

Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Partnerships

The County Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Partnerships is seeking to find out as much as possible about the way that the County Council's partnerships with voluntary organisations work. District Councils also provide support to voluntary organisations, in some cases the same ones as those supported by the County Council. Although this exercise is about the County Council and the way its partnerships operate, it could be that working between councils in this area could also be improved to everybody's benefit. Therefore, it would be very helpful to have answers to the following questions.

Meeting with Officers of South Bucks District Council

What criteria does the District Council use when deciding which organisations to support and who makes the decision whether or not to provide a grant?

Support is given to organisations which can help the Council promote the wellbeing of residents of South Bucks and can add to the service provided. The bodies supported provide services which the Council would otherwise find difficult to make available. They mentioned in this regard support for an Age Concern project which provided "Handyman" support for Pensioners and Disabled people. Support for the Mediation Service which was based in High Wycombe.

Does the Council have a definition of a partnership and does it see the groups that are being supported as partners or as something else?

The term partner was one that readily used but they did not seem to have a clear definition. They referred to organisations like Housing Associations with whom they had clear partnership arrangements and to organisations that they gave token support because of the benefit their work provided for the community.

What conditions, if any, are made when issuing grants?

In answering this question they seemed to talk about criteria for giving grants more than conditions. Careful thought would be given to the contribution that the organisation would make and whether it would bring benefit to residents of South Bucks. The nature of the District, large geographical area with small towns, meant that they had special problems. Therefore they supported some organisations that were centred in adjoining Districts.

What monitoring takes place of the services provided by the organisation receiving the grant or the way that the grant money is spent?

Monitoring was dependent of the extent of support that the Council provided. For organisations that received small grants they may be satisfied with statements of accounts and reports of activity. For others like those mentioned above they would require more information and would probably carryout some assessment of the value of their work. For services like the

Mediation Service which was based in High Wycombe they would want to be sure that South Bucks residents were getting a good service.

In what circumstances would a grant be withdrawn and how would such a decision be taken?

They gave us no examples of grants being withdrawn although they said such a decision could be made. A decision would be based on a review of the organisations work and whether they were satisfied that it was providing a valued service. We asked who would make such a decision and they suggested it would probably be an officers recommendation to the Cabinet.

Does any liaison take place with the County Council over issuing grants, monitoring etc? If there is no liaison, would it be helpful if there was?

They said that no liaison was taking place in the area of support for voluntary organisations but there was cooperation through the New Bucks Partnership on a wide range of other issues. One officer seemed sceptical about whether cooperation was necessary, but an alternative view was put forward. On reflection his colleague said that cooperation would be helpful and that they would like to talk to Social Services from time to time about this area of activity. We concluded, that relative to the larger District Councils, there was a low level of activity in support of social care partnerships. Probably their uncertainty in answering this question resulted from this. However demographic factors need to be taken into account when considering the response.

What plans, if any, are there to change the current methods of determining which organisations receive support?

They had no plans to change their current method of determining grants.

Comment

We were made very welcome by the four officers of South Bucks District. They willingly gave us well over an hour of their time and answered our questions fully.

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