

Cabinet Report

Report of Head of Policy and Programmes

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Wards affected: All

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To: CABINET

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Vale Partnership Grants

Recommendations

That Cabinet agrees to:

(a) Cease the process to explore the commissioning of information and advice services from 2023 onwards (as previously agreed in October 2021).

(b) Extend the current Partnership Grants to Oxfordshire South and Vale Citizen's Advice Bureau and Wantage Independent Advice Centre (now known as Vale Community Impact) and Community First Oxfordshire towards the provision of services across the district to 31 March 2024, subject to approval of the 2023/24 budget by full Council.

(c) Consider potential partnership models for the Partnership Grant fund with the intention to commence a new funding scheme from April 2024 onwards subject to approval of the 2024/25 budget by full Council.

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of the report is to seek a decision from Cabinet on the future of the council's Partnership Grant fund.

Corporate Objectives

2. The council's Partnership Grant fund supports the Corporate Plan objective of building healthy communities. It also supports the equality objective to support

communities to deliver better outcomes for disadvantaged groups and encourage community cohesion.

Background

3. The council has for many years provided funding for organisations to provide community advice, support and outreach services in the district. This has been in the form of partnership grants for which there is currently a budget of £154,920 per annum.
4. The organisations currently receiving funding are as follows:
 - Oxfordshire South and Vale Citizen's Advice Bureau (CA) £88,920 to deliver advice services across the district.
 - Wantage Independent Advice Centre (WIAC) now known as Vale Community Impact (VCI) £58,000 to deliver advice services across the district.
 - Community First Oxfordshire (CFO) £8,000 to offer outreach support and training programmes to community organisations across the district.
5. The formal approval of this funding comes to an end this financial year (March 2023).
6. On [1 October 2021 Cabinet](#) considered a number of options for this fund and agreed to:
 - a) commission an organisation to provide information and advice services from 2023 onwards (budget permitting); and
 - b) extend the current partnership grants to Oxfordshire South and Vale Citizen's Advice Bureau, Wantage Independent Advice Centre (now known as Vale Community Impact), and Community First Oxfordshire towards the provision of services across the district in 2022/23.

Further considerations

7. The 2022/23 extension of the existing partnership grants was completed earlier in the year and stage payments have been released to the three organisations in accordance with grant conditions.
8. Following the Cabinet decision in October 2021, officers commenced the detailed process of exploring commissioning information and advice services. However, it became apparent at the early stages of developing a specification, that the direction of travel did not align with the partnership approach being delivered through the Covid-19 pandemic and more recently the support response to refugees and asylum seekers being welcomed across the district and residents affected by the cost-of-living crisis.
9. The organisations currently being funded and working in partnership with us, have and continue to deliver excellent service and have embraced a highly flexible approach to supporting our local residents and targeting their services to meet resident need and our agreed priorities.

10. VCI and Citizens Advice have worked with officers on the development and distribution of government grants to assist residents in hardship since 2020. They assessed eligibility and offered a holistic package of support for the Emergency Assistance Grant, Winter Support Grant, two Covid Support Grants, Household Support Funds 1 and 2 and are prepared to distribute Household Support Fund 3 if required.
11. It is officers' view that having flexibility within community partnership arrangements is essential in the current climate, and officers recommend Cabinet reconsider the proposed option to 'commission an organisation to provide information and advice services from 2023 onwards'.
12. Whilst a commissioning route does offer some benefits as outlined in the paper presented to Cabinet in October 2021, the current flexible operating model is providing an efficient and effective route to allocate Government funding and provide support to our most vulnerable residents at a time of challenge and uncertainty.
13. If Cabinet supports this change in approach, officers recommend continuation of the existing funding arrangements for 12 months (until March 2024) subject to approval of the budget by Council in February 2023. This would allow a new Partnership Grant fund policy to be prepared and considered during the year (2023/24); with applications to be made and determined by Cabinet in readiness for approval of the budget by the Council for 2024/25.

Climate and ecological impact implications

14. Officers will continue to have discussions as part of annual monitoring with the current grant recipients, about their commitment to climate action in general, and how they may make positive contributions to the climate emergency across their work and organisation. Any potential future partnership model or policy will ensure this is incorporated into it.
15. All three organisations are currently supporting the council's climate emergency by offering energy saving advice to residents and/or communities as part of their current cost of living advice services, which includes energy saving measures to cut home energy bills.

Financial Implications

16. The council has had an ongoing partnership grants budget to fund voluntary organisations for several years now. £154,920 per annum is included in the medium-term financial plan for 2023/2024, 2024/2025 and 2025/2026, subject to the annual budget setting process and approval by Full Council.
17. Any council decision that has financial implications must be made with the knowledge of the council's overarching financial position. For Vale, the position reflected in the council's medium-term financial plan (MTFP) as reported to Full Council in February 2022 showed that the council was able to set a balanced budget for 2022/23, but that there is expected to be a budget gap in future years.
18. This future funding gap is predicted to increase to over £3.7 million by 2026/27. As there remains no certainty on future local government funding, following the

announcement of a one-year spending review by government, and as the long-term financial consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic remain unknown, this gap could increase further. Every financial decision made needs to be cognisant of the need to address this funding gap in future years.

Legal Implications

19. There are no specific legal implications arising from the recommendations in this report, it is open to Cabinet to decide not to proceed with a proposal which it has previously agreed. Should the current partnership fund be extended for a year, a contract variation will need to be prepared to extend the current legal agreements.

Other implications

20. In line with the public sector equality duty, we have considered the implications of a partnership grant extension for the three current recipients, with a view to implementing potential partnership models. Officers will continue to regularly monitor the grants awarded on a regular basis. Officers are of the view that no groups or persons with protected characteristics will be disadvantaged by this decision and will carry out a further assessment on the potential partnership models later this year. All organisations the council funds through this scheme help to advance equality of opportunity for the communities they provide services for.

Conclusion

21. Officers recommend that Cabinet reconsider the commissioning of advice services and instead give consideration to a new Partnership Grant fund which could offer greater flexibility in services than commissioning.
22. This would involve extending the grant term for the three organisations currently in receipt of a partnership grant whilst partnership models for a new Partnership Grant fund are fully developed during the next financial year. Officers suggest this is until March 2024.
23. If Cabinet approves this approach, then officers will develop a new Partnership Grant Fund during the next few months for Cabinet's consideration. Applications can then be opened and determined by Cabinet subject to the necessary approval by Full Council of a budget for funding to commence in April 2024.