

Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee – Review of Advice Services in Manchester Task and Finish Group

Minutes of the meeting held on 30 October 2019

Present:

Councillor Hacking – In the Chair
Councillors Collins and Grimshaw

Councillor Craig, Executive Member for Adult Health and Wellbeing

Councillor Clay, Ward Councillor for Burnage
Councillor Rawlins, Ward Councillor for Baguley and Member of the Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee

Sinead O'Connor, Cheetham Hill Advice Centre
Andy Brown, Citizens Advice Manchester
Dan Pye, Citizens Advice Manchester
Hayley Hughes, Citizens Advice Manchester
Lauren Edwards, Shelter
John Ryan, Shelter

Apologies:

Councillors M Dar and Douglas

CESC/ROASIM/19/05 Minutes

Decision

To approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 30 September 2019.

CESC/ROASIM/19/06 Perspectives of External Stakeholders

The Chair outlined the purpose of the Task and Finish Group and invited the views of the external guests on advice services, in particular on the challenges in this area and what could be improved.

Sinead O'Connor from Cheetham Hill Advice Centre reported that some of the challenges with advice services in Manchester were that some people were giving advice when they shouldn't be as they were not advice agencies while some organisations could, with some staff training, help members of the public with filling in forms but were instead referring this basic support on to advice agencies. She informed Members that previously many people would only need to seek advice once and would then have stability once they were receiving the right benefits or in a job; however, changes to benefits and the job market meant that people's lives were less stable and more people needed to repeatedly seek help from advice services. The Director of Homelessness commented that perhaps this change needed to be reflected in how the Council commissioned, monitored and valued advice services. Sinead O'Connor agreed, commenting that there was an assumption that the focus

of advice services should be to encourage people to solve the issue themselves or to have a one-time contact with the service after which they would not need further support but that this did not reflect the reality of the current situation.

Sinead O'Connor advised Members that there were also some people who did not contact the commissioned advice services for help and were in contact with smaller grassroots organisations but that these organisations often did not have the training to provide appropriate advice so should either be referring people on to the commissioned advice services or should be provided with advice training. She outlined the challenges of multiple deprivation in north Manchester. She also reported that there was a strain on services providing immigration advice, partly due to European Union (EU) citizens seeking advice regarding Brexit but also due to other non-UK citizens then becoming more nervous about their status and seeking advice. A Member commented that there was a need for increased advice provision in north Manchester.

Andy Brown from Citizens Advice Manchester informed Members that he would provide them with written information on the range of services his organisation provided. He clarified that some organisations reported that they provided advice but actually provided basic information and then referred people on to the main advice organisations. He informed Members that some Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) provided detailed advice but that most did not and that they were unable to provide independent advice to tenants on debt because they were one of the organisations that the tenant would owe money to. He reported that the commissioned advice services provided a good service but were operating at full capacity and could not meet any additional demand if those people who needed advice but did not currently access advice services started doing so. He advised that his service did not have the resources to provide a comprehensive welfare benefit service across the city, although they did run a Help to Claim service funded from central government. He reported that they also could not provide the range of housing advice they wanted to due to changes to Legal Aid. He also reported that there was no longer any access in Manchester to good quality, low cost family advice. He advised that his service provided some employment advice, making use of funding from a range of sources, but that there was a need for more employment advice in the city. He reported that, in addition to people paying for legal advice on immigration, people were starting to pay to access advice on employment issues and benefits. He expressed concern that Brexit would result in an increased demand for advice services which the commissioned services would not have the capacity to meet. He outlined how important the core funding from the Council was in enabling his organisation to lever in additional funding from other sources but advised that this additional funding could only be spent on specific activities. He also informed Members of the support his service had put in place to assist former Thomas Cook employees who had lost their jobs when the company collapsed, stating that his organisation did respond to crises such as this but that limited resources affected their response.

John Ryan from Shelter informed Members that the system could be improved by ensuring that valuable resources did not have to be wasted challenging other agencies and departments where they should not have to be challenged. He gave as an example Shelter having to challenge housing associations who were threatening to evict a tenant for rent arrears which were due to a delay in receiving

Universal Credit and where it was clear that the money was coming. He advised Members that there was an opportunity for different agencies and departments to work better together so that they weren't using resources to challenge each other. He suggested that housing associations should see eviction as a last resort and that agencies could work together to prevent evictions from happening. He also outlined work Shelter was doing with private sector landlords to reduce the risk of tenants reaching the stage where they were being evicted and becoming homeless. He expressed concern that funding for advice services had been reduced over recent years. He supported Andy Brown's comment that the funding from the Council enabled the commissioned advice services to lever in additional funds, stating that they were able to bring additional money into the city through this. He informed Members about a national government-funded homelessness advice service which provided training to councils and other organisations but which was not used as much as it could be. He advised Members that this could be used to train people to identify at the earliest stage problems which could lead to homelessness if not addressed. He emphasised that early intervention was key.

The Citywide Services Manager from Manchester Libraries informed Members that her service provided information, not advice, to members of the public and also provided venues for organisations such as Manchester Citizens Advice to provide advice from. She advised that this had worked well as a lot of local people were using this service and it enabled them to get advice at their local library rather than having to travel elsewhere. She reported that people with a range of issues, including people who were homeless, used libraries as an open, warm, free space and that libraries staff referred them on to services for support, where they could. She informed Members that Manchester Libraries were currently looking at a scheme taking place in Glasgow where a Citizens Advice Bureau homelessness adviser was being employed to provide early intervention. She reported that Manchester Libraries were also looking at providing a space for credit unions in their venues as well.

In response to a Member's question, Andy Brown reported that organisations such as Manchester Citizens Advice were regulated by external bodies and subjected to audits which provided assurance about the quality of advice being provided. He informed Members that just under 50% of his organisation's clients were in social housing and that this was because social housing providers did not provide the level of advice that his organisation did. He commented that they were not trained to do so, it was not cost effective for them to do so and they had a conflict of interest in advising tenants who had housing arrears. He suggested that the social housing providers should instead contribute towards the funding of commissioned advice services, as some of the problems which they dealt with stemmed from the RSLs. He supported John Ryan's comment that work should be done with RSLs as, he stated, they were sometimes too quick to start eviction proceedings against tenants. The Ward Councillor for Baguley commented that, as the Task and Finish Group was discussing RSLs, it should seek the views of RSLs which provided advice services. The Executive Member for Adult Health and Wellbeing reported that RSLs had been invited to attend the Advice Forum but that only one had attended. John Ryan commented that social housing providers did some excellent work but that there were also some areas for improvement.

Members discussed whether Manchester Citizens Advice should provide advice outside of office hours. Andy Brown stated that his organisation currently provided advice services from 8 am to 6 pm on Monday to Friday. He reported that previously it had provided advice services on Saturdays and some evenings. He advised that, while this was valuable for some people, it had not been cost effective as fewer people had accessed the service during these times. He suggested that one option could be to put telephones in libraries, similar to the ones installed in GPs' surgeries, which local residents could use to speak to Manchester Citizens Advice, including on Saturdays. He advised that, while this would still require a member of staff to work Saturdays, it would be more cost effective than having Saturday advice sessions running in a number of venues. The Citywide Services Manager reported that she could look into this with Manchester Citizens Advice.

Hayley Hughes informed Members about how Manchester Citizens Advice was developing new ways of delivering their services, which had included piloting the use of Facebook messenger as a way for people to contact the service at any time and using a chatbot to help people to navigate information on their website, with the ability to get a call back from an adviser if this did not resolve their issue. She reported that, in addition to the telephones which had been installed in GPs' surgeries to enable people to access advice services, Manchester Citizens Advice was also working to reach people through a range of other organisations such as through pharmacies and Early Help Hubs.

A Member stated that library staff needed more training to deal with the complex queries they were faced with. Andy Brown informed Members about the months of training his advice staff received, the supervision in the role, the refresher training they had to undertake and the liability insurance his organisation held in relation to advice services and stated that there would be challenges in training library staff to provide advice. A Member reported that not all library staff knew where to signpost people for help and that some level of additional training would be useful, suggesting that money could be made available by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA). The Ward Councillor for Burnage advised that some libraries were staffed by volunteers who wanted to help their community and who also needed this training. He commented that there was a demand for face-to-face support and that some people needed this rather than telephone support, for example, if there were language barriers and they needed help filling in forms for benefits. He suggested that library staff, volunteers and community groups should be provided with training, not to provide advice, but to help people with filling in forms.

The Citywide Services Manager reported that libraries staff tried to help everyone who accessed their service and in the vast majority of cases were able to do so but, where they couldn't, they sought information from elsewhere. She advised Members that every library should have a core information pack to enable staff to signpost people to appropriate services and that she would check that each library had this and that it was up-to-date. She informed Members that libraries across the city provided digital literacy classes which would help people to fill in forms online.

The Chair asked the external guests what the Council could realistically do to improve the situation. Sinead O'Connor informed Members that people who were doing low-paid, unstable work, such as on zero hours contracts, or who were being

paid cash-in-hand were experiencing problems accessing benefits because benefits staff did not believe that their income was so low, or did not accept the documents they provided as evidence of their employment. She reported that this was happening with Universal Credit claims but also with housing benefit claims processed by the Council and suggested that this be addressed. She also reported that some other councils were using council tax arrears as a means of identifying people who were struggling with debt and using it as an opportunity to help them. John Ryan advised Members that the Council should use social housing plans to address the shortage of social housing and that it and the GMCA should use their influence to lobby for change which addressed the structural problems which exacerbated the shortage.

A Member commented that early intervention and prevention were key. He asked the external guests how they thought the Council should use its influence with social housing providers to bring about change. Andy Brown advised Members that the best starting point would be to invite them to have a genuine, meaningful conversation about this issue and work with them to find a way to address the number of social housing tenants requiring help from advice services.

Sinead O'Connor commented that some of the key issues for the Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit were that more work needed to be done to obtain EU settled status for Looked After Children, that a lack of immigration advice was making people vulnerable to homelessness and that an over-demand for free immigration advice meant that some people were not submitting their applications to remain in the UK in time which meant they could lose their recorded length of stay in the UK and in some cases have to leave the UK.

The Ward Councillor for Burnage asked the Director of Homelessness if he could provide figures on the percentage of people accessing the homelessness service who were social housing tenants. A Member asked for figures on the tenants that RSLs had provided advice and support to and how successful this had been in preventing them from becoming homeless.

Decisions

1. To thank the guests for attending.
2. To request that the written information on the services provided by Manchester Citizens Advice be circulated to Members of the Task and Finish Group via the Scrutiny Support Officer.
3. That there is a need to engage with Registered Social Landlords regarding advice services and to consider at the next meeting how to do this.
4. To give further consideration to additional funding for advice services, in particular whether partners can be making a larger contribution.
5. To ask the Director of Homelessness for figures on the percentage of people accessing the homelessness service who were social housing tenants.

6. To ask for figures on the tenants that RSLs have provided advice and support to and how successful this has been in preventing them from becoming homeless.
7. To note that, following the final meeting of the Task and Finish Group, this area of work will continue to be reviewed through the Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee.

CESC/ROASIM/19/07 Mapping of Local Advice Provision and Proposals for In-house Homelessness Prevention Advice

Decision

To defer this item to the next meeting.

CESC/ROASIM/19/08 Terms of Reference and Work Programme

Decision

To add the Mapping of Local Advice Provision and Proposals for In-house Homelessness Prevention Advice to the agenda of the next meeting.