



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and Date of Committee	EXECUTIVE – 13 SEPTEMBER 2023
Subject	REVIEW OF COMMUNITY GRANT SCHEMES
Wards affected	ALL
Accountable Member	Councillor 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
Summary/Purpose	<p>To consider proposals to refine the community grant funding so that is better aligned to the outcomes intended from the Council Plan and fosters greater community engagement.</p> <p>The report sets out the process through which the Service Level Agreements will be awarded for 2024/25 onwards and the Civic Crowdfunding Platform will be introduced to ensure that the defined outcomes are achieved.</p>
Annexes	Annex A – 2022/23 Revenue Grant Allocations
Recommendations	<p><i>That the Executive Resolves to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) <i>Grant delegated authority to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader and Executive Members for Stronger Healthy Communities, Planning and Sustainable Development, Environment and Climate Change to approve Service Level Agreement awards;</i>b) <i>Agree the maximum Service Level Agreement award for Lots 1 to 3 will be £25,000 per annum unless in exceptional circumstances where evidence has been provided to justify the need for a higher award;</i>c) <i>Permit organisations who are awarded a Service Level Agreement to also submit projects to the SpaceHive Crowdfunding Platform.</i>
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	No

Exempt	No
Consultees Consultation	Findings from the 'Your Voice Counts' Council Plan consultation, learning from other councils, current Community Revenue Grant Recipients, Executive Members and Chief Executive Officer.

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 On the 8th March 2023 the Executive resolved to introduce a new approach to grant funding from 2024-25. This comprises two new elements - a Civic Crowdfunding platform, and the introduction of 3-year Service Level Agreements (SLAs) aligned to the outcomes intended from the West Oxfordshire Council Plan.
- 1.2 To allow for a managed transition, the Executive agreed that the Community Revenue grant funding recipients of 2022–23 be awarded the same level of community revenue grant for 2023-24. Details of the organisations awarded this funding are listed as Appendix A.
- 1.3 The budgetary allocations for the new approach agreed in March 2023 between Service Level Agreements and the Civic Crowdfunding Platform are set out below:-

Budget Item	£
3 Year Service Level Agreements (Lots 1-3)	132,000
3 Year SLA Housing and Debt Advice (Lot 4)	150,000
Crowdfund Pledges (WODC contribution)	120,000
Total	402,000

- 1.4 This report provides an update on work to deliver the new approach.

2. THE FUTURE APPROACH TO REVENUE GRANT FUNDING

Service Level Agreements

- 2.1 SLA applications will be invited across four Lots:
1. Improving our natural environment and the access to it, so that we enable physical and mental wellbeing and cohesive, connected communities.
 2. Taking action towards the climate and ecological emergencies, so that we reduce carbon footprints and encourage nature recovery.
 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.
 4. Providing residents with high quality, independent housing advice, welfare and debt advice services, so that they are empowered to tackle their problems and we support those who are unable to deal with difficult circumstances on their own

- 2.2** The total budget available for SLA Lots 1-3 is £132,000. As opposed to making outline allocations to apportion the budget across Lots 1–3 it is suggested the allocations be informed by the proposals that come forward to help achieve the desired outcomes from those lots. It is difficult to predict what projects will come forward and retaining this flexibility may prove useful.
- 2.3** SLA applications aligned to delivering our desired outcomes in the four Lots will be accepted from:
- Constituted voluntary and community groups
 - Registered and excepted charities
 - Community Interest Companies
 - Independent statutory bodies in appropriate circumstances
- 2.4** Commercial organisations and exempt charities will not be eligible to apply for SLA funding nor will town and parish councils, other statutory bodies, organisations providing a statutory service on behalf of a statutory body, education providers or unconstituted groups and associations.
- 2.5** The SLA application process will be set up in the Publica Group electronic tendering system <https://in-tendhost.co.uk/publicagroup>, hosted on behalf of the Council. This will provide a transparent and robust assessment framework within which to assess applications, including a set of evaluation criteria.
- 2.6** SLA applications will be considered by a grants panel consisting of a lead offer for each lot and the Executive Members with responsibility for environment, climate change and ecology, communities and social welfare. The panel will appraise applications received once each has been screened against the following evaluation criteria:
- 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
 - Proposed monitoring and evaluation
- 2.7** The grants panel(s) will make recommendations as to which applications should be funded. It is recommended that the Executive grant delegated authority to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader and Executive Members for Stronger Healthy Communities, Planning and Sustainable Development, Environment and Climate Change to approve Service Level Agreement awards.

2.8 It is proposed that the maximum SLA award for Lots 1 to 3 will be £25,000 per annum, unless an applicant has been able to demonstrate exceptional circumstances where evidence has been provided to justify the need for a higher award. This level of investment will enable a number of organisations to deliver projects of scale.

2.9 The three-year service level agreements will be executed, ready for 1st April 2024 implementation.

2.10 It is proposed that an award of an SLA does not preclude an organisation from also submitting projects to the Council's Civic Crowdfunding platform for the opportunity to raise money from the wider public.

Civic Crowdfunding platform

2.11 The Civic Crowdfunding platform provides a new and accessible way that our residents can be at the heart of civic change and provides a springboard for locally-led ideas to attract funding more easily. This aligns directly with the key aims of the Council, which has a drive to be aspirational, innovative and bold; and sits well with the Council priorities of 'Putting Residents First' and 'Working Together for West Oxfordshire.'

2.12 The Council is looking to support projects which deliver on the following outcomes:

- Community led change
- Improved health and food equity
- Well connected and resilient communities
- Improved mental and physical wellbeing across all age groups and backgrounds
- Improved essential local infrastructure that facilitates rural living
- Improved environmental outcomes, such as carbon reduction, improved biodiversity or green infrastructure

2.13 The projects which will be more likely to attract Council support are those which:

- Improve the physical and mental wellbeing of our local communities
- Directly address climate change
- Enhance lives through events and activities
- Support young people's ideas and ambitions
- Help to tackle the barriers and challenges many of us experience in life, such as poverty, ill health, distance from services, social isolation/loneliness
- Cultivate food equity, building a fair food system for everyone
- Protect and enhance our natural and built environment
- Invest in and maintain the facilities we rely on for these activities to take place

2.14 The maximum pledge to be made by the Council has been set at £10k. The maximum amount the Council will pledge has been set at 40% of project costs with scope to extend to 50% for projects of particular interest.

2.15 A priority for the Executive will be to dedicate funds specifically to projects led by young people and wishes to encourage young project creators to come forward with ideas.

3. NEXT STEPS AND TIMETABLE

3 year Service Level Agreements (SLAs)

3.1 An SLA information event, detailing the application process for community groups eligible to apply for a service level agreement, will be hosted on 5th October. It is hoped that a wide range of eligible organisations will attend – both past recipients and those who have not received funding from the Council before. Applications will be invited until the close of tendering on 31 December 2023.

Civic Crowdfunding Platform

3.2 A briefing for all Councillors will take place on 27th September. At the same time the dedicated website will go live. A Creators Workshop for potential applicants will be held in mid October. The Communications team will deliver a plan to maximise the visibility of the scheme to both donors and prospective applicants. Organisations of all scale, including those new to organising projects will be encouraged to attend the workshop. Projects will be live on the platform and able to receive pledges of support in early November.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The overall approved budget to support this area of work is £468,000 – as set out in the table below. This is contained within existing budgets and it is hoped represents an opportunity to be more effective in achieving greater community impact.

Budget	£
Service Level Agreement Lots 1-3	132,000
Civic Crowdfunding platform fee	30,000
Civic Crowdfunding platform pledges	120,000
Improved grants capability (Funding Officer)	25,000
SLA Lot 4 (Housing, welfare and debt advice services)	150,000
Cotswold National Landscape	11,000
	468,000

- 4.2 The proposed budget for SLA's Lots 1-3 is £132,000. The budget for Lot 4 is £150,000. The budget for the Civic Crowdfunding platform is £120,000.
- 4.3 By entering into 3 year SLA's 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.
- 4.4 Currently organisations are required to apply for funding on an annual basis, making it difficult to deliver long term outcomes and creating a significant administrative burden for both the applicant organisations as well as the Council.
- 4.5 Lot 4 is already delivered via a commissioning approach with the West Oxfordshire Citizens Advice Bureau providing high quality welfare advice and support to residents. In recognition of the Covid-19 pandemic impacts and current cost of living crisis and the increased demands on this service, the Executive agreed the budget for this be increased by £70,000 from within existing resources to provide a total budget for this activity of £150,000.

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 Council engaged with 2022-23 Community Revenue Grant recipients to notify them of the review of community grants schemes and committed to rolling forward their 2022-23 grant for 2023-24 as part of a managed transition. This mitigated any reputational risk to the Council and a potential negative financial impact on the recipients themselves. The recipients have been engaged with from an early stage and this has been well received, with many thankful for the long notice period for change.

7. EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 7.1 The Council is a signatory to the Oxfordshire Compact and the supporting funding code and will wish to ensure adherence to the key provisions in this around consultation and the provision of appropriate notice around the introduction of changes. The managed transition described in section 1 allows for this.

7.2 The proposed 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 also accords with the Oxfordshire Compact.

7.3 The proposal does not negatively impact on any protected characteristics.

7.4 An Equalities Impact Assessment was undertaken of the Community Grant Review proposals presented to the Executive in March 2023. This included the service level agreements proposed in this paper and can be found at Annex C of the 8 March 2023 Executive Paper.

8. CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

8.1 The inclusion of Lots 1 and 2, with a focus on environment, climate and nature recovery, supported by three year SLA's, provides good potential for a positive impact on tackling the climate and ecological emergencies through local action.

9. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

9.1 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. The Executive could also decide not to award a service level agreement for welfare advice and support and this would save £150,000 per annum. Both of these options would place the authority in an unusual position in it not offering any form of grant support and remove the scope to achieve Council Plan priority outcomes through grant funding. This option would also have a significant, negative community impact.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

10.1 None.