



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and date of Committee	EXECUTIVE – 12 MARCH
Subject	COMMUNITY GRANTS – WESTHIVE REVIEW
Wards affected	ALL
Accountable member	Cllr Rachel Crouch – Executive Member for Stronger, Healthy Communities. Email: rachel.crouch@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Phil Martin - Director of Place Email: phil.martin@westoxon.gov.uk
Report author	Janine Sparrowhawk - Community Funding Officer Email: janine.sparrowhawk@westoxon.uk
Summary/Purpose	A review of the Westhive Crowdfunding scheme to date and consideration of the outcomes as detailed in the report.
Annexes	Annex A – List of Westhive Projects.
Recommendation(s)	That the Executive resolves to: <ol style="list-style-type: none">I. Note the findings of the review on the Westhive Civic Crowdfunding scheme to date and agree to introduce the following enhancements to the Council’s approach to grant giving:<ol style="list-style-type: none">i. Continue with the 3rd year of the Spacehive contractii. Consider the benefits and implications of CIF funding being made available on the platform in 2025/2026iii. Increase the maximum Council pledge to £12,000 or 75% of the project total, whichever is less.iv. Launch a small grant scheme to complement the Westhive programme in consultation with Executive Member for Stronger, Healthy Communities.
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Putting Residents First

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	Feedback from organisations on the Westhive Civic Crowdfunding scheme.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 On the 6 November 2024 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommended that a review of the Westhive Crowdfunding scheme be undertaken and be brought back to the Committee in March 2025. An officer review has been undertaken and is detailed in this report. The review aims to demonstrate transparency of the grant systems both past and present and the potential to improve the efficiency of the current available grants.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 In March 2023, the Council reviewed the approach to community grant funding, to better align to the outcomes intended from the Council Plan and to foster a greater sense of community engagement and involvement. The Council's intention was always to continue to play an integral role in supporting the development of community services through providing grant aid. The review and recommendations were agreed by Executive in March 2023.
- 2.2 Following the grant review a series of changes to the grants programme took place. Funding was divided into 2 parts – a) A programme of 3-year Service Level Agreements with community organisations linked to the Council Plan and b) The commissioning of Spacehive Ltd to provide the Westhive civic crowdfunding platform which launched in October 2023.
- 2.3 Spacehive's mission is 'to make it easier for people to improve their local area' and they work with over 40 local government organisations across the UK. They are the only dedicated community fundraising platform in the UK and have been operating for over a decade. Over £30 million has been raised to date through the Spacehive platform - the highest success rate of any crowdfunding platform with an average project success rate of 84%.
- 2.4 The Westhive platform promotes each project, supplementing the efforts of project creators and acts as a collection point for other grant funds alongside funding from the Council.
- 2.5 The grants review also led in October 2023 to the appointment of a Community Funding Officer. This role is to oversee the new 3-year Service Level Agreement grants programme and provide information and guidance to community groups around sources of funding including the Westhive platform.

3. PREVIOUS GRANT SCHEMES

- 3.1 Prior to the Grants review in 2023 the Council operated three Community grant schemes.
- 3.2 The **Community Facilities Grant scheme** was introduced to replace a series of historic capital schemes run by the Council. Applications came mainly from town councils, parish councils and sports clubs and funding allocated largely to village halls, playgrounds and sports facilities. It was a capital only scheme. The total annual budget was £200,000. There were two rounds each year – one in April and one in September. The scheme provided up to £50,000 or 25% of the total project costs (whichever was the lowest). The grants review found that this funding was under-allocated.

Details of the grant awards are:

Community Facilities Grants Annual Budget £200,000.00					
		Award totals	No. of applications	Value of total project costs	Organisation
2022/23	Round 1	£41,511.00	2	£166,206.00	Charlbury Bowls club (building extension) Chipping Norton Swifts FC (goal posts)
	Round 2	£50,000.00	1	£447,002.00	The Branch Trust C/N (Community Hub)
	Total	£91,511.00	Total	£613,208.00	
	Unallocated	£108,449.00			
2021/22	Round 1	£11,562.50	2	£56,250.00	Great Rollright PC (Playground) & Stonesfield Cricket Club (scoreboard)
	Round 2	£134,472.00	6	£573,774.00	Stonesfield Playing Field Ass. (outdoor gym) Stonesfield Scouts (new hut) Witney RFC (clubhouse extension) Ducklington PC (MUGA & play equipment) Witney Mills CC (mower), Filkins Village centre (playground)
	Total	£146,034.50	Total	£630,024.00	
	Unallocated	£53,965.50			

3.3 The **Community Revenue Grants** scheme had a budget of £188,000. It was a revenue only scheme offering annual grants usually between £1,000 and £10,000. Higher awards were given when there were significant benefits across extensive parts of the District, or in cases where the activity had a strong connection with achieving the Council's ambitions for the District through partnership working. There was limited opportunity to open this up each year for new applications, therefore the funded organisations remained fairly static year on year. Seven of these organisations have since been successful in being awarded a 3-year Grant Agreement.

Details of the grant awards are:

		Award totals	No. of applications	Organisation
2022/23	Total	£187,851.00	13	Cotswold Conservation Board, Community First Oxfordshire, Volunteer Link Up, Chipping Norton Theatre, Age UK, My Life My Choice, Citizens Advice West Oxfordshire, Thomas Gifford Trust, Wychwood Forest Trust, Lower Windrush Valley Project, Wild Oxfordshire, Home Start Oxford, Home Start Banbury.
	Unallocated	£409.00		
2021/22	Total	£179,368.00	12	Cotswold Conservation Board, Community First Oxfordshire, Volunteer Link Up, Chipping Norton Theatre, Age UK, My Life My Choice, Citizens Advice West Oxfordshire, Thomas Gifford Trust, Wychwood Forest Trust, Lower Windrush Valley Project, Wild Oxfordshire, Home Start Oxford.
	Unallocated	£8,632.00		

3.4 The **Community Activities Grants** was outside of the scope of the grants review. It was felt to have been working well. It has not been a priority to run the scheme in 2024/25. It has an annual budget of £11,000 per year. Grants awarded in the past have been to a maximum of £500 and have been used most recently to support not for profit community groups to deliver very local activities and services that meet the needs of residents most affected by the cost-of-living crisis. The scheme is application based with a standard verification process in place.

4. WESTHIVE PERFORMANCE

4.1 The annual budget allocation to the Westhive general fund is £120,000. This is a Capital and Revenue scheme. Projects can typically expect a pledge of up to £10,000 or maximum of 40% of the total project costs, whichever is less

4.2 The UK Government's Community Infrastructure Fund (CIF) had an allocation of £226,126 directed to Westhive to support capital elements of projects. To date £214,336 of this fund has been allocated to projects on the platform, some of which are still actively fundraising.

4.3 The overall value of projects which have reached their fundraising target is £412,043. The total combined Council and CIF investment to these is £206,939.

- 4.4 Projects have been able to pitch to either or both funds depending on the project type. The availability of both funds has meant that large scale capital projects have been able to receive significant funding towards their projects.
- 4.5 Where a project has pitched to both funds officers have allocated funding firstly from the CIF budget, as the funding needed to be spent before 31 March 2025. This has meant that that the Westhive general fund (Council funding) has not been fully allocated.
- 4.6 Officers and the Westhive Member Panel review and determine the Council pledges in line with the Westhive criteria. The Council Plan's Priorities are the foundation for the Westhive criteria.
- 4.7 Since the launch of Westhive in October 2023, three rounds of pledge review meetings have taken place – in January 2024, June 2024 and October 2024. A fourth round is programmed to take place in Spring 2025.
- 4.8 The contract with Spacehive Ltd will enable a further two rounds to take place in Autumn 2025 and Spring 2026.
- 4.9 Four online creator workshops have been hosted by Spacehive in conjunction with officers for potential project creators. These have been well attended. These workshops provide information on how the civic crowdfunding platform works and enables break out rooms for sharing project ideas and tips for launching a campaign with one-to-one advice. Online workshops are provided in Spring and Autumn.

5. WESTHIVE PROJECTS TO DATE AND PLEDGE LEVELS

- 5.1 Over 3 rounds of Westhive a total of 12 projects have successfully reached their project targets and two are still actively fundraising. Of those successful projects the Council (Westhive General) fund has contributed £52,603.00 of funding and the Community Infrastructure Fund (CIF) has provided £154,336.00. Spacehive analytics report that 90% of projects receiving Council (Westhive main fund) funding get the backing they require and that the number of backers who have pledged to projects that the Council has supported (excluding CIF) is 416. Please refer to Annex A which details all of the projects that have used the Westhive platform.

6. FEEDBACK FROM USERS AND NON-USERS

- 6.1 As part of the review the Community Funding officer has asked several organisations for feedback. Responses were from a mixture of those who had used the platform and those who had not. Comments included:
 - The fee element can be a barrier. Several organisations mentioned that the fee element of the platform does put them off using Westhive and that alternative sites appear to charge smaller or no fees e.g. Go Fund Me and Crowdfunder. One organisation who has received substantial pledges on two occasions on the platform has voiced its dissatisfaction with the Spacehive fees.
 - *'We are a very small charity, with no unrestricted funds, and we are trying to work responsively to needs of people. We plough as much of our time and volunteer*

resources into getting projects and events up and running as quickly as possible in response to young people's wishes, and needs identified in the community, as well as making the most of opportunities. Within three weeks we had planned, advertised and ran a session and Westhive isn't a quick enough turnaround for us'.

- *'I think for little projects it's just been too much work in the past – but we're working on a big project that Westhive could be good for'.*
- *'In terms of sharing the availability of the Westhive fund, I've mentioned it to a few people. I found the online pre-application talk really helpful'.*
- *'Credit to West Oxfordshire District Council. I was sceptical about the Westhive platform, but having committed and followed the process through, it is really good'.*
- *'A great big thank you to all our backers and supporters – especially thanks to Westhive and the folk at West Oxfordshire Council who have topped up our funds to the tune of nearly £24,000 – we are thrilled, this means we will be able to get to work over the Winter month. But-just for now thank you so much for giving us your backing!'*

7. CONTRACTUAL ARRANGEMENTS WITH SPACEHIVE

- 7.1** The contract with Spacehive commenced on 1 May 2023 for a 3 year period until 30 April 2026 with the option to extend to 30 April 2027. The annual contract fee is £30,000 plus a one-year extension cost of £30,000 if activated.
- 7.2** The notice period for the Council for ending the contract without penalty is at least 90 working days prior to the start of the subsequent year.
- 7.3** The contract can be extended by the Council for one period of up to 12 months, by giving Spacehive three months written notice before its expiry.
- 7.4** The contract states that Spacehive provides a 'Product Suite' consisting of:
- The Westhive branded online microsite (Movement App)
 - Integrated crowd/grant-funding system
 - Impact reporting suite
- 7.5** In addition, Spacehive provide a verification service. This is a detailed review of each application to ensure it is viable, an appropriate fundraising target has been set and that all elements are appropriately costed and necessary to the project. In addition, a check of all planning permission, licencing requirements, organisational information and supporting documentation is undertaken to verify the group and their plans. This takes place before campaigns start. The team also provides technical support to any applicants needing assistance to navigate the system and utilise the technology fully. Spacehive actively supports project creators through a mix of online resources such as guides and videos and live support including workshops and project drop-in surgeries The dedicated Spacehive Partnerships Director holds bi-weekly updates on project status with officers.
- 7.6** The contract allows for two funding Rounds per annum.

8. SPACEHIVE FEES APPLIED TO PROJECTS

8.1 Spacehive applies charges to a project only if it reaches its target. The Spacehive platform fee of 7.5% (+VAT) is automatically calculated and added to a project campaign target at the outset before a group starts fundraising. This means that all fees are built into the overall campaign target, they are visible to the project creator and consistently applied. Groups receive 100% of the amount they need to deliver their project. In addition, the electronic payments provider – Stripe – apply transaction fees. These are capped but vary and are linked to how many transactions (pledges) are made and the amount of money pledged to a campaign.

Stripe Transaction fees:

- Maximum 2.9% card Payments
- Maximum £4/€ Direct Debits (DD) - Partner Pledges (WODC pledge) are added by DD
- Maximum £5 Bank Transfer Fee

8.2 There are no fees associated with adding pre-campaign funds - money raised prior to crowdfunding on the platform – so long as these are added at the outset before their project has launched and they have started crowdfunding.

8.3 All platforms charge fees to enable them to provide a platform and support service. Some are more apparent than others. Some platforms apply charges even where projects do not reach their fundraising target. Spacehive is transparent and states all charges up front.

9. REVIEW SUMMARY

9.1 Momentum is building

- Westhive is garnering greater community engagement and involvement and the momentum of groups coming onto the platform and being successfully funded is increasing with each round. It is recognised that the new initiatives take a little time to get established.

9.2 Greater diversity of applications against previous schemes

- The groups coming forward onto the platform are more diverse than those supported through previous Council grant funding schemes. The platform is advertised widely.

9.3 Verification burden eased from officers but there remains a benefit of officer involvement

- Spacehive undertaking verification, validation and feasibility of projects removes a significant burden from officers and the Council. It has been important to provide some ad hoc individual support to applicants over the phone on top of comms support and promotion and the management of the assessment/pledge meetings.

9.4 CIF funding has added appeal – but important to get a balance between funds

- The use of the Westhive platform to distribute the CIF funding has made the platform appealing to Capital projects and potentially attracted more interest. Should this funding not be available via the platform in 2025/2026 there is a risk that less projects will come forward. In terms of distribution by the pledge panel it might be preferable not to

prioritise the CIF funding for distribution but rather take a more balanced approach to ensure that Council funding is equally prioritised for distribution.

9.5 Technical challenges have impacted some individuals but not all

- Some, but not all, project creators have found the technical aspect of the platform challenging. The Spacehive Support Team and Community Funding Officer have been very responsive when feedback is received and provided guidance and support. For some the prospect of seeking any sort of funding, particularly from a public authority where controls must be more robust, is daunting.

9.6 WODC Officer support has been important

- The Community funding officer role has been important to support groups to navigate the Westhive platform and provide help over the phone and face to face. Without this support some project creators would not have moved forward. They have also provided information about other funding opportunities and sign posted where appropriate. Additional support from the Communications team has also been key in getting the message out locally and promoting good news stories when projects have been successful.

9.7 Westhive projects to date have been larger scale and longer-term projects

- It appears that for very small groups looking to make a quick application for a project which is required soon, Westhive is not the platform of choice. The twice-yearly assessment and decision-making process may favour longer-term projects. No projects led by young people have come forward to Westhive but this approach may not be appropriate for them.

9.8 Positive working relationship with Spacehive

- At this halfway point there is a positive and responsive relationship with Spacehive. The Council team is very pro-active and where issues are raised these are dealt with quickly by the Spacehive team.

9.9 Funding from the public is hard to achieve

- There is recognition that the gap between what the Council can fund and the fundraising target can be challenging to fill. Groups are finding it challenging to secure individual pledges from members of the community. This may be due to cost-of-living pressures. Public funds are under pressure and competition for grant funding is fierce. Previous funding schemes also relied on achieving match funding so would face similar challenges.

10. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

10.1 The Council could decide not to contract Spacehive in 2025/2026. The notice period is 90 working days prior to the start of the contracted year. This would have required the Council to have indicated this intention to Spacehive by 18th December 2024. The annual contract fee remains payable if notice is given after this notice period.

10.2 Returning to the previous approach of direct grant giving would require the Council to resource the support and background checking currently undertaken by Spacehive.

11. CONCLUSIONS

11.1 Continue to operate Westhive for the remainder of the contract.

At this stage it would be prudent to continue to operate Westhive for the remaining year's contract.

11.2 Consider the benefits and implications of CIF funding being made available on the platform in 2025/2026.

Westhive has certainly appeared a more attractive option to project creators with the availability of the CIF funding in 2024/2025. However, the Council's funding has been allocated less quickly as a result. Some thought should be given as to which is preferable. If CIF funding is available on the platform in 2025/26 then the care should be taken to prioritise in equal measure the distribution of Council funds.

11.3 Consider changing the Council's pledge level.

To ensure that the platform remains appealing, give projects the best chance of success and to boost our chances of distributing the Council funds fully, the Council could consider increasing the pledge level and move to providing a maximum of £12,000 (1/10th of the pledge fund) or 75% of the total project costs whichever is least.

11.4 Activate the Community Activities grant.

The Council intends to implement a small grants scheme utilising the Community Activity Grant funding to reach small scale groups with short term funding requirements. This would enable groups to deliver small projects within a quicker timeline and have a low value, light-touch process. A thematic approach could be applied, such as a focus on mental health, young people and food support. This would have some resource implications in terms of verification and general management of the process. Details of a small grants scheme to be considered by the Executive at a meeting on 11 June 2025.

12. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

12.1 The Council cancelling the 3rd year of the contract with Spacehive after the 18 December 2024 would incur costs of £30,000.

12.2 All funds are in the existing budget. The agreed annual budget for the Westhive fund remains as £120,000.00.

12.3 Officers and the Westhive Members Panel review and determine the Council pledges in line with the Westhive criteria which ensures appropriate use of public money.

12.4 The Westhive budget underspend of £90,000 for 2023-24 was allocated to funding the financial gap of the 3-year Grant Award Agreements that were entered into for 2024-2027.

12.5 Returning to the previous grant scheme approach would require the Council to resource the support and background checking currently undertaken by Spacehive.

12.6 Any underspend of the Westhive budget could be carried forward to future funding rounds.

13. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1** The Council is 2 years into a contract with Spacehive which ends on 1st May 2026. The financial implications of cancelling that contract are set out above.
- 13.2** All Westhive applications are verified by Spacehive, to ensure that they are appropriate to launch on a civic crowdfunding platform. Spacehive also ensure that the arrangements in place for the delivery of projects are appropriate. Officers provide additional support to organisations as needed to enable verification of projects.
- 13.3** Officers and the Westhive Members Panel review the projects and supporting material, and this is reflected in the recommendations for pledges.

14. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 14.1** Should the Council decide not to continue into year 3 of the contract with Spacehive then there is a financial risk as set out above.
- 14.2** The Council's annual Westhive fund is currently not being distributed in full. There is concern that therefore it is not delivering the social return on the Council's investment that is sought.
- 14.3** The assessment process by Spacehive ensures that pledges will only be made to eligible applicants. While this process prevents pledges being given to support ineligible activities, it cannot mitigate wholly against dissatisfaction where projects are unsuccessful in reaching their targets.
- 14.4** While the Westhive fund is within the Council's control, projects will also need to attract sufficient funding to reach their campaign target from other supporters by their campaign deadlines. While this is feature of crowdfunding, it may impact on take-up. Projects the Council determines to support today may not meet their targets and therefore will not draw down grants.
- 14.5** Where pledges are drawn down, but change of circumstances prevent activity taking place, Spacehive have procedures in place to seek the return of pledges. The Council maintains its discretion not to recover the grant where alternative or more limited activity could still take place.

15. EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 15.1** The Westhive scheme has been designed to be open to geographical communities and communities of interest. The range of projects that have come forward onto the Westhive platform is to a degree testament to this, as they cover a range of very different activities, from different communities of geography and interest across the district.
- 15.2** The recommendations are designed to increase access to Council funding by all groups in the community.

16. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

- 16.1** All projects on the Westhive platform have been asked to consider climate change, and any activity they could undertake to help mitigate its impacts. Positive actions to address climate change are encouraged.
- 16.2** The Council's Westhive Pledge Review Group meeting can consider applying a premium up to a total of 50% of a projects total cost, to projects which are seeking to directly address climate change and the ecological emergency. Continuing the Westhive approach will enable continuing investment in such projects. By using successful projects as examples, the Council can look to promote more activity in addressing these concerns.

17. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 17.1** None

(END)