

Voluntary Sector Grant Funding Working Group

Date: 26th April 2016, 10am
Present: Councillors T Hayward (Chairman), D Brown and Mrs L A Duffy
Attending: Julie Farrow
Officers: C Stopford and A Green (Note Taker)

Notes Of The Previous Meeting

The notes of the meeting held on 12th April 2016 were confirmed as a correct record.

Question And Answer Session

The Chairman welcomes Julie Farrow, Hunts Forum, to the meeting of the Working Group and outlines that the purpose of the session is to discover the issues and problems that the volunteering side of the voluntary sector are facing. All attendees were reminded that the session was not part of the procurement exercise and that Members are currently gathering evidence in order to establish how the funding should be used.

Mrs Farrow informed the Working Group that the first problem organisations have is funding and the changes from grants to contracts. Mrs Farrow explained that public sector authorities are moving away from offering lots of little grants and are instead opting to award larger contracts. The result of this is that larger organisations from outside the area are tendering for contracts within the area thereby putting the sustainability of local organisations at risk.

Members were informed that the Hunts Forum are currently tendering for County Council funding however in order to tender they are having to purchase extra insurance with no guarantee that they will be awarded the contract.

The Working Group was warned of the dangers of the procurement process with the example of UnitingCare Partnership (UCP) being given. UCP won a five-year £800m NHS contract by undercutting rivals however the contract ended after eight months because UCP stated that it was not financially sustainable.

Mr Stopford informed Members that the public sector has to use contract finder to advertise contracts and grants over £25k. The database is national and users are able to set parameters which results in an email alert to the user once a contract appears which matches the parameters.

There was a discussion about the mechanics of a consortium in which the Working Group heard that organisations part of the consortium retain their independence and can send a representative to the board meeting. If a consortium wins a contract there would be a negotiation at board level as to how the money would be divided amongst the individual organisations. In respect to grants organisations would bid in their own right.

A further issue for the voluntary sector is that volunteers do not have the right skills to facilitate change. There is a need for infrastructure organisations to plan ahead and get their members to think about the future needs for the sector. It is therefore crucial that volunteers are trained with the right skills to manage the changes within the sector.

Mrs Farrow highlighted the further issue that financial support is decreasing whilst demand is increasing. The risk is that volunteers and paid staff could become overstretched and miss something crucial whilst dealing with a service user.

When asked about donations Mrs Farrow stated that there is a lack of donations and that is a result of the bad press charities receive as this tars all charities with the same brush.

In response to the question why is demand increasing Members were told that it could be that people, who don't meet the criteria, are currently being deflected away from the statutory services. In addition if an organisation is seen to be doing a good job then consequently they will gain more work.

During a more general discussion about the growth in demand the Working Group were informed that more people require support but also individuals expect more. Mrs Farrow informed Members that the sector is aware that the re-education of expectations is required. Hunts Forum ran a session called 'How Your Town Works' which explained to people which public bodies provides what service.

Following a question regarding getting the right individuals within the community to provide volunteering hours and enthuse others to do the same Mrs Farrow stated it was possible to get the right individuals so long as the organisation is imbedded within the community and that they know the individuals to ask.

Members queried the possibility that little individual organisations are frightened of losing their identity if they support or seek assistance from another voluntary organisation however Mrs Farrow stated that some organisations are able to provide a focused service on a shoestring budget and that all they require is the latest sector information.

In response to a question regarding what action could public bodies do to help the consortium to strike the balance between being big enough to be able to deliver the services required yet not become a faceless organisation and lose the community spirit. Mrs Farrow stated that public bodies could say 'could the consortium to provide this service and it is up to you on how to provide it' or 'could the consortium provide this service whilst fulfilling a set of key criteria'. This way the consortium knows where they stood and would be able to plan for the fulfilment of the contract.

The Working Group was made aware that the County Council have asked Hunts Forum to work with a specifically defined organisation. Members were told that a reason for this could be that the particular organisation could provide a particular service which the County Council would like to be provided. Mr Stopford stated that it could be possible to protect the principle without demanding that the consortium should work with a particular organisation.

Following the question concerning which approach works better, the umbrella approach of a consortium or individual organisations going for their own piece of funding, Mrs Farrow stated that the sector has got to change and the approach where individual organisations tendered for their own piece of funding is the old way of working. She added that it has to be an umbrella approach as one group can administer and manage the contract therefore baring the costs of doing so meaning that more funding is released for frontline services.

Another issue highlighted was that for smaller organisations demonstrating their impact can be difficult. Mrs Farrow informed Members that in most cases smaller organisations don't know how to demonstrate their impact or even know what impact they have. She added that most of the smaller organisations won't have the data to prove their impact.

In response to a question on how to resolve the issue Mrs Farrow stated that it is crucial that the smaller organisations are educated on how to measure their impact. Where a consortium is in position the larger organisation can assist the smaller organisation on how to measure their impact. The Working Group were informed that each year Hunts Forum compiles a survey and a report is produced. Last year there was a return rate of 56% and that is up to 62% this year. It was confirmed that the Hunts Forum report would be circulated at a scrutiny meeting.

Mr Stopford informed Members that education can come through multiple routes and that way the message has a better chance of reaching the intended audience. Discussion ensued regarding the use of other platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. Mrs Farrow stated that the sector does not use these platforms that well.

Following a query regarding how organisations and individuals are informed about Hunts Forum's courses, the Working Group was informed that they find out via the Hunts Forum website or the Hunts Forum newsletter. Mrs Farrow stated that organisations in receipt of Hunts Forum notifications are encouraged to cascade the information to other organisations or individuals who are not on the mailing list. Members were informed that 300 people a year attend Hunts Forum courses.

In response to the question on how well does the sector engage with business the Working Group was informed that the sector doesn't do it that well. Members were informed that the sector needs the expertise and leadership from business in order to become more effective. The issue local organisations faces is that the larger the business the more likely they are to work with larger organisations and charities.

The Working Group asked Mrs Farrow about the volunteers the service has and was informed that volunteering has changed and there is a lot of movement of volunteers that isn't tracked as opportunities arise and volunteers decide that they would like to engage a new challenge. This causes an issue with smaller organisations as there is less scope to keep volunteers engaged with the task and prevent them from jumping ship to another organisation.

Members were informed that if a volunteer is working with vulnerable adults or children or someone on their own they need a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check. However currently it can take only three days to complete a DBS check. The issue could be that individuals are more mobile often living at different addresses in different areas this therefore means that there would have to be multiple checks.

The age of volunteers was raised by Members to which Mrs Farrow stated that volunteers tended to be older people as they have more time to give however there is an increase in young volunteers probably as a result of the national citizen service scheme.

In response to a question on what can the Council do to improve the sector Members were informed that the sector would find it useful if Councils developed a combined strategy of what they want out of the sector. In addition, coordinating the link between the sector and Parish Councils would be useful so that organisations are able to identify local volunteers and expertise.

The Chairman thanked Mrs Farrow for her time and for answering the Working Group's questions so clearly and fully. Mrs Farrow then left the meeting.

Discussion

The Working Group briefly recapped the question and answer session with Mrs Farrow and discussed what documentation and actions were required before the next meeting. Mr Stopford stated that he would circulate to the Working Group examples from his previous authorities of what had been done before. The contract tender for the County Council would be circulated to Members as well as Citizens Advice Bureau's (CAB) ward breakdown document.

The Chairman briefed Members that they had received the evidence that should be considered before making a decision on what they would like to do. Members agreed that they will have a difficult decision to make

Mr Stopford reminded Members that the fund is a fixed amount but should consider how to split the funding. Currently £115k is allocated to CAB, £38k to Hunts Forum and £37k to Hunts Volunteer Centre however Members were informed that the split could be 50:50 or any formula that is deemed appropriate.

The Working Group was informed that the tender document could be scored in a variety of different ways and each score could be weighted by the importance Members have placed on that particular criteria. Members were advised that the document scoring can be amended however once the Council are accepting tenders it can no longer be changed.

Any Other Business

The next meeting of the Working Group will take place on the 19th May 2016, 10am at Centenary House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon (MAGPAS).