

**Shropshire Council
Communities Scrutiny Group
Task & Finish Group Workshop
Environmental Maintenance Grant Programme**

Workshop Part 1

**Purpose of the Task & Finish Group –
Terms of Reference (Appendix 1)**

The purpose of the Task & Finish Group has been agreed as making recommendations on Shropshire Council's future approach to its Environmental Maintenance Grant programme, e.g. the programme is stopped, the programme continues as is, or the programme is redesigned and continues.

To inform this work the design and the delivery of the current programme – e.g. its budget, the application process, any monitoring and evaluation and the overall outcomes achieved by the programme should be understood.

Specifically, the Task & Finish Group will be looking for evidence that the programme -

- provides value for money for the council, i.e. it fulfils the benefits of the Highways service
- adds value to the council's core environmental maintenance work, i.e. investing in the programme results in overall savings
- generates social value within communities
- makes a difference to the residents of Shropshire

The budget for the EMG programme is derived directly from Highways revenue budgets. Members of the Group will want to consider if there is an opportunity for further investment in highways maintenance if the grant programme was to cease, and what the impact of this might be on local communities.

These considerations are being made in the context of Shropshire Council's extremely challenging financial position. Members of the Group will want to consider if continuing the grant programme is a sustainable position at a time of declining revenue budgets, and what added, social and preventative impact is enabled through the investment of the grant.

Background

Shropshire Council's Highways and Transport team have operated the Environmental Maintenance Grant for the last 7 years. The programme has operated successfully and is seen as delivering a number of benefits –

- Local provision of services at a reduced cost
- Flexibility and responsiveness through service delivery at a local level
- Removal of contractual and administrative process from Shropshire Council
- Local determination of services and requirements
- Recycling of the Shropshire pound

The recipients of the grants are overwhelmingly rural parish councils and a small number of town councils. There is one community group using a grant to enable local residents to carry out litter picks and environmental tidy-ups.

In previous years the programme had been limited to existing recipients, i.e. the opportunity to apply for funding was not widely advertised. In 2016 it was agreed that the 2017/18

programme would be opened up to all town and parish councils. This resulted in many more applications being received and the available budget being greatly oversubscribed. The value of individual approved grants (capped at £3,000) was reduced significantly to enable all eligible applications to be supported.

Feedback from local councils that have received an EMG has been that a review of the design and delivery of the EMG programme is needed. Their general view is that the grants are welcome, valued and a practical way for Shropshire Council to support locality working.

There is an alternative view, which is that the current grants system doesn't achieve a critical mass to make community and service impacts and generate financial efficiencies.

Finally, there is the view that as Shropshire Council is still in the challenging position of budget reductions and increasing expenditure in areas of social care, it simply cannot afford to continue to fund the EMG programme and the activity could be funded directly by local councils.

To understand the value and impact of the EMG programme, it was agreed that it would be scrutinised through the Communities Scrutiny Committee and consequently a Task & Finish Group established and a Workshop organised.

Examples from other councils (Appendix 2)

As part of the evidence we have collated, we have looked at 44 unitary, county, borough or district councils to see if they have specific programmes in place to support local environmental maintenance works.

We found that -

31 had no details of a local environmental maintenance grant programme

13 had funding programmes that can be spent on maintenance/highway works as part of a range of activities along with a number of other options

2 had dedicated grant programmes for EM works – Devon and Surrey

1 council provided 'annual funding pots' for recommendations made by elected members to support initiatives in their areas – including highways/EM work - Gloucestershire

Description of the current programme EMG programme paperwork (Appendix 3)

Summary of programme activity 2010 – 2017

Year	Core budget	Actual total grant value of grants awarded	No of grants awarded
2010/11	110,000	109,006	65
2011/12	110,000	103,072	63
2012/13	110,000	107,991	65
2013/14	110,000	106,877	62
2014/15	110,000	114,052	65
2015/16	110,000	101,392	57

2016/17	110,000	152,043	72
2017/18	110,000	152,000	96

Summary of the 2017/18 applications
Appendix 4

96 local councils made an application and received funding. The eventual total budget allocation was £152,000 (an increase of £42,000 on the core budget of £110,000). The total value of the applications was £200,843, a 32.13% increase on 2016/17.

The programme was oversubscribed by £48,843 (@£152k)... or £87,343 of the original £110,000. Therefore 75.68 % of the original application values was agreed and funded.

Summary of the activity funded by the grants in 2017/18
Appendix 5

Through all the applications, a total of 407 different activities will be delivered in 2017/18.

The top 5 activities were –

- Tidying grass - mowing/ strimming grass in amenity spaces – 109 councils
- Clearing leaves/debris from grids – 41 councils
- Straighten and clean road signs – 41 councils
- Litter picking – 39 councils
- Controlling weeds – 36 councils

The bottom 5 activities were –

- Street sweeping - 10
- Clear vegetation from culverts – 9
- Maintain closed churchyards – 9
- Pointing of visibility fences – 5
- Cleaning toilets – 4

Office time spent administrating the programme

Using conservative figures it has been calculated that the cost of officer time spent administering the grant programme using the current approach is between £3,500 and £4,000 per annum. These costs would increase if a greater level of monitoring and evaluation of the grant funded activity was carried out.

Collated questionnaire feedback
Appendix 6

Questionnaires were sent to all town and parish councils regardless of whether or not they had received an EMG. Responses from 49 councils/organisations were received.

Summary of the feedback received in the questionnaires
Appendix 7 (to follow)

Summary of interviews with a small number of grant recipients Full report Appendix 8 (to follow)

Interviews have been carried out with a small number of clerks of councils that receive EMGs.

Organisation represented	Name
Various rural PCs across south Shropshire	Jayne Madeley
Various rural PCs across north Shropshire	Melanie Joyce
Ellesmere Town Council	Mandy Evans
Cleobury Mortimer Town Council	Matt Sheehan
Church Stretton Town Council	Danny Chetwood
Various rural PCs across central and south Shropshire	Rebecca Turner

Headline feedback on the application process

There were mixed views on the complexity of the application process - some found application process easy, and others found it difficult. It was felt that first time applicants were more likely to find it hard and maybe the process is less complicated for smaller grants.

It was felt that the timings and timescales on grant approval and payment was out of sync with budget setting – some precepts are set before Christmas.

It was also felt that firmer guidelines were needed on how the grants are to be spent.

Headline feedback on the effect of the grants

Through the interviews, it was established that clerks thought that the funding supports local budgets, provides savings that are 'hidden' e.g. work on ditches will reduce surface flooding and reduce maintenance costs, and adds to the 'contentment of communities'.

The fact that local people are employed to deliver the EMG funded work was seen as a positive, as was activity such as gritting on pavements in outlying areas, which was seen as a making a saving to Shropshire Council as a centrally located gritter didn't have to be sent out to very rural locations.

Finally, it was noted that some local council budgets are set with an assumption that the EMG will automatically be awarded, and that grants are being used to fund activity that is not on highway land.

Financial comparison Appendix 9 (to follow)

Members of the Group will want to understand how the cost of the activity delivered through the EMG programme compares to the cost of similar activity delivered by the council's term maintenance contractor. e.g. approximation of contract costs, local agreements and costs and current Highways processes.

Discussion session with local council clerks and councillors and others involved in the delivery of EMG funded activity

Representatives of local councils, a community organisation and a contractor delivering lengthsman activities will be joining the Workshop for a 90 minute question and answer and discussion session.

Organisation represented	Name	Link to EMG programme
Various rural PCs across south Shropshire	Eileen Reynolds	Clerk to PC that uses EMG
Various rural PCs across south Shropshire	Jayne Madeley	Clerk to PC that uses EMG
Various rural PCs across north Shropshire	Melanie Joyce	Clerk to PC that uses EMG
Ellesmere Town Council	Mandy Evans	Clerk to PC that uses EMG
Cleobury Mortimer Town Council	Matt Sheehan	Clerk to PC that uses EMG
Church Stretton Town Council	Danny Chetwood	Clerk to PC that uses EMG
Church Stretton Pride of Place	Trevor Halsey	Clerk to PC that uses EMG
Various rural PCs across central and south Shropshire	Rebecca Turner	Clerk to PC that uses EMG
Environmental Maintenance Officer for Munslow, Diddlebury & Culmington.	Gary Trim	Delivering EMG funded lengthsman activity Also a councillor for PC that uses EMG

Workshop Part 2

Reflection on the available information and the evidence heard

Members of the Group will want to discuss what they have heard so far. Members will also want to share their initial thinking as it relates to the purpose of the Workshop and the future of the grant programme, i.e. stop, continue as is, or continue with change.

Further exploration of the options

Building a shared understanding of the pros and cons of each option and reaching an agreement on which will be recommended and the implications of this.

Design of the recommended option and actions related to this

The grant programme is stopped – when would this happen, would there need to be a transition period?

The grant programme continues without change – what would be the justification for this?

The grant programme continues with change – what would a redesigned programme look like?

Agreement on recommendations to the Communities Scrutiny Committee

The next meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee is on 27th November. It is proposed that a report is then taken to Cabinet on 20th December.