

**To:** City Executive Board  
**Date:** 21 November 2017  
**Report of:** Scrutiny Committee  
**Title of Report:** Review of Community Grants and Commissioned Advice Strategy

<b>Summary and recommendations</b>	
<b>Purpose of report:</b>	To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations on the Review of Community Grants and Commissioned Advice Strategy decision
<b>Key decision:</b>	Yes
<b>Scrutiny Lead Member:</b>	Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair of Scrutiny Committee
<b>Executive Board Members:</b>	Councillor Dee Sinclair, Culture & Communities; Councillor Susan Brown, Customer & Corporate Services
<b>Corporate Priority:</b>	Strong and Active Communities
<b>Recommendation(s):</b> That the City Executive Board states whether it agrees or disagrees with the five recommendations in the body of this report	

<b>Appendices</b>
None

## Introduction and background

1. The Scrutiny Committee considered the Review of Community Grants and Commissioned Advice Strategy at a meeting on 7 November 2017. The Committee would like to thank Councillor Dee Sinclair, Executive Board Member for Culture and Communities, Dave Growcott, Acting Communities Manager, and Julia Tomkins, Grants and External Funding Officer, for attending the meeting to present the report and answer questions. The Committee would also like to thank Kiera Bentley, Chair of Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action (OCVA), for her public address, and Sue Tanner and Peter Wilkinson, Trustees of Rose Hill and Donnington Advice Centre, for their written submission.
2. The Board Member for Culture and Communities introduced the report, reminding the Committee that this review was written in the context of cuts in public spending, growing demand, and community and voluntary organisations having to do more with less. The review has brought many issues to the surface. There is a clear

need for the grants programme to support the Council's key values and priorities. The report sets out, among other things, how the programme has been reviewed to maximise its effectiveness in tackling inequality and cohesion. One outcome is the introduction of three year funding awards through the open bidding grants programme as well as the commissioning programme. This will help to build the sustainability and long term security of community and voluntary organisations and is a direct response to feedback the Council has received.

3. Kiera Bentley, Chair of Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action (OCVA) addressed the Committee. She said that OCVA receives funding from both the County Council and City Council but is seeing a reduction in that funding. OCVA supports some 4,500 organisations across the county, with a further 500 organisations thought to be operating "below the radar". 52% of the work OCVA supports is in the city and much of this is aligned with the City Council's priorities, although OCVA also supports other activities that the Council is not necessarily sighted on. She regretted what she saw as a lack of prior dialogue with the City Council and was not aware of any negative feedback in relation to OCVA's work.
4. Officers said that the review should not be read as criticism of OCVA and provided assurance that the City Council has been engaged in dialogue with representatives of OCVA about the proposals, including at a meetings in March and October 2017.

### **Summary and recommendations**

5. Several members of the Committee expressed concern at the limited extent to which the open bidding and small grants programmes benefit black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities, given that these communities make up a significant proportion of the city's population. It was reported that there is a history of applications from BAME groups being rejected because they have not been filled in correctly, whereas other members of the community, who are more versed in such matters, are more likely to be successful. In the view of some members this amounts to a pattern of behaviour that perpetuates an inbuilt, if unintended, bias that the Council should be trying harder to correct. Furthermore, the Committee commented that some BAME communities do not see OCVA as properly representing their interests or providing them with the support they need to overcome barriers to accessing funding and to "level the playing field".
6. Officers said that over the last year a great deal of work has been done by the Council working closely with BAME communities, and that this will be reflected in future monitoring reports. The Committee noted that some grant funding, including for commissioned advice services, is of benefit to all communities in the city including BAME groups. The Committee also heard that there may be other underrepresented groups (e.g. disabled people) that also face barriers to accessing grant funding.
7. The Committee considered the merits of a number of suggestions for how the Council could go about increasing the representation of BAME groups amongst grant recipients. These ideas included allocating a proportion of grant funding specifically for underrepresented BAME groups, identifying an agency to act as an umbrella organisation for BAME communities, and making this objective a service development priority. These suggestions were ruled out but it was agreed that the Council should find an appropriate means of building capacity within underrepresented BAME groups that have historically struggled obtain funding

through the open bidding or small grants programmes. Another option is to link this objective to funding for community and voluntary sector infrastructure support.

***Recommendation 1 – That the Council identifies a suitable means of building capacity within BAME communities that are underrepresented among open bidding and small grants recipients, perhaps by linking this objective to the priorities for community and voluntary sector infrastructure support going forwards.***

8. The Committee noted the importance of the Council continuing to reach out to make sure that advice and information about the open bidding and small grants programmes is widely available and understood. The Committee commented that it would be desirable for these efforts to be targeted towards underrepresented groups. The recent publication of a grid showing how grants are evaluated is welcome as a means of informing potential and past applicants but greater efforts should be made to disseminate this sort of information within BAME communities and elsewhere.

***Recommendation 2 – That a greater emphasis is placed on disseminating information about the grant application processes, together with advice about how to make a good application. This information should be generally available but also targeted at underrepresented groups and communities.***

9. The Committee considered the proposal to make a 5% reduction to the advice centres' budgets and noted the written submission from trustees of Rose Hill and Donnington Advice Centre, which stated that this cut will almost certainly impact on the service they can provide to clients in a very deprived part of the city at a time when clients need all the help they can get to cope with the roll-out of Universal Credit. The Committee commented that the four advice centres based in Oxford do fantastic work and in many ways are the jewels in the city's crown.
10. The Committee explored the rationale for this proposal and heard that the 5% top-slice will contribute to a service development pot, with the addition of a further £20k that the Council is making available. The Committee heard that all four advice centres will be able to bid for this funding in order to implement service improvements recommended by Advice UK, a body that all four advice centres are members of. It is considered that this proposal will provide both an incentive and a partnership approach to delivering service improvements. The alternative is to maintain funding at the current levels while pushing the advice centres hard to deliver the recommendations.
11. The Committee noted that the development fund proposal could be seen as a 5% cut to funding for advice centres but it could equally be viewed as a £20k increase. The Committee sought and received assurances that the Council wanted all four advice centres to access this funding pot and that it could be distributed equitably. The Committee heard that no advice centres necessarily need to lose out or be placed in a position where they need to reduce services. The Committee also noted the bidding process introduces an extra administrative burden on the advice centres and that the Council may be seen to be taking with one hand (at a time of increasing demand) while giving with the other. It might also be said to be poorly timed given the introduction of Universal Credit (case work for which is taking longer than expected).
12. The Committee considered a proposal to recommend that the 5% reduction should be put on hold pending further discussions with the advice agencies. A majority of

the Committee did not support the proposal to put the 5% reduction on hold. The Committee heard that further meetings with the advice agencies would be taking place very soon, including the following day, to discuss this issue. The Committee agreed that it would like to see good quality continuing engagement with the advice centres to explain, provide reassurance and build consent for the changes.

***Recommendation 3 – That the Council ensures that there is a continuing dialogue with advice centres about the proposals, including specifically the proposal to make a 5% reduction to the direct funding that goes to each organisation and to pool that money with an additional £20k that advice centres can bid for to fund development work.***

13. The Committee commented that the number of small grants awarded is low and probably does not reflect the extent of the need in the city. It was suggested that there are potentially lots of small social enterprise organisations in the city that could benefit from small amounts of funding and potentially generate returns. As well as ensuring that messages about the small grants and open bidding programmes are communicated more widely, the Council could also consider the merits of offering “social grants” to social enterprise organisations.

***Recommendation 4 - That consideration is given to whether there is a role for the Council in providing ‘social grants’ funding directly to social enterprise organisations.***

14. The Committee considered the proposed income ceiling of £200k for organisations applying for small grants and questioned why the focus was solely on income, rather than reserves, for example. The Committee thought that an income ceiling might, perhaps, be too blunt an instrument and exclude some organisations the Council would wish to benefit from this funding stream. It was explained that the income ceiling is intended to exclude larger, national organisations. While the Committee support funding local community groups, a counter argument is that larger organisations may be more efficient in delivering intended outcomes.

***Recommendation 5 - That further consideration is given to whether the proposed £200k income ceiling is the most appropriate means of limiting the size of groups that can apply for small grants.***

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