

OPEN

Adults and Health Committee

25 September 2023

Recommissioning of Universal Information & Advice Service

Report of: Helen Charlesworth-May, Executive Director of People

Report Reference No: AH/06/2022-23

Ward(s) Affected: All

Purpose of Report

- 1 This report seeks approval from Adults and Health Committee to recommission the Universal Information and Advice (UIA) Service.
- 2 This service contributes to the Council's Corporate Plan 2021-25 objective of being a council which empowers and cares about people and the priority to 'reduce health inequalities across the borough'.

Executive Summary

- 3 The Universal Information and Advice service provides financial information and advice to all residents of Cheshire East. This thereby enables improved choice and control, improved mental health and wellbeing and leads to reduced demand on statutory services.
- 4 The data received through performance monitoring shows a consistent demand for the service, with particular need for debt advice due to the cost-of-living crisis.
- 5 Consultation has taken place to gauge residents' views on the current service and needs going forward. Engagement with members and stakeholders has also taken place and has helped to refine what is required of the service going forward. Market engagement has also been undertaken.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Adults and Health Committee is recommended to:

1. Approve the recommissioning of the Universal Information and Advice service
2. Delegate authority to the Director of Commissioning and Integration to award the contract(s)

Background

- 6 The Universal Information and Advice service provides independent, confidential, impartial information and advice which focuses on problem solving. It is accessible through a variety of channels, such as face to face, telephone and online support.
- 7 The service is currently provided by Citizens Advice Services in Cheshire East, which is a partnership between Citizens Advice Cheshire East (lead provider) and Citizens Advice Cheshire North. The service has been in place since 1 April 2019 and the contract will end as of 31 March 2024.
- 8 The primary reasons that residents access the service are for:
 - Benefits, tax credits and universal credit advice
 - Debt advice
 - Housing advice.
- 9 7,562 individual clients accessed the service in 2022/23, with 20,081 high level advice issues supported. The average queue time for a telephone call was circa 8.8 minutes. Residents were assisted to realise £3.4m worth of financial benefits and savings.
- 10 Demographics of clients accessing the service show that in 2022/23 on average 54% had a disability or long-term health condition; of these 29% had multiple impairments and 28% had a mental health condition. 38% were tenants of a housing association / registered social landlord and 20% had an income under £400 per calendar month. This shows that residents with some of the greatest needs are utilising the service and therefore benefitting from the advice given.
- 11 Demand for the service has remained consistent with some changes in need seen due to the cost of living crisis. Clients accessing advice for

debt in 2022/23 has increased by 18% on 2021/22. Also, Citizens Advice have highlighted increased trends in the need for food banks, utility bill support, benefits (including PIP claims) and housing issues.

- 12 The issues that clients are presenting with are more complex and taking longer to resolve. On average, in 2022/23 each client presented with 2.7 issues, an increase of 12.5% on 2021/22.
- 13 The Money and Pensions Service carry out a national annual debt survey. The 2022 survey showed that 18% of the UK adult population (around 9.3 million people) needed full debt advice from a registered provider. This has increased from 16% in 2021. The Poverty JSNA published in December 2022 has also highlighted the increased demand for food banks, that people in households with disabilities, single parents and single adults without children are particularly likely to experience poverty.
- 14 It is of note that there are relatively few alternative services available that cover the full range of support provided by the UIA service. Examples include:
 - Age UK Cheshire East - which provides information and advice to older people only;
 - Christians Against Poverty - have accredited debt advisors but only in limited areas of Cheshire East;
 - Pennysmart CIC - which only provides telephone and online support.
- 15 Due to the clear need amongst local residents the intention is to issue a tender opportunity for a three year contract with two one year extensions. The new service will support the following service outcomes:
 - To help residents receive the benefits they are entitled to, including assistance for those requiring help with applications and appeals
 - To improve the financial capability of individuals and help residents with debt and budget management
 - To help residents with support and legal advice regarding complex housing issues around deposits, essential property repairs, and to avoid homelessness including support with court hearings
 - To help people remain in employment with the appropriate rights and support.
- 16 The service will have a single point of access so residents can easily access the information and advice that they need. This will be

accessible via phone and online (with face-to-face support also being available).

- 17 The service will be focussed on areas of deprivation but will also offer outreach across a range of other locations in the Borough via face-to-face sessions.
- 18 Regular promotion and accessible branding of the service will be needed to ensure that all residents are aware of it and how they can best access it.
- 19 The service provider(s) will have to be accredited by the Financial Conduct Authority to be able to provide qualified consumer credit advice. They will also need to be an organisation listed as a competent authority that can authorise approved intermediaries for debt relief orders.

Consultation and Engagement

- 20 Consultation took place with residents via focus groups, drop-in meetings and telephone interviews. An online survey was also conducted which was promoted through the Council's consultation webpages and Digital Influence panel (see Appendix A). All feedback received has been used to inform the service specification.
- 21 In total, 266 responses were received to the survey. A large proportion of these respondents had heard of the service, with 74% aware that it provides financial information and advice. Service access was flagged as an issue amongst respondents. This included ensuring that drop-in sessions are available at a wider range of locations. The main barrier to being able to manage their finances well was the cost-of-living crisis, with most respondents also highlighting benefits advice as being important.
- 22 Engagement with members has also taken place. Feedback from this noted the increasing demand for financial advice and the increasing complexity of issues that are raised by residents. They also highlighted the need for face to face sessions for residents that lack of the ability to use and/or do not have access to technology. It was also noted that all residents should be able to access the service as residents seen as middle income earners may also be struggling with utility bills.
- 23 Stakeholders have been consulted through both a survey and online focus groups. 69% of survey respondents reported they regularly signpost people to the service. However, half of survey respondents did not know the service was commissioned by Cheshire East Council. These findings were also repeated by the online focus groups.

- 24 In both the survey and focus groups there was also feedback on the need for more face-to-face/ outreach support, timeliness of support and the need for support for filling in benefit forms.
- 25 Representatives from Revenues & Benefits, Customer Services, Libraries and Communities have also been engaged as part of the recommissioning process.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 26 Residents will continue to be able to access information and advice that will help to support their health and wellbeing and resilience. This is particularly important given the current cost-of-living crisis. Furthermore, the service will reduce their need to access statutory health, care and housing services.
- 27 The recommission supports the Corporate Plan priority to, “reduce health inequalities across the borough”.

Other Options Considered

- 28 Do nothing and allow the contract to end, which will mean that the service will cease to be provided. This would result in a lack of early intervention advice for residents and would therefore increase demand for statutory health, care and housing services.

Implications and Comments

Monitoring Officer/Legal

- 29 If the value of the recommissioned service over its entire term exceeds the financial threshold of £663,540 it will need to be competitively tendered using the Light Touch procedure in accordance with the Public Contract Regulations 2015, however if the value falls below the above mentioned threshold, the contract will be tendered in accordance with the procedures set out under Chapter 3, part 5 paragraph 3.1, of the Council’s Contract Procedure Rules.

Section 151 Officer/Finance

- 30 The new service will be delivered within the existing service budget. The budget for this service is £277,000 per annum and is within the Adults Commissioning Team Plan. As such, there are no implications for the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

Policy

- 31 The commission contributes to the Council's Corporate Plan 2021-25 objective of being a council which empowers and cares about people and the priority to 'reduce health inequalities across the borough'.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- 32 An Equality Impact Assessment has been developed as part of the recommissioning process. Please see Appendix B.

Human Resources

- 33 It is likely that TUPE would apply for staff from the existing providers if the contract is awarded to a new provider.

Risk Management

- 34 Recommissioning of the service is following a project management approach which includes the identification of risks. As such, any significant risk will be controlled for and escalated for action where appropriate.

Rural Communities

- 35 The service offer will include telephone and online access to the service. The service specification will also include the need for face-to-face appointments to be delivered at a range of accessible venues. This would provide rural communities with an opportunity to meet with an advisor in person where required.

Children and Young People including Cared for Children, care leavers and Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

- 36 The service aims to support those residents with the greatest need, this could include care leavers and parent carers.

Public Health

- 37 Financial issues are understood to have a significant impact on the wellbeing of people. This can result in anxiety, stress and poor mental health. This in turn can have negative physical health effects such as contributing to high blood pressure.

Climate Change

- 38 The recommission of the service will include social value questions including one specific to the environment. This will seek to minimise the

environmental impact of the service. The service specification will also contain specific requirements relating to this.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Kelly Brighthouse, Project Manager kelly.brighthouse@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Appendices:	Appendix A – Citizens Advice Information and Advice Service Survey 2022 – Summary Report Appendix B – Equality Impact Assessment
Background Papers:	Corporate Plan and Health and Wellbeing Strategy