

**The Future Use of Community Grant**

<b>Final Decision-Maker</b>	COMMUNITIES, HOUSING & ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE
<b>Lead Head of Service</b>	William Cornall Director of Regeneration & Place
<b>Lead Officer and Report Author</b>	John Littlemore Head of Housing & Community Services
<b>Classification</b>	Public
<b>Wards affected</b>	All

**Executive Summary**

To consider whether the Council will continue to provide a Community Grant and if so, to consider how that grant should be utilised.

**Purpose of Report**

Decision

**This report makes the following recommendations to this Committee:**

1. That the Committee agrees the Community Grant budget from the options set out in Paragraph 3.1.
2. That the Committee adopts the approach outlined in Paragraph 3.2 of the report.

**Timetable**

<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
CHE Committee	30-11-2021

# The Future Use of Community Grant

## 1. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
<b>Impact on Corporate Priorities</b>	<p>The four Strategic Plan objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embracing Growth and Enabling Infrastructure</li> <li>• Safe, Clean and Green</li> <li>• Homes and Communities</li> <li>• A Thriving Place</li> </ul>	Head of Housing & Community Services
<b>Cross Cutting Objectives</b>	<p>The four cross-cutting objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heritage is Respected</li> <li>• Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced</li> <li>• Deprivation and Social Mobility is Improved</li> <li>• Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability is respected</li> </ul>	Head of Housing & Community Services
<b>Risk Management</b>	The risks posed are within the Council's risk-assessment appetite.	Head of Housing & Community Services
<b>Financial</b>	The proposals set out in the recommendation are all within already approved budgetary headings and so need no new funding for implementation.	Section 151 Officer & Finance Team
<b>Staffing</b>	We will deliver the recommendations with our current staffing establishment.	Head of Housing & Community Services
<b>Legal</b>	Acting on the recommendations is within the Council's powers.	Legal Team
<b>Privacy and Data Protection</b>	Accepting the recommendations will increase the volume of data held by the Council. We will hold that data in line with our retention	Policy and Information Team

	<p>schedules.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We recognise the recommendations will impact what personal information the Council processes and so have completed a separate data privacy impact assessment.</li> </ul>	
<b>Equalities</b>	We recognise the recommendations may have varying impacts on different communities within Maidstone. Therefore, a separate equalities impact assessment will be completed depending on the decision of the Committee.	Policy & Information Manager
<b>Public Health</b>	We recognise that the recommendations will have a positive impact on population health or that of individuals.	Public Health Officer
<b>Crime and Disorder</b>	The recommendation will have a positive impact on Crime and Disorder, particularly regarding the mediation service. The Community Protection Team have been consulted and mitigation has been proposed	Head of Housing and Community Services
<b>Procurement</b>	On accepting the recommendations, the Council will complete the sourcing of those services in line with financial procedure rules.	Head of Service & Section 151 Officer
<b>Biodiversity and Climate Change</b>	<p>The implications of this report on biodiversity and climate change have been considered and are;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There are no implications on biodiversity and climate change.</li> </ul>	Biodiversity and Climate Change Officer

## 2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

2.1 The CHE Committee has previously considered the Council's position in relation to the grant funding that is provided to community groups. The amount of grant and the number of organisations that benefit from the funds has greatly reduced over the years. The matter was last considered by the CHE Committee on 17<sup>th</sup> January 2017, which led to the current arrangement being implemented from April 2017

2.2 The CHE Committee agreed a five-year service level agreement to the benefit of the Maidstone Citizens Advice Bureau, Involve, and Maidstone Mediation. The overall budget has reduced by 5% per annum over the five-year period. A service level agreement was entered into with each organisation, setting out the expectation from both parties and outlining the outcomes anticipated from the grant.

2.3 The outgoing grant settlements were utilised to provide services that are not currently provided by the Council itself, or to supplement services by providing a more in-depth or greater level of expertise than is presently available within our own resources. These are summarised in the table below:

<b>Type</b>	<b>Service provided</b>	<b>Provider</b>
Mediation	Mediation in neighbour disputes; negotiating between family members in homeless cases; mediation services into schools; anger management courses.	Maidstone Mediation
Advice	Debt advice & assistance. Employment advice. Benefit advice incl. universal credit. Assistance with preventing homelessness – mortgage/rent arrears, illegal eviction. Consumer advice.	Citizens Advice Bureau
Community links	Act as a conduit between the Council & voluntary sector; maintain a directory of voluntary groups; lead and develop a range of forums (e.g. older persons; BME)	Involve

2.4 The total budget in the final year of the current arrangement was £163,000 and the settlement to each organisation is as follows:

Maidstone CAB	£133,100
Involve	£21,700
Maidstone Mediation	£8,200

This arrangement comes to an end on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 and the CHE Committee is asked to consider how it will utilise this budget going forward.

2.5 The services provided by the voluntary sector reflect areas of activity that are not currently provided in-house by the Council's own officers. The provision of these services by an external organisation has a number of benefits. These include:

- Those organisations having an expertise and knowledge that would otherwise need to be developed in-house.
- Voluntary sector groups are often seen as 'trusted bodies' and independent of statutory agencies.
- This can be particularly helpful if the advice is related to action being taken by the Council e.g. Council Tax recovery.
- Voluntary organisations can draw upon knowledge developed in delivering other services e.g. pension advice; social prescribing.

- 2.6 Attached as Appendix 1. are the activities tables for both the Maidstone Mediation service and the Maidstone Citizens Advice Bureau. All three organisations funded through the Community Grant were affected by the restrictions imposed by the Covid19 pandemic to a greater or lesser degree. As a result, the Council evolved some aspects of services previously delivered by the voluntary sector. An example of this would be the merger of our respective lists of voluntary and community groups. The Policies, Communities and Engagement Team have agreed a biannual update meeting with Involve, as well as sending a quarterly update so they can maintain a smaller inhouse list of key community groups.
- 2.7 Maidstone Mediation remained open throughout the pandemic, they refocused and like many organisations worked virtually and safely. This enabled their clients to maintain full access to their services, particularly those needed to be able to cope during a time of stress, anxiety, frustration and feelings of loss of hope for many.
- 2.8 The Maidstone CAB also provided a range of services virtually. The focus of their work changed, with different issues becoming more in demand in response to what was happening within society more generally. For example, as the moratorium on property possession orders went into effect the need for housing advice reduced. However, this was offset by an increase in employment and debt advice as people tried to understand the impact of furlough and the associated concerns about income levels.
- 2.9 The move to online services amongst all three funded organisations mirrors the feedback from the wider sector, recorded as part of the community groups' Impact & Recovery Survey earlier this year. Although, it is noted that 26% of respondents said they had to temporarily suspend activities during the lockdown periods. Social isolation and mental health support featured highly in this survey as being areas of activity that were most called upon.
- 2.10 Advice was provided by the Council's shared procurement team to the effect that this budget was no longer being utilised in the traditional grant role. In practice, the Council was seeking a supply of a service as it was entering into an agreement for specific work; and this was to be carried out over a sustained period. This means that if the Council wants to continue to provide this grant in this way, we will need to follow the Council's financial rules.
- 2.11 Sums paid over a fixed term period are combined for the purpose of the financial rules. This means that if the Committee were to follow a similar breakdown of the grant in the future, a three-year grant settlement would mean that the awards for both the mediation service and community partnership service will require three written quotes. The larger debt and other advice grant will require a formal tendering process.
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### **3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS**

3.1 The Committee could choose to:

- 3.1.1 Remove the grant budget completely to be taken as a saving for the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). This would provide a significant contribution of £174,000 towards the saving's target.
- 3.1.2 Provide a three-year grant, reducing by a further 5% each year creating a saving of £8,700 per annum or £26,100 by the end of the three year period. This sum would contribute towards the MTFS saving target and the impact would be a tapered reduction spread over the period of the new settlement.
- 3.1.3 Provide a three-year grant without reducing the overall budget. This will provide the same level of funding for the supplier but would not contribute to the MTFS and would mean that savings would need to be found from other areas of activity.

3.2 The Committee could agree to continue to fund the voluntary sector in the provision of services for:

- A mediation service that MBC officers can make referrals to (7% of the overall budget).
- Debt advice & assistance. Employment advice. Benefit advice incl. universal credit. Assistance with preventing homelessness – mortgage/rent arrears, illegal eviction. Consumer advice (80% of the overall budget).
- Provide a lead role between the Council & voluntary sector; maintain a directory of voluntary groups; lead and develop a range of forums (e.g. older persons; BME) (13% of the overall budget).

This approach will require the Council to tender for those services, depending on the size of the relevant allotted budget.

3.3 The Committee could decide to utilise the whole grant for alternative proposals to be invited from the voluntary sector. In doing so the Committee will need to decide what objectives should be met by the grant settlement. The Impact & Recovery Survey provides a source of information that may assist Members if they choose to investigate this further. The relevant information is attached as Appendix 2.

### **4. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

4.1 The voluntary sector continues to provide a range of services that the Council would have to provide directly or decide that it no longer requires these to be delivered. The benefits from the links with the voluntary sector was brought into focus during the Covid19 pandemic. The Council remains under financial pressures over the period of the MTFS and there is a need to develop options for savings to mitigate this. For these reasons the preferred options are those contained in Paragraphs 3.1.2 and 3.2.

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## **5. RISK**

- 5.1 The recommendations are within the Council's risk appetite. Voluntary groups expressed future funding as their highest concern within the Impact & Recovery Survey. Locally, we have seen the impact on organisations when local authority commissioned services result in the loss of finances. Whilst most organisations are resilient and are able to adjust over time, the loss of funding can in the short-term lead to disruption and fragility to those voluntary groups.
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## **6. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION**

- 6.1 If the recommendations are approved, officers will commence the process of identifying local voluntary groups to obtain three written quotations for the mediation service and community sector lead role. The advice service will be tendered in accordance with the Council's financial procedure rules.
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## **7. BACKGROUND PAPERS APPENDICES**

Appendix 1 - Example of Activities

Appendix 2 - Impact & Recovery Survey – issues identified for Maidstone.

## **8. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- CHE Committee report 17<sup>th</sup> January 2017
- Impact & Recovery Survey