

Executive

Commissioning of Advice, Volunteering and Voluntary Car Driving Schemes in Cherwell

23 May 2011

Report of Head of Housing Services

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To consider a commissioning exercise to deliver a consistent and equitable approach to the funding of advice, volunteering and volunteer driving services in Cherwell and to consider the implications for a potential countywide Dial-a-Ride service.

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| This report is public |
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Recommendations

The Executive is recommended:

- (1) To cease existing funding arrangements for organisations funded through the Council's Voluntary Sector (Community Development) Grants Programme and Community Transport Grants Programme as from 31 March 2012.
- (2) To commence a commissioning process to fund strategically relevant Advice, Volunteering and Volunteer Car Driving services across three geographical areas within Cherwell.
- (3) To note ongoing officer discussions with Oxfordshire County Council regarding County Council proposals to develop a countywide Dial-a-Ride Service and how this might serve District residents most in need of this service.
- (4) To receive a further report on the outcome of this exercise as part of the 2012/13 Service and Financial Planning process in the Autumn.

Executive Summary

Introduction

- 1.1 This report highlights the reasons why a new approach to the funding of voluntary sector advice, volunteering and volunteer driving schemes is necessary from April 2012. This report recommends a move from grant funding organisations to commissioning strategically relevant services.

- 1.2 This report proposes the commissioning of advice, volunteering and volunteer driving services located across three urban centres serving the district as a whole.

Proposals

- 1.3 To cease existing funding arrangements for organisations funded through the Council's Voluntary Sector (Community Development) Grants Programme and Community Transport Grants Programme as from 31 March 2012. This funding is listed in Appendix One.
- 1.4 To seek to reduce the Council's overall spend in this sector in line with the reduction in central government funding.
- 1.5 To commission a district wide advice, volunteering and volunteer driving service located in Banbury, Bicester and Kidlington serving the towns and surrounding villages.
- 1.6 To commission a three year contract (1st April 2012 to 31st March 2015) with an option to extend for a further two years to 31st March 2017, with reference to 1.5 above.
- 1.7 To engage with Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) to investigate the possibilities of how a county wide Dial-a-Ride Service would help to protect Cherwell's most vulnerable residents as a result of the proposed grant withdrawal which in turn would result in the closure of the Cherwell Dial-a-Ride Service
- 1.8 To undertake a procurement exercise to aim to achieve value for money, with reference to 1.5 above.
- 1.9 Please note this proposal does not include all the Council's grant aid activity, some of which was already reduced this year but is restricted to those listed in Appendix 1.

Conclusion

- 2.0 This proposal marks a shift from grant funding organisations to commissioning strategically relevant services. We are in a time when it is important that the Council funds services which target those most in need, are delivered on an equitable basis and support the Council to deliver its statutory responsibilities. This proposal sets out to do this in the context of a national agenda of Localism and Big Society.

Background Information and proposal

- 2.1 The business case for voluntary sector agencies to deliver advice, volunteering and community transport is very strong:
- Members of the public are more likely to ask an organisation who they know and trust for advice than a statutory service
 - Voluntary agencies are able to attract additional funding through charitable trusts, fundraising etc to enhance a service
 - Trained volunteers working alongside paid staff enhance service provision and add value ~ often the value of volunteer hours over a year can equate to thousands of pounds 'in kind'.
 - Specifically for advice, The 'Case For Advice' (Advice Services Alliance) details the huge savings in relation to community cohesion, health and wellbeing, economic benefits and social inclusion and improving public services
- 2.2 There are many organisations in Cherwell which provide support, advice, transport and information to local residents. Most of these groups function without financial support from the Council and exist through the support of volunteers and fundraising.
- 2.3 In addition to organisations referred to in section 2.2, there are a number of organisations who collectively receive a significant level of in grant from the Council Please see Appendix One which summarises the funding awarded.
- 2.4 Though, for many years these organisations have delivered important and well respected services for residents of Cherwell there are some important reasons why a new approach to funding is proposed. These can be summarized as follows:
- 2.4.1 **Significant Changes to Community Transport across Oxfordshire.** As reported to Executive earlier this year, the responsibility for concessionary fares is now with the County Council. The national move towards personal budgets for people with physical disabilities and other special needs may mean that 'block purchasing' of transport services may not be viable in the future.
- The delivery of community transport is not a statutory function of the District Council and therefore brings into question the high level of funding for community transport in times of reduced public spending. Cherwell's funding for community transport is currently awarded to Banbury Community Transport Association, with a smaller contribution to ORCC. A recent review of community transport found that Cherwell provides a considerably higher (over 60% higher) level of grant funding for community transport than other districts in Oxfordshire. Whilst the Council *could* withdraw completely from community transport, this paper proposes a continued involvement through commissioning volunteer car driving schemes, working in close partnership with parish councils to ensure rural communities are well served. There is also potential for contributing (at a much lower level) towards a jointly commissioned countywide Dial-a-Ride Service, which other District Councils are currently considering for their most vulnerable residents. Officers are currently working with the County's Integrated Transport Unit in taking forward this proposal which is intended go live by April 2012.
- 2.4.2 **Low take up of advice service by certain groups within the District.** Anecdotal evidence suggests that young people and particularly people

whose English is not their first language are less likely to access local advice services funded by the Council. There are some services which target specific groups and localities such as Oxfordshire Chinese Community Advice and Banbury Samaritans, but this does raise the question of the Council financially supporting one group over another and a fair distribution of funding across the District as a whole.

2.4.3 Consideration of population and levels of deprivation across the District. For service provision funded by the Council to be equitable, we need to consider the population across the District and also consider areas of deprivation. The following table supported by the map at Appendix Two shows data on population and Housing Benefit claims (to give an indication of need) split over three geographical areas aligned with the three towns of Banbury, Bicester and Kidlington. This is a useful exercise in that it considers population and housing benefit take up in rural areas as well as urban areas.

| District | Population | Percentage of Total District Population | Housing Benefit Claimants | Percentage of Total District Housing Benefit Claimants | Average of combined percentages & proposed proportion of funding |
|-----------------------------------|------------|---|---------------------------|--|--|
| Banbury & surrounding villages | 63223 | 43% | 4563 | 64% | 54% |
| Bicester & surrounding villages | 44692 | 31% | 1807 | 25% | 28% |
| Kidlington & surrounding villages | 37290 | 26% | 760 | 11% | 18% |
| Total | 145205 | 100% | 7130 | 100% | 100% |

2.4.4 Consideration of Legal Services Commission funded services. The Legal Service Commission funds a number of Community Legal Service (CLS) contracts in Cherwell and the surrounding areas. Such contracts include Family Law and Employment Law. These contracts are delivered by solicitors and certain voluntary sector groups including Banbury CAB who deliver a CLS Debt and Welfare Benefits Contract. In addition the Legal Services Commission funds a national helpline which includes access to advice on debt, employment, family law and welfare benefits. The helpline does not include immigration, which is delivered through a National Immigration and Asylum Team. It is important to note that this is the current provision, however there are potential changes in the future, depending on the outcome of Legal Aid reforms that are being proposed by the Ministry of Justice.

2.4.5 Consideration of consistency in procurement. The Council's grant process is open and transparent. However, in considering reduced funding and the growing importance of equitable service delivery, it is important that the Council commissions services which prioritise its statutory responsibilities, commissions services which are outcome focused and

wherever possible serve the district equitably as a whole.

2.4.6 Concern with regards to viability or organisations that rely heavily on council funding. Though the Council has a policy of funding no more than 75% of an organisation's overall income, some organisations have struggled to secure additional funding. The impact of this is that should Council funding be withdrawn or reduced these particular services will be unviable. Therefore an important role for the Council should this proposal be approved will be to work with service providers to identify additional funding streams to increase capacity and resilience. It will be important, in future commissioning to build in a target for services to secure 100% match funding thereby the Council only funding 50% of total income.

2.4.7 Changes at a county level to funding of infrastructure organisations. Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action (OCVA) are currently funded at a county level to provide infrastructure support to the voluntary sector. Cherwell is the only district in the County to have a separate infrastructure organisation in Cherwell CVS and there is therefore potential for duplication in services.

Please note, there is a parallel piece of corporate work being undertaken by officers looking at community development activity across the district. This includes voluntary sector capacity building such as training and higher level infrastructure activities some of which are delivered on a county basis by different organisations. Such activities, though related are not within the scope of this report.

Proposals

2.5 The proposed model is for the Council to commission an advice, information, volunteering and voluntary car scheme operating out of three Community Advice Centres. The rationale for commissioning these services together is two-fold. Firstly there is the common factor of volunteering and there may be opportunities for volunteers to give their time to more than one element of the services e.g. advice and volunteer driving. Secondly, it reduces the stigma of people accessing advice services ~ people could, for example be accessing the Community Advice Centre to explore volunteering so it would not be obvious to the public why someone is entering the building. The service will operate out of each of the three towns, serving that particular town and surrounding villages, as per the map in Appendix Two. The specification for each centre will include the following:

2.6 Information and support for people seeking volunteering opportunities. Each Community Advice Centre will be commissioned to promote volunteering opportunities in the locality. It is likely therefore that each centre will be linked into the Do-It Web resource, which in turn will be promoted amongst all local voluntary organisations to place volunteering opportunities on. By having in a sense a 'mini volunteer bureau' in each Community Advice Centre there will be the dual benefit of local knowledge about voluntary groups in the surrounding area and a greater opportunity to recruit volunteers into the advice centres themselves. The minimum requirement will be for each centre to provide access to a computer, printer and telephone for members of the public wishing to access this information.

Service providers may add value to this by providing:

- Trained staff or volunteers to assist members of the public in using the computer, explaining information and making contact with organisations.

- Providing mentoring and training on interview techniques, communication skills, timekeeping etc
- Working collaboratively with local voluntary organisations to promote volunteering

2.7 Development of volunteer car driving schemes. Each Community Advice Centre will be commissioned to develop volunteer driving schemes within the town and villages in its service area.

It is likely that the most effective way for each Community Advice Centre to do this will be for them to work in partnership with the parish councils and other community groups to identify needs and opportunities and target priority areas or priority groups as identified by communities. This may be through building capacity through providing training and information packs and support to local community groups wishing to set up volunteer car driving schemes. It is estimated that it costs approximately £200 to set up a local volunteer car driving scheme (publicity, insurance etc) which will be built into the budgets for each Community Advice Centre. This model of delivery will provide transport for vulnerable people living in rural area needing face to face advice at the Community Advice Centres and other local services. This will hopefully deliver a 'double win' in that the link between the volunteer car driving schemes and the Community Advice Centres will increase opportunities for vulnerable people in rural areas to access transport when they need to receive face to face advice. This in turn will reduce the need for paid advice staff to undertake home visits, which can prove expensive and take up considerable time.

2.8 Advice on debt, money management and welfare rights. Current Council grant funding for Bicester CAB, Banbury CAB and KADIC is for a range of subject areas. Taking into consideration the services that are funded by the Legal Services Commission and taking into consideration that certain subjects are not a statutory duty of the council (e.g. Consumer Advice) it is recommended that the Council commissions advice services which increase financial capability, and prevent homelessness. One of the biggest causes of homelessness and most significant block to housing options for people living in Cherwell is housing related debt. Therefore, in line with our statutory responsibility to prevent homelessness it is proposed that the Council commissions advice on debt, money management and welfare rights. Service providers will provide this advice through:

- A triage service available through drop-in, telephone, letter and email
- Appointments for follow up case work for issues which cannot be dealt with through triage
- Resources for people to 'self help' through access to computers, information leaflets etc
- Undertaking targeted publicity to engage people who are currently under represented in accessing advice services. This includes young people and people from ethnic minority groups
- Collaborative work with other advice services including the Council's Housing Options Team and the Customer Services Team

Service providers may add value through:

- Running a rolling training programme for people to attend on money management
- Providing training to other community organisations to build capacity for other groups to provide advice, information and training on money management
- Establishing systems (possibly in partnership with another organisation) for people to save money and pay debts

Please note that as part of the evaluation of applications for funding there will be a requirement for services to evidence experience in delivering free advice to a recognised quality mark.

2.9 Information and signposting to other advice, information and support services. This may include:

- Providing Information on local and national services including telephone and web based services.
- Signposting advice over the telephone, face to face or email from paid or volunteer
- Providing a stock of updated information leaflets for people to take away
- Making computers available for people to access web based resources.

Services may add value through providing training to other community organisations to build capacity for other groups to provide advice, information and training on money management

2.10 Duty Court Desk in Banbury. This requires trained and experienced staff being available to give advice and representation to people in the court system due to risk of repossession or eviction. Please note that Court desk representation at Oxford Court is funded through the Legal Services Commission 'Housing Possession Court Duty Scheme', to provide emergency advice and advocacy to anyone facing possession proceedings.

Commissioning

2.11 The proposals for commissioning include the following.

2.12 That the advice, volunteering and voluntary driving service is commissioned through a competitive tender process. As this is considered to be a 'Part B' Service it is not subject to a full EU Tender.

2.13 That the anticipated level of funding available is made known to organisations wishing to tender. This would allow organisations to make informed bids. It also means that one of the ways organisation's bids can be scored is through demonstrating how they can add value through volunteer hours, securing additional funding etc.

2.14 That the tender is divided into three geographical 'lots': Banbury, Bicester and Kidlington. Though people may access any of the three services (especially by telephone or email) the geographical split is taking a common sense view of where people may travel to for face to face advice. It also means that the services will be responsible for networking with other voluntary organisations in their 'area' for the purposes of the volunteer bureau function and for the purposes of developing volunteer driving schemes. Hopefully it will also mean a strong sense of local identify.

2.15 That organisations are able to bid for one or more of the geographical lots. It should be noted that bidding for more than one geographical areas is expected to deliver improved value for money (due to shared 'back office' functions such as HR, communications etc) and improved business continuity. It should also be noted that there is the risk that some existing providers may not be successful and that there is a significant risk of closure for organisations who receive more than 75% of their funding from the Council (please see Appendix One). However, Housing Services

are undertaking a programme of work during 2011/12 to build capacity into local organisations to respond to Big Society agenda in the context of reduced public funding. This includes a 'Voluntary Sector Health Check' (which includes an offer of one-to-one advice), a series of training events on funding and governance (at different locations across the district) and an increased focus on capacity building in the Voluntary Sector Forums.

- 2.16 That a proportion of funding for each lot (possibly between 5 and 10%) is held back for 'payment on results', whereby services exceed expectations/targets.
- 2.17 That contracts are awarded for an initial period of three years with an option to extend for a further two years.
- 2.18 That the Council stays in close communication with the County Council and neighbouring authorities throughout the procurement process. This is particularly relevant to advice services and community transport. The County Council is planning two separate and relevant reviews ~ a review of voluntary infrastructure support services and a review of community transport. There is an option to hold back from this commissioning exercise to wait for the outcome of these county reviews, however this delay will prevent the District from realising the savings projected and delay commissioning strategically relevant and sustainable service provision. What is crucial is to continue the dialogue to ensure that the services commissioned by the District Council are in a strong position to bid for County funding should this become available at a later date.
- 2.19 That parallel to this commissioning exercise, the Council explores potential building options for these services. It may well be that should existing service providers be successful in the procurement process then they will chose to remain in their current buildings. However, there are issues with some of the current buildings in relation cost, condition and location. If a key outcome is to deliver efficiency savings and improve accessibility, then there is a gain to the Council negotiating cheaper and improved premises and these options are being explored. Associated with this is the opportunity which the new civic building in Bicester will offer which will be factored into the process.
- 2.20 That contract monitoring will form an important part of this commissioning exercise. This will not just be about 'checking on performance' but to work constructively with service providers to seek opportunities to develop services, secure funding from other sources and work collaboratively. This capacity building role from the Council will also include publicity and communications to ensure the service take up is representative of local people in Cherwell, including people regardless of age, gender, nationality and sexuality. The service providers will be required to have a computerised system to monitor and quantify the agreed targets. The Council will monitor performance of the service through quarterly electronic returns and a six monthly monitoring visit. These are the standard arrangements, but extra visits or requests for monitoring data may be requested by The Council, subject to need.

Quarterly monitoring data request will consist of the following information:

- Number of advice sessions delivered and the method of delivery
- Number of new clients
- Number of repeat clients
- Number of debt/money cases closed
- Number of debts
- Value of debt
- Benefit realisation

- Homeless prevention cases

Additional annual monitoring will consist of the following information:

- Information on other funding sources and progress in securing 100% match funding to the council's funding
- At least 95% client satisfaction with the service they have received
- Evidence of what outcomes have been delivered through providing the services
- Profile of clients by ethnicity, gender, age, disability
- Profile of referrals to and from the organisation (where applicable)
- Updated service development plan

Key Issues for Consideration/Reasons for Decision and Options

3.1 The following options have been identified. The approach in the recommendations (Option Three) is believed to be the best way forward

Option One **Continue current arrangements.** This would not deliver the 24% savings nor provide an opportunity to target funding at services which support the Council's statutory responsibilities and improve cost effectiveness and a more equitable distribution of resources.

Option Two **Delay the proposed commissioning arrangements until the County Reviews for both Community Transport and Advice Services are complete.** It should be noted though that the risk of entering into a county procurement exercise are a) further delays, b) significant officer time, c) potential compromise between county and district priorities.

Option Three

- To cease existing funding arrangements for organisations funded through the Council's Voluntary Sector (Community Development) Grants Programme and Community Transport Grants Programme as from 31 March 2012 – as listed in Appendix One
- To commence a competitive commissioning process to fund a strategically relevant Advice, Volunteering and Volunteer Car Driving Service across three Community Advice Centres in Cherwell.
- Through undertaking the above achieve an efficiency saving.

Consultations

4.1 These proposals have been devised with ongoing discussions with partners. All the relevant agencies have been given the opportunity to meet with Council Officers to discuss the proposal. Most of the key agencies have already met with Council Officers on at least one occasion to discuss the context and rationale for this proposal. This includes KADIC, C CVS, ORCC, BCTA, Banbury CAB and Bicester CAB. Though all agencies are understandably concerned about their own financial well being, there is a

good understanding within the voluntary sector about the financial pressures for the council in the current climate.

- 4.2 Council Officers have also met with Elected Members who are the member representative on outside bodies for the agencies relevant to this proposal.
- 4.3 In addition Council Officers have consulted with relevant officers in Oxfordshire County Council to ensure a co-ordinated approach to engagement and support for the voluntary sector.

Implications

Financial: The proposals contained in this report are consistent with the Council's MTFS and are intended to provide a better and more cost effective service to local people particularly this in greatest need of support.

Comments checked by Karen Curtin, Head of Finance
01295 221551

Legal: The procurement process proposed is in accordance with the Council's procurement policy and procedures.

Comments checked by Richard Hawtin, Team Leader –
Contracts and Property, 01295 221695

Risk Management: There are risks associated with the recommendations in this report. As highlighted above, this could result in a very different voluntary sector make up in the District and in some cases will have a significant affect on those organisations listed in Appendix 1.

Comments checked by Gillian Greaves, Head of Housing
Services, 01295 221654

Equalities An Equalities Impact Assessment has been undertaken in respect of this proposal. The need to develop equality of access to services for Cherwell's most vulnerable customers has been of paramount importance.

Comments checked by Claire Taylor, Corporate and
Community Planning Manager, 01295 221563

Wards Affected

All

Corporate Plan Themes

Cherwell, a District of Opportunity
Cherwell, an Accessible Value for Money Council

Executive Portfolio

Councillor Michael Gibbard, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Planning
Councillor Barry Wood, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Policy,
Community Planning and Community Development

Document Information

| Appendix No | Title |
|----------------------------|---|
| Appendix One | Voluntary Sector (Community Development) Grants and Community Transport Grants in 2010/11 |
| Appendix Two | Map showing area divisions to inform proposed distribution of service centres |
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