

From: Fran Bennett [mailto:fran.bennett@dsl.pipex.com]
Sent: 21 March 2006 09:29
To: HARRISON Nicola
Subject: CVO sector report

dear Nicola

thank you for your letter of 8 March about the City Council's review of policies and procedures for support for the community and voluntary (CVO) sector. Apologies for the delay in replying - but we understood from you that a response emailed this morning would be acceptable. We should stress that due to the time constraints this is a personal response from us, as we have not had a management committee meeting of the Blackbird Leys Neighbourhood Support Scheme Ltd since your letter of 8 March.

As we hope you know, we are most grateful to the City Council for its ongoing support, and were very pleased to be told that we would get an increased level of grant in 2006-07. However, we receive only about half our funding from statutory sources (including the County Council and local housing associations as well as the City Council), and have to raise the remainder ourselves from charitable trusts etc. This is becoming increasingly difficult. It is also very timeconsuming, as each trust normally requires a different format of application and a different reporting format etc. In terms of value for money, and a better use of our time, to receive a more substantial grant from our core funders would make much more sense. We have also been advised by a major partner funder that we must try to become more sustainable; this in essence involves obtaining more core funding on the one hand and investigating income generation on the other, rather than continuing to rely on trusts. This is therefore the perspective we must bring to the debate about how the City Council supports the CVO sector.

We would welcome a more strategic approach from the City Council towards the CVO sector in general and the advice sector in particular. But we would hope that this time the energy and effort would be sustained. We find the regular grants application process, and the support from our grants officer, very helpful. However, what has not been so helpful is the Council's previous attempts to take a more 'strategic' approach. As you know, the recent review of advice provision did not have a smooth ride; and following it, no action has yet been carried through.

There was a lot of willingness from the advice agencies to co-operate and think through with the Council how to improve services. But this was dissipated by the lack of any follow-up. This is apparently now being taken forward again; but with organisations feeling that they put effort into participating in the review, often at short notice, only for it to be left in mid-air, it may be more difficult to rekindle the goodwill. We would urge, therefore, that any plan to bring about change should be more modest in its ambitions, more careful to achieve co-operation and consensus, and more concerned to keep the momentum going towards constructive outcomes once that is achieved.

The idea of bringing together different forms of support to the CVO sector is welcome. We benefit from mandatory (though not discretionary) rate relief. We also receive support via our grant for 100% of the rent of our premises. However, the requirement to show that the latter is based on a commercial rent and a formal billing process between different Council departments meant that we had to spend a lot of time last year negotiating about a proposed rent increase by the Council for which we had no formal guarantee of financial support from the Council. This seems, to put it mildly, somewhat counterproductive.

The plan by the Council to shape its approach to the CVO sector more strategically is welcome, as is the priority on social inclusion in general and deprived areas in particular. What is of great concern to us, however, is the idea of tendering for services. The possibility of tendering is mentioned as part of the more flexible approach to grant provision which the Council would prefer. Flexibility from our point of view involves core grants, preferably on a rolling basis of at least three years. This provides stability and security, and ensures that we do not spend a high proportion of our time renegotiating conditions of support rather than getting on with the work.

Well-respected local services which have built up local support over the years need continuity of finances. To go through a tender process would impose an unrealistic burden and would ignore the reputation and confidence which such a service had earned over the years. We need a level of trust that we have proved ourselves to be worthwhile organisations, rooted in the local community, with networks and connections which cannot be replaced. There is much more at stake than can be encompassed within competitive commercial processes. This should be particularly important if the Council is concerned about social inclusion. We would urge the Council to resist any moves towards treating its relationships with the CVO sector as equivalent to procurement.

Again, the need for the Council to liaise with other bodies is respected, and in particular an advice strategy coordinated with the County Council would make sense (and did not seem to be high on the agenda in the review of advice provision). However, it needs to be appreciated that organisations such as ours also have other partners with whom we have to liaise, and who have other requirements of us - especially if the level of funding we receive from the City Council requires us to depend on other funders to a greater degree. This needs to be borne in mind when making suggestions on (eg) monitoring processes etc.

Lastly, we would urge that the relationship between the City Council and the organisations it funds such as our own be maintained throughout the year in a more sustained way. We would welcome regular visits from grant officers, not only at grant renewal stage or when a one-off review of advice provision is taking place but through the year, so that we can keep them in touch with our progress and problems. Perhaps this would be an outcome of the additional staff proposed in the document.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to comment.

Best wishes

Helen Leney (Chair) and Fran Bennett (Treasurer), BLNSS Ltd

From: Andrew Nairne [mailto:andnic@nairne.f9.co.uk]
Sent: 17 March 2006 12:17
To: HARRISON Nicola
Cc: Andrew Nairne
Subject: Review re support to the Community and Voluntary Sector

Dear Nicola,

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to comment on the Grants Review.

We support the need for such a review. As you know for our 06/07 grant we were assessed by the City's part-time Dance Officer (as Neil Smith was on long term leave) and, I understand, a panel which did not include anyone with knowledge of cultural developments or the arts. This year, therefore, it has been difficult for us to feel wholly confident in the process. While we understand the decision to make 06/07 a 'holding' year our exhibition, education and community programming is of course in continuous development - very much in line with local policies such as social inclusion, diversity and young people. We believe we have a strong case for greater support from the City.

We hope we will be able to seek a funding agreement with the City for three years from 2007/08 in recognition of our value to the City, our practical need to plan ahead, and the City's forty year old partnership with Arts Council England as a core funder of Modern Art Oxford.

Overall we support the recommendations of the Review as set out in your paper - it seems a strong proposal which should lead to a more strategic use of Council funds, with a clearer focus on stated Council objectives and policies and a likelihood of levering in more support to the City from other agencies and external sources.

Below are a few specific comments related to particular points in your report:

1. Under 'Background' , para 5 :

The Council has an important agreement / partnership with Arts Council England which relates to a number of key organisations in the City and to the City 's Arts Strategy.

2. Under 'Where we are now', para 9.

The grants do cover a very wide range of sectors and organisations. The proposed Steering Group, in considering the concept of themes should perhaps also consider whether consideration of support for organisations of ongoing strategic importance to the City (such as Modern Art Oxford) should, in fact, be considered exactly the same way as organisations seeking a modest year to year project grant.

3. Under para 17. Again Arts Council England could have been mentioned here, regarding the need for a joint approach to funding arts development in Oxford.

4. Under para 21 'Allocate money in different ways' . This seems to refer to types of funding agreement appropriate to the expectation of different outcomes. We support this approach. Modern Art Oxford - as well as being an outstanding resource (in terms of arts programme quality and long experience in relation to undertaking projects in the community, for example) is also at the forefront of developing the City as an exciting, contemporary cultural destination - which is perhaps less easy to measure.

5. Under para 15 - we strongly support the suggestion of flexibility - improving City Council buildings used by CVO's. This would be in the long term interest of the Council in relation to their capital assets.

6. Position Statement

We support the Position Statement, with one possible exception. Point ten implies identical levels of assessment for all CVO's. You may want to consider, as implied elsewhere in the proposal, graded levels of assessment which relate to levels of funding. In other words, Officers would spend more time and seek more evaluation from those receiving large grants than those receiving smaller grants. This approach has been shown to give better value for money overall and makes the level of required bureaucracy appropriate to the scale of grant.

7. Under para 22 - Should also note here the City's recent Arts Strategy, developed with arts and cultural organisations across Oxford, and the City's Cultural Strategy.

8. Para 34 - We would propose that the Steering Group includes at least one person with expertise and knowledge of arts and cultural developments in the City. If the Steering Group is to include elected members the obvious current candidate would be Councillor Maureen Christian who has considerable knowledge of this area and is the portfolio holder for Culture.

9. Para 41 - A more strategic approach will encourage greater partnership working between different organisations in the City and more opportunities to seek external funding - in seeking to move forward new initiatives.

One concern, not addressed directly in the report, is the need to ensure that different Business Units communicate effectively with each other in supporting CVO's and seeking to deliver shared objectives.

With Oxford Inspires raising the City and County's cultural horizons through numerous initiatives, and all the key arts organisations in a constant process of positive transformation, this is one of the most exciting times to be living in Oxford. The arts have an absolutely key role to play in regeneration, communities, education and learning as well as backing growth and the City's economic future.

I hope the above thoughts are helpful.

With best wishes

Andrew

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