

## **Divisions Affected - All**

### **Delegated Decision by Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care**

**27 February 2024**

**Budget approval for the Joint Commissioning of an Adult Advice Service in Oxfordshire, between Adult Social Care and Public Health**

**Report by Corporate Director for Adult Social Care and Corporate Director for Public Health and Community Safety**

## **RECOMMENDATION**

1. **The Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care is RECOMMENDED to**
  - (a) Approve the proposal for Adult Social Care and Public Health to jointly commission an advice service for adults in Oxfordshire via an open tender process, with a value of up to £1,820,000 over a period of up to 5 years (£364,000 per annum).
  - (b) Delegate authority to the Director of Adult Social Care, the Director of Public Health, the S151 officer and the Head of Legal and Deputy Monitoring Officer to award and complete the contract for Provision of Adult Advice Services as referred to in this report following the conclusion of a procurement exercise pursuant to the Council's Contract Procedure Rules, to enable service delivery from 1<sup>st</sup> November 2024.

## **Executive Summary**

2. Jointly commissioning a new advice service via a competitive tender process will support people to live their lives as independently, successfully and as safely as possible within their communities, to enhance wellbeing and improve people's choices. The service will aim to maximise income addressing underlying issues and health inequalities and taking a prevention approach to increase the wellbeing of residents using the service.
3. The proposed service will do this by providing free, independent and impartial advice to assist people with benefits, debt, budgeting and other financial and welfare issues, thereby maximising incomes and helping people to make the best use of the money available to them.
4. This approach supports the council's transformative ambitions to deliver innovative services with the experience of the user at the centre. Commissioning advice services as a long-term contract also provides more stability for the

sector, supporting our ambition to be a partner-of-choice for community organisations.

5. On 31<sup>st</sup> October 2024 two services funded by the council which provide advice for residents in Oxfordshire will reach the end of their contract/grant period. This includes the Oxfordshire Specialist Advice service (OSAS) funded by Adult Social Care and Benefits in Place (BiP) funded by Public Health.
6. In December 2023 Public Health DLT and in January 2024 Adult Social Care DLT agreed the proposal to combine the resources of Adult Social Care and Public Health to jointly commission a revised/reviewed co-designed adult advice service from 1<sup>st</sup> November 2024.
7. The Council intends to achieve this by commissioning a contract with a service provider via a competitive tender process. The total combined value of the proposed contract is £364,000 per annum, £1,820,000 over 5 years.
8. The contract value will be over £500,000 and therefore is required to be entered in the Forward Plan, in accordance with the Access to Information Rules. This is a key decision and one that is delegated to the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care to take, consistent with overall Council policy to deliver agreed strategy/plans within the area of responsibility and within approved budgets.

## **Background**

9. The link between financial hardship and health and wellbeing can be a vicious cycle, with both effecting the other. Poor health can lead to financial hardship through reduced access to education and limiting employment opportunities, which can lead to unemployment or lower wage jobs. Living with the stress and anxiety of financial hardship and the stigma which can sometimes be attached to this, can have a damaging impact on long-term health and wellbeing.
10. Advice services can be crucial to support households to access the support they need to maximise income and manage debts and in turn help to reduce some of the stresses associated with financial worries.
11. Financially stable households are less likely to require specialist Adult Social Care and other services and are more able to cope with health and/or social care difficulties if they arise. A key strand to our Oxfordshire Way approach is to strengthen families and communities. The approach also matches the priorities in the new [Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2030](#), enabling residents to be more in control of their finances. Advice centres have proved an effective way to help protect the most vulnerable.
12. The current providers of the Oxfordshire Specialist Advice Service reported a £2.7 million annualised income gain from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) into the local economy which is designed to assist with costs of care.

13. However, not everyone is claiming what they are entitled to. For example in Oxfordshire, it is estimated that 4000 people are entitled to but not claiming pension credit, which amounts to potentially £8.2 million of unclaimed entitlement (<https://insight.oxfordshire.gov.uk>). Receipt of welfare benefits are a gateway for other types of support. Pension credit can give eligibility for free dental treatment, cold weather payments, and additional payments if you are a carer or have a disability.
14. Reasons for not claiming benefits include administrative complexity, lack of awareness, fragmentation of support, and stigma. These are all issues that can be addressed, fully or in part, by good benefits advice provision.
15. Two services funded by the council which provide advice for residents in Oxfordshire will reach the end of their contract/grant period on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2024:
  - Oxfordshire Specialist Advice service (OSAS)
    - Contract with Age UK Oxfordshire and funded by Adult Social Care
  - Benefits in Place (BiP)
    - Grants to the four Citizens Advice offices in Oxfordshire and funded by Public Health (the current grant will end on 31<sup>st</sup> March and a 7-month extension will be put in place to bridge the gap before the newly commissioned service starts).
16. In December 2023 Public Health DLT and in January 2024 Adult Social Care DLT agreed the proposal to combine the resources of Adult Social Care and Public Health to jointly commission a revised/reviewed co-designed adult advice service from 1<sup>st</sup> November 2024.
17. A jointly re-commissioned Advice Service presents an opportunity for Public Health and Health, Education and Social Care (HESC) to combine resources to provide a longer term and more sustainable funding offer to the advice services sector through a procured contract with a particular focus on supporting people in our communities most likely to experience inequalities.
18. The proposed advice service would deal with issues of inequality, build resilient communities, address the demand for advice, provide prevention duty under the Care Act 2014, provide improvement of public health under s 12 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012, include the use of better technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI) and provide reliable advice for frontline staff and the people looking for support from care services.

## **Proposed New Service**

19. The overall aim of the proposed advice service is to support people to live their lives as independently, successfully and as safely as possible within their communities, to enhance wellbeing and improve people's choices. We want advice services which maximise income addressing underlying issues and health inequalities and taking a prevention approach to increase the wellbeing of residents using the service.

20. The proposed advice service will achieve this by providing free, independent and impartial advice to assist people with benefits, debt, budgeting and other financial and welfare issues, thereby maximising incomes and helping people to make the best use of the money available to them.
21. The new service will be open to residents of Oxfordshire with a focus on targeting aimed at older people, adults with learning disabilities, adults with mental health concerns, adults with physical and sensory impairments, adult and young carers, young people aged 16+ and families with young children (particularly those with disabled children), with a specific focus on supporting people in our communities most likely to experience inequalities as outlined in our community profile programme. [Community Insight Profiles | Oxfordshire Insight](#)
22. Features of the proposed new service model will include becoming a transformed service jointly commissioned within the council to improve efficiencies and enable smarter outcomes. The new service model will also offer opportunities to bring in districts part way through the contract to join up advice provision further. Digital pathways are required within the specification to help manage demand including opportunities to use Artificial Intelligence (AI). Further signposting from the Oxfordshire County Council Customer Service Centre will be encouraged to sources of self-help as well as to the commissioned service.

## Corporate Policies and Priorities

23. The proposed commission aligns with the councils following local priorities outlined in Oxfordshire County Councils **Strategic Plan 2023-2025**:
- Commitment to tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire
  - Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents
  - Support carers and the social care system
24. The delivery of stronger, more resilient communities will address a portion of the demand on health and social care services as identified in the Councils Strategic Plan 2023-2025 priority of supporting carers and the social care system. The proposed interventions make a significant contribution to prevention work which seeks to strengthen health outcomes and build on individuals' strengths.
25. The new advice service model also aligns with the new **Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2030**, through enabling residents to be more in control with their finances.

## Financial Implications

26. The proposed budget for the annual Public Health contribution is £121,000 and the proposed budget for the annual Adult Social Care contribution is £243,000.
27. The total contract value is expected to be £364,000 per annum. This will be £1,820,00 over a three-plus-two-year contract arrangement. Artificial Intelligence (AI) developments will require an additional separate £20,000 for

the first year of the contract which will be sourced from the Adult Social Care budget. It is still to be decided whether this will be within the contract value or held as a separate council project budget.

28. It is expected that there may be efficiencies from joint working between services, in terms of staff time for procurement processes and contract management.
29. As the city and district councils also commission advice services across Oxfordshire, we will include flexibility in the contract for future potential collaboration and opportunities to consolidate our commissioning with city and district councils. This is an area that requires further exploration.

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## **Legal Implications**

30. The statutory power for the Council purchasing these services is set out at paragraph 18 of this report. It is intended that the services will be procured competitively in accordance with the Council's Contract Procedure Rules and the Public Contract Regulations 2015. Provided commissioners comply with such rules, there are no legal implications in the proposed course of action.

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## **Staff Implications**

31. Further exploration is needed as to whether TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment) could apply to the employees carrying out the activities presently provided by each service. TUPE information will be requested from the existing providers and will be reviewed for any OCC pensions or other financial risks. This information will be provided to bidders during the tendering process.

## **Equality & Inclusion Implications**

32. An Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) was completed, and was authorised by David Munday, Deputy Director of Public Health on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2024.
33. The EIA summarised that people with protected characteristics are expected to be overrepresented in the new service. As such it is important that the procurement process ensures that potential providers set out how they will ensure equality of access to these groups. The full EIA can be found in annex 1.

## **Sustainability Implications**

34. A Climate Impact Assessment (CIA) was completed, and approved by David Munday, Deputy Director of Public Health on 13<sup>th</sup> February 2024.
35. The CIA generated the summary that the commission of a new advice service has very few direct impacts on climate action policies. Enabling progress towards net zero is not one of the key purposes of the service, nevertheless there are numerous co-benefits. Residents accessing the Adults Advice Service can receive referrals to the Better Housing Better Health Programme which supports the transition to more efficient energy use by retrofitting resident homes. This support will be targeted to low-income households, alleviating fuel poverty and improving wellbeing. We will also expect that the provider has flexible working practices in place, allowing their staff to work from home if necessary, and to provide residents with the possibility of accessing the service without travelling.

## **Risk Management**

36. The purpose of the proposed new advice service and increasing capacity is to minimise risk. Alternatives would be to not do anything and allow the contract and grants to end on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2024 or bring the service in-house. Bringing the service in-house was rejected due to a lack of in-house expertise and value in having the service being provided independently. Additionally, if services do not continue vulnerable people may find it difficult to access the appropriate support resulting in potential for loss of income, increase in debt and reductions in wellbeing. Consequently, there would also be increases in care costs for the council and workload/pressures on operational teams.
37. The key risks identified with this approach are:
- a) If there is no viable market to have a successful procurement, a delay in sourcing a provider may have potential reputational risk to the council. This will be mitigated by allowing sufficient time in the procurement plans to attract interested providers and creating a circulation list from the previous provider engagement event.
  - b) Disinvestment from the District/City Councils as a result of the new contract. We will involve districts/city in engagement discussions and explore opportunities for a county wide Advisory Services Charter.
  - c) Service Mobilisation as handover to a new provider may create delays and disruption in service provision. The Mobilisation Plan will be assessed at the procurement stage for robustness.
  - d) There are a range of different advice services in Oxfordshire, funded from a variety of sources, all key to local and accessible advice. There may be a perception that a large commission of this type will impact on the provision of smaller independent services. This will be mitigated with the requirement for the service provider awarded the contract to work in partnership across the advice services system.

## Consultations

38. In October 2023, we held an Oxfordshire advice services stakeholder event to look at what the advice sector currently offers, what the aims and outcomes of a future service should be and how this service should be set up.
39. An online survey was also devised, asking people who have used advice services in the last 12 months for their experiences and views on what the services did well and how they could be improved.
40. We also completed benchmarking with other local authorities to see how they are providing advice services in Berkshire Oxfordshire Buckinghamshire (BOB) and also in Kent.
41. We used these consultations described above to help us shape the business case and specification regarding the future requirements for the model of the new advice service.

Annex: Annex 1 – Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA)

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