

Proposed Officer Key Decision to be taken by the Strategic Director of Communities Group on or after 16 September 2016

Approval to Procure for a Specialist Benefits Advice and Associated Services

Recommendation

That the Strategic Director of Communities Group enters into all relevant contracts for the provision of Specialist Benefits Advice and Associated Services on terms and conditions acceptable to the Strategic Director for Resources.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 Warwickshire County Council currently contracts with Warwickshire Welfare Rights Advice Service (WWRAS) for the delivery of a specialist benefits advice and associated service. The service has been in operation since 2008.
- 1.2 The current contract value is £255,000 per annum. The budget and responsibility for the service and its outcomes transferred from the People Group to Communities Group in April 2016, it is now managed by the Localities & Partnerships Team.
- 1.3 An exemption has been approved for an extension of 12 months for the current contract with WWRAS until the end of March 2017 to allow sufficient time for the internal transfer of funding, consultation with service users and for sufficient time for service to be tendered and to ensure sufficient time for implementation of a new service in the event of a change of provider
- 1.4 Work is underway to develop a new outcome based service specification to ensure the future service is fit for purpose and aligns with the Advice Services and Youth Services and Third Sector Support and Development Services in Warwickshire.

2.0 Current Service Provision

- 2.1 The current service is funded to increase awareness of Social Security benefits available for Warwickshire residents by increasing the number of service referrals by staff of WCC and related agencies.

The service has five broad approaches:

- Support for frontline workers
- Representation for individuals when challenging a decision
- Benefit checking/form completion service
- Presentations to all levels of the statutory and non-statutory sector
- Disseminating information and guidance materials

- 2.2 In 2015/16 through the tribunal representation, benefits take up work and advice provided via the Benefits Enquiry Line (BEL) financial gains for Warwickshire residents totalling £3,025,426 were secured
- 2.3 Through the Appeals and Take Up work returns on investment was significant, i.e. £1 of funding = £7.50 in increased benefits.
- 2.4 There were 583 enquiries to the BEL last year covering 1,001 different benefit issues. The majority of calls to the BEL relate to disability and ill-health benefits, the replacement for DLA - Personal Independence Payment (PIP), accounted for 23% of all enquiries, ESA/IB remained the highest single enquiry area at 26%.
- 2.5 30% of calls from frontline professionals were on behalf of clients with a mental health disability, whilst enquiries on behalf of people with a physical disability amounted to 33% of all enquiries. 8% of all enquiries to the B.E.L related to a child or young person, with 4% of enquiries relating to pensioner benefits.
- 2.6 29 in-house training sessions, talks and presentations were undertaken. 198 people attended, 38% of attendees were from WCC Adult/Children's Services staff, 62% were from other agencies in the county. 403 people attended local sessions this year with 55% from Adult Services, Children's Services or joint teams
- 2.7 Through the Appeal Tribunal work successfully secured benefit entitlement for clients totalled £1,182,720. The spread of referrals coming from each area was; Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council 29%, North Warwickshire 11%, Stratford District 22%, Warwick District 24%, Rugby 14%, 46% of referrals came from CABx , 26% were self-referrals, 5% from Adult Services & Children's Services, 2% from Bromford and 21% from other agencies, which include Housing Associations, Care Agencies and other voluntary sector groups

3.0 Proposal

- 3.1 The current contract with WWRAS is due to expire on the 31st March 2017. Doing nothing is not an acceptable option.
- 3.2 It is proposed that Warwickshire County Council retender the Specialist Benefits Advice and Associated Services. The tender will require year on year efficiencies (5%), moving to payments in arrears
- 3.3 The process for the retender of a specialist benefits advice and associated services will begin from the September 2016, with the intention to award and commence services from 1st April 2017.
- 3.4 It is proposed that the new contract will align with other Third Sector Commissioned Services and will therefore be awarded for an initial term of 15 months (until 30th June 2018), with an option to extend by further periods, not exceeding a further 2 years in total. This timescale will allow for the consideration of alignment opportunities as set out at 1.4.

4.0 Timescales associated with the decision and next steps

4.1 The table below outlines the high level milestones and associated timescales.

Milestone	Date
Approval to tender secured	16 th September 2016
Procurement plan approved	30 th September 2016
Final specification signed off	30 th September 2016
Tender period - Open process	12 th Oct – 25 th Nov 2016
Evaluation	28 th Nov – 18 th Dec 2016
Contract Award	13 th January 2017
Contract start date	1 st April 2017

4.2 As the tender specification progresses and final designs are agreed Equality Impact Assessments will be completed. The tender process specifications for the new services will include requirements relating to equality of access.

5.0 Background Papers

None.

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The report was circulated to the following members prior to publication:

Local Member(s):

N/A

Other members: Councillors Compton, Rolfe, Perry, A.Webb