



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and date of Committee	DELEGATED DECISION
Subject	AWARDING OF GRANT FUNDED THREE YEAR SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENTS 2024-2027
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	Cllr Joy Aitman, Executive Member for Stronger Healthy Communities Email: joy.aitman@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Andy Barge, Assistant Director – Communities Email: andy.barge@publicagroup.uk
Report author	Heather McCulloch, Community Wellbeing Manager Email: heather.mcculloch@westoxon.gov.uk
Summary/Purpose	To present a summary of applications to the 3 year grant funded service level agreements awards programme and to set out the recommended level of awards as determined by the Chief Executive under delegation, in consultation with the Leader and Executive Members for Stronger Healthy Communities, Planning and Sustainable Development, Environment and Climate Change.
Annexes	Exempt Annex A – Summary of all applications
Recommendation(s)	That the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader and the Executive Members for Stronger Healthy Communities, Planning and Sustainable Development, Environment and Climate Change, resolves to: Agree to award 3 year Service Level Agreements at the funding level indicated and to organisations as set out in Annex A.
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Putting Residents First• Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All• Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife• Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency• Working Together for West Oxfordshire

Key Decision	YES
Exempt	YES
Consultees/ Consultation	<p>This process was set out in reports to Executive on 8th March 2023 and 13th September 2023, where it was approved.</p> <p>Review meetings were held with relevant Executive members and the Chief Executive Officer on Wednesday 24th January, Thursday 1st February 2024 and Wednesday 7th February 2024.</p>

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 In reports to the Executive on 8th March and 13th September 2023 it was agreed to adopt a new approach to community grant funding, better aligned to the outcomes intended from the Council Plan and fostering greater community engagement and involvement. The 3 year grant awards are part of this approach, alongside the Westhive civic crowdfunding platform.
- 1.2 Integral to this new approach are a number of outcomes, or 'lots', all of which have been informed by the Council Plan adopted in January 2023. The Plan itself was shaped by the extensive 'Your Voice Counts' consultation and therefore reflects what's most important to our residents.
- 1.3 The three lots applicable to this awards decision are as follows:
- Lot 1** – Improving our natural environment and the access to it, so that we enable physical and mental wellbeing and cohesive, connected communities.
- Lot 2** – Taking action towards the climate and ecological emergencies, so that we reduce carbon footprints and encourage nature recovery.
- Lot 3** - Increasing community resilience and amplifying the voice of the seldom heard, so that we take action on issues most important to our residents and their needs, such as access to food, supporting young people and cultural provision.
- 1.4 All proposals were required to demonstrate:
- Evidence of financial need by the applicant body
 - Strategic fit and alignment to the relevant lot's outcome
 - Extent of impact, innovation and collaborative working
 - Fit with any existing provision to avoid duplication or displacement activity
 - An assessment of risks associated with the proposed activity
 - A proposed monitoring and evaluation approach
- 1.5 Applications aligned to delivering our desired outcomes in the four lots were accepted from:
- a. Constituted voluntary and community groups

- b. Registered and excepted charities
- c. Community Interest Companies (CICs)
- d. Independent statutory bodies in appropriate circumstances

- 1.6** Commercial organisations and exempt charities were not be eligible to apply for funding and it was not open to town and parish councils, other statutory bodies, organisations providing a statutory service on behalf of a statutory body, education providers or unincorporated groups and associations.
- 1.7** The maximum grant award available was set at £25,000 per annum unless the case could be made by the applicant that the activity proposed would make a particularly significant impact to achieving the Council's outcomes. If this case could be made then the applicant could be considered for a higher award.
- 1.8** The application process for Lots 1-3 was set up in the Publica Group electronic tendering system <https://in-tendhost.co.uk/publicagroup>, hosted on behalf of the Council. This has ensured a transparent and robust assessment framework within which to assess applications, including a set of evaluation criteria.
- 1.9** The funding opportunity for Lots 1-3 was live from 13th October 2023. Applicants were required to submit their proposals by 31st December 2023.
- 1.10** It was agreed with Executive that as opposed to making outline allocations to apportion the budget across Lots 1–3, the allocations be informed by the proposals that come forward to help achieve the desired outcomes from those lots. Given the difficulty to predict what projects would come forward, retaining this flexibility has proven useful.
- 1.11** The procurement for a fourth lot, focussed on high quality, independent housing advice, welfare and debt advice services is being led by another department and was procured in a separate competitive exercise with an alternative timeframe (29th November 2023 to 3rd January 2024). One tender bid was received and following the evaluation process against Lot 4 specification it is our intention to award subject to contracts being agreed. The contract is for a period of 3 years, commencing 1st April 2024. The budget available for Lot 4 is £150,000 per year.

2. SUMMARY OF BIDS

- 2.1** The budget available for Lots 1-3 is £132,000 each year – a total of £396,000 across the 3 year scheme.
- 2.2** The Council received 17 bids for Lots 1-3. The demand is high and in order to meet all requests in full the Council would require a budget of £1,131,891.
- 2.3** A full list of organisations submitting bids is included in Exempt Annex A including those where it is our intention to award.
- 2.4** Other points of interest:
- Of the bids received, 7 out of 17 had not applied through the Community Revenue Grant scheme previously;

- One organisation has made two applications for separate projects
- Two applicants are requesting £40,000 per annum – as they believe that their projects will make a particularly significant impact on Council outcomes
- One applicant is currently applying for the same project on both the Westhive platform and this scheme.

2.5 The procurement team has checked and verified bids. We have been advised by them that the Council has received all outstanding pieces of information from applicants and that there are no conflicts of interest.

2.6 Applications have been considered by an officer grants panel consisting of a lead officer for each lot, and by the Chief Executive and the Executive Members with responsibility for Stronger Healthy Communities, Planning and Sustainable Development, Environment and Climate Change. The panel has appraised and scored applications based on responses in the following questions:

- Method statement (50% of score) – describing the planned project, its strategic fit with Council outcomes, the likely impact, fit with other projects, timescale and budget for the activity
- Added value (20% of score) – explaining the added value contributed by the organisation, its expertise in the sector leverage opportunities
- Safeguarding (5% of score) – confirming that appropriate policies and procedures are in place
- Inclusion (5% of score) – explaining how each project is inclusive and equitable
- Monitoring and evaluation (15% of score) – setting out the methods and process planned
- Risk assessment (5% of score) – providing a risk assessment for each proposed project

2.7 Furthermore the panel adopted a number of principles to assist in reaching recommendations:

- Be constructive with organisations and identify additional funding streams that could be used to swell the core budget.
- Be fair and expect organisations to only deliver a reduced programme if a lower amount of funding is provided
- Be thorough and consider the financial need of the organisation
- Be open to innovation
- Be rigorous and allocate funding by ranking
- Value track record

2.8 Reviewing in this way has enabled officers and members to determine a list of priority projects. This will be essential to inform how the funding is allocated.

2.9 All awards are subject to contracts being agreed. Successful projects are expected to start delivery in April 2024.

2.10 In line with the Council's Publication Scheme, the awards will be published on the Council's website once the service level agreements are in place.

3. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

3.1 Given the scheme is oversubscribed officers have been exploring alternative options for projects to secure financial support. This has included:

- Using some of the unallocated 2023/24 Westhive pledge pot
- A number of project proposals being referred to the UKSPF/REPF teams for consideration
- A number of projects reviewed for suitability for funding via Contain Outbreak Management funding (COMF)
- Explore potential to utilise a small sum from the Council Priorities Fund

3.2 Adopting these additional funding opportunities has allowed us to swell the core budget for the three-year period from £396,000 to £553,500. This approach accords well with one of the intended outcomes from the grants review, namely, to optimise the total funding available and maximise reach and impact.

3.3 The decision is delegated to the Chief Executive in consultation with members of the Executive and has been reached following engagement with specialist officers who have followed a robust and objective assessment process. Whilst the wider Council could request a review of the decision such action would delay the process of confirming awards to applicants.

3.4 Whilst not recommended, Executive could decide not to award three year service level agreements for Lots 1-3. This would save £132,000 each year. This option would place the authority in an unusual position of not offering any form of grant support and remove the scope to achieve the Council Plan priority outcomes through grant funding. This option would also have a significant, negative community impact.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The budget for Lots 1-3 is £396,000 over 3 years or £132,000 per annum. The total requested by applicants over 3 years is £1,131,891. Through the verification and assessment processes applications have been reviewed, scored against the criteria and prioritised. This is reflected in the level of awards proposed. These proposals are within budget.

4.2 A number of other sources of external funding available to the Council have been explored to help bridge the gap and ensure that the maximum benefit to residents is achieved. This has increased the budget to £553,500 over the three years.

4.3 By entering into 3 year agreements the Council is committed to an agreed level of funding to successful recipients for 2024-25, 2025-26 and 2026-27. This commitment will need to be met in the 2024-25 budget which will be approved by Council in February 2024 and will need to be reflected in subsequent annual revenue budgets approved by the Council, or met from reserves.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The proposal within this report relates to the Council's discretionary grants budget and not to any statutory schemes. The way in which this resource is invested is at the Council's discretion, subject to appropriate governance, transparency and financial safeguards.

6. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 6.1 The procurement process requires applicants to submit a variety of documentation to mitigate the risk of a fraud, health and safety failings and safeguarding issues. Furthermore the officer assessment panel reviewed the proposals and the applicants' suitability to deliver the programme based on specialist knowledge.
- 6.2 The Council will have an agreement with each successful applicant setting out in detail the obligations of each party. Failure by the successful applicant to deliver the programme within the terms of the agreement may result in the Council removing funding.
- 6.3 The agreement and the progress of the project will be monitored by the Community Funding Officer with support from specialist officers where required. A monitoring framework will be put in place for each successful applicant. The funding will be distributed in 3 parts over 3 years subject to successful delivery of each years of the programme.

7. EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 7.1 The approach of three year grant funding, supported by service level agreements to provide a framework for all parties on areas such as delivery, quality and agreed outcomes accords with the Oxfordshire Compact.
- 7.2 The recommended awards do not negatively impact on any protected characteristics.
- 7.3 An Equalities Impact Assessment was undertaken of the Community Grant Review proposals presented to the Executive in March 2023. This included the 3 year grant agreements proposed in this paper and can be found at Annex C of the 8 March 2023 Executive Paper.

8. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The support of projects with a focus on environment, climate and nature recovery, provides good potential for a positive impact on tackling the climate and ecological emergencies through local action.

9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 9.1 Submissions from all applicants are retained and available for further review

(END)