

Report of the Strategic Directors of Health and Wellbeing and Corporate Services to the meeting of Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny to be held on 20th October 2020

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Subject:

Welfare Advice services in Bradford District

Summary statement:

The following report outlines the current commissioned welfare advice services across Bradford district, the delivery of services during the last year, including as affected by COVID-19 and plans for future service delivery

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1. SUMMARY

The following report will detail the provision of commissioned Welfare Advice services across the Bradford district. This includes information on what these deliver; the use made of them; budget reductions made in 2019-20; new investment granted by Bradford Council in 2020-21 and future plans

2. BACKGROUND

Bradford Council ran a commissioning programme for the delivery of professional welfare advice services in 2016-17-18. This resulted in five separate contracts let across 4 different lead providers for a term of four years plus one.

Four of the five contracted services are Area/constituency based delivering in Bradford East, West, South and Airedale (a combination of Shipley and Keighley). The last one operates district wide and is aimed at a client group who have complex and/or long term health conditions.

Who provides services?

The lead providers are;

Family Action: Local organisation that has expanded nationally with a regionally accountable governance structure

St Vincent Du Paul/CHAS: local organisation affiliated with a national provider with a locally accountable governance structure

Equality Together: local organisation with a locally accountable governance structure

Bradford and Airedale Citizens Advice Bureau and Law Centre: national affiliated organisation with a locally accountable governance structure

Lead providers have partners and sub-contracting arrangements with more locally based organisations to ensure that they meet the needs of all the communities in the district.

See appendix 1

What services are delivered?

Professional welfare advice services offer support, both practical and advisory, across a wide range of differing issues. This includes but is not limited to;

State financial support; welfare benefits, Universal credit, Personal Independence Payments (PIP), furlough and other income support such as pensioner credits etc.

Landlord tenant law and advice; homelessness and housing legislation, lease/rental agreement arrangements, eviction and/or housing repairs, mortgage relief schemes.

Local Council benefits; council tax, housing benefit, sign posting and support re adult services and care needs

Debt; advice and support to manage debts and income; Debt Relief Orders (DRO's)

Immigration/legal status support

The above is not exhaustive. Providers receive a wide range of contacts from the public and can and do form a bridge for other needs such as emergency food, domestic violence issues, child care and child support through to trading standards.

All service providers, including partners and sub-contractors are required to maintain nationally recognised accreditation systems including through the Home Office (for

immigration advice), the Financial Services Authority (for debt advice) and others as they apply.

Services range from one off and/or simple enquires through to court and/or tribunal representation.

The contracts issued were scheduled to end in January 2021; they have been formally extended for the 'plus one' term to January 2022. This is in recognition of the continuously changing climate brought about by COVID-19 and to create some stability in the district to manage the challenges anticipated in the coming months and to allow time to review and re-commission future services.

3. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

What has happened during COVID-19?

Lockdown

During the lock down period from March 2020 the nature, volume and delivery of welfare advice services has changed. This included significant change to access systems in order to protect clients and delivery staff; reducing face to face contact, the withdrawal of sessional options in community settings and switch to internet and telephone based services. Additionally overall service demand was affected by government financial protection schemes such as furlough, the moratorium on council tax payments, the suspension of the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) sanctions regime and other suspensions such as credit card and utility payments, the suspension of eviction in rented accommodation, food parcels and support for vulnerable households delivered directly by the Council and the partial closure of tribunals and courts systems across the country.

See Appendix 2

Impacts

Access

Prior to the national lock down, welfare advice was offered and accessed predominately through face to face contact. Sessions were based in community venues, doctors' surgeries, community centres, hospitals, town and city centre based offices, children's centres, foodbanks, drug and alcohol services etc. There was also telephone and internet based access albeit that these were not as well used.

From late March through to now all services including lead providers, partners and sub-contractors have had to reduce or stop 'face to face' access; switching to internet based options, web chat, e-mail, WhatsApp and telephone. Where possible the documentation required for welfare benefits applications, immigration cases and others has been received via the post or scanning and e-mail. This is manageable, although it must be recognised that not all people have adequate access to the internet. Therefore, all organisations have had to make limited face to face contact to support those in this position.

Needs

The cases presenting to services during COVID-19 have changed. The abeyance of courts, tribunals, evictions proceedings, immigration appeals, late payment notices etc. has meant that many existing complex cases and/or appeals have not proceeded, similarly the numbers of new cases asking for this type of help has reduced. Instead, people are asking for support with Government schemes; furlough etc. and access to welfare benefits as well as personal support around COVID-19, particularly initially those in 'shielded

groups and people with underlying health conditions. Welfare advice services are also playing a key role in food distribution for households in food poverty.

Recovery planning

Recovery plans for all welfare advice services were developed in June of this year, anticipating that falling infection rates would make it possible to resume limited reopening of face to face services. With the need to protect staff and customers, this meant appointment only systems and access to city centre bases in Bradford and Keighley only. Partners and sub-contractors have also tried to open for face to face options, however in the face of rising infection rates and new national and local guidance on personal contact this has stopped.

Individual service experiences

In the first quarter of 2019-20 the district wide service for people with complex and long term health conditions (lead provider- Equality Together) has seen a rise in appeals against personal independence payment applications (PIP), social care issues and more generally the need to reassure worried vulnerable clients. This has extended the time spent with clients but has been invaluable to support better health and wellbeing.

Citizen's Advice Bureau and Bradford Law Centre (CABABLC)-the locality based lead provider in Bradford West and Airedale has seen a 50% rise in generalist ring back appointments relating to furlough. These relate to Universal Credit (UC) and New Style UC claims (contribution based incapacity claims). One of their sub-contractors Girington Centre was seeing people face to face on a limited basis when the nature of the enquiry required it, predominantly in respect of immigration advice; this has stopped now as there was a suspected case of COVID-19 in their staff team resulting in the need to self-isolate.

Family Action the lead provider in Bradford East has experienced a rise in demand for advice on UC and New Style UC claims too and the additional help offered by the government. Operating by telephone and not face to face means that more time is needed for each call and the submission of supporting documentation can be problematic if individuals lack smart phones and/or computers in order to scan them.

St Vincent Du Paul/CHAS is the lead provider in South area and has also experienced an increase in UC claims and housing advice. Housing concerns include mortgage and rent 'holidays' and advice on what may come next, as well as furlough. The expectation is that on the lifting of current restrictions there could be surges in demand and specifically an increase in enquiries around homelessness and housing.

Council Customer Contact services

During the early lock down period, the Council's own customer contact services have been the first point of contact for many residents in the district. Enquires routed through the (01274) 431000 have related to a range of matters; welfare advice and access to emergency support systems being two of the largest. The locality based hubs operating at that time then made sure that welfare advice systems were fully connected in and all appropriate referrals were passed on.

The Customer Contact Centres in Keighley and in Bradford have remained open for face to face help throughout and have being able to routinely support the initial needs of householders and individuals wanting and/or eligible to claim UC. This is a very positive aspect of the Council's own service delivery and, as the centres are well linked into

welfare advice provision, they are able to quickly refer people with more complex needs such as debt or access to PIP. From the 1st April 2020 through to August 30th Customer Contacts dealt directly with 142 people's claims for Universal Credit and fielded 504 related queries. This is less than last year, again as a result of COVID-19.

Outcomes and Performance data –Appendix 3

How many enquires?

From the 1st April 2019 to January 2020 commissioned Welfare Advice services have dealt with 32,035 enquires from 11,167 people. These are split across the 5 contracts, the largest numbers coming from Bradford West (which includes the Bradford city centre base), then Bradford East and the combined Keighley and Shipley contract (including the Keighley Town centre base), followed up by Bradford South and the specific contract aimed at those with complex and/or long term health conditions.

From whom?

Of the 11,167 people the largest numbers came through Bradford West services' and the majority of presentations asked for support regarding welfare benefits, closely followed by debt issues. PIP, immigration and housing cases were also regularly raised and these types of enquires generally can take longer to resolve.

Customers' profiles

The largest number of people contacting services noted their ethnicity as being 'white British' followed by those self-defining as 'Asian' or 'Asian British'. Services are contacted by people from a wide range of different ethnicities, however there are concerns regarding the language and cultural needs of people from central and eastern European communities. Providers are hoping to tackle this as part of the plans for some of the new investment granted by the council.

The majority of people using services are between 26 and 56 years old. The single largest group however, is in the 56 to 80 age group.

Prior to COVID-19, outreach sessional work was accessed regularly. As discussed above this is not significantly different.

The sector has become aware through their contact with the Equity Partnership that people from the Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Trans-gender and Queer (LGBTQ) are underrepresented in their customer group. To tackle this, providers are working with directly with the Equity Partnership to train their teams and ensure that future services are accessible and recording better information about service usage from this diverse group.

Mental Health

In recognition of the impact that COVID-19 has had on individuals, particularly the worries and concerns relating to household income as a result of furlough, possible redundancy, job losses and the like there are plans to link up welfare advice services, the Credit Union and advocacy.

Transformation programme

In 2018-19, the Council employed FutureGov to work across welfare advice services and the Council's own Customer Contacts service with a view to bringing these two closer together and making significant reductions in the finances underpinning them. This laid the ground work for what has become the 'Transformation Programme', which is part of wider planning work streams for Early Intervention and Prevention. The advent of COVID-19 has put this programme into abeyance. However, learning points have already begun to

emerge from the closer working relationships between the services which have come about because of lock down from March 2020 till now.

4. FINANCIAL & RESOURCE APPRAISAL

The contracts issued in 2017/18 came to a total cost of £2,545,339.00. Subsequent changes to the financial support granted to Local Authorities during following years resulted in proposals to significantly reduce this investment. Original proposals indicated a reduction of £1.7 million, however during the consultation processes run to garner views in 2018-19 this was later reduced to £500,000.00 bringing the total budget to £2,057,355.00. See Appendix 1. The impact of this was less sessional/outreach opportunities being made available in community locations and less staff hours.

In summer 2020 Bradford Council's Executive recognising the importance of welfare advice and the part these services play in the district, particularly during COVID-19 agreed new short term investment of £350,000 up until the 31st March 2021. Full details can be found in **Appendix 4**.

This new investment and spending plans have been developed jointly with the lead providers and in consultation with their sub-contractors and/or partners using a co-design methodology. It will be used for the following;

Increase in staff hours across all services: due to the knowledge and expertise required to deliver these services organisations are uplifting existing staff hours. New recruitment is not possible for the few months that these extra funds will run.

IT upgrades: including software and hardware to increase functionality and the reach of internet based service options.

Language and cultural needs: this will purchase a new 'front end' service operated by the Council's Customer Contact service to ensure initial enquires will be met with staff who have appropriate Central and Eastern European (CEE) languages as well as the costs of translation/interpretation services.

Additionally, it is planned to run a targeted take up campaign aimed at CEE communities to advertise the dedicated phone line for access.

5. RISK MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE ISSUES

5.1 All the providers anticipate that when the legal & tribunal systems resume and the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) sanctions are re-imposed there is likely to be a rise in demand specifically relating to complex cases, both those which have been in abeyance and new ones. This surge will be hard to meet particularly through the more restrictive access required under social distancing.

5.2 There is pressure from the community for the resumption of 'face to face' access which will increase if and when current restrictions lift. The need for continued Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) is paramount and where and how these can be delivered is limited.

5.3 The systems in operation now, such as the use of the 431000 number and the Council's Customer Contacts centre are likely to see a rise in demand when local and national restrictions end and their role needs to be maintained in relation to welfare advice demand management and partnership.

5.4 There is an increase in UC claimants across the district, as furlough will not apply in some cases. The processes needed for economic recovery and people to resume paid

work maybe slow initially, leaving some householders at a disadvantage.

5.5 Changes in national income support systems, furlough and other factors is a risk in terms of the impacts this may have on Bradford's residents and any additional demand which may result for welfare advice support.

5.6 The Chancellors' latest proposals are expected to result nationally in redundancies. At this time, it is difficult to predict how many this maybe in Bradford district. Officers are linked into the Council's intelligence systems and will be working with colleagues internally and externally in key organisations such as a Chamber of Commerce in order to provide early support and intervention.

5.7 Brexit has the capacity to create uncertainty for local employment and supply chains relating to food and affordable food. Welfare advice services have played and continue to do so an important role in distributing emergency food supplies to customers in crisis.

5.8 Finance for welfare advice services has been granted through the Reducing Inequalities in City (RIC's) programme. This is linked to health settings and has been invested into existing service providers.

6. LEGAL APPRAISAL

It is a legal requirement for Local Authorities to support access to welfare & debt advice and other advice based services. This is particularly pertinent in relation to the Health and Social Care Act and Housing/Homelessness acts. In both cases there is a need to ensure fair access to services and demonstrate that advice and care is accessible to those not eligible for direct support.

7. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

7.1 EQUALITY & DIVERSITY

Welfare advice is accessed by a wide range of disadvantaged groups of people; those in poverty, people from black and minority ethnic groups; women and/or lone parents etc. The new commissions include a separate contract for services aimed at people with continuing and complex health conditions, which includes those with disabilities and/or mental health problems. The Council also recognises that households with low incomes are particularly disadvantaged and, as these services aim to maximise and stabilise finances via benefits and managing debt, they are directly beneficial for the group

In addition to the above it is a stipulation of service specifications that service are delivered within an equalities framework; with appropriate language speakers and staff who can appreciate and acknowledge the cultural needs of the populations they serve.

7.2 SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

The contracts have been issued on a 4 plus one-year basis and have been extended into the 2022 in recognition of the needs of the district.

7.3 GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS IMPACTS

It is stipulated that services must be easily accessed via public transport; acknowledging that those on low incomes quite often rely on public transport.

During the service review, it was found that not all existing office bases have the most

appropriate facilities for advice clients. The contract specification outlined what is expected in the future which includes adequate heating; warm welcoming atmosphere; access to private interview rooms; better use of internet based services etc.

Where necessary this may result in fixed office and/or sessional based service closures, reducing overall the number of buildings this contract supports.

At this time and in the light of COVID-19 services are primarily accessible through telephone and the internet. As noted above recovery plans for all services were developed in summer 2020 however infection rates and new restrictions have placed these on hold.

The sector has had access to personal protection equipment and this will continue to be available however at this time it is not appropriate to open services wholesale.

7.4 COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

Housing and welfare advice helps to stabilise householders; families and single people alike. Evidence from programmes aimed at reducing repeat offending show that early intervention for those released from prison; access to the right benefits and housing can dramatically change the likelihood of re-offending in the future. This is a similar experience for those tackling drugs and/or alcohol misuse and people faced with partner violence and abuse.

7.5 HUMAN RIGHTS ACT

Advice services assist families and/or individuals to access a range of 'entitlements' under legislation; this includes housing; welfare benefits; support services and social care; immigration status etc. All of these underpin rights enshrined within the Human Rights Act.

7.6 TRADE UNION

At the award and initial implementation of new contracts, there was the possibility of staff changes which could have resulted in loss of employment and TUPE. These change processes were completed and there were no involuntary job losses made. The savings made in 2019-20 reduced staff time, which is now being redressed via the reinvestment agreed by Council earlier in the year.

7.7 WARD IMPLICATIONS

Services are divided on a ward and area basis to ensure local accessibility, the best use of services is made and that clear understanding of local demographics is applied to make sure that services are flexible and meet locality based needs.

7.8 AREA COMMITTEE ACTION PLAN IMPLICATIONS (for reports to Area Committees only)

None

7.9 IMPLICATIONS FOR CORPORATE PARENTING

As a Corporate Parent, the Council has a legal and moral duty to safeguard and promote the outcomes for looked after children. Households in need of welfare advice/ debt counselling and/or specific advice regarding immigration and asylum may well contain children and young adults for whom the Council retains responsibility as a Corporate

Parent. In these circumstances, the providers of welfare advice are important as a source of professional help and support for these families and individuals.

7.10 ISSUES ARISING FROM PRIVACY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

7.10.1 All four providers of welfare advice are required to maintain full and comprehensive records in order to manage the individual cases which are brought to them. Each individual is asked for a formal written consent to maintain these records and they are not shared with others except with express permission and in order to facilitate a case outcome.

7.10.2 Anonymised data is shared with the Council on the use of the welfare advice services in order to make sure that the communities of Bradford are being served effectively and receiving the help they require. This includes the details of the use made by customers of these services; trend data and people's protected characteristics such as age, gender; sexual orientation; ethnicity; religion etc.

8. NOT FOR PUBLICATION DOCUMENTS

None

9. OPTIONS

That the Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny members read the above report

That the Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny members may wish to discuss comment and discuss the issues outline in the above report

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny members may wish to comment and discuss the issues outline in the above report

11. APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Table of Providers, partners, costs and contracts

Appendix 2: Table of comparison of Quarter 1 2019 against 2020 outturns

Appendix 3: Usage figures for first two quarters 2020, by contract

Appendix 4: Outline new investment plans

12. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Needs analysis 2016/17/18