

Committee(s) Natural Environment	Dated: 16 May 2024
Subject: Enjoying Green Spaces and the Natural Environment – 2023-24 grant awards and funding criteria review	Public
Which outcomes in the City Corporation’s Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?	Diverse Engaged Communities, Leading Sustainable Environment and Vibrant Thriving Destination
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	No
If so, how much?	N/A
What is the source of Funding?	N/A
Report of: David Farnsworth, Managing Director of City Bridge Foundation Report Author: Tilly Holmes, Funding Officer, Central Funding and Charity Management Team	For Decision

Summary

The Enjoying Green Spaces and the Natural Environment (EGS) funding theme was initiated in August 2016 and forms part of the Central Grants Programme (CGP). For the 2023-24 round, the Central Funding and Charity Management Team (CFCMT), formerly the Central Grant Unit, assessed 16 eligible applications for £73,333 available funds. Six organisations have been awarded funding for projects that will take place across the different Opens Spaces overseen by the Natural Environment Division.

The current grant criteria have been reviewed and officers propose several changes which they hope will better align the fund with departmental strategies and ensure the fund is as effective as possible.

Recommendations

Members are asked:

- To note the allocation of grant aid for 2023-24 approved under delegated authority to the Natural Environment Chairman and Deputy Chairman
- Approve the proposed amendments to the current *Enjoying Green Spaces and the Natural Environment* funding criteria as referenced in paragraph 12.

Main Report

Background

1. On 18 July 2016, your Committee agreed the Enjoying Green Spaces and the Natural Environment (EGS) funding stream. This grant scheme awards funding between £2,000 and £15,000 to community, voluntary and charitable groups under four sub-themes:

- Connecting communities with their green spaces
- Improving the conservation value of the green spaces
- Improving our knowledge of the biodiversity of the green spaces
- Improving mental health through the use of green spaces

See **Appendix 1** for full eligibility criteria.

2. Your Committee delegated authority to the Natural Environment Director in consultation with your Chairman and Deputy Chairman to agree the award of grants.
3. The Enjoying Green Spaces and the Natural Environment funding stream (EGS) is overseen by CoLC's Central Funding and Charity Management Team (CFCMT).
4. EGS opened to applications last year in August 2023. The closing date for applications last year was 6th November 2023. Sixteen submissions were received with a total funding request value of £212,417.
5. Applications and applicant organisations underwent due diligence checks by the CFCMT to ensure compliance with the established eligibility criteria.
6. Twelve of the applications were eligible and underwent a full assessment by grants officers. Those applications were reviewed and assessed by the Natural Environment Director and other senior Natural Environment officers at the EGS Officer Panel on 28th February 2024.
7. The funding award recommendations were approved by the Chairman and Deputy Chairman under delegated authority.

Current Position - 2023-24 Awards

8. The Central Grants Programme has an annual City's Estate budget of £220,000 split across three grant programmes. EGS receives an annual budget of the £73,333 to allocate to eligible applications. In 2023-24 funding of £73,635 was awarded over six grants, a list of these grants can be found at **Appendix 2**. The overspend on this programme has been covered by funds written back in year and allocated to the programme.
9. Those organisations that were unsuccessful have been informed and feedback has been offered to all unsuccessful applicants to ensure they have a better chance of being successful in the future.

Review

10. The grant scheme has been operating for eight years and officers (including the EGS Officer Panel) have reviewed the current criteria, taken into consideration all applications and sent a brief questionnaire to all applicants to the programme. Highlights include:

- 27 questionnaires were returned
- Most applicants had prior knowledge of the fund and/or heard about it from Corporation officers
- Most successful applicants had sought out and received pre-application advice, and some unsuccessful applicants had not
- Several applicants suggested that having an outcome by the end of the year/early the following year would better suit the way they programme activities
- An applicant made a comment that they found the website wording 'Grants of up to £20,000 may be considered in exceptional cases' misleading.

11. The CFCMT have reviewed the criteria for the programme and aligned it to updated Natural Environment Strategies. A focus group was set up with the Natural Environment Leadership Team to feed into the criteria review. The group assessed the following:

Geographic eligibility – Located in the Square Mile, City Gardens are eligible for CILNF funding (also distributed by the CFCMT). The CILNF has a healthy budget and has larger possible maximum awards, so it is recommended that City Gardens are no longer included under EGS.

Sub-themes – The sub-themes were reviewed against the Natural Environment Vision and four strategies on access and recreation; culture, heritage and learning; nature conservation and resilience; and community engagement. As well as providing some greater specificity under the 'Connecting communities with their green spaces' sub-theme, a new sub-theme 'Providing opportunities for children and young people to learn and have fun,' is recommended. It is recommended that all applications meet the sub-themes 'Improving the conservation value of the green spaces' or 'Improving our knowledge of the biodiversity of the green spaces,' in addition to at least one of the remaining sub-themes ('Connecting communities with their green spaces,' 'Providing opportunities for children and young people to learn and have fun,' and 'Improving wellbeing through the use of green spaces').

Timeline – In the applicant survey, several organisations expressed that having an outcome by the end of the year/early the following year would work better for how their organisations programme activities. Grants assessors would also benefit from changing the dates for EGS to better manage the CFCMT workload. It is recommended that the funding stream opens annually

at the start of June, closes in mid-September, with the panel held annually in early December.

Maximum grant – With a small budget, the allowance for ‘exceptional projects’ at a £20k maximum for those cases is inappropriate and inequitable.

Reapplying for funding – To further limit organisations becoming dependent on this funding stream, it is recommended that organisations which have already received three years’ funding will be subject to a fallow period of 12 months before they can apply to the fund for the same work.

12. Proposed changes to funding criteria

- Remove City of London Gardens from ‘Where we fund’
- Amend the current sub-themes to better align with Departmental strategies
- Add another sub-theme; ‘Providing opportunities for children and young people to learn and have fun’
- Change the timeline so that the fund opens to new applications annually at the start of June, closes to annually in mid-September, and the panel is held annually in early December
- Remove the option that applications ‘up to £20,000 may be considered in exceptional cases’
- Add the rule that organisations who have already received three years’ funding will be subject to a fallow period of 12 months before they can apply to the fund for the same work.

13. In addition to the proposed criteria changes, officers will be making a number of procedural changes in response to feedback. Those include: communicating more explicitly both the pre-application advice offer and the need for the appropriate licencing/permissions in advance of funding being released; working more closely with Natural Environment officers; publishing previously funded projects on the website; and focusing on ensuring those who were unsuccessful receive helpful feedback.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

14. **Corporate Plan Implications:** EGS helps deliver aims and outcomes of the Corporate Plan 2024-2029, particularly Diverse Engaged Communities, Leading Sustainable Environment and Vibrant Thriving Destination. It also supports all the main objectives of the Natural Environment Department’s strategies, including:

- Encourage respectful use of our open spaces; visitors will respect one another and care for the open spaces
- Provide welcoming places that people from all backgrounds feel comfortable to explore
- Build advocacy and encourage people to learn about, care for and protect the natural world around them

- Developing communities of interest who support providing a programme of activities which deliver wide-ranging benefits for people including wellbeing, nature connection, confidence, understanding and involvement
 - To protect and enhance the biodiversity of our open spaces
 - Cultivating a sense of deep pride in our spaces amongst users.
15. **Security Implications:** All EGS applications are considered in consultation with the Natural Environment team to ensure the safety of the public.
16. **Financial Implications:** EGS sits under the Central Grants Programme which is funded on an ongoing basis, all grant assessment and management costs are covered by CFCMT budget.
17. **Equalities and Resourcing Implications:** CFCMT assess and manage all grants according to best practice, ensuring Equity, Diversity and Inclusion considerations are built into each stage of the process.

Conclusion

18. This report summarises the discussions of the Enjoying Green Spaces and the Natural Environment (EGS) grants assessment panel. It also presents recommendations in relation to the funding criteria to ensure EGS aligns with departmental strategies and is as effective as possible.
19. Terms of reference can be found at **Appendix 3**.

Appendices

- Appendix 1** – Enjoying Green Spaces and the Natural Environment – Criteria with amendments
- Appendix 2** – Enjoying Green Spaces and the Natural Environment – Awards 23-4
- Appendix 3**– Enjoying Green Spaces and the Natural Environment – Terms of reference

Background Papers

- Enjoying Open Space and the Natural Environment granting funding theme report, Open Spaces & City Gardens, 6 June 2016
- Implementation of Grant Theme – Enjoying Open Space and the Natural Environment, Open Spaces & City Gardens, 18 July 2016
- Enjoying Open Spaces and the Natural Environment - Award of grants and review of grant aid criteria, Open Spaces & City Gardens, 8 April 2019

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