

22 January 2010

Voscur board response to Bristol City Council's Draft Commissioning Strategy for Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Services

Voscur's board considered Bristol City Council's Draft Commissioning Strategy for Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure support services at meetings in November and December 2009. The board offers the following responses.

1. The funding allocated to infrastructure support services is part of the Council's Community Development Investment budget. This budget has until now been ring-fenced for investment in local organisations. This is particularly important at this time of recession and reduction in funding from other sources. The Council has this week given a cross party commitment to reviewing its procurement practices to ensure that they are supportive of local businesses and SMEs and we would hope that that includes local voluntary and community sector organisations.

- Will the council continue to maintain its commitment to supporting the local voluntary and community sector by choosing grant funding as its purchasing mechanism, or by alternative means?

2. Presently, less than 1% of the Council's total expenditure on the voluntary, community sector is spent on infrastructure support services. It is our view that a measurable improvement in services will not be achievable without additional investment.

3. The consultation period finishes on 22 January. We are concerned that as the responses to the consultation will need to be reviewed, assessed and incorporated by the project group before the specification and strategy can be

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signed off and presented to Cabinet at its meeting on 25 February, this does not give sufficient time to a) develop a specification and b) for voluntary sector groups to consider the specification and if necessary to make representations to Cabinet.

4. The consultation period is from 19 October to 22 January, However, organisations have been asked to register their interest as either a sub-contractor or single main provider. Therefore, although the consultation process is ongoing, the register of interest implies that the delivery model has been decided.

- Will responses to the consultation influence the delivery model?
If not
- What elements of the strategy will the consultation responses influence?

5. Describing and listing delivery activities (support services) as part of the strategy rather than commissioning outcomes implies that there will be no flexibility in the contract for VCSE infrastructure support services to identify and respond to new and emerging support needs. We are concerned that a consequence of this approach will be to stifle responsiveness and innovation.

6. The Council's stated preferred model is that of a lead contractor sub-contracting to others, thus reducing the Council's current contract management costs.

- How much of the Council's cost savings will be reallocated to the lead contractor to reflect its contract management responsibilities, restructuring, and additional back office costs (and to prevent a funding cut?)

6. The Strategy proposes a Community Development 'wrap around' service. The need for additional community development support has arisen because the Bristol City Council community development team has been moved from supporting the development of community groups, to supporting the neighbourhood partnerships and the cohesion agenda. Fourteen BCC community development staff have been redeployed. To replace that support from this budget will be impossible. The Council needs to be able to clarify the future role of its Community Development team before the final specification is produced, and/or find additional funding to support this work.

7. The strategy states that not all elements identified in the service model are likely to be affordable within the current funding. The Council has asked groups to prioritise services.

It is our view that a combination of all services is needed. The City Council's investment is not enough to pay for a complete range of infrastructure support services. Presently local infrastructure organisations such as Voscur raise additional funds and generate income to add to the City Council's investment, and are able then to offer free and low cost support to groups that need it.

The influencing function is vital across a number of policy areas – much influencing takes place which is not always visible to front-line VCS organisations. Influencing at this level is possible because local infrastructure organisations are well established, are accountable to their local member groups and networked in and connected to public and private sector organisations.

The top three priorities identified from the survey had been funding, improving services and influencing decision-making. The focus groups wished to redress the perceived imbalance between practical support and influencing.

- Where conflicting views are expressed in responding to the current consultation, how will these be weighted?

9. The strategy lists 'complementary networks' that the Council would expect bidders to have a relationship with. We are concerned that some organisations are named and not others.

10. There is not full representation from all the equalities strands in the service specification group.

- How will the Council ensure that all equalities perspectives are heard in the development of the specification?

We hope that you will be able to respond to our concerns and address our questions.

Wendy Stephenson
On behalf of Voscur