

Plymouth Octopus Project
The Zebra Collective
Devonport Guildhall
Ker St
Plymouth
PL1 4EL

16th December 2013

Dear Cllr James

VCS response to consultation on 2014 budget proposals:

I write from Plymouth Octopus Project, a one year project commissioned by PCC to support the VCS and make sure its voice is heard. This letter formalises the views of 37 people representing 34 community organisations at two budget consultation events in December.

While there are inevitably some differing opinions the main themes are clear. The sector understands the Council's need to balance the budget in the context of falling income and the rising cost of services, and supports its approach of not compromising what we need to achieve for the city. It feels it can contribute to this in terms of delivering what it does best, in suggesting ways for the city to increase income, in working in closer partnership with the city, and in ensuring its own structures are efficient and more collaborative.

Workshop discussion was organised under four questions:

1 Which services that the Council currently delivers do you think that communities and civil society organisations could provide more efficiently on our behalf?

The VCS is experienced in front line working and has a good understanding of community need. This means that it can both deliver and co-design effective and efficient services. These include:

- **Community Development.** We would welcome additional resource to help us build on this work. There is a real opportunity to support this through the voluntary workforce.
- **Infrastructure Support.** This also will build capacity in communities and smaller organisations.
- **Prevention and community based services** such as Children's Services (e.g. non-targeted youth work and youth clubs), Health Prevention Services (e.g. smoking cessation, and tackling obesity)
- **Support** for older people, adults with complex needs, respite, day care and residential services.
- **Housing options** and housing advice, building on the support and advice that we already provide.
- **Local Neighbourhood services** (e.g. Access, Transport)
- **Environmental and Street Services.** (e.g. parks, gardens and allotments, emptying bins and recycling)
- **Education and Training** especially to the disadvantaged

- **Commissioning** through demand led co-design. Not procurement (this needs to stay with the Council)

To support this provision the sector would emphasise:

We fully support co-operative and collaborative ways of working. The sector is keen to be involved in co-designing services and believes that involving recipients and participants of services as early as possible is key. An emphasis was also placed on strengthening partnerships with more partnership work cross sector. Some services could be delivered by a hub or consortium of organisations.

The sector would suggest that PCC use the VCS asset base across the city for Council staff to reduce infrastructure costs.

The sector would like to emphasise the importance of robust commissioning and end-to-end commissioning with a focus on outcomes rather than outputs. When considering service re-design and efficiencies we would encourage the Council and partners to keep outcomes at the heart while ensuring that the services are based on need and are demand driven.

There is also a need to manage the market and diversity of provision. We would welcome longer contracts (3-6 years).

2 Do you have any ideas on how the Council could generate more income to address part of the financial shortfall?

Assets

- Increase occupancy rates of empty commercial premises, maybe trading VCS services for rent.
- Retaining Council land and assets and see it as a future investment
- Expand usage of Council property and people (staff)

Fees and charges

- Review council tax
- More significant means testing. Implement a means tested approach to service provision e.g. subsidised services like travel cards
- Review where other agencies should contribute to payments rather than the Council, and redefine their contributions

Commercial approach

- Consideration should be given to which services the Council can charge for (spot-services) e.g. trade waste, pest control
- More commercial focus such as coffee shops in libraries
- Providing a service centre to facilitate community groups and charge for printing, equipment hire (e.g. sound systems/stages)
- Provide training
- Market the Brilliant Co-operative Council framework and concept to other Local Authorities

Shared services

- Take a commercial approach to providing back office functions outside the Council. Consideration would need to be given to ensuring enough capacity is in place to meet additional demand. For example providing a consultancy service to other local authorities. Create a pool of experts who can charge for services across the peninsula and beyond, keeping specialist functions in our city e.g. Legal Services.
- Plymouth infrastructure – sharing senior management functions across the city
- Support VCS with bid writing team to bring investment to the city.

Increasing income for the city

- Plymouth is rich in history and we need to exploit this to bring in tourism and raise income
- Make better use of our natural assets and invest in infrastructure to generate income
- Continue to invest in and host big national and international events to generate income for the Plymouth economy – Plymouth is 'open' e.g. America's Cup and Mayflower anniversary
- Charge an 'Ocean City' tax linked to income generated through tourism or city events.
- Use the dockyard as an asset and have a more commercial approach
- Positively promote our city (city leaders, communities and residents as ambassadors for the city)
- Maximise opportunities to draw down European and government funding

3 How do you think we can improve partnership working between the Council and the Voluntary and Community Sector?

This is not just about delivery, but about how we engage. The Sector envisages early discussion of strategy with the Council, leading to end to end co-design of services and to needs led commissioning, followed by agreed quality assurance processes.

This will mean partnership of VCS groups as well as partnership with the Council, and a move to collaboration rather than competition. It is also likely to need a change in emphasis in how the VCS is perceived by the Council, with a recognition that it has access to people and can reach the most in need, employs people, is an agent of change and a generator of income. It can also identify need in communities and people, rather than having to rely on data.

This trust and faith in the sector could be demonstrated in shared terms and conditions, as well as open communication and full partnership in strategy and development. This would include an equal place on strategic boards.

This will improve communication, which currently can prove a barrier to partnership working. In practical terms the Council is seen as risk-averse and its processes can discourage innovation and community action for small scale events.

Specific suggestions for strengthening partnership working between the Sector and the Council include:

- Invest in people – cascade volunteer experience (e.g. interpreters)
- Expand Community Champions in communities (not just geographical)

- Harness skills we have to support and build capacity
- Use of empty buildings both centrally and in neighbourhoods
- Improve Sell2Plymouth – it does not assist smaller organisations
- Share facilities/back office
- Improve procurement processes for smaller VCS organisations (streamlined PQQs for whole year would reduce costs)

4 How can you do your bit?

We are committed to continue working together to deliver improved, joined up services and develop and build on relationships across the sector through:-

- Open communication and more talking within our sector and across sectors – health, public, commercial
- Joint funding bids
- Pooling and sharing resources
- Building on existing successful models and best practice

We will add value to services delivered in the city through:-

- Networks – we can share our networks and footprints to ensure services reach those most in need
- Volunteering and mentoring support
- Offering more flexibility and creativity
- Helping to map services across the city
- Setting up meetings for other organisations
- Providing training and capacity building
- Promoting Plymouth positively
- Creating jobs
- Contributing to the design and planning of services
- Providing accommodation and holding assets that can be used for community based service delivery by other agencies.
- Community engagement.

However, we acknowledge that some difficult conversations need to take place across the sector to avoid duplication and to ensure that we maximise opportunities for joining up where we can complement each other. There is also a need to challenge larger civil society organisations to engage with smaller grass-roots community and residents' organisations.

We are passionate about this city and what we do, and are convinced that fuller partnership working between the Council and the VCS can create more robust and sustainable communities despite the current financial shortfall.

Yours sincerely

Jacky Clift
Plymouth Octopus Project