

VOLUNTARY SECTOR REVIEW
(Report by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being))

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 At its meeting held on 4th October 2011, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) considered a report by the Head of Environmental and Community Health Services detailing the outcome of a review of the Voluntary Sector Organisations that hold commissioning agreements with the Council.
- 1.2 The Executive Leader and Executive Councillor for Healthy and Active Communities were in attendance at the meeting together with Councillors P J Downes and T W Clough. This report summarises the Panel's discussions.

2. THE PANEL'S DISCUSSIONS

- 2.1 The Panel have been reminded of the background to the review, which had been prompted by Members at the November 2010 meeting of full Council. A series of review meetings has been held with the organisations concerned to assess the potential impact of a reduction in grant funding upon service users, their ability to attract external funding and their willingness to utilise their financial reserves to offset any grant reductions proposed by the Council.
- 2.2 The Panel has questioned whether the true value of the social impact of grant reductions to voluntary organisations can be assessed given that they have a number of functions beyond those specified in their service level agreements that affect the wider social environment. The review findings indicate that a majority of the voluntary organisations could be placed in a vulnerable situation if a significant reduction was agreed. Members have expressed the view that the cost would, in fact, exceed any grant reductions. As a result there would be greater pressures on the Council, public service providers and voluntary organisations operating within the District.
- 2.3 The Panel has concluded that the availability of funding to these organisations has developed over time. Comment was made that future budget deliberations should start by identifying needs the services offered by the organisations. Furthermore, the Council should take into account whether services are offered on a District-wide basis. Huntingdon Shopmobility and St Barnabas Community Learning Centre are they only organisations that provide services to a specific sector of the District's community.
- 2.4 Members have noted the outcome of the Equality Impact Assessment and expressed some concern at the effect of any grant changes on those in isolated rural areas.
- 2.5 The Panel has taken into account the fact that financial support is also provided to the voluntary organisations by other funders such as Cambridgeshire County Council, the Primary Care Trust, Police and Town and Parish Councils. Members have acknowledged the difficulties faced by some organisations when other funders withdraw their contributions and noted that the District Council has in the past frequently made up the shortfall in funding.

- 2.6 Members have commented on the contributions made by each of the organisations and have expressed the view that any grant adjustments should be assessed on an individual basis. It is felt that a blanket reduction across all organisations would not be appropriate given the varying levels of funding currently received by the organisations and the contributions that the grants make overall towards their operating costs.
- 2.7 The Panel has acknowledged the valuable contribution made by the organisations and identified that they each have their own links with other voluntary organisations across the District. Members support the close working practices that they currently employ and they would encourage them to explore further opportunities for closer working in order to generate greater efficiency savings.
- 2.8 The Panel has suggested that the Executive Councillor for Healthy and Active Communities should investigate alternative accommodation options for the voluntary organisations with a view to achieving efficiencies. The options include approaching Churchmanor Estates and Huntingdon Town Council, utilising accommodation space available at Pathfinder House and the Bargrove Centre in Eynesbury, St Neots.
- 2.9 A suggestion has been made that the Council should offer support to the organisations that it currently commissions in their search for external and/or match funding opportunities. Additionally, it has been suggested that a more holistic approach to the review with other voluntary sector organisations should be undertaken. The point has been made that future large scale developments such as the St Neots Eastern Expansion could potentially add to demand for voluntary services. The Executive Councillor for Healthy and Active Communities has indicated that he will bear these points in mind and thanked the Panel for its contributions.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 The Cabinet is requested to take into consideration the views of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) as set out above when considering this item.

Contact Officer: Miss H Ali, Democratic Services Officer
 **01480 388006**