



Epping Forest District Council

SCRUTINY

REPORT OF THE GRANT AID REVIEW
TASK AND FINISH PANEL
PART ONE – MAJOR GRANTS

APRIL 2015

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1. Chairman's Foreword

1.1 At its meeting on 16 September 2014, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed the establishment of a Task and Finish Panel to review the Council's Grant Aid Scheme for Sports, Arts, Leisure and Community Groups in terms of the overall policy/guidance and procedures for major grants and Service Level Agreements, including those for the determination of applications, and those for the pre and post determination stages.

1.2 Early in the process the Panel came to the conclusion that it would be easier and more logical to break down the review into two parts, namely one focussing more on the major grants and associated policy and procedure (to be completed in the 2014/15 Council year), and the other relating to the Service Level Agreements with voluntary groups active in the District, including the Epping Forest District Citizens Advice Bureau (EFD CAB) and Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF), to be carried out in 2015/16. This report relates to the first part of the review.

1.3 I would like to take the opportunity to thank those involved to date, for their input and invaluable contributions and ideas. These include all the other members of the Panel (Councillors John Knapman, Jeane Lea, Ann Mitchell, Stephen Murray, Glynis Shiell and Brian Surtees), Councillor Helen Kane as the Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Wellbeing (the portfolio covering the Scheme), the Community Policy and Grants Officer and Assistant, and the Assistant Directors (Private Sector Housing and Communities Support) and (Community Services and Safety) and the Community Development and Wellbeing Manager.

1.4 The intention is that the second part of the review will include site visits and meetings with some of the voluntary sector organisations. It will no doubt also involve other Members and Officers, plus representatives from some of the voluntary sector groups concerned.

2. Overview

2.1 Bearing in mind the origins referred to in 1.1 above, the Panel determined the following terms of reference:

To specifically consider:

- *The eligibility criteria and assessment arrangements for funding, taking into account the budget available and the thematic areas in the Leisure and Cultural strategy*
- *The grant maxima*
- *Appropriate arrangements for safeguarding*
- *Review procedures*

To consider any other matters deemed appropriate.

2.2 The aims and objectives were:

2.2.1 To report findings to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and to submit a final report, to be completed by 16 April 2015, for consideration by the Committee and the Council;

2.2.2 To gather evidence and information in relation to the review, through the receipt of appropriate data, presentations and by participation in fact-finding visits to other authorities if necessary;

2.2.3 To have due regard to the relevant legislation and the Council's procedures; and

2.2.4 To consult political groups and independent Councillors during the review process.

3. Context

3.1 There is general recognition of the vital role the voluntary and community sector brings to the prosperity and well-being of the Epping Forest District. It has a long tradition of providing services directly or in partnership with the Council, to the community and to specific client groups. It has built a reputation for diversity and innovation, and funding approved under the scheme is aimed at enhancing these aspects, as many of the clients and customers of the applicant groups suffer the effects of being socially excluded or disadvantaged.

3.2 The Scheme's aims are in common with those of the groups receiving support and, indeed, the Council's wider objectives in terms of finance and value for money, culture and heritage, a healthy lifestyle and support to younger and older people. The sector plays key roles as follows:

- Building 'social capital' by promoting self-organised communities and by encouraging volunteering and active citizenship;
- Providing services to local people and to particular groups in the community, thereby meeting social and individual needs;
- Advocacy on behalf of communities;
- Contributing expertise on policy formulation through dialogue with the Council and the wider statutory sector;
- Providing employment and income, thereby contributing to economic output; and
- Delivering public services and offering greater customer choice.

3.3 The review process undoubtedly increased the knowledge and understanding of Panel Members regarding the 'Third Sector' and Members can now, in turn, impart that to other Councillors and residents. It not only helped in providing assurances that the policies and practices of the Scheme continued to meet local needs to a good standard, but also provided an opportunity to identify measures through which the strategic and operational linkages between the voluntary and community sector, the Council and other partner bodies could be strengthened even further.

3.4 In December 2014 the Council adopted a new Leisure and Cultural Strategy. That strategy identified Community and Cultural Cohesion, Inequalities, the needs of Young People, Youth Unemployed, Anti-Social Behaviour, an Ageing Population and Rural Isolation as key issues to be addressed. The Council acknowledged the important role the voluntary sector played with regard to all these aspects, whilst noting that the Panel was about to embark on this review which would also seek to ensure that resources were used in the most efficient way possible and that policy priorities were met.

3.5 The Council wishes to maintain its respect for the independence of voluntary and community organisations, whilst providing opportunities for increasing their role and scope. Nonetheless, in view of the need to identify efficiency savings, a decision had been made to reduce the Grant Aid Budget by £11,517 in 2015/16. This had reduced the overall budget to £83,453 of which £43,453 was committed on three year agreements. In effect, this left £40,000 for consideration of applications for one-off major grants. The Panel's review was undertaken against this backdrop.

4. Recommendations

The Panel recommends as follows;

(1) That the initial priority for grants under the Scheme in 2015/16 should be for:

- (a) new projects which have not received grant aid funding in the past;
 - (b) new groups which have not received funding in the past;
 - (c) projects concerned with Older People (in view of the greater emphasis being placed on this in the new Council Corporate Plan for 2015-20); and
 - (d) projects concerned with Younger People;
- (2) That the following revisions be made to the *Introduction* section of the Grant Aid Application Form:
- (a) Older People and Younger People to be listed as a separate Key Priorities; and
 - (b) the reference to Domestic Violence to be amended to 'Domestic Abuse';
- (3) That the following revisions be made to the *What You Can Apply For* section of the Grant Aid Application Form:
- (a) the inclusion of feasibility studies as a type of scheme for which an application can be considered; and
 - (b) the removal of the example of a Counselling Service from the second paragraph;
- (4) That the following revisions be made to the *Factors Taken into Account* section of the Grant Aid Application Form:
- (a) the support of your local Town or Parish Council to be added as a factor;
 - (b) the impact of the project on the District to be added as a factor; and
 - (c) a further comment inserted to caution applicants that failure to disclose other funding received would jeopardise their bid;
- (5) That the following revision be made to the *Grant Conditions* section of the Grant Aid Application Form:
- (a) an addition of a requirement to provide the District Council with an evaluation of the funded project after six months;
- (6) That the following revision be made to the *Grant Decisions* section of the Grant Aid Application Form:
- (a) addition of wording in the first paragraph to the effect that the Portfolio Holder was advised by officers before taking a decision;
- (7) That the question on the Application Form in the *About your Organisation* section concerning the management structure of the applicant group be expanded to include whether the group was part of a larger organisation;
- (8) That 'Support of Older People' be added to the *Contribution towards Relevant Council Objectives* section of the Funding Matrix for the Grant Aid scheme Scorecard;

(9) That the requirement to provide the District Council with a copy of the group's Safeguarding Policy if they answered Yes to the question concerning working with children and Vulnerable Adults, be added to the *Grant Aid Application – Check List*;

(10) That the use of social media and Parish/Town Council websites be added to the range of methods used in publicising the Scheme;

(11) That a press release be produced subsequent to the issue of the Portfolio Holder decision for each round of applications;

(12) That the possibility of an award being made at Council meetings and/or arrangements for an annual 'Project of the Year' Award be investigated;

(13) That each group in receipt of a Service Level Agreement from 1 April 2016 be required to show 'added value' through their services on a year by year basis and that requirement be included as part of the Agreement; and

(14) That, as part of the review of Service Level Agreements in 2015/16 representatives of the groups be invited to attend meetings of the Panel and/or visits by Panel members be carried out, to gain a greater understanding of their role and services provided and to assess their suitability for the Agreement to be maintained from 1 April 2016.

5. Report

5.1 Meetings of the Panel dealing with the first part of the review were held on 14 January, 2 and 31 March, and 16 April 2015. In carrying out this stage, the Panel gathered and assessed a range of evidence including the following:

- The eligibility criteria for the current scheme;
- A copy of the existing application form;
- Details of the grants approved in the past five years;
- A list of current three year Service Level Agreements;
- The Grant Aid Scheme Scorecard/Funding Matrix used in the assessment of applications;
- Information on the current advertising and consultation arrangements;
- The relevant Council targets impacted by the Scheme; and
- Monitoring arrangements through follow-up visits.

5.2 The Panel discussed possible revisions to the Scheme to deal with the budget cut for 2015/16, which it was noted equated to approximately a 22% reduction in funding available for one-off grants. Possibilities considered included allocating proportionately less money for each grant approved, restricting the number of grants approved by geographic area within the District, giving priority to those grants pertaining to District-wide activities or at least covering several parishes, abolishing extra grants to groups for new projects when they were already in receipt of funding through a Service Level Agreement, and removing specific categories from the scope of the Scheme.

5.3 In looking at the application form itself, the Panel felt that, following on from the greater emphasis afforded to Older People and Younger People in the new Corporate Plan, these should be clear, distinct key priority areas in the criteria. Furthermore, whilst pleased with the excellent and extensive range of projects and groups receiving funding over the years, the Panel wished to give even more encouragement to new imaginative schemes and groups not previously, or recently, in receipt of funding.

5.4 The Panel considered the application form to be comprehensive and reasonably clear but identified a few areas which it felt would bring it up-to-date and enhance it. These included: the renaming of the Elderly to Older People and Domestic Violence to Domestic Abuse; the inclusion of feasibility studies as projects suitable for consideration; the removal of the example of a counselling service as a new project in the *What you can Apply for* section; the specific inclusion of the impact of the project on the District in the *Factors Taken into Account* section; the support of the local Parish/Town Council as an additional factor in determining an application; a requirement for a project evaluation report to be supplied by a successful applicant group approximately six months after the project's implementation; and a requirement for a copy of the group's Safeguarding Policy to be provided where applicable.

5.5 It was noted that there were a number of groups which, whilst having a specific branch or being active in the District, were part of a larger organisation. The Panel agreed that the section on the form dealing with the group's management structure should be expanded to ask this particular question. In noting that the form was generally compact with a small font size, the Panel was assured that it could be provided with larger print and would be offered on the Council's website as a download. It had been planned to bring out a new form with amended guidelines and criteria earlier in 2014/15 in any event but that would now take place once the Task and Finish Panel had completed its review.

5.6 The Panel noted that other funding schemes had seen their available finance reduced and that, in turn, had impacted on applicant groups seeking joint or match funding for their projects. The District Council did not usually liaise directly with Parish and Town Councils that also offered Grant Aid schemes, although the potential for funding from other sources was always assessed as part of the application process and seen as a positive factor.

5.7 Given the paucity of funding available, the Panel looked at the potential for increasing the amount from other District Council budgets. Two possibilities looked at were to allow Councillors to donate part of their Basic Allowance to the Grant Aid Budget or to persuade local businesses to contribute to it. On balance, the Panel came to the conclusion that these options should not be pursued. The Basic Allowance was paid to Members in recognition of their community role and to reimburse them for expenses incurred representing their communities and there were other more appropriate ways businesses could get involved with community projects without donating directly to the Grant Aid Budget.

5.8 The Panel noted that, prior to the Cabinet system of government in 2001, the Grant Aid Budget had been allocated to successful applicants at one particular point in the Council year, leaving little or no monies left for the consideration of applications later in the year. Likewise, under the present system whereby applications were determined by the Portfolio Holder on a rolling basis approximately every six months, invariably each year's allocation was used up. Whilst at one moment, and indeed at the end of the financial year, there might appear to be monies remaining in the budget, this was because payment to the applicant group was not released until proof of expenditure was received. In some instances, this might be in a subsequent financial year. However, this money was not an underspend, as such.

5.9 It was noted that consultation arrangements were in place as a means of obtaining views about the groups and the applications received. These would vary dependent on the application concerned but would normally include the following:

- Ward Councillors – for comment;
- EFDC Resources – for comments on the accounts and finances of the group;
- VAEF;
- EFDC Community Services staff;

- Other would be funding groups in appropriate circumstances; and
- Parish/Town Councils where appropriate.

5.10 The Panel received a report on the different advertising methods used in publicising the Scheme. It noted that approaches used were many and varied and included those itemised below. VAEF and the Community Development staff assisted in identifying harder to reach community, sports or arts groups whom, in appropriate circumstances, they signposted towards the opportunities presented by the Scheme:

- The District Council website;
- Direct contact with Parish/Town Councils;
- Parish magazines/Town Guides;
- Newsletters e.g. VAEF and those of groups already in receipt of funding;
- Display notices;
- Local Newspapers;
- Stalls at local funding forums/events;
- Sessions as part of the training to new Members following District Council elections; and
- EFDC Reception/Information Centres.

5.11 Sample copies of the pro-forma used on follow-up visits to groups successful in receiving grants were supplied to Members of the Panel. It was noted that, in addition to proving a mechanism to monitor the success of a project, the visits provided the opportunity to see the groups carrying out their everyday activities, and a dialogue to discuss ongoing matters or for the group or District Council to raise matters of concern. The issues discussed varied dependent on the type of group and project concerned but tended to encompass the following:

- Whether the project had been a success and, if not, why not;
- Promotion of EFDC funding;
- If applicable, whether the group was able to obtain additional funding, and from whom, to complete the project;
- Any volunteer/staff issues affecting the project;
- Are any further improvements/developments anticipated;
- Financial issues affecting the group;
- The records maintained/attendance figures/ is the project being used; and
- Relationship with other partner bodies and the wider community.

5.12 The Panel was also in receipt of the schedule summarising information on the 17 groups in receipt of three year funding agreements, including the names of the groups, the range of services provided and the amount of funding per annum. This information illustrated the variety of such groups, whether in the community, arts or sports area, and gave perspective to the two levels of grant awarded. A thorough review of the agreements, accompanying policy and criteria, was to be carried out by the Panel in 2015/16.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Following a thorough review, the Panel was satisfied with the way that the Scheme operated, notwithstanding any findings from the more extensive review of service level agreements to be carried out in the next Council year as previously referred to. Members were particularly pleased with the rich variety of schemes and the multifarious groups which had been assisted through the Scheme. The Panel acknowledged that in some instances the funding amounted to a lifeline for the groups and the much-needed services they provided to the community. The Panel is

of the opinion that, subject to the minor amendments to the policy and operational aspects set out in the recommendations in section 4 above, the overall arrangements for the Scheme, in terms of major grants to the groups concerned, should remain as at present.