

Manchester City Council Report for Resolution

Report to: Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee – 6 February 2020

Subject: Review of Advice Services in Manchester - Final Report and Recommendations

Report of: Review of Advice Services in Manchester Task and Finish Group

Summary

This report presents the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Review of Advice Services in Manchester Task and Finish Group. The Task and Finish Group was established to consider the availability of advice services across the city, with a view to producing recommendations to be considered in the budget in the next financial year.

Recommendations

The Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee is asked:

To note the findings of the Task and Finish Group and endorse the recommendations as set out in the report.

To submit the recommendations to the Executive Member for Adult Health and Wellbeing and the recently established multi agency Advice Forum for their consideration.

Wards Affected: All

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Background documents (available for public inspection):

None

Appendix 1 – Terms of Reference of the Task and Finish Group

Appendix 2 – Work Programme of the Task and Finish Group

Appendix 3 – Minutes of the Task and Finish Group

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 At its meeting on 7 February 2019, the Resources and Governance Scrutiny Committee considered a call in of the decision taken by the Acting Executive Director Strategic Commissioning (with Director of Adult Social Services responsibilities) relating to the appointment of a provider to deliver city wide advice services.
- 1.2 The Committee recommended that the Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee establish a Task and Finish Group to consider the availability of advice services across the city, with a view to producing recommendations to be considered in the budget in the next financial year.
- 1.3 At its meeting on 5 September 2019 the Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee formally established the Task and Finish Group.

2.0 Membership

- 2.1 The following members of the Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee were appointed to the Review of Advice Services in Manchester Task and Finish Group:
 - Councillor Hacking (Chair)
 - Councillor Collins
 - Councillor M Dar
 - Councillor Doswell
 - Councillor Douglas
 - Councillor Grimshaw

3.0 Objectives

- 3.1 To determine how provision of advice services in Manchester can be improved, to include consideration of:
 - how gaps in provision can be addressed.
 - how more can be achieved within limited resources.
 - opportunities for additional provision outside of existing contracts and funding arrangements.
 - how advice services are delivered, including opportunities to work with new partners.

4.0 Key Lines of Enquiry

- 4.1 The key lines of enquiry identified were:
 - To gain an understanding of the current situation.

- To identify any gaps in provision, for example, by type of advice or geographic area.
- To hear the perspectives of external stakeholders.

4.2 The Task and Finish Group held 3 meetings to undertake investigations into these lines of enquiry:

Meeting Date	Focus
30 September 2019	The current position and gaps in provision
30 October 2019	Perspectives of external stakeholders
15 November 2019	Mapping of local advice provision and proposals for in-house homelessness prevention advice

5.0 The Current Position and Gaps in Provision

Relevant key lines of enquiry:

To gain an understanding of the current situation.

To identify any gaps in provision, for example, by type of advice or geographic area.

- 5.1 In order to identify areas for improvement, the Task and Finish Group first sought to gain a greater understanding of the current situation. Members considered a report on the current position in respect of the recent tender of citywide advice services. The report 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.
- 5.2 The Task and Finish Group noted that, in addition to the commissioned advice services, advice was provided by some Council services as well as by a range of external organisations, some of which were not known to the Council. Members discussed the importance of having clarity on what particular agencies or services were doing and whether their role was to advise people or to provide information and signpost them to other services. Members were provided with information about the recently-established Advice Forum and the role that this could play in improving advice provision.
- 5.3 Members discussed concerns raised by Ward Councillors, including whether residents could easily access face-to-face support locally. Members discussed some of the venues which could be used to provide advice services locally and in a non-intimidating environment, including libraries, Sure Start Centres and schools.
- 5.4 The Task and Finish Group discussed concerns about the quality of immigration advice that people were receiving from some solicitors, often for high fees. Members stated that preventing and tackling homelessness should be a priority area and heard about plans to prevent people becoming homeless by addressing problems at an earlier stage.

Recommendation 1

There is a clear need to undertake an audit of what services are available in each of the localities of the city both from commissioned services and other sources. It is recommended that such an audit be undertaken and that it falls within the remit of the Advice Forum.

Recommendation 2

Consideration should be given by the Advice Forum to, where feasible, using a wider variety of venues where advice services could be accessed, such as libraries, children's centres and schools. In addition to examining the location of services, the Advice Forum should consider to what extent the provision of services relating to homelessness and asylum seeking are adequately provided for either within or outside the current commissioned provision.

6.0 Perspectives of External Stakeholders

Relevant key line of enquiry:

To hear the perspectives of external stakeholders.

- 6.1 The Task and Finish Group invited a range of stakeholders to their second meeting to hear their perspectives on advice services in Manchester, including the services they provided and the current challenges in this area of work. Those in attendance included representatives from Cheetham Hill Advice Centre, Citizens Advice Manchester and Shelter, as well as a representative from the Council's Library Service.
- 6.2 Members heard about the level of training and supervision needed to provide professional advice and the regulation of the commissioned advice services. Representatives from advice services expressed concern about smaller grassroots organisations which were providing advice to people without having the necessary training and knowledge to do so.
- 6.3 The Task and Finish Group discussed whether other organisations could be provided with training to deal with queries and whether their role should be limited to assisting people with filling in forms and signposting them on to relevant advice agencies for more complex queries. A representative from the Library Service reported that libraries staff provided information, but not advice, to members of the public and provided venues for organisations such as Manchester Citizens Advice to hold advice surgeries. Members noted the advantages of face-to-face assistance with filling in forms, particularly where there were language barriers.
- 6.4 The Task and Finish Group discussed the role of Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), hearing from external stakeholders how a minority of RSLs provided advice to their tenants but that they could not provide independent advice in relation to debt due to a conflict of interest as one of the organisations the tenant would owe money to. Members also heard that advice services were

having to spend time challenging other organisations in situations when they felt they should not have to do so, for example, challenging housing associations which were threatening to evict tenants for rent arrears due to a delay in receiving Universal Credit. Members heard that just under 50% of Manchester Citizens Advice's clients were in social housing. The Task and Finish Group discussed whether additional funding could be made available from RSLs or the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA).

- 6.5 The Task and Finish Group questioned whether Manchester Citizens Advice should provide advice outside of office hours and heard that this had been tried in the past but had not been cost effective; however, it was suggested that one adviser could be available on a Saturday by telephone, with telephone access being provided in local libraries.

Recommendation 3

Consideration should be given to the Council funding more training for library staff to deal with the complex queries they were faced with. Acknowledging the professionalism of advice workers and the complexities of offering advice, it was suggested that training should be restricted to improved signposting capacity and support for those requiring assistance with basic form filling and signposting. This support is especially important where there are language barriers. This additional training and capacity building could be made available not only to library staff but also to volunteers and community groups based in community buildings.

Recommendation 4

The Advice Forum should undertake a review of the existing relationship between commissioned advice services and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) to ensure that there is a minimisation of unnecessary challenge between them. Examples of where this challenge is wasting resources is where an RSL threatening eviction due to late arrival of Universal Credit causes a debt advice provider to expend resources dealing with a case where it is clear the money will eventually arrive. Better co-ordination to eradicate these instances would prevent waste in the system.

Recommendation 5

Consideration should be given to out of hours provision (i.e. outside 9am - 6pm Monday to Friday), particularly the potential to provide telephones in libraries, similar to the ones installed in GPs' surgeries, which local residents could use to speak to Manchester Citizens Advice (for example) on Saturdays. 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.

Recommendation 6

It is recommended that the Executive Member for Adult Health and Wellbeing explores additional resources, in particular for the recommendations relating to additional training, from sources other than the Council. It is clear that RSLs and the GMCA could be asked to consider a more active financial role than at present.

7.0 Mapping of Local Advice Provision and Proposals for In-house Homelessness Prevention Advice

Relevant key line of enquiry:

To gain an understanding of the current situation.

- 7.1 Additional information on commissioned advice services and the mapping of local advice provision was provided to Members of the Task and Finish Group.

8.0 Conclusions

- 8.1 Members reviewed the current provision of advice services and considered how this could be improved. From this, the Task and Finish Group have made a number of recommendations to be addressed to the Executive Member for Adult Health and Wellbeing in the first instance. The Task and Finish Group Members also recognise that the responsibility for delivery of advice services across the city is a partnership arrangement and as such request that the recently established multi agency Advice Forum also receive and consider these recommendations.