



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and date of Committee	EXECUTIVE – 11 MARCH 2026.
Subject	SUSTAINING INVESTMENT INTO COMMUNITY SERVICES
Wards affected	ALL
Accountable member	Executive Member for Stronger Healthier Communities Email: rachel.crouch@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Phil Martin - Director of Place Email: phil.martin@westoxon.gov.uk
Report author	Heather McCulloch – Community Wellbeing Manager Email: heather.mcculloch@westoxon.gov.uk Lucy Empson – Community Funding Officer Email: lucy.empson@westoxon.gov.uk
Summary/Purpose	To outline the principles, application process and timeline for the commissioning of three-year Service Level Agreements for Community Grants covering the period 2027-2030.
Annexes	Annex A – Sustainability Impact Assessment outcome
Recommendation(s)	That the Executive resolves to: 1. Approve the principles and timeline as set out in Sections 3 and 4. 2. Agree an increase to the Base Budget of £53k per annum as part of the 2027-2028 budget setting process, and for subsequent years, bringing the total budget available to £555k over three years. 3. Delegate authority for oversight of the commissioning process to the Director of Place, in consultation with the Executive Member for Stronger Healthier Communities.
Corporate priorities	• Putting Residents First • A Good Quality of Life for All • A Better Environment for People and Wildlife

	• Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency • Working Together for West Oxfordshire
Key Decision	YES
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	WODC Climate Change Manager and Principal Ecologist Publica Procurement Team

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1** In November 2025 the Executive agreed to commission a further three-year Community Grants Programme thus helping to safeguard support following Local Government Reorganisation in 2028. The base budget of £396,000 was also agreed.
- 1.2** This report sets out the proposed principles and timescale for commissioning the programme, which is required to be in place by April 2027. The rationale for providing 3-year funding is in order to meet the ambitions of the Council in terms of creating legacy, promoting excellence and supporting innovation.
- 1.3** In order to achieve the target date of April 2027 it is necessary to begin to prepare for the commissioning process now.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1** The Council introduced a three-year Service Level Agreement Programme for Community Grants in 2024. There are currently eight programmes of work being delivered by seven organisations. Wild Oxfordshire submitted two applications - one was on behalf of the Evenlode Catchment Partnership - and was successful in securing funding for both.
- 2.2** The current agreements end in 2027 so are approaching the end of Year 2.
- 2.3** Funding for the 2024-2027 programme is made up as follows:

Base budget	£ 396,000
Underspend in Westhive (Round 1)	£ 90,000
COMF Funding for MH	£ 60,000
Councillor priority funding	£ 7,500
Total	£ 553,500

- 2.4** The process utilised the procurement framework; however, final decision-making involved Executive Members and Senior Management. The demand for funding was much greater than anticipated, and additional funds were secured towards the end of the process to enable a wider range of organisations to benefit from support.
- 2.5** Under a separate arrangement the Council has a three-year agreement with Citizens Advice Oxfordshire, which is due to expire in April 2027. This contract is overseen by Mandy Fathers in Publica. It is recommended that the commissioning of this service beyond March 2027 remains separate to the Community Grant commissioning process.

3. PRINCIPLES OF THE NEW THREE-YEAR COMMUNITY GRANTS COMMISSIONING PROCESS

- 3.1** Once again, we are proposing to utilise the procurement framework. We have had an initial discussion with the Procurement team. We discussed our draft timeline and learning from the previous process. A key requirement identified is the need to set a budget for the whole

programme at the outset and adhere strictly to it throughout, to protect the integrity of the procurement process.

- 3.2** The external funding secured for the 2024-2027 programme is not available for the 2027-2030 programme. The Council is asked to consider increasing the base budget to add value and capacity to the programme.
- 3.3** It is proposed that the scheme opens to applications in June 2026 and closes in September 2026. Applications will be invited for programmes of work that align with the Council's priorities. These priorities are set out in, or informed by, the following strategies and plans:
- West Oxfordshire District Council Plan 2023-2027
 - Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Oxfordshire 2024-2030
 - Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS)
 - West Oxfordshire Climate Change Strategy 2025–2030 (district-wide carbon reduction and climate resilience)
 - West Oxfordshire Nature Recovery Plan 2024–2030
- 3.4** It is proposed that applications should focus on the delivery of the following outcomes:
- Lot 1 Climate Resilience** – achieving a reduction in carbon emissions and creating sustainable communities that are resilient to climate impacts, primarily flooding, extreme heat, and drought.
- Lot 2 Nature Recovery** – enhancing the natural environment to increase biodiversity, alongside providing wider opportunities for people to access it and understand its value.
- Lot 3 Community Wellbeing** – reducing health inequalities and creating more connected communities to enable people to enjoy a better quality of life
- 3.5** From the Council's perspective as a funder, measurable outcomes provide greater confidence in a proposal, demonstrating that a strategic plan is in place. Our focus will be on measuring the degree to which the proposed investment is likely to deliver tangible benefits, and well-defined outcomes can provide that assurance.
- 3.6** A maximum award of £30,000 per year, per application, is proposed. We recognise that this will support a smaller number of organisations overall but does recognise the increased costs and ensures that the funding given by the Council remains significant and impactful to the organisations receiving it. Whilst applicants may bid for less than three years funding we fully expect all applications are expected to request funding for the full three-year period. There will not be an amount of funding allocated per Lot. It is expected that applications may deliver across multiple Lots. An organisation will be permitted to submit a maximum of 2 applications.
- 3.7** Specialist officers will form a Panel to review and score all applications, following verification by the Procurement team.
- 3.8** The Panel will give priority to projects that can demonstrate:

- Partnership approaches to the delivery of the activities
- Strong links to identified needs and supporting data
- Delivery across more than one outcome/lot.
- Environmental impact – maximising carbon reduction, climate resilience and nature recovery
- Social impact – clear benefits to residents
- Neighbourhood impact – localised gains
- Commitment to improving rural access to services
- Inclusivity – tackling inequality of opportunity
- Co-benefits for climate and nature
- Deliverability and impact within the proposed timeframe
- Innovation and excellence
- Beneficiaries remain exclusively West Oxfordshire residents following Local Government Reorganisation.

3.9 Weighting will be applied to certain elements of the response - with the Method Statement being the most important part. The Panel scores will determine which applications are successful.

3.10 The following is a list of the types of programmes which might come forward:

Improving rural transport options	Habitat restoration and creation (e.g. meadows, planting trees)	Activities to enhance mental wellbeing
Community energy generation	Active travel	Community art and cultural programmes
Food equity initiatives	Improved access to greenspaces	Programmes reducing isolation
Energy efficiency initiatives	Natural flood management or extreme heat management	Activities for young people outside of school
Facilitating partnership working for nature recovery	Species conservation	Community food growing

3.11 Organisations will be deemed eligible to apply on the following basis:

Eligible	Ineligible
Constituted voluntary and community groups	Commercial organisations
Registered and excepted charities	Exempt charities
Community Interest Companies (CICs)	Town and Parish Councils

Independent statutory bodies in appropriate circumstances	Statutory bodies
	Organisations delivering a statutory service on behalf of a statutory body
	Education providers
	Religious-based organisations proposing to undertake work that includes acts of worship or religious instruction

3.12 A report setting out the funding decisions will be presented to the Informal Executive in November 2026.

4. TIMETABLE

4.1 The proposed timetable for the commissioning process is as follows:

4 March	Report to Overview and Scrutiny setting out the approach
11 March	Report to Executive setting out the approach
June 2026	Scheme opens Market - place event held
September 2026	Scheme closes
September / October 2026	Verification by Procurement team
October / November 2026	Bids circulated to the Assessment panel Assessment Panel meet
November 2026	Report to Executive to note the outcome of the procurement Inform Finance team regarding budget
December 2026	Notify applicants of the decision
January – March 2027	Legal agreements drafted, exchanged and approved Mobilisation of new providers
April 2027	Programme commences

5. COMMISSIONING COMMUNITY SERVICES

5.1 The procurement for a focussed high quality, independent housing advice, welfare and debt advice service, is being led by another department and was previously procured in a

separate competitive exercise with an alternative timeframe. The Contract for these services was for 3 years, starting 1 April 2024 and ending on 31 March 2027.

- 5.2** The current arrangements are under review, and a formal procurement process will be administered later this year to ensure a new contract is in place for 1 April 2027.

6. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 6.1** The timeframe could be contracted as at the moment it is very generous. Options could include opening the programme to applications later in the year, reducing the application window, shortening the assessment and decision-making period, or providing applicants with less notice of funding outcomes. However, our preference is to retain a generous timeline at this stage to allow for unexpected developments and competing demands on time. The Procurement team have confirmed that the proposed timeframe is both achievable and preferable.
- 6.2** The number of Lots could also be adjusted, either reduced or increased. Our preference is to maintain multiple focus areas, as this is likely to make the programme more relatable and accessible to a wider range of potential applicants across different sectors.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1** The base budget for the programme is £396k which would enable the Council to support a maximum of five projects over the three-year period.
- 7.2** The Executive is asked to consider whether growth to the base budget should be sought as part of the 2027/2028 budget setting process to add value and capacity to the programme.
- 7.3** In the previous programme demand outstretched supply considerably. It is anticipated that the 2027-2030 programme will attract a high number of strong applications, recognising that the funding environment is challenging for the voluntary and community sector. Operating costs including those relating to staff have increased significantly over the past three years.
- 7.4** In recognition of increasing costs the maximum annual award will be £30,000 per annum, per award. While this limit was previously extended for one organisation, this approach is not proposed for this programme, to allow resources to be distributed across the widest possible range of organisations.

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1** The process will be conducted through the procurement framework, ensuring that all due diligence is completed and appropriate organisations are awarded funding. The Communities team will work closely with the Procurement team to ensure the process is followed correctly.
- 8.2** Support from the Legal team will be required to draft legal agreements with each successful applicant once decisions have been reached. This is expected to take place between January and March 2027.

9. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 9.1** The primary risk is not meeting the proposed timescale with the effect that organisations will be left without confirmed funding. In such an event, service delivery may be disrupted, residents could be affected, and the Council's reputation could be negatively impacted.
- 9.2** The strict adherence to the procurement framework minimises the likelihood of challenge from unsuccessful organisations.

10. EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 10.1** This report and resulting commissioning process will consider equality and inclusivity in the decision-making process to ensure that the Council meets its duty to pay due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination and promote equality in relation to:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment
- Marriage and Civil Partnership
- Pregnancy and Maternity
- Race
- Religion or Belief
- Sex
- Sexual Orientation

- 10.2** Applications that demonstrate inclusivity and actively tackle inequalities will be prioritised.

11. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1** Please see the SIAT as Annex A.
- 11.2** The funding will encourage and support local communities to take action on climate and nature, enabling them to realise the associated environmental and social benefits.

12. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 12.1** None.

(END)