



## Report to Cabinet

**Date:** 2 March 2021

**Title:** **Communities and Localism Select Committee Inquiry into the effectiveness of covid-19 grants**

**Relevant councillor(s):** Councillor Paul Irwin, Chairman of the Communities and Localism Select Committee

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**Ward(s) affected:** Not ward specific

**Recommendations:**

**Recommendations made by the Inquiry Group to Cabinet:**

- 1. *Recognising the work of our Local Heroes to continue to raise awareness for further volunteering and fundraising***

**At the last Buckinghamshire Council meeting before the election, a one-minute clap should be held at the beginning of the meeting to say thank you to all those who helped during the pandemic. We can also recognise the work of our Local Heroes by continuing to raise awareness by promoting and publicising the excellent work of the voluntary sector to help encourage volunteering and fundraising**

- 2. *To continue the effective collaboration of the strategic partnership to protect the voluntary sector by;***

- A. Ensuring key decision makers are represented on the Strategic Funding Group to address the needs of Buckinghamshire and local communities. As part of this and other work carried out by the Council, it is important to continue looking at efficiencies to obtain value for money with all grant funding and to be able to position, flex and change direction as required so we can be quick to act**
- B. Considering how the Council's review of its estate and community assets could identify possible properties that could support the voluntary sector.**

- 3. To review the funding process to enable all community groups to have equal opportunities to access funding by:-**
      - A. Providing funding navigators to help community groups access funding in Buckinghamshire. The Strategic Funding Group in partnership with the funding navigators, at a more local level, can review how all grants are currently distributed to ensure that funding is fast tracked when required and outcome focussed with an accessible system for applications
      - B. Providing as much certainty of longer term funding as the Council is able so that voluntary and community organisations can plan ahead
      - C. Review the application process for Community Boards as follows:-
        - Identifying the benefits of Community Boards having a Small Grant Fund to empower smaller community groups where a small grant can bring huge benefits
        - Undertaking a review of the criteria of the Community Board application process to see whether it should be more closely aligned with the Public Health Assessment and to ensure a consistent approach to applications to more than one Board
  - 4. Building the Volunteer response by:-**
    - A. Having a Campaign to reach out to our Lockdown Heroes to encourage them to continue the legacy of volunteer work which could help strategic partnerships to build a volunteer army for Buckinghamshire to provide a response to any emergency
    - B. Reviewing whether more can be done to encourage staff to take up volunteer roles by developing an Employer Supported Volunteering Procedure
  - 5. Supporting smaller voluntary and community groups – recognising the benefit of smaller agile grass root organisations to complement the larger more established voluntary organisations**
    - A. Continue to recognise the independence and value of pop-up community groups to engage residents who may be worried about the stigma of approaching more formalised groups and ensure that pop up groups are supported to deliver their services safely, including formalising their group where appropriate

- B. To identify structural enablers e.g. Street Associations, Community Connectors, Community Board Co-ordinators who could link local organisations together to build capacity and identify funding opportunities.
6. *The Council should continue to work with strategic partners on a Buckinghamshire Food Partnership, to:-*
- A. Ensure a clearer system of referral so that food is fairly distributed to the most vulnerable and that more formalised food banks are given priority over funding
  - B. Build on the current mapping of community food activity (food directory) by providing mutual support, collaboration, to share resources and to target and bring in funding.
7. *The Council needs to focus resource towards reducing loneliness and social isolation by:-*
- A. Continuing to set up foundation services that provide the first steps in finding individuals who are experiencing loneliness, supported by structural enablers
  - B. Continuing to direct interventions focussed on helping people maintain existing relationships and develop new ones e.g. promoting support activities such as lunch clubs, befriending schemes (which can be found in the directory of services which has been produced)
  - C. Providing gateway services like transport, technology, spatial planning and housing which make it easier for communities to come together.

**Reason for decision:** For Cabinet to consider the recommendations of the Communities and Localism Select Committee Inquiry into the effectiveness of covid-19 grants

## **1. Executive summary**

- 1.1 The Communities and Localism Select Committee agreed to set up an Inquiry, chaired by Councillor Paul Irwin, to assess the effectiveness of community organisation grants during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 1.2 Over the period of 8 December 2020 to 18 January 2021 the Inquiry Group held a number of meetings and evidence gathering sessions with key stakeholders with a view to making recommendations to Cabinet for it to consider at its meeting on 2 March 2021.

## ***2. Content of report***

- 2.1 The Inquiry Group have identified the seven recommendations detailed above. Whilst the Inquiry Group recognise that many of these recommendations will require working in partnership with other organisations, they anticipate that the Council should take the lead. One of the main themes running through this Inquiry report was that the Council and its communities could not operate without the voluntary sector. However, there was real concern, as recognised by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, that the voluntary sector was likely to shrink in the immediate future with a reduction in fundraising leading to organisations calling on their reserves. Therefore, the promotion and protection of the voluntary sector should remain a key priority for the Council, the Strategic Funding Group, Community Impact Bucks and other partners.
- 2.2 The Inquiry Group hope that this report will enable the Council to build upon its strong links with the voluntary sector and to play an even greater role in facilitating change through stronger partnership working leading to resilient and protected local communities across Buckinghamshire.
- 2.3 The Inquiry Group have been inspired by the voluntary work being undertaken throughout Buckinghamshire and want to place on record its thanks to everyone who has helped us through the pandemic which has strengthened and renewed our belief in the power of local communities. It is important that the Council is creative about embracing recent volunteers, many of whom have been from the younger age group - volunteering needs to be made attractive and accessible to everyone.
- 2.4 Whilst recognising that the funding process had to be set-up quickly, the Inquiry Group want to highlight lessons learnt through its recommendations on the management of community grants for any future pandemic ensuring that:
- there are no gaps or duplication of services,
  - that resources are being used effectively and efficiently providing value for money for all residents through good partnership working,
  - benefits are provided which may have a long term impact on communities.
- 2.5 Therefore, the Inquiry Group have made recommendations about continuing to raise awareness of the work of the voluntary sector, continuing the effective collaboration with strategic partners, building on the legacy of volunteering, continued support for funding including looking at how Council and community assets could be used further and the need to provide value for money by using a structural enabler to ensure that resources are being used effectively. The role of Community Boards is key in this process and can act as a structural enabler in terms of co-ordinating funding at a local level to ensure that grants are only given where clear local need is demonstrated.

- 2.6 The Inquiry Group's key findings and recommendations are set out in the report attached at **Appendix 1**.
- 2.7 The Inquiry Group recognise that the Council was proactive from the start of the pandemic working with the Strategic Funding Group, Community Impact Bucks and other voluntary and community sector (VCS) partners. The National Lottery have described Buckinghamshire as unique in their approach and the Council has also been complimented in its bottom up approach to funding. The Council recognise the work of pop-up groups during the pandemic, many organised themselves into groups or partnered with established organisations to provide assistance and support to their neighbours. The Council and its partners need to continue supporting them to deliver their services safely, including formalising their groups where appropriate and also helping them to collaborate with established organisations to ensure cost effective local delivery.

### ***3. Other options considered***

- 3.1 Appendix 1 provides context to each of the Inquiry Group's recommendations. Cabinet are asked to consider these recommendations and provide a response.

### ***4. Legal and financial implications***

- 4.1 These will be considered as part of the Cabinet's response.

### ***5. Corporate implications***

- 5.1 These will be considered as part of the Cabinet's response.

### ***6. Consultation with local Councillors & Community Boards***

- 6.1 The report and recommendations were produced by the Inquiry Group which was formed of a cross-party group of Members from the Communities and Localism Select Committee. As part of evidence gathering, Community Board Chairmen were consulted with and took an active part in meetings. A questionnaire was sent out to Community Groups and Members about their views on the Councillor Crisis Fund, the results of which can be viewed in the appended report.

### ***7. Communication, engagement & further consultation***

- 7.1 As noted above, a questionnaire was sent out to Community Groups and Members about their views on the Councillor Crisis Fund, the results of which are appended to the Inquiry Group's report. 76% of Members gave a 4 or a 5 out of 5 for the success of the scheme and 92% of community groups gave a 4 or 5 (5 being the top mark).
- 7.2 The Inquiry Group held sessions with the Strategic Funding Group, Cabinet Member for Communities and Public Health and Service Director, Community Impact Bucks,

Community Board Chairmen, representatives from Birmingham Council for Voluntary Service and Birmingham City Council on Neighbourhood Network Scheme, Local Support Hub officers, 11 food Community Groups and 17 other Community Groups (Mental Health and Finance).

**8. *Next steps and review***

- 8.1 Cabinet will provide a response to the Inquiry Group's recommendations at its meeting on 2 March 2021.
- 8.2 The Communities and Localism Select Committee will review progress with the implementation of the recommendations in the inquiry report after a six and twelve month period.

**9. *Background papers***

- 9.1 The Inquiry Group considered a range of background information at each of its evidence gathering sessions. Throughout the report contained at Appendix 1 there are a number of hyperlinks to background papers along with explanations.