

Voluntary Sector Response to Tough Choices Consultation

30th June 2010

Introduction

West Lothian's Voluntary Sector is fully aware of the current financial situation at both national and local levels of government and the negative impact that the budgetary cuts will have on critical and priority services. Both the Council and the Voluntary Sector need to continue to examine the internal workings, structures and administrative set up of each organisation in the pursuance of a continued high quality service delivery for our community which has never been more important.

The Voluntary Sector empathises with West Lothian Council in its difficult task of finding £45million in efficiencies over the next 3 years. (A prudent and cautious person would probably put that figure at £60million given the election of a new government at Westminster) and the impact that cuts, when applied, will undoubtedly have on staffing, services and communities. Council is respectfully reminded that in applying cuts to the Voluntary Sector, this may have a disproportionate effect on staff, volunteers and services. The sector is already coping with the effects of selected reduced core funding and increased competition for resources from other funding bodies.

The Tough Choices consultation exercise being carried out by Council is a further reminder of the progressiveness of West Lothian Council as it seeks, once again, a route of inclusiveness by involving its partners and key stakeholders in the consultation and influential decision making process.

The Voluntary Sector in West Lothian, as Council is aware, plays a very important role in the delivery of services to a high proportion of West Lothian's community. Its diversity, flexibility and commitment has long been the subject of much praise from Council colleagues at officer and elected member level.

This robustness and professionalism is allied to a sense of pride in all that the Sector achieves in the name of the many organisations that make up West Lothian's Voluntary Sector. These cuts will impact on some organisations more than others and in turn threaten the survival of other organisations.

Planning for efficiencies, smarter working practices, partnership and collaborative working by the Voluntary Sector and Council are keys to a successful outcome in these difficult times.

For ease of explanation I have broken down the Voluntary Sector response into 4 specific areas.

How the Sector Currently Looks and is Funded Today

West Lothian's Voluntary Sector is made up of a diverse number of organisations covering a wide range of thematic areas such as homelessness, youth services children and families, sports, voluntary arts, adult education, neighbourhood networks, advice and counselling, volunteering, older people's services, addictions and learning/physical disabilities. The sector reaches out very effectively to many of the 168,000 population of West Lothian, 23% (approximately 38,640) of whom actively involve themselves in some form of formal or informal volunteering, generating as an in kind contribution to the social economy of West Lothian £30 million per annum.

The target group focussed on by the Tough Choices Consultation Document, but not exclusively, are those in the funding bracket of £50,000+. A mix of local and national voluntary organisations. These are by far the middle to larger of the voluntary sector organisations whose client groups collectively number in the thousands.

The proposed reduction in the voluntary sector budget over a three year period 2011/14 is £381,000. Culture and Communities equates to a projected cut of £251,000 and Social Policy a projected cut of £130,000, a reduction in the budget from £4,074,000 to £3,693,000. When the proposed reductions come to fruition on the 1st of April 2011, there is the potential for a huge impact on local organisations over the corresponding 3 years that are perhaps less able to adapt to the loss of much needed income.

Overview of General Feedback Received from Voluntary Sector

The event held at Howden Park Centre on 14th June 2010 as part of the Tough Choices Consultation process highlighted areas of genuine concern by Voluntary Sector delegates but also threw up at the same time areas of challenge and opportunity. This is probably best demonstrated in a SWOT analysis – Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats, many as perceived by West Lothian’s Voluntary Sector organisations in their feedback sheets.

Strengths

- Diversity
- Flexibility
- Opportunistic
- Ability to respond at short notice
- Experienced Staff and Volunteers
- Broad Skill Base
- Ability to Work to Budgets
- Determination and Commitment
- Added Value, more for the money
- Supportive and Caring
- Quality Standards
- Proactive
- Collaborative and Partnership Working
- Strategic Planning in most Orgs
- Income Generation
- Communication
- A Major Employer

Weaknesses

- Single Source of Income
- Grant Dependant
- Skills Deficit in Specific Areas
- Lack of Skilled Governance in some Organisations
- Strategic Planning Training Requirement
- Risk Averse
- Business Acumen Requirement

Opportunities

- Shared Accommodation/Costs
- Reduction in Cost
- Partnership and Collaborative Working
- Shared Resources
- Joint Working
- Internal Audit on Organisational Needs
- Mergers and Amalgamations
- Joint Funding Applications
- Consortium Bids

Threats

- Reduction/Loss of Services
- Loss of Independence/Identity
- Low Level of Communication between Voluntary Orgs/Partners
- Lack of Vision
- Inexperienced Leadership
- Failure to Adapt to Change
- Loss of Skilled Staff due to Uncertainty of Funding
- Loss of all Funding

What the Sector Has to Offer

The Voluntary Sector offers commitment to identifying the kind of efficiencies that will lessen the impact of a funding reduction over a protracted period of time. In addition, we will strive to work smarter by engaging with other like minded partners in cost cutting arrangements that include better joined up services, a commitment to look internally at process and functions and how to become a more effective partner in the delivery of national and local strategies.

West Lothian's Voluntary Sector offers much as a productive and equal partner, such as:

- ✓ A major contributor to the Single Outcome Agreement (SOA) and Life Stages Model and is a willing participant in the move towards a greater focus on outcomes.
- ✓ A willing and equal partner in the delivery of services to the community of West Lothian.
- ✓ The ability to attract additional funding from external sources into West Lothian's local economy.
- ✓ Being flexible and adaptable in sourcing funding using consortium bids.
- ✓ A major employer in West Lothian.
- ✓ The ability to contribute to the personal and social development of individuals and groups.
- ✓ To enhance the social capital of West Lothian by providing an environment conducive for growth and development.
- ✓ Acts as a vital direct interface between individuals, communities and Council services.
- ✓ Provides a wide range of volunteering opportunities, on many occasions, acting as a conduit to employment, training or further education.
- ✓ Provide a service that is cost effective and brings added value

What the Sector Asks For

West Lothian's Voluntary Sector is a mix of some 800 + organisations staffed by professional and dedicated staff and volunteers, driven by commitment to their respective client groups and communities. To each organisation, what they do by way of service delivery is of the utmost importance and in many cases has life changing experiences for staff, volunteers and client group.

The funding received from Council is more often than not subsidised by other externally generated sources of funding and more often than not that effort goes unrecognised. The recognition of the Voluntary Sector as a major player, is at times, not given the credit it rightly deserves. The Sector needs to be recognised for what it contributes to the social and local economies of West Lothian.

The community of West Lothian is a thriving and growing entity. West Lothian Council is a progressive council, hailed in many quarters as visionary and to be applauded for their efforts to date. The Voluntary Sector is an integral part of the same community and views itself as a major player in providing solutions to some of the ills that befall our communities and not, as a burden. Meaningful partnership working, particularly during these difficult times must be viewed as a "win, win" situation for all concerned.

The time for independent thought and actions by one major partner to the exclusion of the other can only be deemed as detrimental to the whole effort, short changes our communities and prolongs the problem. We ask the Council to work with us in every area that affects the community of West Lothian. Voluntary Sector Gateway will play its part by instituting a training programme designed to assist the Sector in identifying efficiencies within their organisations. There is perhaps a role for Council Link Officers to be involved. The results will be efficiencies, best use of resources and expertise and a saving of much needed finances.

When assessing the sectors performance, do it with a degree of consistency. Use one clear monitoring framework and utilise the services of a voluntary sector working group drawn from the Voluntary Sector Strategic Group. (VSSG)

The process of change is proving difficult for The Voluntary Sector and Council. Excellent communication and mutual support can make the transition that bit more bearable. Knowing what is required and support to make that change ensures that each of the partners is on the same path and arrive at the destination on time and in tandem.

Conclusion

While the Voluntary Sector is mindful of the critical situation that West Lothian Council has to deal with over the next few years, it is important to remind those in Council charged with this heavy burden of responsibility, that West Lothian's Voluntary Sector is and always will be, an asset to the community and when utilised to its full potential as an equal partner, will play a full and meaningful role in arriving at a successful outcome that is mutually beneficial. The services delivered by the sector once lost will be difficult to recover and will leave gaps in provision. Cuts in public and voluntary sector provision that impact on the same client group leaves little room for manoeuvre and could have far reaching consequences.

The social capital of every community is its people. Any action that impedes the development of this valuable resource will prove to be an impediment to the overall growth and recovery of our community. The message is clear. The Voluntary Sector and the Council must operate as willing and equal partners, benefitting from each other's ideas, shared ambition, skills, expertise and personnel to make the difference to the community that we both serve.

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