

# Can partnership working between public and voluntary sectors survive the cuts in funding?

**Councillor Bernard Atha, the seasoned Leeds City Labour politician, gave his views on the choppy waters ahead.**

The reality is that the cuts are going to be severe. They come at a time when the Leeds City council budget is already under pressure with an £8 million plus deficit at Adult Services and £6 million plus at Children's Services.

Looking further into the figures reveals that many organisations depend on council funding so the impact will be large. Instead of succumbing to a general feeling of alarm and despondency it's important to think about what can be done.

It's not yet clear how the Council is going to deal with the cuts, but there is a need to be strategic rather than to make uniform cuts across the board. Making a uniform reduction seems fairer, but it isn't, it's the easy way but it's not the right way. The real test is to ask how we can protect the most vulnerable and the most damaged in our society.

As the loss of council funding can destroy an organisation's whole funding strategy it's important that the Council consults with the voluntary sector. This consultation should not be master talking to supplicants, but a conversation between equals providing services. Consultation is vital prior to any decisions being made. The decision-making process must be open and transparent.

One problem is that the process of commissioning and procurement can be so expensive and prolonged, so detailed and honest that it can lead to the wrong results. There has to be a way for small, capable voluntary and community sector organisations to transfer over to the brave new world. The reality is that they might need help to do this.

The question of consultation does present a problem, how do you consult with the over 1,000 groups that receive council funding? There has to be a way found that is genuine consultation that includes all groups at all levels.

There are options for organisations to cut costs, these include sharing back office services and mergers. The sad thing is that cost cutting will always have a human price in terms of people being put out of work.

Eric Pickles has stated that the "best time to be in local government is now". Whilst doubting this there are some good suggestions on the table such as abolishing ring fencing (when central government predetermines what specific funds must be used for). There is a real need to phase any cuts in over a period to allow proper adjustments to take place.

To conclude with a pessimistic, but an optimistic note at the same time: cuts in local authority provided services, such as care homes, could provide opportunities for the voluntary sector.