

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

Minutes of the meeting held on 30 September 2019

Present:

Councillor Hacking – In the Chair
Councillors Doswell, Douglas and Grimshaw

Councillor Craig, Executive Member for Adult Health and Wellbeing

Apologies:

Councillor Collins

CESC/ROASIM/19/01 Terms of Reference and Work Programme

The Chair provided an overview of the terms of reference and work programme for the Task and Finish Group. He informed Members that the number of meetings had been reduced from four to three as the key lines of enquiry and purpose of the Task and Finish Group, which had been proposed as the subject for discussion at the first meeting, had already been determined at the Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee meeting on 5 September 2019. He reminded Members that it was not the role of the Task and Finish Group to review contracts for advice services which had already been awarded.

Decision

To note the terms of reference and work programme.

CESC/ROASIM/19/02 The Current Position (Context for Provision of Advice Services in Manchester) and Gaps in Provision

The Task and Finish Group received a report of the Director of Homelessness which provide an outline of the current position in respect of the recent tender of citywide advice services. It highlighted a range of issues for consideration with regard to access to and provision of advice in the city and suggested areas where this could be further developed to increase access to quality advice for Manchester residents.

The main points and themes within the report included:

- The local context and demand for advices services;
- The current provision;
- Future options for consideration; and
- Potential gaps.

The Executive Member for Adult Health and Wellbeing highlighted the impact of austerity on both the funding of advice services and on the demand for advice relating to issues such as financial problems and homelessness.

A Member asked what had happened to the external advice services which the Council had ceased funding. The Executive Member for Adult Health and Wellbeing reported that some had amalgamated with other organisations and that some had continued operating with funding from elsewhere, although their advice provision might have changed.

A Member expressed concern that cuts to advice services could have an impact on other areas, such as mental health services. The Executive Member for Adult Health and Wellbeing agreed that there was a link with mental health, as mental health problems could lead people to experience poverty which could then have a further negative impact on their mental health. She reported that the main advice contracts did not represent all the advice services that the Council funded, stating that, for example, people could now access advice via their GP's surgery. She advised Members that early intervention was important to prevent problems reaching a crisis point. The Director of Homelessness reported that, if problems with benefits were not resolved at an early stage, it was much more difficult to address later on and could result in people being at risk of homelessness, when the problem could have been resolved quite easily at an earlier stage.

A Member asked how non-commissioned services which provided advice linked in with the commissioned services and what training and support was available for libraries staff who dealt with requests for advice from members of the public who could have quite complex queries.

The Director of Homelessness reported that, in addition to the advice services commissioned by the Council, a number of services within the Council provided advice but that it was difficult to quantify this. He advised Members that there was an opportunity to undertake an audit of what was available in each of the localities within the city, including advice services provided by other agencies, and that this could be done through the recently-established Advice Forum. He also reported that the Forum could be used to provide training and development, for example on preventing homelessness, and for organisations to provide peer support. The Executive Member for Adult Health and Wellbeing expressed concern that, at present, some providers of specialist advice were not known to the Council or only became known to the Council when they were in financial difficulties and in need of emergency support. She commented that a clearer advice offer would enable staff in libraries to effectively signpost people to advice services rather than feeling that they had to advise members of the public themselves.

The Director of Homelessness highlighted that it could be difficult to draw a clear distinction between providing advice and signposting individuals and that, sometimes, it was more appropriate to signpost people with complex queries on to specialist advice. The Executive Member for Adult Health and Wellbeing advised that it was important to have clarity and boundaries regarding whether particular agencies or services were advising people or providing information and signposting.

The Chair expressed concern that some immigration solicitors were charging people high fees and providing poor advice and asked whether the Council could do anything about this. The Director of Homelessness reported that the Council could run a campaign advising people to check where they were getting advice from and

informing them about good quality, free advice they could access. The Executive Member for Adult Health and Wellbeing reported that the Council funded groups which worked with asylum seekers and, through these groups, was providing information to asylum seekers at the earliest opportunity.

In response to a question from the Chair, the Executive Member for Adult Health and Wellbeing reported that the Forum was being led by the commissioned advice services and would help to strengthen relationships in the advice sector as well as being a way for them to engage with the Council. She reported that the organisations in the advice sector were setting the priorities but that it would include a focus on quality, improvement and capacity-building.

The Chair commented that advice providers were being invited to the next meeting and suggested that the Advice Forum be discussed with them. A Member requested that information be provided on how these organisations linked in with partners, for example, libraries, Sure Start Centres and the Yes project. He also questioned whether the Council could access funding available at a Greater Manchester level.

The Chair outlined some concerns of Ward Councillors, including whether residents could easily access face-to-face support locally, the need for Ward Councillors to know how to respond to or where to refer residents requiring advice related to homelessness and the need to have a clear understanding of and co-ordination of advice provision, as well as being able to identify any gaps. He reported that the provision of advice relating to debt, homelessness and immigration were priorities.

The Director of Homelessness outlined plans to develop a citywide approach to homelessness prevention, which would require investing in giving people the skills to provide basic advice at an early point and to understand when a query was too complex and should be referred on. He informed Members about two locality-based pilots related to homelessness prevention which would use local assets such as libraries and GPs' surgeries.

A Member expressed concern that some groups were less likely to seek advice than others. The Director of Homelessness reported that it would be useful for the Advice Forum to look at equity of access to advice. The Executive Member for Adult Health and Wellbeing outlined some of the support available to enable people to access advice, for example, providing advice in different languages and providing advice in a written format.

Members discussed venues which could be used to provide advice services such as libraries, Sure Start Centres and schools, commenting on the value of using less intimidating venues and places that people visited anyway, while also noting that some people would want to keep any problems they had separate from their child's school. The Executive Member for Adult Health and Wellbeing informed Members that officers would provide a breakdown for the next meeting of the venues currently being used by commissioned advice services.

The Chair requested that a report be provided to the next meeting on the mapping of local advice provision, both in terms of the ward and the type of venue, and on proposals for in-house advice relating to homelessness prevention. A Member asked

for more information on how the Advice Forum would work and whether housing providers which provided limited advice in relation to debts, prioritising their rent arrears, would be engaged in the Advice Forum.

Decisions

1. To request that a report be provided to the next meeting on the mapping of local advice provision, both in terms of the ward and the type of venue, and on proposals for in-house advice relating to homelessness prevention.
2. To request more information on how the Advice Forum will work and whether housing providers which provide limited advice in relation to debts, prioritising their rent arrears, will be engaged in the Advice Forum.