

Community Investment Budgets in Bristol

Background

Bristol has a population of 428,200 according to the census 2011, an increase of 38,000 since 2001. This is almost a 10 per cent increase, higher than the England and Wales average of seven per cent. In 2001 eight per cent of Bristol's communities were black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME). More recent estimates put the BME population at 13-14 per cent. Bristol has become a very diverse city over the last 10 years. Historically, our main BAME communities have been Black Caribbean and Asian but, more recently, the Somali community has grown to an estimated 10,000 people and there is a significant Eastern European community. There are more than 100 languages spoken in our primary schools and 30 per cent of children in our schools (across primary and secondary) are BAME. Although Bristol is a comparatively affluent city that has not been affected as badly by the economic downturn as many others, we still have a number of super output areas (SOAs) that are among the most deprived in the country. And 26.7 per cent of our children live in poverty (compared to the national average of 21.3 per cent).

Summary

Bristol City Council produced an investment strategy for the Community Investment Budget from 2012/15. It aimed to fund local voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations that promote or improve the economic and social wellbeing of deprived and disadvantaged communities in Bristol. The strategy was subject to a 12-week consultation period, in line with the Bristol Compact, and the comments and feedback received enabled us to shape the final version. The strategy has three key outcome themes reflecting key priorities in the Bristol 20:20 plan (our Community strategy):

1. The VCS is supported to deliver effective services to local communities
2. Communities are stronger and more resilient
3. Inequality for deprived, disadvantaged and excluded communities is reduced.

Equalities groups were consulted about the strategy and were also consulted on the information used in the joint strategic needs analysis (JSNA) for our proposed tackling discrimination service that will be established in January 2013. At the same time we had to make a seven per cent cut in the investment budget which created greater pressure on the budget. Politically, the council was committed to protecting VCS investment and ensuring that budget reductions did not disproportionately impact on the VCS.

In September 2011, we held outcome-based grants processes for three areas, one of which focused on 'strengthening communities'. A previous needs assessment for advice services identified the need for an underlying network of community-based organisations to enable communities, particularly those people living in deprived areas of the city, communities of interest and those on a low income, to have improved life chances.

Who is involved?

- Commissioning managers: EqlA (screening and full elements), A strategy that is clearly based on the needs of equalities groups and deprived communities, adequate consultation, overseeing outcomes based grants process and facilitating panel with relevant information, decommissioning impact assessment.
- Project manager: overseeing decision-making processes in consultation and liaison with panel members and local cabinet members, decommissioning impact assessment.
- Equalities officers: advising on EqlA and signing-off (screening and full elements).
- Legal Dept: ensuring that the process and outcomes are compliant with relevant legislation.

The funding was targeted at community-led organisations whose activities include providing effective targeted information, signposting or advice to communities for whom access needs, language or cultural competence are likely to make access to services more difficult. The strategy stated that we particularly wanted to fund organisations providing services to the following groups:

- Older people.
- Young people.
- Disabled people, including people with mental health issues.
- People from BAME communities, particularly newly-arrived and refugee communities.
- People living in areas of high deprivation, particularly in peripheral areas of the city, for whom access to transport may be a barrier.

The challenges for us

One of the key problems arising from this process where demand from many community-based organisations was high was to ensure that organisations were prioritised according to the quality of the application and the service offered. In addition, there was the problem of ensuring that the services funded covered the key groups set out above. The final allocations were determined by an evaluation matrix, underpinned by an EqIA of the whole process using equalities monitoring data provided in the application process.

Ensuring that the Community Investment strategy reflected the strategic aims of the city

The strategy stated that the local VCS in Bristol plays a key role in making Bristol 'a city of strong and safe communities' (Bristol 20:20, Outcome 3). The proposals for Community Investment Grant directly contribute to the Bristol 20:20 Action Plan (Community strategy). The services and activities that we would fund relate directly to the priority: 'empower and sustain resilient, cohesive communities that influence local decisions and shape public services, strengthen volunteering and the voluntary and community sector and promote equalities and reduce the gap created by historic inequality.' (Bristol 20:20 Action Plan, Outcome 3 Action 1 January 2011)

Essentially, this was a shift away from traditional grant funding to a more outcome-based approach to ensure that the VCS clearly aligns with and contributes to the strategic aims of the city council and partners. In order to achieve this and ensure the strategy was bought into by the VCS we consulted widely on the proposals giving a suitable period of time to achieve this (complying with the Bristol Compact).

Underpin any strategies and processes with an effective equalities impact assessment

The strategy, needs assessments, information asked for in the application processes and evaluation matrix were all clearly underpinned by a transparent equalities impact process that drew on up to date information about the needs of equalities groups. This ensured that at all stages of the process we were able to justify decision-making processes with clear and transparent auditable trails. The demand for funding far exceeded the level of funding available and in order to reflect the aims of all the groups and communities that we had prioritised for funding we devised an evaluation matrix that proposed a spread of services across our identified and stated needs groups which are: disabled people, older people, young people, community-led organisations serving deprived communities in peripheral areas of the city, those serving BME communities, particularly refugees or newly arrived communities. Applicant organisations were grouped according to their stated beneficiaries and ranked by score.

This enabled a good spread across identified needs in the city without duplication. The highest scoring organisations providing services to older people, young people and disabled people were allocated funding.

A range of services to peripheral deprived areas and to BAME communities have also been funded. However, this model was not solely based on scores and did result in some lower scoring organisations being funded over some higher scoring organisations in order to ensure the optimum mix of services is in place. All funded organisations had to achieve a threshold of achieving at least 50 per cent in their score. Organisations scoring below a certain threshold received a lower percentage of funding than they had applied for.

Ensure that there is a clear decommissioning process that ensures there is alternative provision for vulnerable service users

All organisations that were no longer funded as a result of this process were visited and assessed to ensure that they were signposted to sources of help. Our aim was to support groups to develop their sustainability and address the following issues:

1. What is the outlook for the organisation from April in terms of sustainability?
2. How many service users will be affected by these changes and what is the profile/demographic of those service users? How can they be referred to alternative services?
3. What is the specific loss of service that will be experienced by service users e.g. opening times, drop-ins, activities, appointments?
4. What outcomes will not be delivered?
5. What ideas/plans do organisations or services have for mitigating impact on service users e.g. referral to other agencies, other funding applications, communication to ensure people know what's happening?
6. Issues related to governance, finance or baseline standards: how are these being resolved/improved to ensure the organisation is fit for purpose in terms of applying for funding in the future?
7. Whether organisations or services had sought help from the VCS Infrastructure Support Service? (all were referred by BCC as a matter of course).

Outcomes

Greater rigour in our grants process and a move to an outcomes based approach where VCS organisations had to show what difference their proposed activities would make to communities most in need.

An explicit reference to the needs of equalities communities throughout the needs analysis and the investment strategy. Equalities was threaded throughout the process to ensure that we funded provision that would tackle inequalities and meet the needs of groups most in need.

An equalities impact assessment that was developed from the start of the process and resulted in actions to mitigate the impact of loss of funding for some groups.

What we learnt

- Ensure that the priorities for VCS funding clearly align with the strategic priorities of the city.
- Always underpin all strategies and processes with an comprehensive two stage equalities Impact assessment (initial screening and then full impact assessment after consultation and process).
- Ensure you are explicit in your strategy and guidance information as to how you will apportion funding so that it reflects the needs of all the organisations that you intend the funding to be covered by.

- Plan ahead so that you have available relevant information provided by organisations and consult as widely as possible.
- It is important to consider all available information when assessing the impact of a new or changed policy or function and whether it meets the particular needs of different equalities groups and that this is presented with a clear audit trail.

Greater clarity could have been given in the guidance about how we would apply the evaluation matrix in the first place as we should have anticipated that demand for this fund would be very high from many organisations who were seeking to maintain funding or replace funding lost from other funding streams.

More frequent briefings with the Executive Member would have helped him deal with challenge and lobbying as it developed.

We could have offered more help and advice to organisations whose key policies needed to be reviewed and improved for, example, the content of some organisations' equalities policies was poor or out of date and we are now giving more advice so that policies can be improved, prior to applying for funding.

Key to future success and ensuring this budget has maximum impact is the monitoring process. Through monitoring we are able to pick up problems early on and are working closely with Voscur (the VCS infrastructure support service) to ensure that organisations get the help they need e.g. with governance, training, funding advice and general capacity building.

The funded organisations are working at the frontline in communities and neighbourhoods and we are working to ensure that perspective and intelligence is shared within the city council so that we understand the needs of equalities communities better

Contact

Gillian Douglas, Neighbourhoods, Equalities and Social Inclusion Manager
Bristol City Council
Email: Gillian.Douglas@bristol.gov.uk