

To: Cabinet
Date: 15 December 2021
Report of: Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: Strategic Grants Review

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations concerning the Strategic Grants Review report
Key decision:	Yes
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor Liz Wade, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Shaista Aziz, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Communities
Corporate Priority:	All
Policy Framework:	Council Strategy 2020-24
Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report.	

Appendices
None

Introduction and overview

1. At its meeting on 08 December 2021, the Scrutiny Committee considered the Cabinet Strategic Grants Review report.
2. The Committee would like to thank Councillor Shaista Aziz, Cabinet portfolio holder for Inclusive Communities, for presenting the report and answering questions, and Ian Brooke, Head of Community Services, for authoring the report and supporting the meeting.

Summary and recommendation

3. Prior to the commencement of the meeting, a brief presentation was made to the Committee on behalf of some of Oxford's advice centres and in anticipation of the Strategic Grants Review item. Sue Tanner, Chair of the Board of Trustees at Rosehill and Donnington, spoke on behalf of the three local advice centres, Agnes Smith in Blackbird Leys; Barton and Rose Hill; and Donnington. She drew attention to a paper which had been distributed by them to members of the Committee in advance of the meeting. The presentation detailed the value, financial and non-financial that advice centres provide the local community. A copy of this letter can be provided to Cabinet members on request.
4. Cllr Aziz, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Communities, introduced the report by first thanking Sue Tanner for her presentation at the beginning of the meeting and for the important contribution made by all those who work in advice centres. The workload of advice centres had undoubtedly increased as a result of Covid, having to deal with a multitude of issues, frequently affecting the most vulnerable members of the community and particularly women. The proposals before the Committee did not seek to identify, specifically, where cuts would be made but, rather, to set out a strategy for making such decisions in due course. Comments made at this stage would help to inform the strategy.
5. Cllr Aziz was grateful for the letter which had been sent to members of the Committee on behalf of the advice centres in advance of the meeting and said she would be pleased to meet their representatives to discuss their concerns. It was agreed that this letter should inform the Budget Review group's deliberations.
6. The strategy sought to set out a new approach to grant funding which supported the following principles: equalities at the heart of the programme; recovery from Covid; tackling deprivation; and environmentally sustainable. The strategy also sought to make the process of accessing grants easier and, in particular, to facilitate access to grants by organisations/groups which had not done so previously.
7. Ian Brooke, Head of Community Services, said the need to take £200k from the overall programme was a difficult and unwelcome challenge. The review process leading to this point had been lengthy and detailed, involving conversations with as many relevant people as possible to inform the proposals now before the Committee. The contribution of advice centres was not in question, and the written submission made in advance of the Committee provided the basis of some helpful options to be explored.
8. Issues raised and discussed by the Committee included much recognition of the value of the work provide by advice centres. Some discussion was held over how to make the application system for funding more straightforward, the ability of different organisations to leverage grant funding to provide outcomes far beyond what might be expected from the outlay, the close relationship between grant funding and the Council's objectives. Greater discussion was held over the topics of the recommendations below.

9. The Committee makes a two recommendations, concerning i) balancing access to funding with providing stability, and ii) the Oxford Lottery.

Balancing Access and Stability

10. The issue of greatest discussion amongst members of the Committee concerned the issue of those groups given funding for three years. The issue raised was that groups who are funded for three years face a deep uncertainty for the final 18 months of their funding. If funding is not secure, staff will begin to drift away in favour of greater stability, which impairs the organisation's ability to undertake its work, even if that funding is subsequently renewed. The idea of annual funding rounds, which would providing a rolling three year buffer was put forward as a means of providing a longer financial horizon to organisations funded in this way.
11. Two problems were identified with this suggestion. The first being the perception amongst some voluntary and community organisations that grant funding is hard to access by those who have previously been unsuccessful. Secondly, that applying for funding, particularly for less experienced groups is a significant administrative burden, and that for some this burden outweighs the uncertainty that a possible cliff-edge to their funding brings. The Committee is aware that long-term stability and diverse access to grant funding do not sit particularly easily with one another, and that there is a degree of trade-off between the two. Whilst ease of access for all sections of the community is certainly a valuable goal, the suggestion of the Committee is that there are other means of safeguarding this, such as the weightings of grant criteria. It would be expected that a successful re-applicant would have to show strong alignment with the Council's own strategic goals, including supporting diverse communities. Consequently, the Committee suggests that, on balance, the additional robustness that greater financial stability brings, would be of greater benefit than having the potential for greater churn of groups provided with grant funding. The second point, that for some organisations, applying for funding is a burden is taken on board. The Committee's suggestion, therefore, is that three-year funded organisations are allowed, but not obliged, to apply for a further three years of funding on an annual basis.

Recommendation 1: That the Council permits (but does not oblige) organisations granted three-year grant funding to reapply for such funding on an annual basis.

Oxford Lottery

12. A relatively small recommendation, but the Committee noted that for some community groups a small amount of money can go a long way. The Oxford Lottery is a contributor to the overall sums available to the voluntary and community sector, generating £12,000 per year for qualifying local good causes. Although not a major contributor to the overall budget, the Committee would like to see this maximised as far as possible. One idea put forward to achieve that is that ticket sales could be increased if they were offered as a matter of course to those making purchases at the different shops in the Town Hall – the museum shop and the coffee shop. At present, tickets are not on sale at these places. Not

only might this presage a moderate increase in sales, but it would have the further benefit of being likely to be attracting money from outside Oxford to give to its voluntary and community sector. The Committee suggests this idea is implemented.

Recommendation 2: That the Council, makes available tickets for the Oxford Lottery at cash registers in the Town Hall, such as the museum shop and coffee shop.

Further Consideration

13. The Committee has requested that the Budget Review Group give special attention to the proposals, and a briefing note is being written up to inform this. Further, Scrutiny also wishes to consider the forthcoming report on grant allocations.

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Cabinet response to recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee made on 08/12/2021 concerning the Strategic Grants Review

Response provided by Cabinet Member for Inclusive Communities, Councillor Shaista Aziz

<i>Recommendation</i>	<i>Agree?</i>	<i>Comment</i>
1) That the Council permits (but does not oblige) organisations granted three-year grant funding to reapply for such funding on an annual basis.	No	<p>Whilst we understand that this would give security to organisations and their other funders, it goes against the review findings in the following ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It would enable a small group of organisations to hold onto the bulk of the available funding which would make it harder for new organisations to join therefore potentially reducing access, diversity and inclusion. <p>It would reduce the timetable to change the funding scheme, making it more difficult for the council to align the grants programme to future financial challenges</p>
2) That the Council makes available tickets for the Oxford Lottery at cash registers in the Town Hall, such as the museum shop and coffee shop.	Yes	<p>Yes, we will look to do this and also explore how we can also do so in other community venues such as our community centres</p>

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