

Report to the Cabinet



Report reference: C-055-2015/16
Date of meeting: 3 December 2015

**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Asset Management & Economic Development
Subject: Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund
Responsible Officer: Mike Warr (01992 564593)
Democratic Services: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That a bid for District Development Funding be requested from the Council in the sum of £35,000 for 2016/17 to continue the work of the Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund;
- (2) That the fund be opened to all appropriately constituted organisations and bodies throughout Epping Forest District as well as Economic Development Officers (EDOs) from Epping Forest District Council, who would be allowed to bid for projects independently but also as partners in joint projects with other appropriate organisations; and
- (3) That a formal policy document be drafted to set out the nature and requirements of the fund, detailing the criteria for both the eligibility of properly constituted groups and the eligibility of applications, prior to the launch of the 2016/17 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 and 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. In addition, it would allow Council Economic Development Officers to propose projects. It is proposed to continue the good work generated by this fund by making a further amount of £35,000 available for partnerships to bid for in 2016/17.

It is proposed that the fund be opened to any appropriately constituted organisation within the District such as, for example, village hall committees, local traders groups, local business groups, local charitable organisations, subject to the need for any such bids to still address the key objectives of the scheme to enhance and promote the use of our District shopping centres.

To support this extension of the scheme to encompass a wider range of properly constituted groups and organisations it is proposed that a formal policy document be drafted setting out the full terms and conditions of the scheme and detailing the criteria for those groups that will be eligible to bid. This policy document will be submitted to the

Cabinet for agreement before the start of the 2016/17 funding cycle.

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 increased to benefit other local economies elsewhere in the District.

Other Options for Action:

To not make the funds available.

To make the funds available in some other format or via a revised scheme.

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. It is further proposed that with effect from the 2016/17 programme the fund be opened up to all appropriately constituted bodies and organisations throughout the District that submit applications focused on benefiting the town and local shopping centres, whether locally or District-wide.

4. It is acknowledged that this opens up the scheme to applications from an extremely wide range of groups. To establish appropriate controls and limits as to how such groups should be 'properly constituted' it is proposed that a formal 'Town and Village Centres Opportunities Fund Policy' be published to coincide with the launch of the 2016/17 scheme. This policy will set out the requirements of all properly constituted groups and organisations, the specific criteria against which all applications will be assessed and decided upon and the ways in which the allocated funds will be monitored post-application.

5. All 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.

6. 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.

7. Decisions as to whether applications are successful are made by the Portfolio Holder for Asset Management and Economic Development at the conclusion of each bidding round. These decisions are made with advice and comment from the District council's Economic Development Officers (EDOs) where appropriate. Projects put forward by Economic Development Officers, whether independently or in collaboration with partnerships, should be assessed and decided upon by the Portfolio Holder using the same criteria as all other bids but without further input from the EDOs. Should further clarification on the bid be required, as might happen with other external bids, this would be formally sought in writing from the EDOs.

8. Details of all successful bids agreed by the Portfolio Holder will be formally published at the conclusion of each round of applications as Portfolio Holder Decisions subject to call-in.

9. With the scheme having now run for three years it is suggested that, in addition to the three key objectives, the importance of District-wide and sustainable initiatives, plus the promotion of the Council's agreed economic development priorities be further emphasised to the partnerships for any future proposals. To achieve this it is proposed that the decision to allow Economic Development Officers (EDOs) to put forward appropriate projects be reinforced as well as allowing the EDOs to work with the centres to develop joint projects and applications.

10. This idea of joint working has already started to develop as part of the current scheme and has seen EDOs meeting with both established town centre partnerships to discuss ideas as well as representatives from smaller centres. A project to explore the potential for the promotion and development of a new Village Market in one of the village centres has begun and will hopefully bear fruit over the course of the next few months, as well as into the next year of the fund.

11. It is therefore recommended that the 2016/17 scheme and all subsequent schemes be open to the following range of applicants:

- The town centre partnerships and other appropriately constituted organisations and bodies of Buckhurst Hill, Epping, Loughton Broadway, Loughton High Road, Ongar and Waltham Abbey;
- Appropriately constituted organisations from the smaller village centres of Abridge, Chigwell, Nazeing, North Weald, Roydon and Theydon Bois;
- Epping Forest Chamber of Commerce;
- Epping Forest District Council Economic Development Officers;
- Joint project applications between any combination of the above centres and organisations, and including the Chamber of Commerce;
- Joint project applications between the above centres and organisations and the Economic Development Officers (EDOs) at Epping Forest District Council; and
- Any other appropriate projects at the discretion of the Economic Development Portfolio Holder.

Project History to Date

12. Applications supported to date over the three years of the programme include:

- Buckhurst Hill TCP – Photography Exhibition/Fashion Show;
- Buckhurst Hill TCP - Joining The Dots & Getting Us On the Map projects - producing promotional material for the town centre and linking up local businesses with a global research project being conducted by Manchester Metropolitan University;
- Golden Triangle (Buckhurst Hill, Chigwell, Loughton) – Golden Triangle “app”;
- Epping TCP – Epping Festival 2014;
- Epping Forest Chamber of Commerce – Marketing of One Shops Local;
- Epping Forest Chamber of Commerce - project to enhance the One Shops Local website bringing closer links with the Chamber’s own site;
- Loughton Broadway – Christmas Shop Local, Mural Project and Debden Day 2014;
- Loughton High Road TCP – originally for the Loughton Summer of Fun but as that did not go ahead in summer this has been agreed for a similar project later in the year;
- Loughton Broadway - the Shop For Local campaign for 2014 and Debden Day 2015;
- Loughton High Road TCP - funding towards the Milestones programme providing training to local businesses;
- Ongar Town Forum – Multi-disciplined/faceted approach to tourism;
- Ongar Town Forum – Further funding towards the multi-disciplined tourism initiative including enhancing the Visit Ongar website and developing the town App; and
- Waltham Abbey TP – funding for a Cucumber Festival subsequently redirected towards a Meridian Event. Marquees have also been funded for use at the Waltham Abbey Town Show.

13. Comprehensively evidencing the success and long lasting impact of the schemes and projects is not always practical or possible. To an extent this is in the nature of projects where establishing a clear link between action and effect is difficult but it is also a reflection of the limited resources that the partnerships work with when putting the projects together and the unstructured or unquantifiable nature of some of the projects eg. a fashion show or a decorative mural. However, that said, all bidders to the scheme are asked to demonstrate how they will monitor the progress and success of their project and what the lasting effect on their centre will be. They are further asked to complete an End of Grant Report which sets out what the grant has achieved. Whilst further efforts could be made to quantify and measure impacts and outcomes, the inclusion of these elements in the bidding process and end of grant summary encourages the partnerships to consider this when designing and delivering their project.

14. We will again, as part of the 2016/17 Fund bidding process, stress the importance of being able, as far as is possible, to demonstrate the impact the projects have had and will carefully consider this element when assessing new bids and proposed projects. Bids made by EDOs will similarly seek to evidence their impact where possible.

15. The current 2015/16 programme has recently received its first tranche of applications and it was pleasing to receive some applications from some smaller local centres as well as from the established town partnerships. This reinforces the thought that there is an appetite to access funding in these smaller centres and to implement creative local initiatives. The first tranche has seen a proposal centred on a village’s local market as well as proposals for an enhanced seating area for a small local centre.

16. This year we have also included the opportunity for partnerships that are struggling to operate effectively and that are at risk of ceasing to exist to apply to the fund for 'seed-funding'. This is intended to help those struggling partnerships to commission professional support and advice to develop a way forward for their partnership. A number of partnerships have shared with us their concerns about the feasibility of continuing and we have encouraged them to access this funding to address their issues and concerns. One application has been received for the seed funds although some work remains to be done to define the costs, scope and objectives of the work before it can progress. We have worked closely with the partnership to advise them, as much as we can, how to take this forward.

17. It needs to be acknowledged that after the first tranche of applications much of the current fund remains to be spent. This also includes an unallocated element of the previous year's fund (approximately £8k) and there remains some monies to be returned to the fund for some of the projects listed above that either did not require the full amount applied for or the project did not materialise, either partially or in full, sometimes due to a vital partner moving away from the District. That said, it should also be noted that Economic Development Officers are working on potential schemes that would require the drawdown of funding within this financial year.

18. It has not always been possible for each partnership to submit new, innovative and appropriate bids to the scheme. This is a reflection of many factors but it is considered that Economic Development Officers (EDOs) are in a position to further support the town centres through the submission of additional proposals as well as offering advice on potential new projects and support on appropriate joint projects.

19. The EDOs have up to this point held back from applying to the fund as they wanted to give the partnerships a full opportunity to bring forward proposals and access as much of the fund as possible. With the financial year moving on it is now the intention of the EDOs to put together a suite of proposals for consideration by the portfolio holder. It is not intended that these take any kind of precedence over applications by partnerships and other organisations however it is intended to propose projects and ideas which can have a wide and ongoing impact on the town centres. These ideas have not yet been formulated in detail but areas of interest include:

- Accessing key professional advice on the future of our town and local centres and the development of an understanding of the identities of our centres and what they have to offer;
- Developing a method for EFDC, the town partnerships and other interested parties to effectively communicate with their customer base;
- Exploring the potential of the District's markets to act as a catalyst for improved town and local centre performance;
- Working with the college and schools to identify potential town and local centre projects that can feed into curriculum activity and benefit both businesses and students; and
- Explore opportunities to tie in the District-wide tourism offer to the town and local centres to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes

20. This list will continue to be developed and where appropriate, the input, involvement and support of the town partnerships will be sought. It is also acknowledged that some of the ideas proposed will need to wait until the 2016/17 programme to ensure there is capacity to deliver them.

21. The Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund is seen as an important means of

encouraging locally driven economic development initiatives which are owned and therefore supported by the local business community. It is therefore suggested that the scheme be continued and that the same level of District Development Funding as in previous years is provided for 2016/17, that being £35,000.

Resource Implications:

An allocation of £35,000 will be required from the District Development Fund in 2016/17.

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:

The partnerships have been involved at various stages in refining the application process.

Background Papers:

None.

Risk Management:

If the £35,000 funding is not secured there is a risk that appropriate District-wide and sustainable initiatives may not be able to access the vital seed 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.

Due Regard Record

This page shows **which groups of people are affected** by the subject of this report. It sets out **how they are affected** and how any **unlawful discrimination** they experience can be eliminated. It also includes information about how **access to the service(s)** subject to this report can be improved for the different groups of people; and how they can be assisted to **understand each other better** as a result of the subject of this report.

S149 Equality Act 2010 requires that due regard must be paid to this information when considering the subject of this report.

Applications approved under the Town & Village Centres Opportunities Fund provide much needed investment and the stimulation of the economy in town and village centres throughout the District.

Some of those centres are based in less affluent areas, with others located in more rural parts of the District. Consequently, local residents in those centres can sometimes experience the effects of deprivation, albeit for different reasons.

Funding through the scheme can mitigate those effects.