Responses to Harrow Shopmobility questions to Overview and Scrutiny

Question 1
Have members of the Committee themselves examined the Grant Application Forms? Do they realise how difficult it can be to fully answer some of the questions posed especially those that require answers to be restricted to a certain number of letters?

Response
The Grants Advisory Panel (GAP) have examined the Grant Application Form and made recommendations on the form to the Portfolio Holder for Community and Cultural Services. Forms were reviewed by GAP at their meetings on 13 September 2011 and 9 November 2011. As part of this discussion GAP were aware of the character limit applied to responses on the form. The number of characters was increased this year in light of feedback received last year. To ensure applicants were aware of the character limit this was stated against each question. This format is standard practice on electronic forms issued by funding bodies.

Feedback on the form was also received from voluntary sector representatives in June 2011. These representatives did not identify any negative impact for groups applying for grants. 78 applications were received this year with all organisations able to complete the form as required.

Question 2
Although the grant application form refers to 'Guidance Notes' these are not comprehensive and it is difficult to understand precisely what information some of the questions actually require and in what format it should be provided. Can the Council ensure that in future such forms are written in plain English and not in Council phraseology. Will the Council also issue a glossary of terms used as headings to assist in defining what actually is required?

Response
In addition to the Guidance Notes there were notes against each question in the form to help applicants understand what information was required. To assist applicants in understanding unfamiliar terms there were hyper-links inserted in to the electronic form that provided information on areas such as The Equalities Act 2010.

To guide applicants through the application form, information sessions were provided during the application period. These information sessions outlined what information was required and offered applicants the opportunity to raise any questions they had about the form or the process. Applicants were also able to access one to one support from Harrow's interim CVS (Council for Voluntary Service) service. This support included the offer of an individual review of applications before they were submitted. As a result of this support there appears to have been an overall improvement in the quality of applications submitted this year.

Question 3
The marking system used provides for scores of 1,2, or 3 (only) the more marks the better. It is difficult for us to comprehend how the marks are allocated given such stringent format where there seems to be no middle ground. Will the Council please clarify how this system of marking works and publish that information for consideration. The marking system this year meant that applicants with more than three 'less than perfect' answers did not get a grant unless the appealed.

Response
This years assessment system used a scoring scheme of;
0 – not met
1 – barely met
2 – partially met
3 – fully met

This scoring scheme was introduced as a result of reviewing the system used last year and does allow for a middle ground (which was not available last year). The panel assessment process means that applications are assessed by more than one officer and it is through careful consideration and discussion that scores are awarded. To ensure that panels operate consistently Panel Chairs are provided with guidance notes and meet before the beginning of the process to agree the approach to be used. Consistency is also monitored by the moderation and verification of a sample of assessments by officers not involved in the initial assessment. This year panels were also observed by members of the voluntary and community sector and their feedback on the process was positive.

As can be seen from this years list of final grant awards, successful applicants do not have to achieve a score of 3 against each criteria in order to be awarded grant. The final list of grant awards shows that only two applicants achieved an assessment score of 100%.

Question 4
The application forms are the same for all. It seems that volunteer run and staff many of the smaller organisations. They may be helped by possibly only one administrator, whilst the larger ones may employ more trained personnel, some of which may have specialised in fundraising and will have more expertise when completing forms than smaller organisations.

Are members convinced that this 'one size fits all' approach is fair and equitable to all or should some 'weighting' be given for organisations which comprise almost entirely of volunteers to allow for the difficulties they have in comprehending and completing the forms?

Response
It is recognised that both small and large organisations are competing for funding whether this is through the Council's Main Grants programme or any other funding body. All funding bodies however operate a single application process and do not offer a differentiated process for smaller organisations. This year's application form was designed to be clear and accessible for all organisations with support (as described in response to question two above) available for all applicants.

Many smaller organisations apply for small grants. To assist these organisations in being successful 15% of the budget was ring-fenced to ensure that some of the funding was distributed as small grants. The scoring threshold for awarding grants was lower than that applied to large grants and assessment panels used a proportionate approach to assessing applications in this category. This resulted in 22 grants being awarded to smaller organisations.

Question 5
The service we provide to our users runs on a continuing basis, it is not a 'one-year project'. So we require some continuity in funding. The application form seems to make no distinction between on-going services and single projects. Are Members aware of this: do they consider it is best practice? This is especially important to organisations whose services are equipment based, as without the security of knowing that they have continuing funding scheduled, replacing older and less efficient equipment is almost impossible without this knowledge. Consideration should be given by Council to organisations providing such services and provide appropriate designed forms for these organisations.

Response
The Main Grants Programme is publicised as an annual, open and competitive process. The programme is open to all eligible Third Sector organisations and does not take in to account any previous funding awarded by the Council. Organisations are able to apply for both ongoing activities and one-off projects. This is a discretionary fund and there is no guarantee that funding will be awarded to particular organisations or activity.

The Council does however recognise the need to provide longer-term funding to deliver some services and has therefore approved the Third Sector Investment Plan. This sets out a framework for the delivery of a new commissioning process for 2013/14 to deliver funding over a longer-term than a year for services aligned to Council priorities.

Question 6
Are members aware that where an application is refused and an appeal is lodged the organisation is still required to sign a Service Level Agreement dating from (this year) 1 April 2012 – even though the funding was note agreed until some weeks after that date and the money will be paid until much later. This has greatest impact on smaller organisations providing single services where the monitoring period covers the period prior to the grant being dispersed. Should this system not be tightened up?

Response
Organisations are required to sign an SLA dated 1 April 2012 as the grant funding period is <u>fixed</u> and runs parallel to the Council's financial year (1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013). The guidance notes to applicants advises organisations that projects or activities must be completed in the same financial year for which the application is made and all money must be spent by 31 March 2013.

It is recognised however that final grant awards are less than the amounts applied for and grant notifications are issued after the start of the financial year. Organisations are therefore invited to amend their delivery plans before the SLA

is prepared and agreed. Organisations can amend delivery plans if they feel that the late notification of a grant award is going to have an impact on the planned project or service.

The monitoring of grant awards takes place half-way through the funding period and at the end of the financial year. The monitoring process takes in to account the fact that less funding may have been awarded, or that funding was received later than anticipated. The monitoring process is designed to be a supportive, two-way dialogue between the organisation and the Council. The organisation can use this opportunity to explain and agree variances in their delivery plans or spending profile. The mid-year monitoring system was introduced two years ago and feedback on the process has been invited. Last year seven organisations responded to requests for feedback and this will be used to develop the process next year. Any feedback on ways in which the process can be improved are welcome.

It is also recognised that organisations would benefit from an earlier confirmation of funding, therefore a revised timetable will be proposed for 2013/14.

Question 7
It is intended that a commissioning system should apply in future, discussions about which are in progress at present. Do Members believe this will function more smoothly than the present process? What input will this Committee have in to the process to ensure that this does happen?

The development of the commissioning process has been based on feedback from both Members and voluntary sector representatives. Members of GAP provided their input in to the development of the process at a number of meetings during 2011. Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee also provided comments on the development of the Third Sector Investment Plan at their meeting in December 2011. Officers have also reviewed practices in other boroughs and are working closely with officers in other Directorates to develop this process. It is recognised that the introduction of a new system may be difficult for some organisations however there will be support available to assist voluntary groups in participating in the new process.