



## **Shropshire VCS Annual Assembly**

1:30pm, Wednesday 24 April 2013

Shrewsbury Town Football Club

### **REPORT**

#### **Welcome**

Sonia Roberts, Chair of the VCS Assembly welcomed all to the 2013 Annual Assembly. Sonia spoke about attendance at the event, with over 120 people made up of VCS Assembly members and public sector representatives from a wide range of local organisations including DWP, Shropshire CCG, Shropshire Council, Fire and Rescue Service, the NHS, Police Authority and the Association of Local Councils. Also attending the event as special guests were Bill Longmore, Police and Crime Commissioner and his deputy Barrie Sheldon. Sonia then ran through the outline of the event and introduced the theme of Welfare Reform and speakers Jackie Jeffrey (Citizen's Advice Shropshire) and Steph Jackson (Shropshire Council).

#### **Welfare Reform Overview**

Jackie Jeffrey described how the country had suddenly woken up to Welfare Reform over Easter when the national press started highlighting many of the changes being introduced. However Jackie explained how these changes have been known for some time and that significant change had already taken place through 2011 with ESA (income related employment and support allowance). National VCS bodies have been lobbying for change for some time and influencing national decision making but the context of austerity has been the driving force behind reform. Jackie described many of the public perceptions around Welfare Reform and how inaccurate some of those are. The facts are that only 3% of the welfare budget goes to the unemployed, 0.7% is claimed fraudulently and only 27.8% claim Jobseekers Allowance for more than a year. Jackie outlined the key areas of change with Universal Credit replacing a number of benefits, the introduction of Personal Independence Payment, the benefit cap, housing benefit, the Social Fund and changes in Council Tax support. Jackie described the timescales within which change would happen and spoke about the length of time phased introductions would cover. Jackie then highlighted the social policy implications of these changes. The staggered introduction of change and the resulting layering effect will mean that the full impact on individuals will not be known for some time but services will see an increase in people in need of support.

#### **The Impact of Welfare Reform**

Steph Jackson, Shropshire Council's Head of Customer Support and Assets, spoke about the impact of Welfare Reform in Shropshire. Steph explained that the rural nature of Shropshire means that economic implications of Welfare Reform are likely to be more

significant that in the middle of London. Steph spoke about the change that had been introduced through 2011 and the impact that had upon those in private rented accommodation. Changes had included local housing allowance rates being capped, 5 bedroom rate scrapped and £15 per week top up abolished. Overall the loss of income in the economy had been £815,980. Another change in non-dependant deductions had affected 1,384 claims and the loss to the economy was calculated at around £927,280. Steph then spoke about Discretionary Housing Payment and commented on the changes introduced in January 2012 when the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) single room rent restrictions for under 25s had been extended to under 35s and resulted in an approximate £627,020 loss within the local economy. Steph then moved on to highlight the changes that have been introduced this month (April 2013).

April 2013 has seen a handover of responsibility for Council Tax Benefits to local authorities with a 10% reduction in budgets. Shropshire Council has worked hard to calculate the impact of this reduction and used its local discretion to consult on and adopt a local policy that will minimise the impact on local people (taking into consideration changes that will follow nationally over the coming years). Shropshire's Council Tax Support scheme includes:

- Removal of second adult rebate
- Reduction of the capital limit from £16,000 to £10,000
- Removal of earnings disregards
- Removal of child benefit disregard
- Increase in non-dependant deductions

Steph explained that 2,130 people in Shropshire will be affected by under occupancy or 'bedroom tax' as it has become know. The economic impact is thought to be £1.2 million. Although Discretionary Housing Payments can be made the size of the budget for this means that there will be people living in Shropshire who won't be able to remain in their properties. In recognition of the support needed Shropshire Council has been working closely with local VCS organisations and other partners.

Steph then spoke about the introduction of the household benefit cap and Universal Credit and emphasised the point Jackie had made about the layering affect of change. She explained that access to support completing on line applications and making claims will be important and mentioned the work Shropshire Council and the VCS have been doing in partnership, developing community service hubs.

Shropshire has been one of the areas involved in the National Direct Payment Pilot, and its rural nature means different learning points will be highlighted from those in urban areas. Steph spoke about her work with the pilot and explained that 1,876 people in Shropshire are in scope. The pilot will run for 12 months and started in July 2012. Learning has included the importance of communication and joint working between services, a recognition of how the elderly often experience high levels of worry even if they are not immediately affected by change, the levels of resistance to change, the



need for support with budgeting and the need to understand that 'people are like onions' with multi-layered issues.

The presentation concluded with an examination of the impact of change on the county (including an economic impact of around £9 million) and the impact on customers (including financial impacts, housing impacts and increased need for support and advice).

Jackie thanked Steph and highlighted the need for VSC Assembly members to evidence the impact of Welfare Reform. Jackie stressed the importance of working together and in partnership to support local people.

## Questions and Answers

The wording of the questions and answers is not accurate, as worded on the day, but the main points are made.

**Q** Shropshire Fights Back has reported that landlords are going to reclassify their second bedrooms as box rooms to get around national benefits changes. Can they do this?

**A** Benefit is based on the size of the property and number of bedrooms but landlords can't keep changing the designation of their property. If they claim a property is one bedroom they will get a one bedroom rate so it isn't likely that many landlords will adopt this approach.

**Q** Welfare Reform is complicated and it is difficult to take all the information in. Information needs to be clear and easy to understand for everyone, not all computer based and in the written word.

**A** The Welfare reform Steering Group has been considering access to information on welfare reform and how best to communicate. Leaflets are being produced. The Autistic Society has been helping but input from other bodies such as Taking Part would be really helpful.

**Q** The Housing Support Forum is working to demonstrate where people can go to ask for help and to ensure that a housing officer is available in every area to offer advice.

**A** Members of the panel commented how important that support is.

**Q** The Charity Sector can't really lobby national government so how can we respond?

**A** There is a role for the VCS in campaigning and the issues raised around welfare reform are not political, it is about describing the experiences of service users and making the evidence available to influence change.

**Q** Click to go is designed to improve computer skills for job seekers and to help them register on job sites. What other support is available?

**A** Jackie and Steph described support available from housing, through libraries, community hubs and other VCS bodies but the panel and audience agreed that there is a need for more information on available support and signposting



**Q** Having followed the Welfare Reform Bill through Parliament etc. have concern that many people don't recognise that many people with disabilities are required to seek work after a 12 month period.

**A** Yes, this is part of Employment Support Allowance (ESA) and there has been significant lobbying at the national level from many VCS bodies including Citizens Advice, concerned about the impact this has.

## **Annual Report**

The Terms of Reference for the Annual Assembly were formally approved. June Jones proposed and Linda Cox seconded.

Sonia spoke about her time as Chair of the VCS Assembly and provided an update on the work that has taken place over the last 12 months. Sonia referred to the Annual Report available within the Annual Assembly packs and picked out highlights including the re-branding of the Assembly and the development of new Forums of Interest (now 16 in total). A request made by members at the last Annual Assembly was for more themed events and the Board had responded by holding more events including an economic growth workshop, and supporting the organisation of the Big Debate on Welfare Reform.

A year ago members had asked for more networking opportunities so that has been built into the Assembly's activity over the last year. Support promoting services was requested so the Market Place Day was held in January to promote services to commissioners and others, and 5 themed COPE events were organised to promote services to GPs and health workers.

The introduction of Big Society, localism and a move to outsourcing services to the VCS had prompted the development of the VCSA Modernisation Programme and Sonia provided a summary of that work covering support for Forums of Interest, the development of Shropshire Providers Consortium and the work to develop partnership with the private sector and other partners. In particular the Dragons Den event held had resulted in a measurable impact of £10,200 in-kind and pro-bono support for 7 organisations with many other benefits harder to quantify.

Sonia provided specific examples for all of the Modernisation projects and highlighted some of the many practical benefits that VCS organisations had seen by working in these new ways. Sonia moved on to describe the work that has started to develop the Compact and the work taking place through partnership with the CCG including the Compassionate Communities project. Also mentioned was the recent launch of Building Health Partnerships (Shropshire is one of only a few national pilot sites chosen to pilot new partnership arrangements between the CCG and VCS).

## **Forum Updates**

One minute updates from the Forums of Interest were provided. Some of the progress described has been captured below:

- Green Shropshire Xchange works to conserve and protect the environment, promote community action and environmental activities. The steering group is constituted with a bank account, has an action plan in place and has been looking at funding and five new initiatives. An event is being planned for September and the group are benefiting from strong networks and sharing skills, ideas and knowledge. See the website for more information. <http://www.greenshropshireexchange.org.uk/>

- Shropshire Infrastructure Partnership works to build capacity within the VCS offering advice guidance and support, providing events and loaning equipment. There are 8 partners but membership is open and other organisations delivering this type of activity are welcome to join. There is a regular newsletter, SIP delivers a 4 year BASIS contract and leads on volunteering. An event in July will see the launch of an on-line learning gateway. <http://shropshirevcs.org.uk/>
- The County Sports Partnership focuses on sports and physical activity and joined the VCSA in January. Its vision is to ensure everyone can benefit from sport and physical activity every day. Over the next year the partnership will be engaging more with clubs and coaches and more with community groups. <http://www.shropshiretelfordwrekinsportpartnership.org.uk/>
- The Community Transport Consortium has 7 member organisations delivering community transport in Shropshire. In the last year it has set up as a company incorporated to enable members to take on contracts together. Other VCS organisations with buses are very welcome to join.
- The Information, Advice and Guidance Forum has 9 partner organisations working as advice givers and providing independent and free access to information on welfare benefits, housing benefits and community care. Over the last year the Forum has been involved in a range of activity through the Assembly including Dragon Den, the Big Debate on Welfare Reform and the development of Shropshire Providers Consortium. The forum has developed a leaflet and ESA toolkit.
- The Visual Arts Network and Heritage Forum have been working together and recently amalgamated to allow them to work more closely together and develop joint working arrangements. The forums have been jointly looking at funding opportunities and will be considering how to better link galleries and museums. Audit and mapping work is planned for the next year.
- The Health and Social Care Forum's purpose is to share good practice and discuss common issues. There are 45 members and the Forum meets bi monthly. Over the last year the forum has focused on all the changes taking place within health and has worked closely with public sector commissioners. This has included holding a joint event with the CCG. This partnership work will continue with Building Health Partnerships in the next year.
- The Pan Disability Forum has, over the last year, met with People2People, the CCG, the Health and Wellbeing Stakeholder Alliance and other bodies. The Forum has considered personalisation, issues affecting the most vulnerable people living in Shropshire, welfare reform and the Compact. There are 40 members covering the spectrum of disability.
- The Training Providers Consortium shares ideas, considers training opportunities, works to develop grant applications and jointly look at opportunities for shared projects. The forum is keen to work with other VCS organisations delivering training and would welcome new members.
- Shropshire and Telford VCS Mental Health Forum has been focused on the modernisation of mental health services. Issues that the forum has been considering

include acute care, new facilities, the work of crisis teams and issues around confidentiality and acoustics. The Forum is keen to communicate concerns to the CCG and hopes to work more closely with the public sector to address concerns over the next year.

- The Housing Support Forum's members range from very small charities to large national VCS organisations. Members meet regularly and have seen a traumatic last year due to the scale of change experienced. All have reconstituted and been retendered. The members have regroup and reformed and the Forum now consists of 2 consortia delivering housing support services in Shropshire.
- Partners for Social Enterprise work with any organisations interested in trading and would welcome new members. Organisations don't have to be formally registered as social enterprises. The Forum has done a lot of work looking at good practice case studies including visits to those bodies that may inspire others. Networking and peer support are key roles for the forum and members have been considering how small organisations can work together to seek contract opportunities. The development of ip&e in Shropshire has been followed with interest.
- The Criminal Justice Forum is a new Forum and its membership has been developing and looking with interest at changes in the criminal justice system. The Forum works closely with the public sector and it aims to become better equipped to respond to commissioning opportunities. Barrie Sheldon, Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner will speak at the next meeting, as will Shropshire Providers Consortium. New members are welcome.
- The Children and Young People's Summit has been established since 2004. It has 40 members and meets quarterly. It facilitates representation on partnership groups and works closely with the public sector. Issues include the development of new services/contracts, and working together to explore opportunities for the future. Anne Seymour will be stepping down as Chair due to a move to Devon but will continue to be involved virtually.
- Shropshire Older People's Assembly provides a voice for older people and works to influence change. It meets 4 times a year and its meetings are public and open for all to attend. Over the last year themes have included health, housing, transport and social care. Mental health and dementia are also a focus. Over the next year joint work will take place with the Pan Disability Forum.

## Handover of the Chair

Sonia Roberts officially handed over the role of Chair of the VCS Assembly to Jackie Jeffrey (previously Vice Chair).

Sonia thanked the VCS Support Team past and present, Cllr Gwilym Butler and Michael Hyatt for their support. Sonia mentioned how Jackie's expertise and knowledge of the issues that the people in Shropshire are facing would make her the perfect Chair for the VCSA over the next 2 years. Sonia also gave a special thanks to Anne Seymour



for her commitment to the VCS Assembly and all she has done on behalf of the membership.

Cllr Gwilym Butler thanked Sonia for her work as VCSA Chair, he spoke about her professionalism, enthusiasm and determination and commented that she had been an fantastic Ambassador for the Assembly and wider sector. The significant progress made by the Assembly and all the benefits it brings means it is now the envy of other local authorities.

## **Year Ahead – Priorities**

Jackie began her presentation by referencing the Assembly's Terms of Reference. They include the statement: *It is based on the belief that collective representation is more influential than a series of individual voices, and that co operation generates shared strength through a pooling of energy, ideas and resources.* Jackie spoke about how important it is to work together to influence collectively and how the energy of the Forums, their range and the breadth of membership with 300 bodies, offers strength.

Jackie illustrated her point with an example from her personal life and the work she does in her community to prepare and organise the Welshampton structural bonfire. Jackie's presentation included photographs that illustrated how the group had started small and but then worked together to grow experience and skills and used vision and ambition to develop more impressive and eye catching structures each year (see presentation). The group has demonstrated that it can work hard, has imagination, shares skills and collaborates. The group is now working with other communities, an example is working with school children in Ellesmere.

Jackie asked the Assembly members to support her in her role as VCSA Chair. It is important to work together in order to ensure a lasting legacy. Members can support by getting involved, providing evidence and data and supporting the Forums of Interest in their work.

Jackie outline how members can get involved by describing the priorities going forward. These include working with the VCS Task Group and with town and parish councils and Elected Members; working with public sector commissioners, developing a locality approach, implementing social value, implementing the commissioning strategy, developing the Compact and supporting the Forums of Interest. Communication also remains a priority and this must be both ways, from the VCSA Board to the members and from the members to the Board. Jackie commented that the priorities may be ambitious but working together they can be achieved.

## **Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) – Building Partnerships**

Helen Herritty, Chair of the CCG, spoke about the CCG's development and how it fits within the health care landscape. Helen described how the CCG works and how GPs have taken responsibility for commissioning a large proportion of healthcare activity within Shropshire. Helen described the way the CCG is constituted and how many decisions are delegated to the governing body comprised predominantly of GPs. Helen spoke of the role Dr Caron Morton plays as accountable officer. As a new body the CCG is keen to have courage, to learn and do things differently. A priority will be working with others including the VCS, building strong relationships.

Helen described how the CCGs work fits with the Health and Wellbeing Board for Shropshire, the NHS England Area Team, Commissioning Support Unit (Shropshire and Staffordshire) and the Local Authority (with its responsibility for public health).

The budget sizes and areas of responsibility were described and Helen spoke about the areas of work VCS Assembly members have been involved in including the Long Term Conditions committee, Compassionate Communities project, GP Community Care Coordinators initiative, Patient and Public Involvement Committee, and new joint work with the Shropshire Compact and Building Health Partnerships pilot. Helen commented how important this partnership activity is. She also spoke about the importance of maximising relationships and recognising still untapped potential in partnerships.

Helen introduced Sam Tilley, Head of Planning and Partnerships at the CCG, and offered to provide hand outs to the VCSEA describing the CCG (a patient leaflet) and a structure diagram.

Questions covered:

- How VCS organisations should bid for resources/delivery opportunities
- How 'Any Qualified Provider' works
- Recognising the cost incurred in changing services and being bold/adventurous.

It was suggested that a workshop should be organised to explain Any Qualified Provider. On bidding, Helen spoke of the work still required before the CCG would be in a position to make decisions and encouraged the audience to bear with the CCG in the short terms while it completes its work to establish its commissioning systems/processes. Helen promised to take the comment on costs of designing services differently back for consideration.

Members of the audience commented how helpful they had found the presentation and particularly the diagram explaining how the CCG fits within the healthcare landscape.

## **Shropshire Compact**

The CCG, VCSEA and Shropshire Council signed a Memorandum of Understanding highlighting key partnership principles and providing the foundations for joint work in developing a revised Compact for Shropshire. See:

<http://vcsvoice.org/the-compact/memorandum-of-understanding-compact/>

Sonia gave some background information and spoke about the work that has been taking place to develop the Compact in Shropshire. Sonia described the importance of refreshing the Compact in light of national policy changes and the way in which work has been done to ensure the Shropshire Compact fits with the National Compact and supports its key principles. Sonia explained that the national body Compact Voice have been supporting the work and attended a Compact Development Day that took place in Shrewsbury on 12 March. The Compact Review group has been meeting frequently and has now developed a draft Compact document that will soon be circulated widely for comment by the Assembly members. Sonia asked the members and Forums to support this work and handed over to Jackie to introduce the Compact Activity. 5 questions were posted around the room and members asked to comment.

## **Close**

Jackie brought the event to a close and wished everyone a safe journey home.