

Portfolio holder presentation Overview and Scrutiny 19th January 2016

Main portfolio issues – community engagement and rural affairs

Hitchin Town Hall – JR providing information on this

Rural Capital Funding Scheme – run in conjunction with partner organisations and part funded by the remaining LSP funding. This is to provide relatively low amounts of money, from around £5k to £10k average, to approximately 10 halls across the district which were found on survey to need small injection of funding to bring them up to Disability Access Standards, or to improve toilet/kitchen access to the benefit of more local residents.

Parish Challenge Panel meeting in December has just awarded £32,894 toward works across a number of NH Parishes, to halls playgrounds and for general environmental improvements.

Community Centres and Lease renewals

The Community Hall Strategy agreed by Cabinet in 2012 introduced a policy to encourage community associations to take on the running of facilities, aligned with the Localism agenda and in order that the Council no longer bore the whole cost of their provision. There remain two centres who have not yet signed a new lease with the authority, and officers will be reporting back to Cabinet shortly to seek agreement how best to handle these going forward; significant officer and third sector time has been expended thus far.

Grants review – the way in which we award and pay grants to local organisations has been reviewed, first by the O&S task and finish group, shortly thereafter by internal audit, and all recommendations examined by officers.

Alongside the necessary local changes is a national move by the Cabinet office to create some ground rules regarding councillor decision making in regard to grant payments, brought about following the likes of Tower Hamlets and similar ‘decisions’. This may result in some more changes to financial regulation or overview of decision making.

Similarly, whilst the review has been underway, procurement changes have given rise to a wider review of the use of Memorandum of Understanding, with the result that these will be changed almost in their entirety to contracts, and commissioned services. The general rule is that if the scheme is something the Council has previously or could in future provide, then it is a contracted service.

The Council currently spends £419k per annum on discretionary grant awards – reducing to £335k if the budget proposal for 20% reduction is agreed at Council.

Major MoUs, to the likes of CAB, CVS etc currently total £289k per annum

Safeguarding

We report issues, incidents reported and the outcome of the annual countywide audit to Overview and Scrutiny annually. Levels of reporting have risen, due to the training and awareness raising

undertaken with officers and members, and of course given the expansion of the Careline service across and beyond the county boundaries.

Officers responsible for Safeguarding reporting, known as Designated Safeguarding Officers, are also the point of contact now for reporting concerns regarding Child Sexual Exploitation (arising from Rotherham and similar investigations) and for young people becoming radicalised/at risk of extremism.

Community Covenant

Agreement across the county how Councils will engage and enable serving and former service personnel in their local community – providing advice, opportunities for work, adequate or adapted housing, etc.

Outlook article encouraging businesses and others to engage shortly, including by providing concessionary rates to service personnel/veterans.

Health

We have had £200k funding from Public Health at HCC to deliver an agreed range of projects across North Herts, which include schemes to help those diagnosed with dementia and their carers, schemes to provide cookery and nutrition courses in childrens centres and activity schemes for older people in community centres.

There is uncertainty whether this funding will continue post 2017 or if so, to what degree.

Investment of £63k of this money has brought in £250k of Sport England Funding, matched by others funders and 'in kind' officer hours etc to deliver around £750k of community based activities over three years.

Main challenges in regard to the portfolio

- **Expectation** – NHDC have always been one of the highest providers of grant funding across Hertfordshire – the spending review and other constraints on budgets will mean that we need to build in greater sustainability to the local community and voluntary sector, and reduce funding available.
- **Capacity** - not only for NHDC, but for groups working with us and in the local community, capacity including the availability of volunteers is and will become a bigger factor given the needs of an ageing population (with rise in care demands) and grandparents providing a greater degree of childcare for parents
- **Skills** – the community/voluntary sector will increasingly be required to operate differently ie. Community Interest Companies, to take on services or facilities and thus a key issue will be ensuring they have access to opportunities to develop
- **Counter terrorism/extremism** –increasing agenda to report concerns around community tensions, and individuals at risk of becoming radicalised against our need to build and retain an inclusive community for the different groups who live here
- **Health** – whilst we have a duty to co-operate in the delivery of schemes to encourage physical activity and in the general prevention of conditions such as diabetes, poor nutrition,

obesity etc, with the reduction in Public Health funding, it is increasingly unlikely that NHDC will be able to pick up the bill for such schemes.

Summary of Recommendations from the grants task and finish group 2013

1. The Council (or its area committees) should consider giving more direction on the priorities for grants, perhaps by setting clearer priorities and reviewing these regularly.

Agreed, and there should be a better link in terms of priority areas to the council's corporate plan, adopted strategies and needs identified by latest data – this will also need to be more focussed given the spending review constraints

2. The Council should review its grants guidance notes to make sure they are fit for purpose and user friendly.

They have been revised slightly, but will be revised completely once a new process is agreed and adopted – they will be considerably shorter than the current guidance

3. Officers should make clear reference to the appropriate guidance note when making recommendations to area committees when they are considering grant applications.

Agreed and part of the proposal to be made

4. Area committees should check whether grants have achieved the objective for which they were originally intended by receiving a formal annual report or similar from the CDO on the outcome of projects.

Agreed, but we need to make sure this is proportionate to the amount granted, and the capacity of the organisation delivering the scheme

5. Cabinet (or a relevant portfolio holder) should monitor whether recipients of grants covered by major MoUs have achieved their objectives and consider whether there should be closer member oversight through the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and/or a member working group.

Major MoUs will have to change considerably in the future. They are no longer fit for purpose, most payments made in this way should be under contract to protect the council and its use of public money. New paperwork is currently in the process of being redrawn which will formalise the relationship, performance management etc better than previously

6. The role of NHDC appointees should be made clearer by means of a formal briefing note to such individuals and they should have a more prominent role in reporting back to the Council on the performance of major grant recipients. The mechanism for them doing so should be clearer.

Completed for civic year 2015/16

7 - There should be provision to award a new district-wide grant, and Cabinet should ask the Head of Policy and Community Services to investigate the practicalities of district-wide funding and report back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in due course.

We have made an interim arrangement with the establishment of a district wide pot from April 2015, but as there is no 'new money' this funding has had to be taken proportionately from area committee funding.

8. Minor MoUs should be reviewed within the scope of the other recommendations made in this report.

Minor MoUs are not equitable and have now ceased.

9. The Council should review the designation of district wide and committee specific grants governed by MoUs to ensure they are correctly allocated.

The only 'MoUs' (or contracts) the authority will have in future will be districtwide – local payments constitute grants and should be applied for and processed accordingly.

10. The allocation of grants to area committees should be updated to reflect the latest census data.

This has been completed and remains part of a rolling programme

11. Cabinet should consider the terms of reference of the Rural Grants Fund to take into account the ability of parishes to raise more funds through their local precept.

This will need to be looked at further, as the existing grants policy is not sufficiently up to date to reflect the council's revised budget policy position which is that we should not be funding authorities which can raise funds via their own precept. We should not be delivering or developing any more funding schemes only in rural areas, but across the district or we may lay ourselves open to challenge in regard to equity.

12 - The administration of the Rural Grants Fund should remain unchanged for two years, at which time Cabinet should consider whether it should be re-distributed into the relevant area committee budgets.

See response to 11 above.

13. The Council should calculate the actual and notional benefits which are given to community groups in addition to grant aid; and these figures should be made available to councillors when organisations apply for assistance from the council.

We can provide information on Non-discretionary rate relief, but to gather all information regarding the potential 'benefits' an organisation gain from us from, say, preferable accommodation costs, would be

onerous and require significant officer resource to complete given the number of grants we currently make.

14. Wherever possible area committees should be made aware of contemporaneous applications to other grant awarding bodies when considering applications. The application form should ensure this aspect is covered.

It is proposed that a revised form be used, but this needs to be adopted as part of the wider grants policy in due course.

15. Cabinet should consider whether area committees, with the support of the Community Development Team, might be better placed to identify projects which could be funded by section 106 monies and unilateral undertakings.

The Community Team are already meeting with planning and with parish councils etc in order to identify community facilities and schemes which could benefit from such funding – but with availability/likelihood of such funding decreasing, it is doubtful that much of what is in parish and neighbourhood plans could be financed.