

Strategic Policy and Resources Committee

Thursday, 10th December, 2020

SPECIAL MEETING OF STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE HELD REMOTELY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

Members present: Councillor Black (Chairperson);
Aldermen Dorrian, Haire, Kingston and Sandford;
Councillors Beattie, Bunting, Carson, Garrett,
Groogan, Heading, Long, Lyons, McAllister,
McDonough-Brown, McLaughlin, McReynolds,
Murphy, Pankhurst and Walsh.

In attendance: Mrs. S. Wylie, Chief Executive;
Mr. R. Cregan, Director of Finance and Resources;
Mr. J. Walsh, City Solicitor;
Mr. J. Hanna, Senior Democratic Services Officer; and
Mr. H. Downey, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

No apologies were reported.

Declarations of Interest

Alderman Kingston declared an interest in relation to item 2a – Covid-19 Community Support Funding, in that he worked on a part-time basis for the Forward South Partnership, one of the nine strategic partners referred to within the report, and left the meeting whilst the matter was being discussed.

Restricted Items

The information contained in the report associated with the following two items is restricted in accordance with Part 1 of Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to exclude the members of the Press and public from the Committee meeting during discussion of these items as, due to the nature of the items, there would be a disclosure of exempt information as described in Section 42(4) and Section 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Covid-19 - Community Support Funding

(Mrs. A. Allen, Neighbourhood Services Manager, attended in connection with this item.)

The Committee was reminded that the Council, at its meeting on 19th November, in passing a motion on Food Poverty, had agreed to create a fund of £300,000 to provide additional and holistic support to those who were in need this

Christmas. £150,000 of that had been allocated to the Salvation Army and the St. Vincent de Paul Christmas Appeals.

The Committee was reminded further that, at its meeting on 26th November, it had agreed that the remaining £150,000 be shared between the nine strategic area community partners across the City, based on the allocation method of 50% population and 50% need, using multiple deprivation as a proxy. It had agreed also that £100,000 from anticipated funding of £505,000 from the Department for Communities, aimed primarily at addressing food poverty and financial hardship over the Christmas and New Year period, be allocated at risk to those partners, using the same allocation method.

The Neighbourhood Services Manager reported that the Department for Communities had since confirmed that the exact amount which it would be allocating to the Council would be £470,000. In addition, officers had been made aware of the potential for various units within the Department for Communities to provide the Council with additional funding, to focus upon the same high level priorities, with a requirement that it be utilised in full by the end of March, 2021. She provided details of the level of funding which would be likely to be forthcoming, subject to all formal agreements being put in place, and explained that, for the purpose of allocation, those had been merged into three distinct streams. Accordingly, she recommended that the Committee agree:

Funding Allocations

1. Stream 1 - Food, Financial Hardship, Warm, Well and Connected (approximately £676,300)
 - a) to allocate £353,800 to the nine area based strategic community partners, using the allocation method of 50% population and 50% need, with multiple deprivation as a proxy, to enable them to extend the reach and scope of their existing service provision;
 - b) to allocate £322,500 immediately to thematic community/voluntary partners to support to the following organisations:

Organisation	Services	Total
Community Food Providers (individual grant of max £2K to 45 groups)	Equipment to enable increased community food provision (food parcels and hot food)	£90,000
Children and Young People Locality Group x 5 (North, South, East, West and Colin) (each locality group £24K to be awarded to owner or a consortium of VCSE service providers within that locality group)	Additional local services to support children, young people and their families	£120,000

Age Friendly Partnership (award to one of consortium of VCSE partners in partnership for citywide cover)	Services to address increased risk of social isolation and loneliness due to Covid-19	£20,000
Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid	Food, personal care, financial hardship, emotional wellbeing support to assist women affected by domestic and sexual violence	£10,000
Men's Advisory Project	Food, personal care, financial hardship, emotional wellbeing support to assist men affected by domestic and sexual violence	£5,000
Belfast Migrant Forum (award to one or consortium of VCSE partners in forum to provide citywide cover)	Food, personal care, financial hardship, emotional wellbeing support for BAME families (inc. refugees and asylum seekers)	£15,000
Here NI, CaraFriend and Transgender NI (individual grant to each of £7,500)	Emotional health and wellbeing and services for those affected by domestic and sexual violence	£22,500
HEART Project (as facilitator for community counselling services)	Additional community counselling services across the city	£40,000
TOTAL		£322,500

- c) that any increase in demand for the micro/medium grant programme already underway be met firstly from additional funding of approximately £486,000 which it was anticipated would be forthcoming in January from the Department for Communities, as part of its general Covid-19 community support programme. Given the tight timescales involved in delivery, that is, by the end of March 2021, approximately 50% of the funding remaining should be distributed to the nine strategic community partners, using the allocation method alluded to in part a), approximately 50% be allocated to those thematic community/voluntary organisations referred to in part b) above;

2. Stream 2 – Volunteer Fund (approximately £117,500)

- a) to allocate £100,000 to the nine strategic community partners, using the allocation method of 50% population and 50% need, with multiple deprivation as a proxy, to plan volunteer recognition programmes before the end of the financial year for their areas; and

- b) that the remaining £17,500 be made available to support volunteer expenses/costs as part of existing grant programmes.
3. Stream 3 – Financial Inclusion (approximately £175,148)
- a) to ring fence £15,000 for the Belfast Advice Group to secure the technical assistance which it needs to help it business plan for increased demand for advice services in 2021/22 and beyond, as a result of the impacts of Covid-19; and
 - b) to allocate the remaining £160,148 is distributed to existing advice Consortia, using the existing Council model for financial allocation in relation to advice.

Additional Recommendations

4. Ongoing Financial Management
- that a review of the financial position and overall progress be scheduled for the end of January, 2021, to allow for any decisions around potential reallocation of funding to be made by the Committee in sufficient time as to enable local delivery to take place.
5. Request for Extension
- that, in light of the significant level of funding which the Council would be expected to allocate to local community/voluntary partners so close to the end of the current financial year, a letter be forwarded to the Department for Communities requesting that the delivery period be extended until the end of June, 2021.

It was

Moved by Councillor Carson,
Seconded by Councillor Beattie,

That the Committee agrees to adopt the foregoing recommendations.

At the request of a Member, the proposer agreed to amend recommendation 3.b) to the effect that £28,000 be allocated to Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid and agreed further, at the request of another Member, to allocate £16,500 to the "We are Pangs" perinatal health charity, thereby leaving £115,648 for distribution to existing advice consortia.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. adopted the recommendations set out above, subject to the amendment of recommendation 3.b) to reflect the allocations which had been made to Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid and We are Pangs; and

- ii. in noting that the Council, at its meeting on 1st December, had delegated authority to it to take decisions around the allocation of Covid-19 Christmas Response Funding, agreed, in accordance with Standing Order 47 (a) (2) (c), that the foregoing decisions would not be subject to call-in, on the basis that an unreasonable delay could be prejudicial to the Council's or the public's interest.

The Committee noted that the Neighbourhood Services Manager would brief Members on the roles and membership of the five Children and Young Person's Locality Groups operating across Belfast, which had secured funding under Stream 1.b)

Council Assets Rental Holiday and St. George's Market – Financial Implications

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 20th November, it had agreed to defer consideration of a request to provide those businesses operating from the units in St. George's Market with a three-month rental holiday, in light of the trading difficulties which they were experiencing as a result of Covid-19. The Committee had, in response to further restrictions being imposed by the Northern Ireland Executive on 27th November, requested information on the financial implications of providing businesses across the entire Council asset base with a two-week and four-week rental holiday. A request from the operators of the stallholders within the Market itself for a three-month rental holiday had also been deferred.

The Committee was reminded further that, at its meeting on 26th November, it had again agreed to defer the matter to allow for further details to be provided on support packages which were available to businesses, the Council's rental asset base and any tenants who had requested Council support since the pandemic had emerged.

The Director of Finance and Resources provided an overview of the external support packages of most relevance to the Council's tenants, as well as Council-managed initiatives, and provided details of the number of leases and monthly rental income across its assets base. In terms of businesses requesting Council support, he explained that, in addition to the requests relating to St. George's Market, traders in Smithfield Market had, during the summer, sought a three-month rental holiday. However, in line with the Committee's decision of 19th June, that had not been acceded to. One other tenant, namely, Belfast City Marathon Limited, which leased space in Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Park, had recently approached the Council to highlight financial issues arising from the impact of the postponement of Belfast City Marathon events.

The Director reminded the Committee that the Bobbin Coffee Shop in the City Hall had been closed since the introduction of lockdown in March and that, due to the layout of the building, it had been unable to offer a carry out service. He explained that, for that reason, its rent had been frozen until such time as the business could operate fully. Council officers had informed the NOW Group, the operator of the business, that it would be offering it a one-year contract extension and were working with it to identify additional financial support which it could access.

The Director then outlined the financial and other implications for the Council of providing a rental holiday for tenants across its estate and reviewed the specific arrangements which had been put in place to support the stallholders in St. George's Market. He concluded by pointing out that, should the Committee accede to the request from the stallholders, it would, when combined with the three-month rental holiday which had been granted earlier in the year, cost the Council in total £550,408.

In response to a suggestion from a Member that the contract for the operation of the Bobbin Coffee Shop should be extended for longer than twelve months, the City Solicitor confirmed that, since this could, in the context of procurement, be regarded as being exceptional circumstances, he would extend it for a further eighteen months.

After discussion, it was

Proposed by Councillor Beattie,
Seconded by Councillor Walsh and

Resolved – That the Committee agrees:

- i. to grant a further three-month rental holiday to the stallholders in St. George's Market;
- ii. to set aside up to a maximum of £100,000 to support, in the form of rental relief, any business across the Council estate which, in line with criteria to be drawn up by Council officers, can demonstrate that it requires financial assistance, as a specific result of difficulties created by the Covid-19 pandemic;
- iii. that the aforementioned criteria be presented to its monthly meeting in January for notation;
- iv. to note that the City Solicitor would extend the contract for the operation of the Bobbin Coffee Shop for a further eighteen months; and
- v. agrees, in accordance with Standing Order 47 (a) (2) (c), that the foregoing decisions would not be subject to call-in, on the basis that an unreasonable delay could be prejudicial to the Council's or the public's interest.

The Committee noted that, in the absence of it having been granted delegated authority to implement the aforementioned decisions, that the Council, at its meeting on 7th January, would be asked to provide retrospective approval.

Chairperson