

Funding for Citizens Advice South Somerset 2016/17

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Purpose of the Report

This report sets out the outcomes of a review of Citizens Advice South Somerset (CASS) and seeks the approval of the District Executive on the level of funding to be included in the 2016-17 budget.

Forward Plan

This report appeared on the District Executive Forward Plan with an anticipated Committee date of 3rd December 2015.

Public Interest

- CASS is the major provider of free, confidential independent and impartial advice in the South Somerset area. Advice services are quality assured under the national Citizens Advice Membership Scheme.
- In addition the organisation aims to improve policies and practices that affect people's lives.
- The Bureau has been serving the community of South Somerset since 1961.

SSDC supports CASS to ensure that people across South Somerset are able to access free, impartial and expert advice; to ensure that isolated and vulnerable people in the district are able to access services fairly and not be disadvantaged by their circumstances; to ensure that policies are improved; to deliver services to some of those people most in need; and to meet a range of objectives in our Council Plan.

In addition to financial support SSDC have also assisted CASS with premises having co-located them in Petters House along with the council's own Welfare Advice Team as a step towards creating an Information and Advice hub.

Recommendation

It is recommended that District Executive:-

1. Agrees to an allocation of £121,730 for South Somerset Citizens Advice Bureau in the 2016/17 budget.
2. Notes that funding will be reviewed annually and be subject to the implementation of a new service specification that will require a series of service improvements that will deliver improved outcomes for South Somerset residents.

Background

At the 5 March 2015 District Executive meeting, the council approved grant funding of £121,730 for CASS for the financial year 2015/16.

Following this decision, a review of CASS's activity was commissioned by the Portfolio Holder, Cllr Sylvia Seal, to assess the quality of the services received and to ascertain whether the council can achieve improved levels of service within the available funding envelope for 2016/17 and beyond. The review was undertaken between March and July 2015 and comprised a comprehensive evaluation of CASS services and an analysis of performance data and other historical and anecdotal matters.

The results of the review were subsequently shared with the CEO and trustees of CASS. The positive response made by CASS to the issues raised and the progress they have made in the intervening months have directly informed this report's recommendation.

On the 28 October a further progress meeting took place between Portfolio Holder Cllr Sylvia Seal, Corporate Director Rina Singh, CASS CEO Angela Kerr and Chair of Trustees Lin Cousins. As an outcome of this meeting the Portfolio Holder confirmed her support for a recommendation of one year's funding at the 2015/16 level.

Review

The following sets out in summary the issues covered by the review, the specific areas of concern and the response by CASS describing both the progress that has already been made and the improvements that are in hand.

The following activities were undertaken as part of the review:-

- i. Funding per head of population comparison against 25 other council areas
- ii. An analysis of factors with the potential to influence future information and advice priorities
- iii. Analysis of CASS's 2013/14 and 2014/15 performance data benchmarked against seven comparator CABx and their respective funding authorities.
- iv. Funding Options Appraisal

i. Funding per head of population comparison

This comprised an analysis of the level of core funding 25 councils give to their CAB as compared with their populations.

The cost of providing the service per head of population ranged from £0.13pp to £2.12pp. SSDC at £0.74pp sits at the lower end of this range.

ii. Analysis of factors with the potential to influence future information and advice priorities

- a) The recently published Somerset Advice Strategy 2015-18 (led by Taunton CAB on behalf of Somerset Advice Network) identifies a number of challenges facing the Information and Advice sector. Amongst these are:-
 - The cumulative impact of cuts in public funding - cuts to council services which affect residents and the risk of reduced funding for Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector advice agencies.

- The wider influences of increasing social inequalities – e.g. the cumulative impact of housing and other cost increases alongside low/stagnant/irregular incomes.
 - The impact of debt and poverty-related stress on health and wellbeing.
 - The need for consistent and inclusive advice services across rural and urban Somerset.
- b) An analysis of data sets and research to understand what challenges there might be to future Information and Advice needs highlighted some indicators that will be relevant to how a 'fit for the future' CAB will look. These were:-
- An **ageing population** with the challenges of access, digital exclusion, changes in social welfare legislation, the rise in the number of carers and an increase in the number of older grandparents requiring debt and money advice as a consequence of providing financial support to their children and/or grandchildren.
 - **Rurality** with the challenges of poor public transport affecting access; poor broadband coverage and the relative higher costs of living creating such things as fuel poverty and the need for money, debt and benefits advice.
 - **Housing** with the challenges of high cost housing relative to incomes and limited availability of private rented and social housing.
 - **Welfare Reform** with the ongoing effects of welfare reform and the yet unknown impact of Universal Credit. Also the increasing number of people in work and receiving benefit has increased the complexity of benefits claims.
- c) SSDC's own Welfare Advice Service have also set out how they would like to work more effectively with CASS in the future so as to improve the overall experience for customers. In particular they would like to see CASS introduce systems of working and client management that will improve:-
- Accessibility across the whole of South Somerset for crisis/emergency assistance (e.g. LAS, food parcels, emergency advice/advocacy).
 - Responsibility to follow up client casework e.g. chasing up decisions, appeal delays etc.
 - Where support (or follow-on support) is not able to be provided, refer to an agency that can until a conclusion is achieved.
 - The up-skilling of volunteers as well as paid staff to undertake casework with clients.
 - If appeal work is undertaken, to fully represent clients at Tribunals (following training of CAB staff/volunteers in tribunal representation, SSDC's Welfare Advice Team would be happy to provide support through shadowing etc.).

CASS Response

With access to services being a common factor in many of the issues in b) above, CASS will be continuing the development of the telephone advice services and will continue to bring forward other ways for people to access services.

Use of the email advice service is increasing steadily (150 users between April 2014 and January 2015) and a further 225 users since February 2015.

A pilot project is also underway with the Symphony Hub whereby CASS specialist Welfare Benefits advisers will be available to Symphony clients via skype facilitated by Symphony key workers. This represents an innovative and sustainable response to the need to bring advice into the homes of people who might otherwise find accessing the service difficult.

To further develop the working relationship between CASS and our own Welfare Advice team, both parties have taken part in periodic meetings. This will be further enhanced through a requirement to hold regular joint meetings as part of the 2016/17 service specification.

iii. Analysis of CASS's 2013/14 and 2014/15 performance data benchmarked against seven comparator CABx and their respective funding authorities.

When reviewing the performance data that was reported to District Executive in March 2015, as supplemented with the final quarter figures for 2014/15, the following issues emerged as those with which we had concerns.

In order to provide a means of benchmarking the CASS information, a comparator 'family' of 7 other CABx was selected (Bridport; Sherborne/Dorchester; Bournemouth; Poole; Stroud; Braintree; Harrogate) based on having similar sized populations and levels of local authority funding.

a) Volunteers

Review findings

CASS appeared to operate with a distinctly lower than average number of volunteers.

We had also received some anecdotal feedback which pointed to a past organisational culture having possibly contributed to poor volunteer recruitment and retention levels.

CASS response

A new volunteer involvement strategy and campaign has been implemented. Volunteer numbers are improving and this is an upward trend. Key to the successful recruitment and retention of volunteers for the future will be that recruitment is based on a proper understanding of the core skills necessary for advice work and on those people who are willing and able to train for the available roles. This should shift the emphasis on to the quality rather than just the quantity of volunteers.

The number of volunteers currently working for CASS is confirmed as being 43 (excluding the Trustees and the 'Friends'). The CEO is confident that with new plans in place for volunteer recruitment and training they will achieve their target of 50 volunteers in the near future. Plans include taking the training out to Wincanton and Chard with the aim of increasing local volunteer teams to support service expansion in those towns. Regular reports on the impact of their new approach to volunteer recruitment and training will be provided to the council and welcome the opportunity to work with you on this in future.

The new volunteer recruitment campaign commenced with an event at Yeovil College on the 21st September 2015. Recruitment campaigns for Wincanton and Chard have also been planned.

The volunteer training programme has also been revised and is now available as an infographic to present to all potential volunteers during their initial interviews. This will help to make much clearer to potential volunteers how to navigate through the volunteering opportunities or into alternative volunteering if the training commitment for the service is too much for them. (A copy of the Infographic is attached at Appendix 1).

b) Abandoned call rates (the percentage of calls to the bureau that do not get answered).

Review Findings

Up to the final quarter figures for 2014/15 the abandoned call rate had been high, peaking at around 70%.

Although the rate reduced further between April and July 2015, compared with the 7 benchmarked bureaux, this placed CASS's answered call rate as average but still noticeably lower than the best performing who reported abandoned call rates of only 1%.

CASS response

The introduction of 'Adviceline'* has kicked-started a much improved phone based service. Currently c50% plus of calls are now being answered which is well in excess of the target they had set themselves. Progress with implementing the Somerset Adviceline service has been pleasing and CASS's contribution to making this work has exceeded that of the other partners. This is, however, still a work in progress and the recruitment and training of Adviceline volunteers has been given a high priority. A stretch target of 80% answered calls will also be included in the updated business plan.

An independent assessment of Somerset Adviceline has shown that resources need to be directed to Mondays and Tuesdays which are the busiest days. Increasing the number of volunteers and the introduction of new processes such as remote/home based telephone answering are being considered.

Also under consideration is the introduction of an answerphone message alerting callers to the possibility of long waits on the telephone on a Monday and Tuesday and encouraging people whose issues are not urgent to call back on other days.

A marketing plan is also being put together to better inform and prepare the public for Adviceline and how best to use it.

(*'Adviceline' is a networked telephone system where callers, if unable to get through to their local bureau, are routed to the next available bureau within the network, which for the Somerset Adviceline will be the other Somerset CABx. Any overflow may be routed to one of three national call centres (Caerphilly, Merton or Gateshead) but these calls can be routed straight back into the waiting list for the local bureau if the enquiry has to have a local response.)

c) Debt and Benefit related enquiries

Review findings

A reading of CASS's 2014/15 performance data, when compared with the benchmarked CABx, showed a reduction in the number of debt enquiries and new debt enquiries requiring casework support, a reduction that appeared counter intuitive and contra to the understood

trend; particularly when taking into consideration the ongoing effects of the economic recession, the increase of people on 'in work' benefits and the introduction and continued implementation of welfare reform.

CASS response

CASS's Debt Caseworkers had just under 100 live debt cases open as of September 2015; these cases take between one to three months to resolve. This figure is being sustained fairly consistently throughout the year and they have not seen a decrease in the levels of debt case work. Debt and Welfare benefits clients are also presenting with lengthier and more complex problems so whilst overall numbers may appear to be down the complexity of cases has increased.

Data Reports on debt and benefits extracted for SSDC's activity reports do not include work funded by other sources.

The recording and interpretation of debt statistics is also more complex than it might appear on initial reading and which cannot be fully understood through a simple comparison with previous year figures. For example, Citizens Advice's national campaign against pay day lending had dramatically reduced the number of people locally in trouble with loan-sharks which would show as a reduction in debt cases.

Clients are also directly referred into specialist teams therefore by-passing the drop-in service and falling outside core data statistics.

d) Organisational Income - achieving more sustainable income streams for core services

Review Findings

When looked at in totality, the funding CABx receive from their councils may appear to be a small percentage of overall spend. However, as a result of the benchmarking exercise it was clear that in all cases council funding is supporting core functions with the balance of funding financing additional projects or targeted information and advice activities. This places them in a vulnerable situation if council funding were at risk of being heavily cut or withdrawn.

Whilst reliance on councils for core funding may be considered high risk, especially in the context of austerity and the increasing pressures on public finance, CASS's situation is no different to that of other CABx. All are dependent on their council for core funding and whilst all CAB managers' report success in diversifying income this is only in relation to project funding.

Furthermore council funding officers that were interviewed reported that whilst in some circumstances they may commission additional one-off projects or services, their principal funding is provided to support the core 'generalist' service.

CASS response

CASS endorse the conclusion of our review that "without Council funding supporting core services most CAB would struggle to function or at worst would cease to exist"

One of the key roles of the new CEO will be to secure sustainable funding for the organisation and CASS will welcome the opportunity to work with SSDC on any opportunities to secure such funds. They already have a number of funding applications in progress including to the Big Lottery and Trust funds. A 'Reaching Communities' bid to enable the opening up of advice pathways for vulnerable and isolated people has successfully passed

through to a full second stage application and feedback on the bid thus far is that it has an 80% chance of being awarded funding.

e) Quality of Advice

Review Findings

Probably the most difficult area of the service to evaluate is that of the Quality of Advice received by the public. Whilst there has been some anecdotal evidence to suggest that clients have at times not received as good a service as should be expected there is no way of testing this unless a comprehensive 'Mystery Shopping' exercise were to be carried out.

The only objective measure we have of Quality, therefore, is the three yearly Quality of Advice audit conducted by Citizens Advice nationally. The most recent was conducted in the spring of 2014. This did raise some issues around the quality of initial 'Gateway' assessments and follow up advice.

CASS response

The national Citizens Advice 'Quality Audit' system has undergone a recent and radical change and CASS are positively embracing that change. The new system will provide CASS, and SSDC as funders, with a better picture of organisational performance. It should be noted that under the previous Quality system the audit score of 75% achieved by CASS would have been considered a good score with only a minority of Citizens Advice organisations achieving 80% plus.

Funding from reserves has been agreed by the trustees to appoint an additional two casework supervisor posts. Not only with this help with the quality assuring of advice given by volunteers and specialist caseworkers but it will also provide the capacity to enable CASS to roll out a full service in outreach settings.

Staff and volunteers took part in an away day on the 24th September to agree the approach to the adoption of the new National Citizens Advice Model, known as the "dynamic advice" model.

CASS have also approached Citizens Advice nationally to be an early adopter of the new quality framework in October 2015.

The first of several strategy reviews with key staff and Board members has been held with the Board approving a redesign of the over-arching management of their client services.

iv. Funding Options Appraisal

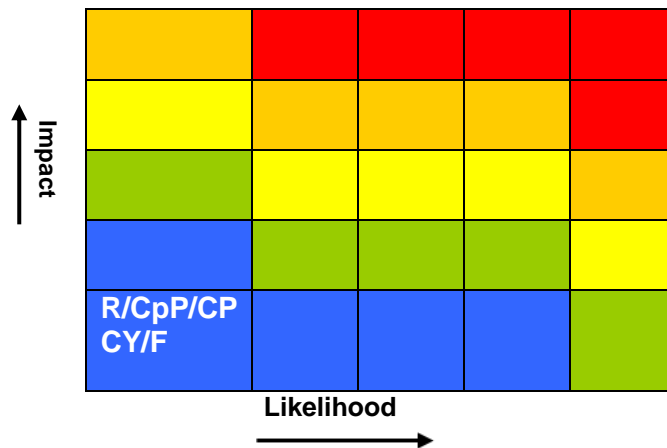
The review also needed to consider all the possible funding options open to the council once the current funding ends on 31st March 2016.

The following 6 options, including an option to end funding, were considered.

Option 1: End Funding.

Option 2: Bring in-house.

Option 3: Part fund and part invest in our own Welfare Advice service.



Key

Categories	Colours (for further detail please refer to Risk management strategy)
R = Reputation	Red = High impact and high probability
CpP = Corporate Plan Priorities	Orange = Major impact and major probability
CP = Community Priorities	Yellow = Moderate impact and moderate probability
CY = Capacity	Green = Minor impact and minor probability
F = Financial	Blue = Insignificant impact and insignificant probability

Corporate Priority Implications

- Work with partners to contribute to tackling youth unemployment
- Minimise homelessness by providing advice, support and housing options
- Work with partners to combat fuel poverty
- Provide Welfare Benefits support and advice to tackle poverty in our vulnerable residents

Carbon Emissions and Climate Change Implications

None

Equality and Diversity Implications

Working with the voluntary sector is one of the Council's means of providing services to hard to reach groups and engaging with communities and individuals who otherwise find it hard to access public services. CASS deliver services to some of the most vulnerable people in the district. Services are free and are provided to all regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion. The CASS has an adopted Equalities Policy.


Background Papers

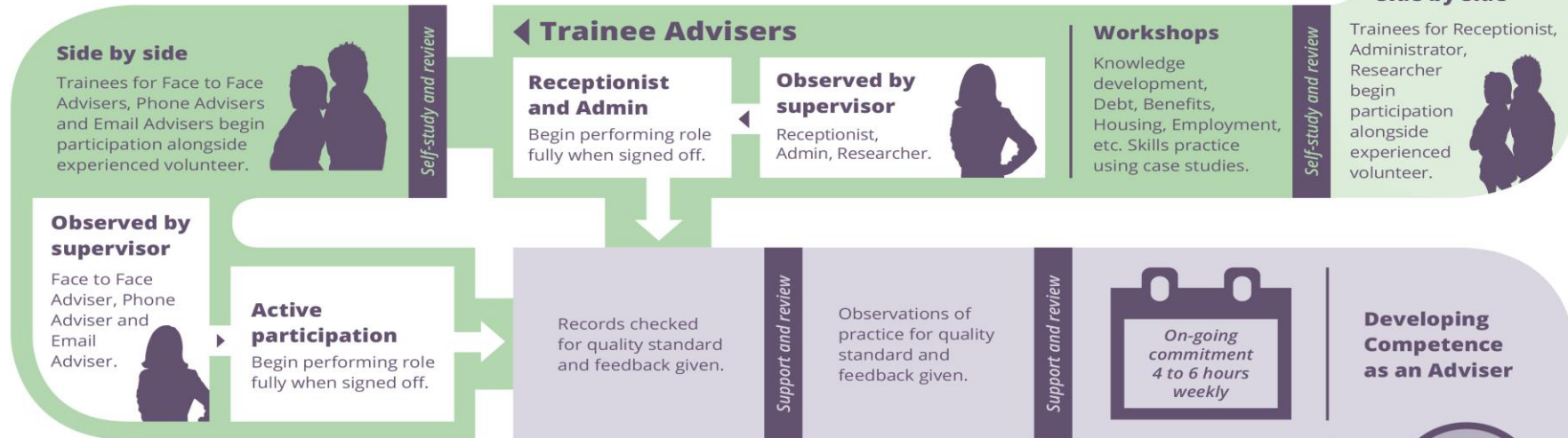
CASS report to District Executive - March 2015

Appendix 1

Volunteer Training

Your training programme will be tailored to your interests, availability and pace of learning. We will equip you with the knowledge, skills and tools you will need in your role. Your training will be something like this....

<p>Workshop Induction and overview of Citizens Advice. Skills development, listening, questioning, researching, using advice systems and resources.</p> 	<p>Self-study Interactive online learning and home study using the information packs we provide.</p>	<p>Support and Review One to one reviews with the volunteer training officer.</p>	<p>Shadowing Shadowing of an experienced volunteer, across a range of roles to understand the service that we deliver.</p>
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- 1 to 3 Months
- 4 to 6 Months
- 6 to 12 Months
- On Going

Would you like to know more about joining us and training as a Citizens Advice Volunteer?

With no obligation come in for a chat with June or Angela or give us a ring.
01935 847675

Experienced Adviser

Support & Development review

- Monthly Workers Meeting
- External Citizens Advice Training
- Internal Citizens Advice Training
- Other relevant Training

