

**CHIEF OFFICERS MANAGEMENT TEAM**

**13<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2011**

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL  
(SOCIAL WELL-BEING)**

**1<sup>ST</sup> NOVEMBER 2011**

**CABINET**

**17<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2011**

**VOLUNTARY SECTOR  
(Report of the Working Group)**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 At its meeting held on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2011, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) decided to establish a Working Group to investigate the social value of the functions performed by the voluntary organisations that have Service Level Agreements with the Council. The idea for the study emerged from concerns over the impact on third sector organisations of the Council's proposals in the future to reduce the funding it awards to community organisations.
- 1.2 At the time, Councillors S Cawley and R J West and Mrs M Nicholas were appointed onto the Working Group, together with former Councillor Mrs K E Cooper who contributed to the study up until May 2011. Councillor S Cawley assisted up until June 2011 when Councillors K M Baker and Mrs P A Jordan were appointed onto the Working Group. In addition to investigating the social contributions made by the voluntary organisations, the Working Group has been tasked with making recommendations on alternative ways of supporting the voluntary sector. Councillor R J West has been appointed as the Working Group's *rapporteur*. The Working Group has met on six occasions over the ensuing months.
- 1.3 Prior to establishing the Working Group, initial discussions were held at the February 2011 Panel meeting with the Chief Executive of the Hunts Forum of Voluntary Organisations who delivered a presentation to Panel Members on the work of Hunts Forum and the role of the voluntary sector in Huntingdonshire. The former Manager of the Huntingdonshire Volunteer Centre and the Chief Executive of Hunts Forum have attended Working Group meetings, together with the Council's Healthy Communities Manager. Members of the Working Group are grateful for the assistance and support they have provided in the course of their investigations.

**2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 As alluded to earlier, the study emerged from Members' concerns over the impact of the Council's budgetary proposals to reduce the level of grant awarded to the voluntary organisations by £277,000, which represented a 78% budget reduction in 2013/14. The voluntary organisations that the proposals relate to are listed below:-
- Huntingdonshire Citizens Advice Bureaux
  - Hunts Forum of Voluntary Organisations
  - Huntingdonshire Volunteer Centre
  - Huntingdon Shopmobility
  - St Barnabas Community Learning Centre
  - Disability Information Services Huntingdonshire
- 2.2 During the planning stages of the study, clear and demonstrable links to the Council Plan were identified. The Council Priority to "Work in Partnership to Support Strong

Communities” contains specific activities such as “supporting and encouraging community-led activity” and “encouraging community involvement, volunteering and service”.

- 2.3 In addition to the Working Group’s investigations, the Head of Environmental and Community Health Services was tasked by Chief Officers to undertake a review of organisations within the voluntary sector that are funded by the Council, including those organisations that receive grant aid. This review has been concluded and has been considered by the Panel and the Cabinet at their meetings in October 2011. In that light, Members of the Working Group have been mindful of the need to ensure that investigations are not duplicated.

### **3. FINDINGS**

#### **(a) Supporting Documentation and Existing Information**

- 3.1 At the time the study was initiated, the Coalition Government acknowledged that local spending cuts to the voluntary sector was a potential repercussion of its decision to reduce the level of funding it awarded to local authorities. In that light, the Cabinet Office issued a series of guidance documents on this subject. These documents, which are listed below, have been circulated to Members of the Working Group and have been utilised during the course of the study:-

- Better Together – Preparing for Local Spending Cuts to the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector (Cabinet Office)
- Measuring What Matters – A Guide for Overview and Scrutiny Committees About Using “Social Return on Investment” To measure Social Value (Cabinet Office)
- A Guide to Social Return on Investment (Cabinet Office)
- First Steps in Monitoring and Evaluation (Charities Evaluation Services).

- 3.2 Having received these documents, Members have concluded that the methodologies outlined within them are costly, time consuming and require significant levels of resources. They have, therefore, decided to focus on whether and to what extent the voluntary organisations contribute towards the achievement of the key strategic areas outlined within the Council Plan.

- 3.3 In addition to the guidance, the Working Group has also review the existing commissioning agreements for each of the organisations listed in paragraph 2.1, which include details of their respective performance indicators and Members have expressed their satisfaction with the content of them. In reaching this conclusion, the Working Group has taken into account the Annual Report on Organisations Supported by Grants via Service Level Agreements, which had been prepared by the Head of Environmental and Community Health Services and presented to the Panel in July 2011. Members will recall that at the time the report was considered, the Panel expressed their satisfaction with the performance levels that have been achieved.

#### **(b) Hunts Forum of Voluntary Organisations**

- 3.4 The Chief Executive of Hunts Forum of Voluntary Organisations has been party to the Working Group’s investigations and has informed Members that 13 voluntary organisations are currently based at The Maple Centre, alongside Hunts Forum. The primary role of Hunts Forum is to act as a conduit between the District Council and

the numerous voluntary organisations within the District. There are 570 registered community and/or voluntary organisations in Huntingdonshire and of those 250 organisations are members of Hunts Forum. An organisation does not have to become a member of Hunts Forum to access its services.

- 3.5 Cambridgeshire County Council has recently reviewed its commissioning agreement with Hunts Forum. The new agreement came into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011 and will cease on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012. Copies of the agreement have been circulated to Members of the Working Group for information.
- 3.6 As the only District-wide voluntary sector representative within the District, there are demands placed on Hunts Forum to attend various meetings, thereby preventing Officers from pursuing core business activities.
- 3.7 Officers of Hunts Forum spend a significant amount of time searching for sources of and applying for external funding. The application process requires numerous sources of evidence to be supplied, which is a further demand on Officers' time. If the District Council was to work in partnership with Hunts Forum in this area, there could be benefits for both organisations in terms of the knowledge and expertise gained and the income that is generated. This concurs with the comments made by Members at last month's Panel meeting, during consideration of the Voluntary Sector Review report, that the Council should offer support to the organisations that it currently commissions in their search for external and/or match funding.

**(c) Site Visits**

- 3.8 The Working Group has decided that the most effective way to conduct their investigations would be by undertaking visits to the voluntary organisations. Visits have been undertaken to three of the six organisations:-
  - Huntingdonshire Citizens Advice Bureaux
  - Disability Information Services Huntingdonshire
  - St Barnabas Community Learning Centre

The following paragraphs contain the Working Group's findings.

***Huntingdonshire Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB)***

- 3.9 The Working Group met with the CAB Manager and the Chairman of the Huntingdonshire CAB on 12<sup>th</sup> September 2011. The Working Group has acknowledged the valuable contributions made by its volunteers and the professional approach that is adopted by the organisation when offering advice and support to service users. These are achieved through a comprehensive training programme for volunteers.
- 3.10 The Huntingdonshire CAB Annual Report indicates that the Huntingdonshire volunteers in total worked 336 hours per week in 2011. The service they provide is free to the community.
- 3.11 The three main areas in which advice is delivered by the CAB relate to debt, benefits and employment. All three have social repercussions not only for the District but for the Country as a whole.

- 3.12 The role of the CAB in offering advice to its communities is acknowledged by the Government. Government forms advise applicants to contact their local CAB for advice on how to complete them.
- 3.13 Some CAB in other areas do not offer services to users who live in neighbouring local authority areas. This is because the local authorities that provide them with funding insist that it should only be utilised to serve those residing within their areas. Whilst this may be the case for some CAB across the Country, the Huntingdonshire Branch offers its services to non-Huntingdonshire residents and this equates to around 10% of queries.
- 3.14 CAB generally try to operate in a flexible way. Resources are deployed according to demand and prioritised in order of need. The organisation has recently re-established its opening hours, made more effective use of its telephony service and held drop in sessions as necessary. The CAB has demonstrated its willingness to embrace new technologies, with consideration shortly due to be given to extending its services to include the option of offering advice by email. The introduction of the "Gateway" interview process has already delivered efficiencies, with around 26% of queries concluded during the initial interview process.
- 3.15 It has been evident to that the CAB are responding to the challenges that its faces both in terms of financial pressures and increasing levels of demand. Historically, demands for the service have increased year on year. Statistics reveal a 9% increase in demand in March 2011, when compared to the same period the previous year. Plans to merge the Huntingdonshire, Ely and Fenland Bureaux with a view to generating efficiencies are in the early stages. The three Bureaux already share training resources.

#### ***Disability Information Services Huntingdonshire (DISH)***

- 3.16 On the 20<sup>th</sup> September 2011, Members met with the Manager of DISH.
- 3.17 DISH serves the whole of Huntingdonshire. It is co-located with Disability Cambridgeshire, which helps it to share expertise with that organisation. Most of its work is carried out through home visits. DISH has 2.5 FTE workers. Two representatives of DISH carry out 3 / 4 home visits per week. Each visit takes between 1 and 3 hours. It receives 12/1300 telephone enquiries per year. Levels of enquires are gradually increasing.
- 3.18 DISH has an additional project funded by RADAR to employ a voluneer co-ordinator to train volunteers and help them obtain qualifications. It will lose this funding shortly. It will also lose funding from Lloyds TSB Bank.
- 3.19 DISH helps adults and families on any issue in their dealings with organisations. It is able to assist with administrative procedures and fill out forms. Workers use the CAB systems to keep up to date with legislative changes. It receives referrals from CAB, NHS organisations and the Job Centre. Workers will attend GP surgeries if requested. One of the benefits of its work is that keeps individuals in their own homes. It also helps to prevent homelessness. A third benefit of its work is that it prevents and detects fraud.
- 3.20 Other benefits of the work of DISH are that it provides a route into work for its volunteers through giving them skills, work experience and confidence and it

provides feedback to public sector organisations on the way they operate, thereby enabling them to improve their procedures.

- 3.21 DISH undertakes its own fundraising activities. At one time, it employed a dedicated income generation officer but this initiative was not successful. The District Council's funding is required because DISH have to find match funding if they are to obtain money from other sources. More importantly, the other organisations that provide funding often stipulate that before it will make a contribution, applicants should be in receipt of funding from its local authority because it demonstrates the legitimacy of the organisation if it has this endorsement.

### ***St Barnabas Community Learning Centre***

- 3.22 The final site visit took place on the 27<sup>th</sup> September 2011 when Members met with the Manager of St Barnabas Community Learning Centre. It has a crèche facility located within its premises.
- 3.23 The main function of the centre is that it is building, which is available to the community from 9.00am to 9.00pm Monday to Thursday. It is mostly used by members of the public to access its computers. There are approximately 20 casual drop-ins per week.
- 3.24 The Centre is also used by job seekers. It provides training on interview and recruitment skills. Staffline, a recruitment agency, uses the centre to source temporary workers for local businesses. It helps approximately 25 individuals per year to find employment. This is in addition to the recruitment of temporary workers.
- 3.25 50 / 60% of the Centre's clients are migrant families. It opens in the evening to help those who are in employment. It provides translation services, a qualification conversion service together with a basic English classes and signposts individuals to other service providers.
- 3.26 The Centre provides training courses in catering on behalf of the County Council.
- 3.27 The Centre is prevented from charging customers by the terms of its constitution. It does receive a small income from U3A for hosting classes.

### ***Huntingdon Shopmobility***

- 3.28 The Working Group has been informed of the background to the Shopmobility scheme which was established when Huntingdon Town Centre was pedestrianised. In addition to the site visits, Councillor R J West has undertaken a site visit at Huntingdon Shopmobility on the 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2011. Councillor West has met with the Manager and one staff member and has also been provided with an opportunity to speak to service users. The users have outlined the significant benefits that Shopmobility provides, which impacts greatly on their lives from both a user and a carer perspective. Shopmobility enables users to become independent for a few hours each week to do their shopping and run their errands whilst at the same time providing a number of social benefits. The contributions that these users make to the local economy have also been acknowledged by the Working Group.
- 3.29 The Working Group recommends that options for reducing the current level of expenditure by Shopmobility should be explored. The options might include looking

at cheaper rates for portakabins, enquiring whether retailers could assist with meeting some of the scheme's costs and exploring alternative accommodation sites.

**(d) Voluntary Sector Review Undertaken By The Head of Environmental and Community Health Services**

3.30 Reference has already been made to the review undertaken by the Head of Environmental and Community Health Services which was the subject of a report to the Panel last month. Prior to this, Members of the Working Group had met with the Healthy Communities Manager to discuss progress so that they could incorporate his work into their investigations.

3.31 Based on the information made available at the time, the Working Group has noted that the voluntary organisations have indicated that a 20% reduction in the level of grant funding they receive from the Council could be accepted but that service reductions would arise as a result. However, a 50% reduction in funding would jeopardise the future viability of some of the organisations. The Working Group is mindful that, for a majority of the organisations, the District Council is their core funder and that they are also subject to funding reviews by other organisations such as the County Council and NHS bodies.

3.32 On the basis of their findings reported above and given the differences in the levels of funding currently received by the organisations and the variations in the contribution it makes towards their operating costs, the Working Group recommend that a uniform rate of reduction across the organisations would not be appropriate.

3.33 The Working Group has acknowledged that each organisation contributes in some way towards the Council's priorities. In particular they assist with the priorities to "Help Vulnerable and Disabled People to Live Independently" and "Work in Partnership to Support Strong Communities".

3.34 The Working Group's attention has been drawn to a number of opportunities for reducing the voluntary organisations' costs and for achieving efficiency savings. These are as follows:-

- moving into office accommodation at Pathfinder House;
- the possibility of merging with other voluntary organisations offering similar services with a view to reducing/sharing management costs; and
- reviewing the way in which organisations deliver their services, especially utilising advances in technology wherever possible.

3.35 Having regard to moving into accommodation at Pathfinder House, it has been reported that the Council's Facilities and Administration Manager is currently exploring this through the "Making Assets Count" Countywide initiative. The Working Group supports this action.

3.36 Referring to the other two suggestions, the Working Group has endorsed the recommendation that the voluntary organisations should explore merging with other voluntary organisations and review the way in which they deliver their services.

**4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

4.1 The Working Group has investigated the social value of the functions performed by the voluntary organisations that have Service Level Agreements with the Council.

Members of the Working Group have acknowledged the valuable contributions made by the organisations to the Council's aims and, outside the terms of their SLAs, the impact that each has on the wider social environment. The challenges faced by the Council in making future budgetary decisions is one that has been recognised not just by the Working Group but by all Members across the authority. The recommendations proposed by the Working Group have been considered in terms of their ability to inform the Council's future budgetary decisions and offering alternative support to the voluntary organisations.

- 4.2 The Panel is requested to endorse the findings and views of the Working Group for circulation to all Members for consideration during their deliberations on the budget later in the year.



## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Minutes and Reports of the meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) held on 1<sup>st</sup> February and 1<sup>st</sup> March 2011.

Notes of the meetings of the Working Group held on 28<sup>th</sup> March, 22<sup>nd</sup> July, 23<sup>rd</sup> August and 12<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> September 2011.

Voluntary Sector Working File held by Democratic Services Section.

Report by the Head of Environmental and Community Health Services – Voluntary Sector Review – to Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) and Cabinet at their meetings on 4<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> October 2011 respectively.

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