



Lewes District Council

Strengthening our Relationship with the Voluntary and Community Sector



**A Report to Cabinet on 6 January 2014 by the Scrutiny Panel
at Lewes District Council**

**Members of the Panel : Councillors S J Gauntlett (Chair), J V Harris
and E E J Russell**

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Introduction by Councillor Stephen Gauntlett **Chair of the Scrutiny Panel**

This Review was undertaken to acknowledge how much we value the voluntary and community organisations in our District and to establish how we work with them in the future. It's hard to establish how many groups there are in Lewes District as most groups in the voluntary and community sector are informal community groups.

One of the Council's key promises is "an unswerving commitment to customer service"; this ties in well with this Review in planning how we can work better with our colleagues in the third sector.

As you will know, the budget for Councils is being cut continually and this unfortunately means that in some cases we are not able to give the grant and financial support that we once did, but there are many ways in which we want to continue working with representatives of the voluntary and community sector. Despite these difficult times, we still give just under £180,000 of financial support to the sector across our District (see Appendix E for more information) and our contribution to Discretionary Rate Relief in 2013/14 was £116,570.

We support a number of community and voluntary groups. The work of our Community Rangers could not be done without the support of its conservation volunteers. Newhaven Fort itself runs a volunteer scheme as well as hosting the Castle Hill Special Needs group which is supported by our Community Ranger and Fort staff.

We also run and support a staff volunteering scheme¹ to enable staff to be given time to volunteer in the District. In these times of austerity we all need to be looking at how we can do things differently, how we can make our money stretch further and how we can work together in partnership.

Thank you to everyone that took the time to give us your views on this important issue, whether it was through the questionnaire or attending the event at Newhaven Fort. We have taken all your views into account, and will update you on the progress of the recommendations from this Review.

For further information about this Review or Scrutiny at Lewes District Council, please contact Rachel Allan, Scrutiny and Committee Officer at rachel.allan@lewes.gov.uk or 01273 471600

¹ The staff volunteering scheme is a scheme which supports staff who wish to volunteer at schools and colleges within the District for up to 15 hours per calendar year.

Executive Summary

Members of the Scrutiny Review undertook significant work in order to identify the issues that were felt by members of the voluntary and community sector. The main findings of the Review were:

- That there was a need for a dedicated officer at the Council to work with voluntary and community organisations.
- Better communication between the Council and voluntary and community sector groups was required.
- A better exchange of information between the Council and voluntary and community sector groups was necessary.

The Panel agreed on six recommendations.

1. That a dedicated part-time officer be appointed at the Council to work with voluntary and community sector groups.
2. That engagement with the voluntary and community sector be delegated within the portfolio of a Cabinet Member.
3. That a policy be drafted detailing how and why voluntary and community sector groups are funded in Lewes District and how the Council currently supports the voluntary and community sector.
4. That the Council be requested to offer regular space in publications and the website to voluntary and community groups and to raise awareness of existing mechanisms for continued dialogue.
5. That the staff volunteering scheme be widened at the Council so staff can work with voluntary and community sector groups within the District.
6. That the Council be requested to explore whether there is a benefit to the sharing of resources and space between the Council and voluntary and community groups.

More information and the background to all recommendations can be found on page 9.

Background to the Review

In June 2012 the Scrutiny Committee highlighted that the way in which the Council worked with the voluntary and community sector was an important issue to review in Lewes District. A Panel of three Councillors was set up to explore the issue in more detail. [The scope of the Review can be found here.](#)

Broadly defined, the voluntary sector accounts for one in twenty-five full-time paid jobs in the UK and one in ten service jobs, while the total contribution of volunteers to the economy is estimated at £25 billion per annum.² It has been estimated that, in 1991, some seven million people served on voluntary organisation management committees and just over a million served as charity trustees. The voluntary and community sector is a major employer within East Sussex, employing more than 10,000 individuals across the county. This total is equivalent to 4% of the total population of the county, and 7% of the total working age population.³ This means that the voluntary and community sector rivals many of the biggest organisations in the county as a key local employer.

"If you want to build a bigger society you have got to have the foundation there and that's the charities, the social enterprises, the community groups and they are the very ones that are being hit. They are making redundancies, they are cutting the work they do in communities. The whole approach of building a bigger, stronger, more active society involves something of a revolt against the top down, statist approach of recent years. Close links between citizens and the institutions of representative democracy were seen as crucial to national success in the next millennium" Sir Stephen Bubb, who heads the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations:

Volunteer hours are equivalent to £1.5 million every week. Using the average wage for East Sussex, it is possible to calculate that the hours donated by volunteers are equal to £1,599,973 every week. Furthermore, this weekly value is equal to an annual contribution of £79,998,677, just shy of £80 million. These figures give just an indication of the true value of voluntary and community sector, and what the unseen economy, and its army of volunteers, are contributing within our communities.

Taking the income figures gathered from member organisations, and assuming that these are representative of the whole of the sector within the county, it is possible to calculate that the voluntary and community sector in East Sussex has an estimated annual income of £476 million.

This work complements the current work the Council is undertaking to improve the democratic conversations⁴ within the District. The Council is looking to devolve decisions and funding to local communities and citizens

² Statistics from the Home and Communities Agency.

³ Statistics from Valuing the Voluntary Sector report (East Sussex County Council)

⁴ Democratic Conversations in Lewes District is a piece of work to improve engagement between the District Council and Town and Parish Councils.

where possible. An essential element of localism is the creation of good structures for participation. This has led to the Council's adoption of the Principles of Participation, as drawn up by The Democratic Society. These principles link in with many of the recommendations from this Review, especially the engagement of voluntary and community sector groups. [Click here for more information.](#)

"It's so hard finding the right or best officer to deal with the problem, sometimes you feel like you are being passed around the whole Council"
Quote from a member of a community group in Ringmer.

The Review was undertaken in partnership with representatives from 3VA and East Sussex County Council. As part of this Review, Councillors undertook a great deal of background reading to gain a better understanding of the issues involved (Appendix D).

Methodology and Community Engagement

This Review took place over the course of four meetings, as well as a consultation day in July 2013 at Newhaven Fort where the Panel heard the views of various stakeholders.

The total income of general charities in the UK was estimated as £35.5 billion in 2007/08, an increase of 44% on 2001/02 when the total income was £24.6 billion (at April 2008 prices) (Homes and Communities Agency)

The first meeting took place on 25 February 2013. This meeting established the scope of the scrutiny review of how Lewes District Council works with the voluntary and the community sector.

The second meeting of the Panel took place on 22 April 2013, the purpose of which was to discuss consultation options for the review, where a draft questionnaire for discussion was circulated. T

Consultation Event at Newhaven Fort

A consultation event was held in order to engage with voluntary and community groups. For more details of the event, see Appendix B.

"We need regular briefings, event like this are really helpful and should take place more often" Quote from a member of a community group in Seaford.

Representatives from 32 organisations attended the event, or engaged in another way with the consultation (for full list see Appendix A). An analysis of the consultation can be found in Appendix B. Some of the main points that arose from this consultation were:

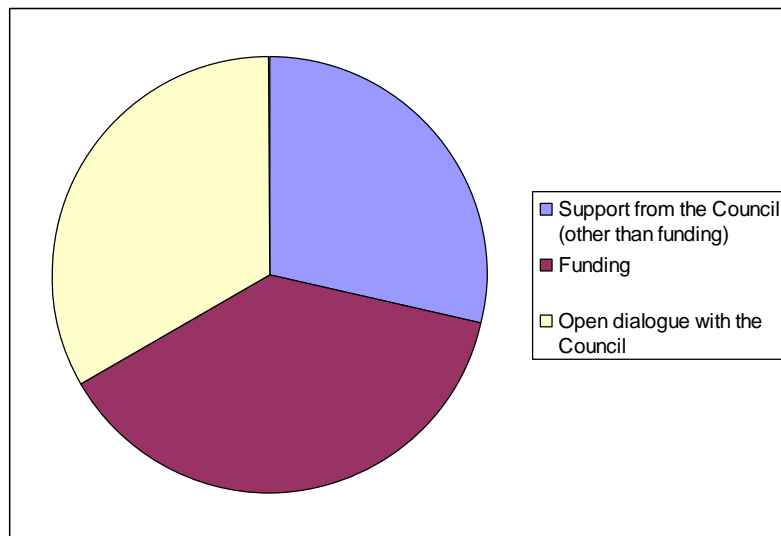
- The need for better lines of communication between the Council and members of the voluntary and community sector.
- A need for a specific officer at the Council to work with voluntary and community groups.

- The need the sector had for funding, or other support from the Council.

Invitation to Event



Top Three Concerns from Voluntary and Community Sector Groups



All participants took part in an evaluation of the day that took place, which showed that the exercise had been really useful in opening up dialogue between groups and the Council, and 90% of participants wanted more events like this with the Council in the future.



The Panel met twice more, in August and October 2013. At these meetings Councillors analysed the consultation results and developed a series of recommendations.

[Here are the detailed minutes and papers from all of the Review meetings.](#)

Monitoring of Funded Groups

The Council part funds six groups across Lewes District. Appendix E details the amount of funding and further information about the groups.

The Panel advised that it was important that a policy was developed to accurately monitor information about groups that Council funds to have more measured output and a unified approach to all groups. It was also important to ensure that the monitoring of the groups was appropriate to the level of funding given.

Recommendations

The Panel agreed on six recommendations as part of this review.

1. That a dedicated part-time officer be appointed at the Council to work with voluntary and community sector groups.

Background:

This is the key recommendation, and without it, the other recommendations below could not happen. A dedicated resource is required to drive this piece of work. The suggestion is a part time post (2 days per week) at an assistant level would be able to deliver this work.

Lewes District Council previously had a dedicated officer who worked with voluntary and community groups, and other District Councils in East Sussex have this facility.

“We need one person we can contact for help to ask questions” Quote from a member of a voluntary group in Lewes.

The consultation undertaken in this Review has shown that this need still exists, and a designated officer would be able to easily deliver the other recommendations as part of this Review.

2. That engagement with the voluntary and community sector be delegated within the portfolio of a Cabinet Member.

Background:

At present, engagement with the voluntary and community sector is not delegated under a specific portfolio, although it tends to fall under the Cabinet Member for Business, Economic Development and Tourism.

Having this work clearly defined within a Cabinet Member’s portfolio would highlight the importance of the work, as well as help to signpost voluntary and community sector groups.

3. That a policy be drafted detailing how and why voluntary and community sector groups are funded in Lewes District and how the Council currently supports the voluntary and community sector.

Background:

At present, there is a lack of a consistent approach regarding how the Council monitors the funding given to different groups within the voluntary and community sector. A consistent approach would aid transparency for Councillors and residents.

This could be through annual reporting mechanisms, clearly set out in agreements with voluntary and community groups. This approach is welcomed by voluntary and community sector groups who would like a consistent approach.

4. That the Council be requested to offer regular space in publications and the website to voluntary and community groups and to raise awareness of existing mechanisms for continued dialogue.

Background:

As part of the consultation day at Newhaven Fort, attendees took part in a communications workshop. At this workshop, many groups indicated that reductions in funding had led to a cut in their publications budgets due to high printing costs.

Many groups also indicated that they lacked some expertise in design and website development. Space to groups could be offered in District News, LDC News and other publications. At the moment, space is offered in publications and the website, but on an ad-hoc basis. This recommendation would formalise that agreement and ensure all groups had the opportunity to take advantage.

A strong theme that arose from the consultation event was that groups felt that they did not know who to contact at the Council, and were not always made aware of the latest information concerning changes at the Council.

"I never know what the Council is doing, and what the best way to find out is".
Quote from a member of the voluntary group from Seaford.

The website could be a useful way to do this, as well as holding and attending events across the District with voluntary and community groups to ensure a visible presence by the Council.

5. That the staff volunteering scheme be widened at the Council so staff can work with voluntary and community sector groups within the District.

Background:

The Council has a staff volunteering scheme, but at present this is restricted to a specific programme with local schools and young people. There are currently many staff and Councillors signed up to this scheme, willing to give their time. If this scheme was widened, staff and Councillors could offer their valuable skills to the voluntary and community sector.

There are many specific skills that officers have, such as finance, meeting management, IT, communications and engagement which would be useful to members of the voluntary and community sector.

6. That the Council be requested to explore whether there is a benefit to the sharing of resources and space between the Council and voluntary and community groups.

Background:

Throughout the consultation, groups indicated that they struggled to find meeting rooms, and often could not afford the high room charges offered at other locations.

The Council also runs many courses, as well as subscribing to a library of online courses. Spare places are frequent, therefore places could be offered to groups at a reduced or free rate. Also a well trained voluntary and community sector will ultimately benefit the Council.

If training and meetings rooms were offered at a reduced rate, this could act as an income stream for the Council.

“With less money, it’s getting harder to book meetings spaces”. Quote from a member of the voluntary group from Lewes.

With tighter budgets, groups indicated throughout this Review that it is an increasing strain on current resources to afford levels of insurance required and equipment, especially in relation to IT.

If the Council could set up a system to allow groups to come together, or join with the Council to purchase said items, this could release a financial burden from groups.

Next Steps and Feedback

The recommendations arising from this Review will be taken to the Cabinet meeting on 6 January 2014 for consideration.

All residents, members of the community and stakeholders that have taken part in this Review have been thanked and given feedback on the findings of the Panel. They will also be contacted to let them know the conclusions of the Cabinet’s considerations of those recommendations.

Appendices

- A. List of Organisations that took part in the Review
- B. Event Plan
- C. Report of consultation findings
- D. Background Reading undertaken by Panel
- E. Information regarding Groups the Council Funds

Appendix A

List of Organisations that took part in the Review

Art techniques	Newhaven Community Development Association
Churches Together	Peacehaven Twinning Organisations
Citizen's Advice Bureau	Red Cross
Cool Canines, Newhaven Community Dog Club	Seaford Chamber of Commerce
Dancing for Fun and Fitness	Seaford Cinema South Downs Society
Downs 60 Plus Club	Seaford Community Partnership Seaford Live
East Sussex Association of Blind and Partially Sighted People	Seaford & Newhaven Access Group
East Sussex Credit Union	Sompritti
Friends of Telscombe Tye	St. John's Sub Castro
Home Works West	Tenants of Lewes District
Lewes and District Seniors Forum	The House Project, Peacehaven
Lewes Community Land Trust	The Friends of Anne of Cleves House
Lewes District Scouts	Trustee Beechwood Hall and Monday Club
Lewes News	Wave Family Support
Meridian Mature Citizens Forum	3VA
Newhaven District Mencap Society	Newhaven Twinning Association OAP Care

Appendix B

Event Plan

Purpose of the day: To understand how voluntary and community groups view their current relationship with Lewes District Council and explore ways of strengthening it

Aims:

- How good is LDC's relationship with the voluntary and community sector?
- How can LDC support current VCS priorities?
- How can LDC improve awareness of its work with the VCS?
- How can LDC communicate and engage the VCS better?
- Raising awareness of support available to the VCS (3VA)
- Networking and exchange of information
- Meeting cllrs & officers

Other Information

- Sign-in/reception desk
- Workshops for groups
- Newhaven Fort – information & tour sign-up
- Info exchange – wall of posters/leaflet table for any participating group
- Other community/vol orgs stalls and leaflets

Workshop 1

1. Overall – how do groups rate their relationship with LDC? Jackie's exercise
2. Priorities/Support – what is each group's top three concerns over next year? What support do they need? How can LDC help? Particular focus on non-financial/in-kind support e.g. use of rooms, training, expertise, economies of scale in purchasing etc
3. LDC role/working together - understanding LDC service provision & current work with VCS and is it effective? What are opportunities e.g. commissioning, project work, advisory capacity etc?

Workshop 2

1. Communication/Involvement - how can the VCS get involved e.g. consultation, representation? Strategic partnerships and engagement opportunities? How strong are the channels of communication? Website, facebook, twitter, newsletters? Are they effective? Does the VCS know who to contact?

Appendix C

Report of Consultation Findings

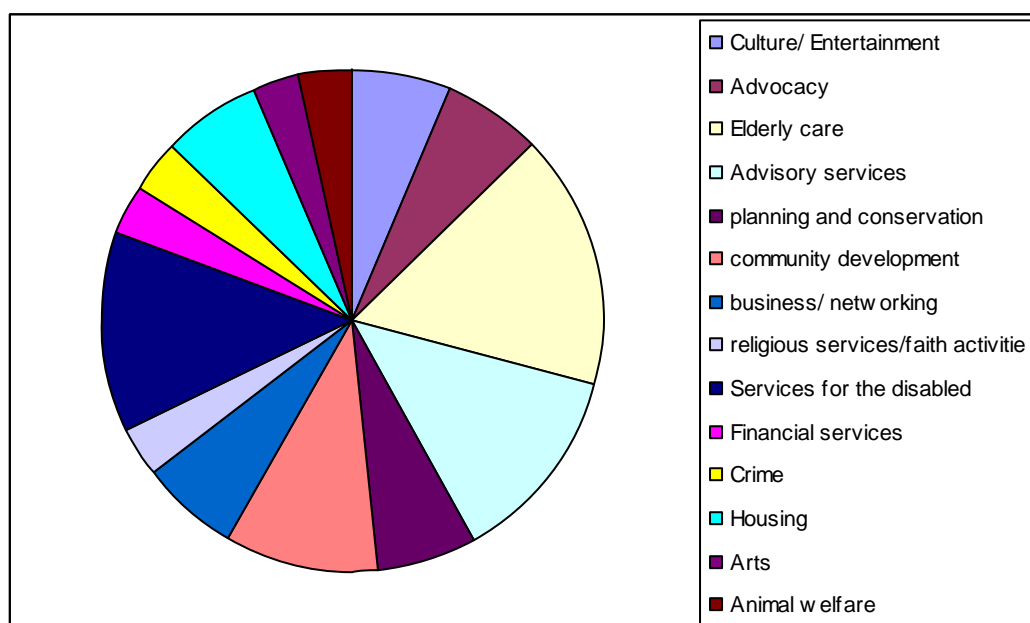
Information

These results are based on workshops and discussions from the consultation event on 6 July 2013 as well as questionnaires received from other organisations that could not attend, and conversations with other groups.

Response Information

The event was attended by 51 people, representing 40 voluntary and community organisations that worked within Lewes District Council. The event was also attended by Councillors and senior officers from Lewes District Council. Questionnaires and emails with information from people who could not attend the event were received from a further four organisations.

The chart below represents the type of organisations represented in the consultation.



Present Relationship with Lewes District Council

Many groups were happy with their working relationship with the Council, but some groups were not happy and would like to develop a better relationship. Many groups are focussed on funding, but almost all would like better communication with the Council. The main issues that arose were:

- The lack single point of contact at the Council for organisations
- Lack of information on the Council's website
- Groups felt that they would "ping-pong" between departments when trying to find out information.
- Bureaucracy at times got in the way at the Council
- Need more information about funding
- Council and funding seemed like a closed club sometimes
- Council not returning emails/phone calls.
- Need to know what is going on at LDC (events etc) – could join up

- Lot of change at LDC, better website could keep groups up to date
- Need better contacts at LDC

Present Concerns of voluntary and community groups

The main concern of most groups was funding, and concern about the sustainability of their groups. Staff and volunteer recruitment was also a high priority, as well as the ability to train staff. Other costs such as publicity costs, bills and insurance was a worry.

There were concerns that reduced funding at councils would lead to more pressure on the third sector to deliver services. At the same time groups were concerned that they were not always accepted as being legitimate.

A further concern was who they could go to for help and who groups should contact at the Council. They felt that there should be no wrong door as the public don't know or care about differences between LDC/ESCC etc.

Communications

Some groups had a good relationship with the Council, but many felt that the communication between them could be improved. Groups mostly still used leaflets, word of mouth and external publicity to promote their groups, but wanted to link more to websites and social media etc. Suggestions were made regarding how communication could improve, such as:

- Better information on the Council's website
- More events, like the consultation event
- A dedicated officer in the Council to work with groups
- Named contacts within the Council that groups could ask for information
- More information generally about how the Council runs
- Information about Councillors
- Two way information – Council also should learn from the third sector.
- Space in LDC publications

How the Council and groups can work better together

Groups were really keen to work more closely with the Council, and a number of suggestions arose in order to ensure this, such as:

- Shared space in council or other buildings
- Help with marketing (funding and expertise)
- Dedicated officer support
- Use of Council meeting spaces
- Help with accessibility
- Help with experienced officers at council (legal/equalities/minutes/agenda prep etc)
- Less red tape for groups at the Council
- Help with volunteer training
- Joint up working – work together leads to less duplication
- Be part of a one-stop shop

- Expansion of staff voluntary scheme to groups.
- Cheaper access to purchasing equipment etc
- Facilitate shared training etc between groups
- Space on website
- Need help with statistics about the District.
- Regular third sector briefings
- Re-establish LSP
- Third sector have safe space to speak the truth to power
- Advice about running businesses, training etc

Possible Areas for Recommendations

The following are a list of possible areas for recommendations that Councillors may wish to consider:

- That the Council helps voluntary and community groups publicise their groups, through internal and external publications.
- A mechanism is set up within LDC for groups to communicate with Lewes District Councillors
- Dedicated officer support at LDC is offered to the third sector.
- There are named contacts in departments within the Council for groups.
- A mechanism is set up to ensure that better information is given to the third sector about how the Council runs.
- An annual event across the District takes place between groups and the Council.
- The staff volunteering scheme is widened at LDC so staff can help groups with their expertise, such as design, event planning, minute writing etc.
- A mechanism is set up and run by the Council so groups can have cheaper access to purchasing equipment etc
- Groups are invited to Council run training as a reduced cost, or free if there are spaces.
- The Council looks at re-establishing the LSP.
- The Council examines whether the new buildings will have shared space for groups to work in.
- Meeting rooms are offered at the Council to groups for free.

Appendix D

Background Reading

- Service Level Agreements
- Lewes and Seaford Citizens Advice Bureau – Business and Development Plan 2011- 2014
- Valuing the Voluntary Sector – Economic Value Added (EVA) report 2011
- Action in Rural Sussex – Business Plan 2012 – 2014
- House of Commons Library - Voluntary Sector Statistics (VSS)
- List of community and voluntary organisations
- Employment data
- Building a Brighter Future – A Regeneration Strategy for Lewes District Council 2012 – 2015
- Corporate Plans
- The Localism Act (Nov 2011)

Appendix E

Groups the Council Funds

TO ADD