

VAL main grant application appeal

VAL is seen as the 'go to' organisation for small and medium sized charities in the borough providing vital information, support, training and specialist advice on topics ranging from governance and fundraising to safeguarding and GDPR. We foster the development of the community sector from start-ups to organisations in crisis and bring people together through introductions, forums and networking. If you are a small or medium sized charity your main access to affordable advice on running your organisation comes from your local infrastructure body. The 900 people and organisations on our database use VAL as a source of crucial information and support.

Last year VAL provided 262 cases of tailored support around governance, finance and fundraising including 68 in-depth support cases. 223 people from faith groups in Lewisham have been trained in safeguarding adults and 27 safeguarding community champions have been recruited. Over the past three years we have supported Lewisham organisations to bring an additional £1million of funding. Thirty organisations received intensive support to demonstrate their impact through the 'Show Your Impact' programme.

Given this level of interaction and our understanding of the needs of the community sector as set out in our application and based on on-going demand and need from members and service users, the score of 1 at Q7 is highly questionable.

We understand from the Main Grants Programme report that the authority is looking for a different approach to supporting the sector and favours the bid from the Lewisham Local Consortium of which VAL is a member (although we were not informed a bid was being submitted). While we appreciate that the sector needs joined up approaches and innovation, there is no evidence that a single, untested new infrastructure body will meet the needs of community organisations. VAL has the expertise, local knowledge and contacts within the borough to provide the critical support organisations need.

Q 9b – the assessment describes the vision to develop the Mulberry centre as having 'limited success to date'. We dispute this. In the last year we have run 62 events at the centre this year with over 800 attendees. Numerous partner organisations have made use of our space delivering services to refugee women, people with head injuries, and mental health service users. We have also hosted forums and networking events including Lewisham Migration Forum, our forum for CYP groups and the Equalities Working Group. To make the transformation to a fully accessible hub providing resources, meeting spaces for networking, sharing ideas and creating solutions a long lease is needed (VAL's ran out in December). Secure tenure would provide opportunities to seek capital funding which were not possible under the short lease issued. We would also welcome more flexibility in the subletting of office space to create income to reinvest. The assessment also notes limited fundraising success (Qs 9 and 14), in fact a 1 in 3 ratio of success is the norm across all types of charity and likely to be less for infrastructure bodies which as second tier organisations are harder to secure funds for, more importantly we have supported organisations to bring in an additional £1million which should be a key activity of any infrastructure body.

We are now in a position to recruit a new Chief Executive. We believe fresh leadership will bring a renewed lease of life to VAL and take us forward to build on our core services to create the income and innovation we have the skills and experience to provide.

Since the submission of the Main Grants application, a two year grant of £100,000 from City Bridge to extend the Impact programme has been confirmed. We have been informed this is likely to be withdrawn without some core funding from LBL. We will also have to withdraw from joint bids with Metro – one supporting CYP groups, and another to establish a Lewisham Equalities Forum.

At VAL we believe a dual approach to the allocation of the grant would reduce the risk of moving to a new infrastructure support organisation. This would enable groups to get core support from VAL while introducing new approaches to community development and business involvement from Lewisham Local. At the same time it would help us preserve the best of VAL's well known core offer and prevent a jarring transition with concomitant lack of support and confusion for groups who still need essential services.