

**Communities Overview Committee
Environmental Maintenance Grant Task & Finish Group Workshop
16th November 2017**

Cllr Cecilia Motley, Cllr David Evans, Cllr Viv Parry, Cllr Simon Harris, Cllr Paul Milner, Cllr David Turner

Chris Edwards, Steve Brown, Ffion Horton, Nikki Cheek, Tom Dodds, Danial Webb, Kate Garner

Apologies – Cllr Robert Tindall

Workshop Part 1 notes

Issues and queries raised

Tension between highway revenue budget reducing whilst EMG top sliced amount stays the same.

Strategic scales of economy versus locality delivery opportunities.

How are TPCs spending the grant, e.g.
Is it being spent efficiently?
Is it being matched?
Is it being programmed over 1 year?

Is the EMG saving SC funding on the planned programmed work? Is the saving actually to the term maintenance contractor?

Is the EMG saving SC money on the responsive works?

Volunteers have more flexibility when doing things like litter picking as they will cover all areas – not be limited or constrained by ownership issues – a lengthsman will be constrained by land ownership issues.

Issues of concern we've raised – may not be clear in our guidance leading to lack of clarity.

The work done through EMG is not taken out of the term contract, therefore it doesn't reduce the cost of the term contract.

Therefore however, does the EMG add value to the way the contract is delivered? Does it result in better outcomes? Could this still be the case without the EMG?

The importance of good communication between parishes and the Highways teams (Inspectors/technicians) – when it's working it works really well.

Health & Safety issues, clarity needed.

Feedback from interviews with EMG applicants

Eileen Reynolds, Jayne Madeley, Rebecca Turner, Gary Trim, Trevor Halsey, Danny Chetwood, Matt Sheehan, councillor from Billingsley PC

Apologies – Mandy Evans

Eileen Reynolds – exceptionally rural parishes vulnerable to flooding. 2 local lengthsman working over the parishes able to respond to issues such as the need for gritted roads early in the morning - people getting to work, children getting to school.
There is good communication between the lengthsman, the parish clerk and Shropshire Council. Lengthsman is able to respond very quickly to issues that could become serious by taking preventative action.

Q. any suggested changes?

A. More budget!

Church Stretton Pride of Place Group

Trevor Halsey : group of volunteers started after F&M to help to attract visitors back to CS – used to get grant via CSTC, not gets it directly from the EMG; litter picking, street sweeping, station gardens, planting
Group relies on the EMG – only source of income – has enough funds for 2 more years, but will run out of money after that.
The group is going over and above both the SC works and the CSTC works – adding a lot of value.
Need a regular source of income.

Rebecca Turner– Clerks for 5 parishes - small to medium councils – precept £5k - £25,000k

Atcham – maintenance, viability splays, pavement between bridge and Salop Leisure, it is a gateway into Shrewsbury, improve it as a gateway to Shrewsbury
Play areas, street lighting, support other organisations such as local play areas
Get good value for money and better customer services from small organisations
Timeline for the grant is difficult – precept set before the grant is aware
Aware of current arrangements, what are the current standards
Is insurance level appropriate? £5m?
Do give more budget to the work but smaller parish less able to do so
Rebecca:– Atcham PC – ‘highways work’ on an area that is a gateway into Shrewsbury
Great Ness – maintaining a cemetery owned by SC
Good VFM by using local contractors – standard of customer service is greater
Could do with knowing what the maintenance contract standards are to help with resident queries.

Gary Trim – lengthsman

No expectation with safety, bollards, bridges, culverts, weld bridges back up, should be immediately done, when requested the materials not available from SC,
Lots of emails thanking for their work
If he doesn't do it then who will
Let things get to a desperate point before work is done
Will provide materials at own cost, needs a flow of materials
Can't dispose of the material he's collected – can't they put it in the tip and therefore should they not be able to put it in the same place of the SC waste is put
Seeing works that need to be done, e.g. repairs to metal work on bridges - that are a hazard – SC saying that they can't do these works – so these works aren't 'nice to have' – they are resolving hazards - a safety issue.
Has used his own materials FOC to resolve issues

Jayne Madeley: 2 lengthsman over 3 parishes - used to be able to involve people from Oak Farm (not currently)
Lots of reporting back to JM who reports it on to relevant services
Contented communities – little jobs that SC will never be able to do, get done and this increases community well-being.

DPPC doing more works than originally agreed in the application – adding value.

Cleobury Mortimer Town Council

Matt Sheehan

Feels the loss of Hedge 2 Hedge gangs

EM person partially funded by grant – about 40% of the EM budget from the grant

Partnership working, alternative potentially cheaper option than contractor gang

MS is listed as a environmental penalty officer

Potential for collaborative works with other councils

Taken things away but didn't replace - £5-6k spent but only received £1,900

Communication – will contact H&T to inform of the work they have done – great working relationship

Church Stretton Town Council

Danny Chetwood

Has dedicated environmental team, grant tops up the team. It is 4-man team, parks, environmental work, they deliver the grant work, much less of the cost of the work funded by the grant than Cleobury but figures not known

Quickly and efficiently deliver on site reactions

Value added – residents know the team, team know the area, seamless deliver, quickly, efficiently, don't have to complain to get a reaction

Reduction on the grant this year but no discussion on what the grant will no longer fund

Time sheets taken – not requested by SC

Record of assets in each area and which ones are managed by who – discussions can be had on how added value can be given

Stops a lot of complaints coming through to the council

Question & Answer session

Viv: How responsive are lengthsman to issues such as trees on footpaths?

Jayne: ROW are not part of the EMG (not pavements)

Danny: CS EM team looking after the growth at the bottom of the lime trees

Paul: Would the parishes EM work continue if the budget stopped/reduced?

Jayne: Ditton Priors pC would not continue once it has spent all of its remaining grant.

Rebecca: Parishes already topping up grants/going over and above the core grant – and having to meet the shortfall of other services.

Matt: Adding value at every opportunity (volunteers from JCP) – sees the grant as SC supporting the parishes to do over and above and generate social value

David T: Obvious that there is a huge range of activities being undertaken through the EMG.

Eileen: Lengthsman paid £10 per hour – own tools, own vehicle - obviously a voluntary contribution from him and VFM.

David E: CATC tenders every three years for its EM contractor – EMG is topped up by the TC (about to re-contract)

Jayne: The PCs also put out a tender saying what they want doing for a fixed price.

Jayne: VFM – would like to know what SC wants from the TPCs to create VFM

Steve: We recognise the VFM that is created, just has to balance with the budget challenges.

What advice would TPCs give to us about how to go forward?

Rebecca: Link well-managed places to the appeal of Shropshire as a place to live, work and play in (EG Strategy)

Matt: Recognise that the people here today are the proactive ones – wanting to go over and above and really support SC – think about how these people contribute to SC's outcomes.

Gary: If every TPC was given £3k they would probably find a way to spend it. If no TPC got the EMG, no work would get done. Focus the grant on the important issues – be more focused in what SC wants to see done.

Danny: Blurred lines in CS about who should be doing what – would welcome a new discussion on this to create clarity and avoid duplication.

David: Different expectations and aspirations in the parishes around the county

Jayne: Can tell the difference between a parish with a lengthsman, and one that doesn't – the PCs will work with whatever funding they are given – the PCs have stuck only to Highways Maintenance works only.

Cecilia: If PCs were given less money would they just 'manage' this and still keep on going? Majority of people thought they would.

Confirmed that CIL cannot be used to replace the EMG funding.

Confirmed that the EMG is a grant not a subsidy.

Rebecca: Concerned that a reduction in the grant would not fit well with reducing works. e.g. the cost of cutting a cemetery could not be easily reduced.

Matt: The person within the TPC who looks after the EMG is almost an additional employee for SC

Trevor: If you want VFM, make the TPCs utilise volunteers to add lots of value to the paid for work

Rebecca: Concern that PCs would not be able to co-ordinate volunteer groups

Kate: Could they be able to organise themselves?

Matt: CM only been in the scheme for a couple of years.

EMG is used to contribute to the cost of employing a LM (PC pays the rest)

EMG is giving SC the option of using local people to deliver works instead of sending people from Bridgnorth to CM.

CM PC is very proactive around EM – the EMG is used as part of a package of resources

CM PC could work in partnership with local parish councils

Very small feedback loop in reporting and resolution

The EMG is important to the PC – sees SC supporting the PC

Danny: CS has an EM team 4 people – added value – residents know the EM team; the EM team knows the area.

This year the grant reduced, but there was no conversation between SC and CSTC about what was not going to be done. CSTC has managed this itself – timesheets are kept, but not asked for by SC. Could there be a discussion about the assets within CS to establish who is going to do what and how?

CSTC values the grant – thinks that it could show VFM – (DC doing some work on this)

Workshop 2 – discussions on what was heard

Importance of communication and co-operation between the TPCs and local Highways teams around EM issues and resolving these.

Health and Safety issues – can't be ignored, but there is a mixed understanding.

The role of volunteers in local environmental maintenance

Conclusions

Do the EMGs do 2 things? How do these balance?

1. the actual activity the grant funds
2. The way the grants make the councils feel, e.g. supported by SC, giving a sense of empowerment.

The added value generated by the EMG?	The actual activity
Localism agenda, which SC has always valued	Small acts are making a big difference in very rural areas
Match funding as a criteria – sharing the burden of the cost	There are some activities that are more valuable to us than others – streamline the grants to these?
A well maintained environment supports the vibrant economy that Shropshire values	Much more clarity needed through the guidance
The generation of social value through the activity	What does good look like? What is best practice? Need for case studies.

What would we need to continue?

A set of criteria would be a very wise addition in order to ensure the grant goes to those who genuinely need it. We need also to include something to the effect that the grant cannot be used to top up core budgets but must be used for discrete maintenance purposes. Recipients also need to report on the use to which they have put the maintenance grants on an annual basis to ensure they are meeting the criteria. We may have to think about who will be signing off the annual reports .

Much greater clarity in the guidelines

Review the criteria for eligible activity

The role of volunteers – what would we want them to do?

More accountability.

Match funding

Assume that it is unlikely that more TPCs will apply for funding if the activity criteria is limited and the application eligibility criteria changes.

Take out the larger market towns, population more than 10K

Offer training on insurance issues

Use the eligible activity criteria to shape a future programme and therefore, who would want to apply?

Rewarding the proactive areas – working with the willing

Link the eligible activity to the activity that is important to the Highways teams

Make match funding a desirable criteria

Impact of stopping the programme

What's the cost of this?

What message do we give to communities about how we value them and how we work in partnership with them?

The activity that is currently being delivered will stop (not all of it, but a lot and probably where it matters most in the most rural areas)

An opportunity to have the relationship with local councils that means we can have a conversation with them about other things.

An opportunity to demonstrate that Localism is not lost, but difficult in times of austerity.

The following recommendations were confirmed at the workshop:

Shropshire Council's Environmental Maintenance Grant programme should continue with the following changes to its design and delivery –

i. Changes to eligible activity

The activity eligible for funding from the programme should be the activity that brings most added value to the delivery of Shropshire Council's Highways term maintenance contract. Highways officers should advise what this activity should be.

ii. Application eligibility

The eligible applicants should be limited to Shropshire's rural town and parish councils. Urban town councils a population of over 10K should be ineligible to apply.

iii. Value for money and incentivising added value

The grant should not be used to top up core budgets but should be used for discrete maintenance purposes. Applications should be scored according to how they demonstrate value for money and provide added value to the core funding and activity. Examples of VFM and added value should be –

- Councils demonstrating that they are committed to their effective delivery of environmental maintenance works in their areas by contributing to or matching grant funding.
- Demonstrating that councils are working together to provide economies of scale and reduce costs, e.g. multiple parishes let 1 contract.
- The design of activity that clearly creates social value, the appropriate use of volunteers to add value to the core activity

iv. Design of the funding programme

Funding decisions should be made for a 3 year period, e.g. 2018/19 – 2020/21. This will reduce bureaucracy associated with the application process and provide more time for monitoring and evaluation of applications. It should also enable local councils to let 3 year contracts that offer greater value for money with confidence. It is recommended that the EMG programme is reviewed in year 2 and a decision then made about the future of the scheme, from the end of year 3. If the decision is made to end the EMG programme at this point, a 12 month notice period should be given.

v. Annual value of the funding programme

The annual value of the programme should be £75,000. There will be no increase to this amount.

vi. Value of individual grants

The maximum value of individual grants should be £1500 p.a. There should be no increase to this amount.

vii. Application criteria, guidance notes and monitoring.

The guidance notes accompanying the application process should be reviewed and rewritten to ensure that there is absolute clarity about the design and delivery of the grant funded activity. There should be a particular focus on health and safety. This should also include a more robust approach to monitoring the funded activity through the completion and submission of an annual report from each recipient, and a process for this should be designed and implemented. A process should be put in place to ensure appropriate signing off of the annual reports.

viii. Consultation on proposed changes to the EMG programme

A recommendation should be made to Cabinet that it approves the delivery of a 6 week consultation period in early 2018 on the recommended changes to the EMG programme based on previous Committee Overview Committee reports.

ix. Delegated authority

A recommendation should be made to Cabinet to delegate authority to the Head of Infrastructure and Communities in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport to implement the revised EMG programme detailed specification following the consultation.

These recommendations will be made to the meeting of the Communities Overview Committee on 27th November 2017.