

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF GRANT AID REVIEW TASK AND FINISH SCRUTINY PANEL
HELD ON MONDAY, 15 FEBRUARY 2016
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 7.00 - 8.00 PM**

Members Present: C P Pond (Chairman), A Boyce, G Shiell and B Surtees.

Other members present: H Kane

Apologies for Absence: A Mitchell and S Murray

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

24. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Panel noted that no substitutes had been appointed for this meeting.

25. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest pursuant to the Council's Member Code of Conduct.

26. MINUTES

Resolved:

(1) That the minutes of the meeting held on 29 October 2015 be taken as read and signed by the Chairman as a correct record, subject to the following amendment to minute 21, resolution (2) to read:

“(2) That a draft Service Level Agreement for Voluntary Action Epping Forest would be brought to the Panel.”

27. REVIEW OF GRANT AID SCHEME - SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENT WITH EPPING FOREST CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAU

The Chairman invited the Panel to review the Grant Aid Service Level Agreement with Epping Forest (EF) Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) following their presentation to the Panel on 29 October 2015.

Cllr Boyce commented that he was very impressed with the services offered by the EF CAB when he spent a day with them during his year as Chairman. They helped a vast number of people with their problems, including financial, personal and family issues.

G Wallis reported that the CAB was now fully operational from Loughton Library and were happy to host further visits from Members if they wished. The new CAB

premises in Epping were scheduled for opening in April 2016. Officers could not advise the panel on the Outreach service provided by the CAB and based at Ongar. J Chandler expressed concerns about the expensive overheads for the CAB in the District and opined that the Outreach service was very cost effective in comparison to permanent offices. G Wallis highlighted that the CAB received a considerable amount of money from the Council each year to provide their services within the District, and an application had recently been received for a further £5,000 (not granted) for refurbishment of the new premises at Loughton Library.

Cllr Pond felt that it was better for the CAB to be based at Loughton Library rather than a back office, especially with the excellent parking facilities nearby. Cllr Kane informed the Panel that she had attended the last annual general meeting for the CAB in the District, and the CAB were happy that the County Council had offered space within Loughton Library. However, the move had been expensive as the CAB had undertaken certain office modifications so that the accommodation met their specifications, which had been funded out of their reserves.

G Wallis was concerned that the CAB within the District was not reaching out enough to other organisations for funding, and relying solely on the District Council; however, the CAB had indicated that this issue would be examined in the future. J Chandler added that funding from the European Union was also potentially available. Cllr Surtees commented that the CAB had to demonstrate value for money to the Council, given the high level of funding provided to them, and that services-in-kind should also be counted, such as the provision of rent-free premises.

Cllr Pond believed that the CAB needed three centres in Epping Forest as it was such a widespread District. G Wallis stated that the CAB had only two permanent centres within the District, at Epping and Loughton, as the centres at Waltham Abbey and Limes Farm were part of the Outreach Programme. J Chandler added that there was the possibility for the CAB to be based at the Civic Offices in the future as part of the Transformation Programme. Cllr Surtees welcomed the idea of creating a possible Community Hub at the Civic Offices.

Resolved:

(1) That provision for longer term funding to the Citizens Advice Bureau in Epping Forest be maintained by the District Council from 2016/17, based on performance management benchmarking closely monitored on an annual basis; and

(2) That the Service Level Agreement for the Citizens Advice Bureau in Epping Forest be based on the agreement in relation to Voluntary Action Epping Forest.

28. PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENTS

G Wallis introduced a report on the proposed recommendations for Service Level Agreements.

G Wallis reminded the Panel that it had now received presentations from all of the key organisations receiving Grant Aid funding through three-year Service Level Agreements with the Council, as well as considering the range of other local voluntary sector groups receiving lower levels of funding. The Panel had received detailed presentations from Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF), which currently received £39,120 per annum plus £31,690 towards accommodation costs, and Epping Forest (EF) Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), which received £113,840 per annum plus £42,000 from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) towards two Debt

Advisor posts. The Panel had also reviewed all paperwork and monitoring information used in the administration of the Council's Grant Aid Scheme, and considered the arrangements operated by a number of other local authorities in Essex.

G Wallis reported that the proposals before the Panel, for inclusion in the final report to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in April, was: for Service Level Agreements to be no longer used for those Groups receiving less than £5,000 in total over the period of the award (usually three years); for a revised Service Level Agreement to be approved for those groups receiving funding in excess of £5,000 over the period, including VAEF and EF CAB. The new Service Level Agreement would include the revised Monitoring/Evaluation form and a Schedule of Objectives to be achieved as a condition of their funding.

J Chandler added that the Chief Internal Auditor had requested section 4.2 to be strengthened in the draft Service Level Agreement to delay and/or prevent payment if necessary in the event that the Group or Organisation failed to provide sufficient evidence of progress towards the achievement of their agreed objectives. Cllr Surtees suggested that section 5.2 should read "...*audited accounts*..." rather than "...*examined accounts*...", and this was agreed by the Panel.

In response to questions from Members of the Panel, G Wallis stated that the potential funding of Groups involved in questionable activities would be covered by section 3.5 and the need for the Group to comply with Safeguarding legislation. If the Council should ever run out of money then J Chandler believed that this would probably be dealt with under the Council's general Business Continuity risk within the Corporate Risk Register, but the Chief Internal Auditor would be requested to examine the wording.

Cllr Surtees enquired as to whether Column A on the Monitoring & Evaluation Form should include the number of cases dealt with by the CAB within the District. J Chandler stated that this would be covered by the objectives agreed with the CAB under Schedule A of the Agreement, and could be outlined in Section 2 (Benefits for the Local Community) of the Monitoring & Evaluation Form. G Wallis added that the Council would ask for such information from the CAB when the Agreement was reviewed in any case.

The Panel thanked G Wallis and N Wilkinson for their assistance and support throughout the Review, and expressed their gratitude for the tremendous efforts made by C Overend before his tragic death in October 2015.

Resolved:

(1) That the overview of the findings of the Panel during Phase II of the Review be noted;

(2) That the following proposed arrangements for the future operation of the Council's Grant Aid Scheme be agreed for inclusion in the Panel's final report to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in April 2016:

(a) that the use of written Service Level Agreements be ceased for Groups receiving three-year Grant Aid funding of less than £5,000 in total over the period of the award and a more efficient annual monitoring process be introduced for these Groups instead; and

(b) that the revised Service Level Agreement (as attached at Appendix 1 of the report) be approved for all Voluntary Sector Groups receiving three-year Grant Aid funding of £5,000 or more in total over the period of the award, including Voluntary Action Epping Forest and Epping Forest Citizens Advice Bureau, subject to the following amendment:

(i) Section 5.2 be amended to read “...*audited accounts*...” not “...*examined accounts*...”.

29. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

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

30. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

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

31. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Panel noted that its next, and final, meeting was scheduled for 14 March 2016.

CHAIRMAN