

GRANTS ADVISORY PANEL

MINUTES

11 SEPTEMBER 2012

Chairman: * Councillor Nana Asante

Councillors:

* Ramji Chauhan (1)	* Bill Phillips
* Manji Kara	* William Stoodley
* Mrs Vina Mithani	* Krishna Suresh (3)
* Joyce Nickolay	* Sasi Suresh

Adviser: * Deven Pillay, Representative of the Voluntary and Community Sector., Voluntary and Community Sector

* Denotes Member present
(1) and (3) Denote category of Reserve Members

111. Attendance by Reserve Members

RESOLVED: To note the attendance of the following duly appointed Reserve Members:

Ordinary Member

Councillor Chris Mote
Councillor Varsha Parmar

Reserve Member

Councillor Ramji Chauhan
Councillor Krishna Suresh

112. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that the following interests were declared:

Councillor Nana Asante declared a disclosable non-pecuniary interest in that she was a member of the Voluntary and Community Sector Forum, was the Council representative on Harrow Agenda 21 Environmental Forum; and had been a guest of the following associations: Angolan Civic Communities Alliance; Association of Senior Muslim Citizens; East African Welfare & Development Concern; Edgware Central African Youth Association in the UK;

Harrow African / Caribbean Association; Harrow Bengali Association; Harrow Iranian Community Association; Harrow Asian Multi-Cultural Association; Harrow Muslim Council; Harrow Tamil Association; Hindu Council (Harrow); Horn Response Project; IWANAAJI Somali Disabled Association; Pakistan Society of Harrow; Tamil Community Centre; Harrow Victim Support; and Afghan Association of London (Harrow). She would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

Councillor Ramji Chauhan declared a disclosable non-pecuniary interest in that he was a member of Harrow Agenda 21 Environmental Forum, and had been a guest of the following associations: Harrow Bengali Association; Harrow Asian Multi-Cultural Association; Harrow Tamil Association; Hindu Council (Harrow); Indian Association of Harrow; and Pakistan Society of Harrow. He would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

Councillor Manji Kara declared a disclosable non-pecuniary interest in that he had been a guest of the following associations: Harrow Iranian Community Association; Harrow Asian Multi-Cultural Association; Hindu Council (Harrow); Indian Association of Harrow; Pakistan Society of Harrow; and Afghan Association of London (Harrow). He would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

Councillor Vina Mithani declared a disclosable non-pecuniary interest in that she had been a guest of the following associations: Harrow Bengali Association; Harrow Asian Multi-Cultural Association; and Pakistan Society of Harrow. She would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

Councillor Joyce Nickolay declared a disclosable non-pecuniary interest in that she had been a guest of the following associations: Harrow Bengali Association; Harrow Tamil Association; and Pakistan Society of Harrow. She would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

Councillor Krishna Suresh declared a disclosable non-pecuniary interest in that he was the Assistant Portfolio Holder for Community and Cultural Services, and had been a guest of the following associations: Harrow Bengali Association; Harrow Asian Multi-Cultural Association; Harrow Tamil Association; Pakistan Society of Harrow; Somali Cultural & Educational Association; and Tamil Community Centre. He would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

Councillor Sasi Suresh declared a disclosable non-pecuniary interest in that she had been a guest of Harrow Bengali Association and Harrow Tamil Association. She would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

Deven Pillay, representative from the voluntary and community sector, declared a disclosable non-pecuniary interest in that he was Chief Executive of Harrow MENCAP, and had been a guest of all the named community associations in the officer report. He would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

113. Minutes

The Chair noted that the final sentence of paragraph 7, page 3 was incorrect and should read:

“The Chair stated that the scoring of applications during the assessment process was in question, and had resulted in a number of discrepancies and many successful appeals.”

RESOLVED: That the signing of the minutes of the meeting held on 11 September 2012 as a correct record be deferred until the next meeting.

114. Public Questions, Petitions and Deputations

RESOLVED: To note that no petitions were received, questions put or deputations received under the provisions of Executive Procedure Rules 51, 49 and 50.

RECOMMENDED ITEMS

115. Application Assessment Process

The Panel received the report of the Corporate Director, Community Health and Well-Being, which set out the proposed format for the assessment of Small Grant and Outcomes Based Grant applications in 2013-14.

An officer explained that, following discussion at the 30 July meeting of the Panel, when the need for more consistency in the assessment process was agreed, three options had been drafted for the Panel's consideration, and Panel members were asked to recommend their preferred option to Cabinet. She outlined each option, and described the advantages and disadvantages for each.

Option 1: Recruit an independent body, from outside of the borough to undertake all of the assessments.

Advantages:

- the assessments may be seen to be more objective;
- an outside body would have no previous knowledge of local groups and assessments would be based on the information contained in the application form only.

Disadvantages:

- this option would come at an additional cost to the Council which had not been included in the budget;

- the assessment of applications would be undertaken without reference or awareness of local organisations and the local context.

Option 2: That a single panel, made up of the same officers, assess all applications that were received.

Advantages:

- this could lead to more consistent scoring;
- the number and range of officers involved would be reduced.

Disadvantages:

- this approach would restrict the involvement of a wide range of officers that may bring useful knowledge to the process;
- this approach reverted to the system previously used, which could be seen to be too insular.

Option 3: Retain the current system, with improved consistency of panel members, i.e. a consistent panel chair for all applications and one nominated member from the relevant service area for all service-specific applications.

Advantages:

- panel members would be drawn from officers who had previously been involved in the assessments and who had now gained experience of assessing applications and using the scoring system;
- a consistent Chair should achieve consistent scoring.

Disadvantages:

- the potential risk of inconsistent scoring remained, although this should be minimised;
- a reduced number of panel members may limit the opportunity for peer challenge.

Panel Members considered the application forms, and asked for clarification on the following points:

- the weighting of questions, in particular question 3D;
- the breadth of scoring options, and whether there was sufficient distinction between categories to allow for thorough assessment and comparison;
- the importance of avoiding ambiguity which could lead to disparities in scoring – ‘barely met’ and ‘partially met’ were highlighted;

- the ability of new groups to meet the criteria for successful bids;
- the process for a consortium bid;
- the ease of use of the online application process.

An officer explained that the different scoring methods were intended to provide greater granularity and assist sound judgements, and that a scoring guide would be provided to panel members with examples for each score so that answers could be assessed and compared in a reliable and consistent manner.

Panel Members considered which of the proposed options would deliver the most robust, transparent and consistent system for assessment, and were of the view that inconsistencies arose in the judgements made by differing panels. It was, therefore, preferable to have panels made up of the same people, but they were also in favour of panel members having service specific experience and for advice being available within the panel. The Panel agreed that allowing observers from the voluntary sector to attend and give feedback was a constructive measure, and there was potential to develop and increase their involvement in the future.

In considering Option 1, the Panel agreed that, while external involvement would provide independent and objective assessment, costs would have to be met from the grants budget, and the Panel's ultimate preference was for all monies to be made available to voluntary groups. The Panel also acknowledged that an appreciation of the local context and local background knowledge was desirable on the part of assessment panel members, and this could be lacking in an external assessor.

Panel Members also stated their belief that assessment panel members should receive training to enable them to carry out the work effectively, and that early nominations from service areas would allow this training to be provided. In response to a comment from an officer that guidance would be provided, the Chair observed that guidance was helpful but not sufficient to fully equip staff to perform effectively in this role, which was why the Panel was recommending training.

In response to an officer's comment that a panel comprising representatives of all service areas would be very large, the Chair commented that if senior managers were involved, they would have overview and experience of several disciplines within their service area. Another Member considered that individuals would be bringing their work and personal experiences to bear when assessing an application, and that specific knowledge was not always necessary when looking at the generic elements of an application.

The Panel also suggested that all panels, including those for Small Grants applications, should comprise at least three Members to ensure a majority decision.

The Panel considered Options 2 and 3 together, and Members' preferences were evenly divided between both options. The Chair, in recognition of the value of both options, asked that Option 2 be redrafted to incorporate the principles contained in Option 3, namely:

- a consistent Panel Chair for all applications; and
- one nominated member from each service area, ideally with knowledge and experience of a number of disciplines within the service area.

The Chair also commented that with regards to disadvantages, bullet point 2 of Option 2 did not revert to the previous system, as claimed in the report, as no scoring had been used previously.

Resolved to RECOMMEND: (to Cabinet) That

- (1) a single panel, made up of the same officers, assess all applications that are received;
- (2) the panel comprises:
 - a consistent Panel Chair for all applications; and
 - one nominated member from each service area, ideally with knowledge and experience of a number of disciplines within the service area.

Reason for Recommendation: To have a robust and transparent assessment process in place for assessing grant applications.

RESOLVED ITEMS

116. Information Update - Update on Community Premises

The Panel received a report providing an update on proposals for the future management of Community Premises, specifically in this instance, the ground floor offices of Council owned premises at 27 Northolt Road, South Harrow.

In response to a Member's comment that the issue of Community Premises had already been reported on in the local press, the Chair stated that as an advisory body, and as the report had been deferred from the previous Panel meeting on 30 July, the Panel had a duty to consider the issue.

An officer described the proposals contained within the report, and the events and consultation that had taken place. Consultation had shown strong public support in favour of community organisations contributing to the cost of Community Premises, and consultation with user groups had indicated that some were interested in exploring options to manage the building themselves.

The building was currently used by 27 voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations for a range of activities, from using the postal address to designated office space.

CARRAMEA, a consortium of 16 organisations based at Community Premises, had been successful in securing funding of £60k from Harrow Strategic Partnership (HSP) and £50k from the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) and this was the foundation for their proposal to manage the building and offer multi-use, flexible office and meeting room space to VCS organisations at affordable costs. They planned to install state-of-the-art IT equipment and employ a centre manager, and hoped to provide opportunities for volunteers and job-seekers in reception and administration duties.

Officers were anxious to ensure the sustainability of the project and develop VCS organisations' capacity for self-sufficiency. The property was currently part of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and as such, would require market rents to be paid. A lease of 10 years was proposed, subject to agreement by Cabinet, with 6 monthly break clauses for either party. The Council would support the project by paying the rent of £18,750 for the first year, with tapered funding for the next two years. CARRAMEA would be responsible for rates, utilities and repairs, and had allowed for these in their business plan. CARRAMEA had been directed to seek specialist advice and support from other charitable organisations.

Officers indicated that aspects of the project could be regarded as a pilot in the light of the Localism Act's provisions for community management of assets.

Members considered the opportunities and risks posed by the project, including:

- long-term viability and security;
- the stability of member organisations;
- the management capacity of member organisations;
- continued funding streams;
- advisability of employing full-time staff;
- the status of CARRAMEA members and non-members;
- the level of investment required to bring the building up to standard;
- VCS organisations' ability to pay for the resource
- the scope for re-negotiating the terms of the lease;
- restrictive clauses in the terms of the lease.

An officer responded to the issues raised and explained that CARRAMEA members were named as registered founding members of the charity, but there was no guarantee that the membership would remain the same; there was no benefit or disadvantage to being a member of CARRAMEA, members were not given preferential rates or treatments. A centre manager had been appointed, but was not full-time. In respect of funding and capacity, CARRAMEA had secured their funding without support or intervention by the Council, and had not been approached but had come to the Council themselves with their project proposal. They had already received requests from VCS organisations for use of the centre, and had taken advice on benchmarking costs. There would be no restrictive clauses in the lease, but any changes would have to be re-negotiated and agreed by the Council.

The Chair expressed her personal opinion that, as the project proposal currently stood, the organisation was inadvertently being set-up to fail. Officers assured her this was not the case, but she observed that greater investment would be necessary to fully meet the needs and costs involved.

Despite their concerns, Members wished the project success.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 9.37 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR NANA ASANTE
Chairman