

## **EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES**

**Committee:** Grant Aid Review Task and Finish Scrutiny Panel      **Date:** Wednesday, 14 January 2015

**Place:** Council Chamber, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping      **Time:** 7.05 - 8.00 pm

**Members Present:** Councillors Mrs C P Pond (Chairman), J Knapman (Vice-Chairman), A Mitchell MBE, Ms G Shiell and B Surtees

**Other Councillors:** Councillors Ms H Kane

**Apologies:** A Boyce and S Murray

**Officers Present:** L Swan (Assistant Director (Private Sector Housing & Communities Support)), C Overend (Policy & Research Officer) and G J Woodhall (Democratic Services Officer)

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### **1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN AND VICE-CHAIRMAN**

As this was the first meeting of the Panel, the Democratic Services Officer opened the meeting and requested nominations for the role of Chairman. Following her acceptance by the Panel, a nomination was requested by the Chairman for the role of Vice-Chairman.

#### **Resolved:**

- (1) That Councillor C P Pond be elected Chairman of the Panel for the remainder of the municipal year; and
- (2) That Councillor J Knapman be elected Vice-Chairman of the Panel for the remainder of the municipal year.

### **2. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23 JULY 2002 REFERS)**

There had been no substitute members appointed for this meeting.

### **3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

- (a) Pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct, Councillor G Shiell declared a personal interest in agenda item 6, Grant Aid Scheme Review – Scoping Report and Terms of Reference, by virtue of being a member of two bodies currently in receipt of Grant Aid. The Councillor had determined that her interest was not pecuniary and would remain in the meeting for the consideration of the issue.

### **4. MINUTES**

The Panel noted that there were no minutes to agree as this was the first meeting of the Panel.

## 5. GRANT AID SCHEME REVIEW - SCOPING REPORT AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

L Swan presented the Scoping Report and draft Terms of Reference for the Grant Aid Review Task & Finish Scrutiny Panel.

L Swan reported that the Council had had a Grant Aid Scheme in operation since the 1980's. The Policy governing the Scheme had been reviewed several times, with the most recent occurring in 2009. Since 2001, responsibility for decision-making had rested with the relevant Portfolio Holder, currently the Portfolio Holder for Leisure & Community Services; previously, applications had been determined by the Policy & Resources Sub-Committee, and then the Grant Aid Panel.

L Swan advised the Panel that the Grant Aid Scheme currently had a budget of £94,970 per annum, comprising of:

- (i) one-off grants up to £5,000 towards specific projects (20 in 2013/14); and
- (ii) 15 grants up to £5,000 to support community groups in the longer term, totalling £47,000 - these were funded via 3-year Service Level Agreements, all of which were due to expire in March 2016.

In addition, the Council provided two larger grants to Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) and the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), which totalled £153,000 in 2014/15.

L Swan stated that, in December 2014, the Cabinet had decided to reduce the budget for the Grant Aid Scheme for 2015/16 by the following amounts:

- (i) £7,550 which had been allocated to Homestart as it had ceased functioning during 2014; and
- (ii) an overall reduction in the one-off Grant allocation of £11,517, reducing the Grant Aid budget to £83,453 from April 2015 onwards.

L Swan informed the Panel that the review would have to take account of this budget reduction. In addition, the Scheme's current eligibility criteria and policies had been developed in line with the Council's Leisure and Cultural Strategies, and the Panel would also have to consider the recent revisions to these strategies. The Panel was asked to consider its draft Terms of Reference, and the timescales for completing its review of the Council's Grant Aid Scheme.

The Panel acknowledged that their role would be to examine the organisations that receive Grant Aid and analyse the Grants that were approved. Cllr Pond suggested that the eligibility criteria should be available for the Panel to consider at their next meeting, and this was agreed. The Panel considered whether a Finance Officer should always attend the meetings of the Panel, but it was felt that this should only happen if the Panel felt it was necessary.

Cllr Knapman suggested that one consideration could be to recommend that a percentage of the Council's overall spending should be allocated to Grant Aid, or another possibility was for the Council to use some of its reserves to support the Grant Aid programme. The impact of any cut in Grant Aid expenditure on the receiving organisations should also be carefully considered, otherwise the Council could be reducing their income at the very time that their workload was increasing due to the ongoing financial situation. Cllr Surtees added that some organisations

could come to rely on Grants as an essential source of income. There needed to be a community gain from Grant Aid expenditure, and the Council needed to consider the right method to implement any cuts in the budget. C Overend offered to provide details concerning the Grants approved during the previous five years for the Panel to consider at its next meeting.

Cllr Knapman enquired whether alternative sources of funding was investigated for the organisations that apply for Grant Aid, so as to release funding for other organisations? Could the Council do more by keeping a register of available funding sources and providing all applicants for Grant Aid with this list? C Overend reassured the Panel that the Council did direct applicants for Grant Aid to alternative sources of funding, and would assist with their applications to these other sources for funding to realise their projected total. At one time, the Council possessed a licence to use the 'Grant Finder' database tool, but this had now expired. Cllr Surtees wondered whether the Grant Aid budget could be augmented without the Council Taxpayer paying more; perhaps by getting local businesses involved, or through charitable donations from individuals or organisations.

Cllr Surtees highlighted the problem of applicants for Grant Aid having to incur the expenditure first and then providing the receipts to support their application for Grant Aid. This could act as a barrier to smaller organisations accessing Grant Aid. The Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Community Services stated that applications for Grant Aid needed to be evidence based, but it was possible to consider applications based upon the submission of detailed quotes or estimates. Cllr Pond commented that Grant Aid applications now seemed to be approved throughout the municipal year rather than at one particular time. C Overend agreed that, at one time, all Grant Aid applications were agreed at one particular time. However, this then meant that there was not any funding available for urgent projects which emerged at other times of the year. The current system of a rolling programme throughout the year was adopted in 2001 with the Cabinet system. The Panel noted that there were advantages and disadvantages with either system, and that neither was perfect.

Cllr Pond suggested that the Grants paid to VAEF and the CAB should be looked at separately. C Overend advised that both organisations had Service Level Agreements with the Council which also ran until March 2016. It was agreed that the Panel should examine the smaller Grants this year, and then request the Overview & Scrutiny Committee to continue the Panel in 2015/16 to examine the Grant Aid arrangements for both the CAB and VAEF. This would enable both the CAB and VAEF to be invited to meetings of the Panel next year. C Overend undertook to provide the Panel with a list of all the current three-year Service Level Agreements that the Council was involved with at the next meeting of the Panel.

In considering the draft Terms of Reference, the Panel was broadly in agreement and approved some small amendments. Firstly, it was felt that the Panel should report during the current municipal year, and it was agreed to provide its final report to the Overview & Scrutiny meeting scheduled for 27 April 2015. Secondly, it was felt that "*Appropriate arrangements for safeguarding*" should be expanded to read "*...of children and vulnerable adults.*" Finally, it was agreed that an additional consideration should be "*Appropriate arrangements for the monitoring of expenditure.*"

**Resolved:**

(1) That the draft Terms of Reference for the Panel be approved, subject to the following amendments:

- (a) consideration 1(c) to read “*Appropriate arrangements for safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults;*”
  - (b) a new consideration to be added concerning “*Appropriate arrangements for the monitoring of expenditure; and*”
  - (c) the Panel to present its final report to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting scheduled for 27 April 2015.
- (2) That the eligibility provisions for the current scheme be provided at the next meeting of the Panel (CO);
  - (3) That more details concerning the grants approved during the last five years be provided at the next meeting of the Panel (CO);
  - (4) That a list of all the current three-year Service Level Agreements involving the Council be provided at the next meeting of the Panel (CO); and
  - (5) That guidance on suitable dates for future meetings of the Panel before the Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting on 27 April 2015 be provided prior to the next meeting of the Panel (GJW).

**6. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

The Panel noted that there was no other urgent business for consideration.

**CHAIRMAN**