will run until the end of May. A report will then go back to the Council's Cabinet, which asked for this consultation exercise. This should happen in late June 2006. Once a Cabinet decision has been reached, the proposals will be implemented. Part of this will be a decision about the processes for communication, meaning that VCS organisations will be informed who to contact about what. One possible option for us is to have the Community Regeneration team as first point of contact.

However, there are at least two different models we could consider: a single point of contact, as suggested above, would have to have general knowledge of the issues you want advice/support with. This might be a challenging task, given the complexity of the VCS and the tasks we all are being asked to undertake. An alternative would be to nominate specialist officers in different directorates/departments, who will have more detailed knowledge about the issues, but this might require additional coordination of the information provided. We would like to hear your views on this issue during the consultation period and thereafter.

Question:

Following on from the previous question, who will be the contacts in the VCS for Herefordshire Council?

Answer:

Herefordshire Council is seeking a single route in for consultation or point of contact within the VCS, this will make discussions and decision making much easier for everyone involved.

Question:

The consultation document mentions grants for VCS, in particular we are interested in the Small Grants Scheme. Is there going to be a single 'gateway' for accessing this scheme?

Answer:

The current Small Project Fund is being revisited as a result of the review of the VCS Strategy proposals. This fund can offer up to £1,000 for projects, which means you cannot apply for the same thing again, once you have had funding (though you can apply, but it would have to be for a different purpose). We are inviting VCS as part of this consultation exercise to give us their views on how this scheme could operate in the future to serve your needs.

Question:

In order to make interactions between the Council and the VCS easier, are there any plans to use the Council's website to communicate on particular issues and ask questions?

Answer:

The Council is going through a substantial change process, which includes how we use our website, which was revamped during 2005. One thing that is likely to happen is that more Council services will be available online, including the facility for citizens to ask questions online and receiving answers online. All consultations, including this one, are now carried on the website. In addition, this week we launched our community portal and the new multilingual Migrant Workers' website together with West Mercia Police.

Question:

We understand that funding needs to be tightly controlled, it is public money, and it needs to reach the right people and the right causes. Are there any plans for VCS to be involved in the commissioning of services to ensure that our knowledge of the needs on the ground are properly taken into account? Also the minutes of such meetings should be publicly accessible, can they be posted on the Council's website?

Answer:

Herefordshire Council is already involving local people and organisations in Council decisions. For example, the Scrutiny committees have representatives of voluntary organisations as advisers, and meetings are mostly open to the public, including the meetings of Cabinet. We will, however explore what else we can do to use the VCS's expertise.

From a Children's Service's point of view, Commissioning of services not only by Herefordshire Council, but by everyone providing services for children will be brought together under the Children's Trust (consisting of various partners in the Statutory and Voluntary Sector, guided by the Children and Young People's Plan, which was launched on 4th April 2006. As part of the "Every Child Matters approach to improving outcomes for children, all our services will be commissioned in such a way that VCS have their say on how best to deliver services and who is best placed to so.

Question:

The consultation document points out that Herefordshire Council values the contribution the VCS has made and is making to the life in Herefordshire. Do you have an overview of the financial value and contribution the VCS makes to and in Herefordshire.

Answer:

Herefordshire Council has over the years worked in partnership with the VCS, many services would not have been delivered in the successful way they are, had it not been for the knowledge of the issues on the ground, the unique skills and approaches the VCS can offer.. A study undertaken for and on behalf of a number of organisations, including the VCS and Herefordshire Council in 2000 estimated the income of VCS in Herefordshire at £22m, just under 17% were from local authority sources (either grants or contracts). The total value of volunteer time provided to the county of Herefordshire was estimated at £15.25million (this used average earnings as a comparator).¹

Question:

Can you give us an example of the commissioning processes that are already in operation and could be used as a blueprint for the future?

Answer:

One good example is Community Transport, where Herefordshire Council has been working for some time through the Rural Transport Partnership, commissioning services within public transport from within the VCS. Ca. £200,000 worth of public transport services are being delivered through 7 schemes, run by the VCS, to ensure that e.g. isolated communities have access to transport (and through this to services they need), which otherwise they would not have via the 'mainstream' provider in the County.

¹ Source: Valuing the Voluntary Sector, Research Report on the social economy in Herefordshire and Worcestershire, 2000, undertaken by Chris Wardle & Associates