

To: City Executive Board

Date: 12 February 2015

Report of: Scrutiny Committee

Title of Report: Grant Allocations to Community and Voluntary Organisations 2015/16

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To present comments from the Scrutiny Committee on the council's grant allocation for 2015/16.

Key decision? No

Scrutiny Lead Member: Councillor Simmons, Chair of Scrutiny Committee

Executive lead member: Councillor Rowley, Executive Member for Leisure Contract and Community Partnership Grants

Policy Framework: Corporate Plan 2014-2018 and Oxford Sustainable Community Strategy

Recommendations: That the City Executive Board:

1. Works with OCVA to improve outreach and engagement activities with diverse community and voluntary groups, with a focus on building capacities and supporting bid-writing.
2. Considers providing a greater separation between grants allocated to smaller, localised community groups and those that seek to achieve wider community benefits.

Introduction

1. The Scrutiny Committee pre-scrutinised Grant Allocations to Community and Voluntary Organisations 2015/16 at its meeting on 3 February 2015. The Committee would like to thank Councillor Mike Rowley, Julia Tomkins and Ian Brooke for presenting this report and answering questions.

Summary of the discussion

2. The Scrutiny Committee noted that the total amount requested through open bidding was £233,841, against an available budget of £100k.

£20k is currently unallocated and this will be focused on the priority area of debt.

3. The Committee expressed concern that no Asian organisations had received grant funding. Members questioned the level of communication and assistance provided because some groups, such as Indian and black groups feel they have dropped off the radar. The Committee also suggested that there is a need to support organisations in building their capacities, as well as providing funding. Officers recognised that this as an issue and advised that no Asian groups submitted bids this year. The Committee heard that as part of the Cowley project, diverse groups were being offered support with bid writing. The Committee suggest that its concerns are relayed to Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Association (OCVA), and that further efforts are made to improve outreach and active engagement with these groups.

Recommendation 1 – That the City Executive Board works with OCVA to improve outreach and engagement activities with diverse community and voluntary groups, with a focus on building capacities and supporting bid-writing.

4. The Committee questioned why the City Council has stepped in to support some organisations whose budgets had been cut by other agencies but not others. The City Council does not generally fund organisations where other bodies (e.g. Health) are responsible. However there have been exceptions where organisations have been at risk of folding and the City Council has been able to offer short term support to make them more sustainable.
5. The Committee expressed concern that the City Council was only providing 25% of the funding requested by Cutteslowe Community Association on the basis that the cost per head was expensive. The Committee suggested that support could have been provided based on a lower cost per head.
6. The Committee noted that small local organisations are required to compete for funding alongside some much larger organisations with international reputations. The Committee suggest that consideration is given to providing a greater separation in grant allocations between organisations focused on small-scale localised community development activities and those that are of wider community benefit.

Recommendation 2 – That consideration is given to providing a greater separation between grants allocated to smaller, localised community groups and those that seek to achieve wider community benefits.

Board Member's executive response

Response to recommendation 1: I am happy to accept this recommendation. Given the concerns that were expressed at the meeting about the capacity of overarching support services to reach minority communities, we will also explore other ways of making those communities aware of what we can (and cannot) offer.

We will include in the OCVA specification for 15/16 that they must follow up any unsuccessful applicants to any of the grants funding pots to offer them support and guidance. We already offer bid writing workshops for all community groups through OCVA, and this will continue.

Response to recommendation 2: I agree that full consideration should be given to the difference between larger voluntary-sector organisations and smaller groups based in local communities, and the need to strike a balance, as well as to ensure Oxford retains a wealth of groups that come from within local communities to achieve collective goals.

The Council awards grants solely on the basis of the proposal's contribution to achieving the Council's local objectives, as well as evaluating applications on the basis of how closely the applicant works with local communities and how well they establish the specific local need. We also offer dedicated support to community groups in preparing bids, both directly and through OCVA, and this will continue.

I am not convinced that a formal separation between different kinds of bidder would help to achieve this. The Council already has different a number of different grants budgets: for commissioning, with no bid limit and divided according to the Council's objectives; open bidding grants up to £10,000, and small grants up to £1,000 both very much aimed at local community-based groups; specific grants budgets for meeting particular needs. I think that considering applications separately according to the type of organisation they come from, rather than simply always bearing in mind the considerations outlined in my first paragraph above, could add complexity and diminish flexibility in achieving the Council's objectives.

However, there could be more we could do to ensure that small community-based groups are fully aware of what we can and cannot offer, and have the capacity to make appropriate applications; and our work on Scrutiny's first recommendation will be structured in order to address this.

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List of background papers: None

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