Public Report
Cabinet

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting
Cabinet – 16 November 2026

Report Title
Advice Services and Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure – Service Level Agreements (2027-2030)

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?
Yes

Executive Director Approving Submission of the Report
Jane Maxwell, Director of Policy, Strategy and Engagement

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Ward(s) Affected
Borough-Wide

Report Summary

This report makes recommendations for the grant funding of two separate three-year service level agreements (SLAs) for the period April 2027 to March 2030. These are for the provision of the following services:

1) Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Infrastructure services – held by Voluntary Action Rotherham (VAR) – providing support to voluntary and community groups including organisational development, governance, funding, recruiting volunteers and training.

2) Advice services – held by Citizens Advice Rotherham and District (CARD) – providing advice including welfare benefits, debt, immigration and general advice.

At the Cabinet meeting on 20 November 2023, Cabinet gave approval to award two three year service level agreements (SLAs) running from April 2024 to March 2027 to these same organisations. Following a co-design process over the summer, the two new proposed SLAs for the next three years (April 2027 until March 2030) will progress the commitments set out in the Rotherham Compact, an agreement between public sector organisations who are members of the Rotherham Together Partnership and voluntary and community organisations in Rotherham. They will build on experience gained through the current SLAs, taking account of local and national research, and set out a strategic approach for the future of these services in Rotherham.

Recommendations

That Cabinet:

1) Agree to progress the arrangements for VCS Infrastructure Services in Rotherham, including:
    a) The proposed model being delivered through a standard SLA for three years commencing from 1 April 2027 and continuing to 31 March 2030, which is based on the findings of a co-design exercise.
    b) Funding of £573,000 being awarded as a grant to Voluntary Action Rotherham, in annual payments of £191,000, to deliver the three-year SLA.

2) Agree to progress the arrangements for Advice Services in Rotherham, including:
    a) The proposed model being delivered through a standard SLA for three years commencing from 1 April 2027 and continuing to 31 March 2030, which is based on the findings of a co-design exercise.
    b) Funding of £999,000 being awarded as a grant to Citizens Advice Rotherham and District, in annual payments of £333,000, to deliver the three-year SLA.
    c) Utilising £93,000 of funding per annum previously allocated for pension credit advice as part of the 2025/26 Council Budget process to fund the increase to the Advice Services SLA.

List of Appendices Included

Appendix 1 Case Study: Voluntary Action Rotherham
Appendix 2 Case Study: Citizens Advice Rotherham and District
Appendix 3 Initial Equality Screening Assessment
Appendix 4 Carbon Impact Assessment

Background Papers
Cabinet Report 20.11.2023 Advice Services and Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Service Level Agreements 2024-2027
Rotherham Compact www.varotherham.org.uk

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel
No

Council Approval Required
No

Exempt from the Press and Public
No

Advice Services and Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure – Service Level Agreements (2027-2030)

1. Background

1.1 At its meeting of 20 November 2023, Cabinet gave approval to award two three-year service level agreements (SLAs) running from April 2024 to March 2027. One SLA was for Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Infrastructure Services, which was awarded to Voluntary Action Rotherham (VAR) at £126,000 per annum. The second SLA was for Advice Services, which was awarded to Citizens Advice Rotherham and District (CARD) at £240,000 per annum.

1.2 The current infrastructure services SLA provides the following support to voluntary and community groups:

- Writing a constitution
- Managing meetings
- Registering as a charity
- Developing financial processes
- Applying for funding
- Managing staff and volunteers
- Having good governance arrangements and business planning

1.3 The current advice services SLA provides the following support to advice services:

- Welfare benefits
- Debt
- Immigration
- General advice

1.4 Both of the current three-year SLAs expire on 31 March 2027. This report makes recommendations for SLAs to cover the next three-year period from 1 April 2027 to 31 March 2030. It takes into consideration the results of the co-design processes undertaken in July and August 2026, in accordance with the Rotherham Compact. The co-designs build on experience gained through delivery of the current SLAs, taking account of local and national research, and set out a strategic approach for the VCS and for advice services in Rotherham.

1.5 The base budgets for the two SLAs have been unchanged since the current models were established in 2014, although there have been additional service expectations. During this period, costs have increased (food, fuel, staff, national insurance, general overheads) but the level of service delivery has had to be maintained. In general, demand for services has been increasing, reflecting significant rises in living costs, which typically have a greater impact on those with low incomes.

2. Key Issues

2.1 Current VCS Infrastructure SLA

Through the current service level agreement, infrastructure services provide support to VCS organisations across the borough to become more effective and sustainable. This support incorporates information, advice, training facilities and help with networking, partnerships, advocacy and campaigning. It also includes specific support for volunteering, supporting people to set up voluntary and community organisations or social enterprises, as well as bringing VCS groups/organisations together in networks and forums to inform and influence strategic planning.

2.2 VAR is delivering four key strands of VCS infrastructure support:

- Group Support – develop community groups through a whole journey approach, from starting up to delivering large government contracts.
- Volunteering – working with voluntary organisations and partners to provide support to their volunteers, and a nationally accredited Volunteer Centre that enables people to become active in their communities.
- Communications and Engagement – to strategically represent the VCS, providing information and opportunity to the sector, developing groups to respond to need and take up those opportunities.
- Partnership working – work in partnership across the sector, aligned with stakeholder plans, developing local solutions and being the trusted voice of over 900 voluntary and community groups who are members.

2.3 Current Advice Services SLA

The overall demand for advice service provision in Rotherham remains at a high level. The number of clients supported has increased by 23% since 2023/24. The table below shows CARD's total number of clients, funded through a number of sources including Rotherham Council grant funding over the SLA period.

Table 1 – Total CARD Clients 2023/24 to 2025/26

	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
Telephone (outbound)	7,639	7,850	9,894
In Person	1,787	4,335	5,339
Email	3,227	3,816	4,893
Adviceline Phone (Inbound)	5,300	3,215	1,585
Other	112	627	1,003
Letter	83	302	393
Webchat	548	610	119
Videocall	208	53	11

Total	**18,904**	**20,808**	**23,237**

2.4 Advice services continue to be delivered under the four-level model previously adopted:

- Level 1 – signposting and self-service, including referrals from other service providers
- Level 2 – Triage, advice trained form filling, low level knowledge-based general advice
- Level 3 – High level knowledge-based advice and case work
- Level 4 – Advocacy and specialist appeals

2.5 Level 2 and 3 services are delivered through CARD, the Council and the voluntary sector providing a range of services mainly focussed on:

- Debt
- Housing
- Employment
- Education
- Consumer Rights
- Immigration
- Welfare
- Family
- Legal

Level 4 is provided by the Council's Advocacy and Appeals Services and CARD.

2.6 <u>Rotherham Compact</u>
The Rotherham Compact is an agreement between public sector organisations who are members of the Rotherham Together Partnership and voluntary and community organisations in Rotherham. It sets out commitments on both sides to improve the way in which public organisations and the VCS work together for the benefit of communities and citizens.

2.7 In its work with the VCS, the Council has committed to follow the processes and procedures agreed through the Rotherham Compact which states:

> *"An underlying principle of effective commissioning for outcomes should be the commitment to embed genuine co-production into all commissioning activity. People's energy, skills, interests, knowledge and life experiences should be harnessed to influence the support and services they receive. This includes active participation alongside commissioners of services in the shaping of, and design of new service delivery models. Co-production gives a collective sense of ownership and can connect residents to the statutory organisations and voluntary and community organisations with a common purpose."*

Co-design Process

2.8 As the current SLAs are due to expire on 31st March 2027, invitations to bid were advertised on the Council website, for a suitable organisation to become the lead co-design partner to work alongside Rotherham Council, for the new three-year SLAs (1 April 2027 to 31 March 2030), in accordance with the Rotherham Compact.

2.9 As a result of the assessment process, VAR was again appointed as the lead organisation for the VCS infrastructure services co-design and CARD was again appointed as the lead organisation for the advice services co-design. The outcomes of the eight-week co-design processes provide the detail for agreement of standard three-year service level agreements with VAR and CARD for the respective future service provision.

2.10 The Council recognises the important strategic role that both delivery partners (VAR and CARD) have within their respective sectors, and the value of their strong working partnership with the Council. Both organisations are well-managed, have good governance arrangements, are organisationally stable and have a good quality of service delivery.

2.11 Both stakeholder and client consultation has taken place as part of the co-design process. VAR consulted with VCS member organisations and did an online survey. Meanwhile, CARD consulted with their advice partners and also undertook a survey. The feedback through the co-design demonstrates that the services are highly regarded by their client groups.

2.12 VCS Infrastructure Co-design

Current budget: £126,000 per annum; £378,000 over the three year SLA. This provides a 'hub and core' support model comprising of:

- Delivering a dynamic programme to enable a vibrant VCS as a catalyst for sustainable and resilient community activity, including engagement at the Rotherham level as well as sub-regionally and nationally.
- Partnership working across agencies in Rotherham, contributing to strategic direction for the borough and engaging the VCS in delivering outcomes aligned to shared borough priorities.
- Building social capital and social value, strengthening community assets in neighbourhoods, linking with the roles of Elected Members, Neighbourhoods officers and VCS activity at the local level.
- Promoting equalities and community cohesion, particularly with marginalised or socially excluded communities. This includes the approach to supporting tackling inequalities and deprivation, linking to and supporting advice and crisis support services.
- Strengthening financial resilience in the sector, with support for external funding bids and good governance.
- Championing the "Rotherham Compact" and facilitating reviews to ensure alignment with national best practice.
- Supporting the role of volunteers, including skills development, effective management, brokerage of volunteers in VCS activity and volunteering opportunities in public services.

2.13 **Proposed budget:** £191,000 per annum; £573,000 over the three year SLA. In the next proposed three-year SLA, VAR will continue to deliver the hub and core model. An increase in funding would enable VAR to deliver additional new and emerging priority activity areas including:

- Attracting and brokering Corporate Social Responsibility partnerships, investment and resources for Rotherham front line VCS groups and organisations
- Increasing work on Social Value, including brokering and supporting social value offers, investment, resources and expertise for the benefit of the VCS and the Rotherham communities they serve.
- To develop and strengthen the 'Community Cohesion' offer, practice and opportunities with Rotherham VCS and stakeholders
- Flex capacity to respond to other new and emerging Rotherham priorities, which encompass VCS and/or wider stakeholders

2.14 An increase in the SLA budget would enable VAR to do more of this type of work, at pace, as well as enhancing organisational sustainability. A case study exemplifying VAR's work is attached as Appendix 1.

2.15 <u>Advice Services Co-Design</u>
Current budget: £240,000 per annum; £720,000 over the three year SLA. This funds CARD's essential central hub operations, enabling clients to access CARD services at a central location and ensuring effective back-office support for outreach locations across the borough.

2.16 **Proposed budget:** £333,000 per annum; £999,000 for the three year SLA. In the next proposed three-year SLA, CARD will continue its shift to more face-to-face venues including the Town Centre Hub office as their first point of contact, as well as outreach locations across the borough. An increase in funding would create additional specialist capacity at the central hub and strengthen support for residents with more complex advice needs. The exact nature of the additional specialist support will be agreed through the annual delivery plan for the SLA, but is expected to comprise elements of the following activity:

- Welfare benefit appeals – greater senior caseworker capacity to provide more consistent support for local residents through Personal Independence Payment (PIP), Employment Support Allowance (ESA), and Universal Credit Mandatory Reconsiderations.
- Form-filling – dedicated advisor time to help residents complete key forms, including PIP, Pension Credit, and Universal Credit applications.
- Housing and complex debt prevention – specialist advice for households facing eviction, significant rent arrears, or escalating Council Tax enforcement, helping to reduce the risk of further financial or housing pressures.
- Improved outreach escalation – advisors delivering services across the outreach network would have clearer referral routes into hub specialists, helping vulnerable community clients access support more quickly where capacity allows.

- Out of hours services – provide additional advice provision options in evenings and weekends to support people in employment who are unable to access traditional services.

2.17 The additional funding would go directly into specialist frontline capacity, reduce reliance on general waiting lists, and strengthen early intervention across welfare benefits, debt, immigration, housing, and form filling support. This will prevent issues escalating into homelessness, lost household income, or costly enforcement activity. It will also seek to ensure that support is available to communities across the borough. A case study exemplifying CARD's work is attached as Appendix 2.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

3.1 **Option one** would be to do nothing. This would result in withdrawal of support for VCS Infrastructure and for Advice Services from the end of the current SLAs (31 March 2027). A do-nothing option would not be aligned to the Council's vision for Rotherham where "we value decency and dignity and seek to build a town where opportunity is extended to everyone, where people can grow, flourish and prosper, and where no one is left behind". A do-nothing option would also not be aligned to the strategic priorities under the 'Enabling strong and proud communities' theme in the Rotherham Plan, making sure services are easy to access and shaped around local needs.

3.2 **Advice**: Whilst some advice provision would remain in the VCS, the capacity would fall far short of that required to meet demand. The Council's in-house services would not have the capacity to fill the gap. The withdrawal of support for some of the most vulnerable people, who rely on advice services, would have significant equalities implications and run counter to the policy priorities set out in the Council Plan.

3.3 **Infrastructure**: Whilst there is no statutory requirement to support infrastructure services in the VCS, this support strengthens the sustainability and resilience of voluntary and community groups in the borough, which are working with a diverse range of communities and issues. Therefore, **a do-nothing option is not recommended.**

3.4 **Option two** would be to re-commission both VAR and CARD at their current grant funding levels (£126,000 per annum for VAR and £240,000 per annum for CARD) for three years.

3.5 Whilst the base budgets for the two SLAs have remained unchanged for over a decade, the level of service delivery has been maintained. However, given the current financial constraints for both delivery partners linked to inflation and increasing demand on services, the current level of service delivery is not sustainable. Therefore, **option two is not recommended.**

3.6 **Option three** would be to re-commission both VAR and CARD and include the proposed increased funding amount for both organisations (£191,000 per annum for VAR and £333,000 per annum for CARD) for three years, to reflect increased costs, sustained high levels of demand for services, proposed

additional capacity and enhanced delivery models outlined in paragraphs 2.13 to 2.17.

3.7 This option would acknowledge the fact that costs (such as fuel, staff, national insurance, general overheads), have increased and that continuing to deliver at the current level without additional grant funding is not sustainable. The base budgets for the two SLAs have been unchanged since the current models were established in 2014, but there have been additional service expectations.

3.8 In general, demand for advice services and VCS support services has been increasing, reflecting significant rises in living costs, which typically have a greater impact on those with low incomes. The proposed additional funding would reflect the increased costs and would lead to enhanced service provision across the borough. A further report is due to be considered by Cabinet in December regarding Crisis and Resilience provision, which will also include neighbourhoods based support.

3.9 In the meeting on 5 March 2025, Council approved core funding of £93,000 for additional temporary Pension Credit Advice, as part of a broader package of support for residents with the cost of living. This service has been delivered by Age UK (£55,000 per annum) and CARD (£38,000 per annum) for 2025/26 and 2026/27, with the respective service level agreements concluding on 31 March 2027. Given the context of the changes to the winter fuel allowance, cost of living pressures and increased demand for CARD general advice services, it is proposed that this funding is re-purposed into broader support for residents from 1 April 2027. The budget of £93,000 would be added to the £240,000 budget currently available for CARD to enable the new SLA to be funded at £333,000 per annum for three years. This will enable a wider range of residents to benefit from advice services, including Pension Credit form filling.

3.10 **Option three is the recommended option** and is summarised in the table below.

Table 2: Summary of recommended option for the VCS infrastructure and advice services SLA

Service level agreement	Brief description of service provided	Current allocation per annum (April 2024 – March 2027)	Recommended allocation per annum in option 3 (April 2027 – March 2030)
VCS infrastructure services SLA	Provides the following support to voluntary and community groups across the borough: writing a constitution; managing meetings; registering as a charity; developing financial processes;	£126,000	£191,000

	applying for funding; managing staff and volunteers; and having good governance arrangements and business planning.		
Advice services SLA	Provides the following advice services: welfare benefits; debt; immigration; and general advice.	£240,000	£333,000

4. Consultation on proposal

4.1 Both stakeholder and client consultation has taken place as part of the co-design process. VAR consulted with VCS member organisations and did an online survey. Meanwhile, CARD consulted with their advice partners and also undertook a survey.

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

5.1 All processes need to be completed in time for commencement of the new SLA delivery on 1 April 2027.

5.2 Subject to Cabinet approval, a detailed delivery plan will be produced in December and January with VAR and CARD. This will include further equality analysis and first year delivery targets being agreed. The new SLA paperwork will need to be produced and signed off by mid-March in time for delivery to commence from 1 April 2027.

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

6.1 There are no direct procurement implications arising from the recommendations detailed in this report as the arrangements relate to grant agreements that fall outside the scope of procurement legislation.

6.2 The proposed additional costs across both services are £158k per annum, with a total additional cost across the three year contracts of £474k. These additional costs will be met through a reallocation of a £93k budget investment in 2025/26 towards an extension of Pension Credit Advisors, £279k across the 3 years. The remaining amount of £65k per year, £195k across the 3 years will be met from the Council's inflationary budgets held for major contract inflation.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

7.1 The Council has power to provide financial assistance to voluntary and community sector organisations pursuant to section 1 of the Localism Act 2011 (the General Power of Competence). In addition, the Health Services and Public Health Act 1968 provides a power for local authorities to provide financial and other assistance to certain voluntary organisations whose

activities include the provision, promotion or support of services of a welfare, health or advisory nature. The proposals contained within this report support the Council's strategic priorities relating to community resilience, social inclusion and access to advice services.

7.2 Appropriate grant agreements should be completed with the relevant parties setting out the conditions of funding, monitoring requirements, performance expectations, audit rights, compliance with subsidy control requirements and arrangements for termination.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

8.1 There are no direct workforce implications for RMBC employees. The proposals relate to grant-funded service delivery by external organisations and no TUPE implications have been identified for the Council at this stage.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

9.1 The Infrastructure SLA is not service specific but encompasses support for the VCS across all areas of activity. This includes VCS organisations that provide services and support for children and young people.

9.2 Many of the users of advice services will be from families with children and vulnerable adults, some with disabilities and/or financial exclusion issues. Continuation of advice services is important to safeguarding and is consistent with being a child friendly borough.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

10.1 Equality forms part of the shared principles of the Rotherham Compact that will drive the co-design of future VCS Services. These are:

- Respect: public and VCS organisations are accountable in different ways, but both need to be open and honest. Effective partnerships are built on mutual understanding and an appreciation of the differences between partners of the Compact.
- Honesty: It is only through open communication that strong partnerships can be built and maintained. Full and frank discussions should be the basis for resolving difficulties.
- Independence: The independence of the VCS is recognised and supported. This includes the right for voluntary and community organisations to campaign, to comment on and to challenge policy such as a ‘critical friend’ (whatever funding or other relationship may exist) and to determine and manage their own affairs.
- Diversity: The public sector and the VCS value a thriving civil society, which allows different groups to have a voice and bring forward new ideas.
- Equality: Fairness for everyone, regardless of their background, is a fundamental goal, and public sector and the VCS will work together to achieve this.

- Citizen empowerment: By working together, the public sector and the VCS can help to improve conditions for communities and people, meeting their needs and reflecting their choices.
- Volunteering: The energy and commitment of people giving their time for the public good contributes to a vibrant society and should be recognised and appreciated.

10.2 The Rotherham Compact contains a section on equality. It states that

"Equality for everyone, regardless of their background, is a core value shared by the public sector and the VCS. Over the last four decades, discrimination legislation and related policy have played an important role in helping to make Britain a more equal society. As both society itself and equality legislation continue to evolve, it is crucial that the public sector and the VCS work well together to achieve equality and fairness for everyone."

10.3 An Equalities Screening (Form A) has been completed alongside this report. It recognises the requirement to address equalities as part of the co-design for the service provision going forward. Infrastructure services are at the core of support for the diversity of the VCS. This, along with the equalities data from current advice service provision, will be the starting point for the Equality Analysis. Advice services are response driven, meeting demand for support, often by the most vulnerable people in society. Much of the advice demand, especially around benefits, debt and immigration are accessed by people with protected characteristics. In addition, many of VAR's members, particularly small groups, are delivering support to people with protected characteristics. There are also some larger voluntary groups working on equalities but feedback from the sector shows that there is potential for more groups to include equalities considerations as part of their service delivery. In the light of this, an Equalities Analysis (Form B) will be completed as part of the continued co-design process in December 2026 and January 2027.

11. Implications for CO2 Emissions and Climate Change

11.1 For Advice Services there are no implications for CO2 Emissions or Climate Change.

11.2 For Infrastructure Services there are likely to be positive implications for CO2 Emissions and Climate Change, as VAR is supporting organisations that are working towards the net zero agenda for the borough.

12. Implications for Partners

12.1 The VCS are key strategic partners in the Rotherham Together Partnership. The recommendations of this report would reinforce the strategic role of the VCS in Rotherham, adding value to partnership working.

12.2 The Council works in partnership with VCS advice providers through the Advice in Rotherham (AIR) Partnership.

13. Risks and Mitigation

13.1 There is the risk that the co-production collaborative approach fails through disagreement between the parties. In these circumstances, should the processes set out in the Compact not produce a resolution, the Council would need to instigate other arrangements to secure continuity of service delivery.

14. Accountable Officers

Fiona Boden, Head of Policy, Performance & Intelligence

Approvals obtained on behalf of Statutory Officers: -

	Named Officer	**Date**
Chief Executive	John Edwards	28/10/26
Executive Director of Corporate Services (S.151 Officer)	Judith Badger	26/10/26
Service Director of Legal Services (Monitoring Officer)	Phil Horsfield	27/10/26

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