

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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Partnership Grant Policy 2024/25-2028/29

Recommendation

That Cabinet approves the Partnership Grant Policy 2024/25-2028/29 attached at appendix one.

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of the report is to seek approval from Cabinet for the new Partnership Grant policy, to provide five years of funding to successful organisations (2024/25-2028/29).

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. Historically, there has not been a formal grant policy to award the funding.
 6. On the [11 November 2022, Cabinet](#) agreed to extend the current grants to the above organisations until the 31 March 2024. In order to improve transparency; to then develop a policy to commence a new funding scheme from April 2024.

Considerations

7. Officers have developed a Partnerships Grant policy which provides revenue grant support for organisations providing information and advice services across the district, in relation to those who are most in need due to inequalities from the cost of living crisis and/or other national issues.
8. The scheme will favour organisations who are actively exploring partnership or collaborative working with other voluntary organisations to avoid duplication of services provided and improve efficiency. It recognises the need for flexible responsive services and revenue funding that extends more than one year, so that organisations can plan ahead with confidence.
9. In developing the policy, consideration was also given to setting criteria wider than just information and advice services, covering specific support. However, this option was rejected as the need for these particular services has increased significantly since COVID and now the cost of living crisis. Equally, as the budget remains the same, it would result in very small awards, that would not meet the needs of the organisations or council, which ultimately impacts on services our residents receive.

Climate and ecological impact implications

10. As the energy crisis continues to impact the most vulnerable households in our communities, local advice services have an increasingly important role to play in supporting residents with low incomes, living in low energy performance homes. They provide a vital service to access funding and practical help to improve energy efficiency through better insulation, ventilation and cheaper, low carbon heating solutions ensure people are comfortable and safe in their own homes. These measures provide long term solutions to reduce energy costs, improve wellbeing and make a positive difference to the district's carbon emissions.
11. As part of the application process organisations will be asked about their commitment to the climate emergency and what support they offer residents in this area.
12. Officers will also have discussions as part of annual monitoring with the successful grant recipients, about their ongoing commitment to climate action in general, and how they may make positive contributions to the climate emergency across their work and organisation.

Financial Implications

13. 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 (MTFP) for 2023/2024 to 2027/2028, subject to annual review and approval by Council when setting its budget. It is recognised at the time of writing the MTFP does not extend to the full lifespan of the proposed policy.
14. We recognise the pressure on organisations of increasing demand for services, when grant funding remains the same each year. A proposed annual review of the grants budget would allow for possible award increases should an organisation be able to show their costs for delivering the services have increased. Or indeed the harsh reality that the budget may need to be redeployed should the councils overarching budgetary situation change during the five years.
15. 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 2023 showed that the council was able to set a balanced budget for 2023/24, but that there is expected to be a budget gap in future years. However, there is great uncertainty over this caused by a lack of clarity from government.
16. The future funding gap is predicted to increase to over £7.8 million by 2027/28, based on current cautious officer estimates of future funding levels. Whilst it is anticipated that overall funding for the council will remain relatively unchanged in 2024/25, the lack of certainty on future local government funding from 2025/26 onwards means the level of funding, and the resulting estimated funding gap, could be significantly different from current officer estimates in either a positive or negative way. Every financial decision, particularly those involving medium-term funding commitments (i.e. those beyond 2024/25), needs to be cognisant of the potential for significant funding gaps in future years.

Legal Implications

17. There will be a need to provide an audit trail and to ensure, so far as reasonably possible, that there is compliance with the Subsidy Control Act 2022. Therefore, at the grant application stage applicants will be required to disclose any funding they have received which may constitute Minimal Financial Assistance (MFA) in the financial year in which the grant is applied for and/or the previous two financial years, which together with any grant awarded by the council would be in excess of £315,000.
18. All successful organisations will then be required to enter into a formal grant agreement with the council and will be assessed in line with the Subsidy Control Act 2022; MFA and/or Services of Public Economic Interest requirements, if applicable.

Risks

19. There is a reputational risk that the council may not be able to sustain funding the organisations for five years, due to its own budget pressures. We will mitigate this risk through including clauses in the legal agreement, which enable the council to review the payments as part of the annual budget setting process. Alongside, reflecting that the funding awarded is not a guaranteed annual commitment for the life of the grant, rather an intent. This approach has been historically understood by partnership grant

recipients who were awarded four years' worth of funding. They were reliant on the councils' budget setting process each and every year.

20. There is also the possibility organisations don't deliver against their agreed targets and as a result our residents don't receive the valuable services they need. We will mitigate against this through regular on-going dialogue and performance monitoring meetings throughout the year to understand current pressures and to help identify workable solutions. We also have the ability to reduce or stagger their payments, as a last resort.

Other implications

21. In line with the public sector equality duties, we have considered the implications of the policy on those protected by the Equality Act 2010. Officers are of the view that no groups will be disadvantaged by approving the policy. All organisations who are likely to apply for the funding are providing services to help to advance equality of opportunity and/or meet the needs of their communities. The security of up to five years of funding will ensure that those in most need continue to receive the support at this critical time and for years to come.

Conclusion

22. Officers recommend that Cabinet approves the attached Partnership Grant Policy 2024/25-2028/29, that commits to awarding organisations for up to five years of funding, subject to annual budget review and approval. This will give the funded organisations much need security, allowing them to plan ahead with confidence to meet the needs of our most vulnerable residents.
23. If Cabinet approves this approach, officers will prepare the application process and launch the scheme in July 2023 with the potential funding being in place from April 2024.