

Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 3

19 June 2023

Recommendations/Actions

Update on Shared Prosperity Fund

The Committee discussed, in depth, the outcome of the agreement for the fixed yearly allocation for the core United Kingdom Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) in that it had not been received or signed off until the 28th of March 2023, resulting in Bridgend County Borough Council (BCBC) not commencing projects and schemes in year 1 as planned.

Following detailed consideration and discussions with Officers and the Cabinet Member, the Committee made the following Recommendations:

1. While the Committee acknowledged that starting a scheme or project before written confirmation of any Government Grant Funding carried some risk, Members reflected on whether the process undertaken by Cabinet and Officers had taken into consideration the risk of the UK Government not permitting the rolling of year 1 funding into year 2. Members therefore recommended that Cabinet consider whether, on balance, starting the process of these projects before funding was received was a justified risk moving forward and also provide reassurance as to how they could ensure it will be considered in future decisions, as the Authority would not want to receive any less than the 8.3% announced by the United Kingdom (UK) Government.

Officer's response

The Corporate Director for Communities agreed and advised that a discussion be tabled for the Cabinet and Corporate Management Board to consider the risk based approach suggested by Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 3 with regards to commencing Grant Funded Schemes ahead of confirmed funding and whether this could be considered for future schemes. The outcome of this discussion will be reported back to the Committee.

2. The Committee furthermore recommend that a way of providing short term interim funding (including potentially reserves) for projects that have a high degree of certainty of Grant Funding be explored and consideration be given to mechanisms for managing risk and allowing projects to commence where Grant Funding had been agreed in principle, but not yet formalised.

Officer's response

The Corporate Director for Communities to discuss with Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change a potential interim funding arrangement for high certainty grant funded schemes, which may allow them to proceed ahead of formalised

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agreement letters. The outcome of this discussion will be reported back to the Committee.

Additional Information

Following detailed consideration and discussions with Officers and Cabinet Members, the Committee requested:

3. That Members be informed of the outcome, as soon as possible, of whether or not the request made by a number of Authorities to roll over year 1 funding into year 2 had been granted.

Officer's response

The Corporate Director for Communities will notify the Committee of the outcome of the United Kingdom Governments decisions to roll over year 1 Shared Prosperity Fund into year 2 when received.

4. Information that the Director of Communities offered regarding engagement with community groups to establish the level of demand for Bridgend Local Investment Grant Funding and assistance required. This was in response to Members' concerns regarding responsibilities and reliance on volunteers and organisations to deliver the projects and Officers' explanations that part of the UKSPF was to build resilience and economic development, targeting communities that may not normally have access to that type of funding.

Officer's response

The Group Manager - Economy, Natural Resources & Sustainability will provide a written brief outlining the engagement activities that will take place with local community groups to ensure that they understand the grants that are available and are assisted in applying. This is to be distributed to the Committee Members.

Forward Work Programme (FWP) Update report

The Committee discussed the draft outline FWP and Members expressed concern in relation to the Communities Directorate having sufficient resources, commenting upon the level of Directorate budget savings made over the last 10 to 12 years, the level of unfilled vacancies, the outstanding responses to Scrutiny Recommendations, information requests and delays in reports being available. The Committee stressed that this was not a criticism of the Director or any staff.

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Following detailed discussions, the Committee made the following recommendations:

1. Members welcomed their position within the Committee to challenge and scrutinise correctly, however were unified in feeling that they recently had not had the scope and opportunities to consistently do so. Members expressed severe concerns and the need for greater understanding of the structure, resources and pressures within the Communities Directorate to better understand the position as to any potential issues and to seek assurances that the Directorate has the resources to deliver what it is required.

The Committee agreed that this concern was paramount and recommended that an extraordinary meeting be requested, before the Committee scrutinises any further reports from the Directorate scheduled on the draft outline FWP. They requested that that the Chief Executive, Leader and Cabinet, and appropriate Finance Officers be invited to this extraordinary meeting with the explicit aim of seeking assurances and, if needed, working together to identify potential solutions.

Officer's response

The Extraordinary meeting requested was held on the 25 July 2023 and the Leader, Cabinet, Chief Executive, Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change, Chief Officer - Legal & Regulatory Services, HR & Corporate and the Corporate Director for Communities were invited as requested.

2. The Committee require assurance that the proposed topics scheduled in the draft Outline FWP are achievable before further consideration and agreement of their FWP.

Officer's response

Noted by the Corporate Director for Communities and the reports outlined on the Forward Work Programme were considered achievable within the timeframe as set out at that time.