

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 Chiltern District Council Represented by Cllr Dodd and M/s D Gullet

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?

The Council has a clear method of determining grants to voluntary bodies. The first consideration is whether the organisation requesting support can help the Council in achieving its objectives. Applicants are advised of the Council's criteria for awarding grants and this is sent to them at the same time as an application form. (A copy of the document is attached.) For larger organisations where there is a history of partnership working (e.g. CAB) grants are awarded for a three year period. Smaller community based organisations are required to submit an annual application. The criteria clearly sets the Council requirements and conditions for the grant.

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 Council has a broad interpretation of the term partnership. They said that they consider they are working in partnership with all organisations to whom issue grants. The reply followed logically from the answer given to question one and the clear policy of issuing grants to those who demonstrate that their project meets the Council's Community Plan Key Objectives.

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

The criteria refers to a number of conditions. They did not award grants to organisations that were holding substantial bank balances. Organisations were expected to use funds in line with their aims and not to accrue balances. They said some organisations saved for a "rainy" day. We discussed the practice of holding reserves sufficient to cover staff redundancy costs in the event of closure. They said that they had not experienced that argument.

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

They understood that monitoring could be onerous for some organisations particularly small ones. They tried to make it as simple as possible but public money was involved. Usually it was sufficient for them to see the annual report and balance sheet. In the case of larger organisations however they wanted to be sure that they were fulfilling the terms of the service agreement and did therefore take an interest in performance management. Their members who served as Council representatives on the Management Committees of a number of bodies also kept them informed.

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

It was unusual for them to withdraw a grant but repeat applications may not be successful. At the last round of applications three organisations came off the list. They did not want organisations to think that grants were permanent. They encouraged them to use the Council's support to establish themselves and to pump prime activity. But they always wanted organisations to think about future funding. Clearly this approach is confined to smaller organisations, scouts, guides, and other community based groups. Organisations like the CAB and Dial a Ride where they have service level agreements it would not apply.

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 currently there was no liaison between District and County. They suspected that there may be a number of organisations that receive funding from both County and District but they could not readily name them. They thought that closer working could be helpful. It would be interesting to know who does what and why. They said that cooperation might be useful if it leads to the development of a single application, they were not however suggesting a single grant. They also thought that monitoring might be taken care of by one authority and that this would benefit the organisations that were jointly supported.

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

Chiltern District Council have only recently adopted a new policy for providing grants to those organisations with whom they work in partnership and have no plans to make a further changes. They explained their process for dealing with grants and communicating with partners. We particularly noted that partners are regularly consulted and that support is sometimes provided in kind (e.g. help with accommodation and help with lottery grants were mentioned). The criteria for support sets out the Council's requirements plainly. They also described their administrative arrangements and political management and the way in which members are kept involved.

Comment

The Executive Member (Cabinet Member) responsible for the Community Portfolio answered most of our questions. He was clearly was fully in touch with the Council's activities. Recent budget problems had caused them some difficulty and they had decided this year to freeze grants to some organisations at current levels, others were not awarded grants this year.

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