

Advice and Information Contract

Summary:

The Council has for many years provided funding to support the provision of advice and information via the Citizens Advice Bureaux. The funding arrangement that we have in place is due to terminate and consideration needs to be given as to the best way to provide such support to residents of North Norfolk in the future. The position is summarised as follows.

- The advice and Information contract with Norfolk Citizens Advice and joint funding agreement with Norfolk County Council is due to end on 31st March 2020 and we have been asked to consider an extension to it for a further 12 months in order to bring it into line with NCC's arrangements.
- The total annual grant for the service amounts to £109,000, of which North Norfolk District Council provides £66,323 and Norfolk County Council provides £42,677 per annum.
- Any decision to provide continued grant funding (for the period 1 April 2020 – 31st March 2021) for the Advice and Information service provided by Norfolk Citizens Advice needs to be informed by an evaluation of the effectiveness of the service and in particular the way it is provided and the locations that are used in North Norfolk. Such a decision will need also to consider potential alternative means of provision both in the immediate term and in the future.

Options considered:

Option 1: To extend the current funding agreement with Norfolk County Council and to contract with Norfolk Citizens Advice for another year until 31 March 2021. The original contract which ended on 31st December 2018 was already extended by fifteen months, until 31st March 2020, at the request of Norfolk County Council. A further extension of the contract would require suspension of the Council's Standing Orders in accordance with exemption Rule 9 (f). There are elements of the existing contract that, for a variety of reasons, are not being delivered. The

actual cost of delivering the service has also not been reviewed. Therefore, it is not appropriate to merely extend the contract and this option is not recommended.

Option 2: Not to award any funding towards the provision of Information and Advice services in North Norfolk. Statistical data submitted by Norfolk Citizens Advice as part of the existing contract as well as data from services such as Social Prescribing, demonstrates a need, particularly for elderly and vulnerable residents, to provide access to a range of support services, including advice and information. Whilst Norfolk County council will continue to fund Advice and Information services, ceasing any funding by the Council for Advice and Information services would have a negative and detrimental impact on residents. This option is not recommended.

Option 3: Not to award a grant to Norfolk Citizens Advice when the current arrangements end on 31 March 2020. Whilst there is a compelling case to review and revise the grant award from the Council, the total withdrawal of funding support from the Council to Norfolk Citizens Advice would have an impact on their ability to provide appropriate Advice and Information services across North Norfolk. This option is not recommended.

Option 4: Not to extend the current contract with Norfolk Citizens Advice and joint funding agreement with Norfolk County Council until 31st March 2021 but instead to award a *conditional* grant, not exceeding the current level (£66,323), to Norfolk Citizens Advice towards the provision of Advice and Information services in North Norfolk, which would include variations of the service provision arrangements. This option is recommended as:

- it will provide the opportunity to review/tailor the service, taking into account the reasons why elements of the existing contract are not being delivered and their appropriateness/efficacy;
- the combined funding from Norfolk County Council and this Council for the existing Advice and Information service in North Norfolk does not accurately reflect the cost of the service that is currently being delivered;
- Since the original contract was agreed, other services such as Social Prescribing have been established in North Norfolk, which offer

advice and information as part of a wider support service. The amount and conditions of the grant awarded to Norfolk Citizens Advice should reflect other advice and information services being delivered.

Conclusions:

In 2016, the agreement with Norfolk County Council to jointly fund and procure a three-year Advice and Information service resulted in the provision of an enhanced advice and information service across the district.

Norfolk County Council has decided to extend their contract for advice and information services for a further year until 31st March 2021. This will include funding towards services being delivered by Norfolk Citizens Advice across Norfolk.

There is a need to review the funding as there are services within the existing contract that are not being delivered in North Norfolk; but also others that we see as being essential to maintain. The actual cost of services being delivered compared to the allocated funding also needs to be reviewed.

Ending the joint contract with Norfolk County Council will enable the Council to award a conditional and appropriate grant to Norfolk Citizens Advice for the delivery of advice and information service in dedicated offices and agreed outreach locations for the period 1 April 2020 – 31st March 2021.

The amount of the grant should not exceed the current allocated annual funding of £66,323.

Recommendations:

That Cabinet resolves:

- To review the advice and information service being delivered by Norfolk Citizens Advice.
- Having regard to the review, to delegate authority to the S151 Officer, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Culture & Wellbeing, to award a conditional grant (of no more than the current sum of £66,323) to Norfolk Citizens Advice towards the continuation of advice and information services in North Norfolk at dedicated offices and agreed outreach locations for the period 1 April 2020 – 31st March 2021.

- Over the coming year, to review the various operational options for meeting the advice and information needs of the District in future years (after the proposed new contract period).

Reasons for Recommendations:

To enable the continuation of established advice and information services by Norfolk Citizens Advice in North Norfolk for the period 1st April 2020 – 31st March 2021.

To ensure the funding awarded by the Council to Norfolk Citizens Advice enables residents across North Norfolk to benefit from the provision of advice and information services in North Norfolk including at designated and outreach locations as appropriate.

To ensure that sufficient preparations are made to secure appropriate provision to meet the needs of users of the service in the future.

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS AS REQUIRED BY LAW

(Papers relied on to write the report, which do not contain exempt information and which are not published elsewhere)

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Cabinet Member(s) Cllr Virginia Gay	Ward(s) affected All wards in North Norfolk
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1. Background

1.1 At the Cabinet meeting on 6 January 2015, Cabinet accepted the recommendation of Overview and Scrutiny to consider opportunities to work with Norfolk County Council to procure a new generic advice and information service in North Norfolk. Prior to this the Council had awarded grants to individual Citizens Advice Bureaux which delivered advice and information services in North Norfolk. Due to a number of concerns in relation to one particular service provider, and the desire to ensure consistency across the District, the Council was not willing to continue with this arrangement. As a result, Norfolk County Council and this Council agreed to enter into a three-year Partnership Agreement to jointly fund the provision of a new generic advice and information service across North Norfolk from 1st January 2016 until 31st December 2018. Following a procurement exercise a contract was agree with Mid Norfolk Citizens Advice to provide the service via a consortium with Norfolk Citizens Advice.

1.2 Overall the Advice and Information service has worked effectively and has increased the number of physical locations in North Norfolk where advice and information could be accessed. There have been issues with the implementation of certain aspects of the contract, e.g.:

- face-to-face provision in dedicated or drop in locations in all seven main towns in North Norfolk – no service is currently provided in Wells-next-the-Sea;
- face-to-face provision in Mundesley and Melton Constable – no service is provided in these locations;
- face-to-face evening and weekend support – no service is provided;
- electronic kiosks in two identified locations in NNDC – no longer operational;
- email, web chat and skype – no web chat and skype service is provided.

1.3 The non-compliance issues have been raised with the service provider. It was accepted that in some geographical areas there was not sufficient demand (and insufficient benefit) for an outreach service which only operated for a limited number of hours and days each month. In relation to evening and weekend support, health and safety issues and the willingness of volunteers to work unsocial hours were identified as reasons why these services were not delivered.

1.4 Prior to the original contract expiring on 31st December 2018, Norfolk County Council decided to extend its funding for the North Norfolk generic advice and information contract for a further 15 months up until 31st March 2020. Norfolk County Council provides funding for a range of advice and information including specialist advice services across the county. These services have different contract end dates and the County Council wanted to align all contracts to start and end at the same time.

1.5 The Council's Standing Orders prevented the contract from being extended for a further 15 months. However, it was possible to suspend the Council's Standing Orders in accordance with exemption Rule 9 (f), in order to allow the contract to be extended and in October 2018, Cabinet agreed that the contract would be extended for a further 15 months until 31st March 2020. It was stated that no further extension would be sought and a new tender process would be undertaken during the 2019/20 financial year to allow a new generic advice and information service to operate with effect from 1st April 2020.

2. Current position

2.1 In April 2019 Mid Norfolk Citizens Advice merged with Norfolk Citizens Advice. The Advice and Information Service in North Norfolk has therefore since then been delivered by Norfolk Citizens Advice.

2.2 In North Norfolk, face-to-face services are currently being provided from designated offices on various days and times in Holt and North Walsham. Outreach services are provided in Fakenham, Stalham, Cromer and Sheringham (Appendix A). Advice can also be obtained via the Norfolk Citizens Advice web site, email and by phone.

2.3 Norfolk County Council has recently advised that it has been unable to progress the procurement of a generic advice and information service and has decided to extend all its contracts for the provision of advice and information services for another year (until 31st March 2021). A small increase in the funding allocated towards these services has also been agreed.

- 2.4** Whilst the benefit and value of the services provided in North Norfolk are recognised, much has changed since the contract commenced (and since it was first extended) – outlined above; it is not therefore considered appropriate to just follow suit with Norfolk County Council and merely extend the contract for another year. In addition, the historic reasons why the initial joint funding agreement was established are no longer relevant.
- 2.5** A meeting recently took place with Norfolk Citizens Advice to discuss the current service and the actual delivery cost. It was identified that the current cost of the delivery of the service in North Norfolk is significantly less than the grant awarded.
- 2.6** Norfolk County Council is aware of the end of the current joint contract arrangement. The funding of £42,677 which NCC currently allocates towards the North Norfolk joint contract, together with an agreed increase, will remain available for provision in the contract extension between NCC and Norfolk Citizens Advice for the delivery of Advice and Information in the county (as a whole). Their contract will be amended to include North Norfolk within its remit. A copy of the County contract has been requested so the type and level of Advice and Information services in North Norfolk to be provided by Norfolk Citizens Advice and funded by Norfolk County Council is clear. Once this has been received, a review undertaken of total service provision in North Norfolk completed and an assessment of need undertaken, it is suggested that the Council offer a conditional grant to Norfolk Citizens Advice for the provision of agreed and appropriate Advice and Information services in North Norfolk for the period 1st April 2020 – 31st March 2021 (over and above that allowed for in the Countywide contract).

3. Conclusion

- 3.1** The Council acknowledges the need for and the benefit of generic Advice and Information services. The value of the Advice and Information services provided by Norfolk Citizens Advice is recognised.
- 3.2** There is no-longer a need to have a separate joint-funding agreement with Norfolk County Council and Norfolk Citizens Advice. Norfolk County Council will continue to fund Norfolk Citizens Advice to deliver Advice and Information services in North Norfolk to a certain level. A conditional grant from This Council will, however, facilitate the continuation of services at the existing level (at least) from designated Norfolk Citizens Advice bases in North Norfolk.
- 3.3** Norfolk County Council was due to have completed its review of generic and specialist Advice and Information services by April 2020. This has not happened. Unless this Council ends its joint-contract with Norfolk Citizens Advice there is a concern that it will be asked in future to further extend a contract that does not fully meet agreed outputs, may not meet current need and where the cost of the service delivered, in relation to the grant, has not been recently reviewed.
- 3.4** Reviewing the provision of Advice and Information services will enable the Council to ensure that the needs of all its residents can be met with a particular focus on those who are vulnerable and most in need of support or who live in rural locations and may not be able to access designated or

outreach services. It will also identify duplication and gaps in service provision, enabling alternative approaches to be considered.

4. Financial Implications and Risks

- 4.1** The current contract with Norfolk Citizens Advice has an annual value of £109,000 per year of which Norfolk District Council provides £66,323 and Norfolk County Council provides £42,677 per annum. Norfolk County Council has committed to continue (at least) its proportion of this level of funding until 31st March 2021. North Norfolk District Council has allocated sufficient funds to support the current level of funding towards the external provision of Advice and Information services (up to a maximum of £66,323 - already accounted for in the budget). Ending the existing contract, reviewing Advice and Information services and awarding an appropriate and conditional grant will have no additional financial implications for the Council. Changing the agreement or reducing the level of funding would obviously generate a saving, which could potentially be allocated towards alternative provision of this kind of service.

5. Sustainability

- 5.1** This report covers the period 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021. It does not in itself raise any issues of sustainability.

6. Equality and Diversity

- 6.1** There are no equality and diversity implications directly related with this report. Reviewing the provision of Advice and Information services will ensure that it is accessible to all residents with a particular focus on those who are most vulnerable and therefore are likely to have a greater need for these services.

7. Section 17 Crime and Disorder considerations

- 7.1** There are no Section 17 implications directly associated with this report.