

## CABINET ITEM COVERING SHEET PROFORMA

**AGENDA ITEM**

**REPORT TO  
CABINET**

**11 MARCH 2010**

**REPORT OF  
CORPORATE  
MANAGEMENT  
TEAM**

### **CABINET DECISION**

*Access & Communities – Lead Cabinet Member – Councillor D Coleman*

#### **EFFICIENCY, IMPROVEMENT AND TRANSFORMATION (EIT) REVIEW OF ADVICE AND INFORMATION SERVICES**

1. Summary

This report presents the findings of the EIT review of Advice and Information. This review was a “reporting-in” review to the Executive Scrutiny Committee and a summary of the findings presented to the Executive Scrutiny Committee is included at **Appendix 1** with the Committee’s response at **Appendix 5**.

The review included advice and information services that are provided directly by Council officers and by external advice agencies. The objectives of the review were to ensure that those who need advice and information, both now and in the future, have access to suitable services and that available resources are targeted so that these services are delivered in a way that is of value to customers and best meets their needs and expectations.

2. Recommendations

1. That the five separate contracts described in paragraph (66) of the report at **Appendix 1** and their associated budgets be pooled, and the Council develop a new specification for advice and information services that meet residents’ needs and the Council’s strategic priorities, particularly around financial inclusion and also takes account of the current economic climate. That the Council embark on a tendering exercise for a three-year contract, with option to extend for a further two years, with a contract start date of 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011.
2. That the availability of free, independent legal advice and information via the Community Legal Advice telephone helpline and website for people who are entitled to Legal Aid be promoted more widely across the Council by displaying posters and leaflets and raising staff awareness of the service so that more signposting takes place.

3. That the temporary post of ILFO (Independent Living Fund Officer) transfer from the in-house Welfare Rights team to the temporary Personalisation Support Team, followed by a further review to consider the optimum place within the organisation for this role, when the work of the Personalisation Support Team concludes.
4. That, subject to consultation with staff and unions, an organisation restructure be undertaken within CESC to merge the rest of the in-house Welfare Rights team with the CESC Client Financial Services team and that the focus of the Welfare Rights team within this new structure be on (but not exclusively):
  - i. supporting social care clients to maximise their income and access other services that might enhance their wellbeing (thereby bringing in additional income for the Council)
  - ii. undertaking specific projects linked to other Council services and key Council agendas, particularly how to make use of internal information and customer insight to target campaign work
  - iii. acting as a reference point for advice and referrals from Social Care staff
  - iv. co-ordinating Advice and Information provision across the borough
  - v. developing referral protocols with the external provider selected to deliver the contract for advice and information services described in Recommendation (1) above in an attempt to cut down some of the task duplication and enable a more specialist approach to certain tasks (such as representation at Tribunals)
5. That the Welfare Rights service enter into discussions with the PCT to seek to draw in funding by delivering advice sessions at GP practices, similar to models adopted by other local authorities.
6. That the Web Development Team, part of the new Communications Team, develop a specification and work with Xentrall ICT to create a directory of Advice and Information providers across the borough.
7. That Customer Services and the Library Service promote the availability of the new directory and become points of contact for customers seeking sources of advice and information in face-to-face situations and over the telephone.
8. That an advice providers' network be created, with responsibility for setting up and leading this network sitting within the restructured Welfare Rights team recommended at (4) above.
9. The newly formed advice providers' network explore options of bidding for Big Lottery grant to support the activities of the network.

3. Reasons for the Recommendations/Decision(s)

To ensure that those who need advice and information, both now and in the future, have access to suitable services and that available resources are targeted so that these services are delivered in a way that is of value to customers and best meets their needs and expectations.

#### 4. Members' Interests

Members (including co-opted Members with voting rights) should consider whether they have a personal interest in the item as defined in the Council's code of conduct (**paragraph 8**) and, if so, declare the existence and nature of that interest in accordance with paragraph 9 of the code.

Where a Member regards him/herself as having a personal interest in the item, he/she must then consider whether that interest is one which a member of the public, with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard as so significant that it is likely to prejudice the Member's judgement of the public interest (**paragraphs 10 and 11 of the code of conduct**).

A Member with a prejudicial interest in any matter must withdraw from the room where the meeting considering the business is being held -

- in a case where the Member is attending a meeting (including a meeting of a select committee) but only for the purpose of making representations, answering questions or giving evidence, provided the public are also allowed to attend the meeting for the same purpose whether under statutory right or otherwise, immediately after making representations, answering questions or giving evidence as the case may be;
- in any other case, whenever it becomes apparent that the business is being considered at the meeting;

and must not exercise executive functions in relation to the matter and not seek improperly to influence the decision about the matter (**paragraph 12 of the Code**).

**Further to the above, it should be noted that any Member attending a meeting of Cabinet, Select Committee etc; whether or not they are a Member of the Cabinet or Select Committee concerned, must declare any personal interest which they have in the business being considered at the meeting (unless the interest arises solely from the Member's membership of, or position of control or management on any other body to which the Member was appointed or nominated by the Council, or on any other body exercising functions of a public nature, when the interest only needs to be declared if and when the Member speaks on the matter), and if their interest is prejudicial, they must also leave the meeting room, subject to and in accordance with the provisions referred to above.**

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**SUMMARY**

This report presents the findings of the EIT review of Advice and Information. This review was a “reporting-in” review to the Executive Scrutiny Committee and a summary of the findings presented to the Executive Scrutiny Committee is included at **Appendix 1** with the Committee’s response at **Appendix 5**.

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**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. That the five separate contracts described in paragraph (66) of the report at **Appendix 1** and their associated budgets be pooled, and the Council develop a new specification for advice and information services that meet residents’ needs and the Council’s strategic priorities, particularly around financial inclusion and also takes account of the current economic climate. That the Council embark on a tendering exercise for a three-year contract, with option to extend for a further two years, with a contract start date of 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011.
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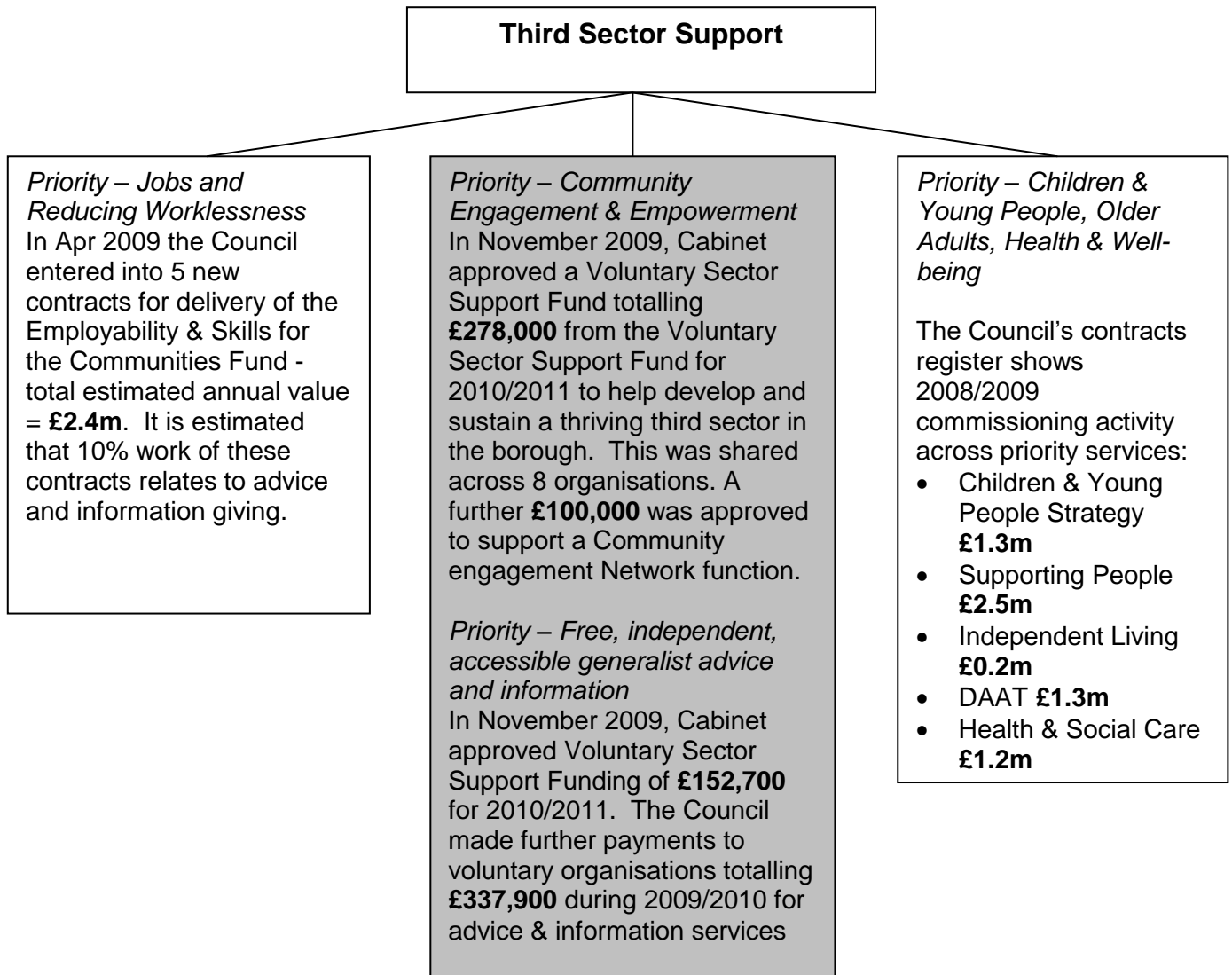
## **DETAIL**

1. The review examined the provision of advice and information services across the borough. This includes advice and information services that are provided directly by Council officers and by external advice agencies (such as Stockton District Advice & Information Service) and considered the current baseline position.

### The Baseline Position

2. An initial assessment of advice and information provision across the borough revealed a wide spectrum of services provided by the voluntary sector, the Council itself and our partner organisations such as health, the DWP and Job Centre Plus, and significant Council activity in commissioning advice and information services from the voluntary sector . This review focussed on those services that provide more "personal" types of advice and information (such as welfare benefits, debt and housing advice) at a higher level than the basic, "what day is my bin emptied?", "how can I pay my Council Tax?" type queries.
3. With regard to arrangements between the Council and external agencies that provide advice and information on our behalf, research in the baselining phase revealed an extensive amount of advice and information being provided by external agencies and the voluntary sector across a wide range of service specific themes

much of which relates to specific advice and information. In 2008-2009, the Council invested approximately £11m in commissioning activity from the third sector (this figure includes national, sub-regional and local third sector organisations). Currently approximately £2.4m is targeted at skills/jobs/reducing worklessness and another £7m towards health and social care. The Council (through community empowerment initiatives) is also supporting the voluntary sector to provide more general advice and information for example relating to financial inclusion, welfare benefits, debt etc and this type of advice has been the focus of this EIT review. The diagram below illustrates the Council's commissioning activities with the third sector, the shaded section being the focus of this EIT review.



4. The above diagram also illustrates the links between this EIT review and the Voluntary Sector Support Fund (VSSF) Review that was considered by Cabinet on 26<sup>th</sup> November 2009. Cabinet agreed, that as this EIT review was ongoing, the level of funding provided for advice and information services (via SDAIS) be kept at the same level for 2010/2011 and considered as part of this review.
5. A decision was taken to concentrate on contracts and grants etc where over 70% of the work undertaken by the outside organisation relates to general advice and information. This amounted to 10 “contracts” with an annual value of £490,600 in 2009/2010 (see **Appendix 2**). Seven of these are with Stockton District Advice and

Information Service (SDAIS), with an annual value of £340,000 - mainly one year arrangements, funded from a variety of sources.

6. With regard to internal services, an initial high-level review identified 24 SBC services that provide advice and information of the type included within the scope of the review, these were further narrowed down to the four internal services whose core purpose is giving advice and information and where the team spends 70% or more of their time giving advice and information. These areas are:

- Welfare Rights
- IAG (Information Advice & Guidance) workers in the Children's Centres
- Families Information Service
- Connexions Personal Advisers

A summary of the costs of providing these services is attached at **Appendix 3**.

7. During the baseline phase, the importance of signposting was recognised. This happens extensively across the Council where services are unable to offer the appropriate advice and guidance themselves and refer the customer on to an alternative internal service or external agency/partner for help. It is essential that front-line staff are equipped with accurate and up-to-date information to enable them to signpost effectively.

8. Other baseline work is described in detail in **Appendix 1** and included:

- A review of service demand;
- A review of customer feedback;
- A Viewpoint survey to establish residents' views about advice and information provided directly by the Council and by external advice agencies, in particular:
  - What type of advice and information residents have sought;
  - How easy it was to access that advice and information;
  - How residents would prefer to access and receive advice and information ;
- Looking at advice and information services provided by external organisations to identify if there is any duplication.

The following Conclusions emerged from the Baselining Exercise and helped to focus the direction of the review and the development of options for further consideration:

9. The current economic climate is resulting in an increased demand for advice and information services that is proving difficult to meet. At a time when the Council needs to support vulnerable households and seek to minimise the impact of the recession on local communities, it may not be appropriate, at this time, to seek to make efficiencies that will reduce service provision, even though a number of advice and information services provided by the Council are non-statutory. This review has therefore sought to identify ways of making better use of the existing resources that are expended on providing advice and information, and examine the possibility of joining existing services together more effectively whilst recognising that the higher than usual demand driven by the recession should reduce in the medium to longer term.
10. Legal Services Commission (LSC) funding is available in cases, such as welfare benefits and debt advice, where the person seeking advice and information is entitled to legal aid. The review found that the Council could do more to encourage residents to approach organisations such as the Community Legal Advice national telephone helpline and this would help these residents through LSC funding. This could then free up Council resources to support those residents that don't qualify for legal aid. Promoting the Community Legal Advice telephone service might also ease demand on local service provision.

11. There is duplication of service provision around welfare benefits and maximisation of benefit income across the borough, with services available from the Council's own Welfare Rights Service (and to a lesser degree other internal advice and information providers), SDAIS, Community Legal Services and the Carers' Centre. There are also many sources of debt advice, but these are external to the Council. The Council is not under any statutory obligation to provide either of these services.
12. There is a need for a comprehensive store of information about the availability of advice and information services across the borough to assist those who are required to signpost residents to an appropriate service. A web-based directory of services, accessible to both residents and staff would be welcome.
13. Many of our contracts with voluntary sector organisations are based on yearly agreements, sometimes due to funding uncertainties. These short-term arrangements lead to uncertainties for SDAIS staff (resulting in staff turnover). There may be economies for the Council and more funding certainty for any external organisation delivering the services, if all these different arrangements were pulled together to be tendered and managed as a single contract.
14. Following on from the above conclusions, four topics were identified for further detailed investigation as the next stage of the review:
  - Consolidation of all the advice and information services that the Council commissions from external organisations into a single specification that could then be tendered, including the advice and information services that are currently included in the Core Funding Agreements that accompany allocations of grant from the Voluntary Sector Support Fund.
  - Enter into discussion with A4e, the organisation that is contracted by the Legal Services Commission to operate the national Community Legal Advice Service, to understand their capacity for taking on additional cases and how the Council could best promote the national telephone advice line.
  - Further investigation to understand the reasons for the duplication of welfare benefits advice between the Council's Welfare Rights service and external advice and information agencies and whether this could be eliminated via an alternative service delivery model.
  - Consider a model for future delivery that ensures more co-ordination and joined up working between all the different parties involved in advice and information giving across the borough.

The summary report at **Appendix 1** describes the analysis of each of these options and how the recommendations were formed.

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

15. The proposals around contract rationalisation release potential savings, currently assessed at £61,500 over three years, commencing 2011/2012, however it is suggested that the specification be worded in a way that gives the Council the option of re-investing these savings to expand the range of advice and information services provided under the contract, given the current economic climate. This would be reviewed as the situation becomes clearer. The proposals offer the



potential for further savings in relation to bringing income in to the Council, but these sums cannot be quantified at this stage.

## **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

16. TUPE may apply where providers have appointed staff to undertake the work associated with the existing contracts that are to be consolidated under the new corporate advice and information contract. This will be discussed further with current providers as the tender documentation and specification are being prepared and, if necessary, the TUPE details will be included.

## **RISK ASSESSMENT**

17. This report is categorised as low to medium risk. Existing management systems and daily routine activities are sufficient to control and reduce risk.

## **SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY IMPLICATIONS**

18. Enhanced service delivery through the EIT process. The objectives of the review are to ensure that those who need advice and information, both now and in the future, have access to suitable services and that available resources are targeted so that these services are delivered in a way that is of value to customers and best meets their needs and expectations.

## **EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

19. This report has been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment and has been judged to have a positive impact. An action plan has been developed to ensure equality of opportunity is addressed during the development of the specification for the new corporate advice and information services contract.

## **CONSULTATION INCLUDING WARD/COUNCILLORS**

20. A Viewpoint residents survey was conducted as part of the baseline phase. There have also been discussions with Catalyst and voluntary sector organisations during the baseline and options appraisal phase.
21. Consultation has taken place with the Unions.
22. This was a reporting-in review to Executive Scrutiny Committee. Comments from the Committee are attached at **Appendix 5**.

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### Background Papers:

EIT Review of Advice and Information, Scoping Document and Project Plan (Executive Scrutiny Committee 10<sup>th</sup> June 2009)

Efficiency, Improvement and Transformation Review of Advice and Information Services (Executive Scrutiny Committee 20<sup>th</sup> October 2009)

Efficiency, Improvement and Transformation Review of Advice and Information Services  
(Executive Scrutiny Committee 16<sup>th</sup> February 2010)

Ward(s) and Ward Councillors: Not Ward specific.

Property: The SBC Welfare Rights service is currently based in Billingham Council Offices. The team may need to be relocated in the event of an organisation review which is one of the options under consideration in this report.