

## Agenda item 6

For ratification – updates to the FTC Community Grants Programme

Authors: Andy Jones, Grants Committee member and Hannah Stopford, Community Partnerships and Development Manager

### Summary (incl. recommendations)

FTC's community grants programme is a vital source of funding for local groups. Since becoming a Committee, challenges in the process have been encountered. A recent review has collated feedback from relevant stakeholders and the Committee members have convened to agree appropriate changes to address these challenges. This report outlines the suggested changes that aim to make the Grants Programme more efficient, more equitable and more impactful.

## Background

Frome Town Council's Grant programme is popular with our local Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise organisations. It is relatively straightforward to apply to, with local councillors at the heart of decision making, with the support of the Communities Team who are well linked into the local network of community organisations. The recent research into the [Funding Landscape in Frome](#) suggests FTC Grants are the most common source of funding for local organisations. As part of the feedback "Several noted the value of existing Council funding but called for more flexible and substantial grants" (p 18).

## Development of the Grants Programme

The Grants Programme is regularly reviewed according to feedback from applicants and the Grants Committee and staff. Two years ago, the decision was made to turn the Grants Panel as it was then into a committee structure. The intention was to increase transparency of decision making and to enable the committee's decisions to be decided on the night rather than waiting for a later full Council meeting. As outlined in the March Council meeting earlier this year, we have also recently carried out a couple of pilots to increase resident participation and engagement in the grant making process, both of which were successful and have been agreed to continue this year.

## Challenges

The oversubscription of the latest grants round highlighted particular challenges with the current model. We have collated feedback from:

- Applicants
- The pilot Grants Advisory Panel
- Committee members
- Staff

Key issues that were highlighted by these groups included:

- Lack of time in the public meeting for full and meaningful discussions of grants.
- Discomfort from applicants being there on the night and not feeling able to contribute to discussions.
- Perceived arbitrariness of final decisions around amounts of grants.
- Perceived weighting of physical presence on the night – those not able to attend felt like they were missing out.
- Frustration at the length of time required to fill out applications that don't succeed.
- Lack of clarity around scoring mechanisms and impact.
- Lack of capacity to advise and connect groups prior to the full application stage.
- Insufficient opportunity for the advisory panel to meaningfully contribute to discussions.
- There is increased demand for our Grants Programme which further exacerbates capacity and integrity of the process.
- There is a missed opportunity for FTC to be more strategic about the kinds of projects that are being funded in town, linked to priorities and data.
- Holding the Young People's Grant at the same time as the FTC Community Grant (as well as piloting the advisory panel) put undue pressure on staff, especially Sian James who manages the complex administration.
- We can't easily measure the impact of the grants given out.

## Review

The Grants Committee met on Friday 24 April to assess the feedback and agree suggested modifications to the programme to address challenges. Note that the Young Persons Participatory Grant Making programme and the Advisory Panel pilots are already agreed and will form part of the future rounds of grant making.

## Key Changes

1. Be specific about our **priorities** for grants when inviting organisations to apply. Link these priorities to our Council Plan and known data or upcoming challenges for the town.
2. Introduce an '**Expressions of Interest**' stage to the grants programme. Applicants will be invited to submit a short 'one page' (or video/voice note) outline of their project proposal. The Communities Team, with a steer from the Committee, will carry out advice sessions and workshops (as well as 'how-to' guides) to support successful groups to refine their applications and identify possible partners where appropriate. The hope is that full applications will be clear and well researched in the local context of need and available offers. It also means that organisations won't need to spend a lot of their time at this first stage.
3. Hold the FTC Community Grants **ONCE a year**, in the autumn. Risk of oversubscription will be mitigated by the EOI round, and the Young People's Grant which will close in Jan/Feb 2027 (as it did this year). This will serve to reduce the demand on admin and staff time.

4. Better **align and communicate** the Terms and Conditions, eligibility criteria, application form, scoring mechanism and feedback channels. Involve the current Grants Advisory Panel in the redesign of this process.
5. Continue to hold Committee meetings in **public**. The support given at the Expression of Interest stage means that we should no longer need to question applicants on the night. Instead, a summary of the projects will be given, a closed conversation will take place, and the Committee members will come back online to vote in public on decisions for each grant.
6. Improve the **monitoring** and tracking of funded projects including the demographics they reach and areas of focus. Create more opportunities for Councillors to visit successful projects.

### Ratification

We suggest that the Community & Place Committee ratifies these changes and delegates to the Communities Team and Grants Committee to carry out and communicate these changes to the VCFSE community. The suggested changes will make the Grants Programme more efficient, more equitable and more impactful. There should be improved linking of our funding objectives with Council priorities, less effort needed from applicants, and more opportunity to support applications from under resourced organisations.

### Suggested Timeframe

The following suggested timeframe allows the space for applicant support, panel involvement, and meaningful scoring:

- July - EOI stage open.
- Six and a half weeks of triaging, support and workshops for potential applicants. Advisory panel recruited and trained.
- Mid-September – Full Application stage Closes
- Scoring and Administration
- Early November – Grants Committee meeting, decisions made on the evening.

Other options considered	We have looked at alternative models, such as the Crowdfunder community chest, none of which yet look suitable for our aims. We will continue to look at different ways of doing things as technology and systems and the local landscape evolve.
Key considerations for the Council	Increased capacity requirement for Communities Team to administer the Expressions of Interest stage – to be planned for and reviewed.
Consultation and feedback	Consulted with Applicants, Staff, Committee Members and Panel. Monitoring and evaluation to continue with future iterations.
Links to Council Plan and	Objectives (Aim 1) are to: shape a strategic approach to supporting local projects that fill identified gaps in provision and attract grant funding and; improve the impact and reach of the FTC Grants

Medium-Term Financial Plan	Programme through alignment with council priorities, tracking funding distribution, measuring residents reached, and identifying areas of greatest impact.
Financial and Risk Implications	Risk of oversubscription of grants – mitigated as above
Legal / HR Implications	None
Equalities Implications	Improvement to process should increase equitability and reach of grants programme.
Community Safety Implications	None
Climate Change and Sustainability Implications	None
Health and Safety Implications	None
Health and Wellbeing Implications	None
Constitutional Requirements	None
Background Papers	None
Report Sign-Off (if appropriate)	Peter Wheelhouse, Town Clerk 23/04/26

<p><b>Recommendations</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ratify the proposed changes to the Community Grants Programme.</li> <li>2. Delegate to Communities Team and Grants Committee to carry out changes and make decisions on detail.</li> </ol>
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