

Community Renewal Fund – Process Review June 2021 for Business Board

1. Background

The Community Renewal Fund (CRF) was announced by Government in the March 2021 Budget when the prospectus was issued, subsequently the application form, technical guidance and FAQ's were published on 17 March 2021. The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) is appointed the Lead Authority for the CRF and is therefore responsible for coordinating the bidding process, administering any award and payment of funding, plus monitoring of the funds once allocated from Government to the Combined Authority.

An open call was launched on the CPCA website on 31st March 2021 for CRF applications from local organisations which closed on 7th May, the Strategic Funds team used the internal online CRM called HubSpot to manage the applications. Assessments and Evaluations both internal by CPCA Officers and external through independent evaluation specialist consultants were carried out on the 24 applications received, those 24 were then assembled and put into ranked order based on those evaluation scores, next the Business Board contributed with further evaluation scoring of the top 12 ranked applications to further refine towards a shortlist of suitable strong applications. From the combined assessments and evaluations as noted above, a final shortlist of 7 applications was assembled to fit within the £3million value limit for each District and those 7 applications proposed to The Mayor and Combined Authority Board Members on the 9th June 2021 for their approval to be able to submit to Government.

The Mayor made the decision on 11th June 2021 after consultation with the Combined Authority Board members via a Mayoral Decision Notice. The final shortlist of applications for the Combined Authority area was submitted to Government on the 17 June 2021, before deadline on the 18th June. Government are expected to announce successful allocations to each lead authority against those bid shortlists in July or August 2021.

2. Purpose of Review

The Business Board requested a brief review be undertaken to pull together lessons learned from the CRF submission process. It should be acknowledged that the team had now completed its submission to government for CRF and that whilst it will be helpful to reflect and identify lessons learned any proposals for process improvement from this review can only be applied to any new funding streams in the future.

3. Methodology

The review has been a quick exercise and has not involved any other organisation who may have also had to submit bids to government, it has focused solely on the work carried out by the CPCA Team on its own process and submission.

For this report the team did look at the recent review carried out for the Business Board on the Local Growth Fund and the recommendations that review put forwards.

We are aware that improvements can always be made to current processes, but it should be borne in mind that some funding streams come with criteria, guidance and requirements that will always need to be reflected in any process developed by the CPCA.

4. Review

Taking the lessons learned from the LGF Review the team looked at how they have been applied to the CRF process and the potential for further lessons to be learned from the CRF process. The LGF process Review recommended the following:

- a. Development of a pipeline of prospective projects
- b. Expression of Interest being lighter touch and review the scoring matrix once criteria and guidance has been given to LEPs by central government
- c. The Full Application –detailed Application be produced which is based on the Treasury Green Book approach to business case development.
- d. Entrepreneur Panel (EAP) – expansion of the Panel to include of Section 151 officer and give the panel a more formal role in the appraisal process
- e. External Appraisal – expand external due diligence to bring in additional external or internal support around the financial appraisal of projects in terms of affordability.

The review of the CRF process has indicated that several the recommendations from the LGF Review have been applied to CRF; those being:

- a. A lighter touch EOI which included several gateway pass/fail questions
- b. A more detailed full application – although this was prescribed by government in terms of the content and the format
- c. External due diligence which included a financial & delivery review of organisations bidding

The CRF process also highlighted other areas which could be improved for future funding schemes, those being:

- a. Review the Assurance Framework - create flexibility within the framework to enable processes to be built around funding opportunities for tight bidding windows offered from Government, plus looking at additional Board or delegated routes to getting sign off.
- b. Identify and maintain a list of organisations and key individuals to receive updates on funding opportunities
- c. Clear and agreed advertising campaign strategy to be developed for future funding opportunities. Engage with the Business Board experts for support and a steer on marketing campaigns
- d. Where possible time should be given to creation of information gathering purposes of the application forms. It is acknowledged the time given was not sufficient from government, but peer review would have assisted. Workshops and web sessions for applicants wishing to apply for funding expansion of the pre-screening questionnaire to include more detail for potential inclusion on future pipeline
- e. Training on the funding scheme, scoring and how to evaluate should be put in place with a team of volunteer internal officer evaluators. Recruit external team to offer independent view on applications
- f. Re-tender for external due diligence and fund support
- g. Assurance framework review to ensure clarity and flexibility to allow the BB to have a role in all funding schemes within the CPCA
- h. Explore how to make best use of technology to support the application processes, evaluation and how to capture real-time inputs from assessors and Boards

A common theme from both reviews is the need to re-tender for external due diligence support as required when each scheme launches.

5. Conclusion

There are 8 areas listed above from the CRF process which are for potential improvement or learning points for consideration at the next round of bidding activity or any future delegated funding from government.

Officers will undertake to review those improvement learning points when any new funding rounds announced.

It should be acknowledged that the Business Board continues to have a robust and transparent process for gathering, evaluating and approving projects through its Local Assurance Framework, but the Board should remain open to being more agile and reactive to the new future funding opportunities by keeping processes and the Local Assurance Framework under review.