

Cabinet Report



Listening Learning Leading

Report of Head of Policy and Programmes

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To: CABINET

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Revenue grant fund options

Recommendations

That Cabinet agrees to:

- (a) Extend the 2022/24 Revenue Grant Scheme for a further year (2024/25) to the current grant recipients.
- (b) Update the current scheme policy to align with the new Corporate Plan.
- (c) Launch the new scheme to all Voluntary and Community Sector organisations in late Summer 2024, funding to begin in April 2025.

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of the report is to seek a decision from Cabinet on the future of the council's Revenue Grant Scheme.

Corporate Objectives

2. The council's revenue grant scheme supports the Corporate Plan objective of Improved Economic and Community Wellbeing.

Background

3. The council has for many years been in a very fortunate position to provide significant funding towards improving community facilities and activities, the environment and the health and well-being of our residents. The community grants portfolio currently includes budgets for four grant schemes: Revenue (£333,996), Capital (£320,000), Councillor Community (£180,000) and Everyone Active (£50,000).

4. In August 2021, Cabinet approved the 2022-2024 Revenue Grant Scheme policy that was open to all voluntary and community sector organisations across the district.
5. The council approved two-years of funding to 22 organisations in March 2022 by ICMD, following recommendations for the Community Grants Panel held in February 2022.
6. The grants totalling £667,992 divided equally over two years, were awarded to the organisations listed in Appendix 1, to support the delivery of services across our district and pay towards their core running costs and income diversification or income generation. Delivery targets were set during the Summer 2022.

Options

7. As we look towards 2024/25 and beyond, it is vital the revenue scheme remains agile and flexible in response to meeting both current and emerging needs of our communities, whilst ensuring the scheme supports the delivery of forthcoming Corporate Plan priorities. Alongside supporting the capacity and resilience of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to continue to deliver much needed services for our residents.
8. The 2022/24 Revenue Grants Scheme comes to an end on the 31 March 2024. The ongoing annual budget to provide this scheme is currently £333,996.

There are a number of options available, some considerations are set out below:

- a) Extend the current scheme for the existing 22 organisations for a further one, two, or three years.
- b) Extend the 2022/24 Revenue Grant Scheme for a further year (2024/25) to the current grant recipients. Update the current scheme policy to align with the new Corporate Plan, giving consideration to offering as long term funding as possible to sustain and support our local voluntary sector. Launch the scheme to all Voluntary and Community Sector organisations in late Summer 2024, funding to begin in April 2025.
- c) Review and update the 2022/24 Revenue Grant policy. Launch the scheme for new applications in late Summer 2023 for two, three or four years of funding.
- d) Close the scheme

A. EXTEND THE CURRENT SCHEME TO EXISTING ORGANISATIONS FOR A FURTHER ONE, TWO OR THREE YEARS

9. This option would give these organisations and the communities they provide services to much needed financial security at this crucial time. Particularly for some organisations such as Citizens Advice, and The Berin Centre who are supporting vulnerable residents through the costs of living crisis. Along with Riverside Counselling Service and The Abingdon Bridge who are supporting people with mental health issues, which have likely increased due to the current climate.
10. Prior to the 2022/24 scheme organisations received four years of funding. So, extending for a further two years would provide a comparable scheme and enable the council to further build and develop our partner relationships with these organisations.

11. It would save organisations the precious time they have to focus their efforts on providing the services, rather than applying for funding, along with saving significant officer time and resource to update the policy, set up a grants scheme and evaluate the applications.
12. However, the disadvantages are that it does not allow any new organisations to apply for the revenue funding, which is much needed by all - the golden ticket!

B. EXTEND THE 2022/24 REVENUE GRANT SCHEME FOR A FURTHER YEAR (2024/25) TO THE CURRENT GRANT RECIPIENTS. UPDATE THE CURRENT SCHEME POLICY TO ALIGN WITH THE NEW CORPORATE PLAN. LAUNCH TO ALL VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR ORGANISATIONS, FUNDING TO BEGIN IN APRIL 2025.
13. This option would allow the council to align the Revenue Grant Policy with the new Corporate Plan. Though does assume the Corporate Plan will be in final draft by May/June 2024 and approved by July 2024. Allowing any potential new Cabinet members and Community Grants Panel members to influence the policy development.
14. Gives the current 22 recipients another year of guaranteed funding, which has the advantages for the organisations and council listed in option A above and ensures there are no gaps in funding.
15. Upon launching a new policy, it allows new and current VCS organisations to apply to the scheme. Providing a great opportunity for the sector to receive up to four years of funding, subject to annual review by full Council when setting its budgets.
16. It also allows us to potentially align the policy to the new Vale Partnerships Policy, who are currently considering¹ five years of funding (2024-2029) which will end March 2029. This would benefit organisations who are able to apply to both schemes, in terms of financial planning.
17. The Community Enablement team would require very early sight of the Corporate Plan in order to develop and align the scoring criteria of the Revenue policy. This option does carry a small risk that delays in the development of the Corporate Plan will impact on the ability to launch the Revenue Grant Policy in time to avoid any gaps in funding. Officers will work closely with the relevant teams to mitigate against this and take early action if this is looking likely.

C. REVIEW AND UPDATE THE 2022/24 REVENUE GRANT POLICY. LAUNCH THE SCHEME FOR NEW APPLICATIONS LATE SUMMER 2023 FOR TWO, THREE OR FOUR YEARS OF FUNDING.
18. This option allows new and current VCS organisations to apply to the scheme. Providing a great opportunity for the sector to receive two, three or four years of funding.
19. It has the disadvantage that organisations would be focussed on applying for grant funding at a really critical time when their efforts could be best used on supporting

¹ To be determined in June 2023

residents through the cost of living crisis.² Along with more officer resource to review/update the policy and being unable to align the Revenue policy with any new Corporate Plan priorities before launching in September 2023. This option is therefore not recommended.

D. CLOSE THE SCHEME

20. This option will save the council £333,996 each year along with the officer resource to administer the scheme, that could potentially be diverted elsewhere to support those experiencing the cost of living crisis.
21. However, the current and potential future VCS organisations would experience the financial impact on their organisations, resulting in the possible need to reduce or close their services. An Equality impact assessment would be required to understand the extent. For organisations such as the Citizens Advice and The Berin Centre who are supporting vulnerable residents through the costs of living crisis this would have a significant impact on the services they can provide at this crucial time. Along with Riverside counselling and The Abingdon Bridge who will be supporting people with mental health issues, which as referred to earlier, have likely increased due to the current climate. Therefore, this option is not recommended.

Climate and ecological impact implications

22. Option A has neutral impact. Officers review the current grant recipient's commitment to climate action in general, and how they may make positive contributions to the climate emergency across their work/organisation during annual monitoring meetings.
23. Options B and C provide positive opportunities to further review and align the policy and scoring criteria, to understand and encourage the VCS organisation's commitment to acting on the climate emergency.
24. A revised revenue grant scheme could also offer positive opportunities to contribute to the council's climate emergency through contractual agreements or encouragement to reduce carbon emissions where possible.

Financial Implications

25. The council has had an ongoing revenue grant budget to fund VCS organisations for a number of years now. £333,996 per annum is included in the medium-term financial plan for 2024/2025 to 2027/2028. This remains subject to the annual approval by Full Council when setting its budget.
26. We understand the voluntary sector organisations need for more than one year's financial security, which is also felt by the council. Whilst recognising the harsh reality that the budget may need to be redeployed should the councils overarching budgetary situation change during the funding period.
27. If option B is supported, the ongoing budget commitment and number of years the policy would be active could be considered when the updated policy is presented for approval in 2024. The conditions of award or legal agreements (subject to value) could

² appreciate won't apply to all VCS organisations.

also reflect that the funding awarded is not a guaranteed annual commitment for the life of the grant, rather an intent. This model is currently understood by our revenue partners. They are reliant on the councils' budget setting process each and every year.

28. As with the current policy there's a risk for options A, B or C that organisations do not deliver the services expected. However, we would mitigate this through regular review/performance management meetings and in line with the constitution we can reduce or withhold a grant if an organisation fails to meet the agreed targets.
29. Whilst option D, closing the scheme might present opportunities to divert the funding elsewhere. This would be false economy, as the actual service users who benefit from the voluntary sector are likely to present themselves to the council for support if services are reduced or closed as a result.
30. Any council decision that has financial implications must be made with the knowledge of the council's overarching financial position. For South, the position reflected in the council's medium-term financial plan (MTFP) as reported to Full Council in February 2022 showed that the council is due to receive £2.1 million less in revenue funding than it plans to spend in 2022/23 (with the balance coming from reserves).
31. This funding gap is predicted to increase to over £3 million by 2026/27. As there remains no certainty on future local government funding, following the announcement of a one-year spending review by government, and as the long-term financial consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic remain unknown, this gap could increase further. Every financial decision made needs to be cognisant of the need to address this funding gap in future years.

Legal Implications

32. There are no significant legal implications arising from any of the options.
33. For options A, B or C, organisations will either enter into a legal agreement or sign standard conditions, depending upon the value of the award.
34. There is a small risk that organisations who receive a grant could already be in receipt of funding subject to the Subsidy Control Act 2022 (in the last three fiscal years). This could result in the council falling foul of the Act.
35. To mitigate against this risk:
 - a. Organisations must confirm they have not received any Minimal Financial Assistance (MFA) in this financial year and/or the previous two financial years, in excess of £315,000 when applying for funding.
 - b. If a grant is considered a subsidy, then any grant awarded is declared and offered as Minimal Financial Assistance and offered on the basis that the organisation has **not** received any other Minimal Financial Assistance in the current and previous two financial years, which in total exceeds or when taken together with this grant will exceed £315,000.
 - c. Our standard conditions also advise, if a grant is considered a subsidy, then the organisation must declare our grant award amount to any other sources of Minimal Financial Assistance received in the future; they must advise the council if they receive any other Minimal Financial Assistance during the life of the grant

award and declare that the threshold will not be exceeded by accepting the grant award or other Minimal Financial Assistance in the future.

Other implications

36. In line with the public sector equality duty, we have considered the implications of each of the options. Officers are of the view that no groups would be disadvantaged by option A, B or C.
37. Option A has a neutral impact. Many of the current grant recipients are providing services that help to advance equality of opportunity and/or meet the needs of their communities and would continue to receive funding.
38. Option B and C provide positive opportunities to further review and align the policy and scoring criteria, to understand and encourage the VCS organisation's commitment to further advance equality of opportunity, fostering good relations and meeting the needs of their communities.
39. Option D to close the scheme, would have a significant impact. As referred to earlier, current, and potential future VCS organisations would experience the financial impact on their organisations, resulting in the possible need to reduce their services, which in some cases would mean a significant reduction and possibly closure. This could lead to those customers then presenting at the council for support, due to gaps in the VCS service provision. A full Equality impact assessment would be required to understand the extent if this option were chosen.

Conclusion

40. Recovery from the pandemic and cost of living crisis has highlighted more than ever the need for ongoing sustainable funding within the Voluntary and Community Sector.
41. Officers recommend option B as it will provide financial security for a further year (2024/25) to the existing grant recipients. Alongside enabling any new Cabinet members to influence the development of the Revenue Grant Policy and align it with the new the Corporate Plan priorities, and potentially the Vale Partnerships policy, which would benefit organisations who are able to apply to both schemes, in terms of their financial planning.

Appendix 1

The following table provides a summary of the organisations we agreed to fund during 2022/23 to 2023/24, following approval via an Individual Cabinet Member Decision.

Organisation	What the organisation does?	Amount awarded 2022/23 – 2023/24
Oxfordshire South & Vale Citizens Advice Bureau	Local charity and member of the national Citizens Advice network. Provide residents with free and confidential advice for all types of enquiries (Benefits, work, debt and money, consumer, housing, family, law and courts, immigration, and health)	£238,444
Riverside Counselling Service	Riverside supports adults and young people from the age of 12 years across South Oxfordshire who face challenges with their mental health and emotional well-being. They provide counselling on a one-to-one basis alongside a variety of therapeutic groups, workshops, community training and courses for professionals.	£45,568
The Thomley Hall Centre Limited	Thomley provides play, leisure and learning opportunities for people of all abilities and disabilities at our spacious indoor and outdoor facility.	£70,000
Didcot Train Inspiring Young People	Didcot Train support for the safe and positive development of the Young People of Didcot and its immediate surroundings for the benefit of themselves, their families, our community, residents, and society.	£25,148
MyVision Oxfordshire (formally Oxfordshire Association for the Blind)	MyVision provides support and services for blind and partially sighted, including: information and advice, equipment demonstration and loan, technology training, counselling, befriending (telephone and in person), social groups and sports, children's activities, awareness raising and campaigning.	£26,228
Community First Oxfordshire	Community First Oxfordshire is a community development charity working with communities across the county to strengthen community infrastructure and resilience. Through newsletters, engagement events, Community Led Plans, community action webinars, community transport, advice and support for community buildings and enterprise.	£18,498
NOMAD Youth and Community Project	NOMAD supports children/young people and their parents/carers, particularly those who are marginalized and disadvantaged through economic and/or complex social issues and living in Henley and the surrounding area, including Nettlebed, Stoke Row, Bix, Shiplake, Woodcote and Sonning Common.	£15,058
My Life My Choice (MLMC)	MLMC are an independent, multi-award winning user-led charity (including the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service 2017) with all 15 trustees having a learning disability. As well as promoting choice, empowerment	£13,192

	and participation, they provide volunteering, training, social and paid work opportunities that combat loneliness and isolation and lead to more fulfilling lives.	
Style Acre	Style Acre empowers 270 adults with learning disabilities and autism to live life to the full through; supported living, community hubs, outreach services, gardening, work placements and Ways to Wellness project.	£14,477
The Maple Tree	The Maple Tree is a community charity providing play-based early learning activities for the under 5s and their parents and carers. They aim to give every local child and family the best start in life, running sessions for babies and young children with their parents, parenting workshops and courses such as First Aid, one to one advice and support, whole family learning activities and Health Visitor clinics. They currently run sessions every weekday from premises in Wheatley, a weekly outreach session in Forest Hill, and a monthly family fun session on Saturdays. They also offer an online programme of songs, stories and activities for people who may find it challenging to attend in person.	£12,606
The Abingdon Bridge	The Abingdon Bridge is an Oxfordshire registered charity (CIO) which supports young people aged 13-25 in challenging circumstances. Their services are free for young people to access. Offering; 1 to 1 counselling, healthy lifestyles support groups, 1 to 1 wellbeing support, educational workshops (in the community and local schools).	£34,279
Earth Trust	Earth Trust supports the residents of South Oxfordshire by providing free access to our greenspaces 365 days/year. They also provide training, education and engagement opportunities for all ages.	£18,333
The Berin Centre	The Berin Centre offers drop-in sessions, parenting programmes, healthy cooking workshops, employment support, targeted courses such as First Aid and Food Hygiene, and provide a weekly base for the Health Visitor clinic. Riverside Counselling use the premises to deliver counselling and are partners in the Growing Minds school-readiness project. They also run a weekly Community Larder.	£14,541
Home-Start Southern Oxfordshire	Home-Start Southern Oxfordshire is a voluntary organisation committed to promoting the welfare of families who have at least one child under the age of five. They provide emotional and practical support to families with our trained home-visiting volunteers, parent and baby groups and expert support, helping them through their most challenging times.	£16,454
Wild Oxfordshire	Wild Oxfordshire is a local charity which provides a co-ordinated and strategic approach to nature conservation in Oxfordshire. Through providing support and encouraging individuals, communities and organisations to work together, Wild Oxfordshire is the catalyst for	£13,035

	solutions that benefit people and wildlife within our rich and vibrant county.	
Sue Ryder Palliative Care Hub South Oxfordshire	The Sue Ryder Palliative Care Hub South Oxfordshire supports people aged 18 and over who are living with life-limiting conditions such as cancer, heart failure and lung disease. They combine specialist medical care for managing pain and other symptoms, with emotional, practical and spiritual support.	£16,677
Chiltern Centre Ltd	The Chiltern Centre is a disability centre in Henley-on-Thames offering a range of service, including respite care to young people (aged 16 – 30) with learning disabilities (often alongside physical disabilities and/or complex medical needs) and their families across South Oxfordshire.	£13,048
Be Free Young Carers	Be Free Young Carers is a local Oxfordshire charity, based in Didcot, that works with young carers aged 8 to 17 across South Oxfordshire.	£12,277
Millstream Day Centre	Benson Millstream Centre is a volunteer led charity that provides relief to elderly and disabled people and in particular those living in and around Benson, Ewelme, Berrick Salome, Roke and Preston Crowmarsh by providing day care services and such other services as the trustees may decide from time to time.	£11,517
Oxfordshire Play Association	Oxfordshire Play Association delivers a service across the whole of Oxfordshire including South Oxfordshire, and delivers a number of different projects such as play and activity days in Wheatley Junior Youth Club, Didcot / Vauxhall Barracks, Wallingford / RAF Benson, Berinsfield, and Wheatley.	£12,671
Berinsfield Information and Volunteer Centre (BIVC) (Ceased operations Dec 2022)	Berinsfield Information and Volunteer Centre offers help and advice to residents in Berinsfield and surrounding areas.	£11,314
River Thames Conservation Trust	The River Thames Conservation Trust is a grassroots charity that operates in Oxfordshire. They aim to work with local people in rural and urban parts of their catchment – volunteers, farmers and landowners, to improve biodiversity of the River Thames and its tributaries, to improve public understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of the river catchment and its wildlife.	£14,627