Committee Members Present: Councillors L Neal (Chairman), T Lewis (for part of the meeting), B Bernard, B Duffin, D Fulcher, C Gould and G Minshull

Apologies: Councillors K Kiddie and J Wilby

Substitutes: Councillor T Palmer (for J Wilby)

Cabinet Members in Attendance: Councillors M Edney and M Wilby

Other Members Councillors P Broome, C Easton, J Overton and B Riches

Officers in Attendance: The Director of Growth & Localism (T Horspole), the Communities and Democratic Services Manager (L Mickleborough), the Community Capacity Manager (K Gallagher) and the Scrutiny Officer (E Goddard)

1143 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 8 April 2015, were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.
NEIGHBOURHOOD GRANTS

Following a brief introduction by Cllr M Wilby, the Communities and Democratic Services Manager presented her report which sought to assist the Scrutiny Committee in their review of Neighbourhood Grants. The Committee was reminded that in May 2014, Cabinet had agreed to replace the Neighbourhood Board structure with a scheme which would enable members to award grants to support initiatives in their own areas. Officers were pleased to report that much positive feedback had been received regarding the scheme during the first year of the new approach to working, and that local members had worked together with Neighbourhood Chairmen to support many worthy, local projects and had made a real difference in the community. Members were asked to consider the findings in the report and to identify any potential improvements to the current ways of working.

It was noted that the word ‘not’ in paragraph 2.8 of the report under Criteria for funding was an error. This sentence should read, “At present, the ground rules prevent the funding of proposals where the grant recipient has received South Norfolk Council funding for the same activity within the previous 2 year period”.

The Committee discussed the timescales for processing successful grant applications. Officers advised that, in contrast to average turnaround times of 84 days with the old Neighbourhood Fund scheme, Member Ward Grants were mostly being processed within hours of acceptance, and that Community Action Fund (CAF) Grants were taking an average of 15 days to complete. Members learned that this was, in part, due to a change in emphasis requiring members to ensure that the necessary framework was already in place.

The Committee was pleased to note that very few applications for grant funding had been rejected and this was mostly attributed to local members and Neighbourhood Chairmen liaising closely with officers to ensure that the required criteria was being met. Officers commented that in some cases, where potential projects did not qualify under the criteria for Member Ward grants or CAF funding, members were offered help in finding alternative funding from other sources. There was some discussion around the Council’s decision not to support projects or schemes where Norfolk County Council funding had been withdrawn. The Communities and Democratic Services Manager clarified the position, adding that South Norfolk Council could only consider funding projects which are sustainable in the future. One Neighbourhood Chairman commented that requests for funding to pay rents and salaries also did not fit the criteria, but that members would always try to assist those groups in other ways.

Neighbourhood Chairmen, Cllr Overton and Cllr Riches were invited to share their experiences of the scheme during its first year, and the recently appointed Neighbourhood Chairmen for Tas Valley, Cllr Easton and Tiffey Valley, Cllr Broome were asked to advise the Committee of their thoughts and experiences of the scheme so far.

Cllr Overton addressed the Committee and advised of the various projects in his area which had benefitted from grant awards, including the provision of a defibrillator in Shotesham, a footpath link in Beccles, funding to enable the completion of a football clubhouse at Yelverton,
an archive book of Poringland, funding for Brooke Scouts, the archiving and display of 1950’s photographs of Seething Airfield, and an open day at Caistor Roman Town. Members were advised that, although members had promoted the scheme through social media and in parish magazines, it had been difficult to spread the awareness of available funding to local groups during the previous year, but reassured the Committee that word was starting to spread and that local groups were already making enquiries regarding their projects for the current financial year. Cllr Overton stressed the importance of liaising with local members regarding potential projects and also encouraged members to consider the pooling of funds where there was an overlap and where a project might benefit a wider area. He strongly felt that a spread of funding over the neighbourhood area was the best way to ensure fairness.

Cllr Riches spoke of his experiences during the past year, advising the Committee that projects funded for village halls in Starston and Bressingham had been well received and had made a huge difference to local people. Members were informed that although enquiries were considered from Market Towns, these were usually re-directed to instead seek funding through the Market Towns Initiative (MTI). In response to a question regarding the promotion and advertising of the scheme, Cllr Riches advised the Committee that he had made local groups aware of available funding through parish magazines and by word of mouth.

Cllr Easton addressed the Committee and advised members that he had, so far, funded one application in his area for the Saxlingham Scouts’ hut floor, and had received a few other enquiries. He stated the importance of managing the expectations of potential applicants, the need to encourage parishes to work together, and spoke of the varying needs, experience levels and enthusiasm of different community groups and parish councils.

Cllr Broome echoed the importance of local members working together, which had achieved the provision of a defibrillator in his area. Members were advised that several meetings had been arranged and interests had been noted for potential projects, including the provision of equipment for Hingham Village Hall.

Members discussed the need for parish councils and local groups to be made more aware of the funding available for projects. It was suggested that Neighbourhood Chairmen should be encouraged to speak to parish councils directly in order to promote the available funding but, after discussion, it was felt that this was too onerous a task and it was accepted that this should instead be the responsibility of the local members. It was agreed that members should not limit their advertising to parish councils but should speak to community groups and seek out opportunities to provide funding in their local areas. Cllr Duffin advised the Committee that, as an employee of Community Action Norfolk, he was in contact with many local groups and village hall users in South Norfolk, and that he would be happy to assist with the promotion of the scheme.

In response to a member’s query, it was agreed that a document be circulated to members to clarify the details of the Member Budget grants and the CAF. It was also noted that two villages, Ashwellthorpe and Tacolneston had been moved from the Tiffey Valley Neighbourhood Area into the Tas Valley Neighbourhood Area, and officers agreed to amend the map on the Council’s website accordingly.
The Committee questioned the New Homes Bonus (NHB) and asked whether this was still likely to be available to provide funding in the future. The Director of Growth & Localism advised that the future of the NHB was not yet clear but that he thought any response to future consultations on NHB the Council would be supporting options that can demonstrate the relationship between growth and providing benefits to local communities.

The Chairman summed up the discussion and thanked the Neighbourhood Chairmen for their contribution to the meeting. Members of the Committee were pleased with the progress of Neighbourhood Grants and recognised that it was providing a real benefit to local communities. It was felt that no changes or improvements were necessary to the current ways of working.

It was then:

RESOLVED

...to note the Neighbourhood Grants Report and its findings.

1145 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME AND THE CABINET CORE AGENDA

Members noted the Scrutiny Committee Work Programme and the Cabinet Core Agenda and were encouraged to contact the Scrutiny Officer with any ideas for future items.

The Scrutiny Officer stated that, since the introduction of Cabinet Policy Committees, much work regarding the development of policies had been undertaken and that it might be useful for the Committee to look further into this. She advised that she had arranged a meeting for the Chairmen, Vice Chairmen and lead officers of the policy committees to discuss the various work programmes and to identify any areas which might be of interest to the Scrutiny Committee, and any policies which the Committee might want to review in the future.

(The meeting concluded at 10.47 am)