



SCRUTINY

Report of the Grant Aid
Task and Finish Review Panel
Part Two – Service Level Agreements

March 2016

Contact for enquiries:
Julie Chandler, Lead Officer
Epping Forest District Council,
Epping, CM16 4BZ
jchandler@eppingforestdc.gov.uk
01992 564214

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Chairman's Foreword

Before I begin to report back on the findings of this Part Two Review of Grant Aid, I would firstly like to acknowledge the tragic loss of the Council's Lead Officer for Grant Aid, Chris Overend.

Chris was Lead Officer for the Part One Review and for most of the Part Two process, until his life came to an untimely end shortly after the October meeting of the Panel. We were sincerely grateful for the work that Chris undertook in relation to Grant Aid and the many other areas of his work within the Council.

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At its meeting on 16 September 2014, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed the establishment of a Task and Finish Panel to review the Council's Grant Aid Scheme for Sports, Arts, Leisure and Community Groups. This was in terms of the overall policy, guidance and procedures for major grants and Service Level Agreements.

Early in the Review process the Panel came to the conclusion that it would be easier and more logical to break down the review into two parts, namely one focussing on the major grants and associated policy and procedure and the other relating to the Service Level Agreements with voluntary groups active in the District, including the CAB and Voluntary Action Epping Forest, which has been carried out in 2015/16. This report relates to the second part of the review.

I would like to thank those involved for their input and invaluable contributions and ideas within Part Two of the Review. This includes all members of the Panel (Councillors John Knapman, Ann Mitchell, Glynis Shiell, Brian Surtees, Tony Boyce and Stephen Murray), Councillor Helen Kane as the Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Wellbeing, Gill Wallis, Community, Health & Wellbeing Manager, Julie Chandler Assistant Director and Nicola Wilkinson, Community & Grants Assistant from Community Services and Safety.

Cllr Caroline Pond
Chairman of Grant Aid Task & Finish Review Panel

Overview

The Review Panel acknowledged the £11,500 saving made from the Grant Aid Budget for 2015/16 in respect of the one –off major grants and considered whether any further reductions could be made to the overall Grant Aid funding programme. It also looked at the various criteria for the distribution of funding; the monitoring and evaluation for each grant awarded and the Service Level Agreements applied.

More detailed consideration was given to the higher level funding agreements, in respect of Voluntary Action Epping Forest and the Citizen's Advice Bureau, who provided presentations to the Panel on their work. In addition, visits were made by the Panel members, to various organisations in receipt of grant funding.

As stated within Part 1 of the Grant Aid Review, the Panel recognised the vital role that the voluntary and community sector brings to local community well-being in the Epping Forest District. However, it also acknowledged the need for a more proactive approach to monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of grants awarded, and particularly the higher level grants.

Recommendations:

- (1) That the current level of Grant Aid funding be maintained;**
- (2) That, from 1 April 2016, funding of less than £5,000 per annum for three years be provided for Voluntary Groups without the need for a formal Service Level Agreement, but, subject to the receipt of an Annual Report from each Group outlining the benefit to the District from the funding;**
- (3) That the revised Service Level Agreement as agreed by the Panel, be adopted by the Council (Appendix 2);**
- (4) That the District Council maintain provision for longer term funding to Voluntary Action Epping Forest and Epping Forest Citizens Advice Bureau from 2016/17 onwards, based on performance management benchmarking closely monitored on an annual basis;**
- (5) That a more rigorous process of monitoring is adopted for the higher Grant Awards currently in operation for Voluntary Action Epping Forest and Citizen's Advice Bureau**

Report:

1. The meetings of the Panel for the second part of the Grant Aid Review were held on 20 July, 28 September, 29 October 2015, 15 February and 14 March 2016. In undertaking this stage of the Review, the Panel considered a range of information including the following:
 - The breadth and funding amounts of Service Level Agreements in place
 - The Service Level Agreement (SLA) documentation itself
 - Information from other local councils on Grant Aid agreements and monitoring
 - Monitoring and evaluation paperwork used by the Council
 - Presentations from the two major funding SLA's; Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) £39,120 and Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) £113,840.
2. At its first meeting the Panel agreed the scope of the Review and that it would be undertaken in three sections, to consider: Epping Forest CAB; VAEF, and the other smaller Service Level Agreements. Visits would be made to a sample of these groups and VAEF and EF CAB would additionally be asked to provide presentations on their work and use of the grant funding provided by the Council.
3. The Panel would also consider the Grant Aid arrangements across a range of District and Borough Councils in Essex, with a view to adopting best practice from these.
4. It was noted that the current Three-Year Service Level Agreements were all due to end in March 2016, hence it would be an advantage to complete the review as soon as possible. VAEF and EFCAB would be advised of the Panel's Terms of Reference before they prepared their presentations to the Panel. A sample of groups in receipt of smaller Service Level Agreements could be visited by the Panel and a questionnaire be sent to each group in receipt of a Service Level Agreement to assist in the Panel's deliberations.
5. At the second meeting of the Panel officers gave an overview of the Grant Aid scheme and advised the Panel that the present two tier Grant Aid Scheme was set up in the 1990s, with the aim of providing a degree of financial security to well-established voluntary groups to enable the Groups to develop their services further. It was an approach that was replicated by other Councils at the time. Currently, there were 15 voluntary groups who had a Service Level Agreement with the Council, ranging from the Alzheimer's Society to Zinc Arts in Ongar which provided a variety of services across the District. Each Service Level Agreement had a number of standard features, such as the provision of up-to-date accounts, minutes from management meetings, and publicising the support provided by the District Council.
6. The Panel was requested to consider the existing arrangements and make recommendations for the operation of Service Level Agreements from 2016/17 onwards, options for which included: maintaining the current arrangements; reducing the number of such agreements; or even dispensing with them altogether. However, the Panel was reminded that it had already agreed in the first stage of the review, that any Group in receipt of a Funding Agreement from 1 April 2016 would be required to show 'added value' to the District, on an annual basis.
7. The Panel was reminded that the current Service Level Agreements, and accompanying criteria, were dated and required revising and it was suggested that the Council should set a threshold of £5,000 per annum below which specific Service Level Agreements would not apply. It would not make any difference to those national organisations which had financial resources more readily available, and for the smaller organisations the Council was not seeing that much return for its investment given the amount of time taken to fulfil all the Council's requirements for an Agreement.

8. It was recognised that simpler, clearly defined criteria such as production of an annual report citing the relevance and value for money from the funding provided by the Council would suffice for the smaller awards. It was felt that the Council should be making it as easy as possible for good organisations to receive Grant Aid funding from the Council and the Panel noted that Uttlesford District Council adopted a similar approach.
9. It was therefore found that the Service Level Agreements in their current form be terminated on 31 March 2016 and that from 1 April 2016, Service Level Agreements only be provided for those Voluntary Groups receiving £5,000 or more per annum. It was also recognised that the criteria for future Funding Agreements should be revised by Officers to take account of local factors. Groups in receipt of Grant Aid Funding should continue to be determined by the Leisure and Community Services Portfolio Holder, regardless of whether a Service Level Agreement was required or not.

Presentation from Voluntary Action Epping Forest

10. J Foile, Chief Officer at VAEF, was invited to give a presentation to the Panel, in order for members to gain a better understanding of VAEF's operation. The Panel was advised that VAEF existed to support the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors, and was established district wide during the early 1990s. The District Council had provided financial support to VAEF by way of an SLA for many years and the funding agreed for 2015/16 was £39,120, which had remained unchanged since 2009/10. From this sum, VAEF paid the Council annual accommodation costs of £11,360 for use of the premises at Homefield House.
11. J Foile highlighted that VAEF worked with many agencies and received referrals from them. For example, referrals for the Handyman Service were received from the District Council. The services provided by VAEF were advertised where possible, including Doctor Surgeries and Dentists etc., but residents would also learn about them from their neighbours by word of mouth. VAEF was also independent from the statutory bodies, which could also help in reaching out to some people.
12. She also informed the Panel of the current key priorities for VAEF, which included: recruiting more volunteers; supporting more people with support needs themselves into becoming volunteers; enabling people to live in their own homes for longer and combating loneliness and isolation as people live longer; and partnership working and engaging with the thematic groups which emerged from the Local Strategic Partnership. VAEF was also looking to increase remote volunteering, for example from people with conditions such as Multiple Sclerosis who could make phone calls to people in an effort to reduce loneliness.
13. In response to questions from the Panel, J Foile stated that VAEF covered the whole District but some services could only be used by the elderly or disabled. The Befriending Service was currently only offered in three areas due to a lack of funding.
14. The Panel was also advised that VAEF were keen to establish a Community Hub, which could potentially be located anywhere in the District, but one of the market towns would probably be the best location. Access to the Hub by residents would be a key consideration when deciding where to locate it. A Community Hub would enable VAEF to set up a 'one-stop shop' for the whole District, and the building could be shared with other organisations. VAEF was always on the look-out for further funding, from the National Lottery and other funding bodies.
15. Members considered the current funding arrangements for VAEF and made recommendations with regard to funding from 2016/17 onwards. It was agreed that given the

current uncertain financial climate faced by local government, it was vital that any funding agreement with VAEF included a range of key performance measures and an “added value” requirement through that agreement. It was agreed that a series of targets would help with performance.

Presentation by Citizens Advice Bureau

16. On October 29th 2015, the Panel received a presentation from R Poulter, Manager at Epping Forest District Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and J Woods, Chairman of the Citizens Advice Bureau Trustee’s Board. This was regarding the services and activities of the CAB in Epping Forest.
17. It was explained that CAB clients generally experienced complicated problems and that 73% of clients were below the average income threshold. However following consultation with the CAB, 2 out of 3 clients had their problems solved. R Poulter provided a series of statistics related to the CAB provision, including;
 - Every £1.00 invested in the CAB generated £3.10 in fiscal benefits, £15.83 in public value and £19.58 in benefits to the individuals who used their service.
 - A saving of £96,000 had been made in reducing homelessness by the CAB.
 - Epping Forest CAB had 56 volunteers and had recently recruited an extra 6 volunteers.
 - The Epping Forest CAB had provided advice to 2,497 people in 2014/15.
 - 33% of enquiries to the Epping Forest CAB concerned benefits and tax credits.
 - Over 25% of CAB clients had a disability or long term health problem.
 - 4 in 5 CAB clients felt less stressed after receiving their advice.
 - 2 in 3 CAB clients had their debt problem solved.
18. J Woods spoke next about the finances of the CAB and stated that funding for the CAB came from District Council grants, CAB fundraising, Parish and Town Councils and donations. However the bulk of funding came from specific projects which the CAB had applied for. The CAB had cut staffing costs from April 2014 and they made savings through sourcing second hand office furniture and equipment where this was possible. However they needed top of the range IT equipment, particularly for assessing official websites.
19. It was explained that CAB branches provided face to face contact, which was preferred by 92% of the CAB’s clients. R Poulter advised that the CAB was planning to move into new offices within Loughton Library and a new site in Hemnall Street, Epping and confirmed that the CAB would be providing an outreach service at Limes Farm, Waltham Abbey and Abridge. They were also working with GPs and they had plans to use Ongar Library at some stage.
20. The CAB was also providing the services of two debt advisors that were additionally funded through the Council’s Housing Revenue Account to the sum of £42,000 and it was planned to continue this service for a further year. These advisors were playing a crucial part in offsetting the potential impact from welfare budget cuts, helping to reduce homelessness. A close working relationship had been established between Housing officers and the CAB and they had quarterly meetings together.

21. At its penultimate meeting, the Panel discussed the details of the SLA with CAB for the amount of £113,840 and it was agreed that the same target setting and closer performance management should be applied, as with VAEF.

Conclusion

22. The Panel was satisfied that the agreed amendments to the Grant Aid Service Level Agreements and improved performance management would ensure that the Council was receiving best value from the grants awarded. They also felt that the level of remaining Grant Aid Funding should remain as it is, to ensure that the Council could continue to support the essential services provided through the voluntary sector.