

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked:

1. To note the Council's grant giving processes and procedures to aid the Voluntary and Community Sector help those needing support during the pandemic.
-

Date of O&S meeting: 13th April 2021

Chair of O&S Committee: Cllr Ovenden

Relevant Portfolio(s): Cllr Peter Feacey, Portfolio Holder for Wellbeing and Community Safety
Cllr Matthew Forest, Portfolio Holder for Culture, Tourism and Leisure

Summary: This report has been produced in response to members of the committee requiring reassurance on the processes and contract monitoring of grants to our Voluntary, Community and Faith sector, particularly over the pandemic period. The report aims to address any concern or perception around use of funds to promote religious beliefs or membership.

Exempt from Publication: **NO**

Background Papers: **N/A**

Contact: Chris.dixon@ashford.gov.uk – Tel: (01233) 330352

Report Title: General processes involved with granting funding to Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector.

Introduction and Background

1. This report has been produced in response to members of the committee requiring reassurance on the processes and contract monitoring of grants to our Voluntary and Community Sector, particularly over the pandemic period. The report aims to address any concern or perception around use of funds to promote religious beliefs or membership.
2. Across the borough, the VCS delivers a broad range of local services to all kinds of people. Organisations range from large formal charities, to small informal community groups, who all play a crucial role in providing essential services, improving our quality of life and strengthening the fabric of our communities.
3. Our grant funding to the VCS, before the pandemic, was mainly distributed through the Community Grant Fund, with a mix of one-off capital and revenue grants, as well as some longer term funding to key organisations. All of these schemes come with clear eligibility criteria and have identified funding priorities. Member involvement in these decisions is via the Community Grants Panel or an Officer delegation. Where applications are successful the organisation will enter into a contract or service level agreement which will be signed and monitored.
4. In Ashford, like many districts, faith-based bodies and religious organisations make up a significant part of our VCS, and make a real positive contribution to the well-being of our society. They are eligible, like any other suitably qualified body, to be awarded a contract and receive funding to support delivery of required services. This includes being awarded grants to carry out a specific project that is of benefit to a specific community or membership of people requiring support.
5. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, the sector has played a key part in Ashford's recovery, stepping up to provide a significant amount of practical and emotional support to vulnerable residents, dealing with the continued increase in demand for support services, whilst having to manage their own pressures such as loss of income from facility hire, cancellation of fundraising events, and difficulty in retaining staff and volunteers through restrictions.
6. Their contribution at this time of crisis required support from the Council in order to aid their effort. The Council had to act swiftly to secure and distribute funding to maintain and strengthen the sector whilst continuing to put in place sound monitoring controls, which are described and evidenced below.

Process by which COVID-19 grants were allocated:

7. Council officer's proactively identified groups and local organisations in need, deserving of funding, or those in the best strategic position to deliver services - through liaison with the Ashford Volunteer Centre, existing Council officer knowledge and a dedicated online contact form. From this information the Council maintained a central database of contact numbers and the type of help available, which is publicised on our website.
8. The Council undertook a comprehensive community group risk mapping exercise to identify pressure points and gaps within the borough. Community groups were risk assessed based on a series of standard questions. The community group data was mapped, using IT software, along with vulnerable people data. From this the Council was able to perform a gap analysis. This analysis helped direct local residents seeking assistance.
9. The Council used crowdfunding and government covid grant allocations to help further support local organisations and to strengthen links with community partners. Funding streams included: Voluntary Emergency Response Appeal (VERA) Fund, Emergency Assistance Fund, Covid Grants, Winter Grants; Containment Outbreak Management Fund; and Clinically Extremely Vulnerable funding. A clear eligibility criteria was documented for all funds in reports to the Business Continuity Incident Management Team (BCIMT), and delegation to spend sort accordingly.
10. Furthermore, prior to allocation of VERA and the Emergency Assistance Fund, officers undertook socially distanced site visits to look at potential projects to be supported to get a full picture of the organisation, to check on how facilities were managed, and to gauge capacity to deliver.
11. All recipients of funding from the various streams listed above received and signed a Grant Agreement which outlines the agreed terms, purpose of the grant, prohibited acts, anti-discrimination, and their monitoring and reporting duties.
12. In specific relation to recipients of VERA, they were contracted to:
 - Maintain and develop the provision of food and other essentials to people in the Ashford borough who are in most need.
 - Accept referrals from Ashford Borough Council for any food provision that is operating during this grant agreement period. Emergency food requests will continue to be met and consideration will be given as to a referrals suitability for other forms of food provision that may be developed by the Recipient.
 - Try to find someone to deliver food to them in crisis or extenuating circumstances if the project cannot be accessed directly by the person/family in need.
 - Collect, monitor and supply data (where available and if known) to Ashford Borough Council with regards to numbers of weekly customers; from what wards customers are from; reasons for need

(hardship, health concerns, can't access shop delivery); and how they have heard about the service (word of mouth, referral, website etc). Data will be required each month.

- Display or advertise on the Recipient website and any relevant social media accounts (if appropriate), with clear opening days and times of when Recipient service can be accessed, and clear methods of how to access and contact relevant staff.
13. Further due diligence was undertaken, and controls put in place with Ashford Vineyard prior to funding being awarded, which included reviewing their eligibility criteria; what participants were receiving support and type of wrap-around support offered. This enabled them to appropriately roll out and expand what they were offering, to try and help residents tackle the root causes of food poverty and financial crisis with this funding.
 14. All monitoring data, from all funding recipients has been successfully collected, and continues to be collected. On various occasions this data has been reported and presented back to Management Team, ACER, Recovery Plan Monitoring Advisory Group, as well as KCC's Vulnerable People and Communities Cell.
 15. All recipients of VERA and the Emergency Assistance Grant have formed a regular online network group, chaired by ABC, to report on services being provided, ask for support with any issues, work closer together on serving residents and collaborate where appropriate.
 16. Recently, all of the Council's COVID-19 Community Support has been reviewed and audited by *Mid Kent Audit*, and received a 'Strong' - relating to controls put in place to manage its risks and support achievement of its objectives, including effective identification of local groups, mapping of risks, partnership working, grant administration, approvals and monitoring.

Conclusion

17. It can be evidenced that clear processes are in place and that strong due diligence is undertaken when granting funding has been distributed to our Voluntary and Community Sector.

Contact and Email

18. chris.dixon@ashford.gov.uk 01233 330 352