

**Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting**

Cabinet – 20 November 2023

**Report Title**

Advice Services and Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Service Level Agreements 2024-2027

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

Yes

**Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report**

Jo Brown, Assistant Chief Executive

**Report Author(s)**

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**Ward(s) Affected**

Borough-Wide

**Report Summary**

Incorporating the results of a recent co-design process, this report makes recommendations for the next three-year VCS Infrastructure and Advice Services SLAs for the period April 2024 to March 2027. It progresses the commitments set out in the Rotherham Compact, building on experience gained through the current SLAs, taking account of local and national research and setting out an aspirational strategic approach for the future of the voluntary and community sector and advice services in Rotherham.

At their meeting of 21<sup>st</sup> September 2020, Cabinet gave approval to award two three-year service level agreements (SLAs) running from April 2021 to March 2024. One SLA was for Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Infrastructure Services, which was awarded to Voluntary Action Rotherham (VAR) and the second SLA was for Advice Services, which was awarded to Citizens Advice Rotherham and District (CARD).

## **Recommendations**

1. That approval be given to progress arrangements for VCS Infrastructure Services in Rotherham, including:
  - a. The proposed model to be delivered through a standard SLA for three years commencing from 1 April 2024 and continuing to 31 March 2027, which is based on the findings of a co-design exercise;
  - b. The recommendation that the funding amount of £378,000 is awarded as a grant to Voluntary Action Rotherham in annual payments of £126,000 to deliver the three-year SLA
  
2. That approval be given to progress arrangements for Advice Services in Rotherham, including:
  - a. The proposed model to be delivered through a standard SLA for three years commencing from 1 April 2024 and continuing to 31 March 2027, which is based on the findings of a co-design exercise;
  - b. The recommendation that the funding amount of £720,000 is awarded as a grant to Citizens Advice Rotherham and District in annual payments of £240,000 to deliver the three-year SLA

## **List of Appendices Included**

- Appendix 1 Equalities Initial Screening Form A  
Appendix 2 Carbon Impact Assessment

## **Background Papers**

- [Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Cabinet Report 21.09.2020](#)  
[Advice Review and Advice Services SLA Cabinet Report 21.09.2020](#)  
[Rotherham Compact www.varotherham.org.uk](http://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

## Co-Design of Voluntary Sector Infrastructure and Advice Services Provision

### 1. Background

- 1.1 At their meeting of 21 September 2020, Cabinet gave approval to award two three-year service level agreements (SLAs) running from April 2021 to March 2024. One SLA was for Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Infrastructure Services, which was awarded to Voluntary Action Rotherham (VAR), and the second SLA was for Advice Services which was awarded to Citizens Advice Rotherham and District (CARD).
- 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
- 1.3 The current advice services SLA provides the following support to advice services:
- Welfare benefits
  - Debt
  - Immigration
  - Generalist advice
- 1.4 The current three-year SLAs for voluntary sector infrastructure services and advice services expire at the end of March 2024.
- 1.5 This report makes recommendations for the next three-year Infrastructure SLA and Advice Services SLA for the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2027, including the results of the co-design process undertaken in June and July 2023, in accordance with the Rotherham Compact.
- 1.6 The co-design builds on experience gained through the current SLAs, taking account of local and national research and sets out an aspirational strategic approach for the future of the voluntary and community sector and advice services in Rotherham.
- 1.7 The report also takes into account the Council's ambition to achieve "excellent" level accreditation under the Equality Framework for Local Government.

## 2. Key Issues

### Current VCS Infrastructure SLA

- 2.1 Through the current service level agreement, infrastructure services have been designed to provide support to Voluntary and Community Sector organisations across the borough to become more effective and sustainable.
- 2.2 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, and bringing VCS groups/organisations together in networks and forums to inform and influence strategic planning.
- 2.3 Under the current delivery model, VAR deliver four key strands of VCS infrastructure support:
- 1) **Group Support** - develop community groups through a whole journey approach, from starting up to delivering large government contracts.
  - 2) **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.
  - 3) **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.
  - 4) **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.

### Current Advice Services SLA

- 2.4 The demand for advice service provision in Rotherham remains at a high level. The number of clients supported has increased year on year and by 63% since 2019/20.

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Telephone	5,016	12,766	18,060	17,882
Email	910	1,445	2,491	3,615
Letter	1,217	520	600	153
Web chat	870	295	541	1,183
In person	6,473	329	333	780
Video Call	0	17	258	248

Other	268	110	184	200
	<b>14,754</b>	<b>15,482</b>	<b>22,467</b>	<b>24,061</b>

There has been a particular increase in the number of people needing cost of living support in recent years, including welfare benefit and debt advice. As shown in the table above, this substantial growth led to a record number of clients and cases in 2021/22, which was then surpassed in 2022/3.

2.5 The last co-design of the advice services SLA was carried out in January 2021 during the Covid pandemic where the requirement for large sections of the working population to work from home had a significant impact on how advice services were delivered. This was central to the changeover from a largely in-person advice service to a service that initially delivered all advice and information digitally, which involved investing into the technology to enable staff and volunteers to work remotely. Over the last year the in-person appointments have shown an increase.

2.6 The current three year Advice Services SLA has been delivered in partnership between CARD and Kiveton Park Independent Advice Centre (KPIAC). As of 1<sup>st</sup> October 2023, KPIAC closed down as an organisation, and any services that were previously delivered by KPIAC are now delivered by CARD. In September 2023, Staff from Kiveton Park Information and Advice Centre were transferred under TUPE arrangements to CARD. Therefore, there has been no impact on service provision.

2.7 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 generalist advice
- Level 3 – High level knowledge-based advice and case work
- Level 4 – Advocacy and specialist appeals

Levels 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
- Immigration
- Welfare
- Family
- Legal

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

## Rotherham Compact

- 2.8 In its work with the VCS, the Council is committed to follow the processes and procedures agreed through 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.”*

## Co-design Process

- 2.10 As the current SLAs are due to expire on 31st March 2024, invitations were put out to bid to become the lead co-design partner to work alongside Rotherham Council, for the new three-year SLAs (April 2024 to March 2027), in accordance with the Rotherham Compact.
- 2.11 As a result of the assessment process VAR was again appointed as the lead organisation for the VCS infrastructure services and CARD was appointed as the lead organisation for advice services. An eight-week co-design timetable was agreed for delivery and completed at the end of July 2023. The outcomes of the co-design processes for both VCS infrastructure and Advice Services provide the detail for agreement of standard three-year service level agreements with VAR and CARD for the respective service provision.
- 2.12 The eight-week community element of the co-design process was completed at the end of July 2023. VAR consulted with 53 VCS organisations and produced an online survey with 118 respondents. Meanwhile, CARD consulted with their advice partners and also undertook a survey, with a combined 141 respondents taking part (86 clients and 55 non-clients). A Member Seminar also took place in July to inform Members of the co-design process and to gain further insight on future delivery.
- 2.13 Feedback received through the co-design engagement process and the subsequent changes proposed to the service model for the next three-year period, are summarised in the following section. It should be noted that as the core approach to delivery has evolved over a number of years reflecting changing client demand, emerging issues and new delivery methods in order to ensure continuous improvement. As a consequence, the proposed changes to the service arising from the co-design represent

the next iteration of the existing model rather than a completely new approach.

### VCS Infrastructure Co-design

2.14 It is proposed that there will be an ongoing asset-based approach, recognising the VCS sector is relatively healthy and the current support offer is strong. Given the responses from the consultation and the need to evolve to meet current need, three key focus areas have been identified in the further development of the service:

1) Investment into the Borough

- Organisations want and need to diversify their income. VAR's support offer and delivery plan need to reflect work in this area, and report against funding drawn into Rotherham.
- There is a need to re-design VAR's training offer to include a greater focus on funding and becoming ready to deliver key stakeholder contracts.

2) Partnerships

- There is a need to continue to further develop cross-sector partnerships, including across South Yorkshire (for the benefit of Rotherham). Rotherham's VCS must be represented effectively at a sub-regional level.
- Within the sector there are opportunities to strengthen and build on existing consortia and network development.

3) The Delivery Plan

- A new delivery plan would benefit from clearer deliverables and distinction of VAR's support offer. It should reflect the breadth of work of infrastructure, cutting across many departments and themes, and recording partnership work in a more effective way.
- The delivery plan should reflect the pathways from partner engagement to group support through the best placed provider. There is the potential to develop further pathways with the Council's Neighbourhood services and other partner engagement.
- The Volunteer Centre should place an initial focus on opportunities to re-engage the sector with volunteering, before launching targeted campaigns to increase the numbers of volunteers in years two and three of the SLA.
- The delivery plan should reflect the need to address inequalities and VAR's work with under-represented groups in line with the Council's ambitions.

2.15 In terms of equalities, many of VAR's members, particularly small groups, are delivering excellent support to people with protected characteristics. There are also some larger charities working on equalities, but more is needed. There is an intersectional aspect to the work of many VCS groups as they are working with people with several protected characteristics. For example, a group may be working with BAME disabled women, or perhaps

with older men from different faiths on issues of isolation/loneliness. In addition, through the service level agreement, all groups will be encouraged to work across different protected characteristics as part of an approach to promote inclusive ways of working. Even where a group was set up for a specific purpose, there may be an opportunity to diversify the range of characteristics the group is supporting.

- 2.16 The topic of loneliness is a theme that cuts across protected characteristics and is one the VCS has enormous potential to address, but more groups and resources are needed to enable borough-wide support. VAR's work in strengthening and making smaller community groups visible, through resources such as GISMO, brings value to stakeholders. As loneliness is an identified local need, VAR will take a leadership role in bringing together the sector to address it.

#### Advice Services Co-design

- 2.17 Feedback from the engagement exercise identified a number of areas for consideration as part of the next co-design:

- Language issues - not being confident of being understood or understanding the advice given.
- Flexibility of service venues and times.
- Mental health that prevents an individual from using digital communication means or engaging with outreach sessions.
- Financial / personal circumstances that mean someone doesn't have access to the technology needed to access advice digitally or the ability to travel to the relevant outreach location.
- Lack of confidence in using technology to access advice and information.

- 2.18 To meet the increasing demand for services the future model will include:

- An asset-based approach ensuring support is appropriate to the level of client ability.
- A flexibility of service to meet the needs of the most vulnerable or least engaged with services.
- Closer partnership working with specialist advice partners to focus dedicated support.
- Increased capacity for advice in the community.
- Advice service locations informed by intelligence from community partners.
- Continue to develop the Advice in Rotherham partnership to provide a forum for intelligence sharing, project collaborations and targeting advice initiatives.
- An integrated referral system to build on the use of Refernet.
- A hybrid approach to build on digital service and new technology as well as telephone and in person advice.

- 2.19 As part of their focus on ensuring equality of access to advice for all local people in Rotherham, CARD is proposing they develop on some of

their existing good work, while introducing new innovative ways to address inequality. This will include:

- An additional five community advice venues at locations across the Borough.
- Video and telephone advice enabling clients to access advice from home.
- Supported video outreach venues for digitally excluded clients.
- 'Attend Anywhere' - signed advice service for clients who are hard of hearing or deaf.
- Contract with Language Line to provide a translation service for clients who don't understand sufficient English.
- Increasing the diversity of staff and volunteers.
- Working closely with community organisations such Rotherfed, Age UK, Rotherham Ethnic Minority Alliance and Clifton Learning Partnership to support wider access to advice.

### **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 Advice Services from the end of the current SLAs (March 2024).
- 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 run counter to the policy priorities set out in the Council Plan.
- 3.3 Whilst there is no statutory requirement to support infrastructure services in the VCS, a do-nothing option would not be aligned to the Council's vision for Rotherham emphasizing that Rotherham is a shared community and provides opportunities so that no one is left behind. A do-nothing option would also not be aligned to the strategic priorities under the 'Building Stronger Communities' theme in the Rotherham Plan, working with individuals and communities on the things that matter most to them. Voluntary sector infrastructure 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 based on the findings of the co-design processes, a refinement of the current delivery plans within the context of a refreshed strategic direction.
- 3.5 This option would take forward the commitments set out in the Rotherham Compact, build on experience gained through the current SLAs and ensure an aspirational strategic approach for the future of the voluntary and

community sector and advice services in Rotherham. The delivery partners (VAR and CARD) have a strategic role within their respective sectors. They are well-managed, have good governance arrangements and are organisationally stable and have a good quality of service delivery. The feedback through the co-design demonstrates that the services are highly regarded by their client groups.

- 3.6 Option two is the recommended option.
- 3.7 Option three would be to undertake additional consultation and engagement through an additional co-design process, in order to gain more detailed information or further insights on the proposed SLAs.
- 3.8 This option would cause a lengthy delay on the start of delivery of the new three-year SLAs as it would involve going back to the invitation to bid being advertised on the Council's website, appointing new delivery partners and completing the eight-week co-design process again. Along with sign off by Cabinet this would not be completed in time for delivery of the new SLAs commencing 1 April 2024. It is not anticipated that this would bring any further benefit to the co-design process that has already been undertaken. Regular stakeholder consultation will be undertaken as part of the delivery of the new 3-year service level agreements to ensure any further adjustment to the service design is implemented wherever necessary. Therefore, option three is not recommended.

#### **4. Consultation on proposal**

- 4.1 Both stakeholder and client consultation has taken place as part of the co-design process. VAR consulted with 53 VCS organisations and their online survey had 118 responses. Meanwhile, CARD consulted with their advice partners and also undertook a survey, with 141 responses. A Member Seminar also took place in July 2023.

#### **5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision**

- 5.1 All processes need to be completed in time for commencement in April 2024.
- 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 taking place and first year delivery targets agreed.
- 5.3 The new SLA paperwork will need to be produced and signed off by mid-February in time for delivery to commence from 1 April 2024.

#### **6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications**

- 6.1 Budget for these services exists within the Council's revenue budget. Extension of SLA's with VAR and CARD at contract values of £126k per annum and £240k per annum respectively can be supported within existing resources with no adverse financial impact.

6.2 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**

7.1 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.

7.2 Neither of the recipients of the grant are considered to be an enterprise engaged in economic activity and further the grant does not confer any economic advantage on the recipients. Therefore, the grants are not considered a subsidy in terms of subsidy control. The grant agreements will ensure that the funding is ring fenced to the activities described in the report, and will set out amongst other things

## **8. Human Resources Advice and Implications**

8.1 There are no direct human resource implications for the Council.

8.2 If there were to be a change of employer for some VCS staff arising from the provisions of the new SLA, TUPE regulations would apply for those staff and the VCS organisations concerned.

## **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 Infrastructure 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 The proposals form part of the broader approach to equalities and tackling inequalities. Seeking "Excellent" level accreditation under the Equalities Framework for Local Government will enhance the future direction for equalities work in Rotherham.

10.4 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 continued co-design process in December 2023 and January 2024.

## **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 by 2040.

## **12. Implications for Partners**

12.1 The VCS are key strategic partners in the Rotherham Together Partnership. The recommendation 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 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 & Improvement  
Assistant Chief Executive's Directorate

Approvals obtained on behalf of Statutory Officers: -

	<b>Named Officer</b>	<b>Date</b>
Chief Executive	Sharon Kemp	06/11/23
Strategic Director of Finance & Customer Services (S.151 Officer)	Judith Badger	01/11/23
Head of Legal Services (Monitoring Officer)	Phil Horsfield	01/11/23

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