

## **Report to the Cabinet**



**Report reference:** C-037-2016/17  
**Date of meeting:** 1 December 2016

**Epping Forest  
District Council**

**Portfolio:** Asset Management & Economic Development

**Subject:** Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund /  
Economic Opportunities Fund

**Responsible Officer:** Mike Warr (01992 564593)

**Democratic Services:** Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

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### **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

- (1) That the application criteria for the Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund, for the remainder of 2016/17 and throughout 2017/18, be widened to allow non-town centre related projects and general economic development opportunity projects to be supported and funded; and**
- (2) That, further to recommendation 1, the fund be renamed the Epping Forest District Economic Opportunities Fund**

### **Executive Summary:**

During 2013/14 the Council agreed to fund a £35,000 Town Centres Fund which enabled a set of Partners to undertake projects to support the local main High Streets. This fund was again made available during the 2014/15 financial year to enable town centre partnerships to make further project bids. It was made available again in 2015/16 although at this point it was also agreed to widen out the eligibility of the fund to enable smaller centres in the district to bid for funding, as well as to allow Council Economic Development Officers to propose projects and in 2016/17 the eligibility criteria was widened further again to cover all properly constituted groups in the district.

For the remainder of 2016/17 and throughout 2017/18 a further widening of criteria to allow non-town centre and non-village centre projects is proposed, facilitating more general economic development projects and objectives to be supported. It is also proposed to rename the fund accordingly.

### **Reasons for Proposed Decision:**

Making these funds available for the town centre partnerships, smaller district centres and other appropriately constituted organisations to bid for, encourages them to think creatively about how they can sustainably promote their town and district centres and create initiatives that have a lasting impact on the shopping centre economy. By widening eligibility to take part in the scheme these benefits can be spread to the wider economy and have an impact on the economies of smaller centres throughout the district. By encouraging district-wide initiatives the impact of this investment can be further widened to benefit other local economies elsewhere in the district.

## **Other Options for Action:**

To not widen the criteria.

To discontinue the fund.

## **Report:**

1. During 2013/14 the Council agreed to fund a £35,000 Town Centres Fund which enabled town centre partnerships, including the Chamber of Commerce, to undertake projects to support the local main High Streets.

2. This fund was again made available during the 2014/15 financial year to enable those partnerships to make further project bids and again in 2015/16 although it was, at this point, widened out into a Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund to also enable smaller 'village' centres to bid for funding. This was in recognition that our smaller shopping centres, wherever they may be in the district have a crucial role to play in enhancing and developing the economy of the district. Whilst smaller than the town centres that have previously been able to bid, these local centres will also have their own issues that they wish to address and will create a wider pool of ideas from which to develop potential district-wide, cross-centre initiatives.

3. With effect from the 2016/17 programme the fund was opened up to all appropriately constituted bodies and organisations throughout the district to submit applications focused on benefiting the town and local shopping centres, whether locally or district-wide.

4. Applicants are encouraged to submit proposals which address three key objectives:

- ensure people are aware of what our centres have to offer and encourage more visits;
- enhance the visitor experience and encourage people to stay longer; and
- support our existing small businesses and help to encourage new investment and fill empty shops / business units.

5. Additionally, they are encouraged to propose creative local bids that could be applied on a district-wide basis. This can therefore create local impacts that have wider benefits as they are implemented or adopted elsewhere. Finally, they are also asked to consider the longer-term impact and sustainability of their proposals thereby using investment in the present to secure ongoing benefits for their town centres in the future.

## Project History To Date

6. Members will be aware that this fund has traditionally seen considerable levels of underspend leading to significant funds being carried over each year. Each stage at which the eligibility to apply has been widened has sought to encourage higher levels of applications in order that the funding available can be put to good use in support of more and more projects within our economic centres.

7. The 2016/17 project has seen a higher level of interest than in previous years, from a wider selection of organisations and is currently considering / set to support / already has funded the following projects in the last twelve months:

- EFDC / Local Strategic Partnership - District-wide tourism website due for launch in 2017 – Funding agreed £8,000;
- Local town centre partnership - retail brochure and map – Funding agreed £1,479;
- Local village centre partnership - business map – Funding agreed £2,415;

- Local parish council - centre car park landscaping project - £2,962;
- Local organisation - Town floral display enhancements – Application in progress with support from Economic Development Officers - £5,000 sought likely to be scaled back at initial stage to around £2,000;
- Village residents association - Project to enhance local village business familiarisation in conjunction with local schools – Funding sought £1,000;
- Local village centre partnership - Outline discussions with Economic Development Officers regarding funding to develop social media and local branding campaigns – Anticipated funding approximately £2,500; and
- EFDC Officers – Planned project to support the provision of local markets throughout the district. Costs and funding to be determined.

8. It is therefore hoped to demonstrate that there remains appetite amongst our town and village centres to access the fund to support their initiatives and that the fund is accessing a wider range of organisations.

9. It should be noted that not all applications that have come forward have been approved and a number have been approved but in scaled down form. Ensuring that the monies are awarded carefully and to appropriate projects as determined by the fund's policy and criteria is a crucial part of ensuring the funds are used in the most appropriate way and to achieve Value for Money for the council.

10. Economic Development Officers have also received enquiries from organisations for projects that, as the current policy stands, fall outside of the permitted criteria and which would likely be rejected. These projects would not likely be eligible because their objectives and prime purposes do not specifically target benefits and improvements to any of our town and village centres. They do however have more general economic development focuses and would address key economic objectives such as the promotion and development of skills and confidence amongst young people entering the job market and the district-wide promotion of businesses to both other businesses and local residents.

11. These projects would not support the three criteria of the fund but could contribute towards a number of the district's agreed economic priorities, namely:

- enhancing the local level of skills attainment; and
- analysing and understanding our business base.

12. It is feasible that other proposals put forward could similarly impact upon one or more of the district's economic priorities without necessarily having any discernible impact on the town and village centres.

#### Proposed Widening of Fund Criteria

13. It is therefore proposed that for the remainder of the 2016/17 funding cycle and throughout 2017/18 the criteria of the scheme be widened to remove the need to demonstrate a direct linkage, benefit or enhancement to a town or village centre and allow such projects to be considered according to the more general economic benefits they bring to the district, its residents or its businesses.

14. It is not intended that this means all proposed projects will be automatically approved. All applicants will still be expected to demonstrate exactly what benefits the project would bring, to quantify those benefits and set out how they will be achieved and measured and to show the level of match funding that will be brought to the project by the organisation applying. Where no town or village centre linkage exists, demonstrating a linkage to the economic priorities of the district would be a key factor in assessing applications. Where no

such linkages exist it would be up to the applicants to set out in detail the nature and quantity of the benefits their proposed project would bring forward, how those benefits will be realised and measured and why those particular benefits should be considered of importance to the economy of the district.

15. It has already been established that Economic Development Officers may submit bids to the fund for work and projects they hope to undertake. It is intended that this continue to be the case, however, for clarification, it is also intended that the fund be available to the Economic Development Officers to support the work streams of the One Epping Forest Economic Board, subject, as with all other applications, to the approval of bids by the Asset Management & Economic Development Portfolio Holder.

#### Renaming of the Fund

16. Given this widening of criteria beyond the scope of town and village centre boundaries it is recommended that the fund be renamed the Epping Forest District Economic Opportunities Fund to reflect its broader economic development application.

#### Continuation of the Fund in 2017/18

17. It is acknowledged that despite efforts to date the fund continues to be underspent. However, as broadening of the criteria has evolved more and more interested organisations have come forward and certainly in the last twelve months there has been a higher level of interest and more applications coming forward. The funding of the new district tourism website is also an excellent example of a project that have come forward through EFDC officers as opposed to outside organisations that will have a considerable economic benefit for the whole district.

18. It is therefore proposed that in its broader form as the Economic Opportunities Fund, the fund continues in 2017/18, however, no additional funding is requested for 2017/18 and the fund will aim to utilise the accumulated underspends in order to demonstrate its ongoing value and effectiveness.

19. Subject to agreement to widen the criteria and continue the fund in 2017/18 it is proposed that the Town and Village Centres Opportunities Fund Policy be revised to reflect the new name of the fund and the widened criteria.

#### **Resource Implications:**

Previously accumulated underspends combined with the £35,000 allocated to the 2016/17 fund made a total of £92,000 available to the fund. Following a mid-year review of progress on the scheme to date this figure has now been profiled across the current year and subsequent year, with £40,000 remaining within 2016/17 budget and the remaining £52,000 profiled into 2017/18 to support the fund in that financial year. No further funding is sought for the fund in 2017/18.

#### **Legal and Governance Implications:**

It is not considered that any implications arise from this report. It should be noted that an agreed standard is required at application stage and a number of stages and procedures to acknowledge any funds awarded and account for any funds drawn down are imposed upon partnerships applying to the scheme. All bids are expected to further complete post-project assessments of their scheme.

**Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:**

None.

**Consultation Undertaken:**

None.

**Background Papers:**

None.

**Risk Management:**

If the criteria of the fund is not widened or the fund is not continued in 2017/18 there is a risk that appropriate local and district-wide and sustainable initiatives may not be able to access the funding they require to be put in place. In addition, the council may not be seen to have confidence in supporting the district's town centres and wider economy.

**Equality Analysis:**

The Equality Act 2010 requires that the Public Sector Equality Duty is actively applied in decision-making. This means that the equality information provided to accompany this report is essential reading for all members involved in the consideration of this report. The equality information is provided at Appendix 1 to the report.