

West Northumberland VCS Assembly network meeting Friday 25 September 2015 – Hexham Community Centre

Question from Pete Woods, Core Music

What can you do to support Community Interest Companies?

Reply from Guy Opperman

Will give to support to whatever company asks and in whatever way I can. Involved in the Prudhoe Walled Garden scheme and trying to get that registered as a CIC. Also involved in Tynedale Community Bank – Working in partnership with Prince Bishops' Trust in Durham and working with Credit Union based at No. 28. Community bank is different to a credit union – it is run more on the lines of a proper bank with savings and loan facilities.

Look to private sector for funding – Egger supported the Jubilee celebrations staged in the town.

PW - lots of CICs in the area – some support for the CICs as a genre would be very welcome. Extended an invitation to GO to visit Core Music.

PW -The Ucorelele project – supports underemployed people by re-skilling, teaching them to make ukuleles from recycled wood. The ukuleles are then sold but VAT is added. If Core did not have to pay the VAT they could employ one more person.

GO reply

Took three years campaigning to get VAT abolished on fuel for Air Ambulance. Will do whatever he can to help but suspects that the whole VAT and revenues issue is very complex but will look at it and raise with the Treasury. Suggested that Core Music also writes to the Treasury.

Georgia Evans, Northumberland Domestic Abuse Services:

We did a domestic abuses needs assessment 2 years ago and one of the key findings was there was not enough staff trained and dedicated to work on a one to one basis or group situation with children & young people who were living in abusive family relationships.

Our service NDAS (Northumberland Domestic Abuse Services) is looking at potential bids to Comic Relief and Children in Need to bridge this gap – is there anything the MP can do to influence the local authority, other statutory partners or indeed the government to act upon this gap in provision, which is a significant child safeguarding issue?

GO reply

Always happy to write letters of support. The LA budgets are being squeezed and the LA having to prioritise but will make representation to them. Suggested keeping the staff but scaling back on the premises as a possible solution. Election next year for Police and Crime Commissioner – so much of the domestic abuse budget is devolved to the PCC – suggested NDAS should pitch to whoever is going to win. The more you integrate your services under one roof the better you will do. The more you can demonstrate how you can co-locate, share costs, IT etc the better able you will be to pitch for funding.

GE –already doing that but would like to take up Guy's offer to write a letter of support.

GO – the best way to do that is for the organisation to write the letter, making the points, who they want GO to make representation to etc and he will send it off with a letter of endorsement.

Carolyn Reynolds, Age UK Northumberland -

Age UK Northumberland, a charity and one of the county's largest providers of care for older people - and incidentally one of the county's largest employers - welcomes the introduction of the national living wage at £7.20 for over 25's next April.

Care has long been a low-paid profession and it is time for that to change. We provide 7000 hours of care per week and already pay above the statutory minimum wage.

However, with a care sector very close to crisis, the pressure to deliver on care contracts is already immense.

We're now facing an increased wage bill from April, coupled with new legislation in Europe that may require us to pay our home-based staff mileage to their first appointment – and in a rural county like Northumberland, we are doubly disadvantaged by that.

Yet our local authority commissioners are required to pay us for contact time only. We need to meet travel costs from the costs of the contract, and at £12.50 per contact hour in a rural area where long distances between calls can be common, that is becoming increasingly difficult – it will soon become impossible.

If we're serious about keeping people in their own communities for as long as possible with appropriate support, will the Government see the bigger picture and provide additional funding to local authorities commissioning social care to meet these increased costs?

GO reply

Attended the jobs fair yesterday where Helen McCardle, Care in the Community etc all trying to recruit. Part of the problem is the double regulator standards – CQC as the national regulator v local authority. Care home sector making representation to try to get the double standards changed. Not a lot GO can do other than referee and keep the peace. The four protected government department budgets are NHS, 4-16 yo education, international aid and defence. GO does not believe that LA funding will be going up. The sector could benefit from better integration of hospital and social care services. Haltwhistle is leading the way on this with a fully integrated health and social care facility.

Liz Holmes, WECAN

WECAN is a community-based organisation with play workers and enablers offering disabled children and young people access to community leisure activities and events. Grant giving bodies are reluctant to repeat fund and they are constantly competing against bigger charities. They are the only charity in Hexham offering this type of support. What help can you give to raise the profile of the charity and help to secure longer-term funding?

GO reply

Cited Riding for the Disabled at Slaley and Calvert Trust at Kielder. Suggested employing a professional fund raiser who would work on a commission-only basis. Can they partner up with anyone? The Calvert Trust regularly raises over £1m a year. Suggested working through the Priory School where the school pays for the services provided by the organisation.

LH – already has a partnership with Hexham Priory School

GO – suggested they get in touch with Calvert Trust. Advised that there is the possibility of certain government grants, but not many. Invited WECAN to write to him to see what he can do but does not want to over-promise.

Rachel Turnbull – Northumberland CAB

Do you think the current benefit sanction regime is an effective and fair way of helping people into work?

GO reply

The system can always be improved – there was a summer review looking at the sanctions regime and how it is implemented alongside Universal Credit. Doesn't think the sanctions regime will end but need to make it work better. The principle of sanctions will stay but constantly discussing with local DWP the implications of universal credit introduction.

Carolyn Reynolds – the DWP has a blanket policy which does not work on a personal level.

GO – DWP here would argue that they do have that flexibility. Believes that benefit sanctions is a method of getting people back into work and supports its continuance.

Sarah Kemp, TSF

How can you support arts and culture in rural communities? Arts Council funding has gone predominantly to Newcastle/Gateshead and urban centres. What about support for arts in education and arts in the community?

GO reply

Where are we headed? Take out the four main protected budget departments and every other department has to make cuts of £1bn. The DCMS will have a reduction in funding of £1bn so the future does not look better for arts funding.

How does LA support local institutions? While Newcastle has been closing libraries, Northumberland has opened more libraries by opening them in tourist information offices.

NCC is very south-eastern focussed in Northumberland – the LA does not spend its money here and Tynedale and rural Northumberland needs to get a better share of the pot and GO is trying very hard to get a better, more responsive LA.

Pete Woods, Core Music

Within Tynedale there is a large amount of goodwill and support for refugees. What are you doing to support refugees and those organisations offering them support?

GO reply

There is no fixed government policy. Over the last three years the emphasis has been on support in the affected community – camps. Charities wanted support in the camps. The summer developments have meant a larger number coming here and the government will speak to LAs who have already had experience of dealing with refugees and asking those LAs if they will take X number. Those LAs tend to be urban – Sheffield, Manchester etc.

There is nothing to stop more rural LAs from accepting more refugees but any help has to be done through the LA. Complex issues around child protection, welfare etc. Basic advice is on Guy's blog from last week.

Pete Woods – the people in this room are used to dealing with very complex problems but a lot of people in the area would like to help. You need to be saying on behalf of your constituents that we are here to help.

GO – couldn't make it any clearer that Tynedale is open for business and want to do more.