

Part A

Report to: Cabinet

Date of meeting: Monday, 28 February 2022

Report author: Democratic Services Manager

Title: Neighbourhood Locality Application Review

1.0 Summary

1.1 This report provides the final comments and recommendations from the Neighbourhood Locality Fund Working Group following a request to review the application process.

2.0 Risks

2.1

Nature of risk	Consequence	Suggested Control Measures	Response (treat, tolerate, terminate or transfer)	Risk Rating (combination of severity and likelihood)
Delays in application process resulting in the final stage of approval being submitted after the project/event has taken place.	An application is refused as it would be deemed to be retrospective.	Add additional control measures to remind individual councillors that an application is waiting for their completion.	Treat	2x2 = 4

3.0 Recommendations

3.1 A new application process to be developed whereby applications are made through the council's website by an external organisation and to be introduced in 2023/24 at the earliest.

3.2 That a revised interim process be introduced for 2022/23 as detailed in paragraph 4.13.

3.3 Officers review alternative ways to access the Members Portal.

Further information:

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Report approved by: Carol Chen, Group Head of Democracy and Governance

4.0 **Detailed proposal**

4.1 At the request of the Mayor a small working group was established to review the current Neighbourhood Locality Fund application process. The working group would comprise:

- Councillor Mark Watkin
- Councillor Karen Clarke-Taylor

The group was supported by the Democratic Services Manager, Democratic Services Officer (LM) and the Digital Development Manager.

4.2 At the first meeting it was agreed that the Labour Group should be approached for a Labour councillor to be part of the working group. The Democratic Services Manager contacted Councillor Bell, Leader of the Labour Group, and he put forward Councillor Richard Smith. Councillor Smith was provided with all the information given to the other councillors and the notes and actions from the first meeting.

4.3 In total the group met on three occasions. The terms of reference were:

- To review the current application processes and to make recommendations on any improvements. Having regard to processes used by other local authorities who have similar schemes, including Hertfordshire County Council.
- To make any recommendations to the Mayor and Cabinet for final approval.

4.4 **Other local authorities**

The Democratic Services Manager contacted local authorities within Hertfordshire and other near authorities. Only two councils had a similar scheme, Hertfordshire County Council and Bedford Borough Council. The Bedford application process had some similarities to the Watford scheme although each ward councillor had their

own budget and they submitted applications through an online form, whereas the Hertfordshire process required organisations to submit applications through the county council's website. Councillor Watkin, as a county councillor, was very aware of the application process for the county council and was able to demonstrate it at the meeting.

4.5 **Survey**

Officers and the members were aware of comments made about the application process and it was therefore considered that it would be useful to carry out a short survey with all councillors in order to gather as many views as possible. The Democratic Services Manager sent an email to all councillors on 21 January. A total of 16 responses were received prior to the working groups last meeting on 10 February. A document setting out the questions is attached at Appendix 1.

4.6 **Using the Members Portal to access applications**

In order to access the Neighbourhood Locality Fund application form it is necessary to use the council provided device and then log on to the VPN and then the Members Portal. It is not possible to access the Members Portal unless on the VPN. Some members have the link to the Members Portal saved on to their desktop or on their usual web browser's bookmarks. The link is also available through the intranet. Once they have opened the portal they need to log in, however this is straight forward as long as they have logged on to the VPN.

4.7 The responses in the survey regarding the submission of applications through the portal were mixed; seven councillors were happy using the portal although some of them recognised that some of their colleagues had difficulties. Six had advised they would prefer an alternative and three had technical issues completing it through the council provided device.

4.8 It was noted during the discussions that since members have been provided with access to their emails through Office 365 there are fewer reasons to log on to the VPN. The working group would like officers to investigate alternative ways of accessing the Members Portal, preferably without having to log on to the VPN. A comment was also made that some councillors will not use the portal and there was also some apathy towards using the council provided device.

4.9 After the forthcoming elections the Democratic Services Manager intends contacting members to ask about their overall use of the Members Portal, which had been introduced as a result of the Watford 2020 review. This will help to identify issues and officers can investigate how they can be resolved.

4.10 **Number of signatures required for an application**

The Democratic Services Manager was aware of some of the concerns about delays caused due to having to wait for individual councillors to sign off applications. Over the last year she has monitored applications and ensured members were made aware of outstanding actions. In order to support the application process if members have identified they are having technical issues and unable to access the portal, the Democratic Services Manager has allowed members to email her their agreement and she has then completed it on their behalf, making notes on the project file as appropriate.

- 4.11 The views about the number of signatures required to support an application were varied in the survey results. There is some concern that if it was reduced to two signatures, where there are wards with mixed political groups, some members may become marginalised and would have no input into the applications or ability to suggest projects. However, there is concern that the requirement for all three ward councillors to acknowledge the application through the portal can cause delays, which is a particular concern if any member is disengaged in the process.
- 4.12 There was some discussion about each councillor being allocated their own funding, similar to the Bedford scheme. However members were concerned that if a councillor was disengaged their funding could go unspent and the local ward would be disenfranchised.
- 4.13 One of the questions referred to the retention of the three signatures and how this should be achieved. Although a number of members felt it should continue to be completed through the Members Portal, the majority felt that an email confirmation should be acceptable, either sent to the lead councillor, the least preferred, or to Democratic Services which was the main preference. The email to the Democratic Services Manager has been used over the last two years and can be continued.
- 4.14 As a result of the comments and the working group's discussions, the members felt the requirement for three signatures should be retained but with some additional steps. The process would involve the following:
- Following the application being submitted by Councillor A, Councillor B would have 21 days to review the application and complete the application through the portal.
 - If Councillor B does not respond within 7 days of the initial email a reminder email will be sent.
 - If Councillor B has still not responded after a further 7 days a second reminder email will be sent in addition warning them if they have not completed within the next 7 days the process will move on to Councillor C. In addition Democratic Services will contact Councillor B by phone to advise

them the application is outstanding and the need to complete the application immediately, providing additional support if required.

- In the meantime Councillor C will be notified that the application has been submitted by Councillor A and is currently awaiting sign off by Councillor B; a further email will follow when they are required to review and sign off the application.

The Digital Development Manager has confirmed it should be possible to set up the reminder emails and enable the application to move on to the next stage if a councillor does not respond within the 21 days.

- 4.15 Following the recent approval of the Leave policy for members it will be necessary to consider how this may impact the application process. At the present time each case will have to be considered on its own merits and discussed with the Group Leader. However, it is not expected this situation is likely to occur very often.
- 4.16 The Democratic Services Manager will continue to support members through the process and if necessary complete application on their behalf subject to an email confirmation having been received.

4.17 **Application process beyond 2022/23**

In reviewing the survey responses and based on the working group's comments, it is suggested that a new application process should be investigated over the coming year and a new system be put in place. The preference is for a scheme similar to the one used by Hertfordshire County Council.

- 4.18 The county council process requires an organisation to complete an application to a county councillor through the county's website. Prior to the application an organisation is encouraged to discuss the application in advance with the county councillor. This ensures the county councillor has had an opportunity to consider an application and provide guidance to the organisation as to whether they consider it acceptable.
- 4.19 A similar scheme for Neighbourhood Locality Fund applications at Watford will need to be developed mindful that there are three ward councillors involved. The scheme will need to ensure there are as few potential delays as possible.
- 4.20 It is not expected that any new scheme will be introduced before May 2023.
- 4.21 Cabinet is asked to review the working groups comments and approve its recommendations.

5.0 **Implications**

5.1 **Financial**

5.1.1 The Shared Director of Finance comments that the Neighbourhood Locality Funds are within the approved MTFs and there are no further direct financial implications arising from this report.

5.2 **Legal Issues (Monitoring Officer)**

5.2.1 The Group Head of Democracy and Governance comments that there are no direct legal implications. Should Cabinet be minded to approve a new process of direct applications any new process will need to publish clear guidance on what may or may not be considered for funding.

5.3 **Equalities, Human Rights and Data Protection**

5.3.1 Having had regard to the council's obligations under s149, it is considered that there are no equalities implications as a direct result of this report.

5.3.2 Having had regard to the council's obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018, it is considered that officers are not required to undertake a Data Processing Impact Assessment (DPIA) for this report.

5.4 **Staffing**

5.4.1 The application process is monitored by Democratic Services to ensure all applications have been processed correctly and provides support as required. In addition, the team arrange all financial payments.

5.4.2 The applications are signed off by the Group Head of Democracy and Governance or her deputy to ensure they meet the application criteria.

5.4.3 The recommendations require officers to look at alternative options and this will be carried out by Democratic Services supported by the Digital Design team, in conjunction with the working group, who have agreed to review any new procedures.

5.5 **Accommodation**

5.5.1 Not applicable

5.6 **Community Safety/Crime and Disorder**

5.6.1 Not applicable

5.7 **Sustainability**

5.7.1 Not applicable

Appendices

Appendix 1 – questions to councillors

Background papers

The following background papers were used in the preparation of this report. If you wish to inspect or take copies of the background papers, please contact the officer named on the front page of the report.

- Survey responses
- Application processes from Bedford Borough Council and Hertfordshire County Council