

Bucks County Council
Partnership Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Review of Social Care Partnerships

FIRST DRAFT

19/02/2002

Introduction

1. At their September meeting the Committee agreed to undertake a study of Buckinghamshire County Council's Social Care Partnerships. The Committee were mindful that Partnerships play an increasingly important role in the delivery of social care services in Buckinghamshire. The contribution that partners play is widely appreciated by officers and members. But the unanswered question is whether partnerships in Buckinghamshire are working in such a way that provides maximum benefit.
2. Over £11m is spent in the 'not for profit' sector by Social Services. This amounts to approximately 15% of the social care budget. It is estimated that more than £2m is spent with the voluntary sector. Substantially more is spent in purchasing services from the Independent Sector but we have not examined this in depth. Our study has concentrated mainly on partnerships with the Voluntary Sector. According to social service officers these have evolved over the years, not always in a planned way. We question how robust these partnerships are, how strong are their links, do they lead to joined up thinking, co-ordinated planning, and action to provide improved service delivery.
3. Successive Governments have pressed local authorities to transfer a range of social care services to the voluntary and independent sector. The Community Care Act required statutory agencies to consult with the voluntary, community and user organisations in the planning and implementation of services, this was made a condition of the special transitional grant.
4. The present Government has reinforced this message by making clear the importance of forging partnerships with the voluntary sector. They say:

"Voluntary organisations make an enormous contribution to social care working alongside and in co-operation with social services. Social services should have good relationships with the voluntary organisations both in service provision partnerships and also in order to help understand the needs of users. Local councils should ensure that they know which voluntary organisations are in their area; what the voluntary sector can contribute to meeting the needs of the local population; and where the council's support for the sector can be used to the best effect."

The Review

5. At their meeting in September the Committee set out its criteria for the review:
 - To identify the number of partnerships and types of partnerships
 - To obtain information on the types of partnerships, assess what the benefits have been and whether there have been any problems
 - To produce an evaluation criteria for measuring the success of partnerships
 - To decide on recommendations to put before the Cabinet.

6. The Committee conducted interviews over a series of three meetings they saw, Kate Kennally, BCC Group Manager Service Development and Commissioning (Adults); Jeffrey Orange, BCC; Anita English, Chairman Bucks Infrastructure Group; Cathy Johnston, Chief Executive Buckinghamshire Community Action; Hugh Carey, BCC Cabinet Member for Adult Care; Janice Campbell Service Manager for Adult Care Services; and Kim Whitbread Community Care Information Officer.

7. Members of the Committee also met representatives of the following organisations, Buckinghamshire Association for the Blind, Mencap Buckingham and District, Peoples Voices, Age Concern Buckinghamshire, British Red Cross Society Buckinghamshire, Cross Roads Care South Bucks, Wycombe District Racial Equality Council and South Bucks Chiltern and Wycombe District Councils.

Types of Partnership

8. The Committee were provided with a list of 71 social care partnerships that receive financial support. Others, recognised as representing the interests of particular groups of service users, do not receive grants but are from time to time consulted about issues affecting the service.
9. The Committee was advised that partnerships generally fall into three categories:
- The development of policy
 - The development of strategy
 - The implementation of strategy (service delivery partnerships)
- Initially the Committee were concerned to learn that partnerships were categorised in this way but it was explained that partnerships did not fit neatly into these categories there is a continuum between policy development and service delivery. A single voluntary agency could fit all three categories.

Why Partnership

10. Earlier work on the issue raised the question about whether the needs of the County Council should drive relationships with partners or vice versa. The report went on to suggest that emphasis should be on doing what is good for the County and the people who live in it. A conclusion that few people would disagree with.
11. That conclusion would seem to be a good starting point for discussion of partnerships and leads to a number of reasons why partnerships should be created.
- To maximise potential resources for the people of Buckinghamshire by involving partners in undertaking some of the County Councils responsibilities thus releasing resources to undertake other priorities;
 - To extend the range of the County Councils activities by working with a wide variety of partners;
 - To develop the new duty of well-being by promoting further partnerships;
 - To develop services in line with the principles of Best Value.
12. We asked voluntary organisations how they defined effective partnership. Their replies had a common thread. They talked about shared goals, the importance of good communications, opportunity to influence, greater

recognition of their work, collaborative working towards a common aim, and working with common purpose.

13. The voluntary organisations that we met said that relationships were generally good but were critical that the County appeared to have no strategic direction. Others said that they felt unequal partners. The Councils earlier work, referred to above, was not concluded and there is no clear statement of policy towards the voluntary sector

14. To achieve these objectives set out in the above paragraphs there needs to be a clear statement of policy. The SSI Report "Towards a Common Cause" says that there should be an over arching framework with local organisations into which the component parts necessary for partnership can be fitted.

RECOMMENDATION

- The County Council should address the criticism that they have no clear policy about relationships with the Voluntary Sector, they need to develop a policy and ensure that it is understood and implemented at all levels of the organisation.

Voluntary Sector Infrastructure

15. The all embracing term Voluntary Sector does not convey a clear picture of the nature of those organisations that join with the County Council in Buckinghamshire to provide services. These organisations range from small community based organisations to large national charities. Some are administered by volunteers and others benefit from professional support. All rely on the good will and support of a large number of volunteers who form management committees, promote fund raising activities and give support in a variety of other ways. In our conversations with the voluntary bodies general concern was expressed about the difficulty of recruiting volunteers.

16. Smaller voluntary groups often have very little administrative support and keeping up with developments and partnership initiatives is difficult for them. They face the continuing problem of having to raise funds, keep up with the changes, struggle to recruit and retain volunteers and provide the service for which they were formed. Help and support is therefore vital if the variety and

scope of these organisations is to continue. In their planning the County needs to recognise these difficulties and develop close liaison. Voluntary bodies would welcome clearer lines of communications and identified County Staff.

17. A number of Voluntary Organisations are able to use the services of their national bodies, they offer support and guidance and act as an important exchange of information. At local level, Bucks Community Action, The Priory Centre and Chiltern CVS are all affiliated to the National Council for Voluntary Service. Through these local bodies voluntary and community groups are brought together to promote and develop effective local voluntary action. They provide a range of services, information, advice, support and training and can act as a channel through which groups voice their opinions.

18. In documents presented to us it was argued that voluntary organisations operate very differently from public bodies and that this needs to be understood by those responsible for developing and delivering partnerships. They are independent organisations with constitutions that set out the way in which they are managed and their governance arrangements. Some have charitable status, in this case, the board members are trustees charged with promoting the best interests of the charity. Trustees have a duty to ensure that the organisation pursues its own independent mission. Although the organisations to whom we spoke did not raise this as a problem voluntary organisations have complained that what they originally set out to provide has progressively changed because of the changing needs of Social Services.

19. We were told that voluntary organisations are being asked to behave in a more businesslike way and to increase their working capacity. To do this they needed the security of core funding backed by political support. They argued that the voluntary sector had to spend a great deal of time looking for funding and preparing bids. This is not a good use of limited resources.

Service Level Agreements

20. The range of partnerships is wide, some make a significant contribution to service delivery within the County. For example the Bucks Association for the Blind provides services on behalf of the Council to blind and partially sighted people. The Red Cross and Age Concern provide day care services and a range of other help. There are several other voluntary bodies who similarly

provide extensive services. In order to formalise relationships and make the responsibilities of the parties clear the Council in common with other authorities has developed Service Level Agreements. Service Level Agreements sit between contracts that the Council may have with independent service providers and the grants that are provided normally to smaller organisations. SLAs set out the type and level of service that the organisations are expected to provide in return for their funding.

21. We asked whether it is proposed to extend Service Level Agreements to all voluntary sector providers. We were told it is not be possible because of limited resources therefore SLAs would be restricted to those who received the largest allocation.

22. The voluntary organisations that we spoke to generally welcomed the stability that SLAs gave them and also appreciated the clear statement of expectations.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Social services are asked to review their criteria for establishing service level agreements with a view to incorporating a wider group of partners.
2. The benefits of agreements which set out clear requirements for the level of service to be provided and stability of funding over a period greater than one year is to be encouraged.

Communications

23. All the officers that spoke to us said that effective consultation was important but we were left not having a clear view about whether they see it to be an integral part of establishing an effective partnership. The diversity of the Voluntary Sector makes communications a complex issue. Small organisations and some of the larger ones said that they experienced difficulties in keeping pace with documentation, directives, briefings and meetings, it took time better spent carrying out their actual work.

24. The Bucks Partnership Forum and Locality Forums are seen to be important links in the chain of communication. They clearly provide a means by which Health and Social Services are able to inform representatives of the Voluntary Sector about their plans, and provide an opportunity for their input. Representatives of the Voluntary Sector play a full part at these meetings and their contributions are taken into account but agendas mainly contain items determined by statutory agencies. Representation is generally from larger organisations and there is a lack of representation from black and minority ethnic communities.

25. The Equality Fairs organised by Social Services in various parts of the County showing services available from the voluntary and statutory sector, was a good example of work aimed at communicating with the black and minority ethnic community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Good communications are a key to successful relations between the County Council and the Voluntary Sector. Named contacts in the departments should be identified to assist in achieving this.
- Consistent efforts should be made to communicate with black and ethnic minority organisations.
- There is a need to develop better communications with smaller organisations.

Working Together

26. The Government's stated objective of working towards a 'partnership' culture implies a more reciprocal and complementary relationship. Officers who spoke to us were supportive of this principle but representatives of the organisations that we spoke to left us feeling that there was not a spirit of joint ownership. In talking about their difficulties they said, Social Services were slow to implement decisions, changing staff meant that consistency suffered and there was often a misunderstanding of expectation.

27. Perhaps much of this can be understood against the background of funding and staffing difficulties that the County faces but it is not indicative of a strong partnership.

28. Voluntary organisations welcome regular close contact with identified officers. They generally feel that this is more likely to lead to support and understanding of their problems. Officers that we spoke to agreed that having an identified contact person for liaison purposes could assist good working relationships.

29. In their report "Towards Common Cause" the SSI said that local councils and social services need to know which voluntary organisations are in their area. In Buckinghamshire officers seemed to have some difficulty in responding to our request for a list of those organisations with whom we have contact. The SSI considered that this played an important contribution to meeting the needs of the local population and helped to develop a strategic approach in identifying the needs of the Voluntary Sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Social Services should bring together the information that they hold about voluntary organisations into one list to provide a clear picture of the County's involvement.
- That a mapping exercise should be undertaken to establish which organisations are jointly funded by statutory bodies in Buckinghamshire.
- Social Services should establish identified contact persons.

Funding

30. Funding of voluntary bodies was not part of our terms of reference but predictably everyone that we saw mentioned it. Funding is complex and it can come from one or more of the following sources; social services, other County Council departments, District Councils, Trusts and Charities, Special Grants, National Lottery and other National Organisations.