

## **VOLUNTARY SECTOR CHAMPION'S REPORT TO FULL COUNCIL**

The role of the Voluntary Sector is unique, distinctive and absolutely vital to the community of Bracknell Forest. The contribution that it makes to the wellbeing of the citizens of the Borough cannot be overstated. Bracknell Forest has thousands of volunteers who give their time and energy freely to others and bring a quality of life that could not be provided in any other way.

In creating the position of Voluntary Sector Champion the Borough Council recognised the value of the work done by the Sector in Bracknell Forest. My role is to act as a focal point and to champion the services carried out by the Voluntary Sector, within and outside the Council.

One of the six tasks identified for Champions is to make contact with the relevant organisations and to establish regular and effective consultation arrangements. With this in mind I have set up a Voluntary Sector Champion's Panel. The purposes and objectives of the Panel are to assist me by:

- acting as the Voluntary Sector's sounding board on all relevant matters;
- providing a channel for communication, enabling the Panel to review and discuss emerging issues directly with relevant officers and members;
- collecting information and identifying issues of special concern which may be beyond the remit of the Panel.
- playing an important role in consulting with the V.S. on the development of policy which could affect them.
- contributing to policy review studies requested by the Executive.

The Panel comprises four members of the Borough Council, three representatives of the Bracknell Forest Voluntary Sector Forum and one invited representative from each of the over-arching Voluntary and Community groups, such as Bracknell Citizens Advice Bureau, BCVS and Churches Together in Bracknell. I see the role of the Panel as that of helping me to strengthen the partnership between the Council and the V.S. and to breaking down barriers that can sometimes exist. Officers and Members of the Executive will be invited to attend meetings when necessary. The first Panel meeting is planned for June.

In October of last year, after serving as a member from the outset, I became the chairman of the Bracknell Forest Voluntary Sector Compact Steering Group, taking over from Mrs Sue Telfer, Director of BCVS. The Compact is a working document, which will provide a framework to support effective partnerships and good working relationships between the Voluntary, and Community Sector, BFBC, BPCT and the Thames Valley Police.

The Compact is made up of an introduction, which sets out the background to its formulation, its status, structure, underlying principles and aims and objectives, and four Good Practice Guidelines which are:- Communication & Consultation, Funding, Volunteering & Community Action and Development Issues. Careful and

comprehensive consultation is a key factor when writing a document such as this, and we have been assiduous in ensuring that this takes place at every stage of its development.

A conference was held in November of last year to discuss and agree the introduction and the first two codes of Good Practice in draft form. This goal was achieved and the texts of the introduction and the first two codes are now settled. These have been sent out to all Councillors and Chief Officers, but if anyone would like a further copy, please let me know. Each time a code is written it is sent out for consultation to all parties concerned (including Councillors and Officers). The importance and effort required to achieve a consensus should not be underestimated, and I am grateful for the support I have received from fellow Councillors and Officers, in particular Councillor Bob Edger and Vince Paliczka, the senior officer involved in the Compact. Workshops were held at the end of last month to discuss action plans for implementation of the first and second codes. This will be repeated for the third and fourth codes with workshops in September. I have to say that we still have some way to go to create the required sense of mutual understanding between the partners. This should not be a surprise; if that understanding had been there in the first place, we would not have needed a Compact. However, I do ask for your continued support and understanding in the work that remains to be accomplished.

When the Compact has been completed a launch will take place. This is planned for the end of the year. At this launch all representatives will be invited to sign up to it.

I serve on many Voluntary Sector committees including BCVS. I have been Chairman of Bracknell Volunteer Centre for 18 years. After 10 years as Chairman of Age Concern Bracknell, I retired last year, but continue to have many contacts in the part of the Sector that serves our Senior Citizens. I also attend the BFVS Forum. The Forum creates an opportunity for all VS group representatives to come together on a quarterly basis to discuss relevant matters and to share experiences and knowledge. By attending groups such as these I am able to keep in touch and fulfil my mandate to explain the policies of the Council. Without wishing to overstate my own competence, I do remind the Executive, in particular, that my experience and knowledge is there to be used in the early stages of devising policies that affect the Sector.

Finally, let me state a personal goal. I would like to see a Voluntary Sector Groups' Centre in Bracknell. My aim is for the VS to have adequate facilities in the Bracknell Town area. Some groups offering a crucial service are working in cramped conditions. They deserve better. It would also be more efficient and effective to have many of our VS groups under the same roof. This would lead to a more integrated sector, sharing knowledge and expertise. Equipment and, where appropriate, offices could also be shared. This goal will take time and effort – I am willing to give it just that!

Councillor Jacqui Ryder

21st May 2002