

To: Cabinet
Date: 15 November 2023
Report of: Head of Community Services
Title of Report: Grant Allocations to Community & Voluntary Organisations 2024/25

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	1) To demonstrate the impact of Oxford Community Impact Fund 2) To agree the criteria/weighting for assessing the 2024/25 Oxford Community Impact fund grants
Key decision:	Yes
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Rehman, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Communities
Corporate Priority:	Support Thriving Communities
Policy Framework:	Thriving Communities Strategy

Recommendations: That Cabinet resolves to:	
1.	Note the implementation of the Oxford Community Impact Fund agreed by Cabinet on 15 December 2021 as part of the strategic grants review;
2.	Note the social value and economic impact of the fund;
3.	Agree that the criteria and weighting for assessing Oxford Community Impact Fund grant applications in 2024/2025 are as set out in paragraph 5 of this report with the additional requirement for applicants to comply with the safeguarding arrangements specified by the Council. Cabinet agrees such safeguarding requirements are to be determined by the Safeguarding Coordinator in consultation with the Head of Community Services.

Appendices	
Appendix 1	Oxford Community Impact Fund Grant Allocations to Community Groups 1 April 2022-31 March 2023
Appendix 2	Charts indicating the communities of identity, geography and interest that funded projects reached 1 April 2022-31 March 2023
Appendix 3	Meaningful measurement - stories demonstrating impact

Appendix 4	Funding leverage as reported in the grant monitoring form for Big Ideas grants 2022/23
Appendix 5	Examples of how the funding criteria were met and delivered
Appendix 6	Equalities Impact Assessment
Appendix 7	Risk Assessment

Introduction and background

1. Oxford Community Impact Fund provides funding to community groups, organisations and individuals to deliver programmes for wider community benefit.
2. The fund aims to help deliver the following key interconnected pillars, in line with the Council's Corporate Strategy 2020-24: Support thriving communities; Enable an inclusive economy; Pursue a zero-carbon Oxford; Deliver more, affordable housing
3. Oxford Community Impact Fund started in April 2022 and comprises four strands:
 - Commissioning essential services – £943K per year – rough sleeping and single homelessness commissioning (£442K); domestic abuse (£53K) and advice services (£448K). The rough sleeping and single homelessness commissioning budget sits within the housing budgets.
 - Supporting peppercorn rent arrangements – £150K per year
 - Big Ideas grants – £338K per year (one round every 3 years with grant agreements in place for three years – currently until 31 March 2025); and
 - Small and Medium Grants – £84K per year (three rounds each year – round 1 £24K, round 2 £44K and round 3 £16K)
4. An additional grant – Big Ideas Transition (£56K) was set up due to the availability of additional funds following year-end adjustments and was used to give one-year transition funding to unsuccessful Big Ideas applicants who had relevant projects.
5. The criteria by which Big Ideas and Small and Medium grants are assessed link to the Corporate Strategy and are as follows:
 - Equalities, diversity and inclusion – 15% (compulsory)
 - Environmental sustainability and zero Carbon Oxford – 15% (compulsory)
 - Partnership working and cross-sector support – 10%
 - Health and wellbeing – 10%
 - Attracting other funding (leverage) – 10%
 - Innovation – 10%
 - Inclusive economy – 10%
 - Balance of reach (communities of geography, identity and by activity type) – 20%
6. Following the grant review in 2021, the grant application process has been simplified and advice sessions are run regularly throughout the year to support organisations and individuals to make applications. The availability of funding has also been promoted widely. As a result, there has been a significant increase in applications with over 20% of grants being awarded to new applicants.
7. Grants are initially scored by the officers with an understanding of the area of work to be funded. The scores are then checked for consistency of approach by the

grants team who add a balance score based on the overall impact of the work and the likelihood of funding being available from alternative sources. The grants team then recommend funding amounts based on the budget available, overall scores and the applicants' response to the question 'Please let the panel know which elements of your project you would be able to deliver if you receive 10 - 20% of your request'.

8. These recommendations are then approved by Cabinet for grant commitments for more than one year: Big Ideas, rent grants and commissioned services. Small and Medium grant recommendations (up to £5K per application round per year) are sent to the Head of Community Services for approval, in consultation with the Executive Director and Cabinet Member for Inclusive Communities.
9. See Table 1 below for the split and Appendix 1 for the list of grantees:

Grant	No. of projects funded	Budget	Funds disbursed £
Big Ideas	36	£338,000	£338,000
Small and Medium Grants R 1	24	£24,000	£22,750
Small and Medium Grants R 2	48	£44,000	£44,000
Small and Medium Grants R 3	22	£16,000	£17,250
Big Ideas Transition	28	£56,500	£56,500
Total	158	£478,500	£478,500

Table 1

10. Oxford City Council facilitates applicants in receipt of Big Ideas funding to meet three times a year as the 'Big Ideas Network' to enable shared learning and evaluation, project collaboration and the pooling of resources.
11. Feedback is sought and acted upon throughout the application process. Feedback from applicants has been predominantly concerned about the decline in the availability of external funding and the impact this will have on delivery. In order to help mitigate this, officers are piloting a Match My Project scheme to help secure additional funding for grantees. Match My Project enables community groups/ grantees to advertise their projects on a website, which businesses can then choose to support.
12. Grants reporting is guided by the criteria used to assess grant applications.

Equalities, Diversity & Inclusion

13. Increasing Equality, Diversity and Inclusion is a key priority for Oxford City Council and underpins its Thriving Communities Strategy. Therefore, demonstrating how the funded activities have helped to reduce inequalities and increase diversity, inclusion and access in the city is one of the mandatory grant reporting requirements.
14. This criterion, along with engagement with the Big Ideas Network and grant advice support sessions, has enabled organisations to get to know, collaborate with and support a more diverse range of marginalised communities in Oxford. This has, in turn, led to organisations adapting their services to reduce barriers and better meet

community needs e.g. helping those who might otherwise be left behind to develop their skills, confidence and social connections – see Appendix 5 for examples.

15. Grantees were asked to provide information regarding the demographics of their board/staff/volunteer teams and their response to the cost of living crisis in a voluntary capacity as part of project monitoring for grants awarded in 2022-23. This will be obligatory for grants awarded in 2023-24. All who responded were assisting people most affected by the cost of living crisis and have recruited or are in the process of recruiting a more diverse team and/or board. For example, Justice in Motion recruited four new trustees reflecting the diversity of the city and My Life My Choice have reserved two positions on their board of trustees for people who are facing racism. Fusion Arts have two new salaried staff and interns from diverse backgrounds.

Environmental sustainability and zero carbon Oxford

16. In January 2019, Oxford declared a climate emergency, and in autumn 2019 became the first UK city to hold a Citizens Assembly on Climate Change. As such, it is also mandatory for Oxford Community Impact Fund's grantees to report on the environmental impact of proposed activities, mitigation measures to offset this impact and, where applicable, plans to increase biodiversity and contribute towards a zero-carbon Oxford.
17. This criterion has encouraged increased awareness of environmental sustainability within the funded organisations and communities they serve and led to many undertaking further training and internal policy development in this area.
18. The organisations have played their part in reducing waste, with most focussing on reuse, repurposing and recycling.
19. Grantees have also made a conscious effort to reduce energy usage and carbon emissions e.g. by replacing lighting and boilers and turning devices off when not in use, replacing print with digital solutions and encouraging everyone to use public transport, bicycles or to walk wherever possible. They have also stopped using single use plastic and instead are using items that are biodegradable or that can be washed and reused.

Leverage and match funding (attracting additional funding)

20. Oxford Community Impact Fund provides seed funding to enable grantees to generate, raise and earn additional income to pay for the full cost of delivery.
21. Oxford City Council also supports organisations to access additional external funding through tailored individual funding advice sessions.
22. In 2022/23, Oxford Community Impact Big Ideas Funding represented 2% of the £12,183,196 overall delivery costs for Big Ideas programmes – see table 2 below. The remaining 98% was paid for by earned income from hires, ticket sales and service charges (£5,071,624); trusts and foundations (£2,841,494); other public sector/national lottery funding (£2,423,657) as well as donations and sponsorship (£1,542,222):

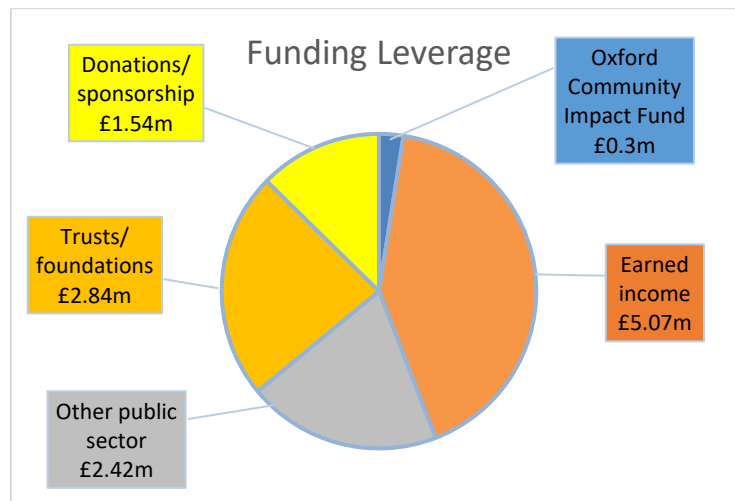


Table 2

23. The seed funding to Big Ideas grantees helped them to raise/generate significant additional money which they used to help pay for fundraising, programme and staffing costs so they could provide preventative support to people who would otherwise be likely to need more statutory services at a greater cost in the future.
24. However, accessing funding is very competitive and the availability of funding is declining whilst needs are continuing to rise. The ability to maintain and increase levels of seed funding is critical to the future delivery of preventative programmes in the city, however this is challenging in the current financial climate.

Partnership working and cross-sector support

25. Demonstrating partnership working is one of the voluntary criteria in the Oxford Community Impact Fund. This criterion, along with engagement with the Big Ideas network, has led to a wider range of different types partnerships developing including more cross-sector working and support of grassroots organisations. This has, in turn, led to wider strategic thinking, better reach and delivery and reduced costs e.g. via sharing knowledge, skills and resources, – see Appendix 5 for some examples.
26. The introductions created through the different strands of the grants awarded have also encouraged collaboration between the grantees. For instance, Aspire Oxford is contracted to deliver English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes to Asylum Welcome clients as part of the UK Resettlement Programme funded by Oxford City Council; Sanctuary Hosting are now sharing space with Asylum Welcome and also source bicycles from the latter's 'Sanctuary Wheels Bike' project for its clients; Asylum welcome also collaborated with Syrian Sisters for fundraising activities to support those affected by the earthquake in Syria.

Health and wellbeing

27. In the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Oxford Community Impact Fund includes a voluntary criterion to support organisations whose activities are beneficial to the physical and/or mental wellbeing of Oxford's residents.
28. The fund has supported several programmes to support the emotional wellbeing and mental health of a wide range of people including young people, older people,

people with disabilities, older single men, vulnerable people, and parents, who are more susceptible to feelings of depression and isolation – see Appendix 5 for some examples.

29. The fund has also supported activities like dance and sports, including swimming, bicycle riding, skating, walks and football, which have increased physical fitness as well as providing connections and interactions between participants.
30. Overall, the programmes funded by Oxford Community Impact Fund have helped to develop and foster a sense of community between residents through their attendance at regular activities. This has led to a greater sense of belonging, improved confidence/self-esteem and decreased instances of loneliness.

Innovation

31. The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it changes in ways of working and while activities such as online workshops, zoom and Teams meetings have become 'business as usual', the Community Impact Fund continues to encourage funded organisations to continue to test new ideas and processes, piloting new technologies and/or service delivery that could result in better quality, social benefit, value-for-money and community reach.
32. Funding has supported a range of innovative ideas that can be tested, adapted and replicated by others. See Appendix 5 for examples.

Inclusive economy

33. Oxford Community Impact Fund included an inclusive economy criterion as a lever to increase opportunities for disadvantaged communities/groups to have a fairer share in the city's wealth economy. This has helped encourage paying the Oxford Living Wage to become a norm in most organisations. Initiatives such as offering apprenticeships/internships and work experience; sharing space, skills or equipment; contracting locally and supporting independent businesses are some of the activities the funding supports.
34. Most of the organisations use local suppliers and contractors for services wherever possible therefore are a source of income for local businesses and vendors too.
35. In addition, several organisations are working with volunteers/freelancers, providing opportunities for professional growth and development. Providing training and capacity building and support services to migrants/asylum seekers and parents helps with employability as they look to integrate in the wider Oxford community. Students also receive mentorship through internships and work experience/placement opportunities.
36. With most organisations offering subsidised tickets for events/training or meeting spaces through measures such as 'pay what you can', this has encouraged greater participation by those people who could not previously afford it.

Meaningful Measurement of the impact of the Oxford Community Impact Fund

37. Three grantees confirmed close to the end of the financial year that they were unable to spend their grants by the 31 March 2023 deadline. This enabled an

opportunity to commission the Old Fire Station to collect and analyse stories from grantee participants to dig under the numerical data and measure some of the impacts of the funding more meaningfully. The stories are compiled in Appendix 3.

38. This method was innovative as it trailed a different way of evaluating that hadn't been used to assess the impact of grant funding previously. It aimed to help the Big Ideas network of grantees, as well as Oxford City Council, to better understand what change is happening for the people we work with and to gather insights that we can all learn from.
39. The stories were collected by trained story collectors, who guided 1-2-1 conversations with individuals (the storytellers) about their experience, and what being involved with the organisation or project had meant for them personally. These conversations were audio recorded, transcribed, and then edited into shorter stories which aim to faithfully reflect the storyteller's insights, while keeping their 'voice' in the storytelling in their own words.
40. As part of the next phase of the process, the Old Fire Station facilitated an in-person discussion session on 6 September 2023 at the Old Fire Station. This session brought Big Ideas partners together to discuss the stories and what we can collectively learn from them. It was also an opportunity to reflect on our experience of using a different approach to impact measurement.
41. The discussion was rich and wide-ranging but the following key insights emerged:
 - a) Although the outputs of the organisations were highly diverse – e.g. arts, self-advocacy, family support work – their outcomes were often strikingly similar.
 - b) The organisations described in the stories cultivate trusting, mutually respectful, non-judgemental relationships with service users. They create 'safe spaces' in which people (who have often had negative experiences of mainstream institutions such as schools, hospitals, family, local authorities) are able to feel secure in their identity and feel that their voice is being heard.
 - c) Service users in the community and voluntary sector have often chosen to access support, rather than feeling as though an intervention has been imposed on them, as can be the case in the statutory sector.
 - d) This environment of mutual trust and respect is the 'magic' that drives transformation. It leads to a growing sense of confidence and agency, both on the part of service users and staff and volunteers working in such organisations. These two factors (staff/volunteer vocation and service user agency) make for a potent combination in which people can surprise themselves, rediscover things that matter to them, and rebuild confidence. They create an adaptable person-centred environment that feels more humane, in which people can 'feel loved', but also rediscover things that they love to do. Several stories showed that people who have been helped in this way become motivated to give back – using their experience to help others.
 - e) Many of the small community organisations described in the stories helped people with complex needs to navigate or access larger service providers. However, because of its longer-term, relationship-based work, the voluntary sector is able to work preventatively in a way that is harder for busy statutory services to achieve: *Basically, we befriend them, we get to know them and their family life and the dynamics. How it is where they're from, their cultures, all those things. Then we attend the meetings to hear what the different agencies are*

saying. We try and hear what they hear, then tell them what we understand by it. Because sometimes nobody's hearing anyone, you know. (Story 13)

- f) This work requires consistency, because a high staff or volunteer turnover prevents relationships from forming. However, funding is often short-term and project-specific, which makes building stable relationships more difficult. Furthermore, funding shortfalls in statutory services mean that demand for community and voluntary organisations is increasing, placing further strain on the sector.
- g) Storytellers found the process of telling their story to be empowering and validating. It amplified the voices of people who might not otherwise be heard and became a powerful advocacy tool for fundraising. Building this kind of evaluation into more services could therefore help to support their mission rather than being considered an additional task that redirects capacity away from core delivery.
- h) The discussion group wondered whether voluntary and community groups could be more formally joined up with statutory services, for example through regular meetings or other methods of contact. Locality based working could offer a conduit for this. The notion of cross-sectoral collaborations on Storytelling evaluation as part of a more deeply embedded Storytelling approach in the city and Council was very popular.

Criteria and weighting for assessing the 2024/25 grant allocations

- 42. Since the funding criteria was agreed in the Cabinet meeting on 15 December 2021, the cost of living crisis has added significant additional pressure on communities.
- 43. Of the overall budget of £1,515,000, £943K (62%) is already allocated to commissioning critical support for those most in need via advice centres, domestic abuse services and rough sleeping and single homelessness pathways.
- 44. Where relevant, some small and medium grant applicants are building food and other support into their projects (e.g. free lunches for participants)
- 45. Given the funding contracts already in place, criteria changes would come into effect for the £84K small and medium grants (6% of the overall funding).
- 46. There is also more emphasis being placed on ensuring Safeguarding processes are in place. The following has been drafted as a possible checklist for grantees:

Commitment to Oxfordshire Multi Agency Safeguarding Arrangements including the requirements set out by the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Adults Board and Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board, and their associated legal frameworks	
Safeguarding governance and structure within service organisation, including policy leads	
Safeguarding prevention and Early Help	
Employment of staff in line with safer recruitment practices and DBS requirements	
Escalation processes	
A staff allegations policy	
Appropriate level of safeguarding training dependent on employee's role	
Reporting and recording of safeguarding concerns	

A whistleblowing policy for staff to report concerns about other members of staff or sub-contractors.	
Advice on information sharing and the associated legal frameworks	
Monitoring and review of safeguarding policy and procedures	

Table 3

47. In light of the above, options for amending criteria for assessing 2024-25 grants include:

- a. Maintaining the criteria as they are
- b. Giving higher scores to projects which directly address the cost of living crisis
- c. Giving higher scores to organisations who demonstrate how their organisation is being developed more intrinsically to meet the agreed criteria
- d. Maintaining the criteria as they are but only give grants to organisations who are able to confirm they have the full safeguarding arrangements in place as per the checklist, when finalised

Options appraisal

48. The pros and cons of the options are:

a. Maintaining the criteria as they are

Pros:

- Applicants have recently got used to working to the new criteria following a full scale review – maintaining them as they are will help people feel confident to apply
- The criteria are currently delivering a wide range of benefits as demonstrated in appendix 2

Cons:

- The opportunity to encourage organisational development may be missed

b. Giving higher scores to projects which directly address the cost of living crisis

Pros:

- The projects will help support those most affected by the cost of living crisis

Cons:

- The scope of projects would be reduced therefore reducing the opportunity for people to benefit from projects which could help them avoid getting into a crisis situation in the first place

c. Giving higher scores to organisations who demonstrate how their organisation is being developed more intrinsically to meet the agreed criteria

Pros:

- Organisations will be encouraged to create more sustainable and longer lasting impact

Cons:

- This could penalise smaller, often more diverse/grass roots organisations, who don't have the budgets or capacity available for more intrinsic organisational development

d. Maintaining the criteria as they are but only give grants to organisations who are able to confirm they have the full safeguarding arrangements in place as per the checklist, when finalised

Pros:

- This will help to ensure Safeguarding is in place for all funded activities

Cons:

This could penalise smaller, often more diverse/grass roots organisations, who don't have the budgets or capacity available to develop all the policies on the checklist

Recommendation:

49. Given the pros and cons of the options above, the recommendation is option d) which is not to change the main criteria and weightings but to add an obligation on successful applicants to meet safeguarding requirements stipulated by the Council

Financial implications

50. A commitment has already been made to three years of funding for Commissioned Services and Big Ideas grants with signed grant agreements being in place for this. The annual amount allocated for small and medium grants is £84k.

Legal issues

51. Under Part 4.5(26) of the Constitution Cabinet is empowered to give grants and thus determine the criteria for grant awards.

52. The giving of certain grants is subject to the Subsidy Control Act 2022 and the Council should establish prior to making grants whether this act applies to any funding it proposes to give.

Level of risk

53. Please see the risk assessment at Appendix 7.

Equalities impact

54. Please see the Equalities Impact assessment at Appendix 6.

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Background Papers: None	
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