

Following note produced by John Watkin, Chief Executive Officer of Denbighshire Voluntary Services Council following his submission of oral evidence to the Finance Committee on the 16th October 2014..

An invitation was extended to Denbighshire Voluntary Services Council to give evidence to the Finance Committee at National Assembly Wales relating to the scrutiny of the Welsh Government Draft budget 2015-16.

1. DVSC indeed consider it an honour to be asked to give evidence to the Committee thus reinforcing its position locally in providing a voice for the Third Sector.
2. Assembly members will note that DVSC did not submit written evidence during the initial consultation stage despite inviting the 1400+ organisations on its database to respond. However when the 1400+ organisations became aware that John Watkin, CEO of DVSC was to attend in person to give evidence the responses from the third sector flowed in which highlights the perception that written submissions do not seem to attract the attention of the Assembly in the same way as submission of oral evidence.
3. In preparation for giving evidence John Watkin read the background papers including the note by Chwarae Teg as to the likelihood that the Chair at the commencement of the session may ask if we have any initial comments and if so to keep them to the top three issues. Therefore the note below is in two parts. First part relates to the top three issues which helps to focus DVSC attention on the areas that are of importance to the sector and the second part the 16 responses from the various voluntary and community organisations which in some cases their identity has been redacted. Clearly if Assembly members would wish to know the identity of such individuals or organisations then I am more than happy to contact the individuals to seek their agreement to such disclosure.

PART ONE – Top Three issues.

- 1. Concern that Local authorities who are subject to cuts, on average 3.4% across Wales (Denbighshire is 3.7%) will lead to reductions in the preventative services and as such demand in the community will shift from local authority to Third Sector without there being any extra funding thus putting additional pressures and greater risk on the Third Sector.**

An example in Denbighshire being the proposed cut of £200,000 to the welfare rights unit (from £550,000 to £350,000) and such a reduction has already been acknowledged as leading to a reduced service added to which the remaining service is to be outsourced so it is unclear as to the identity of the future provider. The impact of this reduced service will mean clients turning to the Third Sector for support and many of those organisations whose assistance is sought will not be commissioned by the local authority. This will be a real pressure on the services of those third sector organisations which could potentially impact on the quality of services delivered by Third Sector.

Very unclear as to how Welsh Government believe that preventative services are being supported when they announce cuts to the following areas where prevention is key to effectiveness and efficiency.

- a. £5.8 million cut in supporting people. There will be a knock on impact for Third Sector as clearly reduced resources will lead to reduced services.
- b. £2.32 million cut to Communities First a programme targeted at those communities most need in need.
- c. £4.95 million capital cut from Community Facilities Programme which for many years has helped local organisations to develop and enhance their local facilities to support local people with a highly measurable outcome in terms of independence and resilience which are two key issues for Wales as we move to encourage local communities to play a greater part in civic affairs.

2. How valued is the Third Sector? Are we being listened to ?

Welsh Government and National assembly regularly celebrate the effectiveness and value of third sector in the delivery of local public services and so for local third sector organisations they find it difficult to comprehend and reconcile when examining the 2015-16 draft budget based on the following examples :

- a. Welsh Government is cutting local authorities by 3.4% on average . In Denbighshire the cut is 3.7% but for DVSC who supports the third sector as detailed in the written evidence below (Part two) the cut is to be 6.9% which in the original draft budget was 4.17%. Why is DVSC being treated differently to that of the local authority.
- b. The emphasis quite rightly by WG is making sure that value for money and effectiveness are seen as key outcomes. If value for money is the key driver would we not all agree that where a provider is able to turn £1 of Welsh government money into a minimum of £3 of deliverable public service provision , that is something to be applauded and encouraged? It would appear not as Voluntary Councils in North Wales for example are being cut by 6.9% despite turning £1.3 million of WG investment into £4million – a multiplier of 3. What other sector delivers that kind of value and is a very good example of SROI (Social Return on Investment). Everyone accepts there has to be cuts but should we be really cutting those services that bring in additional income for the benefit of the community in terms of jobs and services. After all we have to remember that 80% of County Voluntary Council (CVC) grant funding from WG is taken up with staff costs – if the grant is cut then it means staff costs have to be reduced which in turn reduces the capacity of the CVC's to secure additional income through bidding for contracts, grants, service level agreements etc and so we can see quite clearly the impact of a reduction of £495,000 across Wales will have on local jobs and services – that cut will translate to a cut of at least £1.5 million (multiplier of 3)
- c. Aside from the North Wales CVC example above I give a few other examples:
 - a. Wales Cooperative securing an annual £75,000 investment for Financial inclusion and in turn securing an additional of £2 million . The extra £2million would not have happened without initial WG investment.
 - b. St Kentigern a local hospice turning every £1 Welsh Government into £4.26 of front line service for those most in need.

3. Need to revisit the model for delivery of public services in Wales.

Local Authorities have for years been seen as the enabler and provider of local public services and local people have been democratically elected to oversee that the public service provision is delivered effectively.

That model is now broken. There has to be an acceptance that there has to be a new way of working as we can see local authority budgets will continue to be cut for years ahead and the preventative services will suffer particularly where there is a direct conflict in the maintenance and delivery of statutory services as compared with discretionary spend.

The question has already been posed in the evidence below – Is it now accepted that third sector will be delivering non statutory services in the future on the presumption they (Third Sector) are currently effective deliverers of services and provide the greatest benefit to communities in that third sector do not operate for profit but instead reinvest any surpluses within their own community which further energises and regenerates community areas.

If Third Sector is seen as the way to support reducing local authority budgets then there should be active debate now , prescribed by legislation, that forces a change in the local mindset . Without this transformational change we will simply see local discretionary services wither on the vine and beyond saving by the time that third sector is finally invited to participate. Third Sector should be in discussions now whilst there is still some money left to deliver those specific services.

If I could leave one message :

Third Sector are ready to take on the challenge for transformational change but need the support including resources from National Assembly , Welsh Government and Local Service Boards to bring about lasting and meaningful change.

PART TWO – Evidence from 16 individuals/ voluntary/community organisations

- 1. Response from an active Trustee/Volunteer who supports numerous voluntary and community organisations in Denbighshire and plays an active part in the affairs of the Local Authority but who is not a Councillor and is a Trustee of DVSC.**

Q1. Impact of 2014-15 budget :

-it seems to have reduced the chances of DVSC being able to renew various grants and schemes

- this includes the effect of reductions in funding to the various County Councils & the tight budget of Betsi Cadwaladr. Our finances are certainly under considerable pressure –**

Q2. Concerns for 2015/16 :

- Again same pressures, but the reduction in funds for DCC coupled with cap on increasing rates means further limit likely on the ‘schemes / projects’ that DCC has been funding.**
- Leads to reduced chances of our getting Management fee for ‘running’ projects**

Q3. Expectations for 2015-16 :

- Highly dependent on outcome of talks uniting two / three ? County Councils and likewise CVC's. and whether changes take place without creating & leaving too much tension.
- Our reserves will inevitably be affected and redundancies could prove expensive.

Q4. - Preparation for Wales Bill :

- Our volunteer programme may well be affected if changes to Planning & Education patterns lead to problems in enabling volunteers to support local activity;
- it would be helpful if the Bill made it compulsory for County Councils to consult 3rd sector on a range of topics and to have 3rd sector members on their scrutiny committees, preferably with voting rights plus freedom to attend Council and Cabinet meetings, even if not able to vote at Cabinet.
- Health Board finances :
- Again, the ability to maintain grants / projects in which DVSC involved will come under increased pressure.
- Ability to support volunteer activity within Health Service would be affected if DVSC has to reduce its support for volunteer team.

Scrutiny of Welsh Language, equalities and sustainability :

- shortage of funds will almost inevitably make provision of material in Welsh more difficult and likewise provision of instantaneous translation at meetings etc.

2. A response from a voluntary organisation who in the main support people in the community over the age of 50.

My point would be general in that, preventative measures are being encouraged by WG, but it is often the 'softer' end of the wedge which is being squeezed- ie although we are to be funded for our advocacy services for older people by local gov in CCC and DCC, the remit is now over 65s who are in receipt of care services-! The point I made with commissioners is that we need to work with the 50 plus people in order for them to not end up in receipt of services!!! So the squeeze to only fund vital services is not infact leaving much room for preventative services.

The closure of the Welfare Benefits unit at DCC will impact us in terms of more referrals to us, but we still have no gov funding to provide the service as WG all Wales bids seem to be going to the big providers, or consortias, some of which are in competition.

Health board funds are increasingly hard to secure, with paperwork and deadlines being silly in most cases..

Also the WG fund given to XXXX (the one which I complained to you about) is not administered in a supportive fashion- unlike many of the other grant making bodies, who are actively encouraging bids to look and be the best.

I do find there is also a lot of ‘ gibbing’ about full costs recovery from local government funders **who still don’t seem to understand that the third sector need an infrastructure in order to run projects- there almost seems to be an active resistance to overheads/ line management as luxuries!**

3. A response from a local volunteer /Trustee in response to my email to the individual asking if they had a cunning plan for the future

Cunning plan? How many do you want John?

Cunning plan A.) – make elected members work harder by being involved in volunteer groups and ATTEND MEETINGS to earn their vast money.

I did.

Cunning Plan B.) Since budgets are set in the confines of WG committees, where are they publicised? In what media – Daily Post in North Wales to show how little is spent up here, in the local papers or is it only sent to AM`s? And we need it in simple form please, none of the higher than eyebrow language for plebs like me.

Cunning Plan C.) Headlines in papers to include `Volunteers to be rewarded expenses`, `Direct Rail and Road communications North to South so that news and money might travel faster up to North Wales.` and finally `Denbighshire Councillors have accepted a lower settlement for their allowance in a bid to lead other councils to do the same to reduce county expenses.`

Cunning Plan D.) As repeat Plan C.) but change to Officer of DCC. And AM`s.....

How do my remarks sit with you John?

I adjust my low income accordingly. Ie. Just made my evening meal to last 3 nights using 8oz mince with plenty of mixed chopped vegetables with jacket potato. That`s how the rich live. Tell that to the elected members who have just added £24 to our rates by their cunning plan to charge for our green bins.

Best wishes

(I`ll take my boxing gloves off now,)

4. A response from again another very active volunteer and Trustee who a few years ago owned and operated a highly successful , profitable business employing many local people.

Main issues that must be discussed include:-

1. Decent housing to improve lives which leads to healthier population; less illness = lower NHS costs.

2. Good education and better maintenance of school buildings though I believe DCC school teachers already have high standards except that talking to XX High School teachers, the intake is too great for the school to cope with.
3. Provision of employment from school leavers to students leaving university/college with more emphasis on vocational courses rather those chosen on a whim. More plumbers, electricians, builders, caterers, shorthand / typists even though whiz kids of today can sometimes only work on a laptop. Office skills are over looked as well as people skills.
4. Care in the Community for elderly on their own must be better organised and social workers and health officials to liaise better so that patients are not sent home to an empty house with no back-up which often happens if family members are not nearby insisting that things are organised. Working family are not available daytime for care to be given.
5. NHS is failing to cope with demands both in A&E, bed management and sufficient nurses. Funds are misappropriated by using `Bank` staff who are either not trained well, do not fit in well with ward systems and cannot understand their patients` needs since they are only on the ward briefly. It costs twice as much to hire `Bank` staff and is a false economy not to employ permanent nurses who will be covered by sick pay, maternity pay, retirement pension and holiday pay. But the system works far better with happy staff.
6. Police need more bobbies on the feet. Better communication with Joe Public and drug trafficking. End of.

There are many other issues but I think these are the main ones that everyone cares about. Naturally, volunteers keep the country above water and therefore funding for that sector to be patrolled must be made available. Wages permitting.

5. **A response from a local voluntary organisation illustrating the impact that DVSC made in the relocation of a popular young peoples project .**

Dear John

In reply to your e-mail requesting evidence for the National Assembly for Wales Finance Committee. Below is an example of the hidden value of Denbighshire Voluntary Services Council and the use of Welsh Government funding to make a difference, providing value for money and outcomes.

John Watkin, Denbighshire Voluntary Services Council, Chief Executive approached Denbigh Youth Project with a proposal for consideration. Discussion centered on:

- To move premises, identify, a suitable disused building located in an area of disadvantage in the community of Upper Denbigh, with key priorities, to contribute to the regeneration and economic sustainability of the community and to help build enterprising communities by taking on and developing community assets that can provide solutions to the challenges they face.
- To improve partnership working between the public sector, the third sector and others.

DVSC supported Denbigh Youth Project in developing the structures to help enable this to happen, key people to involve and the formation of a steering group. As the project started to develop, membership increased into a larger more strategic group, made up of key stakeholders.

HWB Dinbich, a £2.2 million building was completed this summer 2014, is a major regeneration project for the town of Denbigh and a great example of what collaboration can achieve, a unique cross sector partnership project with a clear vision to increase employment, enterprise and further learning opportunities and supported housing for young people in Denbigh and the wider community.

The key partners are Grwp Cyfnefin, Denbighshire County Council, Grwp Llandrillo Menai and Denbigh Youth Project, and it is this unique partnership that provides a 'stairway' for young people and training, volunteering and employment opportunities within a supported environment.

- 6. A response from a local voluntary organisation who has embraced the collaboration model and has led a local consortia in the delivery of a Families First contract proving that Third Sector do adapt to change – successfully**

Dear John,

Denbigh Youth Project is a provider of services under the Youth Support element of the Welsh Government Families First programme. The consortia type approach is working very successfully, achieving all targets and intended outcomes. This collaborative partnership approach is an example of how working together benefits families and young people living in Denbighshire.

- 7. A response from a Trustee that is active not only in Denbighshire but nationally.**

The questions seem like those they gave local government a few years ago when they knew there would be no overall agreement. Surprisingly, there was a concession that they would give indicative funding for 3 years but I'm not sure how successful that was.

My view is not to pull any punches. Their strategy should be to support and enhance the voluntary sector because it's the cheapest way to provide services locally. They've spent an awful lot of capital and revenue on assisted living etc but that's only for a small number and does not give a range of services to elderly etc.

Q 1. The impact has been a reduction in local services and an inordinate amount of time spent in dismantling services which do make a difference.

Q 2. More of the same but the WG must be vigilant in ensuring scarce resources are targeted effectively.

Q 3 None. The organisation will react but will not be able to plan for the future.

Q 4 Doom and gloom whichever horse you pick.

8. Response from Wales Cooperative with whom DVSC have an ongoing and active partnership

The Wales Co-operative Centre runs the Financial Inclusion Champions Project with funding from the Welsh Government. The amount is currently £75k per year. The Wales Co-operative Centre has itself provided a proportion of the funding for the project from a limited earmarked reserve. One of the objectives of the project is to lever further resources into financial inclusion work. Since the project started we have secured over £2 million of investment. More than half of this was cash. This included substantial grants from the Oak Foundation and Comic Relief to support work with vulnerable, hard to reach, private sector tenants.

9. Response from a concerned individual who runs a social enterprise supporting people in a variety of ways .

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

John,

I will take a look and get back to you. However, although it is not positive, one question I should like to ask is around the issue of the Third Sector **voice being heard**.

One only has to look at the outcome of the communities first cluster to see that although the community said they wanted DVSC to run this the WG totally ignored the voice of the people and appointed the CoOp.

It seems to be that WG listen to the voice of the people when the voice of the people agrees with what WG wanted in the first place.

May be as I get older I get more sceptical 😊

All the best for the weekend.

10. Response from a local activist volunteer who in recent years was honoured for their massive contribution to local community engagement/participation

Dear John, you can repeat anything I mention because its the truth. Without the assistance from the DVSC, volunteers like myself would not be able to continue.

I have quite received a lot of assistance from Tom Kilbourn Digital Inclusion Officer, I also gain support from Joanne Williamson who is really good with sorting out problems with funding, how to go about sorting out problems with our local authority, first aid, all policies, Health and Safety. We also have Gerry Frobisher who works with groups like ours to engage with our youth. The community Development Agency is also a place that volunteers use on a regular basis, and without the support of Doreen Jones and Ann Weir we would not be able to produce all the documents, flyers, posters and tickets for our events which are always free of charge to the community.

Without the support of the DVSC large volunteer groups like ours would not be able to continue.

11. Response from a local Trustee actively supporting a varied number of organisations and which are not exclusively in the Health and Social Care setting

WAG has been putting forward the Third Sector as the answer to its Economic woes, and now penalises them with punitive cuts ,as against their own departments. They want more and more from a reticent population ,whilst keeping the public sectors from cutting continued wastage's under their control. This is evidenced by the increased cuts in funding recently announced. When will they realise, that to get better results they needed to invest to gain future benefits and not cut cut cut. As an example the 2015 Health ,social care and well being Act enshrines more for less, but unless they get more support, which they expect ,now from a squeezed third sector, how can this ever happen without the initial investment and encouragement to the Third sector it needs. "When will they wake up and smell the coffee ". I am sorry to vent some anger on this point, but, I hope it can help in some way.

12. Response from a neighbouring third sector organisation.

1. How does the WG expect Third Sector organisation to take up the increasing demand from individuals and community organisations with diminishing financial resources to Local Government resulting in closure of non statutory services with an expectation that community organisations will take one service.
2. As the key funder to the LA's why can't WG impose specific conditions to ensure that there are appropriate discussions with the community and Third Sector to establish in advance if there is any capacity to cope with increased demands?
3. Does the NAFW accept that society will only receive statutory services in the future from Local Authorities and any non statutory and preventative services will only be provided by the Third Sector who will need financial resources to provide the service that are key to the lives of people in Wales,

13. Response from a neighbouring third sector organisation.

I think one of the main things which needs emphasis is the fact that there is likely to be extensive pressure on third sector orgs in terms of public service delivery outsourcing opportunities. Funding needs to be maintained within the third sector to provide

continued support to enable this to happen. If anything it needs **increasing** in order to enable support which will produce public sector delivery opportunities within the third sector.

Investment needs to be at a grass roots level – i.e organisations who are providing grass roots support (i.e. CVCs) rather than ongoing support for intermediary national bodies (WCVA) who really have no grass roots connections at all.

I'll probably think of more but this is starters !!

14. A response from a staff member of an active voluntary organisation in Denbighshire- Consultation questions

1. What, in your opinion, has been the impact of the Welsh Government's 2014-15 budget?

- Reduced hours and income for staff. Double edged sword as the cost of living and transport has increased.
- More volunteers required to undertake service provision as a result of staff redundancy. Volunteers can only provide a small percentage of the service provision that previously was provided by members of staff. Increased pressure on remaining members of staff as there is a presumption that all services will continue to be delivered at the same rate across the same geographical area. This is highly unrealistic.

2. Looking at the indicative budget allocations for 2015-16, do you have any concerns from a strategic, overarching perspective, or about any specific areas?

- Yes, for the third sector, which is already delivering services with limited resources there is a significant possibility that staff and volunteers will become more sceptical and demoralised if support is not provided. Continually being reminded that third sector organisations need to 'become more business like' and financially sustainable' is fine, however, there has to be a period of adjustment to change, sufficient support to enable this from either private sector business mentors, or from the adoption of different delivery models including collaborative delivery with the public and private sectors. This change requires scrupulous forward planning and buy in from all partners to provide excellent service delivery to beneficiaries of the third sector.

3. What expectations do you have of the 2015-16 draft budget proposals? How financially prepared is your organisation for the 2015-16 financial year, and how robust is your ability to plan for future years?

- More detailed information is required on the draft budget.
- More opportunity for collective discussion on this topic across the third sector in Denbighshire would ascertain the impact that it would have on the third sector.
- 2015-16 budget will inevitably lead to further cuts in third sector service provision. It is difficult to find additional funding to provide core

services as opposed to front line delivery services and therefore without the development of project delivery I see the Third Sector infrastructure organisations contracting in size as a result of the 2015-16 budget especially with the inevitable mergers to mirror Local Government reorganisation.

- Third Sector infrastructure organisations have always provided robust budgetary plans as required by WG, 2015-16 will be the same.

4. The Committee are would like to focus on a number of specific areas in the scrutiny of the budget, do you have any specific comments on the areas identified below?

- Preparation for the Wales Bill **minimum expenditure on this**

- Local health board financial arrangements **keep funding to the front line service delivery**

- Approach to preventative spending and how is this represented in resource allocation (Preventative spending = spending which focuses on preventing problems and eases future demand on services by intervening early) **Good idea.**

- Impact of the Welsh Government's legislative programme and whether its implementation is sufficiently resourced **-funding to go to front line services**

- Scrutiny of Welsh language, equalities and sustainability . **prefer funding to go direct to supporting the delivery of services bi-lingually**

Disclosure of Information - **keep resource to this to a minimum in preference to front line service provision**

15. response below from a local charity supporting people with chronic conditions

Good morning John,

Sorry for the late reply. I know the XXX Association has had to lay off staff because of lack of funding. It is ironic in this time of the Big Society that charities have lost volunteers because they are unable to pay travelling expenses.

16. A response below from the Local Authority in Denbighshire with whom DVSC has an ongoing dialogue

Dear John

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with some information prior to your attendance at the National Assembly for Wales Finance Committee this week. I hope that the following broad responses will be of some use to you.

I have attempted to respond in accordance with the four questions that were included in the email sent to you from the Assembly Committee Chair.

1. What, in your opinion, has been the impact of the Welsh Government's 2014-15 budget?

The main issue we have with the current budget is the in year cuts that have been imposed by Welsh Government to specific grants in particular. These amount to about £4.4m in total and they are largely to do with education support and the supporting people grant. Clearly dealing with unforeseen in year cuts of this nature does place considerable pressure on the authority, especially as we have submitted plans to spend in accordance with what we deemed to be the level of grant funding received by Denbighshire. I will return to this issue of specific grant in answer to question 4 below, in so far as it may affect us in following years.

2. Looking at the indicative budget allocations for 2015-16, do you have any concerns from a strategic, overarching perspective, or about any specific areas?

The Council was expecting the cut to the 2015-16 budget to be in the region of 1.5% as advised by Welsh Government initially. However the then Local Government Minister, Lesley Griffiths announced in July that the cut was likely to be more in the region of 4.5%. It has materialised last week that the level of cuts to Denbighshire County Council is now at 3.7%, over double the amount that we had previously envisaged. This level of reduction does lead us inevitably to consider cutting front line services, a situation that we have largely been able to avoid in the past. The other key issue is the Welsh Government policy on protecting education and social services funding. Whilst in principle I would support such protection by virtue of the fact that these two areas are the biggest budget areas for Local Government, but by cutting 3.7% from the remainder of the Council budget which is around 40% of the overall budget clearly has a very detrimental effect on services such as Environmental Services and Leisure etc. The indicative budget also proposes cuts of around 9% to specific grants. These are largely education and social services grants, and dealing with such a large cut on top of the in year cuts referred to in Question 1 does lead to additional pressures on our budget.

3. What expectations do you have of the 2015-16 draft budget proposals? How financially prepared is your organisation for the 2015-16 financial year, and how robust is your ability to plan for future years?

Members have been working hard with Officers in Denbighshire to look at every single budget heading within all our services, a process that we have entitled Freedom & Flexibilities. This has enabled members to make better informed decisions about any proposed reductions to service areas. Whilst the process is extremely difficult to manage and will lead to cuts in front line service areas, I believe that the Council is engaged in a robust process. Our ability to plan robustly for future years is heavily dependent on receiving good quality information from Welsh Government at an early stage, something that we have not received this year, as we were unaware of the level of cuts and the issue around specific grants referred to above.

4. The Committee are would like to focus on a number of specific areas in the scrutiny of the budget, do you have any specific comments on the areas identified below?

The issue around preventative services is a very valid point to raise as we will undoubtedly be making cuts to preventative services, examples of which are Leisure Services, Education Psychology Service, Education Social Work Service and Support Services within Social Services and Benefits. These will undoubtedly lead to pressures on statutory services either within the Council, or particularly so within the Health Service. It is likely that making such cuts will lead to pressures elsewhere on the public service purse. I would also like to stress that the issue of County Council mergers and efficiencies that will stem from such processes are unlikely to help us in the short term. As you will be aware even with voluntary mergers it is unlikely that such mergers will not take place until 2018, and with forced mergers not until 2020. Any efficiencies stemming from such mergers are therefore at least six years away. The cost of such mergers have also not been calculated properly by Welsh Government,

and therefore that is likely to be an impediment to the merger process. It is also important to note that Welsh Government must be prepared for a decline in performance in some areas, as not all the indicators and targets that are currently in place can feasibly be achieved with such a reduction in resources.

I hope that this response will be of some assistance to you in your preparation to the committee meeting on the 16th October. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to discuss any of these points in greater detail.

17. Response from an active Trustee/Volunteer who has over many years advocated greater investment in the rural areas against a backdrop of young people moving away from the rural areas to find work added to which the older population being socially isolated as local public services are reduced or even completely cut

Rural poverty. Very concerning to see insufficient resources being invested in the rural areas which in turn perpetuates the rural poverty agenda. Whilst the Rural Development programme (RDP) does go some way to help, the fact is that revenue investment is required in greater amounts rather than just the current regime of investing in capital projects which of late have tended to be projects that Local Authorities have been unable to fund from other sources and so the RDP has proved to very attractive in bridging the gap. In future I would hope to see greater community participation rather than the tokenistic community consultation that has taken place to date with regard to the forthcoming funding early next year. By taking the funding to a sub regional level marginalises local community organisations from accessing funding and being supported by the local County infrastructure. The comment being that "big is not beautiful" is apt in the sense whilst the decision makers may perceive a saving in the costs base by moving sub regional and thus achieving economies of scale the costs associated by marginalising local communities by moving decision making away from them will in time prove to be the undoing of the RDP or whatever term the new programme is known as. In other areas of WG activity there is a big emphasis on locality and local involvement / decision making. Clearly the recent RDP consultation was not a good example of being "close to the community 24/7", rather it was a good example of being close to the community for Thursday evening for one day in September followed by three other similar sessions elsewhere. Not a great advert for funders.