

**NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT TEAM'S  
REPORT TO**

**Cabinet**  
**21 February 2023**

**Report Title:** Future Delivery of Debt and Benefit Advice Services

**Submitted by:** Chief Executive

**Portfolios:** Community Safety and Wellbeing

**Ward(s) affected:** All

**Purpose of the Report**

To ask cabinet for authority to procure a renewed Financial and Wellbeing Advice Service.

**Recommendation**

**That Cabinet**

- 1. Approve the proposal to re-procure the Financial and Wellbeing Service and**
- 2. Delegate to the Head of Legal and Governance Services, in consultation with the Community Safety and Wellbeing Portfolio Holder, authority to award the contract arising from the procurement.**

**Reasons**

To continue to provide financial advice to our most vulnerable residents.

**1. Background**

- 1.1 The Council and other local public sector organisations have funded debt/welfare/consumer advice for a number of years to ensure that the citizens of Newcastle have access to personal support and advice.
- 1.2 Faced with the current economic climate with rising inflation, increased utility costs, the likelihood of an increase in the number of residents of the borough experiencing fuel poverty, there remains the need for the delivery of this type of support service.
- 1.3 The Financial Wellbeing & Debt Advice service is currently delivered by the Citizens Advice Staffordshire North & Stoke on Trent (SNSCAB) from their Wells Street office in Newcastle and in addition a drop in service is also run from the Kidsgrove Customer Service Centre on selected and agreed days.
- 1.4 The current commissioned service offers access for residents to self-help online support, telephone and face to face access, with a service emphasis for earlier intervention to reach clients at a timely stage to prevent escalation of issues. The service delivery also, requires a good working relationship with Newcastle Housing Advice to make referrals if the client is

threatened with homelessness or is homeless. Contacts to the service are rising and are expected to continue to do so given current economic climate.

- 1.5 Nationally there has been a fundamental review of welfare with a number of key reforms implemented over the last few years, with further reforms envisaged for the years ahead. The introduction of Universal credit and Personal Independence Payments has had, and will continue to have, an impact on claimants and recipients across the borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme.
- 1.6 The migration to Universal Credit re-started in May 2022 but only in certain areas across the country at the moment. This migration means anyone claiming Child Tax Credit, Housing Benefit, Income Support, income based Jobseekers Allowance; income related Employment and Support Allowance and Working Tax Credit (known as legacy benefits) will be migrated across to Universal Credit at some point between now and the end of 2024. The DWP have not yet released details of when the relevant residents of Newcastle under Lyme will be migrated across. This will be a huge change for some people and lots of support will need to be put in place for those that require it e.g. budgeting advice, IT support etc.
- 1.7 This support service remains a priority for the Council particularly in the current economic climate, and it is envisaged that the positive outcomes will contribute to priority indicators and targets of the Council.

## 2. **Issues**

- 2.1 The current contract with the Citizens Advice Service is nearing the end of its contract and a decision is required with regard to the retendering of this service.

## 3. **Proposal**

- 3.1 Approve the proposal to re-procure the Financial and Wellbeing Service and
- 3.2 Delegate to the Head of Legal and Governance Services, in consultation with the Community Safety and Wellbeing Portfolio Holder, authority to award the contract arising from the procurement.

## 4. **Reasons for Proposed Solution**

- 4.1 Given the current economic climate, re-provision of this contract will support our most vulnerable residents.

## 5. **Options Considered**

- 5.1 Decommission the service and review allocation of funds. However the service has had positive outcomes for residents over the life of the contract and continues support is recommended.

## 6. **Legal and Statutory Implications**

- 6.1 There are no statutory requirements to deliver a Debt and Benefit Advice Service.

6.2 The current contract arrangement ends on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 and should the council decide not to fund this service, officers need to advise the service provider allowing them to review their future options and resourcing.

## 7. Equality Impact Assessment

7.1 An equalities and risk impact assessment will be produced by the service provider as part of the commissioning and procurement process.

## 8. Financial and Resource Implications

8.1 The allocation of funds will continue to be made as part of the council's medium term financial strategy. The current allocation being £70,000 per annum and the contract has potential to run for 3 years subject to funding.

## 9. Major Risks

9.1 If funding is not approved and/or a contract not awarded, there will be no contracted service, which will impact locally on residents, some who are vulnerable, facing difficulties dealing with debt, financial and benefit problems. Added to this is the resulting impact on officers and partners, and a need to signpost to other agencies.

## 10. UN Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG)

10.1 The award of contract and successful delivery of a Debt and Benefit Advice Services supports the delivery of the following Sustainable Development Goals and Climate Change Implications:



## 11. Key Decision Information

11.1 This is a key decision as set out in the Council Constitution under clause 4.1 A Key Decision is any Cabinet Decision (regardless of who takes it) which is likely to:- (a) result in the Council incurring expenditure or making savings of £100,000 or more (revenue).

## 12. Earlier Cabinet/Committee Resolutions

12.1 N/A.

13. **List of Appendices**

13.1 N/A

14. **Background Papers**

14.1 N/A