



**Citizens Advice Bureau
Scrutiny Review**

- Draft Report -

Chairman:

Councillor Julie Robinson

Task Group Members:

Councillor Howard Ballard

Councillor Patsy Ormrod

Councillor Shaun Turner

Councillor Val Wilson

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Chairman: Councillor Michael Vincent

Purpose of Review

To assess whether the council's requirements have been fulfilled, within the terms of the Service Level Agreement between the council and Citizens Advice Lancashire West, and whether positive outcomes have been delivered, prior to the Cabinet making a decision whether or not to continue funding Citizens Advice Lancashire West beyond the end of the current agreement (31 May 2017).

Aims of the Review

1. To review the current Service Level Agreement and come to a view about whether the intended outcomes have been achieved
2. To understand the complementary roles of (i) the council's Debt Advisors and (ii) the service provided by Citizens Advice Lancashire West
3. To review the implementation of the additional recommendations made by the previous scrutiny review and agreed by the Cabinet on 21 January 2015
4. To identify the services that need to be commissioned, and outcomes achieved, if the current agreement with Citizens Advice Lancashire West extends beyond May 2017
5. To explore other funding opportunities

(See scoping document, Appendix 1)

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1

That the council renews the Service Level Agreement made on 1 June 2015, with appropriate updating and re-drafting to reflect Recommendation 2, with Citizens Advice Lancashire West for a further three years from 1 June 2017, with agreed funding.

RECOMMENDATION 2

That, in addition to the requirements already included in the Service Level Agreement, the Citizens Advice Lancashire West be required to:

- (i) Provide the numbers of people seeking advice from CALW who were referred by Wyre Council
- (ii) Prioritise referrals from Wyre Council according to agreed criteria
- (iii) Provide the numbers of people seeking advice from CALW in person and by telephone, respectively
- (iv) Provide the number of 'primary presenting problems' and 'other problems' for which advice is sought
- (v) Provide a breakdown of clients seen, according to benefit type
- (vi) Meet with Wyre Council officers six monthly to review performance within the context of the service level agreement

Evidence from Diane Gradwell and Guy Simpson, Citizens Advice Lancashire West

Diane Gradwell (Chief Executive) and Guy Simpson (Operations Manager), Citizens Advice Lancashire West attended a meeting of the scrutiny review group. Ms Gradwell and Mr Simpson presented an Impact Report, which supported performance information that had previously been provided to councillors.

Following the presentation Ms Gradwell and Mr Simpson were asked a number of questions and made some additional comments in order to help councillors meet the aims of the review. The following information is relevant to the review's purpose and aims:

- i. Citizens Advice Lancashire West (CALW) covers Chorley, South Ribble, West Lancashire and Wyre.
- ii. The annual income received by CALW from other councils for exclusive use in the respective council areas is:

○ Chorley	£75,000
○ South Ribble	£30,000
○ West Lancashire	£50,000
○ Wyre	£30,000
- iii. The LWCAB believes it has delivered the agreed services, as detailed in the service level agreement.
- iv. During 2015/16 CALW dealt with 4667 advice issues in Wyre using a total of thirteen staff and volunteers.
- v. Performance information, including quarterly client satisfaction surveys, indicates that 80% of clients said advice improved their lives, including reducing stress and improving finances, and 90% reported satisfaction with the overall service.
- vi. In response to a recommendation made by the Scrutiny Review Group and supported by the Cabinet in January 2015, CALW now keeps records of the number of cases in which advice is provided by face-to-face appointments compared with ones which are dealt with by telephone. The percentage of initial contacts by telephone has gradually been increasing since April 2015, when it was 42.1%. In the most recent quarter (July to September 2016) the number of initial contacts made by telephone overtook the number of initial face-to-face contacts for the first time, accounting for 53.5% of all initial contacts.
- vii. CALW has been operating from Fleetwood Town Council premises on Poulton Road Fleetwood for the past eighteen months. It was agreed that CALW could use the premises rent-free for five years, to allow them to provide a volunteer hub, which has been developed very successfully.

- viii. The volunteer hub enables more volunteers to be taken on and be fully trained, enhancing and adding value to the service provided and increasing capacity.
- ix. 'Advice' is provided by the CAB, which is very different from 'information' in that it is tailored to individual circumstances. Clients are never told what to do; they are provided with options and possible consequences.
- x. Quality is ensured by stringent national standards of oversight and supervision. A high level of internal and external audit is applied to ensure the highest quality of interventions. It takes 18 months to train a fully qualified advisor and even then their work is 100% quality checked.
- xi. Benefits and debts are the two categories that continue to dominate the advice provided.
- xii. There are plans to develop a Digital Help Centre (DHC) to assist clients who have little or no internet access or everyday digital skills. The need for this has been increased by the recent decision to close a number of libraries which previously offered some digital access. CALW would ideally like a base in Wyre to provide the DHC.
- xiii. There is a possibility of opening a new Telephone Call Centre as part of the Citizens Consumer Advice Services in Wyre.
- xiv. Advice is now available from the CALW website. 28% of web access is via mobile phones. There are also plans to improve CALW's use of social media.
- xv. Wyre's financial contribution helps in the provision of a platform from which services are planned and provided. The true cost of services delivered in Wyre "is astronomical".
- xvi. Different councils fund CALW for different periods of time, depending on their circumstances and priorities. A three-year funding commitment would assist CALW's planning and development.

Evidence from Marianne Hesketh (Service Director Performance and Innovation) and Pete Mason (Head of Contact Centre)

Marianne Hesketh and Pete Mason attended the second of two meetings of the scrutiny review group. They made a number of comments about the current service level agreement and the council's relationship with Citizens Advice Lancashire West, including the following:

Marianne Hesketh, Service Director Performance and Innovation

- i. At present there is no money allocated in the council's budget 2017/18 for the commissioning of this service from CALW.
- ii. It is very difficult to assess the real value of the agreement with CALW to the council. Quarterly statistics are received, which show that lots of people are seen by CALW, but the real impact and effectiveness is more difficult to quantify.
- iii. The council would welcome the opportunity to work more closely with CALW in helping to promote its initiatives. The event held in Fleetwood in October 2016 as part of Big Energy Saving Week, whereby householders were given advice about how to save energy and get help in paying bills, is an example.

Peter Mason, Head of Contact Centre

- i. We cannot accurately quantify what the impact on Wyre Council might be if the agreement with CALW is not renewed. This is because much of the advice they provide is likely to relate to benefits other than Housing Benefit and Localised Council Tax Support. These cases will still have a "knock-on" impact on the council however, as we still have to attempt to collect unpaid council tax from those having problems with entitlement to other social benefits
- ii. It is clear that CALW deal with a very high number of debt advice cases. More detailed information about the level of advice given would be helpful, for example how many cases are supported through the full debt advice process, how many progress to Debt Relief Order stage, and how many subsequently go through bankruptcy proceedings.
- iii. It is anticipated that the new Benefit Cap will reduce the benefits of a number of people, so it will inevitably have an adverse impact upon advice services like the one provided by the Council, which will come under more pressure. It would therefore be desirable to reach an agreement whereby in return for the funding, the council were able to refer a limited number of more complex cases (for example, those where the customer is subject to Department of Work and Pensions sanctions) as priority cases for the CALW to handle.
- iv. It would also be desirable to ensure that Wyre's referrals are dealt with within an agreed set time period.

- v. Face to face meetings between the council and CALW rarely happen. It would be helpful if a requirement to hold such meetings was built in to the service level agreement to ensure that constructive discussions and detailed information exchange takes place at least twice a year, in order to improve the service.
- vi. Taking CALW's figures at face value, it is clear that Wyre gets excellent value for money.

Conclusions

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1. CALW has met the terms of the Service Level Agreement dated 1 June 2015, although there was no evidence that the monitoring of associated or underlying issues, in addition to the primary presenting issue, as had been accepted by the Cabinet on 21 January 2015, had been included. The task group still takes the view that it would be very informative to record underlying issues.
2. CALW deals with a large number of cases.
3. There is scope for more detailed recording by CALW, which might assist CALW's resource allocation and would be helpful to Wyre. For example, (i) splitting benefits data so that the comparative volume of work on the main benefits is known, and (ii) recording whether a client was referred by Wyre or not. This would assist CALW in quantifying the contribution being made to the council.
4. It would be helpful if some cases referred by the council received a higher level of priority (e.g. those involving mental illness), such cases being limited by way of a robust filtering system at Wyre
5. The lack of regular face to face contact between the council and CALW to review the service level agreement is a deficiency.
6. If the quarterly statistical reports are taken at face value it appears that Wyre Council gets excellent value for money.
7. In the current challenging financial climate short-term funding inhibits the growth and development of services and limits security and sustainability.

Responsibility for Implementation of Agreed Recommendations

The responsibility for implementing the recommendations will lie with the Service Director Performance and Innovation.

List of Appendices

APPENDIX 1 Citizens Advice Bureau Scrutiny Review Group – Scoping Document

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18 November 2016

Citizens Advice Bureau – Scrutiny Review Group**Scoping Document**

Review Topic	Citizens Advice Bureau
Chair	Councillor Julie Robinson
Group Membership	Councillors Howard Ballard, Patsy Ormrod, Shaun Turner and Val Wilson
Officer Support	Peter Foulsham (Scrutiny Officer)
Purpose of the Review	To assess whether the council's requirements have been fulfilled, within the terms of the Service Level Agreement between the council and Citizens Advice Lancashire West, and whether positive outcomes have been delivered, prior to the Cabinet making a decision whether or not to continue funding Citizens Advice Lancashire West beyond the end of the current agreement (31 May 2017)
Objective of Review	To ensure that Citizens Advice Lancashire West delivers a service that meets the needs of residents and provides good value to Wyre's Council Tax payers.
Aims of Review	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. To review the current Service Level Agreement and come to a view about whether the intended outcomes have been achieved 7. To understand the complementary roles of (i) the council's Debt Advisors and (ii) the service provided by Citizens Advice Lancashire West 8. To review the implementation of the additional recommendations made by the previous scrutiny review and agreed by the Cabinet on 21 January 2015 9. To identify the services that need to be commissioned, and outcomes achieved, if the current agreement with Citizens Advice Lancashire West extends beyond May 2017 10. To explore other funding opportunities
Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review previous reports and documentation (see below) • Review performance data • Interview witnesses
Potential Witnesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning and Economic Development Portfolio Holder (in his role as the council's nominated representative on the CAB Board) • Wyre Council officers (including, possibly, Service Director Performance and Innovation, Head of Contact Centre and Care & Repair Manager)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chief Executive, Citizens Advice Lancashire West • Fleetwood Town Council • Service users
Documents to be considered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service Level Agreement • Report to Cabinet on 5 December 2012, 'Welfare Advice Service (Citizens Advice Bureau)' • Scrutiny review report to Cabinet on 21 January 2015 • CAB Service Report – 2015 and beyond • CAB performance reports
Risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unnecessarily prolonging what is intended to be a very short review of the outputs provided by the current funding arrangement with the CAB
Level of Publicity	Not defined at present.
Indicators of a Successful Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clear recommendation to Cabinet influencing their decision about whether to continue the agreement with the CAB beyond 31 May 2017
Intended Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A wide range of Wyre residents' social and welfare needs (including debt management in particular) managed effectively
Approximate Timeframe	One month, two meetings
Projected Start (and Completion) Date	November 2016

05.08.16

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