

Voluntary Sector Funding Processes
Best Value Review
23 April 2001
Wider Reference Group discussion with councillors

Introduction

The session (attended by 12 voluntary sector representatives, two District Council representatives, 5 county councillors, UNISON, and 3 county officers) was designed to provide the voluntary sector representatives and others on the Review's Wider Reference Group with an opportunity to express views on the strengths and weaknesses of the four hypotheses derived from the challenge stage, and to comment more generally on the direction of the Review.

Following a welcome from Anthony Kilkerr, Chairman of the Review Group, and an introduction to the emerging issues by Anne Fisher, Lead officer, the participants split into two groups to assess the four hypotheses. In short these are:-

- Decentralise processes
- Centralise processes
- Externalise processes
- Support countywide organisations only

A summary of the combined feedback is *attached*, and will inform the development of the hypotheses, leading to the Recommendations workshop on 4 June.

At the conclusion Anthony Kilkerr thanked people for giving their time and for offering their contributions towards shaping the future of voluntary sector funding processes.

KS 26/04/01

Voluntary Sector Funding Processes
Assessing the four hypotheses
Wider Reference Group and councillors

23 April 2001

Summary of working group deliberations

In relation to the **centralisation/ decentralisation** debate there is a strong desire to exploit local knowledge and expertise, and to have transparency, equity and accountability. Pure centralisation would be too remote from communities, whereas pure decentralisation would lead to fragmented advice, inconsistent systems, and would lose the potential for a centre of expertise.

The group wish to see better countywide co ordination and a bigger central role in attracting and advising on external funds, a sharing of best practise, mentoring and monitoring. They also recognise that such an overview is necessary to make appropriate links and steer groups into partnership working where there are common interests. However there are concerns that putting the whole process at the centre would be unmanageable in terms of volumes and might create an empire at county hall and with it a new 'charmed circle'.

Advantages for the sector of having a degree of local process is that the local knowledge of need is greater, networks are stronger and that decisions on local resources empower local workers. There is also an argument that decentralisation allows for better local partnerships and less duplication (eg with District Councils). However this may have the effect of re enforcing existing 'charmed circles' and be exclusive and less flexible/less targeted than processes with a stronger central role.

There are virtues therefore in developing a centralised process which would offer strategic leadership and direction, a single set of criteria and a team of experts, enabling a professional and responsive relationship with voluntary organisations, regarding county and other funding regimes. Such arrangements need to have clear and accountable links to local communities and local services, so that the voluntary sector have people to talk to locally. The exploitation of new technology must be optimised to provide comprehensive and up to date information, speed and transparency.

Integrity of process and access to county (strategic and local) knowledge and experience might be lost through **externalisation**. For the sector the importance of a dialogue with staff who have knowledge at the various stages (publicity, applying, information on result and monitoring/evaluation) is crucial. They are worried at any moves which may make them more remote from informed decision making. Linked to this is a notion that 'professional application experts could play the system'

Nevertheless there are arguments that by externalising parts of the process the systems deployed would be more objective (no 'charmed circle'), more professional (speed, tracking progress etc) and less bureaucratic. By using an external provider some of the time dedicated by officers (eg handling the paperwork) would be released thereby enabling other tasks to be performed by them.

There may be a place for external provision but the very complex nature of networks and relationships do require an element of 'hands on' working.

A **countywide only** model would be likely to strengthen networks and create links to achieve common agendas. It would also provide a co ordination role, identifying and filling gaps. On the down side the concentration of funding into a very small number of pots will lead to domination by the powerful and small organisations would lose out – or be forced to relinquish their independence . This could also lead to a reduction in innovation and diversity.

In **conclusion** from the wider group perspective any outcome from the Review must have the following ingredients:-

- An overall strategy and a central framework
- Ability to sustain the sector, build community capacity and offer in kind help
- Balance equity and flexibility
- Reduced duplication
- Help with core funding and 'running the business'
- Appropriate tapping into knowledge and expertise
- Responding to local needs
- Rationalised, speedy, consistent and intelligent systems
- 'One Stop' professional advice
- Allow diversity

