



Co-operative Councils

Innovation Network

COVID-19

North Hertfordshire District Council

Community Support Fund: Continuing to Build Community Capacity

A Community Support Fund to ensure community groups were able to continue essential services to residents throughout the pandemic

Context

North Herts is a relatively rural district with a large older population, and the pandemic produced a significant challenge around getting food to those who were shielding or unable to leave the house, as well as issues around loneliness. The District is also home to a number of deprived areas, and the pandemic had a clear impact on the ability of many of the disadvantaged to afford basic needs. The Council felt equipped to address these issues by the strong relationships its Community Engagement colleagues had already built with many community groups, as well the pot of funding already designated for major incidents. It had also been strengthening its ability to engage and conduct grant panels digitally, which presented new opportunities to undertake this activity.

Development

The Council developed the idea of a Community Support Fund for groups put under increased pressure by the pandemic, and who were providing support in one of three key areas: food and essentials; mental health support; domestic abuse support. Two funding options were available: a one-off grant open to application from any community group; and funding agreements – on approach from North Herts District Council (NHDC) – to known providers who offer wide provision across the district, including rural areas. The Policy and Community Engagement Team began developing a policy paper to lay out these criteria. This involved discussions between Councillors, senior leadership, Officers and community groups, to ensure that the paper was well-informed, and the policy could be launched successfully. The ultimate aim was to ensure the survival of community groups who provide essential services for residents, because there could be wider harm to communities if these groups do not survive the pandemic. The project therefore exemplified values and principles of social

responsibility, solidarity, and concern for community and its sustainable development, all of which are integral co-operative values.

Implementation

The Community Support Fund went live in May once it had gone through an approval process at NHDC. Throughout the process, stakeholders were involved in various ways, including: Council staff and Councillors assessing grant applications; community groups being contacted for required information, or to advise whether a one-off grant or longer term funding agreement would be more suitable. The activity represents values of community leadership, whereby the Council helped the community contribute to local outcomes. It also represents the principle of social partnership – strengthening cooperation between communities and Councils through finding new models for meeting priority needs and reducing inequality.



Review

The Fund has granted financial help to a number of community groups which have provided services for the elderly and the young, families and individuals, and for towns and villages alike. It has enabled the continued delivery of vital support around food and essentials provision; services to help combat mental health issues and isolation; and helping those who find themselves in domestic abuse situations. The Council has scheduled a new Community Engagement and Co-operative Development Panel via video conferencing in the coming civic year. The panel will openly engage with the community to act as sounding board on a range of community, commercial and enterprise ideas and projects to benefit the entire North Hertfordshire community. These meetings will further the commitment to these co-operative values and principles. The project demonstrated how policy development and decision-making could be streamlined and expedited within the Council to assist those in need during a crisis. This desire to get aid to community groups quickly prompted a simplification of the grants application process – striking a balance between making applications easy to fill out, while eliciting enough information to ensure a thorough evaluation process. The Council noted that some chasing was required for further information; in hindsight it would need to be clearer about what information is need and

when, while retaining a simple application process. The Community Support Fund continues to take applications on a rolling basis

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