

CAHW Panel – 9th September 2024 – Statement from Becky Brooks, Director - 3SG

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you all this morning.

On behalf of the Third Sector in B&NES, and as the Director of 3SG, which supports 250 charities across the area, I would like to update the panel on the re-procurement of Community Contracts from the sector's perspective.

At the beginning of this year, we were told that there would be no 'cliff edge' in funding - and that the Council would work in collaboration with us as valued partners. Whilst I am grateful for the effort that has been made in opening up conversations with myself in the last month or so, until last week, the Sector was largely in the dark about timelines and as far as I am aware, has had little interaction in terms of collaboration or consultation. The Sector still doesn't know what cuts are coming and where - and this has created huge anxiety, uncertainty and difficulty in making plans for the future.

We are yet to see the outcomes of the Community Services review, despite having asked for it over several months - this is disappointing, because it would be helpful to know where cuts will fall, and to understand the Council's thinking. We hoped there would be an open dialogue around this piece of work, and as far as I am aware, this has not been the case, as was promised by Cllr Mark Elliott at the beginning of this year. If this review is in another format, which I have been told that it is, we would still like to see it, where commercial sensitivities allow.

Whilst I appreciate that the Council has had a busy and pressured time with Adult Social Care coming back in house and now a CQC inspection, the Third Sector desperately needs the Council to start communicating more effectively, trusting it as equal partners to deliver services. Real change is needed for the future of procurement in B&NES and in January, we were asking for that brave and bold piece of work to be done. Having had conversations with a B&NES Commissioner, I can see that this is a huge piece of work that couldn't be done in less than a year, but we are committed to pushing for this change, for greater co-production, trust and better communication. There are great examples of work not too far from B&NES where this system has more flexibility, a willingness to invest and sustain and a grass roots understanding of the challenges of those delivering services. Such systems are where you truly become a 'valued partner'.

I would like to direct members' attention to the recent Council tender in Swindon, in which the Swindon Carers' Centre, supporting residents for over 25 years, had to withdraw, because the ask was completely unachievable for the money offered. It also meant the charity would need to close as a result of losing such a large contract. I cannot imagine what B&NES would look like without its Carers' Centre, and I am genuinely concerned that this scenario could play out with other charities in B&NES. Who picks up services then?

As of last week we received confirmation that market engagement events are likely to take place at the end of September and early October. It is unlikely that would-be providers will go into procurement until the end of the year and that temporary

contracts are likely going to be needed to sustain services. Whilst this creates more uncertainty for the Sector, I hope that commissioners use this time to listen and engage with the Sector in a more open way. 3SG is in the process of organising two sessions with a national procurement expert and we hope that commissioners and the Council's legal team will support this vital piece of work. Whilst we have supported the co-hosting of two sessions for providers with the Council this year, this has provided nothing new in terms of information, nor the opportunity for new solutions or dialogue.

Members of this panel hopefully know of B&NES' Community Wellbeing Hub - an example of where tearing up the rule book and cross sector collaboration has seen proven prevention results and is held up as good practice nationally. We need to rekindle that pandemic spirit - to move away from transactional relationships, with an emphasis on co-production and trust on both sides and exploring the art of the possible. BNSSG has managed to do some really interesting work in this space and we urge B&NES Council to look at its brave neighbours who recognise that ultimately we all have to evolve our systems to thrive in future. And that is what B&NES deserves - a strong, thriving Third Sector providing sustainable, exemplary services for residents.