

ADULT SOCIAL CARE AND SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Adult Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel was held on Wednesday 7 September 2022.

PRESENT: Councillors J Platt (Chair), G Wilson (Vice-Chair), T Higgins, D Jones, G Purvis, D Rooney and J Walker.

OFFICERS: M Barker, S Barker, L Grabham, C Lunn and J Savage.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillors D Davison and R Sands.

22/8 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received at this point in the meeting.

22/9 MINUTES - ADULT SOCIAL CARE AND SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL - 22 JUNE 2022

The minutes of the Adult Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 22 June 2022 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

22/10 INTEGRATION OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE - VERBAL UPDATE

Item deferred.

22/11 THE ROLE OF THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR (VCS) IN SUPPORTING ADULT SOCIAL CARE (WITH A FOCUS ON COVID-19 RECOVERY) - FURTHER INFORMATION

The Chair welcomed the Head of Resident and Business Support; the Head of Strategic Commissioning and Procurement; the Strategic Business Manager; and the Voluntary Sector Liaison and Grants Officer to the meeting.

The officers delivered a presentation in two sections: 'Grants to the Voluntary Sector' and 'Hub Advice and Benefit Take Up'.

The Voluntary Sector Liaison and Grants Officer provided information regarding the 'Grants to the Voluntary Sector' section, which focused on the following matters:

- The processes involved in grant funding allocations, i.e.:
 - determination of the programme and panel compilation;
 - criteria and application form development; programme launch;
 - application forms – submission, assessment and due diligence;
 - panel meeting / determination of application;
 - offer, acceptance and payment of funding; and
 - monitoring of use (for example: in some instances, a return of payments or part-payments may have been requested).
- Grant allocations for 2021/22: 664 grants had been processed, with 532 of these being approved (80% success rate). It was explained that due to over subscription, there was a significantly higher level of unsuccessful grants. Applications received from private sector businesses were immediately discounted, as they did not fit the criteria.
- Amounts awarded – Members heard that in comparison to previous years, the figures had increased significantly during the pandemic. These were as follows:
 - 2018/19 - £290,950;
 - 2019/20 - £303,293;
 - 2020/21 - £1,342,664; and
 - 2021/22 - £2,287,739.

Current projections:

- 2022/23 - £581,821 plus Holiday Activity Fund (HAF) allocation; and
- 2023/24 - £195,000 plus Holiday Activity Fund (HAF) allocation.

The importance of ensuring that VCS organisations were appropriately supported during both the lockdown and recovery periods was highlighted. As organisations at a 'grass root' level, it was essential that those were not lost. In addition to payments of grant funding, it was explained that the team had also offered support and advice to VCS organisations in terms of project management.

- Programmes delivered in 2021/22 – the panel was advised that a number of programmes had been delivered with a view of the importance of getting people returning to activities and supporting local communities. With regards to Public Health messages, it was important to use the VCS to convey messages to the public. The following programmes had been delivered:
 - Befriending;
 - Carers Grant Programme;
 - Community Grant Fund (which residents were involved with);
 - Covid Champions Network Development;
 - Covid Communications;
 - Covid Recovery Grant Programme;
 - Dementia Grant;
 - HAF;
 - Short Breaks; and
 - Staying Included.
- Core grants – the panel was informed that originally there were 17 of these, but this had since been reduced to three. The three recipients were chosen after significant consideration and research, and were reviewed every three years to ensure they remained fit for purpose, etc. These were currently as follows:
 - Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) allocation: £87,314 plus £46,000 = £133,314;
 - Middlesbrough Voluntary Development Agency (MVDA) allocation: £41,314 plus £38,250 = £79,564; and
 - St. Mary's Centre allocation: £12,625.

It was explained that MVDA's allocation brought together funding from two streams: VCS grants and Public Health funded grants. Details were provided in relation to the CAB and the total number of hours spent on a range of varying enquiries, which related to such areas as: 'Benefits', 'Community Care', 'Debt', 'Employment' and 'Housing'. These totals did not include drop-ins and initial assessments, but instead related to cases that had been allocated a Case Worker and where advice had been given and / or action taken. Mention was made of the highly skilled volunteers that carried out the work of the CAB. Details regarding the financial elements of the CAB were provided in the subsequent section of the presentation.

Following conclusion of this section of the presentation, Members asked a series of questions of the officers. In response, the following information was provided:

- With regards to the repayment of grant funding, it was explained that only on rare occasions would grant funding asked to be returned. As an example, reference was made to the HAF. In the event that a grant was paid upfront for a specific project to run over the summer holidays, and either that project did not run or not enough eligible children accessed the service, the organisation would be asked to return it.
- After confirming that not all recipients of grant funding were registered charities, the panel was advised of the necessary requirements to apply for Community Chest funding. The team carried out due diligence: policies around such matters as safeguarding and DBS would be checked, and bank accounts and statements verified. No payments would be made if any concerns were raised.
- During discussion regarding this year's Platinum Jubilee celebrations, the need for Councillor engagement during the grant approvals process was highlighted.

Applications under Small Funds were accepted in both video and traditional written format – a telephone number was attached to every grant application for support provision. It was indicated that a number of grant applications were turned down, but these were applications made by non-residents; where grants had already been approved for a respective street (so as to avoid dual payment); or for social groups where alcohol would be served and monies charged. Mention was made of the reception to the grants programme for the celebrations, which on the whole had been very positive. It was felt that the programme was a great success.

- Reference was made to Community Councils and some banks no longer offering community accounts, which could pose some issues with statement generation and other activities. Members were advised that officers would work around this wherever possible, with mention being made of links with the Community Bank.
- With reference to the amounts awarded and a drop in the monies available in terms of current projections, Members heard that these figures may increase as government energy grants were received. It was indicated that further government grants may also be received to deal with the current cost of living crisis (social care grants, for example). It was emphasised that the financial projections were particularly fluid in nature.
- With regards to the total amount available for the HAF, it was indicated that this was circa. £1m. The fund was quite restricted because it focused on activities that were to be undertaken during the six-week holidays.
- In relation to the cost of living crisis and a strategy to deal with this for the voluntary sector, it was explained that budgets were fixed and that, should additional monies need to be paid out, this would have a consequence on the grants able to be distributed. It was highlighted, however, that there were a myriad of issues at play. Consideration was given to the impact on businesses and the payment of business rates; the impact on Health and Social Care budgets; energy issues; Council Tax collection, etc. It was anticipated that some financial support by way of energy grant funding would be received, though further details were currently awaited. It was indicated that Members' briefing events would be held in due course. Work had been undertaken in respect of fuel payments and a Welfare Strategy was in place. The Council's Leadership Management Team was looking at all of this.

The Strategic Business Manager provided the panel with information regarding the hub advice service and benefit take up. The following matters were raised:

- The hub advice service had commenced in September 2013 and was funded by the Big Lottery. The remit of the service was to provide financial assistance, advice and support.
- The service was delivered by the CAB, Age Concern Teesside and Cleveland Housing Advice Centre (CHAC), with weekly advice sessions being provided at fixed venues.
- Big Lottery funding had ceased in June 2015, though Middlesbrough Council took the decision to extend the programme and provide funding for an additional year, up to June 2016.
- The Financial Inclusion Group (FIG) initiated the benefit take up campaign in 2014 and non advice partners were invited to participate. This campaign work currently continued.
- FIG consisted of 40 partners across Middlesbrough, including those listed above plus others such as Welfare Rights, Middlesbrough Council's Democratic Services and Actes.
- In July 2016, Executive approved £200,000 annually for an integrated benefits advice service.
- In terms of a pre / post Covid offering, Members heard that a pre Covid hub advice and benefit take up service was offered at fixed weekly advice sessions at some venues, and one-off sessions at a range of other venues. During Covid, these sessions moved to telephony only, which resulted in a significant reduction in the number of residents accessing the service. Sessions had re-opened following Covid restrictions on an appointment only basis. During 2021, one off sessions had ceased due to increased risk of Covid infections and a reluctance of venues to open.
- All those accessing the service received a full interview including assistance with form completion, help to challenge adverse decisions, review benefit entitlement calculations, etc. As an example, it was indicated that assistance had been provided

- to individuals who had been turned down for Personal Independence Payment (PIP).
- The service currently provided weekly sessions at 11 different venues: Breckon Hill Community Hub; Contact Centre; Easterside Community Hub; Grove Hill; Hemlington Library; Hope Foundation; Live Well Centre; Newport; North Ormesby Hub; Streets Ahead; and Thorntree. Sessions had also previously been provided at the Neptune Centre.
- Members were provided with statistical data in relation to the number of clients accessing the service in the time period (Q1 – 188; Q2 – 303; Q3 – 274; Q4 – 300), together with an age and gender breakdown. It was highlighted that those aged 60-plus composed the highest figure across all four quarters (53; 91; 87; 99), and more females than males had accessed the service. In response to this, work had been, and would continue to be, undertaken to support those of pensionable age. Work to date had included targeting the demographic in writing; a physical letter to 5,500 residents of pensionable age had resulted in a 50% return. It was highlighted that digital solutions were not always the most appropriate for that particular age group. A budget of approximately £550,000 was available to provide support.
- Regarding financial outcomes, it was indicated that 1065 residents had received support during the 2021/22 financial year. A large spectrum of benefits had been identified, including: Attendance Allowance; Employment Support Allowance; Pension Credit; PIP; and Universal Credit. The total amount of benefits identified was £5,156,759.00.
- In terms of moving forward, the Welfare Rights team had become part of the Resident and Business Support area in December 2021.
- Review of all financial assistance, advice and support was undertaken as part of the Welfare Strategy; all were now centralised. This offered opportunity to identify where duplication existed and could be removed and conversations had taken place with the CAB in this regard. The outcome of this discussion would be clarified with the CAB by the end of November 2022.
- Formal contracts as opposed to grant offering would be provided in future.

Following conclusion of this section of the presentation, Members asked a series of questions of the officers. In response, the following information was provided:

- A Member commented on the presence of the hubs within local communities and thanked all those involved for provision of the service in localised areas. These comments would be fed back to the teams.
- A Member made reference to the list of hubs and queried why there were no hubs in the West Middlesbrough area. In response, Members were advised that this could potentially have been due to need, but this would be looked into. It was commented that ACTES was a partner and based in Acklam. Reference was made to take up strategy and the use of burden funding to target 'pockets' of residents requiring support. Work was currently being undertaken with the CAB to target specific cohorts and build upon that.
- In response to a comment regarding duplication and the advantages that this could offer (i.e. one agency may present support in a more appropriate way for an individual than another organisation could), it was explained that it was the design solution being looked at. It was felt that triangulation of the offer would provide a beneficial approach, as matters did become over complicated for residents when various aspects were considered. It was acknowledged that crossover was important, but that the greater the offer the more complicated and distracting things could become. Essentially, it was about recognising the needs of residents and focusing resources appropriately. It was indicated that by following principles and working with organisations to better identify and fill gaps, the more superior the offering.
- In relation to the 11 venues and a statistical breakdown of take up, Members were advised that this would be looked into.
- In terms of suggestions for new / additional venues, it was explained that these would be coordinated in liaison with the CAB. Reference was made to the cost of living and energy crises and the work currently taking place in relation to these, such as 'stay warm' campaigns and other projects to link in with this. In terms of the rise in the number of people struggling to pay domestic bills and the additional support that would be required, Members heard that monies would be provided by way of the Household Support Fund. Work was currently taking place to determine distribution channels for payments from this.

- A Member made reference to the Welfare Strategy and the cost of living and energy crises. It was suggested that an additional piece of work, such as task and finish, a further investigation or updates, be undertaken to consider this in further detail. In response, it was explained that following Covid, Middlesbrough Council was one of the few Local Authorities to create a Welfare Strategy, which had been exceptionally well received. Work was currently taking place around funding, alongside the designing of a supplementary Welfare Strategy for the business community. The latter was slightly different and based more on cause and effect; the need to understand the funding regime was reiterated. In terms of focus, it was explained that 64,000 payments of £150 had been made to every household in Middlesbrough with a Council Tax liability. The scope and target audience was everyone in town, and therefore people outside of welfare were being reached. The design solution of the strategy concerned, essentially, everybody. In terms of Adult Services, reference was made to an action plan in respect of vulnerable residents that was currently being devised. Consideration would be given to such matters as care home operational costs and the affordability of increased energy bills, and difficulties in recruiting home carers as a consequence of rising fuel costs. Members felt that it would be useful to look into this in further detail.
- In response to a comment regarding some residents not claiming what they were entitled to because of technology, it was explained that a helpline number was available for residents to call. It was highlighted that no-one would be excluded from the process because of technology – support via other means was available.

The Chair thanked the officers for their attendance and contributions to the meeting. The officers left the meeting at this point.

In terms of next steps for the review, the Democratic Services Officer advised that, as per the panel's request, a survey had been forwarded to all of the VCS organisations that received funding from Middlesbrough Council, to seek their views and input into the review. The closing date for receipt of responses was 5 September 2022; the information would be reviewed and incorporated into the panel's final report. Members felt that sufficient information had now been received to compile the report; it was agreed that a draft would be prepared and considered at the panel's meeting in November.

The panel discussed the information presented and felt that an additional item was required to the agreed work programme. The topic would focus on the impact of the energy and cost of living crises on caring for vulnerable adults and consider such matters as home care provision; care homes and financial implications. It was intended that this review would commence at the next scheduled meeting on 5 October 2022; the Overview and Scrutiny Board (OSB) would be advised of the additional item in the interim period.

AGREED:

- 1. That a draft final report in respect of 'The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in Supporting Adult Social Care (with a Focus on Covid-19 Recovery)' would be prepared for the November panel meeting.**
- 2. That the panel would commence 'The Impact of the Energy and Cost of Living Crises on Caring for Vulnerable Adults' investigation at the October meeting; OSB would be advised accordingly.**
- 3. That the information, as presented, be noted.**

22/12

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE

The Chair provided a verbal update on the matters that were considered at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 19 July 2022.

NOTED