

Causeway Coast & Glens Shadow Council

To: Shadow Council

Date: 18 December 2014

Interim Arrangements for Commissioning of Generalist Voluntary Advice Services at Local Government Level 2015-16

FOR DECISION

Linkage to Corporate Plan	
Strategic Priority	Transition and Transformation
Objective	Successful implementation of the convergence plan
Lead Officer	Julie Welsh
Cost: (If applicable)	£101,138

1.0 Background/Context

1.1 The Department for Social Development (DSD) currently carries policy and primary funding responsibility for generalist voluntary advice services in Northern Ireland. While DSD directly funds regional advice organisations, such as Citizens Advice Regional Office, Advice NI and the Law Centre, DSD does not directly support local advice provision. Instead this is delegated to local councils, with DSD providing funding based on need (defined in terms of deprivation) to councils. All four legacy councils in the CC&G area currently provide discretionary supplemental funding to increase the funds available for advice. There are clear social and economic benefits achieved through advice provision, including the boost provided to local economies through maximisation of benefit payments, often accounting for additional local spend exceeding the cost of advice by a factor of four or more. The demand for services at local levels remains high and is expected to increase in both volume and complexity as Welfare Reform is implemented.

At present the DSD ring fences an allocation of funding for Voluntary Advice Services. This forms part of their contract for funding provided to Councils within Community Support Plan Programme. Councils are asked to match fund their allocation by at least 50%. In 2014 the budget for Advice is £211,964. £109,955 is provided by Councils matched by £97,009 from DSD.

In March 2011, in preparation for RPA, the Community Development staff from the four Councils originally came together to determine and address transitional priorities in relation to service provision. The cluster identified arrangements for the transition of Generalist Voluntary Advice in the new council area as a priority 1 task. The preferred option moving forward and as detailed in the Williamson Report "Commissioning of Voluntary Generalist Advice – Review for North East Councils(2012)" was discussed and agreed in each of the four participating Council Chambers as: -

- (a) In the long term, the four Councils will work together under RPA boundaries to implement a single public tender with a lead partner.
- (b) In the short term from April 2013 and leading up to the implementation of RPA, each Council implements public tender, open to a single or consortium provider for their area using a similar methodology and their own area specification.

As an interim measure, each Council has publicly procured services in their respective Council area. In 2014/15 period there are 5 tendered contracts in operation; one in Coleraine, one in Ballymoney, one in Moyle and two in Limavady.

2.0 Planning for 2016

2.1 The commissioning of generalist voluntary advice services has been earmarked for transfer to the Council from DSD through the Regeneration Bill. As per the Social Development Minister's announcement on the 11th November, this will now be delayed until April 2016. Council will therefore continue to receive an offer to fund Advice Services. There is, however, uncertainty around levels of funding /budgets to be made available by DSD towards functions such as advice provision from April 2015 onwards.

Current advice from DSD is to plan provision on the basis of the 'as is' position, but with the understanding that budgets may be subject to cuts. At the time of writing this report, no indication in terms of budgets has been confirmed by the Department. Officers have used the following planning assumptions:

- Overall budgets for Advice will be based on 2014/15 provision with a 5% cut (from Council's contribution), accounting for the probability that DSD may continue to ring fence this element of the Community Development budget. The overall budget for planning purposes would therefore equate to £202,277 for 15/16 period, assuming no cut is applied to DSD's element.
- Based on this budget, combining the funds available to move forward with option (a) above exceeds the EU threshold (>£172,514) in terms of procurement. A procured service is therefore subject to advertisement within the EU Journal, with a timeframe of approximately three months to complete the process.

This timeframe was taken into account in seeking approval to proceed for the commissioning of these services. The Community Services Framework and associated elements, which are inclusive of Advice Services and other community development funding, was presented to Council, following a workshop in October. The decision from the Shadow Council was to defer approval of the overall framework and component strategies, subject to confirmation of budgets from Government Departments. The process has therefore been unable to proceed to procurement stage.

It should also be noted that DSD has recently developed and released for consultation a new advice strategy entitled 'Advising, Supporting, Empowering' A Strategy for the Delivery of Generalist Advice Services in Northern Ireland 2015-2020'. Outcomes of this consultation may have implications for delivery approaches post 2015.

3.0 Conclusion

- 3.1 The delays in the transfer of powers from DSD to Council, the deferment of the Community Services Framework and strategy, the lack of clarity in the budget from DSD and the timing of rates process, present significant challenges in relation to the original intention of a smooth transition of the delivery of advice services in April 2015.

4.0 Recommendations

- 4.1 Considering these unique series of challenges, it is recommended that an interim arrangement is put in place to extend existing contracts with current providers by up to 6 months for a maximum total net cost of £101,138. This sum equates to 50% of the total annual budget and includes a 5% cut from existing Council contributions in 2014.

This extension period would facilitate the continuation of services, while allowing additional time to seek clarity on funding levels from DSD. A procurement process would be developed concurrently under the new legal entity.