

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Cabinet

Date of Meeting: 3rd March 2015
Report of: Head of Communities
Subject/Title: Grant Funding Citizens Advice Services
Portfolio Holder: Councillor David Brown – Strategic Outcomes

1.0 Report Summary

- 1.1 As a Residents First Council, we consider access to universal, free, confidential and impartial information and advice services to be critical in enabling our residents to live independent and self-sufficient lives.
- 1.2 To support this we provide grant funding to Cheshire East Citizens Advice Bureau North and Cheshire East Citizens Advice Bureau to provide advice and support on debt, welfare benefit and housing related matters to the residents of Cheshire East.
- 1.3 Since April 2014, they have dealt with 6,608 face to face enquiries, 1,879 telephone calls and 870 email enquiries. The most common problems that the CABs help Cheshire East residents with are Benefits and Tax Credits, Debt, Employment, Housing and Relationships and Families.
- 1.4 Some of the outcomes that the service has helped to achieve for residents include:
 - Total benefit and tax credit gains of £522,000
 - Support for debts totalling £1.7m
- 1.5 We know that these are independent voluntary organisations that should not rely solely on the Council for their sustainability and we want to actively encourage them to further diversify their funding base. Therefore, we are working with the two Citizen Advice Bureaus (CABs) to design a financially sustainable service for the future that is aligned with the Council's priorities and is responsive to the needs of residents.
- 1.6 Our goal is to move away from an annual funding arrangement, which is restrictive to medium term planning and investment, to a longer term commissioned arrangement from April 2016. This will also allow the lottery funded Cheshire East Co-ordinated Advice Partnership (CECAP) project to conclude. The project was established to transform advice services in Cheshire East by enabling organisations to work together to deliver a smarter, more effective, efficient and sustainable delivery model.
- 1.7 The proposed grant to the two CABs for 2015/16 is £317,990. The current funding for the two CABs for 2014/15 is £287,990, split between the two bureaus £90,778 to the north and £197,212 to the south. To provide further time

for the two bureaus to reach agreement it is proposed that an additional £30,000 of grant funding is brought forward from future years and allocated to CECAB North for 2015/16. The funding allocation for CECAB North and as a consequence the overall funding for 2016/17, 2017/18 and 2018/19 will be reduced by £10,000 each year. The total cost of the grant funding over the four year period will therefore remain the same.

- 1.8 The Council has the powers to award a grant to the CAB to support the organisation using its general power of competence in Section 1 of the Localism Act 2011. It is therefore proposed that Grant funding for universal Information and Advice Services is awarded for a period of 12 months from 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016.

2.0 Recommendation

- 2.1 That Cabinet agree to award grant funding for the provision of universal information and advice services across Cheshire East to:

- (i) Cheshire East Citizens Advice Bureau of £197,212 in 2015/16
- (ii) Cheshire East Citizens Advice Bureau North of £120,778 in 2015/16 on the understanding that the funding allocation for CECAB North and as a consequence the overall funding for 2016/17, 2017/18 and 2018/19 will be reduced by £10,000 each year. The total cost of the grant funding over the four year period will therefore remain the same.

3.0 Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 Cheshire East Council grant funding to Citizens Advice Bureau North and Cheshire East Citizens Advice Bureau will enable them to provide independent, confidential and impartial advice and support on debt, welfare benefit and housing related matters to the residents of Cheshire East.
- 3.2 Failure to provide the Grant to fund Universal Information and Advice Services would result in no services of this nature being available to residents of Cheshire East from 1 April 2015. Whilst this could be considered a loss to all residents of Cheshire East this is likely to have a particularly negative impact on service users that have a protected characteristic detailed in the Equalities Act 2010.
- 3.3 An absence of Universal Information and Advice Services at a time of fundamental and wide reaching changes to the whole welfare and benefits system will inevitably result in increased pressure upon the Council to compensate for this reduction in capacity and volume, with implications relating to the need for the provision of additional services to residents and the corresponding cost implications.

4.0 Wards Affected

- 4.1 All wards

5.0 Local Ward Members

5.1 Not applicable

6.0 Policy Implications

6.1 The Council's has defined its priority outcomes, which include:

- Outcome 1 – Local communities are strong and supportive. Individuals and families are self-reliant and take personal responsibility for their quality of life.
- Outcome 3 – People have the life skills and education they need to thrive. Everyone is equipped to live independent, self-sufficient lives, and to realise their particular talents and abilities.

6.2 The Council considers access to universal, free, independent, confidential and impartial information and advice services to be critical in supporting and enabling residents to become self-reliant and take personal responsibility for their quality of life in order to live independent, self-sufficient lives.

7.0 Rural Implications

7.1 CAB deliver services in our outreach locations and provide a telephone and email service for those that cant physically reach them. The ambition through community hubs in rural areas is to provide links to these types of services through increasing broadband access

8.0 Financial Implications

8.1 The funding for the provision of these services for 2015/16 is £317,990. This spend is already accounted for through the Communities budget.

8.2 The Chief Officers of Cheshire East Citizens Advice Bureau North and Cheshire East Citizens Advice Bureau have been asked to work together to agree a proposal for the allocation of the funding between their bureaus that they consider to be fair, equitable and sustainable. It is recognized that a longer term sustainable service may require the two bureaus to challenge the way their services are delivered today and consider opportunities for them to work more closely together or share services or costs.

9.0 Legal Implications

9.1 In deciding whether to directly award a grant Cabinet must consider the facts and circumstances in which a direct grant award is being proposed (as opposed to awarding a grant following a competitive bidding process or going out to tender) together with the identified risks (paragraph 9) and be satisfied that in making a direct award the Council's is meeting its public law duties.

9.2 The Council has the powers to award a grant to the CAB to support the organisation using its general power of competence in Section 1 of the Localism Act 2011. In exercising the power the Council must satisfy its public law duties.

In essence this means that in making the decision the Council must have taken into account only relevant considerations, followed procedural requirements, acted for proper motives and not acted unreasonably.

- 9.3 The Council must also be mindful of public sector equality duties and the impact of its decision on service users that have a protected characteristic detailed in the Equalities Act 2010.
- 9.4 There is currently no overarching Council policy/framework by which grant funding should be allocated and in principle a direct grant award can be made. However, it is also noted that the Council is moving to a commissioning model and that direct grant awards without competition are considered to be an exception.
- 9.5 In awarding a grant the Council cannot exhibit the same amount of control over the organisation as is commensurate with a contract. Essentially the terms of the grant should set out with what the purpose of the grant is for and only claim claw back provisions in the case of the grant funding being used for other purposes or otherwise improperly. The Council will not be able to assess the quality of the services that are being provided to those requiring welfare advice and determine to withdraw grant funding on that basis (except at the end of the period of the grant funding).

10.0 Risk Management

- 10.1 Whilst the Council has the powers to award a grant to the CAB to support the organisation using its general power of competence in Section 1 of the Localism Act 2011, there is currently no overarching Council policy/framework to assist in determining the mechanism by which grant funding should be allocated and there remains therefore a risk that this decision may be challenged by other providers.
- 10.2 In deciding whether to directly award a grant the Council must therefore consider the facts and circumstances in which a direct grant award is being proposed together with the identified risks and be satisfied that in making a direct award the Council's is meeting its public law duties.

11.0 Background and Options

- 11.1 Cheshire East Council grant funds Citizens Advice Bureau North and Cheshire East Citizens Advice Bureau to provide independent, confidential and impartial advice and support on debt, welfare benefit and housing related matters to the residents of Cheshire East. The services provided are universal - access to services is not restricted by client group or eligibility criteria and they are free at the point of access.
- 11.2 Citizens Advice is a national service made up of more than 300 member Citizens Advice Bureaux, all individual charities, along with the national Citizens Advice charity. The Citizens Advice service aims to deliver value to society by helping people to solve the problems they face. They help people develop the skills and confidence they need to help themselves. They also use their clients'

experiences to campaign for policy changes that benefit everyone. The Citizens Advice service say that they deliver savings for Government agencies because the advice they offer and the way they help clients solve their problems means Government agencies, including local authorities, are less likely to deal with clients.

11.3 The service provides:

- Welfare benefits advice, which leads to increased benefit take up, resolve administration problems or challenges to discrimination;
- Debt advice, which leads to the prioritising and rescheduling of debts and improved financial capability for individuals;
- Housing advice, which leads to recovered deposits, property repairs, and the avoidance of homelessness;
- Employment advice, which can lead to a financial outcome, such as compensation and/or a non-financial outcome, such as reinstatement, enforcement of terms and conditions, or an end to harassment at work.

11.4 The Citizens Advice service further benefits society through the positive impact their advice has on the health and wellbeing of residents, reducing stress and anxiety, preventing relationship breakdown, promoting employment and empowering people to make wider positive changes to their lives. The service is proud of the fact that their volunteering opportunities lead to volunteers gaining new skills and personal development, and these positive effects on individuals' lives have additional value for society, through the advantages and savings associated with having happier, healthier and more productive members of the community.

11.5 The Cheshire East Co-ordinated Advice Partnership (CECAP) project was established in September 2013. This two year project, funded by the Big Lottery, was created to transform advice services in Cheshire East by enabling organisations to work better together to deliver a smarter, more effective, efficient and sustainable delivery model with particular emphasis on education, outreach and prevention, whilst retaining and improving specialist, technical, emergency advice and support for the most vulnerable in our communities. The three main project outcomes are:

- Streamlined advice services meeting clients' needs more efficiently
- More empowered communities
- Information and advice needs of the community met through a more sustainable and enterprising business model

11.6 The Council has been working with the CABs to agree a set of priorities and commissioning goals that will lead to the design of a sustainable Citizens Advice service that is affordable within the funding available. This process is aspiring to commission a 3 year contract from 1st April 2016 to 31st March 2019. The current process is restrictive to medium term planning and investment as the CABs cannot rely on funding continuing. It is recognized that a long term sustainable service may require the two bureaux to challenge the way their services are delivered and consider opportunities for them to work more closely

together or share services or costs. CAB locations are also being reviewed to ensure service delivery is responsive to local demand and equitable across the borough, with the Principal Towns and Key Service Centres from the evolving Local Plan proposed as likely service locations.

12.0 Access to Information

The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting the report writer:

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