

**LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL
26 JANUARY 2005**

**TO: THE EXECUTIVE
14 DECEMBER 2004**

**RESPONSE TO LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY REVIEW:
GRANTS TO THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR
(CHIEF EXECUTIVE – STRATEGY AND PARTNERSHIPS)**

1 PURPOSE OF DECISION

1.1 On 8 July 2004, the Executive considered a report from the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Working Group on grants to the community and voluntary sector. The working group had investigated the processes and mechanisms used across the Council for the application, award and monitoring arrangements for discretionary grants to the community and voluntary sector. The aims of the review were:

- To develop greater understanding and awareness of the Council's systems for voluntary and community grants;
- Examine the range and scale of the councils grants aid and ensure that the application process is suited to achieving the purpose for which grants are provided and supports the voluntary sector;
- Make recommendations to the Executive relating to improving outcomes for residents in matters relating to voluntary sector grant aid.

1.2 The Council welcomes the review which aims to make the Community Grant Aid process more consistent and transparent and would like to thank the Working Group for their work in this area.

1.3 The following response has been produced as a result of several months' investigation into the practical implementation of the working group recommendations and in consultation with the Departmental Funding Officers. The Council recognises the need for clarity in the grants process and the recommendations from this response clearly defines:

- The roles and responsibilities of both the Strategy and Partnerships Team and Departmental Funding Officers.
- The decision making process for one-off and annual grants.
- The need for a annual report on Community Grant Aid

That the possibility of 3 year grant aid funding will be investigated.

2 RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 That the officer responses and recommendations outlined in the supporting information in paragraph 5 below be approved.**

3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION

- 3.1** The recommendations are in response to the report of the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Working Group and aim to further enhance the consistency and transparency of the grants process, whilst taking into account the practical considerations for implementation.

4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1** The alternative to the considered response given is that the original recommendations of the Lifelong learning Scrutiny Working Group be agreed in full without detailed examination or rejected.

5 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

The following information is the considered response to the sixteen recommendations made by the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel Working Group.

- (a) Working Group Recommendation: The level of grant and criteria be decided by each Department in accordance to its budget**

It is recommended that the level of grant awarded and the grant criteria be decided by departments, linked to departmental policies. The Departmental Funding Officers would be responsible for producing this information in line with the timetable set by the Strategy and Partnerships Team.

- (b) Working Group Recommendation: The application form should be adapted to support both small and large applications.**

Any changes to the application form needs to be researched and agreed by the Council's Audit department to ensure the Council are obtaining the required information and complying with current best practice. The definition of a small grant would also need to be agreed, as the majority of the applications for Community Grant Aid are under £5,000. It may actually complicate the grant application form to adapt it to support both types of application. The Strategy and Partnerships Team will investigate the options for changing the application form and discuss the suitability with the Executive Member(s) responsible, the Councils Audit department, representatives of the voluntary sector and Departmental Funding Officers. See also recommendation 5.17.

- (c) Working Group Recommendation: Documents such as constitutions need not be required again if it has been submitted with a previous application and not changed.**

It is recommended that documents such as constitutions need not be submitted if a previous application has been successful and the documents

have not changed. Supporting documents are not retained for unsuccessful applications and would need to be resubmitted.

- (d) **Working Group Recommendation: Partnership Officer to take responsibility for checking forms, sending out acknowledgements and deciding which department is to deal with the application.**

It is recommended that the Strategy and Partnerships Team send out acknowledgements and decide which department is to deal with the application. It was felt that it may be confusing for both Departmental Funding Officers and the Strategy and Partnerships Officer to be asking for additional information for incomplete forms, especially as the departmental Funding Officer's name would be given as the key contact in the acknowledgement of the application. Therefore the request for any extra information will remain the responsibility of the Departmental Funding Officers to ensure alignment with departmental objectives. However, the Strategy and Partnerships Team will deal with any application forms which are obviously incomplete and need to be returned to the applicant, such as those with blank sections on the application form.

- (e) **Working Group Recommendation: The Partnership Officer to be responsible for monitoring grant procedures at all times.**

It is recommended that this be the responsibility of the Strategy and Partnerships Team.

- (f) **Working Group Recommendation: Departmental Funding Officers to process grant applications in the usual way, but to keep to the timetable set by the Partnership Officer. When the Portfolio Holder has signed off recommended grants, all relevant forms and papers to be sent to the Partnership Officer for Implementation.**

It is recommended that the Strategy and Partnerships Team, in agreement with the Departmental Funding Officers, set a timetable. A timetable will not be set for grants awarded throughout the year (Environmental Improvement Grants and One-Off Grants) as this will be decided by the Departmental Funding Officers as required.

- (g) **Working Group Recommendation: The Partnerships Officer to be responsible for notifying all groups on the outcome of applications and of level of grant decided.**

It was felt that the real issue was ensuring that grant applicants were notified of the outcome of their application before the end of the financial year. As grant decisions are made as an Executive Decision by the relevant portfolio holder, decisions are not made at the same time for all departmental grants. Notification will remain the responsibility of the Departmental Funding Officers (applicants to be notified immediately after publication of an Executive Decision). All Departmental Funding Officers must, wherever practical, let applicants know about the outcome of their grant before the end of March.

- (h) **Working Group Recommendation: Partnerships Officer be responsible for dealing with the 10 day appeals process and monitoring Executive decisions.**

There is no ten day appeals process under the current grant system, however adequate provision for appeals is provided in that all Executive Decisions can be “called in” once published. Departmental Funding Officers should also ensure that grant reports are made available to the public on the Executive Work Plan 14 days prior to a decision being made, to enable voluntary organisations to make representation to the appropriate portfolio holder.

- (i) **Working Group Recommendation: Partnerships Officer to be responsible for putting final grants decisions on the Council’s Web-site, publishing in Town and Country and informing all Members.**

It is recommended that the Strategy and Partnerships Team be responsible for this task.

- (j) **Working Group Recommendation: Partnership Officer to check and approve all SLAs and Letters of Memorandum, which have been negotiated and prepared by the department funding officers prior to the grant decision.**

It is recommended that the Strategy and Partnerships Team should not check and approve all SLAs as the team does not have all the required knowledge on departmental priorities. This will remain the responsibility of the Departmental Funding Officers. However, the Strategy and Partnerships Team will be responsible for providing a template SLA for all departments to ensure consistency.

- (k) **Working Group Recommendation: Partnership Officer to notify Funding Officers when they can release grants.**

This will remain the responsibility of Departmental Funding Officers as grants are only released on receipt of a signed SLA (and the appropriate monitoring returns) in order to meet the advice of the Council’s Audit department requirements. The dates that payments are made are negotiated individually with the voluntary sector applicants and outlined in the SLA so there should be no confusion over expected payments dates.

- (l) **Working Group Recommendation: Funding Officers to monitor the delivery of voluntary groups against their SLA or Letter of Memorandum**

It is recommended that this remains the responsibility of the Departmental Funding Officers as they have the appropriate knowledge and expertise.

- (m) **Working Group Recommendation: All small grants to be decided by one Portfolio Holder, an officer and the Voluntary Sector Champion**

The Lifelong Learning Working Group report refers to small grants. The Council does not have a ‘small grant scheme’ but does award a significant amount of grants under £5,000. It is recommended that the decision making process for all annual grants (above or below £5,000) continue to be decided by the departments under current processes to ensure consistency in the annual grants application process. This usually involves a DMT recommendation which is then considered by the director and portfolio holders who make the final decision.

One-off grants need to be decided throughout the year. The following process is recommended:

- Up to £500 – Determined by Director and notified to the Executive Portfolio Holder. Grants only to be awarded if clearly within policy.
- £500-£2,000 – By the Director in consultation with the Executive Portfolio Holder
- Above £2,000 by all the Directors in consultation with the Voluntary Sector Champion and Executive Portfolio Holder(s) having the final decision

It is recommended that the Voluntary Sector Champion be directly mailed the decisions of all grant applications.

The report highlighted that the main issue for applicants was not being clear on what the decision making process for their application was. It is recommended that the decision making process for all grants is added to the Grants Explained Guidance so that it is transparent.

- (n) **Working Group Recommendation: The Council should adopt a three-year funding regime, monitored and reviewed on an annual basis, for larger grants with an SLA in place. All departments should keep to this policy.**

The Strategy and Partnerships team will investigate the possibility of adopting 3 year funding for 2006/07 and beyond. However, in the current Local Government funding regime where Councils do not know from one year to the next what their funding is going to be it is unlikely that a sufficiently robust means of funding over three years could be established. It should be noted that the Council's grant funding is discretionary and any such funding would need to be conditional on budget setting and meeting monitoring needs which removes from the recommendation the objective of providing an organisation with a longer term, more secure funding commitment.

- (o) **Working Group Recommendation: The Council should produce an annual report on grants to the community and voluntary groups. In time this should also include an account of the Council's contributions in kind to the voluntary sector in addition to the direct funding**

The Strategy and Partnerships Team will produce an annual report on grant funding which will be released through the Corporate Services and Resources Executive Member in time for the first meeting of the Council following the annual Council meeting, and will include direct Community Grant Aid and indirect aid such as discretionary Council Tax or Business rate relief. In subsequent years, this report will grow to be a more comprehensive report of all support offered to the community and voluntary sector.

- (p) **Working Group Recommendation: All applications should be dealt with in three clear stages:**

First Stage (application) – responsibility of the Partnerships Officer
Second Stage (decision) – responsibility of the Departmental Funding Officer

Third Stage (implementation) – responsibility of Partnership Officer

The Strategy and Partnerships Team will take an overview and strategic monitoring role over the grants process, however a level of responsibility will remain with Departmental Funding Officers. The Strategy and Partnerships Team will provide all Departmental Funding Officers with a timetable of the grants process to enable a smooth application and decision-making process, that clearly states what is required from them and when:

First Stage (application) -The Strategy and Partnerships officer will be responsible, with the support of the Departmental Funding Officers.

Second Stage (decision) – It is agreed that the second stage should be the responsibility of the departments, although the Strategy and Partnerships Team should monitor the process to ensure that departmental decision making processes meet audit requirements.

Third Stage (Implementation) – It is recommended that this lies with departmental funding officers as they have the relevant knowledge and expertise.

(q) Extra Recommendations

The report also highlighted that the grants needed to be widely accessible. It is recommended that the Strategy and Partnerships Team investigate how improvements can be made in this area.

While it was recognised that some applicants may find it difficult to complete the application, the form had been simplified as much as possible. It is recommended that the Council investigate the possibility of voluntary sector infrastructure organisations, such as Community Council for Berkshire and Bracknell Forest Voluntary Action, offering a support role to any applicants who would like assistance in completing the application from.

(r) Timescales

The Working Group recommended that the officer responses to the working group recommendations be implemented for grants in 2006/07.
Accepted.

6 ADVICE RECEIVED FROM STATUTORY AND OTHER OFFICERS

Borough Solicitor

- 6.1 There are no specific legal issues that arise from this report. The council has a number of legislative powers to make grants, the most encompassing being the well being powers under section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000

Borough Finance Officer

- 6.2 There are no additional financial implications arising from the recommendations in the report.

Access Implications

6.3 There are no specific issues that arise from this report.

Other Officers

6.4 None

7 CONSULTATION

Principal Groups Consulted

7.1 The voluntary sector was consulted on the recommendations in the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Working Group report.

Background Papers

None

Contact for further information

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