

REVIEW OF GRANT PROVIDED TO CITIZENS ADVICE RURAL CAMBRIDGESHIRE

Committee: Operational Services Committee

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[U153]

1.0 ISSUE

1.1 To consider the outcome of a review undertaken as to whether to continue awarding a grant to Citizens Advice Rural Cambridgeshire.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 Members are requested to:

- (i) Cease the availability of grant funding available in 2020/21 and future years; and
- (ii) Approve the recommendation to directly deliver the service as set out in 5.12 of this report.

3.0 BACKGROUND

3.1 The Council is committed to ensuring that all residents have access to services that meet their needs. It is recognised that the district is evolving, and service must be in place that reflect these needs.

3.2 The Council has a track record for delivering against the needs of its residents and this can be evidenced through its approach to multi-agency community hubs, drop-in services and the establishment of referral pathways. Strategies are in place to build resilience and embed effective engagement into Council services by widening the scope of advice and support services being provided by the Council.

3.3 The Council currently provides grant funding (through a Service Level Agreement (SLA)) to Citizens Advice Rural Cambridgeshire (CARC) to support the provision of free, confidential, impartial and independent advice to residents for a wide range of issues; benefits, money advice, consumer advice, employment advice and relationship advice. In 2018/19 a grant of £47,346.80 was awarded to CARC.

3.4 This grant is not guaranteed to CARC beyond 2019/20. A decision to award a grant is undertaken on an annual basis.

4.0 REVIEW

4.1 A review has been undertaken to establish whether a future grant to CARC is effectively meeting the aims of the Council to deliver an excellent service that meets the needs of an evolving community.

4.2 In conducting the review Officers have considered the issues that were dealt with by the Council in 2018/19 and the outcome of the CARC SLA for 2018/19.

CARC 2018/19 Outcomes

4.2.1 In 2018/19 CARC assisted 2,712 East Cambridgeshire residents. CARC has identified that Ely, Littleport, Soham and Burwell make up 60% of the residents utilising their services.

4.2.2 CARC dealt with 8,652 issues, citing the prominent issues as debt and benefits.

- 2,165 of the debt issues were dealt with
- Debt prevention work such as financial capability training was provided to 239 residents
- 352 residents were assisted with family and relationship issues
- 312 residents were assisted with employment issues

Matters dealt with by the Council in 2018/19

4.2.3 In 2018/19 the Council assisted 14,478 residents with a range of council tax and housing benefit queries. The Council provides support and advice to residents on a wide variety of issues, including (not limited to):

- Debt, budgeting and benefits
- Emotional support
- Assistance with Homelink applications and Cambridgeshire Local Assistance Scheme applications
- Discretionary Housing Payments
- Grant applications for acquiring white goods and furniture
- Providing financial support with utility and energy bills

4.2.4 In 2018/19 the Council's Housing Team dealt with 5,449 enquiries which included assisting 561 residents that attended the Housing drop-in sessions. A further 61 residents attended Tenancy Support drop-in sessions. The Council's Customer Service Team assisted 95 residents on matters related to Universal Credit Assisted Digital Claims.

4.2.5 The Council works jointly with organisations that provide specific support such as Red2Green (mental health), CGL (drug and alcohol) and P3 (floating support). In addition the Council has referral pathways established with organisations such as the Bridge Project who provide debt and support advice.

4.2.6 The Council continues to lead the establishment and development of community hubs in Ely, Littleport, Stretham and Earith Traveller Site. In 2018/19 the community hubs assisted 78 residents with housing issues, 204 residents were assisted with mental health issues, 131 residents received tenancy support, 74 residents received floating support (long term support which enables and supports residents to live independently; practical and emotional support), and 79 residents received support from a range organisations including the Rosmini Centre, Sanctuary Housing, Ely Foodbank, Change Grow Live (previously known as Inclusion) and Christians Against Poverty.

4.3 Assessing the services being delivered by the Council and the outcome of the 2018/19 CARC SLA, enabled Officers to develop an options appraisal. A summary of the options appraisal is provided at Appendix 1 of this report.

5.0 RECOMMENDATION

5.1 This section expands Option 3 of Appendix 1 (direct delivery) in more detail.

5.2 The Council's Housing & Community Safety Team delivers a holistic service that seeks to meet the needs of those most in need. Following a full and thorough review it has been established that the service offered is very much in line with the advice and support that is currently being provided by CARC. Further, the review has proven that there is currently overlap and duplication of service.

5.3 The Council's Housing & Community Safety Team has ensured that it is well positioned to respond to the impacts of Universal Credit (Housing & Community Safety part-fund a post in Customer Services specifically for Universal Credit queries) and the Homelessness Reduction Act by recruiting to new posts and working closely with the Rosmini Centre (located in ECDC offices to provide advice and support on immigration, social and employment and legal aid issues).

5.4 The Council's Energy Efficiency Officer (part-time) now forms part of the Housing & Community Safety Team; this enables advice and support to be provided to those in need.

5.5 'Think Tank' sessions were carried out by the Housing & Community Safety Team. The purpose of these sessions was to identify whether there was a duplication of services being provided. The following was identified as duplication:

- Debt advice (e.g. income and expenditure assessments, personal budget plans, liaising with providers to reduce payments, arranging affordable payment plans, referrals)
- Employment advice
- Benefits advice (financial capability training, budgeting support, advice for claimants and appeals)
- Relationship/mediation advice
- Rent advice
- Housing advice
- Immigration housing rights and eligibility
- Pension advice
- Utilities advice (e.g. combining debts)

The Council participates in local campaigns and attracts external funding into the district. Further, the Council is able to refer and signpost clients requiring specialist assistance (such as bankruptcy) to other agencies, many of whom are already partners.

5.6 The Council's Vulnerable Community Strategy provides that services should be aligned to ensure that the requirements of people in need of support are recognised, understood and addressed appropriately.

- 5.7 The Council's developing involvement with the Youth Strategy, Think Communities and ongoing work with Anglia Revenues Partnership places the Council in a very good position to plan, prevent and react to the evolving needs of the community.
- 5.8 Direct delivery of the service enables the Council to act as a one-stop-shop for residents; providing a range of services and expertise that is readily available and expanding on the Council's proven ability to intervene and assist residents with the issues that they face in an ever changing environment.
- 5.9 As identified elsewhere in this report, the Council has already established strong relationships with external organisations who are able to assist the Council where specialist assistance is required. This can largely be demonstrated by the success of the community hubs.
- 5.10 In order to directly deliver an excellent service, the Housing Team will expand by 4 posts on 2 year fixed term contracts. In addition to this the existing Housing frontline staff have broadened their knowledge which has enabled the scope of the drop-ins to increase. During the 'Think Tank' sessions, referred to above, Officers identified that direct delivery would benefit existing staff as it would provide them with an opportunity to develop and enhance their roles within the Council. The Housing & Community Safety Team have already started to further develop their knowledge and understanding, including (but not limited to):
- Universal Credit (including the housing element)
 - Domestic abuse
 - Defending possession proceedings
 - Conflict management
 - Partnership oriented problem solving
 - DASH risk assessments
 - Armed forces covenants
 - Immigrations status and eligibility
 - Drug and alcohol awareness
 - Adults and Mental Capacity Act
 - Mental Health
 - Neglect
 - Parenting and learning disabilities
 - Challenging personal independent payment decisions
 - Overpayments of benefits and tax credits
 - Employment law
 - Mediation

This list is not exhaustive and is provided as a 'taster' to the level of commitment Officers have already undertaken to ensure that they are best placed to understand and offer advice on the issues that face our diverse community. The Council is committed to continuing to provide training to enable Officers to perform to the best of their abilities.

- 5.11 The Council's opening hours (08:45-17:00 (16:30 on Fridays)) provides increased access to services. By comparison the CARC opening hours are Mondays,

Wednesdays and Thursdays (09:15 to 12:00 for drop-in). Other times during these days can be available but by appointment only.

5.12 For the reasons set out in the report and Option 3 of Appendix 1 Members are recommended to cease awarding a grant to CARC in 2020/21 and in future years and deliver the service directly. The financial implications of this recommendation are set out in section 6 of this report.

6.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS/EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT/ CARBON IMPACT ASSESSMENT

6.1 The current cost of the Housing & Community Safety Team is £369,301. If the recommendation is approved then there will be an additional cost of £95,252. This additional cost will be to fund the creation of 4 new posts (2 years fixed term*) on the Council's establishment (1 FTE Team Leader, 2 FTE Support Officers and 1 FTE Administrative Officer). These additional costs will take effect from 1 April 2020 and will be reviewed on a 6 monthly basis.

*The posts are two-year fixed term; this will allow the Council sufficient time to review and evaluate the effectiveness of the service.

6.2 It is proposed that these costs are met from savings to be made by not funding CARC in future years (£47,346.80 per annum). The remainder will be met from Central Government grant allocated to the Council's Housing Team. This fund is ring-fenced for early intervention and prevention and currently has a budget of £627,000, with additional funding of £277,670 recently awarded.

6.3 It is important to note that whilst this recommendation results in an overall cost increase to the Council, there is significant social benefit that outweighs the increased cost.

6.4 A Full EIA is provided at Appendix 2 of this report.

6.5 Carbon Impact Assessment (CIA) completed (Appendix 3). There are no positive or negative carbon impact implications arising.

7.0 APPENDICES

7.1 Appendix 1 - Summary Options Appraisal
Appendix 2 - EIA (Full)
Appendix 3 - Carbon Impact Assessment

Background Documents

CARC SLA 2019/20

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