

The Highland Council Voluntary Sector Policy 2001

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Highland Council, in collaboration with the voluntary sector, undertook a review of its Voluntary Sector Policy Statement during 2000. The initial policy has served its purpose, having guided decision making both in the Council and by the Voluntary Sector through local government reform and some difficult public expenditure rounds during 1996 - 2000. A testament of the old policy has been its success in helping to secure Council funding to underpin many local voluntary organisations who contributes many millions of pounds to the social economy of Highland. An update was however needed and the Council adopted this new policy statement in May 2001, following extensive consultation with the voluntary sector.
- 1.2. The Council's contribution to the annual expenditure of voluntary activity in the area was in 2000/01 in excess of £9.2m, primarily located within the service budgets of the Culture and Leisure Services, Education Services, Chief Executive Office and Social Work Services. The challenge for the policy review was to sustain and enhance voluntary sector activity to meet emerging community needs at a time when public resources in many mainstream services are shrinking. Most importantly the policy must match Council support for voluntary activity with service and community priorities as expressed through the community planning and service planning processes.
- 1.3. Key priorities that had a significant bearing on the development of the new policy were:-
 - The political priority of the current government to address Social Exclusion, Lifelong Learning and Active Citizenship upon which so many emerging initiatives and resources are focused. Voluntary sector activity is frequently a necessary feature of these new initiatives, without whose help and involvement investment opportunities in many communities would be limited.
 - The principles of the Highland Community Plan and the partnership working of the Highland Wellbeing Alliance. The Community Plan has five key themes; Learning Communities; Prosperous Communities; Healthy, Safe Communities; Capable Confident Communities; and Communities Rich in Their Heritage. These are expressed in Strategic Plans such as the Community Learning strategy.
 - The policy framework set by the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Executive and its Voluntary Sector Issues Unit. Their recent activities have included a review of the role of CVS's and the development of the Active Communities national strategy promoting volunteering and community development. The Scottish Compact guides their work with voluntary organisations.

2. The Council's Policy

- 2.1. The Council wholeheartedly supports the voluntary sector and the many individual volunteers in view of the significant role they can play in delivering the Community Plan for Highland, the Council's Goals and Values and its Service objectives.

2.2. Support is defined in broad terms, to include:

- **Recognition** – of roles, responsibilities, constraints and the value of respective contributions.
- **Access** – to information, to consultation and decision making, for those voices that struggle to be heard.
- **Partnership** – sharing of information, mechanisms for joint working, involvement in policy making, planning and service delivery, openness and spirit of co-operation.
- **Resources** – finance, expertise, access to facilities and other support in kind.

2.3. Organisations and individuals may be eligible for financial assistance or assistance in kind, subject to the following principles: -

- support will be allocated on the basis of the Council's stated goals, aims and priorities.
- support will be based on merit (i.e. track record, user feedback), evidence of need and community benefit.
- appropriate levels of monitoring and evaluation will be undertaken to ensure the propriety, efficiency and effectiveness of the use of Council support
- the powers and resources available to the Council may constrain the level, timing and type of assistance offered

2.4. The Council refrains from supporting the primary activities of organisations with a religious or party political purpose, however such organisations can receive funding for their many other undertakings which are consistent with the Council's priorities, such as community care, lifelong learning, youth work and environmental projects.

3. Purpose

3.1. The policy statement is promoted with the following purposes in mind:

- Make communication between the Council and voluntary organisations easier and more effective.
- Increase understanding of the voluntary sector within the Council.
- Increase understanding of how the Council works within the voluntary sector.
- Help to create an environment in which voluntary sector activity and volunteering in Highland can flourish.
- Provide increased opportunities for the voluntary sector to influence policy and the planning of Council services.
- Ensure policies and practices are more responsive to the needs and potential contribution of the voluntary sector.
- Generate a growth in the contribution of a wider group of people to the wellbeing of their communities and in particular increase the involvement of young people.
- Deliver open, accountable, effective and efficient funding arrangements that deliver 'Best Value' in the use of public funds

4. The Highland Council

- 4.1. The Highland Council is the democratic means through which the residents of the Highlands can seek to improve our social, economic, cultural and environmental circumstances by taking action within the Highlands and by representing our distinct needs wherever they require to be stated.
- 4.2. The Council's role is to provide a range of essential services, such as education, caring for older people, culture and leisure services, facilitate public transport, housing, planning and environmental projects as well as to promote economic development in our distinctive area, which covers 10,000 square miles. With over 10,000 skilled employees, a substantial property portfolio, plant and equipment, an annual capital budget of £25m and a revenue budget of £260m, the council is a significant agent for community development.
- 4.3. The Council now has in place its service plans and priorities with resource expenditure committed to a "best value" approach. Such an approach cannot help but be inclusive of the voluntary sector in view of all the advantages that volunteering and voluntary organisations offer.
- 4.4. The Council's Renewing Democracy and Community Planning Select Committee reporting to the Policy and Resources Committee is, amongst other things, responsible for reviewing the effectiveness of the council voluntary sector policy, to scrutinise its implementation and whether it still represents best practice. In particular it will review the processes involved with voluntary sector funding decisions across the Council and comment on options for improving the consistency and presentation of information on value for money issues.
- 4.5. The Council's main public sector partners include Highland and Islands Enterprise, Highland Health Board, Northern Constabulary, Scottish Homes and Scottish Natural Heritage who work collaboratively within the Highland Wellbeing Alliance partnership.

5. The Voluntary Sector

- 5.1. The Highland Council, like many public agencies, defines the voluntary sector in the widest possible sense, to include all **voluntary organisations** and **volunteers** working in any area of activity. Voluntary organisations are: -
 - normally constituted bodies governed through management committee(s) comprising unpaid volunteers
 - constitutionally independent and determine their own aims and objectives
 - non-profit / distributing bodies who may or may not have charitable status but who generally pursue a public good
 - May employ staff and or volunteers
 - diverse organisations, which range from national bodies, some with million pound budgets and hundreds of employees with a wide focus to neighbourhood self-help groups of a few like-minded individuals with no public funding campaigning for a single issue.

- 5.2. The voluntary sector is active in almost every area of public life, especially in a rural area such as Highland, responding to the needs and aspirations of their members, supporters, users and the wider community. They play a key role in stimulating people to participate in the lives of their communities. Many voluntary organisations are based in the field of social welfare but also play a vital role in a range of other activities such as art, sport, formal and informal education, advice and information, health, environment, childcare and transport.
- 5.3. The range and diversity of voluntary organisations is part of the strength of the voluntary sector but it also presents challenges for public agencies like the council to guarantee a fully inclusive approach to the voluntary sector and to volunteers.
- 5.4. In as much as the council has its own spheres of action with different roles, responsibilities and resources, not all voluntary organisations will have an interest in seeking partnership with the Council. Some voluntary organisations will prefer to pursue their own objectives without reference to the Council. Others may find themselves more directly in opposition to the Council than in partnership. The Council fully acknowledges the independence of the voluntary sector and the right of voluntary organisations, even when supported by the Council, to challenge the policies and practices of the Council in the interest of their clients and service users.
- 5.5. This policy statement has been developed jointly however, in recognition of the growing number of cases where a partnership approach between the public and voluntary sectors will deliver better outcomes for Service users and local communities. This policy document seeks to promote an effective and practical working relationship between the Council and the voluntary sector.

6. Volunteering

- 6.1. Although volunteering and the voluntary sector are heavily interdependent they are not coterminous. The great majority of volunteers work in the voluntary sector, though some voluntary organisations involve only a few. Volunteering is an important expression of citizenship. It is the commitment by individuals of time and energy for the benefit of the community. It is undertaken freely and by choice, without concern for financial gain. It is one of the main ways in which citizens of all ages and from all sectors of society become involved in the life of their community and society. Volunteering however also has many benefits for individuals, providing an invaluable and inexpensive gateway for personal development and fulfilment.
- 6.2. Volunteering is recognised as a major resource, contributing thousand of hours labour per week to the Highland social economy. In due course the Council hopes to develop a separate policy focusing on volunteering following the publication of the Active Communities national strategy promoting volunteering and community action. This will, amongst other things, look at the Council's own practices on using volunteers and encourage staff to become involved with volunteering.

7. Action to Deliver the Policy Objectives

- 7.1. During the development of this policy both the Council and voluntary sector representatives emphasised the need for the policy to be a practical, working document that involved specific commitments on both sides. A range of actions has been identified to ensure that the policy will be put into practice. The sections of the policy have been drawn from the national compact addressing “Recognition, Access, Partnership, Consultation and Resources.
- 7.2. These “Action Points” are seeking in particular to take advantage of increased use of ICT in communications, with funding applications on the web, policy statements on the web, database developments, increasing use of email and it is hoped that the voluntary sector can match the Council’s enthusiasm for this approach. There is considerable investment opportunities for ICT to be directly accessible to many organisations or indirectly within service points, libraries and perhaps via village halls and post offices. It is hoped that this shift in working practices will substantially assist with the implementation of good working practices and communication.

7.3. RECOGNITION

The Highland Council will:-

- Acknowledge the value of the contribution of the voluntary sector to the wellbeing of Highland.
- Recognise volunteering as an important opportunity for people to contribute actively to their communities and support volunteering initiatives
- Promote an understanding of the value of the voluntary sector and volunteering within the Council and with partner agencies.

The Voluntary Sector will: -

- Acknowledge that the Highland Council works within a statutory framework.
- Recognise that the Highland Council and its partners have priority areas for action.
- Recognise that the Council is publicly accountable for the resources that it invests with voluntary organisations and volunteers.
- Acknowledge where appropriate, the contribution the Council makes to support individual organisations.

Action Points

- The Council, with its Highland Wellbeing Alliance partners, will undertake regular research to update information about the value of voluntary and community activity in Highland.
- The Highland Council will, with voluntary sector representatives, hold a seminar for elected members on the voluntary sector policy and hold briefings for Services on the implementation of the voluntary sector policy.
- The Voluntary Sector will seek to provide the Chief Executive’s Office in the Council with approved copies of annual reports or annual accounts or both to assist with the above action points.

7.4. ACCESS

The Highland Council will: -

- Provide clear and easily accessible information about channels of communication with the Council at Highland and Area levels
- Take positive steps to ensure the voluntary sector is represented on community planning partnerships and in other relevant planning processes.
- Recognise the importance of ‘umbrella’ bodies and an infrastructure of information, training and development support to the voluntary sector and volunteering.

The Voluntary Sector : -

- Recognise that the Council needs to be kept informed of the existence of each voluntary group and key contacts.
- Promote the development and encourage the use of umbrella bodies to allow particular interests and groups to develop and communicate their views to the council at Area and Highland levels.

Action Points

- The Highland Council, through HI-Ways, will seek to establish a publicly accessible electronic database of local voluntary organisations and relevant umbrella groups, through which communication with the voluntary sector will be based.
- The Voluntary Sector will seek to ensure that data, particularly key contacts, held by the council is accurate and submit amendments directly to the network or via the Council’s local service points when corrections or updates are needed.

7.5. PARTNERSHIP

The Highland Council will: -

- Recognise the need for ongoing dialogue with the voluntary sector to enable its involvement in developing policy and planning services
- Recognise the role that umbrella bodies have in representing voluntary organisations and the right of individual organisations to represent their own views
- Fully acknowledge that umbrella bodies are representative and can speak on behalf of their stakeholders
- Take into account the needs of voluntary organisations in the timing of meetings, circulation of papers, use plain English and minimise jargon.
- Be aware that effective voluntary sector participation involves costs.

The Voluntary Sector will

- Support and encourage partnership working between the voluntary sector and the council at an Area and Highland level in the interests of members, users and the wider community.
- Recognise that collaborative working brings responsibilities to participate in joint meetings and frequently necessitates the use of representatives to convey views of individual organisations.

Action Points

- The Highland Council and the Voluntary sector will seek to categorise voluntary organisations into nationally recognised subsets and identify relevant groupings, partnerships and umbrella groups and the purpose and use of such associations for local groups and the Council.
- The Voluntary Sector will recognise the importance and need to willingly participate in area and pan Highland meetings to maximise collaborative working with the Council and its Highland Wellbeing Alliance partners; subject to the principle that the resources of the voluntary sector may constrain the level, timing and type of participation possible.
- SCVO and Voluntary Action Highland produce an annual report, for the Council's Renewing Democracy and Community Planning Select Committee and Area Committees, on the activities of the voluntary sector and on the strength of the partnership with the Council.

7.6. CONSULTATION

The Highland Council will: -

- Where relevant, plan consultation exercises in collaboration with the voluntary sector
- Take soundings as early as possible in the process of developing or reviewing policy
- Consult with voluntary sector groups with interests in the issues in question
- Meet with appropriate umbrella or intermediary groups on a regular basis at Area and Pan Highland levels to review Council performance, policy and practice and to work on issues of mutual concern.

The Voluntary Sector will: -

- Encourage umbrella or intermediary groups to consult widely and openly to ensure their opinions are representative of the fullest possible range of views on activities important to the Council and its partners.
- Seek to involve Council representatives in discussions on the development or reduction of relevant current activities.

Action Points

- The Council will work with the voluntary sector to develop good practice standards for consultation i.e. production of a summary of any consultation document and where possible at least an eight week consultation period.
- The Highland Council and voluntary sector will assess new communication forms such as e mail and placement of reports on web sites to assist with consultations and information exchange.
- Maintain its standing invitation to SCVO, VAH and HVDA to attend meetings of the Renewing Democracy and Community Planning Select Committee.
- SCVO will seek to facilitate increased communication on the partnership with the Council to voluntary sector organisations through Aurora newsletter.

7.7. RESOURCES

The Highland Council will: -

- target resources effectively in a way that takes account of Service priorities and evidence of need.
- provide funding and other resources based on clear measures of performance.
- follow best practice in the award, administration and monitoring of funding – see Annex A.
- promote decentralisation in the award, administration and monitoring of funding to meet local needs.
- continue to provide support to umbrella bodies such as SCVO, Councils of Voluntary Service and Volunteer Development Agencies in line with the demands made of them.

The Voluntary Sector will: -

- promote the importance of good management practices
- commit to use resources as efficiently and effectively as possible to meet agreed objectives.
- develop and maintain agreed monitoring, evaluation and report-back systems in partnership with the Council.

Action Points

- The voluntary sector will seek to promote common practices in reporting back to the Council and Highland Wellbeing Alliance on the value of the investment made in voluntary organisations.
- The Chief Executive's Office will:-
 - produce by Oct 2001 in a single document to advise on all relevant sources of Council funding including local resources only available within specific areas and place these on the Council's web site.
 - develop and thereafter maintain a timetable for funding applications for all Services for the financial year 2002/2003 and to introduce a funding application form template, with a standard set of conditions suitable for use by / for any Service and have both available on the Council's web site by November 2001.
- The Council will
 - seek to have all organisations receiving annual funding totalling £20k with a Service Agreement by December 2001.
 - introduce a standard set of conditions for organisations receiving funding support outwith a service agreement. This will include a requirement for the submission of a written report by each voluntary organisation to the council within six months (in the absence of or any other specified period) of any cheque payment, outlining the outcomes from the council's investment.
- Services, where relevant, will include in their Service Plan a statement of current priorities for supporting voluntary organisations to realise service needs and the encouragement of volunteering.

- As part of the current Scottish review of CVS's the Council will lobby to have Councils of Voluntary Service's funding increased to sustain their primary functions and to support the sector's involvement in community planning.
- The Highland Council will work with the Highland Wellbeing Alliance partners and others to co-ordinate and maximise the value of joint investment in the voluntary sector and volunteering and seek to develop new sources of investment open to the voluntary sector. By the same token voluntary organisations need to be clear that the council and its partners will not necessarily be in a position to fill funding gaps occasioned by the loss of project funding from other sources.

8. Review of Policy

- 8.1. It is clear that this policy should more firmly establish good practice across the Highlands but its introduction will not be without some stresses and strains. Many of the action points will be achieved and new action will require to be identified. Accordingly it would be appropriate for the Council to continually monitor and review the policy through the Renewing Democracy and Community Planning Select Committee and involve as many voluntary sector representatives to participate in this process as appropriate depending on the issues arising.
- 8.2. The Chief Executive's Office will promote and monitor implementation of the policy as a whole. Within each Service Management Team a named officer or officers will have overall responsibility for ensuring the effective implementation of the policy within that Service.

Annex A FUNDING VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS

The Council currently spends over £9m in securing delivery of its service objectives through the voluntary sector, primarily from within the service budgets of the Cultural and Leisure Services, Education Services, Chief Executive Office and Social Work Services.

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| Culture and Leisure Services | £2,500k |
| Education Services | £1.200k |
| Chief Executive's Office | £790k |
| Social Work Services | £4,700k |

Financial assistance is, as stated in the policy document, subject to the following principles: -

- support is allocated on the basis of the Council's stated goals, Service Plans and priorities.
- support is based on merit, evidence of need and community benefit.
- appropriate levels of monitoring and evaluation being undertaken to ensure the propriety, efficiency and effectiveness of the use of Council support.

In considering applications for funding from voluntary organisations the Council will adhere as far as possible to a standard approach to funding practices and the following **good practice in:-**

The Administration of Grants

- The Council will publish details of all the sources of funding from the Council and the Service priorities that will be used in determining applications and a named contact for any enquiries. Information on these should always be available from the Council's web site and Service Points.
- All grant schemes will outline a standard timetable to which the Council will seek to adhere. The Council will notify applicants of the outcome in advance of the start of the funding year and within 14 days of a decision on their application being taken. Applicants should inform the Council of particular commitments that mean the Council needs to determine any grant application expeditiously.
- The decision making process will be in accordance with the Council's decentralisation policy. Decisions about pan Highland activities or activities being delivered across several Areas will generally be determined by HQ Committees following consultation with Areas. Decisions about organisations whose activities are largely based in one Area will be taken by appropriate Area Committee.
- The Council will use application forms that are concise, straight-forward and where necessary accompanied by clear guidance notes. Forms will be made available through the Council's web site where possible and by e-mail on request.
- Funding support is subject to satisfactory information being provided on the organisation, its constitution, management structures, financial situation, its experience and expertise in the particular area to be funded.
- Make offers of support in writing with a clear statement of the purpose of the offer, its conditions, duration, payment arrangements, and request acceptance in writing.

Organisations receiving regular funding of £20,000 per annum or over will be required to enter into a Service Level Agreement with the Council. A standard letter of offer with conditions of grant will be introduced for other funding awards.

- Ensure prompt payments to an agreed timetable.
- Take into consideration the implications of good employment practice, for example in relation to pensions, salaries, redundancy and equal opportunities policy
- Recognise that good financial management includes holding limited reserves to meet legal liabilities and agree a policy on this as necessary with each organisation in receipt of funding, particularly those with a Service Level Agreement.
- Provide feedback on failed applications on request
- On each single project the Council expects to be kept fully informed on other funders such as National Lottery Boards, the European Structural Fund, Social Inclusion, Partnership Fund, the Highland Wellbeing Alliance Partners, other Council Services, etc. The Council will where practical facilitate quick, collaborative decision making without prejudice or commitment to other parties.

On the Monitoring and Evaluation of Funding Awards:

- Service Level Agreements and other grant award letters will set out agreed clear objectives, as well as specific targets and performance indicators for measuring achievements against objectives.
- The Council will seek to provide guidance on its requirements for the setting of objectives and performance indicators and most importantly establishing specific outputs for grant expenditure.
- The Council, in the interests of proper accountability, will ensure that all grant recipients make appropriate arrangements to monitor and evaluate the quality of their grant-funded work and to report at agreed intervals. These requirements should not become an undue burden to the organisation and be tailored to reflect the size of the grant and the resources of the organisation in receipt of funding.
- All organisations in receipt of funding will be required to submit their Annual Report and Accounts to their named Service contact.
- Those organisations who do not have a Service Level Agreement in place will be required to submit a written report six months after receipt of any cheque payment outlining the outcomes achieved.
- Where an organisation fails to adhere to grant conditions and/or to deliver the agreed objectives funding support will be withdrawn/ reclaimed unless satisfactory remedial action is taken within an agreed timescale.
- Require that grant recipients acknowledge in all publicity the Highland Council funding support.

- Service Committees will receive at least annual reports detailing the organisations in receipt of funding, the total amount of awards, whether a Service Level Agreement is in place and when it was last reviewed. A contact officer from whom a copy of the Service Level Agreement can be obtained will be named in the report.

Services will also have regard to the following: -

- support organisations which make good use of volunteers, provide resources for management and training, have good employment practices and support local and national networks.
- support organisation's or project's that seek to diversify its funding base and give opportunity for an exit route for the Council's funding support or renew the focus of Council support.
- Support organisations that have appropriate systems in place to obtain regular feedback from users or customers on their needs and their levels of satisfaction and views of the benefits/services they receive.