

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES

Committee: Grant Aid Review Task and Finish Scrutiny Panel **Date:** Monday, 28 September 2015

Place: Committee Room 1, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping **Time:** 7.00 - 8.40 pm

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

Other Councillors: -

Apologies: H Kane

Officers Present: J Chandler (Assistant Director (Community Services)), G Wallis (Community, Health & Wellbeing Manager), C Overend (Community, Policy and Grants Manager) and G J Woodhall (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

Also in attendance: J Foile (VAEF)

9. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Panel noted that no substitute Members had been appointed for the meeting.

10. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no Declarations of Interest pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct.

11. MINUTES

Resolved:

(1) That the minutes of the meeting held on 20 July 2015 be taken as read and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

12. PRESENTATION BY VOLUNTARY ACTION EPPING FOREST

J Foile from Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) gave a presentation to the Panel on the services and activities undertaken by VAEF.

The presentation considered the following issues:

- Background information about VAEF.
- An outline of the core activities undertaken by VAEF.
- Direct services provided by VAEF and their value to residents.
- Partnership working undertaken by VAEF.
- Future plans and a new three-year Strategic Plan.
- Potential projects, including the creation of a Community Hub, and challenges for the future.

Following the presentation, and in response to questions from the Panel, J Foile stated that VAEF covered the whole District but some services could only be used by the elderly or disabled. The Befriending Service was currently only offered in three areas due to a lack of funding. It was agreed to distribute the three-year Strategic Plan cited in the presentation to Members of the Panel before the next meeting, scheduled for 29 October 2015.

The Panel was advised by J Foile that the proposed Community Hub could potentially be located anywhere in the District, but one of the market towns would probably be the best location. Access to the Hub by residents would be a key consideration when deciding where to locate it. A Community Hub would enable VAEF to set up a 'one-stop shop' for the whole District, and the building could be shared with other organisations. VAEF was always on the look out for further funding, from the national lottery and other funding bodies. It was felt that Lottery funding would never be approved to build the Community Hub, so the use of Section 106 monies from planning applications would be a better source of finance for it.

J Foile highlighted that VAEF worked with many agencies and received referrals from them. For example, referrals for the Handyman Service were received from the District Council. The services provided by VAEF were advertised where possible, such as Doctor Surgeries and Dentists etc., but residents would also learn about them from their neighbours by word of mouth. VAEF was also independent from the statutory bodies, which could also help in reaching out to some people.

J Foile informed the Panel of the current key priorities for VAEF, which included:

- Recruiting more volunteers;
- Supporting more people with support needs themselves into becoming volunteers;
- Enabling people to live in their own homes for longer and combating loneliness and isolation as people live longer; and
- Partnership working and engaging with the thematic groups which emerged from the Local Strategic Partnership.

VAEF was also looking to increase remote volunteering, for example from people with conditions such as Multiple Sclerosis who could make phone calls to people in an effort to reduce loneliness.

The Panel thanked J Foile for an informative presentation on the activities of VAEF, and it was commented that the increasingly aging population gave scope for VAEF to increase its number of volunteers. Cllr Mitchell added that the remote calling service was very important when she worked at the London Borough Council of Waltham Forest as it helped to reduce loneliness, and encouraged elderly residents to attend events at the Day Centres.

Resolved:

- (1) That the presentation from Voluntary Action Epping Forest on its services and activities throughout the District be noted; and
- (2) That the new three-year Strategic Plan for Voluntary Action Epping Forest be distributed to Members of the Panel prior to the next meeting scheduled for 29 October 2015.

13. REVIEW OF GRANT AID SCHEME - SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENTS

C Overend presented a report on the various Service Level Agreements within the Council's Grant Aid Scheme, excluding the agreements with Voluntary Action Epping

Forest and the Citizen's Advice Bureau Epping Forest.

C Overend reported that the present two tier Grant Aid Scheme was set up in the 1990s with the aim of providing a degree of financial security to well-established voluntary groups to enable the Groups to develop their services further. It was an approach that was replicated by other Councils at the time. Currently, there were 15 voluntary groups who had a Service Level Agreement with the Council, ranging from the Alzheimer's Society to Zinc Arts in Ongar which provided a variety of services across the District. Information on 14 of the Groups had been included in the agenda, including how the Council's Grant Aid funding contributed to their activities and services, and their plans for the future. Each Service Level Agreement had a number of standard features, such as the provision of up-to-date accounts, minutes from management meetings, and publicising the support provided by the District Council.

C Overend advised the Panel that the number of Councils in Essex retaining such agreements with voluntary groups had declined, as had the total number of such funding agreements, although some District Councils had still retained similar arrangements. Having reviewed the information provided by Officers, and having visited a number of the Groups during the Summer, the Panel was requested to consider the existing arrangements and make recommendations for the operation of Service Level Agreements from 2016/17 onwards, options for which included: maintaining the current arrangements; reducing the number of such agreements; or even dispensing with them altogether. However, the Panel was reminded that it had already agreed in the first stage of the review any Group in receipt of a Funding Agreement from 1 April 2016 would be required to show 'added value' to the District on an annual basis.

Following the visits made by the Panel to some of the Groups, it was acknowledged that: the Alzheimer's Society was performing important work, which could be replicated across the District if further funding was available; the Red Cross had had to move premises recently but were still able to loan equipment; and the Ongar & Villages Voluntary Care needed more money to provide publicity asking for more volunteers. There was a certain amount of dissatisfaction expressed concerning Zinc Arts, and that they were not run more akin to a business. They had a number of rooms available that they could lease out but kept requesting Grant funding from the Council. Cllr Surtees stated that Zinc Arts had not been able to attract much business since the recession of 2008-10, and their fees were very high for both local authorities and individuals. Their grant was relatively small and they should probably examine other alternatives for funding; J Chandler confirmed that there were issues with Zinc Arts' business plan.

Cllr Mitchell highlighted that there appeared to be nothing in the accounts for Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS, previously Criminal Records Bureau) checks for the majority of Groups which had dealings with children. J Chandler stated that groups in receipt of Grant Aid had to have a safeguarding policy in place, with properly checked individuals. G Wallis added that DBS checks were usually free so would not appear in the accounts anyway.

C Overend reminded the Panel that the current Service Level Agreements, and accompanying criteria, were probably getting dated and required revising. Cllr Knapman suggested that the Council should set a threshold of £5,000 per annum below which specific Service Level Agreements would not apply. It would not make any difference to those national organisations which had financial resources more readily available, and for the smaller organisations the Council was not seeing that much return for its investment given the amount of time taken to fulfil all the Council's requirements for an Agreement. C Overend commented that historically there had

been demand from Groups for some sort of financial security beyond one year in respect of receiving grant funding and it would be difficult to justify providing £5,000 per annum for some Groups, although they needed the financial certainty. Cllr Knapman stated that for Groups in receipt of less than £5,000 per annum, the existing Service Level Agreements seemed overly bureaucratic and complex. The Council could still agree longer term funding for these Groups but with simpler, clearly defined criteria to meet, such as production of an annual report citing the relevance and value for money from the funding provided by the Council. The Council should be making it as easy as possible for good organisations to receive Grant Aid funding from the Council. The Panel noted that Uttlesford District Council followed a similar approach. C Overend undertook to provide a list of potential, suitable criteria for inclusion in the Panel's Final Report.

Resolved:

- (1) That the Service Level Agreements in their current form be terminated on 31 March 2016;
- (2) That, from 1 April 2016, Service Level Agreements only be provided for those Voluntary Groups receiving £5,000 or more per annum;
- (3) That, from 1 April 2016, funding of less than £5,000 per annum for three years be provided for Voluntary Groups without the need for a formal Service Level Agreement but subject to the receipt of an Annual Report from each Group outlining the benefit to the District from the funding;
- (4) That the criteria for future Funding Agreements be revised by Officers to take account of local factors; and
- (5) That the Groups in receipt of Grant Aid Funding continue to be determined by the Leisure and Community Services Portfolio Holder as at present, regardless of whether a Service Level Agreement was required or not.

14. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

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

15. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

The Panel noted that there was no business which necessitated the exclusion of the public and press from the meeting.

16. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Panel noted that its next meeting was scheduled for 29 October 2015.

CHAIRMAN