

**REVIEW OF SMALL SCALE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENTS  
GRANT SCHEME**

**(Report by the Working Group)**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Panel at their meeting on 2nd January 2007 established a Working Group comprising Councillors Mrs M Banerjee, R W J Eaton, D A Giles, P G Mitchell and J S Watt to undertake a study into various aspects of the Council's Small Scale Environmental Improvements grant scheme. Councillor Mrs Banerjee was elected Chairman of the Working Group.

1.2 The Working Group was specifically tasked with examining the following:

- the purpose of the funding having regard to the Council's corporate objectives and community aims contained in Growing Success;
- arrangements for inviting town and parish councils to propose projects for funding;
- the criteria for evaluating individual projects proposed for funding;
- the extent to which the criteria should have regard, if any, to the size of the town or parish council promoting the project;
- differential levels of financial contribution by the town or parish council promoting the project; and
- the involvement of Members in the evaluation process

These are discussed in detail below.

**2. WORKING GROUP ACTIVITIES**

2.1 The Working Group first met on 13th February 2007, when the Executive Councillors for Finance and for Planning Strategy, Environment and Transport outlined their concerns relating to the existing scheme, which had prompted them to suggest a review. These are addressed in the following paragraphs.

2.2 The Working Group, at this meeting, discussed various aspects of the Scheme and its administration. Members, however, decided that their deliberations should be informed by practical experience of the Scheme in operation. Site visits were, therefore, held at 12 locations where applications for funding had been made for various scales of projects some of which were successful and some not. The visits took place on 2nd April 2007. The next section summarises the Working Group's findings.

### **3. FINDINGS**

#### **(a) The Council's Corporate Objectives and Community Aims**

3.1 The Working Group has been acquainted with the outcome of an exercise by Officers to link the Scheme's aims to the Council's corporate objectives and community aims. The relevant ones are A Clean, 'Green' and Attractive Place; Safe, Vibrant and Inclusive Communities; Access to Services and Transport and A Strong, Diverse Economy. Members have concluded that all the existing scoring criteria have links to the Council's Corporate Plan "Growing Success".

#### **(b) Arrangements for inviting Town and Parish Councils to Propose Projects for Funding**

3.2 The Working Group has identified a number of areas where improvements might be made to the bidding process. Although all clerks receive full details of the Scheme, its criteria and the bidding process, a frequent comment made by town and parish councillors is that they are unaware of it. It appears that the latter are not receiving this communication. In order to avoid such situations occurring in the future, the Working Group recommends that copies of the correspondence to clerks are sent to all Members, which will enable them to raise it at meetings and answer queries.

3.3 The previous recommendation is aimed at raising public awareness of the Scheme. With this in mind the Working Group also recommends that details of all the Council's grants schemes are published in a single location on the website in such a way that members of the public will be clear which scheme is the most appropriate for their purposes. This will increase awareness amongst the public and encourage individuals to raise schemes at parish level. A further recommendation intended to achieve this aim is that the timing of bidding processes for the funding schemes referred to in paragraph 3.5 (and 3.15) are harmonized in conjunction with the County Council.

3.4 Their deliberations concentrated on bids by town and parish councils but, for clarity, the Working Group suggests that the Scheme's literature makes clear who is able to apply.

3.5 A number of suggestions stem from the Scheme's relationship with other funding schemes. If a bid is received for which either the Environment and Transport Area Joint Committee Small Scale Improvements Scheme, the Local Transport Plan Village Residential Areas Environmental Improvements Scheme or the Transport Scheme is more appropriate, be it because of the cost or nature of the project involved, Officers automatically refer it to the body undertaking the administration of that scheme. Furthermore, there is an informal process under which Officers make District Council Medium Term Plan bids for qualifying schemes costing over £30k. The Working Group is of the view that this should be formalised by imposing an upper limit on the value of a project of £30k. In addition, it is proposed that the District Council's contribution should be limited to £22.5k to enable a greater number of projects to be undertaken.

- 3.6 In addition, where a bid has been referred elsewhere the Working Group recommends that the applicant is informed as such to enable enquiries to be made as to the outcome.
- 3.7 In a similar vein the Working Group recommends that where applications are refused under the Small Scale Environmental Improvements scheme (and not referred elsewhere) applicants are formally provided with feedback on the reasons for decisions and details of how their schemes have ranked in relation to others. This will encourage, in subsequent years, the resubmission of bids that are appropriate and avoid the resubmission of ones that are not.

**(c) The Scheme's Criteria**

- 3.8 The Working Group has reviewed the Scheme's criteria. In general they are satisfied with it and have only recommended some minor alterations. A copy of the application form is attached to assist with understanding this discussion. It is suggested that the wording of the Environment, Community Safety, Existing Condition, Local Economy and Community Benefit criteria do not need to be changed. Similarly, the scores attached to each of these, in practice, appear to work well.
- 3.9 The Working Group, however, question the validity of the Prominence criterion. It does not contribute meaningfully to assessments and has inconsistent application in that a quiet part of St Neots might have considerably more through traffic than a village such as Covington, both of which sites were visited by Members. It is, therefore, recommended that the Prominence criterion is removed.
- 3.10 With regard to Access, the Working Group feels that there is no need to distinguish between land that is private with public access and that which is publicly owned. An example is the replacement of a wall and railings outside 36 to 38 High Street, Huntingdon, which has considerably enhanced the appearance of a public thoroughfare, even though technically it is on privately owned land. The Working Group's view is that public benefit is sufficient and so they recommend that the existing two criteria are replaced with a single one, which awards two points if a project is subject to public access or is publicly visible.
- 3.11 At the suggestion of the Executive Councillor for Planning Strategy, Environment and Transport, the Working Group has considered the role of Section 106 Agreements in funding works. Members recognise the inequity of a situation whereby some areas receive considerable benefit via this route while others receive nothing. As things stand, however, money obtained in this way cannot be used for this purpose. On the basis of work undertaken, however, the Working Group is of the view that if it is appropriate to use Section 106 money in this way, Members would endorse a change in the current arrangements from whatever direction.

**(d) The Size of Town or Parish Council**

- 3.12 The situation in the previous paragraph is strongly related to the size of the settlement involved. In the course of its work the Working Group looked at whether this should be factored into the scheme. Members are not in favour of introducing separate schemes for large

and small settlements as the cut off point would be arbitrary and such a move would create additional administration. Equally, they do not feel that size of settlement should be included in the Scheme's criteria to determine eligibility. Nevertheless, they endorse the Executive Councillor for Finance's view that larger parishes and towns have access to other funding sources and are able to raise more money through their precepts and this should be recognised. They suggest that once a project has been approved to proceed, the applicant's contribution should be inversely proportional to the size of settlement. Accordingly, they recommend that a town or parish council be required to contribute £1.00 per elector to a maximum contribution of 25% of the scheme cost. This is the same as the Environment and Transport Area Joint Committee Small Scale Improvements Scheme.

**(e) Financial Contribution by Town and Parish Councils**

- 3.13 The Working Group does not consider that extra weighting should be given to bids for which town or parish councils are prepared to contribute a greater proportion of the total cost than the minimum required under the scheme. While this is welcomed the Working Group feels that it should not form part of the eligibility criteria.

**(f) Members' Involvement**

- 3.14 The Working Group is of the view that Members should not have any involvement in the assessment process. This is because Members will naturally favour their own wards making it difficult to obtain a balanced view. The second point of paragraph 3.15 demonstrates there is no need for Member involvement in assessments.

**(g) Other Matters**

- 3.15 In addition to their deliberations on the matters the Working Group was asked to investigate, two others arose in the course of their work. The first is that as the criteria give added weighting if a project involves a listed building or ancient monument, Conservation Area grants should be added to the list of alternative grant schemes to which bids might be referred. The second is that although, during the site visits, Members concurred with the scoring of bids against the criteria, there was an example that they thought should have been scored differently. As this was only one instance out of twelve they did not feel it merited a change to the process but they thought it should be drawn to Officers' attention.

**4. CONCLUSIONS**

- 4.1 The Working Group has undertaken a thorough review of the Small Scale Environmental Improvements Grant Scheme, which incorporated its strategic underpinnings, its technical operation and its practical application. On this basis the Working Group concluded -

- 1) that links between the Scheme and the Council's Corporate Plan "Growing Success should be noted;
- 2) that copies of correspondence to Clerks should be sent to all Ward Members;

- 3) that details of all the Council's grants schemes should be published in a single location on the website in such a way that members of the public will be clear which scheme is the most appropriate for their purposes;
- 4) that the timing of bidding processes for the funding schemes referred to in paragraphs 3.5 and 3.15 should be harmonized in conjunction with the County Council;
- 5) that the Scheme's literature should make clear who is able to apply;
- 6) that qualifying schemes costing over £30k should be referred for consideration in conjunction with the Medium Term Plan process;
- 7) that the Council's contribution should be limited to £22.5k per scheme;
- 8) that where a bid has been referred elsewhere applicants should be informed accordingly;
- 9) that applicants should be provided with feedback on the reasons for decisions and details of how their schemes ranked in relation to others;
- 10) that "Prominence" should be removed from the assessment criteria;
- 11) that under "Access" existing criteria should be removed and replaced with a single score of two points if a project is subject to public access or is publicly visible;
- 12) that a town or parish council should be required to contribute £1.00 per elector up to a maximum contribution of 25% of the scheme cost;
- 13) that Members should not have any involvement in the evaluation process;
- 14) Conservation Area grants should be added to the list of alternative grant schemes to which bids might be referred; and
- 15) Members' comment on the consistency of scoring should be noted.

## **5. RECOMMENDATION**

- 5.1 Subject to its consideration of the Working Group's conclusions, the Cabinet is invited to authorise the Director of Operational Services, after consultation with the Executive Councillor for Environment & Transport and the Working Group to prepare an amended Small Scale Environmental Improvements Grant Scheme.

## **Background Documents**

Report and notes of the meetings of the Environmental Improvements Working Group

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<b>SMALL SCALE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENT BIDS</b>	<b>DATE:</b>
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<i>Bid Title</i>	
<b>Project officer</b>	<b>P Milward, Project Engineer</b>
<b>Background</b>	

<b>Proposal</b>	
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<b>Alternate Approach</b>	
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<b>Key Assessments / Risk</b>	
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<b>Funding/Costs</b>	
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<b>Future Liabilities</b>	
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<b>Programme Restraints</b>	
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**SCORING CRITERIA FOR SCHEME (Score each section if relevant)**

<b>ENVIRONMENT</b> Site in conservation area +3 Surrounding site of environment significance +2 Surrounding site little environment significance +1 Will be detrimental to surrounding site -1 <p align="center"><b>Add the following if relevant</b></p> Site adjacent to listed building/ancient monument +1 Site is part of listed building/ancient monument +2	<b>EXISTING CONDITION</b> Site in very poor state and in need of immediate attention +3 Site in poor state requiring some remedial works +2 Site in poor state +1 Area has been subject of public complaint +1
<b>PROMINENCE</b> Major access route +3 Minor access route +2 In quiet part of town/village +1	<b>ACCESS</b> Is land private with public access +1 Is land public +2
<b>COMMUNITY SAFETY</b> Improves safety to many +2 Improves safety to few +1 Reduces safety -1 Reduces local nuisance +1 Reduces fear of crime +2	<b>LOCAL ECONOMY</b> Improves access to local retail outlet +2 Improves access to local employment +2 Enhances tourism appeal +1
	<b>COMMUNITY BENEFIT</b> Improves access to all services/facilities +3 Improves access to local services/facilities +2 Enhances community identity +1 Improves community participation +2 Will be maintained by community +3

<b>FORM COMPLETED BY:</b>	<b>TOTAL SCORE:</b>
<b>DATE COMPLETED:</b>	