

Report to Cabinet

25th November 2021



**Horsham
District
Council**

By Cabinet Member for Community & Wellbeing

DECISION REQUIRED

Not Exempt

Community Advice Partnership Agreement

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to inform the decision-making process concerning whether Horsham District Council enters into a partnership contract (also referred to as Inter Agency Agreement) with West Sussex County Council and all other district and borough councils in West Sussex to collectively fund and procure community advice services.

The Community Advice Services Contract expires on 31 March 2022. The current contract was procured by West Sussex County Council with the support of each District and Borough Council. It is proposed that all district and boroughs within West Sussex again enter into an Inter-Agency Agreement (IAA) to collectively procure and fund the service into the future.

The existing service is funded through our annual strategic grant budget and set within annual budget setting. We have funded community advice services for several years and the work of Citizens Advice as the existing provider of the service has demonstrated year on year the positive impact advice services provide.

The annual funding committed to the joint service will be £93,000 p.a. uplifted annually in line with the consumer price index calculated on the anniversary of the agreement.

Recommendations

That the Cabinet is recommended:

- i) To approve the procurement of a partnership contract/inter-agency agreement with West Sussex County Council and the other West Sussex District and Borough Councils for Community Advice Services for the provision of an independent and comprehensive information and advice service for up to seven years from 1 April 2022.
- ii) Delegate to Cabinet Member for Community & Wellbeing the authority to enter into the partnership contract/inter-agency agreement subject to contract approval by the Monitoring Officer.

To recommend to Council to:

- iii) To approve a budget contribution of £93,000 for up to 7 years, uplifted annually in line with the consumer price index calculated on the anniversary of the agreement, subject to satisfactory service reviews in line with Horsham District Council's corporate priorities and the availability of Horsham District Council funding.

Reasons for Recommendations

- i) To enable community advice services to continue to be delivered for residents of the Horsham District, therefore protecting the quality of life of those who live in, work in and visit our district.

Background Papers

None

Wards affected: All

Contact:

Rob Jarvis – Head of Housing and Community Services

Ext 01403 215449

Background Information

1 Introduction and Background

- 1.1 The Community Advice Service in the Horsham district is provided by North South East Citizens Advice. The service is delivered in partnership with Citizens Advice West Sussex and forms a county wide contract for Community Advice Services. The contract expires on 31 March 2022 and was procured by West Sussex County Council with all the West Sussex Local Authorities.
- 1.2 It is proposed that a new county wide advice services contract is procured for West Sussex, led by the County Council with support from the District and Borough Councils. The term will be up to seven years. The advice provided will cover a range of subjects from benefits, housing, consumer rights, education, employment and relationships & family matters to name a few.
- 1.3 The new contract specification will be drafted to reflect the changes in the way people access information and advice where services are delivered to the community.
- 1.4 Horsham's budget for this service is currently £93,000 per annum uplifted each year in line with the consumer price index (CPI). It is proposed that the budget for the funding contribution and the annual uplift are maintained for the term of the contract.
- 1.5 It is also proposed that Horsham District Council continues to procure this service collectively with West Sussex County Council and the other West Sussex District and Borough Councils for a period up to seven years at the current level of funding uplifted annually by CPI.

2 Relevant Council policy

- 2.1 HDC Corporate Plan 2019-2023.

A great place to live – we will plan for communities where people can work, live and prosper. Both our built and natural environments are highly valued and will be well managed to keep our District an attractive place to live. As a service that can support residents through a period of crisis, debt or challenge will empower and improve the circumstances of the resident enabling them to thrive.

3 Details

- 3.1 Horsham's budget for this service is currently **£93,000** per annum uplifted each year in line with the consumer price index (CPI). It is proposed that the budget for the funding contribution and the annual uplift are maintained for the term of the contract.

- 3.2 This proposal continues for a renewed period the previous successful joint working with West Sussex County Council and West Sussex Local Authorities to secure community advice services across the county. The contract seeks to continue the provision of generalist advice available to residents across the district. During the COVID-19 pandemic the services continued to be provided but with a shift towards virtual and non-face to face advice sessions. The contract going forward secures a continuation of services using all forms of contact. The service

4 Next Steps

- 4.1 Enter into the partnership contract as per the details in section 3 and provide support to West Sussex County Council as required as per the partnership contract.
- 4.2 Update colleagues and councillors at the appropriate time of successful service provider.

5 Views of the Policy Development Advisory Group and Outcome of Consultations

- 5.1 Members of the Community & Wellbeing Policy Development Advisory Group supported the recommendations within the report and echoed the value and the great work of the current community advice service provider.
- 5.2 The Council's Monitoring Officer and Director of Corporate Resources, the S151 Officer, have been consulted and their comments have been incorporated into this report

6 Other Courses of Action Considered but Rejected

- 6.1 The Council could seek to secure a service independently of West Sussex and other district & boroughs, the Council is unlikely to be able to provide a service in isolation without the additional funding that is secured by working in partnership.
- 6.2 Do nothing – we could let the service come to an end. We would not only see a significant increase to our services as a result of community advice not being available in respect of matters such as housing and benefits but also from an increased number of residents experiencing debt and financial challenges. Our districts residents are better served with an accessible and free advice service.

7 Resource Consequences

- 7.1 Funding of existing community advice services is set annually within the Council's full budget setting process. Historically this has been funded through Strategic Grants funds and there is no suggestion to change the existing process which has been in place for several years. The cost over the last five years has been £93k p.a. The annual increase linked to Consumer Price Index increases the risk that the cost increases substantially by the end of the contract. A 2% increase year on year would cost £105k p.a. by the end of the contract. And a 3% increase each year would cost £111k p.a. by the end of the contract. CPI inflation was 3.1% in September 2021. The Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy, see elsewhere on this agenda, suggests the Council's overall funding is likely to shrink during this

period. In entering a contract with a CPI increase each year Cabinet is committing the Council to giving an increasing share of its diminishing funds to this service.

- 7.2 A cap on the inflationary increase, such as the lower of 2% or CPI would help limit the potential increases and has been proposed as part of the procurement process.

8 Legal Considerations and Implications

- 8.1 The Council can enter into a new agreement with other local authorities for the provision of this service under section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972 and all other enabling powers.

9 Risk Assessment

- 9.1 Risk assessment and analysis of the risks will be completed through the procurement process. These will include risks around increasing demand, increased reliance if statutory services in areas reduce, ability to recruit and retain volunteers and delivery of service across rural district.

10 Procurement implications

- 10.1 Compliant public procurement will be undertaken by West Sussex County Council on behalf of all district and borough councils within West Sussex.

11. Equalities and Human Rights implications / Public Sector Equality Duty

- 11.1 Having a county wide community advice service enables equal access to all residents to free, impartial advice across a range of subjects, challenges and issues. Accessibility of service from the final service provider will be monitored as part of West Sussex's contract management.

12 Environmental Implications

- 12.1 It is anticipated that the service going forward will utilise existing building and resources but with a shift towards increased virtual and non-face to face contact for residents that want to interact this way.

13 Other Considerations

- 13.1 Additional considerations in terms of data sharing, confidentially, non-financial staffing support, co-location, reporting, service access will be finalised through the procurement process.