

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Cabinet – 21 September 2020

Report Title

Advice Review and Advice Services Service Level Agreement

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

Yes

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

Sharon Kemp, Chief Executive

Report Author(s)

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Ward(s) Affected

Borough-Wide

Report Summary

The provision of advice across a range of topics, and especially in relation to benefits and debt, both through Council services and the voluntary sector, continues to provide essential support to thousands of vulnerable people in Rotherham each year.

Demand for advice services remains high, and is expected to continue to rise, particularly as the economic impact of the COVID emergency and end of furlough create more financial difficulties for people.

Experience from the advice review shows that further improvements can be made, particularly around referrals. This builds on the developments to date in implementing the "single advice model" adopted by Cabinet at its meeting in October 2017. Lessons learnt from operating the Community HUB throughout the COVID emergency are also assisting in improving referral pathways.

This report provides an update on the provision of advice services across Council in-house and Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) providers. It also sets out a process for a new three-year Service Level Agreement (SLA) through co-design with VCS advice providers for the period 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24. It is proposed that this be done through inviting a lead VCS organisation to work with the Council.

Recommendations

1. That approval be given to progress arrangements for advice services in Rotherham, including:-
 - a) Co-design with voluntary sector organisations for services to be delivered by voluntary sector advice providers for three years commencing from April 2021.
 - b) Invitation to bid and appointment of an advice services VCS organisation to lead on the co-design process.
 - c) That the scope of services to be delivered by the voluntary sector focus on provision in levels two and three of the advice model through core service level agreements to a total value of £240k per annum, with the provision for additional project based arrangements covering specific advice service demands and developments over the medium term.
 - d) That the SLA be a “partnership” SLA with each partner a signatory to the SLA and direct receipt of grant.
2. That improvements to referral processes from other services to create person-centred client pathways be built into the new service specification, in line with the Single Advice Model agreed by Cabinet in October 2017.
3. That progress made since the implementation of the Advice Review phase 2 be received.

List of Appendices Included

Appendix 1 – Initial Equality Screening Assessment

Background Papers

The Rotherham Compact

<https://www.varotherham.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/The-Rotherham-Compact-2017.pdf>

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

Name of Committee – Click here to enter a date.

Name of Committee – Click here to enter a date.

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Advice Review and Advice Services SLA Advice Review and Advice Services
Service Level Agreement

1.	Background
1.1	The provision of advice across a range of topics, and especially in relation to benefits and debt, both through Council services and the voluntary sector, continues to provide essential support to thousands of vulnerable people in Rotherham each year.
1.2	The advent of COVID 19 has brought additional demands for advice services. This increased demand is expected to continue as people incur the economic impacts arising from COVID 19. Overall, the demand for advice continues to be a major contributor to tackling inequalities in Rotherham. The lessons learnt through supporting people through the COVID 19 emergency also demonstrate the linkages made through working across partners, which has enabled a person-centred approach that can be built on in services going forward through improved referral pathways.
1.3	Advice services not only deal with the immediate problem but assist with ensuring where possible that the problem does not reoccur. Debt is a good example of this.
1.4	In October 2017, Cabinet and Commissioners' agreed to progress arrangements for advice services, including:- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adoption of a "Single Advice Model" across Council and VCS advice services. • Co-design with voluntary sector organisations for services to be delivered by voluntary sector advice providers for three years commencing from April 2018. • That the scope of services to be delivered by the voluntary sector focus on provision in levels two and three of the advice model through core service level agreements to a total value of £240k per annum, with the provision for additional project based arrangements covering specific advice service demands and developments over the medium term; • Collaboration to produce an integrated model of advice provision across advice services including in-house provision effective from April 2019. • Commissioning and funding model options that will best provide flexibilities for service development over the medium term through a consortium approach in the voluntary sector; and • Identify as part of the Council's Customer Services and Efficiency Programme, improvements to level one signposting and self-serve provision.
1.5	This report provides an update on advice service provision including options for future development.
1.6	Further to the October 2017 report, a three-year service level agreement (SLA) was entered into with Citizens Advice Rotherham and District (CARD), working

	in partnership with Kiveton Park Independent Advice Centre. The SLA covers the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2021.
1.7	The process leading to a new three-year SLA, commencing on 1 April 2021, in accordance with the provisions of the Rotherham Compact is now required.
1.8	From September 2019 a single in-house advice provision was created by the transfer of the Advocacy and Appeals team into the Housing Service, sitting within the Housing Income and Financial Inclusion team.
2.	Key Issues
2.1	The demand for advice service provision in Rotherham remains at a high level both through internal advice service provision, and those services delivered by VCS organisations working in partnership with the Council.
2.2	Services for Council Tenants are provided by the Financial Inclusion Team within Housing Services and are funded by the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The team seeks to secure sustainable tenancies, especially in light of the threat to rent income from the roll-out of Universal Credit and increased arrears levels. Part of the support is at pre-tenancy stage where work is done to ensure that people will be able to sustain their tenancy. Increased capacity has also been put in to address income recovery with financial inclusion. The Advocacy and Appeals Service provides specialist debt and welfare benefits advice focusses on level four advice including appeals against Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) decisions to not award benefits. Its services are open to all, although many clients are referred from other services.
2.3	Advice services continue to be delivered under the four levels model previously adopted. <div style="text-align: center; margin: 20px 0;"> <p style="text-align: center;"> 4 Advocacy Specialist Appeals <hr/> 3 High level knowledge-based advice Case work <hr/> 2 Triage Advice trained Form filling Low level knowledge-based generalist advice <hr/> 1 Signposting Leaflet giving Self-Serve (website) </p> </div> <p>Level four services are provided by the Council's Advocacy and Appeals Services and CARD.</p>

	<p>Levels three and two services are delivered both through the Council and the voluntary sector providing a range of services mainly focussed on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debt; • Housing; • Employment; • Education; • Consumer; • Immigration; • Welfare; • Family; and • Legal. <p>Level one provision includes signposting and self-service. It also includes referrals from other service providers.</p>																																	
2.4	Levels of demand show an increase overall and especially in relation to benefits and immigration.																																	
2.3	<p>The level of demand for the VCS advice services shows an increase in over the two years 2018/19 and 2019/20 as set out in the table:</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>2018/19</th> <th>2019/20</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Unique beneficiaries</td> <td>8816</td> <td>13019</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Benefits</td> <td>6191</td> <td>8206</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Consumer</td> <td>435</td> <td>450</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Debt</td> <td>13402</td> <td>9920</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Employment</td> <td>604</td> <td>836</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Housing</td> <td>734</td> <td>774</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Legal</td> <td>538</td> <td>662</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Immigration</td> <td>437</td> <td>834</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Other</td> <td>4727</td> <td>5349</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Money gained</td> <td>£2,843,804</td> <td>£5,464,243</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		2018/19	2019/20	Unique beneficiaries	8816	13019	Benefits	6191	8206	Consumer	435	450	Debt	13402	9920	Employment	604	836	Housing	734	774	Legal	538	662	Immigration	437	834	Other	4727	5349	Money gained	£2,843,804	£5,464,243
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2.4	<p>In house services cover functions for advocacy and appeals, MacMillian benefits service, and debt.</p> <p>Demand and performance figures for 2019/20, with year on year comparators show the following:</p>																																	
2.4.1	<p><u>Appeals</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 459 referrals for appeals, an increase of 65 from previous year. • 321 appointments offered. • 291 appeals cases taken on. • 173 appeals completed. • 139 of these successful (with 39 lapsed appeals -the optimum outcome with decision changed in clients favour before hearing). • 23 unsuccessful and 9 adjourned. 																																	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 85% success rate (71% being the national average success rate), similar percentage to previous year. • £18,179.94 of weekly income gained – providing an annual income of £945,356.66pa – weekly income reduced by £4,320.44 on previous year. <p>£829,212.44 lump sum payments gained, an increase of £9,684.45 on previous year.</p>
2.4.2	<p><u>Macmillan</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 964 referrals for Macmillan, an increase of 69 from previous year. • 747 appointments delivered. • £73,509.63 of weekly income gained – providing an annual income of £3,822,500.70 <p>£491,814.67 lump sum payments gained.</p>
2.4.3	<p><u>Debt</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 732 referrals for debt advice, a decrease of 41 from previous year. • 449 appointments offered. • 411 debts cases taken on, an increase of 85 from previous year. • £205,314 RMBC rent arrears managed, a decrease of £52,047 from previous year. • £26,169 of other rent arrears managed, a decrease of £35,530.35 from previous year. • £22,819 of council tax arrears managed, an increase of £11,300 from previous year. • £52,748,858.22 total debt managed, an increase of £51,629,416 from previous year. <p>£36,036.79 of income gained an increase of £18,482.86 from previous year.</p>
	<u>Current and future SLA</u>
2.5	The current arrangements for Council grant aided VCS advice services are covered by a single SLA with CARD, which in turn funds the provision by Kiveton Park. This followed a co-design where CARD was the lead partner.
2.6	Other “partnership” co-designed SLAs have now included all partners being signatories to the SLA with direct grant to each organisation. It is recommended that this should apply to any further advice provision SLAs where more than one VCS organisation is party to it.
2.7	Experience gained during the COVID emergency suggest that improvements can be made to referral processes from other service providers as part of providing a person-centred client pathway. It is recommended that improving referral pathways and processes should be part of the specification for co-design and for development of in-house services.

	<u>Rotherham Compact</u>
2.8	In its working with the VCS, the Council is committed to follow the processes and procedures agreed as the Rotherham Compact. This involves a co-design process following the appointment of a lead organisation. The co-design will work within the headline scope of the functions being commissioned and the available budget for grant provision.
2.9	Specifically, the Rotherham Compact 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.”
	<u>Opportunities for service linkages and enhancements</u>
2.10	The previous stages of policy review of advice services have brought significant improvement to linkages and alignment between advice services. This has included referral process to ensure that people get to the right advice provider and do not get lost in the system as part of a single advice model.
2.11	Learning through the COVID emergency with services becoming virtual and many cases and people identified as needing advice through accessing other support services including through the Rotherham Community Hub, demonstrates that more can be done to enshrine working practices and referral processes across services and the Council and VCS in addition to the join up of advice.
2.12	To further the learning from COVID and service users’ experiences, a strategic aim in the co-design of the new SLA will include how service pathways can be improved across a range of services and advice provision. This to include how the advice providers can provide outreach advice with enhanced face to face services, working in neighbourhoods not currently served with advice provision through use of community facilities and neighbourhood-based VCS organisations.
3.	Options considered and recommended proposal
3.1	Option one would be to do nothing. This would result in withdrawal of support for VCS advice services from the end of the current SLA (March 2021).
3.2	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 be counter the policy priority set out in the Council Plan.
3.3	Option two would involve inviting a VCS advice provider to bring together VCS partners, as appropriate, to engage with the Council on a co-design for a new SLA for the years 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24 building on experience from the current SLA, trends in demands for advice, and projections of demand over the medium term.
3.4	The new SLA would include addressing improved referrals pathways for clients taking forward a person-centred approach across services, building on the principle of the single advice model, and provision of outreach services as set out in 2.12 above.
3.5	Option two is the recommended option.
4.	Consultation on proposal
4.1	Consultation and discussion take place around a range of advice service issues through the Advice in Rotherham Partnership.
4.2	It is intended as part of this co-design to engage and consult with organisations and services that make referrals into advice services, with a view to improving lines of communication and support to people requiring advice.
5.	Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision
5.1	All process, co-design and entering into the SLA need to be completed in time for commencement in April 2021.
5.2	Invitations to bid to be the lead VCS advice organisation will be published at the start of October with the lead organisation having been appointed by the end of that month. The co-design process will be concluded, and a new SLA signed off by mid-February in time for arrangements to commence from April 2021.
5.3	The lead VCS advice organisation will engage with other providers and services in developing the service outcomes around the key themes of:- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits • Consumer • Debt • Employment • Housing • Legal • Immigration • Person centred approach • Other advice provision issues identified as part of the co-design process.

6.	Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications (to be written by the relevant Head of Finance and the Head of Procurement on behalf of s151 Officer)
6.1	The current service level agreement for the provision of advice services across Council in-house and VCS providers is £240,000 per annum.
6.2	The budget for each of the three years 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/34 will be maintained at £240,000.
6.3	As the proposed recommendation in this report is to provide grant funding arrangements, there are no direct procurement implications as grant agreements fall outside the scope of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015. Grant funding arrangements can be used to support activity being undertaken by an organisation but where the nature of the legal relationship created is to spend the money in accordance with the grant rather than a relationship whereby the Council can claim breach of contract for failure to deliver.
7.	Legal Advice and Implications (to be written by Legal Officer on behalf of Assistant Director Legal Services)
7.1	The Council is required to operate in accordance with the relevant Best Value Statutory Guidance and the requirements of the Rotherham Compact in its relationship with and funding of the VCS.
7.2	The Council has power to fund the VCS through various pieces of legislation including the Health Services and Public Health Act 1968, the Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976, and the Localism Act 2011. This Act provides the General Power of Competence which gives Councils the power to do anything an individual can do provided it is not prohibited by other legislation.
8.	Human Resources Advice and Implications
8.1	There are no HR implications arising from this report.
9.	Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults
9.1	Many of the users of advice services will be from families with children and vulnerable adults, many with disabilities. Continuation of the 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	Advice provision supports many of the most vulnerable people including many with protected characteristics.

10.2	<p>Equalities data for service demand from VCS advice providers is set out in the table:</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>2019/20</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Under 25</td> <td>4.47%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>25 - 64</td> <td>45.63%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>65+</td> <td>9.25%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Disabled</td> <td>29.45%</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>White British</td> <td>79.81%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>White other</td> <td>6.61%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Asian / Asian UK</td> <td>4.65%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Black / Black UK</td> <td>2.41%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Mixed heritage</td> <td>1.60%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Other</td> <td>4.91%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		2019/20	Under 25	4.47%	25 - 64	45.63%	65+	9.25%	Disabled	29.45%			White British	79.81%	White other	6.61%	Asian / Asian UK	4.65%	Black / Black UK	2.41%	Mixed heritage	1.60%	Other	4.91%
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10.4	<p>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. An Equalities Analysis (Form B) will be completed as part of the co-design.</p>																								
11.	Implications for Ward Priorities																								
11.1	Advice services are person centred through Borough wide services.																								
12.	Implications for Partners																								
12.1	The Council works in Partnership with VCS advice providers through the Advice in Rotherham 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
	Jackie Mould, Head of Policy Performance & Improvement Assistant Chief Executive's
	Steve Eling Policy Officer Assistant Chief Executive's

Approvals obtained on behalf of Statutory Officers: -

	Named Officer	Date
Chief Executive	Sharon Kemp	Click here to enter a date.
Strategic Director of Finance & Customer Services (S.151 Officer)	Judith Badger	25/08/20
Head of Legal Services (Monitoring Officer)	Bal Nahal	26/08/20

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