

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-015-2016/17
Date of meeting: 21 July 2016



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Asset Management & Economic Development
Subject: Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund Policy
Responsible Officer: Mike Warr (01992 564593).
Democratic Services: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That the Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund Policy be adopted;
- (2) That all decisions made under the Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund be made by the Portfolio Holder for Asset Management and Economic Development under the provisions for Portfolio Holder Decisions; and
- (3) That the continuation of the Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund and Policy in future years be subject to the success of the annual bid for funding from the District Development Fund.

Executive Summary:

At its meeting of December 2015, Cabinet agreed that District Development Funding be requested from the Council in the sum of £35,000 for 2016/17 to continue the work of the Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund.

Furthermore, in order to formalise the scheme and to support its extension to encompass a wider range of properly constituted groups and organisations Cabinet also agreed that a formal policy document be drafted setting out the full terms and conditions of the scheme and detailing the criteria for those groups that will be eligible to bid. This policy document will be submitted to the Cabinet for agreement before the start of the 2016/17 funding cycle.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

Making these funds available for the town centre partnerships, smaller district centres and other appropriately constituted organisations to bid for, encourages them to think creatively about how they can sustainably promote their town and district centres and create initiatives that have a lasting impact on the shopping centre economy. In adopting a formal policy for the fund, organisations are able to decide whether to apply with clarity, understanding and certainty as to whether they are eligible, what the scheme's objectives are, how applications will be processed and decisions made and how they will be expected to demonstrate the success of their proposal.

The policy also enables the council to demonstrate how it intends the funding to be used and to set out its expectations of each organisation so as to ensure the money is used in an appropriate and transparent way.

Other Options for Action:

To not adopt the policy.

To adopt the policy in a revised form.

Report:

1. Since 2013/14, the Council has agreed to make available a £35,000 fund which enabled town centre partnerships, including the chamber of commerce, to undertake projects to support the local main High Streets.

2. In 2015/16 the scheme was widened out into a Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund to also enable smaller 'village' centres to bid for funding. This was in recognition that our smaller shopping centres, wherever they may be in the district have a crucial role to play in enhancing and developing the economy of the district. Whilst smaller than the town centres that have previously been able to bid, these local centres will also have their own issues that they wish to address and will create a wider pool of ideas from which to develop potential district-wide, cross-centre initiatives.

3. With effect from the 2016/17 it was proposed that the fund be opened up to all appropriately constituted bodies and organisations throughout the district that submit applications focused on benefiting the town and local shopping centres, whether locally or district-wide. Additionally, it was agreed that Epping Forest District Council Economic Development Officers (EDOs) could also put forward appropriate projects as well as allowing the EDOs to work with the centres to develop joint projects and applications.

4. The 2015/16 fund allocated funding to four schemes with total funding allocated of £14,856 with a further project accessing the seed-funding element of £1500 - £1800 which, as yet, has not been finalised due the extended nature of the discussions which have gone into setting up the proposed support package. The four schemes funded last year included:

- Two local town centres producing business directories or guides to the centre which were to be distributed widely throughout the surrounding area to raise awareness of the local offer and drive footfall.
- A village centre scheme to build a floral display area and seating facility, enhancing the visual attractiveness of the centre and encouraging shoppers and passers-by to dwell a little longer in the area and potentially increase footfall into the nearby shops.
- The procurement of a refreshed tourism website for the district which, as well as better promoting the district's key attractions, many of which are in or on the outskirts of our town centres, will also draw specific focus upon our towns and villages in order to raise awareness of their particular offers whether that be shopping, dining or heritage. It is therefore hoped to encourage the visitors to out of town attractions to extend their visitor experience by subsequently going on to the nearby towns and villages, driving up footfall, increasing dwell times and generating additional visitor spend in the local economy.

5. In agreeing the funding for 2016/17 on this expanded basis it was considered necessary and appropriate to establish appropriate controls and limits as to how such groups should demonstrate their eligibility to apply to the fund.

6. Cabinet agreed at its meeting in December 2015, that a formal 'Town and Village Centres Opportunities Fund Policy' be published to coincide with the launch of the 2016/17

scheme. This policy (attached as Appendix 1) sets out the requirements of all properly constituted groups and organisations, the specific criteria against which all applications will be assessed and decided upon and the ways in which the allocated funds will be monitored post-application.

7. The Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund is intended to encourage partners to think creatively about how they can sustainably promote their centres and develop initiatives that have a lasting impact on their town or village centre's economy.

8. All applicants are encouraged to submit proposals which address three key objectives:

- ensure people are aware of what our centres have to offer and encourage more visits;
- enhance the visitor experience and encourage people to stay longer; and
- support our existing small businesses and help to encourage new investment and fill empty shops / business units

9. Additionally, bids will also need to demonstrate how the project contributes towards the delivery of one or more of the Council's adopted Economic Development priorities. Bids are encouraged that propose creative local bids that could be applied on a district-wide basis. This can therefore create local impacts that have wider benefits as they are implemented or adopted elsewhere. Finally, they are also asked to consider the longer-term impact and sustainability of their proposals thereby using investment in the present to secure ongoing benefits for their town centres in the future.

10. The expansion of the scheme to cover a wider range of eligible groups now allows that funding will be available to local voluntary groups and associations that are appropriately established with a constitution and bank account for their association to receive funds. Funds are not paid to an individual person or business.

11. Organisations eligible for assistance under the scheme could include the following:

- Town Centre Partnerships;
- Local Voluntary, Community and Not-for-profit business groups including district-wide organisations;
- Arts and Culture Groups;
- Social Enterprises; and
- Community Interest Groups with a specific focus written into their constitution on the economic wellbeing of the town or village centre.

12. It has also been agreed that Economic Development Officers at Epping Forest District Council may submit bids to the fund for proposed projects and that these will be assessed and judged against the same criteria as all other proposed projects. Joint applications between any combination of the above groups, including projects supported by and developed with the Economic Development Officers at Epping Forest District Council, will also be acceptable.

13. However, all groups that wish to apply are required to meet a set of eligibility criteria, set out in the policy, covering how they are established, how they operate and how their membership is constituted. A copy of the constitution of any bidding organisation will need to be supplied and where this does not permit the organisation to be involved in projects to support town centre activity they will not be awarded any funding.

14. The policy also sets out how decisions on applications will be made and the timeframe within which these decisions take place. Decisions as to whether applications are successful are made by the Portfolio Holder for Asset Management and Economic

Development at the conclusion of each bidding round. These decisions are made with advice and comment from the district council's Economic Development Officers (EDOs) where appropriate. Projects put forward by Economic Development Officers, whether independently or in collaboration with partnerships, will be assessed and decided upon by the Portfolio Holder using the same criteria as all other bids but without additional advice and comment from the EDOs. Should further clarification on the bid be required, as might happen with other external bids, this would be formally sought from the EDOs.

15. Details of all successful bids agreed by the Portfolio Holder will be formally published at the conclusion of each round of applications as Portfolio Holder Decisions subject to call-in.

16. The Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund is seen as an important means of encouraging locally driven economic development initiatives which are owned and therefore supported by the local business community. It is however acknowledged that such an important fund requires clear guidance for applicants on the scheme's objectives, eligibility requirements and the criteria used for decision-making. It is therefore recommended that the draft 'Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund Policy' be adopted and launched alongside the launch of the 2016/17 funding cycle.

17. The continuation of the Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund and Policy in future years will remain subject to the success of the annual bid for funding from the District Development Fund.

Resource Implications:

The 2016/17 Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund required a District Development Fund allocation of £35,000 to be approved. Underspends from previous years funds are retained and should the 2016/17 fund be oversubscribed appropriate bids will be still be funded through the use of these carried forward funds.

Legal and Governance Implications:

The policy establishes a formally agreed set of standards covering group eligibility, application requirements, decision making criteria and the stages and procedures groups must follow to acknowledge any funds awarded.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

None.

Consultation Undertaken:

None.

Background Papers:

None.

Risk Management:

Establishing the policy enables the council to provide evidence as to how it will determine the eligibility of groups to apply to the fund, what key objectives and economic priorities it expects bids to address and to set out the procedures through which its decisions are made. In doing so it is hoped that the risk of challenge to any decisions made can be mitigated.

Due Regard Record

This page shows **which groups of people are affected** by the subject of this report. It sets out **how they are affected** and how any **unlawful discrimination** they experience can be eliminated. It also includes information about how **access to the service(s)** subject to this report can be improved for the different groups of people; and how they can be assisted to **understand each other better** as a result of the subject of this report.

S149 Equality Act 2010 requires that due regard must be paid to this information when considering the subject of this report.

Applications approved under the Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund provide much needed investment and the stimulation of the economy in town and village centres throughout the District.

Some of those centres are based in less affluent areas, with others located in more rural parts of the District. Consequently, local residents in those centres can sometimes experience the effects of deprivation, albeit for different reasons.

Clearly establishing, through the proposed policy document, the criteria for groups to apply will enable groups in some of these less affluent areas to understand what is expected of their group as well as of any bid. It also sets out transparently how the decisions will be made and within what timeframe. It is hoped that this clarity, certainty and transparency will encourage such groups to apply and successfully develop proposals that support their centre and alleviate some of the effects of deprivation.