

# ***Information/Discussion Paper***

## **Overview and Scrutiny Social and Community**

**20 October 2008**

### **Single Housing Advice Contract – Progress Report**

This note contains the information to keep Members informed of matters relating to the work of the Committee, but where no decisions from Members are needed

#### **1. Why has this come to scrutiny?**

- 1.1 Committee has requested a progress report of the first six months of the Single Housing Advice contract which has been delivered by the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) since 1<sup>st</sup> April 2008.

#### **2. Summary of the Issue**

- 2.1 Since 1<sup>st</sup> April the CAB has been delivering services in accordance with the Single Housing Advice contract which consolidated arrangements for the delivery of housing and debt advice services across the town.

#### **2.2 Monitoring process of contract performance**

- 2.3 Prior to the contract start date a number of joint meetings were held with CAB and relevant officers from the council. This was to ensure the smooth transition of the new arrangements and to further clarify issues of performance reporting requirements to enable the effective delivery of services and performance monitoring from the very outset of the contract commencement date.

- 2.4 In addition to these meetings, operational team leaders from both the council and CAB have met on a regular basis to assist in the induction of CAB advisors and to develop effective joint working arrangements between the CAB advisory team and the Council's Housing Options service. This arrangement continues as deemed necessary by either party.

- 2.5 The CAB as per the contract is required to submit quarterly monitoring information as attached in Appendix A. The information is submitted to the council for internal review as soon as possible after the end of the quarterly period and no later than 14 days. The Service Manager Community Services reviews the information submitted and any issues of clarification are requested from CAB prior to the joint monitoring meeting.

- 2.6 From the submission of performance information an agenda is prepared to identify areas for detailed discussion arising from the performance data.

## **2.7 Complementary indicator review**

**2.8** In addition to considering the specific performance monitoring information supplied by the CAB under the contract terms, CBC officers also scrutinise their internal monitoring arrangements regarding the Housing Options Service to identify trends in relation to the effectiveness of the housing advice service. Effective housing advice is a critical tool in preventing homelessness and will be reflected in relation to the level of demand on the council's Housing Options Service.

**2.9** Since 2003 Cheltenham has been operating an initial housing assessment process whereby agencies across the town submit information on a web based system to measure the number of clients approaching services requesting assistance with housing issues. The information captured through this process serves as an additional mechanism to identify trends in demand for services and support in relation to housing. This is being used as a further tool for measuring the effectiveness of housing advice and indicating areas for further scrutiny, research and testing with our partners through our partnership working arrangements.

## **2.10 Performance monitoring to date**

**2.11** The inaugural quarterly monitoring meeting took place on 24<sup>th</sup> July. In recognition of the importance of the inaugural meeting the relevant Service Managers of the CAB and CBC were also joined by the AD Community Services, Deputy Chief Executive and Cabinet Member Community Development and Housing.

**2.12** As the inaugural meeting of monitoring the new consolidated arrangements of the contract, no previous directly comparable performance data was available to check trends in demand and performance. In future meetings as data is accumulated over a period of time further analysis of direction of travel will be enabled. The complimentary data as referred to under sections 2.8 & 2.9 was reviewed by council officers to test trends in demand and provision from data collected under previous arrangements for the provision of housing advice.

**2.13** The focus of the inaugural meeting was therefore to evaluate the achievements and exceptions of establishing the new arrangements; the impact on CAB as an organisation; testing the monitoring information supplied to clarify understanding of the performance matrix; scrutinising the customer experience as to how their issues are dealt with and testing the partnership arrangements the CAB were undertaking as the provider of the advice contract.

## **3. Summary of evidence/information**

**3.1** At the inaugural monitoring meeting some key areas were noted regarding the commencement of the service delivery under the new arrangements:

**3.1.1** Due to publicity and signposting of clients across agencies, clients were aware of the change from the previous arrangements to the provision of advice services from CAB

**3.1.2** Enquiries to CAB for those services under the contract specification had increased

**3.1.3** Good partnership working practices had been established – the lead role that CAB had taken with regard to the SPA (under 25 allocation and provision group) review and launch was particularly acknowledged

**3.1.4** Issues regarding telephone access were identified at the meeting and CAB reported

actions they were taking to increase the capacity for responding to telephone approaches to the service. This will continue to be monitored.

**3.2** Having scrutinised the performance matrix CBC officers had identified a number of areas whereby they may have expected a different return. CAB were asked for further clarification so as to test understanding and referral processes within the service, these included:

- Referrals to floating support services
- Advocacy work
- Illegal eviction

CAB responses to these queries satisfied council officers that the performance data reflected the demands on the service as opposed to a barrier within joint working practices or lack of understanding of criteria and processes.

**3.3** It was acknowledged that the performance of the CAB with regard to Homelessness prevention cases, a critical target for the council, would be low in the first quarter returns as prevention initiatives often take a considerable time to come to fruition to secure a successful outcome. With case outcomes only reported for the first three months of the service being delivered we would anticipate a cumulative increase in this area with outcomes for cases having presented in the first quarter reaching a conclusion in future quarterly returns.

**3.4** Questions relating to future challenges in particular with regard to the changes in the economy were raised. CAB responded that they were well equipped to deal with such issues and referred to their partnership arrangements with the Consumer Credit Counselling Service. This will continue to be monitored closely.

**3.5** The following areas were identified for further activity and progress reports:

- Promotion & publicity of service for general public
- Relationships with private landlords, specifically in relation to the introduction of the local housing allowance
- Homelessness Prevention cases
- Capacity to respond to telephone approaches

## **4. Next Steps**

**4.1** CAB have submitted the second quarter performance monitoring information, which will be processed in accordance with the process as described in sections 2.2 - 2.9, i.e. an internal review undertaken by CBC officers in relation to complimentary indicator information available prior to the next joint CBC & CAB monitoring meeting due to take place on 31.10.08.

**4.2** Officers will take any questions Overview and Scrutiny would like to be addressed in detail to the next monitoring meeting and feedback accordingly.

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**Background Papers****Contact Officer**

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**Accountability**

Cllr John Webster

**Scrutiny Function**

Social and Community