

Big Society Fund

Equality Impact Assessment

Proposal

To create a fund of £600,000 in the financial year 2011/12 to which communities can make bids for start-up funding for service provision they may wish to undertake in their local area.

What else did you consider and reject? Why was this considered the better option?

This is a new and one-off grant fund for 2011/12. There is currently no fund of this kind in the county council.

In setting up the Big Society Fund we researched other grant schemes including those run nationally such as the lottery, other areas big society related grant schemes and local schemes. It was felt that the approach taken provided the best way to promote the Fund objectives and stimulate bids to come forward from communities.

Impact on service users and their local communities

The fund has been set up in such a way as to enable as wide a range of community groups and organisations to make applications to the fund as possible. The approach to the fund is set out below and shows how we have mitigated any risks that certain groups' access to the Big Society Fund could be negatively impacted by this approach.

1. Grant criteria and application process

The criteria for the Big Society Fund are objective and intentionally broad to give as many communities the opportunity to bid for funds. The three key criteria we are looking for evidence of in bids are; innovation and creativity; the need for the project; and that it has a sustainable business case. We are also looking bids to involve the community.

Need was a crucial consideration in development of the Fund. The chosen approach allows communities opportunity to articulate the need they have identified for their project as well as enabling councillors and professionals in their comments to assess need. Need can be identified in number of ways including community identified need and scores of deprivation which will be taken into consideration when assessing applications. The assessment process will also take into consideration any council services already designed to meet these as the Fund is not designed to replicate council services.

In the fund guidance we anticipate that not all groups interested in applying to the Fund will be well established and organised groups. We do not wish to stifle innovative new projects and groups from applying to the fund because of this so we have indicated in the guidance that newly established groups can bid but that we would need them to be formalised by the time funding is paid out. We have also asked groups to indicate whether they already have health and safety and equality policies. In cases where they are not yet in place these will be a condition of funding.

To enable new and less established groups maximum opportunity to develop projects and harness community support to bid to the Big Society Fund we have set up four waves for applications across 2011. The first wave closes at the end of May 2011 with subsequent

waves every three months. This provides groups more time if required to work up the detail of their proposal and gather local support.

Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action and Oxfordshire Rural Community Council have agreed to provide support to communities and organisations interested in applying for the Big Society Fund but who may not be as well placed to develop bids. We have established clear links and guidance on the website for organisations looking for capacity and development support.

Equality groups potentially impacted

No equality groups would be specifically affected by the Fund criteria, however groups in more disadvantaged areas may find it harder to galvanise support and recruit volunteers to develop proposals impacting their ability to put a bid together.

People with disabilities, those who have literacy problems or don't speak English as their first language may struggle to work with the format of the Fund documents and may require translation or alternate formats. These needs will be handled on a case by case basis.

Mitigation

Bids to the fund can be submitted at any time in the year with four cut off points when they will be assessed and decisions on funding taken. This has been done to enable new and less established groups sufficient time to come together and work up proposals. Groups do not have to be formally constituted or have a bank account in place when they apply to the fund. This is to allow embryonic groups to submit proposals as long as they can work towards this and are successful in getting funding.

Local councillors have a key role in the promotion of the Fund and application process. They provide support to local groups to develop their proposals, make contact with officers or other support as required and put applications together.

Officers are available to provide support to groups wanting to submit applications to the Big Society Fund where requested. This can include providing information from council services, signposting to other information, support or guidance and advice on applications.

2. Promotion of the fund

The Fund is being promoted as widely as possible to enable all communities and organisations equal opportunity to bid into the fund. The communications and marketing plan includes:

General media release – a number of news outlets took up the story and promoted it

Targeted communications include –

- a. large employers in the county to disseminate to their workforce
- b. all councillors to promote in their locality through their role as community leaders
- c. staff to promote through their work with communities and as community members
- d. key partners including district councils and town and parish councils

e. voluntary sector partners including OCVA, ORCC and OALC to promote widely amongst their membership. Many of whose members have specific communication needs that these organisations are experienced in meeting.

f. stakeholder groups such as the Social Inclusion Reference Group, Unlimited and Age UK

We are responding to requests for briefings about the fund from groups and partnerships and encourage promotion through newsletters and partners' websites.

We have set up a designated email address and telephone number for questions and communications about the Big Society Fund including those from groups with special requirements. We are dealing with requests as they arise.

Communities interested in bidding to the fund are asked to submit an expression of interest. This alerts us to their interest and enables us to follow up any initial enquiries and start discussions where required or direct them to other appropriate sources of support including other formats as required. We anticipate that this will enable us to provide appropriate support to those organisations that need it to bring forward a strong bid.

Updates have been provided to Councillors detailing expressions of interest that have been received from groups in their locality. Councillors have a key role in encouraging groups to come forward with proposals, supporting these to develop and acting as a facilitator and key communication link to council officers.

Equality groups potentially impacted

It is not considered that any one equality group would be disadvantaged by the approach to promotion of the fund. Potentially older people's groups may be less likely to have been aware of the fund through the main channels used to promote the fund and the expertise of the Taking Part Team will be sought to help promote to this group.

Mitigation

A number of methods of promotion of the fund have been used to ensure as wide as possible awareness which include online and print media as well as verbal promotion by councillors, officers and key partners who are in regular contact with community groups such as OCVA, ORCC and the City Council.

3. Bid assessment process

Bids to the Big Society Fund will be assessed against the criteria that have been set out and widely promoted. The application form asks bidders for evidence of how their bid meet these criteria.

An eligibility checklist, detailed guidance on the fund and application guidance are available to groups interested in applying and we have provided individual support to groups with questions about their eligibility or how to set out their application.

Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action has been involved in the design of the form drawing on their experience in running grant schemes and supporting voluntary groups to develop proposals. Their advice has been that the form is straightforward and proportionate so we do not consider that any groups have been negatively impacted in their ability to apply to the fund because of the form.

The Fund is primarily an online application process but applications in other formats will be accepted. We encourage groups who are unable to do an online application to contact us about their needs and how we can support them to make an application.

Bids received will undergo an initial sort to categorise those that meet the Fund criteria and those that do will go forward for full assessment.

Feedback will be given to those who don't meet the Fund criteria in the initial sort.

Bids that are fully assessed will receive an assessment against the criteria and the relevant council service area will have the opportunity to further comment on the application from a service perspective. This may include service data on need, information about the group and quality of the bid.

Councillors in each of the fourteen localities in the county will review all bids received in their area and provide a comment for Cabinet consideration. Cabinet will make decisions about which bids to award funding.

Equality groups potentially impacted

Vulnerable groups such as those with learning disabilities, sensory impairments or non-English speakers or those in areas of greater disadvantage may find it harder to put together a strong bid as they may not possess the skills to develop a business plan or articulate their plans clearly.

Mitigation

We have signposted a number of sources of support available to groups interested in applying to the fund including OCVA.

Bidders are required to evidence involvement of their local Councillor who will be able to support them in working up their bid and act as facilitator to get officer support.

A number of community groups have sought direct advice about how to articulate their proposals.

4. Review

Through the locality review meetings in each area Councillors are taking on a key role in promoting the Big Society Fund and encouraging bids to come forward. The meetings to comment on the first round of bids to the fund will provide the opportunity for councillors to identify any potential gaps and go back to their communities to encourage bids to come forward in future rounds.

We will also use the application 'waves' to review the type of bids coming through and the organisations that they are from and will undertake further promotion and support to underrepresented groups/areas if identified.

Impact on providers (local SMEs and voluntary, community & faith sector)

The Fund is open to community groups including voluntary organisations, schools and town and parish councils. It is not available to organisations run for profit as it is intended to be

used for the benefit of the communities in Oxfordshire. Voluntary, community & faith sector will be direct beneficiaries of the grant fund.

Impact of the proposal on other council services

The Big Society Fund will be used to support projects in communities where there is a well defined need and sustainable business case. In some cases it may be awarded to projects that have been developed in reaction to a change in council services.

Impact of the proposal on staff

Administration of the Big Society Fund will be managed through existing resources and has no impact on staff.

Actions

At this stage we believe that we have taken into account most needs that can be anticipated. As noted however we will be reviewing the process on a quarterly basis to identify if any concerns have been expressed, or if an area or groups are not represented in the bids that are coming through to the Fund. This will be led by the Policy Unit in Chief Executive's Office.