

Recommended processes for the operation of Area Committees

Introduction:

After the first year of the Area Committee meetings taking place, the Area Committee Review Working Group were tasked with considering how the meetings went, looking at what went well and what improvements were required. This paper sets out their recommendations on the operation of Area Committees funding.

Funding:

Area Committees are among the few committees in the Council which are quasi-executive which means they have the power to make decisions that could involve allocating funds. The decisions must be taken openly, impartially, with sound judgement and for justifiable reasons.

It is therefore very important that a robust process is established and adhered to ensure transparency, as well as to obviate issues of apparent bias which can arise when committee members are also involved in organisations bidding for funding.

To enable this there needs to be an element of impartial officer assessment. However, it is important to ensure that outcomes of decisions on what are and are not funded sit squarely with members.

This can be achieved using a three-stage process in which members decide on outcomes but not on individual applications. The table below sets out a proposed process:

Stage 1	<p>At the March meeting, members agree a short list of priorities they want to support in the forthcoming funding year, as a means of inviting bids.</p> <p>The Committee may decide to use the funding exclusively for a proactive theme/ambition or open the scheme up for external organisations to make bids or a combination of the two.</p> <p>Priorities need to be detailed enough to enable officers to evaluate bids against priorities without officers needing to exercise much or any decision-making authority beyond a technical assessment of the contribution each bid would make to the priority relative to other bids.</p>	<p>Actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Application forms and guidance notes should make it clear what the required priorities are.• The full details of the funding priorities, to be publicised in the form of direct emails to organisations known by Swale Borough Council (SBC), press releases and internal member updates.• A deadline will be set for getting applications in for each round of meetings and this must be adhered to so that the checking process can take place. Bids presented on the night will not be accepted as they will not have gone through the three-stage process.
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<p>Stage 2</p>	<p>Officers to carry out an assessment of bids against the criteria established by members and using a methodology previously agreed by members.</p> <p>Committee members will have the opportunity to challenge the scoring before the options report is finalised.</p>	<p>Actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Policy & Engagement Officer (PEO) to check that the form has been correctly completed and supporting quotes attached. • PEO to pass to the relevant officer/head of service to check that there is no cross over with other work being carried out by SBC or other organisations. Also, to check that there are no SBC financial/officer resource implications. Comments to be fed back to the PEO by an agreed deadline. • On the close of the application period, PEO to compile a report and pass to 3 impartial officers to carry out scoring process against the priorities. • The outcome of the scoring will be passed to Committee members to give them the opportunity to challenge the scores. Any challenges will go through a review process carried out by the PEO and one officer not involved in the scoring process.
<p>Stage 3</p>	<p>Once any review has been completed the final report will be presented to members at the December meeting and voted on en-bloc.</p>	<p>Actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A report prepared by the PEO setting out the results of the assessment of the bids to be published with the agenda 5 clear working days before the meeting. • Officers will recommend options to vote on, these will depend on numbers of applications received but an example is set out below: <p><i>Option 1 – the four top scoring applications receiving 100% of their bid.</i></p>

		<i>Option 2 – the six top scoring applications receiving 80% of their bid.</i>
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In addition to a clearly articulated and transparent process for determining individual bids in any given year, there is also a need for a general set of pass/fail criteria to be applied to all bids in any year, in order to ensure that only bids which meet the general intentions of the funding go forward for assessment. These criteria need to be agreed by members but should include both general restrictions on the type of activities which can be funded and any more specific exclusions such as ensuring organisations or activities are not double funded from council budgets.

Ideally there should be one set of guidance notes and one application form which will cover the general criteria and also include separate sections for the individual Area Committees priorities.

The principle aim is to prioritise external agencies for funding that deliver something in the area boundary, however each Area Committee during stage 1 of the process will decide if it will accept internal bids from members for funding.

The only realistic alternative to a system such as this, should members want to be able to vote on individual bids, is that any member with an interest which could give them an apparent bias, will have to recuse themselves from all such votes. In addition to unnecessarily disenfranchising members, this also runs the risk that meetings becoming inquorate for these agenda items.