

To: Cabinet

Date: 5 February 2025

Report of: Tom Hook, Deputy Chief Executive – Citizen and City Services

Title of Report: Grant Allocations to Community & Voluntary Organisations 2025/26

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To highlight to Cabinet the positive impact of Oxford Community Impact Fund 2023-24. 2. To seek Cabinet approval to the criteria and weighting for assessing Oxford Community Impact Fund grant applications for delivery from 2025-26 set out at paragraphs 47-58. 3. To seek Cabinet approval to administer a new bidding round for Big Ideas grants maintaining grant agreements for 3 years from 2025-26 financial year – 31 March 2028. 4. To seek Cabinet approval to administer two bidding rounds per year for Small grants for the next 3 years with activity being delivered in year. 5. To seek Cabinet approval to maintain the current levels of core funding for Advice Centres for 3 years from 2025-26 financial year – 31 March 2028. 6. To delegate authority to the Deputy Chief Executive – Citizen and City Services in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities to make grant awards in line with the assessment process and criteria.
Key decision:	Yes
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities
Corporate Priority:	Support Thriving Communities
Policy Framework:	Thriving Communities Strategy

Recommendation(s): That Cabinet resolves to:	
1.	Note the social value and economic impact of the fund – see appendices 1-4
2.	Agree the criteria and weighting for assessing Oxford Community Impact Fund grant applications for delivery from 2025-26 as recommended in paragraphs 50-61 of this report.
3.	Agree to maintain the current levels of core funding for Advice Centres for

1st April 2025-31st March 2028

- Delegate** authority to the Deputy Chief Executive – Citizen and City Services in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities to take decisions as to the grants to be made by the Council against the approved criteria and in line with the assessment process.

Appendices

Appendix 1	Oxford Community Impact Fund Grant Allocations to Community Groups 1 April 2023-31 March 2024
Appendix 2	Charts indicating the reach of communities of identity, geography and interest by funded projects 2023-24
Appendix 3	Funding leverage as reported in the grant monitoring form for Big Ideas grants 2023/24
Appendix 4	Examples of how the funding criteria were met and delivered
Appendix 5	Equalities Impact Assessment
Appendix 6	Risk Assessment

Introduction and background

- Oxford Community Impact Fund provides funding to community groups, organisations and individuals to deliver programmes for wider community benefit.
- 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.
- Oxford Community Impact Fund started in April 2022 and comprises four strands:

Strand	Current Annual Cost (to 31 March 2025)
Strand 1: Grants for essential services: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advice services Domestic abuse helpline 	£501K total per year (to 31 March 2025) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> £448K £53K
Strand 2: Grants for rent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Modern Art Oxford Fusion Arts Barton Advice Centre Agnes Smith Advice Centre Film Oxford Rose Hill Advice Centre Donnington Doorstep Family Centre <i>n.b. leases vary</i>	£82,887K budget allocated per year <ul style="list-style-type: none"> £50,000 £8,837 £8,100 £7,250 £5,000 £3,000 £700
Strand 3: Big Ideas grants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 36 strategic partners – 3 year funding arrangement contracted from 1 April 2022- 31 March 2025 	£338K budget per year (to 31 March 2025) <i>n.b. a grant of £10K p.a. was unclaimed</i>
Strand 4: Small and Medium grants – 100+ per year <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Round 1 Round 2 Round 3 	£84K per year (to 31 March 2025) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> £24K £44K £16K

Table 14

7. Grants are initially scored by 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. For grant agreements up to 31 March 2025, recommendations were approved by Cabinet for grant commitments for more than one year: Big Ideas, grants for rent and essential services. Small and Medium grant recommendations (up to £5K per application round per year) were sent to the Head of Community Services/Executive Director Communities and People for approval, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities.
9. See Table 2 below for the breakdown of Big Ideas and Small and Medium Grants from 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024 and Appendix 1 for the list of grantees:

Grant	No. of grants awarded	Grants budget allocated
Big Ideas	36	£338,000
Small and Medium Grants R 1 2023-24	49 (24 previous year)	£24,000
Small and Medium Grants R 2 2023-24	42 (48 previous year)	£44,000
Small and Medium Grants R 3 2023-24	35 (22 previous year)	£16,000
Total	162 (130 previous year)	£422,000

Table 2

10. In addition to the funding above, officers also hold individual grant advice sessions throughout the year to support organisations and individuals to increase income and secure external funding via grants, Oxford lottery and other income generation including Match My Project. Officers provide one to one advice and write letters of support.
11. In 2023-24, 30% of Big Ideas grantees signed up to [Oxford Lottery](#), which is administered by Oxford City Council (The Council), and collectively raised over £20K.
12. [Match My Project](#) enables community groups and grantees to advertise their projects on a website, which businesses can then choose to support. In 2023-24, 20% of Big Ideas grantees signed up to Match my Project with several benefitting e.g. Arts At the Old Fire Station were supported by Jessop and Cook to create an environmental action plan around the Old Fire Station building and how they can make changes to reduce their carbon footprint.
13. The Council facilitates applicants in receipt of Big Ideas funding to meet in person as the 'Big Ideas Network' to enable shared learning and evaluation, project collaboration, fundraising and the pooling of resources.
14. Feedback is sought and acted upon throughout the application process including improvements to the application and monitoring forms and offering briefings in the evening as well as during the working day. Grantees welcome actions taken to streamline processes and share external funding opportunities.

15. Grants reporting is undertaken annually and guided by the criteria used to assess grant applications.
16. Total beneficiaries reported by Big Ideas grantees are over 500,000 – whilst some people will have benefitted several times and from different projects, this is still a high figure for a city with a population of c.165,000.
17. The availability of funding has been promoted widely. As a result, there has been a significant increase in applications with over 20% of Small and Medium grants being awarded to new applicants.

Equalities, Diversity & Inclusion

18. Increasing Equality, Diversity and Inclusion is a key priority for The 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.
19. 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 increase support for 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 4 for a wide range of examples.
20. Grantees have reported increased diversity on their board of trustees. For example, Asylum Welcome have hired more staff, volunteers, managers and board members with lived experience to move towards becoming a refugee-led charity. Currently, 15 out of 35 members of staff (including a Co-Director of Services and Office Manager), 2 trustees and over 50 of their 250 volunteers are people with lived experience of forced migration. Justice in Motion recruited 3 new trustees in 2023/24; two of whom are from the global majority. My Life My Choice have reserved 2 positions on the board of trustees for people from an ethnic minority, 6 for women and 2 for young people. Homestart also recruited two new trustees including a young trustee recruited through Reach Volunteering.
21. Combined, the advice centres worked with over 13,219 customers during 2023/24. This number includes 9,322 customers who haven't sought advice/assistance from a centre before, and 3,897 who have on-going cases or return for advice/assistance.
22. Over 10% of customer interactions were face-to-face. Since the pandemic, more customer interactions are via digital means, but there is also a need for customers to be seen face-to-face. Phone appointments dominate one-off advice/triage.
23. The key support people needed was for: debt advice, claiming benefits, housing, utilities, employment, legal and relationship issues.
24. Over 4,100 people were assisted to reduce their debt, and around 1,533 people were assisted to claim new benefits or increase the benefit they were entitled to.
25. Advice centres assisted customers to reduce debt to a value of at least £2.1m in 2023/24. This only includes information where this is collected, and we can therefore expect the amount reduced to be higher than this.
26. In addition to this, in 2023/24, the centres have together recorded around £11m money gained for customers. This includes where people have taken up benefits, have been assisted to have debt written off, assisted with charity grants and other one-off payments.

Environmental sustainability and zero carbon Oxford

27. In January 2019, Oxford declared a climate emergency and, in autumn 2019, Oxford 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.
28. 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 and monitoring in this area.
29. Grantee organisations have played their part in reducing waste, with most focussing on reuse, repurposing and recycling – see Appendix 4 for examples.
30. 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)

31. Oxford Community Impact Fund provides seed funding to enable grantees to generate, raise and earn significant additional income to pay for the full cost of delivery – see Appendix 3 and table 3 below.
32. The Council also supports organisations to access additional external funding through tailored individual funding advice sessions, Match my Project and Oxford Lottery. When appropriate, officers also provide letters of support for external grant applications.
33. In 2023/24, Oxford Community Impact Big Ideas, Grants for Rent and Advice Centre Funding of £880,498 represented 6% of the £14,901,300 overall delivery costs for Big Ideas and Advice programmes – see Appendix 3 and table 3 below. The remaining 94% was paid for by earned income from: trading activities including investments (£6,601,638); grants and charitable trusts (£5,110,374); other local authority funding (£540,027) and donations and legacies including via Oxford Lottery (£1,768,763).

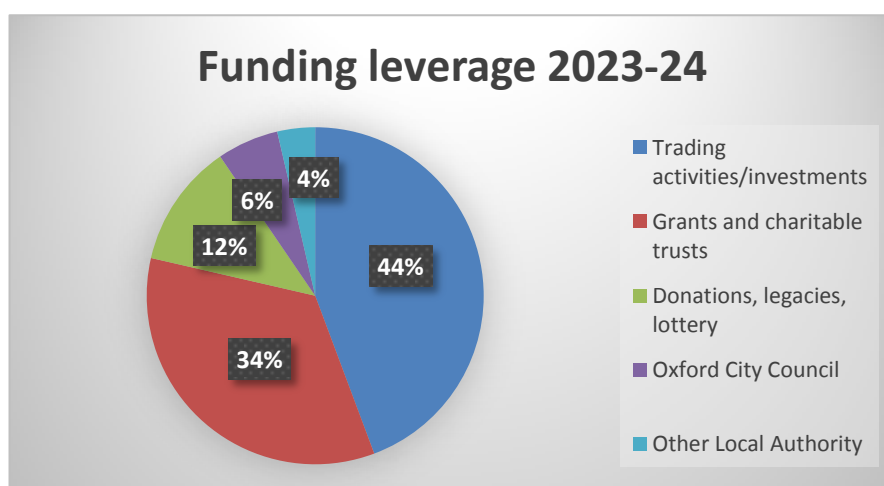


Table 3

34. 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 grantees reported that Oxford Community Impact Fund funding was instrumental in them raising additional funds, 10 reported it may have assisted and only 5 reported that the Oxford Community Impact funding did not lever additional funding.
35. 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

36. 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 of 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 4 for examples.

Health and wellbeing

37. 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.
38. The fund has maintained 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, LGBTQIA+ communities, vulnerable people, and parents, who are more susceptible to feelings of depression and isolation – see Appendix 4 for examples.
39. The fund has also supported activities like dance and sports, including swimming, bicycle riding, walks and football, which have increased physical fitness as well as providing social connections and interactions between participants.
40. 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

41. Oxford Community Impact Fund continues to encourage funded organisations 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.
42. Funding has supported a range of innovative ideas that can be tested, adapted and replicated by others. See Appendix 4 for examples.

Inclusive economy

43. 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 standard practice 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. See Appendix 4 for examples.

44. 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.
45. 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 and placement opportunities.
46. With most organisations offering subsidised tickets for events/training or discounts for meeting spaces through measures such as 'pay what you can', this has encouraged greater participation by those people who could not previously afford it.

Community impact and empowerment

47. The Council has recognised the importance of locally based organisations who foster tolerance and provide opportunities for people to engage in community activities, leisure, culture and social connectivity. There is a real impact on the well-being of citizens and families in healthy, well-connected communities and Oxford Community Impact Fund has been particularly useful to many organisations to enable them to leverage in other funding.
48. At the same time, a variety of approaches to community empowerment have championed the importance of allowing communities to determine their own direction. Councils have sought to transfer power to communities including through creating alternative funding mechanisms and piloting participatory grant making which changes the nature of the relationships between councils and communities.
49. The Community Services review has recognised that the next funding period is an opportunity to rethink priorities in funding, as well as explore and utilise opportunities to increase support to organisations through other routes. This includes, for example, supporting organisations to access expertise needed, and to recruit trustees, as key factors that impact on the viability of groups.

Criteria and weighting for assessing the 2025/26 grant allocations

50. Grantees have fed back that they welcome actions taken to streamline grant application and monitoring processes. There is an opportunity to refine the number of criteria involved to reduce overlap.
51. Currently, the criteria for application are:
 - Equalities, diversity and inclusion – 15% (compulsory)
 - Environmental sustainability and zero carbon Oxford – 15% (compulsory)
 - Partnership working and cross-sector support – 10% (voluntary)
 - Health and wellbeing – 10% (voluntary)
 - Attracting other funding (leverage) – 10% (voluntary)
 - Innovation – 10% (voluntary)
 - Inclusive economy – 10% (voluntary)
52. Whilst the criteria above have delivered a programme which, on balance, reflects the needs of wide ranging communities of identity, geography and interest – see Appendix 2, it has also led to organisations and The Council staff undertaking a disproportionate amount of administration hours in relation to the amounts of funding allocated.

53. **Recommendation 1:** In order to address this, it is recommended to reduce small and medium grants rounds from 3 to 2 rounds per annum for in year delivery with a maximum grant of £3k (it was £5K previously but awards usually ranged between £200 and £2K) with a simplified form and decisions signed off by the Director in consultation with the Cabinet Member. The strand will be called small grants, accordingly.
54. **Recommendation 2:** it is recommended to undertake a new bidding round for Big Ideas maintaining grant agreements for 3 years from 2025-26 financial year – 31 March 2028. This supports key organisations, enabling them to plan strategically and demonstrate their longer term sustainability to national funders. Given cost of living pressures, it is also recommended to maintain the current level of funding to advice centres for 3 years from 2025-26 financial year – 31 March 2028.
55. **Recommendation 3:** it is recommended to reduce the application (and therefore also the monitoring) criteria to focus on two compulsory criteria:
- Criterion 1: Reducing inequalities in the city – score up to 60%
 - Criterion 2: Attracting other funding of at least 70% (leverage) – score up to 40%

It is recognised that strong answers for these will incorporate elements of the other current criteria including environmental sustainability, health and wellbeing and inclusive economy in the new criterion 1 and partnership working and innovation in the new criterion 2.

56. It is also recognised that the Council would wish to support both (usually) larger organisations which have the resources to lever significant additional external funding and smaller organisations which may not have capacity for this.
57. **Recommendation 4:** is therefore recommended to restrict applicants to receive funding either from Big Ideas (core funding for organisations with strategic significance able demonstrate the ability to lever match funding of at least 70%) or the small grants strand (project grants for smaller organisations).
58. **Recommendation 5:** as budgets are limited, given the community focus of the Oxford Community Impact Fund, it is recommended that Big Ideas and small grants strands should only fund activities which local authorities or government bodies are not normally expected to provide under their statutory duties. For example, the provision of activities for pupils during the school day will not be funded, neither will the health or social care of individuals.

Options appraisal - eligibility criteria

59. Considering the above, key options for amending eligibility and criteria for assessing grants for delivery from 2025-26 financial year include:
- a. Maintain the status quo with criteria, bidding rounds and the length of agreements remaining as they are for all strands
 - b. Maintain medium as well as small grants with a maximum grant of £5k
 - c. Reduce the criteria to 2 as proposed but allow organisations to apply to both Big Ideas and small grants strands
 - d. Allow applicants to apply for funding towards statutory activities
 - e. Reduce the criteria to 2 as proposed and limit eligibility for projects/organisations as proposed

60. The pros and cons of the options are:

a. Maintain the status quo with criteria, bidding rounds and the length of agreements remaining as they are for all strands

Pros:

- Applicants have recently got used to working to the new criteria following a full scale review in 2021 – maintaining them as they are will help people feel confident to apply and give small grants applicants 3 opportunities for funding each year
- The criteria are currently delivering a wide range of benefits as demonstrated in appendix 4
- The grant agreements for Big Ideas and Advice Centres would remain at 3 years; the grant agreements for small grants would remain at 1 year; the grants for rent agreements would be issued every year as per lease agreements and therefore keep the same length of financial commitment
- 3 bidding rounds for small grants gives 3 opportunities to apply for funding

Cons:

- Having so many criteria and 3 bidding rounds for small grants makes the application, assessment and monitoring processes take a disproportionate amount of administrative capacity for applicants and The Council staff

b. Maintain medium as well as small grants with a maximum grant of £5K

Pros:

- This will give organisations the opportunity to potentially receive more funding in one grant round

Cons:

- The amounts of funding available and the significantly oversubscribed demand for funding for high scoring applications has meant that awards of over £3K are unrealistic; the published £5K maximum can mislead applicants into thinking funding at this level is likely

c. Reduce the criteria to 2 as proposed but allow organisations to apply to both Big Ideas and small grants strands

Pros:

- This will reduce administration for The Council and applicants for grant applications, assessments and monitoring
- It will give organisations flexibility to potentially receive more funding

Cons:

- A disproportionate amount of small grant funding will be allocated to larger organisations squeezing opportunities for smaller, grassroots organisations, new applicants and those with less fundraising expertise

d. Allow applicants to apply for funding towards statutory activities

Pros:

- This will enable applicants to build stronger relationships with statutory organisations and help to plug funding gaps

Cons:

- Non-statutory community-led provision may receive less funding as a result

e. Reduce the criteria to 2 as proposed and limit eligibility for projects/organisations as proposed, whilst maintaining the current length of grants for Big Ideas and Advice Centres for 3 years and Small grants for up to a year with delivery being undertaken within the financial year in which the award was made

Pros:

- Applicants will save time making a smaller amount of applications
- Staff will save time assessing and monitoring a smaller amount of applications
- Those awarded funding will have capacity to deliver/report at a level which is more suitable for them
- Community-led non-statutory provision will receive more funding
- Smaller, grassroots, new applicant organisations and those who have not got as much fundraising expertise will receive a higher proportion of the small grants allocation
- Applicant expectations will be better managed ref. realistic funding levels

Cons:

- Some smaller organisations will not be eligible to apply for Big Ideas funding

Recommendation on changes to the eligibility criteria

61. Given the pros and cons of the options above, the recommendation is option e) which is to reduce the criteria as proposed and to limit eligibility as proposed.

Financial implications

62. Any proposed changes to the grants budget will be undertaken separately to this report as part of the budget setting process.

Legal issues

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

64. 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

See the risk assessment (Appendix 6)

Equalities impact

See the Equalities Impact assessment (Appendix 5)

Report author	Paula Redway
Job title	Culture and Community Development Manager
Service area or department	Community Services
Telephone	01865 252780
e-mail	predway@oxford.gov.uk

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