

Report of Assistant Chief Executive (Citizens and Communities)

Report to Citizens and Communities Scrutiny Board

Date: 12th September 2016

Subject: Leeds Advice Consortium

Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

Summary of main issues

- 1 This report provides an update on Leeds Advice Consortium which is now in the final year of a three contract awarded in April 2014.
- 2 It evidences the good work that has been undertaken to improve access to advice services and the significant increase in the number of clients assisted since the start of the contract.
- 3 It highlights the emerging issues in relation to advice which will need to be considered when retendering for the service.
- 4 It provides information on the role of the in-house Welfare Rights Service and the rising demand on this service.

Recommendations

The Board is invited to consider the information provided within this report and comment on options for the future if funding reductions are to be implemented.

1.0 Purpose of this report

1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide the Board with an update on the service provided by the Leeds Advice Consortium and to highlight areas of good performance as well as challenges, emerging areas of concern, risks relating to the contract for advice and the re-tendering exercise in relation to this service. It also provides an update on the role of the in-house Welfare Rights Service and the challenges faced by the team due to Welfare Reform.

2.0 Background information

2.1 Following a market sounding exercise undertaken in 2012 and the subsequent Executive Board decision, Leeds Advice Consortium was awarded a 3 year contract to deliver a new citywide advice service. The aim of the new service was to improve access to advice by increasing opening hours and expanding telephone-based advice to help deal with the increasing demand for advice.

2.2 The contract consolidated different streams of funding for advice from across the council. Prior to the award of this contract several departments across the Council gave grants to the advice sector to deliver services on behalf of their clients with all monitoring being done separately and independently.

2.3 This contract is now managed by the Executive Officer-Advice Services who also manages the Council's in-house Welfare Rights Unit. This has enabled a more cohesive approach towards monitoring and led to improved partnership working and the sharing of best practice which in turn allows for more effective use of resources.

2.4 The Welfare Rights Unit has provided a comprehensive Welfare Benefits Service to the citizens of Leeds since 1993.

3.0 Leeds Advice Consortium

3.1 The Leeds Advice Consortium is made up of Citizens Advice Leeds, Citizens Advice Chapeltown and Better Leeds Communities (formerly Burley Lodge Centre). Citizens Advice Leeds is the primary contractor and sub-contracts to Citizens Advice Chapeltown and Better Leeds Communities.

3.2 Citizens Advice Leeds were aware that the new service had to meet ambitious goals and targets over the period of the contract including:

- To more than double the number of clients assisted over the period of the contract
- Transferring resources to telephone advice to enable more customers to access the service Monday to Friday 9.00am till 5.00pm
- Face to face advice to be available Monday to Friday 9.00am till 5.00pm
- To aim to resolve 70% of all enquiries at the first point of contact

3.3 Advice agencies have worked hard over the last few years to respond to the growing need for advice. However demand for advice continues to exceed supply and it was clear to Citizens Advice Leeds that any further increase to client numbers could only come from reconfiguring existing provision.

- 3.4 Following a period of consultation the decision was made therefore to close the bureaux in Crossgates, Morley, Otley and Pudsey from April 2015 with the guarantee that access to advice would still be available for citizens living in these areas.
- 3.5 The result of this reconfiguration has been positive and it has helped Citizens Advice Leeds develop their service to better meet the needs of their clients whilst also increasing the number of clients assisted. The reconfiguration also saw a reduction in staffing at Citizens Advice Leeds which had cost implications.
- 3.6 There has been a growth in the number of telephone calls answered since the contract came into effect. In 2013/14, before contract was awarded, 6,528 calls were answered. This rose to 13,404 in 2014/15 and increased again to 14,573 in 2015/16 - this figure increases further to 19,368 if the number of call-backs is also included. Telephone advice however is not suitable for everyone so to assist more clients, face to face appointments at Citizens Advice Leeds and Chapeltown also increased from 10,066 in 2014/15 to 14,714 in 2015/16 whilst face to face appointments at outreach surgeries increased from 2,736 in 2014/15 to 4,508 in 2015/16. These figures are summarised in the table below.

	2014/15	2015/16
Telephone calls	13,404	14,573
Face-to-face	10,066	14,714
Surgeries	2,736	4,508
Total	26,206	33,795

- 3.7 In year two the consortium dealt with 9.75% more unique clients than in the first year. In year 3 of the contract, the Consortium is on track to help around 45,000 people, 5000 more than the target of 40,000 set in the original contract, and despite a funding reduction of 8%.

4.0 Funding

- 4.1 Funding for the service has varied since the start of the contract but for 2016/17 contributions were as follows:-

£1,146,751.00	Citizens and Communities (Advice Grant)
£135,000.00	Childrens Services (Childrens Centres)
£121,995.00	Public Health (GP Practices)
£76,932.00	Public Health (Mental Health)
£90,000.00	NHS South and East CCG - <i>from April 15</i>
£34,340.00	Adult Social Care (Mental Health)
£46,639.00	Adult Social Care (Non Residential Care Charging) - <i>from April 16</i>
£1,651,657.00	

- 4.2 Every stakeholder has been asked to confirm their funding contribution for 2017/18 and beyond to help plan the future of the service. The Council's financial position means that each directorate is under significant pressure to identify savings ahead of 2017/18 and 2018/19. The Leeds Advice Consortium is aware of the pressures on the Council and is developing options to help cope with potential reductions in funding of between 10%-15%. These options, which will have implications for the level of advice that can be provided, include:

- Reduction in opening hours;
- Changes to the level and way advice is provided in Children's Centres and GP surgeries;
- Reviewing sub-contracting arrangements.

5.0 2018 and Beyond

- 5.1 The initial 3 year contract had an option to extend by a further 2 years in 1-year increments which would take it to 31 March 2019. However it is planned invoke the initial 1-year extension with the intention of having a new contract in place by 1 April 2018. This also coincides with the date Citizens Advice Leeds tenancy comes to an end at Westminster Buildings.
- 5.2 Due to the value of the contract there will need to be a competitive re-tendering exercise value. The contract provides the main source of funding for Citizens Advice Leeds and Citizens Advice Chapeltown and the re-tendering exercise will, therefore, create a period of uncertainty for these organisations.

6.0 Welfare Rights Unit

- 6.1 The Welfare Rights Team have continued to review and amend provision to assist even more people with existing resources. There are 13 Welfare Rights Workers who provide, on a weekly basis, 88 general advice appointments, 153 hours of telephone advice and home visits for those who have more complex enquiries but who are unable to leave their home. There are 2 Assistant Welfare Rights Workers who provide 20 form filling surgery appointments per week plus home visits for those who require help to complete the more lengthy claim forms. A contribution of £46,260 is received from Public Health towards this service.
- 6.2 2 Macmillan Welfare Rights Workers provide a comprehensive service to those suffering with cancer and their families. During 2015 they assisted 4869 clients. By working closely with clinicians and support workers across Leeds they aim to ensure that benefit advice forms an integral part of the patient's pathway. Macmillan Cancer Support continues to provide funding for this service – in 2016/17 the funding contribution is £63,292.00.
- 6.3 Benefit appeal requests, predominantly appeals relating to disability benefits, are dealt with primarily by the 4 Senior Welfare Rights Workers. In the first quarter of 2016/17 206 requests were received this was an increase of 42% on the first quarter of 2015/16. On average each appeal takes 4.5 hours to deal with but across Leeds there are very few agencies that have workers with the appropriate skills to deal with these requests so the majority do tend to fall to the Welfare Rights Unit.
- 6.4 In total the Welfare Rights Team dealt with 34,543 enquiries in 2015/16 which in turn generated estimated benefit gains totalling £19,681,407.00.
- 6.5 The Welfare Rights Unit also has 2 workers attached to the 13+ teams in Children's Services one of whom deals with policies and procedures in relation to benefits and other financial support for young people. The second worker works more directly with the young people and their PA's to ensure they make appropriate claims for benefits in a timely manner. The work they have undertaken since 2014 has been outstanding and the gains generated and savings made for the authority have more than covered the costs of their posts.
- 6.6 The Senior Community Development Officer based in South Leeds continues to provide a comprehensive service including group sessions to help boost confidence and build skills to improve employability and surgery appointments to assist with benefit enquiries and low

level immigration advice. Partnership work is key to this role and the officer has built up excellent links with the team at Dewsbury Road One Stop Centre, the team at the Vale Circles, Social Services, Education Leeds and the Police.

6.7 In September 2015 a new post of Training/Specialist Benefit Consultant was introduced. This post-holder ensures those on the Welfare Right Unit are kept fully up to date with all changes to benefit legislation. Training has also been provided to several other teams from Carers Leeds, Housing Advisors (Benefits), Fostering Support Group, Customer Services, Teenage Parenting Team, LGI, GP's and Touchstone

7.0 Challenges for the Advice Sector going forward

7.1 The expectation is that demand for advice will continue to grow. This is because Welfare Reforms are still being rolled out including further reductions to the Benefit Cap levels from autumn, the ongoing roll out of Universal Credit, the migration from Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independence Payment and further changes to Housing Benefit and, potentially, Council Tax Support.

7.2 Over the last few years benefit legislation has become even more complex and the number of people seeking advice has increased. At the same time overall funding for advice has been reduced and several experienced Welfare Rights Workers have left the sector stating they no longer feel able to help and support people.

7.3 The number of individuals who require an interpreter also continues to result in pressure being placed on the budgets of advice providers. Once again as legislation is amended on a frequent basis for persons from abroad the number of enquiries also increases. Last year the Welfare Rights Unit spent £6,621.53 on interpreting services whilst Citizens Advice and Better Leeds Communities spent in excess of £20,000, of which £9,244.66 was spent with the Council's Interpreting and Translation Team.

7.4 Any funding cuts will have a significant impact on service provision; however, the need for advice will not diminish. The majority of those seeking advice are vulnerable adults who are unable to help themselves so will still require access to advice. The Advice Consortium quote 29% of their clients have a long term health condition or disability 31% of whom identified themselves as having a mental health problem.

7.5 There will clearly be implications arising from a situation which sees reductions in funding against a background of growing demand. For those providing the service there will be increased pressure due to assisting more clients with less resource, whilst clients will have to wait longer to get advice, if at all, and this may come at a cost.

7.6 There are limited options for matching advice resources with demand. Where costs savings can be made through better collaboration between advice agencies or through better use of accommodation, this will be pursued. Other options for reducing costs or matching resources to funding include:-

- Encouraging more people to use self-help options e.g. websites, helplines etc. Citizens Advice already has a website offering online advice and the use of e-claims

can provide an option for those needing help with claim completion. However, for more complex benefits such as disability benefits, this option may be less effective;

- Encouraging more people to seek advice by phone or email;
- Reducing or removing drop-in facilities for those wanting a face-to-face service and replacing the service with surgery appointments only; reducing the number of surgeries provided. These options are likely to require a further review of the number of agencies involved in delivering advice
- Further reducing or removing home visits;
- Reviewing the provision of interpretation where this is a cost to the service;
- Limiting the issues/areas where help will be provided e.g. limiting help with PIP or DLA appeals.

8.0 Corporate Considerations

8.1 Consultation and Engagement

8.1.1 The report is not proposing any changes to the current service provision and as such there is no need for wider consultation.

8.2 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration

8.2.1 This is not a decision-making report and as such there is no need for an EIA screening document to be completed.

8.3 Council policies and City Priorities

8.3.1 The provision of advice supports the Council Plan around supporting communities and tackling poverty. Advice is a key tool in tackling homelessness, maximising income and tackling debt issues.

8.4 Resources and value for money

8.4.1 The information provided within this report demonstrates how advice across the city has been provided to ensure best use of resources and value for money.

8.5 Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In

8.5.1 The report is provided within the context of the formal role of Scrutiny Boards within the Council's constitution. There is no decision being made and there is therefore no call-in requirement.

8.6 Risk Management

8.6.1 In many cases access to advice can help to secure a client's income, reduce indebtedness and help them to remain in their homes. Without this further costs may be incurred not only for the local authority but also for the NHS.

9.0 Recommendations

Members are invited to consider the information provided within this report and comment on options for the future if funding cuts are to be implemented.

10.0 Background documents¹

10.1 None

¹ The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the Council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.