

Councillor Community Grant scheme 2024/25

Policy changes summary

Below is a summary of the proposed changes to the Councillor Community Grants policy and the rationale for these.

Officers also reviewed the Oxfordshire County Council councillor priority fund, to consider if we could incorporate their policy and/or processes.

Key differences are set out in Appendix 1 below. Of these, the main one is that the scheme is open for two years and there is no deadline for members to make their decisions. Whilst on the face of it, that sounds like a good idea, it does have implications. Most of our members like to decide on their awards when the scheme closes, enabling them to review the merits of each. So may not feel comfortable deciding on a first come first served basis. Currently we are unable to carry forward revenue funding if members don't spend all the £180,000 budget allocated in year one, to year two. Consideration would need to be given if this was considered committed in finance terms and therefore allowed.

On the basis that most members like to make their decision when the scheme closes, we have not recommended this change in the proposals below. However, other process improvements not specifically related to policy changes can be seen in Appendix 2.

Section	Change	Rationale (where needed)
Basic rules of the scheme	Introduce a maximum of five wards that applicants can apply to (currently no limit).	<p>We are seeing more applications, where applicants apply to every ward. It can be difficult for them to demonstrate how many people will benefit in each ward. This can result in members preferring to award funding specifically to their own ward first and only if they have funding remaining, will they award to these applications.</p> <p>In 23/24 a total of six applicants applied to five or more wards. Only three of those were eligible projects.</p> <p>Introducing the maximum number of five wards could reduce the administrative burden on members and officers. This would allow members to focus on projects that truly benefit residents in their own ward.</p>
	Open for one round only, a minimum of 14 weeks (from August 2024 to November 2024) and members make their decisions once the scheme has closed.	Due to the number of grant schemes operating each year, there is not enough officer resource to open more than once in a financial year.

Section	Change	Rationale (where needed)
	<p>Urgent/time critical applications can be considered by exception with written agreement from the ward councillor(s) - excludes multi ward applications.</p> <p>Currently the policy says: <i>'Usually open in June and will have two rounds (budget permitting) the second of which will close in February each year'</i></p>	<p>Most members prefer to make their decisions once the scheme closes, enabling them to review the merits of each application. Officers would send all eligible applications to the ward at the same time. Except where there is a requirement to process urgent/time critical single ward application.</p> <p>This timescale would mean an applicant could expect a decision within 12 weeks of the scheme closing. Helping to manage their expectations on when their project could start.</p>
<p>Documentation required from the applicants</p>	<p>Remove the requirement to provide a copy of their bank statement.</p>	<p>Applicants can just confirm they have a bank account in the name of the organisation applying.</p>
	<p>Only ask if there have been any changes to governing documents for every 20th application (rather than requesting to see governance and financial documents for every 5th application) unless they have not received funding before (rather than in the last 12 months).</p> <p>Parish meetings and town and parish councils will be advised they do not need to provide governing documents. Currently the policy is silent on this.</p>	<p>To reduce the administrative burden on the applicants and to speed up administration for officers. Officers currently check the project cost breakdown and other funding received/applied for rather than a rigorous check of their income and expenditure.</p> <p>We will also provide guidance within the application about who can accept the funding for Parish meetings without a bank account.</p> <p>The risk associated with these changes are small, due to the low-level grant. Applicants will still be required to confirm they can provide the documents if required. Except for town and parish councils and parish meetings.</p> <p>Transformation project – longer term we will explore if it is possible to link applicants to all grant applications, they have made so they only attach their governance documents once and not for each grant application.</p>

Section	Change	Rationale (where needed)
Who is not eligible?	Remove the requirement that organisations applying cannot operate a grant giving scheme of their own, or budget for grants and donations.	<p>To reduce the governance required (delegated authority report) when members still wish to fund the organisation.</p> <p>We will still ask whether the organisation (excluding Town and Parish Councils) operate a grant scheme, the value of the scheme and justification for the grant request. This information will be included on the summary sheet for the councillor to support decision making.</p>
What kind of works/services can we fund?	Expanded project examples and encourage all applicants to be inclusive and to consider the climate and ecological implications of their project and links to active communities and food strategy delivery projects.	To mainstream inclusion and climate considerations into projects and linking to other relevant strategies. Along with enabling annual event costs that benefit community cohesion and reduce rural loneliness and isolation to take place.
	Provided further climate project examples including projects that encourage reuse/recycling and/or sharing equipment in the community.	To align with the council's climate aims.
	Amendment to align with council's net zero ambitions, highlighting that we will only support major boiler repairs, where low carbon alternatives are not an option.	To align with the council's climate aims.
What will we not fund?	Added council legal and property fees.	Otherwise, the council is paying itself.
	<p>Amendments made to align with council climate aims/net zero ambitions.</p> <p>Highlighting we won't fund ongoing or regular hire fees unless it's the most sustainable option for the activity.</p> <p>We may not fund projects which could directly, or indirectly have a negative impact on supporting the council to achieve its Corporate Plan aims.</p>	To align with the Corporate Plan aims.

Section	Change	Rationale (where needed)
<p>Application and award process</p>	<p>Provided clarity on not being able to double fund projects or pay more than the total project costs.</p>	<p>Transformation project – longer term we will explore how the grant system can help monitor funding to individual applicants and avoid duplicate funding.</p>
	<p>Applicants will be able to accept their award through an online declaration, rather than downloading the grant acceptance, signing and returning the form and conditions of award.</p>	<p>This will improve the process for applicants and speed up the when the payment can be made.</p>
	<p>The Community Wellbeing Manager will approve the awards via the online grants system (except where a conflict has been established) when authorised to act on behalf of the Head of Service.</p>	<p>Due to the low-level of grants being awarded, it is felt appropriate that the service manager can approve the award decisions rather than the head of service.</p> <p>Where a conflict of interest has been declared, and confirmation has been received from the member that they wish to fund the project, the head of service will approve the board paper/award. This will speed up the decision-making process.</p>
	<p>Removed the requirement for officers to consult with the Cabinet member on changes to funding requests (repurposing) when a ward councillor is no longer in post.</p>	<p>It is felt sufficient for the head of service to make this decision.</p>
	<p>Addition of an alternative format statement has been added to the policy.</p>	<p>To ensure the policy is accessible to all.</p>
<p>Standard conditions</p>	<p>Added the requirement to have all necessary permissions in place (e.g., planning, landlord) as a standard condition of award. This is referenced in the policy but is silent under the conditions section. The application form has always requested this information.</p>	<p>To highlight the importance of this requirement.</p>

Section	Change	Rationale (where needed)
	Added a standard condition relating to Minimal financial Assistance (MFA) in line with the Subsidy Control Act 2022, as currently the policy is silent on this, however the information has been obtained from applicants for several years.	To highlight the importance of this requirement.
Monitoring grants	Members can now approve grant extensions of six months, instead of three and the Community Wellbeing Manager can approve any longer than six months when authorised to act on behalf of the Head of Service	To reduce the governance burden of writing delegated authority forms for extensions longer than three months.

Appendix 1 - OCC councillor priority fund summary

- Open for a two-year period with £15,000 per councillor, with no deadline to make funding decisions, allowing councillors to award larger award if required (Grants over £5,000, require a legal agreement).
- Light touch application form.
- Members make their decision when the applicant contacts them requesting their support and amount of award. The members decision email is sent with the application form to the officers processing the application. No other paperwork is required of the member.
- Conflict of interests are approved by the legal team.

Appendix 2 - Other process changes not referenced in the policy

The following sets out the other process changes we will implement.

- Reduce paperwork for members, where possible members will be provided with a summary sheet (replacing the board paper) for each project on a single e-mail at the end of the scheme. Members will make their decision by completing a table within the e-mail indicating the award amount and any interests they hold.
- Review the current application form and remove unnecessary questions to make the application quicker and simpler for the applicant.
- Provide members with a biweekly or monthly report setting out the applications that have been submitted for the ward and value requested.
- If an application is urgent/ time sensitive the applicant will be required to gain approval from the relevant ward member(s) before applying and provide evidence the relevant ward member(s) will support the urgent decision (i.e., an e-mail) – subject to eligibility checks, applicants will receive a decision within four weeks. This is in line with the OCC Priority Fund.