

Report to Cabinet Member for Public Health and Wellbeing

December 2021

Commissioning of Community Advice and Support services in West Sussex

Report by Director of Public Health

Electoral division(s): All

Summary

The current Community Advice contract provides a generalist advice service across West Sussex and will cease on 31st March 2022. The service model has been developed over many years to meet the specific needs of West Sussex and is funded via a long-standing partnership arrangement between the County Council and District and Borough Councils that dates back to 2010. The current 2019-22 contract provides the majority of the core funding (£1m p.a.) for the service provided by Citizens Advice across West Sussex. The remainder of the funding for the service is raised by Citizens Advice through fundraising and income generated from additional contracts.

In summer 2021 representatives from the Funding Partnership met to discuss the contract including future funding arrangements and contract development within the context of the pandemic and the evident increase in service demand. The Funding Partnership proposed that the County Council, working in partnership with the District and Borough councils, commissions a 3+3+1 year contract to continue the service provision for 2022-29.

The procurement of the service for the period of seven years (3+3+1) is in accord with the West Sussex Plan 2021-25 with a clear commitment from the County Council to support effective partnership working with District and Borough partners and Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector service providers, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the first three-year period of the contract, the service will meet changing needs and demands resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic; for example, the demands for employment advice resulting from the furlough scheme, changes to housing support needs and help for families experiencing financial challenges etc.

The second three-year period will focus on post-pandemic normalisation and a return to service development within a post-pandemic context. The final one-year period will allow for service review and recommissioning based on learning outcomes.

Market engagement undertaken in 2021 suggested that there was some interest in the contract resulting in the procurement decision for an open-tender process and award.

Recommendations

The Cabinet Member for Public Health and Wellbeing is asked to approve:

- (1) the procurement of a Community Advice & Support service via an open tender process, from 1st April 2022 for a period of 3+3+1 years;
 - (2) that the County Council leads the tendering process on behalf of our funding partners, the West Sussex District and Borough Councils; and
 - (3) that authority is delegated to the Director of Public Health to award the contract to the successful bidder.
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Proposal

1 Background and context

- 1.1 The Community Advice & Support Service is part of the information and advice (I &A) commissioning portfolio within Public Health. It primarily provides support to working age adults and families and is commissioned as part of the Council's general duty for the promotion of wellbeing under the Care Act 2014. The other I&A services commissioned by the County Council include I&A for people over the age of 65 years provided by Age UK West Sussex and Healthwatch West Sussex.
- 1.2 The service model has been developed over many years to meet the specific needs of West Sussex and is funded via a long-standing partnership arrangement between the County Council and the District and Borough Councils that dates back to 2010. The current contract with Citizens Advice to provide a generalist advice service across West Sussex will cease 31st March 2022.
- 1.3 The contract is funded via a long-standing partnership arrangement between the County Council and the West Sussex District and Borough Councils that dates from 2010. The current contract provides the majority of the core funding (£1m p.a.) for the Citizens Advice service provided across West Sussex. The remainder of the funding is raised by Citizens Advice through income generated from additional contracts that depend upon the core service and fund raising.
- 1.4 Many of the clients supported by the service are in or are moving towards a crisis situation, particularly as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic from April 2020 onwards. Therefore, the service has a key ongoing role in responding to the pandemic alongside community hubs and services provided by District & Borough councils and the VCSE. The service has a considerable direct impact on other County Council services including Adult's Services e.g. support with Personal Independence Payments (PIP), Public Health e.g. addressing health inequalities and economic development through supporting the workforce in West Sussex to be employment ready. The service works in partnership with other Information & Advice (I&A) providers to ensure a coordinated approach across West Sussex.

- 1.5 The service is monitored on a quarterly basis and demand has consistently increased throughout the previous contract period(s), most likely due to the impact of the national economic situation during the pre-pandemic period. This has resulted in an increased number and complexity of cases in West Sussex that has also been evidenced by other organisations, for example the Sussex Community Foundation (SCF).
- 1.6 In 2017 Citizens Advice in West Sussex piloted a new national data recording system which provides much more specific performance data, including income generated for clients. The new recording system calculates income gained from these activities, which is additional monies brought into the county that benefits the local economy (see **Appendix 1**. 2021 Quarter 1 example data report). Through this the Council has improved information around the direct impacts of the service, for example in the numbers of clients supported to access Personal Independence Payments (PIP) and Attendance Allowance.
- 1.7 The service has performed well against the objectives and parameters set for the 2019-22 contract period. The current contract has focused on improving service access, working with priority groups and service modernisation including the use of new technology, with strong support provided by national Citizens Advice to develop the West Sussex service. As a result, the current service was 'pandemic ready' in April 2020 and moved quickly to a telephone and a digital access service model that has performed very effectively.
- 1.8 The procurement of the service for a period of seven years is in accord with the *West Sussex Plan 2021-25* with a clear commitment from the County Council to support effective partnership working with District and Borough partners and Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector service providers, particularly in response to the pandemic.
- 1.9 The service is often the first point of contact for people in crisis situations and works with other VCSE organisations that operate within County, District & Borough, and other local boundaries. A universal advice and support offer contributes to the following key West Sussex Plan objectives:
- **Keeping people safe from vulnerable situations**
 - **A sustainable and prosperous economy**
 - **Helping people and communities to fulfil their potential**
 - **Making the best use of resources**
- 1.10 The service in West Sussex also supports better local partnership working in promoting place-based local service delivery, supporting Local Community Networks and Social Prescribing to address health inequalities and by the providing local volunteering opportunities.

2 Proposal details

- 2.1 In summer 2021 the County Council working in partnership with the District and Borough Councils agreed the re-commissioning a contract via an open tender process to continue the current service provision for 2022-29. The proposal to award the contract for 3+3+1 years - meaning that the contract shall be awarded for three years initially with an option to extend for a further three

years followed by an option to extend for a further one year (seven years in total). This has been agreed by all partners as it is consistent with funding review cycles. It also minimises any risk of unexpected funding changes outside this agreed funding arrangement. The funding partnership arrangement is supported by an Inter-Agency Funding Agreement, a legal document signed by all parties. Funding from all partners will remain the same for the contract period, subject to annual budget confirmation – see funding table below.

- 2.2 The proposal for an open tender and subsequent contract has been reviewed at Procurement Board this month and approved. The revised Service Specification builds upon the effective service development and service delivery to date including pandemic response. The specification will be completed in mid-November 2021, allowing for the commissioning of the contract from late November 2021 onwards.
- 2.3 Assurance of funding levels from all West Sussex Authorities has been received and work is ongoing with the current Service Provider to continually develop the service in relation to the pandemic and possible contract transfer to a new service provider. The Service Provider will invoice each Funder-Partner directly and an annual inflationary uplift will also be at the discretion of each Funder-Partner.
- 2.4 There are no new resource implications for the Council as the service will continue for the same contract value for the contract period. Due to the pandemic and the increase in demand, the service has provided additional advice and support to clients at no extra cost to the Councils. This illustrates the value for money derived from the contract as well as the support provided to vulnerable clients before they reach crisis point.
- 2.5 The Service Provider will be required to demonstrate how their proposal balances technical and quality requirements against commercial elements to ensure the delivery of an affordable service that is best value for money.
- 2.6 Breakdown of funding allocations is as follows. All figures shown are per annum.

Council	Amount
Adur DC	£83,824 p.a.
Arun DC	£120,550 p.a.
Crawley BC	£140,569 p.a.
Chichester DC	£86,300 p.a.
Horsham DC	£93,000 p.a.
Mid-Sx DC	£119,404 p.a.
Worthing BC	£79,829 p.a.
WSCC	£350,000 p.a.

Total	£1,073,476
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- 2.7 It is proposed to delegate the authority to the Director of Public Health to let the contract on behalf of all the West Sussex Authorities as Funding Partners for this service.

3 Other options considered (and reasons for not proposing)

- 3.1 The Funding Partnership has worked effectively for many years to develop and support the current service model and has the potential to continue operating for the benefit of residents in West Sussex. The funding partnership has therefore concluded that there appears to be little to be gained by reverting back to direct local commissioning and local funding from each partner.
- 3.2 During the course of 2020-21 the funding partnership discussed the impact of reverting back to direct local commissioning from each Partner-Funders. Direct funding from each partner would undermine the service model that has received considerable investment for over ten years and would reduce value for money, the opportunity for shared costs and shared in-kind support.

4 Consultation, engagement, and advice

- 4.1 The Funder-Partners consider the current service model and Service Specification to be appropriate for the commissioning of a seven-year service. In 2014 a survey was conducted to gauge the opinions of residents around the provision of information and advice and its availability within West Sussex. The outcomes of the survey remain relevant for the proposed procurement; however, it is recognised that a survey post the pandemic period would be appropriate and would correspond with 2nd period of the contract award.
- 4.2 The current Service Provider undertakes a regular client satisfaction survey and additional evidence had been collected from stakeholders to allow for commissioning in 2021 through effective performance monitoring.

5 Finance

- 5.1 The contract will be for 3+3+1 years (see paragraph 2.1 above) in line with the decision making funding cycle of the District and Borough Councils and in recognition of the significant role that the service has played and continues to play in response to the pandemic across all of West Sussex. Funding from all the partners will remain the same for the contract period subject to annual budget availability and approval – see table below. The service provider will invoice each Funder-Partner directly and an annual inflationary uplift will also be at the discretion of each Funder-Partner.

5.2 Revenue consequences

	Current Year £m	Year 1 2022/23 £m	Year 2 2023/24 £m	Year 3 2024/25 £m	Year 4 2025/26	Year 5 2026/27	Year 6 2027/28	Year 7 2028/29
Revenue budget	0.350	0.350	0.350	0.350	0.350	0.350	0.350	0.350
Cost of Proposal		0.350	0.350	0.350	0.350	0.350	0.350	0.350
Remaining budget	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

5.2 The effect of the proposal:

(a) **How the cost represents good value**

The Community Advice and Support Service provides a service to over 25,000 customers county-wide every year. The investment in this service enables people facing debt, housing, benefit, pension, health and well-being issues to access the advice and information needed to avoid crisis. The service brings significant amounts of benefit entitlements into the County, enabling people to support themselves and families. The service model employs significant numbers of trained volunteers, benefiting those individuals and reducing staff costs.

The Service specification requires increased performance, quarterly monitoring with countywide, District and Borough Council data. There will also be further development of the Digital Service programme with targets for an annual increase in the number of cases being dealt with.

Market engagement has demonstrated that there are 3 organisations interested in bidding for the new contract, indicating healthy competition can be achieved for the funding available.

(b) **Future savings/efficiencies being delivered**

There will be no cashable savings.

(c) **Human Resources, IT and Assets Impact**

None

6 Risk implications and mitigations

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
If a sufficient number of funder-partners cease to support the partnership commissioning may default back to individual local arrangements and the funding partnership may cease.	To be managed by the Funder-Partnership with a new Partnership agreement to be in place from contract award.

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
The County Council could choose to end its participation in the funding partnership, including its leadership role, in which case service funding would default back to individual local arrangements with countywide co-ordination becoming a task for the district and borough councils.	To be managed by the Funder-Partnership with a new Partnership agreement to be in place from contract award.
Funding from all partners remains the same for the duration of the contract period, subject to annual budget confirmations from each partner-funders.	To be managed by the Funder-Partnership with a new Partnership agreement to be in place from contract award.

7 Policy alignment and compliance

- 7.1 **Equality and human rights assessment:** There is no adverse impact on people with protected characteristics covered by the Equality Act 2010. The service is universal in nature and therefore available and accessible by the whole population of West Sussex.
- 7.2 The primary purpose of the contract held jointly between all West Sussex Local Authorities is to minimise the areas of the county where access to help, information and guidance has previously been limited. This could be as a result of a lack of access to an advice centre, opening hours which limit access by people in daytime employment and access to language assistance being hard to find when needed to aid the advice process.
- 7.3 **Social value and sustainability assessment:** The social value outcomes proposed in the aims of the service support the ambitions of the West Sussex Plan through:
- Ensuring more opportunities for disadvantaged people and promoting local skills and employment
 - Supporting more local people into employment
 - Supporting the growth of local businesses
 - Helping people live a healthy family, home and work life
 - Utilising volunteering opportunities and local partnerships with the VCS to provide a sustainable and thriving business and strengthen social and community capital
 - Supporting a strong community to reduce the risks of families in temporary accommodation
 - Empowering residents to take responsibility for their choices to improve their lives, health and wellbeing
- 7.4 In providing this service it will deliver value for money by addressing complex and multiple issues at the earliest opportunity to prevent escalation to crisis. This generates wider social and economic benefits amongst other local services by reducing demand and resolving complex issues before there is a need to access intensive support services.

- 7.5 The service will operate multiple access points to increase sustainability and reduce the impact on the environment by operating in local areas and offering a telephone, email and online chat service. It will consider the impact of transport in the provision of the service by utilising assets in local communities, ensuring that travel is kept to a minimum and the carbon footprint of the service is low.
- 7.6 This service will generate added social value by utilising an effective and diverse volunteer workforce to achieve its aims, reflective of the local community and the citizens using the service. The recruitment, training, support and retention of volunteers and the building of skills for employment will form part of its core business ethos. The volunteer base has equal opportunities in all areas of the service, including job opportunities and professional skills development.
- 7.7 The service will also promote a positive infrastructure for volunteering within West Sussex. The service will be a centre of excellence for recruitment, training, deployment, and retention of volunteers in the delivery of triage and general advice services. This includes recruiting volunteers who can accommodate the diversity of language needs in West Sussex to broaden accessibility of the service.
- 7.8 The service will take an active role in local and county partnerships in order to fulfil their role as an influencer and maximise social value. It will develop effective links with other public and voluntary sector services and work with all relevant partners to enable clear pathways.
- 7.9 It is also expected that where the service is asked to support Funding Partners in the delivery of a targeted service in a particular area or tackling a specific issue (e.g., a benefit take-up campaign or raising awareness of scams) that it will respond positively within its resources and remit. Work will be carried out at a local level and include other organisations in the community and the local authority where appropriate to maximise the impact of the proposed social value benefits.
- 7.10 The service will ensure that its customers and other organisations can contribute to its development. This will enable the service to identify trends and respond to changing needs and effectively report on the service provision gaps in West Sussex that may inform future commissioning decisions and investment in preventative services.
- 7.11 ***Crime and disorder reduction assessment:*** The provision of financial advice and support to clients in financial crisis may have an impact in reducing crime and anti-social behaviour in West Sussex.

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Appendix 1: 2021 Q1 example data report