



<b>Subject:</b>	Timeframe for Reviews (Strategic Partners and Fuel Hardship)
<b>Date:</b>	Tuesday 7 March 2023
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	David Sales, Director of Neighbourhood Services, CNS
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Kelly Gilliland, Neighbourhood Services Manager, CNS Margaret Higgins, Lead Officer – Community Provision, CNS

<b>Restricted Reports</b>	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some time in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

<b>Call-in</b>	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues</b>
1.1	The purpose of this report is to update members on timeframes for, and/or progress to date, re. taking forward reviews of funding awarded to Strategic Partners for Covid Response/Recovery (20/21 and 21/22) and for Fuel Hardship Fund (22/23).
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to note the update in relation to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• timescales for, and current work being undertaken, in relation to the review of funding allocated to Strategic and Thematic Partners (20/21 and 21/22) – with a final paper planned to come through to committee in August 2023,</li><li>• anticipated timescale for receipt of final monitoring returns from delivery partners in relation to implementation of the Fuel Hardship Fund scheme,</li><li>• officer recommendation that the All Party Cost-of-Living Task Group (to be established and which will include member and officer representation) should review relevant collated information regarding same and make recommendations on next steps as to any further review and verification that might be required.</li></ul>

<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main report</b>																																	
	<b><u>Background</u></b>																																	
3.1	It was agreed at P&C committee in August 2022 (ratified at Council in September) that ‘a review of strategic and thematic partners’ would be undertaken and within the minute ‘that a list of the current/proposed Strategic Partners be circulated to the Members of the Committee.’																																	
3.2	It was then further agreed at SP&R committee in November 2022 when the Fuel Hardship Fund scheme was being developed that ‘a report be submitted to the Committee within the next two months providing an update on the work being undertaken to review the strategic and thematic partners.’ Then in December 2022, members requested that ‘the report on the use of strategic partners, which was due to be presented to the Committee early in the new year, would also include information on the oversight measures in place for the Fuel Poverty Hardship Scheme.’ Furthermore, in January 2023, SP&R committee agreed that ‘an All-Party Cost-of-Living Task Group be established, to discuss the challenges and learnings of the scheme, that would be considered should a similar scheme be required in winter 2023.’																																	
	<b><u>Strategic and thematic partners</u></b>																																	
3.3	Following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated pressure to readily respond to the needs of communities and communities of interest, Party Group Leaders identified and agreed a number of area-based strategic partners, and thematic partners, that Council would award relevant DfC/central government and BCC funding to, and work in partnership with, to address the needs of local residents during the initial lockdown period(s). Tables 1A and 1B provide a summary of the funding allocations to the respective partners.																																	
	<b>Table 1A - 2020/21 – Strategic (area) Partners including allocations made)</b>																																	
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	Southcity Resource and Development Centre	£129,370.20
	<b>Total</b>	<b>£388,110.60</b>
<b>West</b>	Greater Shankill Partnership	£147,868.00
	Upper Anderstown Community Forum	£582,522.00
	Greater Shankill Community Council	£10,000.00
	<b>Total</b>	<b>£740,390.00</b>
<b>Total</b>		£2,229,444.60

**Table 1B - 2020/21 – Thematic Partners (including allocations made)**

Bytes	£32,173.00
Embrace / Nicras	£25,000.00
Forward South	£8,000.00
HereNI	£3,050.00
Red Cross	£50,000.00
Solas	£5,000.00
Store House	£18,000.00
Boring Wells - Food Larder	£14,910.00
Transgender NI	£2,000.00
West Belfast Foodbank	£17,131.00
Womens Aid	£10,000.00
Heart Project	£22,500.00
Age Friendly Partnership (via Engage With Age)	£20,000.00
Belfast and Lisburn Womens Aid 1	£10,000.00
Mens Advisory Partnership	£5,000.00
Belfast Migrant Forum (paid via NIACRO)	£15,000.00
Here NI	£7,500.00
CaraFriend	£7,500.00
Transgender NI	£7,500.00
Heart Project (counselling organisations)	£40,000.00
Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid	£28,000.00
We are Pangs	£16,500.00

SVDP	£75,000.00
Salvation Army	£75,000.00
Community Food Providers (£2k x 45 groups)	£90,000.00
North Locality Group (via Ashton Community Trust)	£24,000.00
South Locality Group (via LORAG)	£24,000.00
East Locality Group (via Eastside Partnership)	£24,000.00
West Locality Group (via Upper Springfield Dev Trust)	£24,000.00
Colin Locality Group (via Colin N'hood P'ship)	£24,000.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£724,764.00</b>

3.4

Throughout the subsequent recovery phases from Covid, and ongoing changes and easing of restrictions, further funding allocations were made to strategic and thematic partners (via officer reports to committee and members then discussing and determining final approach re. same).

**Table 2A - 2021/22 – Strategic (area) Partners (including allocations made)**

<b>East</b>	EBCDA	<b>£155,920</b>
<b>North</b>	Intercomm	£53,700
	Loughview Community Action Project	£53,700
	North Belfast Advice Partnership - Vine Centre	£53,706.67
	<b>Total</b>	<b>£161,107</b>
<b>South</b>	Forward South	£37,456.67
	Southcity Resource and Development Centre	£37,456.67
	LORAG	£37,456.67
	<b>Total</b>	<b>£112,370.01</b>
<b>West</b>	Upper A'Town Community Forum	£174,120
	Greater Shankill Partnership	£46,470
		<b>£220,590</b>
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£603,516.68</b>

**Table 2B - 2021/22 – Thematic Partners (including allocations made)**

Salvation Army	£90,000.00
SVP	£90,000.00
South Locality Group	£10,500.00
East Locality Group	£10,500.00
West Locality Group	£10,500.00
Colin Locality Group	£10,500.00
Age Friendly Partnership	£7,500.00
Belfast and Lisburn Womens Aid	£71,500.00
Mens Advisory Partnership	£16,500.00
Belfast Migrant Forum (paid via NIACRO)	£6,000.00
Here NI	£3,000.00
CaraFriend	£3,000.00
Transgender NI	£3,000.00
Heart Project (Counselling organisations)	£16,500.00
Parent Rooms	£6,000.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£355,000</b>

3.5

The DfC allocation of Social Supermarket Funding in 2021/22 and 2022/23 was also offered out to current strategic and thematic partners as a starting point with those partners, and elected members, encouraged to make officers aware of any other groups who might be interested in applying to deliver support under this scheme. Table 3 below outlines the funding allocations made, and to which groups.

**Table 3 - 21/22 & 22/23 – Strategic (area) and Thematic Social Supermarket Funding allocations**

2021/22 allocations		2022/23 allocations	
<b>North</b>		<b>North</b>	
		North Belfast Advice Partnership	£11,323.33
		Loughview Community Action Project	£11,323.33
		Ashton Community Trust	£11,323.33
<b>South</b>		<b>South</b>	
Southcity	£20,000.00	LORAG	£7,896.67
		Southcity	£7,896.67

		Forward South	£7,896.67
<b>East</b>		<b>East</b>	
EBCDA	£20,000.00	In this Together	£16,432.50
		Larder	£16,432.50
<b>West</b>		<b>West</b>	
Upper Andersonstown Community Forum	£30,000.00	Blackie River Centre	£36,700.00
Greater Shankill Partnership	£20,000.00	Greater Shankill Partnership	£9,780.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£90,000</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£137,005</b>

**Approach to review**

3.6 In terms of the request to review strategic and thematic partners, it is important to note that given the selection of these partners had been a political decision, it would be inappropriate for officers to undertake such a review.

3.7 Therefore, in response to the request from members to conduct a review alongside recommendations made by AGRS-Audit Governance and Risk Services unit within Council, officers have commissioned Cavanagh Kelly to undertake an **independent financial audit** in relation to the allocation of Covid-19 related funding awarded to strategic (area and thematic) partners (as well as via the micro and medium and kitchen equipment grants schemes) during 20/21 and 21/22.

3.8 The main purpose of the audit is to ensure that all funds allocated during this period, and via the various schemes set out above, were spent in line with Letters of Offer/ Funding Agreements, as well as in line with guidance on public spending which was shared with delivery partners at the time. In tandem, officers are also collating and reviewing monitoring returns and supporting information to ensure that key targets and actions were achieved.

3.9 The financial audit has been underway since September 2022 with initial work focusing on:

- i. A desktop review of 110 sample claims from projects resulting from open calls for Micro, medium, or Kitchen Equipment Grants (KEG) - up to a maximum value of £5,000
- ii. A desktop review of 3 sample claims from projects arising from Direct Award Thematic funds with values between to £10,000 to £18,000.

- iii. Site verification visits to 12 Strategic (area) partnership organisations who received Covid-19 funding.

Timescales

3.10 A draft interim report has recently been received (late-Feb 23) by Cavanagh Kelly for officers' consideration and feedback which will include views from Departmental finance and Corporate AGRS colleagues. A final report relating to this exercise is expected by the end of March/early May. The focus of this initial work is linked to the DfC funding allocations.

3.11 In addition, we have requested that the team within Cavanagh Kelly expand their work to include completing verification of an additional 9 Strategic area funding awards, and 10 Thematic awards, allocated from Council funding, to provide a complete picture.

3.12 It is anticipated that we will have all required information from both of these audit exercises, alongside the internal review of monitoring returns, by the end of June and therefore be in a position to bring a composite, comprehensive report through to Committee in August 2023.

Fuel Hardship Fund

3.13 In order to ensure appropriate audit and assurance processes were applied to the delivery of the Fuel Hardship Fund, all identified strategic partners were issued with a range of supporting documents and guidance notes including; project proposal application form, BCC voucher protocols, client data capture sheet, monitoring s/sheet template and monitoring return template. The guidance notes in particular, provided detailed information on the scope and nature of the scheme including an overview of the aims of the scheme, the eligibility criteria as agreed by members, guiding principles, the expected duration (Dec22-Mar23), and an outline of payment terms including eligible, ineligible and restricted costs. The client data capture template issued to partners covered personal details, proof of eligibility and the need to retain supporting evidence as well as recording the voucher allocation noted against utilities). Members should note that as part of the guidance issued, the deadline for strategic partners to submit final monitoring returns on the Fuel Hardship Fund is 6<sup>th</sup> June 2023.

3.14 Officers met the with nominated delivery partners as a collective group on a number of occasions over recent months including prior to the scheme commencing on 30<sup>th</sup> November 2022, and again on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2022. Officers have also been in constant contact with partners throughout the delivery period – particularly between Dec22-Feb23 providing clarity, answering queries and to ensure the Council website was kept update in relation to scheme availability at

	<p>a local level. An initial post-delivery review meeting with partners was held on 20<sup>th</sup> February 2023 to commence the formal process of gathering initial feedback.</p>
3.15	<p>Members will note that the verification and vouching of the Fuel Hardship Fund cannot therefore occur until after receipt of final monitoring returns from partners up to 6<sup>th</sup> June. NB. It has still to be determined whether this will be completed in-house by officers (very much dependent on staffing capacity and capability), or externally by an independent consultant.</p>
3.16	<p>Given the member request at SP&amp;R committee in Jan 2023, that an All-Party Cost-of-Living Task Group be established, it is proposed that cross party nominations are sought post-Council elections in May via the PGL forum. The Members' Task Group, supported by officers, will consider the collated information and feedback gleaned via the returns (as noted previously due to be submitted in early June 2023 by the delivery partners) and agree next steps in relation to further verification, vouching and review.</p>
	<p><b><u>Financial &amp; resource implications</u></b></p>
3.17	<p>Costs of securing the services of Cavanagh Kelly to undertake the financial audit of Covid-19 funding allocations to strategic and thematic partners during 20/21 and 21/22 have been met from within existing budgets within CNS. It is envisaged that any vouching and verification and review requirements needed in relation to the Fuel Hardship Fund will also be met by utilising existing CNS budgets in 23/24 (staffing and/or financial).</p>
	<p><b><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications and Rural Needs Assessment</u></b></p>
3.18	<p>Considered independently as part of the design and implementation or all related funding schemes in addressing Covid response, Covid Recovery and Fuel Hardship.</p>
<b>4.0</b>	<b>Appendices – Documents Attached</b>
	None