

MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday 7 November 2017

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COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Gant (Chair), Chapman (Vice-Chair), Altaf-Khan, Azad, Curran, Fry, Henwood, Ladbroke, Lloyd-Shogbesan, Pegg and Thomas.

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Dee Sinclair (Board Member for Community Safety)

OFFICERS PRESENT: Julia Tomkins (Grants & External Funding Officer), David Growcott (Acting Communities Manager), Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer), Paul Wilding (Programme Manager Revenue & Benefits) and John Mitchell (Committee and Member Services Officer)

44. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Lygo.

45. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Pegg declared an interest as a trustee of the Rose Hill Advice Centre

46. MINUTES

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 09 October 2017 as a true and accurate record subject to the recasting of minute number 38 in relation to 'A Clean and Green Oxford' to reflect the fact that the Committee had heard rather than agreed with the point made by the Board Member about "Green Belt" designation .

47. REPORT BACK ON RECOMMENDATIONS

The Chair was pleased to note that the vast majority of recommendations from the last meeting had been accepted and, of the remainder, all but one had been accepted in part.

48. WORK PLAN AND FORWARD PLAN

The Scrutiny Officer spoke to the report and drew attention to a new item on the Forward Plan scheduled for the December meeting of the CEB on a review of Community Protection Notices. It was agreed that this item should be added to the Committee's work plan.

49. EAST OXFORD COMMUNITY CENTRE - IMPROVEMENT SCHEME

The City Executive Board on 21 November 2017 was to have been asked to consider a report about the improvement scheme. It had however been withdrawn from that meeting. It was expected that the report would be rescheduled for January with another opportunity for the Scrutiny Committee to consider it then.

50. REVIEW OF COMMUNITY GRANTS PROGRAMME AND COMMISSIONED ADVICE STRATEGY 2018-2021

The City Executive Board on 21 November would receive an update on the review of the grants and commissioning programme with proposals as to how it can be further improved. The item provided an opportunity for the Scrutiny Committee to make recommendations to the Board.

Councillor Sinclair, Board Member for Culture and Communities, introduced the report, reminding members of the Committee that this review was written in the context of cuts in public spending elsewhere, growing demand, and community and voluntary organisations having to do more with less. The review had brought many issues to the surface. There was a clear need for the grants programme to support the Council's key values and priorities. The report set out, among other

things, how the programme had been reviewed to maximise its effectiveness in tackling inequality and cohesion.

She drew particular attention to the introduction of a three year funding programme for both the commissioning programme and the open bidding grants programme. This would help with sustainability and long term security for community and voluntary organisations and was a direct response to comments made.

Kiera Bentley, Chair of the OCVA addressed the Committee briefly. The OCVA received funding from both the County and City Councils but was seeing a reduction in that funding. 52% of the work it supported was in the City with some 500 organisations “below the radar”. The OCVA supported many organisations and activities not all of which (or the effectiveness of which) OCC would be aware. The OCVA did focus on priority areas in the City but also supported other activities. She regretted what she saw as a lack of prior dialogue with OCC. She was not aware of any negative feedback in relation to OCVA’s work.

Officers said that the review should not be read as criticism of the OCVA, that there had been prior dialogue with the Association at a meeting held with representatives of the OCVA in March 2017 and was raised again at a recent meeting in October.

Several members of the Committee expressed concern at the limited extent to which the open bidding and small grants programmes benefitted BME members of the community and to which representatives of that community were successful in securing grants. It was reported that there was a history of BME applications being rejected because they had not been filled in correctly whereas other members of the community who were better versed in such matters were more likely to be successful. This was a pattern of behaviour which perpetuated an inbuilt, if unintended, bias.

Some members of the BME community did not see the OCVA as properly representing their interests. It was suggested that there might be merit in identifying a BME focussed agency/organisation to act on behalf of the BME community in relation to grant applications.

Agreed that means need to be found of building capacity with underrepresented BME groups and, where there are outreach activities, it would be desirable for them to be directed towards BME communities in the first instance.

Officers said that, despite what had been said, over the last year a great deal of work had been done, working closely with the BME community and this would be reflected in the monitoring report due to go the City Executive Board in 2018/19.

The publication of the grid which shows how grants are evaluated was welcome as a means of informing potential and past applicants but greater efforts should be made to disseminate it within the BME community and elsewhere.

It was suggested that the evaluation of the programme should have a greater emphasis on outcomes and the difference it has made.

The proposed income ceiling of £200k for organisations wishing to apply for the community grants programme was questioned. It might, perhaps, be too blunt an instrument and exclude some organisations which the Council would wish to benefit. It was explained that the ceiling was intended to exclude larger, non-local, national organisations but agreed that the limit could be looked at.

The proposal to make a 5% reduction to the Advice Centres' budgets to contribute to a pot which could then be bid for in pursuance of the recommendations of the recent review, exercised some members of the Committee as it was thought to be giving a contradictory message, taking with one hand (at a time of increasing demand) and giving with the other. It might also be said to be at odds with the Council's financial inclusion strategy. The proposal was not well timed given the reduction in hours for those who gave advice at the centres and the introduction of Universal Credit (case work for which was taking longer than expected). All of which begged questions about the when those colleagues would have time to assemble bids against the new pot. However, in the absence of this proposal, the Centres may struggle to meet the recommendations of the review. A meeting with the Advice Centres to discuss these matters was due to be held the following day.

The committee considered a proposal to recommend that the 5% reduction should be withdrawn. On putting the matter to a vote a majority of the Committee did not support the proposal.

In discussion it was confirmed that the reference to "emerging" communities had a specific meaning and was not intended to refer to the vast majority of BME residents.

Questions were raised about the efficacy of the City Centre CAB provision when compared with that of other City advice centres and, indeed, that of the CAB in Abingdon. The £100k cost of rent for the City was of particular concern.

While there was majority support for supporting small community groups, a counter argument was that larger organisations tended to be more efficient and likely, therefore, to deliver what was asked of them.

The number of small grants given was low and probably did not reflect the extent of the need. Greater efforts should be made to publicise the opportunities available.

The Chairman drew the discussion to a close by thanking all those who had contributed and summarised a number of recommendations which the Committee agreed should be put to the CEB.

1. Means of building capacity within the BME community should be explored. This might include the identification of an existing group which can represent the BME community for this purpose

2. A greater emphasis should be placed on disseminating information about the grant application process, together with advice about how to make a good application, which should be targeted at underrepresented groups
3. Ensure that there is a continuing dialogue with the advice centres about the proposals
4. Consider the potential benefits of grants being given to Social Enterprises
5. Give further consideration to whether the £200k threshold described above is the most appropriate means of achieving the desired objective

51. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The next meetings of the Committee are scheduled as follows:

- 05 December 2017
- 15 January 2018
- 06 February 2018
- 06 March 2018

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 7.45 pm