

# Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

13 December 2023

## Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise Sector Commissioned Services Progress Report

### Recommendation

That the Committee notes and comments on the progress of the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise Sector Commissioned Services.

### 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 On 8 July 2021, Cabinet approved proceeding with the procurement of the following services, authorising the Executive Director for Resources in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Environment, Climate, and Culture to enter into contracts for the following services:
  - Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE) Support Service (annual value £331,600);
  - Advice Service (annual value £530,550); and
  - Equalities Service (annual value £135,375).
- 1.2 The services were planned to all start from 1 April 2022, replacing broadly similar services that had been in place since April 2016, and to run for an initial period of 3 years, with the option for the Council to extend them for periods of up to a further 24 months.
- 1.3 The procurement involved extensive stakeholder engagement and coproduction where this was possible to inform the scope and content of the services to be commissioned. Data and evidence from a wide range of sources was reviewed and incorporated into the thinking around the services.
- 1.4 The procurement involved two rounds of market testing. The first round of testing was restricted because of the onset of the Pandemic. The second round provided an opportunity for commissioners to assess the impact of the Pandemic on service delivery models, and to consider other factors including:
  - better applying principles of social value;
  - embracing digital delivery to a greater degree;

- how services can play their part in tackling and responding to climate change and challenges around biodiversity; and
- how services can apply the principles of Community Power, asset-based ways of working, and Levelling Up.

- 1.5 The final service specifications and the related key performance indicators represented a significant shift towards outcomes-based services.
- 1.6 The services were tendered between October and December 2021 and subsequently two of the contracts were awarded to start on 1 April 2022 and the third, for the Equalities Service, was awarded to start on 1 October 2022.
- 1.7 At the end of their first year of operation, all the services are performing well against the outcomes in the service specifications.
- 1.8 Through the Analysis below, and through the Appendices, a fuller and more detailed description of the procurement process, and an overview of the first-year performances of the three services, is presented to Committee.
- 1.9 Please note that the appendices have been drafted to ensure compliance with data protection requirements and anonymisation of service users.

## **2. Financial Implications**

- 2.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.
- 2.2 The total value of the services over the initial 3 years is £2,992,575. If the full 24 months' extension is applied to each service, then the value will be £4,987,625.

## **3. Environmental Implications**

- 3.1 There are no direct environmental implications arising from this report.
- 3.2 As part of the tendering process bidders were required to demonstrate their commitment to mitigating against and adapting to the impacts of climate change, and to increasing biodiversity.

## **4. Supporting Information**

### **Principles and expectations embedded into the new service specifications.**

- 4.1 The principle of moving towards outcomes-based services was embedded in the specifications to provide the following key benefits:

- at the tendering stage, to enable and empower bidders to be innovative and creative in their thinking around how the services could be delivered; and
  - after the award of service contracts, and for the duration of contracts, to provide suppliers with the flexibility to adapt to rapidly changing landscapes and circumstances for communities and residents.
- 4.2 In practice, the further shift to outcomes-based services saw the removal of substantial amounts of extraneous detail from service specifications (and related key performance indicators) when compared to the similar services that had gone before, and a much greater focus on tangible benefits to communities and residents.
- 4.3 There was a further shift towards the principles of community power, reflecting the strategic priorities of the Council Plan 2022-27, and asset-based ways of working, asking bidders and latterly suppliers to involve communities in decision making, work alongside communities to take practical action, utilising local assets, and to enable communities to take the lead where this is appropriate and practicable.
- 4.4 There was an expectation that suppliers are part of a shared solution around supporting the VCSE sector, and communities and residents, and a further expectation that suppliers play a key role in emerging partnerships, especially around health and social care and the Integrated Care System.
- 4.5 In line with the introduction of the Countywide Approach to Levelling Up in July 2022, there was an expectation underpinning the contracts that suppliers would play their role in supporting the Countywide Approach to Levelling Up and addressing deprivation and inequality within the priority areas and groups referenced in the approach which was in development at the time of contracts being awarded.

### **Tendering and award process.**

- 4.6 The three services went to open tender between October and December 2021. The VCSE Sector Support Service was tendered in four “lots” opening-up the potential for multiple suppliers to deliver the different lots, and the Equalities Service was tendered in three lots with the same potential for multiple suppliers.
- 4.7 As a result of the stakeholder engagement and market testing undertaken, the decision was made not to tender the Advice Service in lots. The main reason for this was the crossover of activity between the outcomes of the service and a conclusion that a single service provider would provide the most effective delivery model. However, bidders were invited to tender as consortia or partnerships.
- 4.8 The VCSE Sector Support Service contract was awarded immediately post-tender, to start on 1 April 2022, to Warwickshire Community and Voluntary Action working in partnership with Coventry and Warwickshire Grapevine to

deliver the social action lot/outcome, and Coventry and Warwickshire Co-operative Development Agency to deliver the social enterprise lot/outcome.

- 4.9 The Advice Service contract was awarded immediately post-tender, to start on 1 April 2022, to Bedworth, Rugby, and Nuneaton Citizens Advice Bureau working in partnership with North Warwickshire Citizens Advice Bureau and Citizens Advice South Warwickshire.
- 4.10 The Equalities Service contract took longer to award and started on 1 October 2022, supplied by the Equality and Inclusion Partnership.

### **Monitoring and reporting.**

- 4.11 Quarterly monitoring reports are submitted by each of the three suppliers.
- 4.12 Quarterly meetings take place for each of the three services, attended by the supplier, Director, Head of Service, and Contract Manager, and other internal stakeholders relevant to the service. The meetings combine performance monitoring, especially around key performance indicators, and an opportunity to explore trends and patterns around service delivery and the broader context of the service. An example of the benefit of this approach has been in respect of the Advice Service and increased cost-of-living pressures over the last 12 months: insight and intelligence from Citizens Advice, gained through these quarterly meetings, has been invaluable in shaping the Council's cost of living response.
- 4.13 Annual reports are submitted every twelve months by each of the three suppliers, and an annual review meeting takes place to discuss reports and to agree any priorities for the coming twelve months.

### **Impact of services**

*Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise Sector Support Service, supplied by Warwickshire Community and Voluntary Action working in partnership with Coventry and Warwickshire Grapevine, and Coventry and Warwickshire Co-operative Development Agency*

Lot 1, Volunteering Infrastructure (Warwickshire Community and Voluntary Action)

- 4.14 Key metrics for the first year of the service were:
- 1,235 new volunteers engaged with, and 958 of these placed with voluntary and community organisations across the County;
  - 933 voluntary and community organisations supported with volunteer recruitment; and
  - equivalent economic value of these placed volunteers, based on organisations otherwise having to pay for staff time, £3,036,232 over the twelve-month period.

4.15 A key aim of this lot is to create a positive volunteering environment in Warwickshire, where volunteering is open to all, volunteers can make a difference to their community, enjoy their volunteering experience, and volunteering is celebrated. This has been achieved over the first year of the service by:

- connecting organisations and volunteers via promotion and brokerage of volunteering opportunities;
- promoting volunteering opportunities to individuals;
- Corporate Social Responsibility and Employer Supported Volunteering;
- providing good practice and support to VCSE sector organisations around volunteer brokerage and management;
- organising volunteer events, forums, and training; and
- arranging volunteering awards and events.

4.16 Challenges reported around creating a positive volunteering environment have included:

- recruitment for trustee roles;
- increased demand on volunteer capacity, including from statutory services;
- the complex needs of some people being referred to volunteer in combination with limited support available within VCSE sector organisations to place them appropriately;
- a change in volunteer profile post COVID, including a reduced number of older volunteers; and
- the recruitment and retention of volunteers, and the reduced capacity of organisations to support volunteers.

Lot 2, Social Action (Coventry and Warwickshire Grapevine)

4.17 Work around this lot, the outcome of which is difficult to measure numerically, has focused on the Camp Hill area of Nuneaton over the first year of the service, reflecting its designation as a Levelling-Up priority area, with three primary areas of activity:

- community events;
- establishing a resident led action group; and
- establishing a youth voices group.

4.18 Together these three activities create an interconnected “ecosystem”, supporting each other and growing. The impact and success of this activity is that all 3 activities are now linked to the Camp Hill Community Group, developing the community leadership potential of everyone involved.

### Lot 3, Social Enterprise Development (Coventry and Warwickshire Cooperative Development Agency)

4.19 40 new and 82 existing social enterprise organisations across Warwickshire were supported over the first year of the service via 1:1 advice and group support sessions.

4.20 Across the year, several challenges have been identified around social enterprise support:

- the legacy of COVID, meaning many social enterprises have had to use reserves to survive, resulting in cash flow issues;
- barriers to procurement and securing contracts, including payment in arrears resulting in cash flow issues;
- lack of understanding of changes to funding sources, and less funding available overall;
- inflation resulting in increased employment costs; and
- increased premises costs.

4.21 Across the year, several opportunities have been identified:

- increased overall awareness of the social enterprise sector;
- anchor institutions wanting to work with the sector;
- funding picture becoming clearer and access to finance becoming easier;
- increased willingness to share knowledge within the sector (peer to peer schemes are developing); and
- greater support from Local Authorities.

### Lot 4, Collaboration, Partnerships and Development (Warwickshire Community and Voluntary Action)

4.22 Key metrics for the first year of the service were:

- £1,769,573 additional funding awarded to voluntary and community organisations because of the support provided; and
- 1,090 voluntary and community organisations supported and upskilled through funding and development advice.

4.23 Over the first year of the service, collaboration and partnership working both within the VCSE sector and between the VCSE sector and the public and private sectors, has been achieved by:

- delivery of safeguarding awareness sessions for children and adults;
- creation of a comprehensive resource library, for use by VCSE sector organisations;
- organisation of a range of funder events;
- supplier participation in a range of boards and partnerships to act as an effective conduit for the VCSE;

- provision of 1:1 advice and support on Charity Commission requirements, funding, and business planning;
- facilitated meet the funder events and bespoke advice; and
- support for the VCSE sector with emerging issues and trends.

4.24 Some of the challenges that have presented over the year included:

- reduced volunteer hours;
- increased demand for services and more complex needs;
- increased operating and premises costs;
- difficulty recruiting and retaining staff;
- reduced reserves;
- access to funding for core costs; and
- increase in governance issues for organisations, including difficulty recruiting trustees/directors.

4.25 Opportunities over the year included:

- emerging health and wellbeing agendas; and
- engagement in Local Authority and other partner priorities including Levelling Up funding and the distribution of UK Shared Prosperity Funding.

*Advice Service, supplied by Bedworth, Rugby, and Nuneaton Citizens Advice Bureau working in partnership with North Warwickshire Citizens Advice Bureau, and Citizens Advice South Warwickshire*

Outcome 1, Residents have access to advice and support around personal debt, financial difficulty, employment, and housing.

4.26 Key metrics for the first year of the service were:

- 2,724 residents were supported across 16,195 debt issues;
- 2,113 residents were supported across 5,824 issues relating to financial services and capability;
- 1,086 residents were supported across 2,559 issues relating to employment; and
- 2,114 residents were supported across 5,327 issues relating to housing.

Outcome 2, Residents have access to (“Tier 1”) advice and support around immigration matters.

4.27 Key metrics for the first year of the service were:

- 264 residents were supported across 616 issues relating to immigration and asylum.

Outcome 3, Residents’ money management skills and confidence is increased.

4.28 Key metrics for the first year of the service were:

- 97% of residents helped reported that they understood their rights or options more because of the service;
- 93% of residents helped reported that they were healthier or less stressed because of the service; and
- 95% of residents helped reported that they felt more confident to sort out their problems in the future.

Outcome 4 Residents' take-up of financial and welfare support services is increased.

4.29 Key metrics for the first year of the service were:

- £3,768,000 debts written off on behalf of residents;
- 2,016 charitable grants/payments and provision of food and goods with a total gain of £447,000 for residents; and
- 185 residents averted homelessness.

Outcome 5, Residents' understanding of their rights relating to social security benefit entitlement is increased, in turn allowing increased levels of self-help among residents.

and

Outcome 6, The social security benefit entitlement rights of residents, especially vulnerable residents, are effectively championed.

4.30 The two lots considered together, key metrics for the first year of the service were:

- £11,832,000 in benefit increase for residents, relating to new awards, reinstatements, or decisions challenged;
- 325 appeal cases handled; and
- 135 tribunal hearings handled.

Outcome 7, Cross sector partnerships work together to tackle poverty, financial exclusion, and social security benefit take-up.

4.31 Key metrics for the first year of the service were:

- 55% of residents helped had experienced a disability or long-term health condition;
- 1,102 residents helped were living in the top 20% most deprived areas of England (top 20% Indices of Multiple Deprivation Lower Super Output Areas). 10,906 residents helped were living in the top 30% most deprived areas; and

- 6,938 issues originated from residents living in the top 20% most deprived areas of England. 23,946 issues originated from residents living in the top 30% most deprived areas.
- 4.32 The first year of the service saw significant increased demand in comparison to the previous year (the last year of a similar service operated by the supplier). Key drivers were, unsurprisingly, the current economic climate and cost-of-living pressures.
- 4.33 The service helped 15,660 residents, compared to 13,613 residents the previous year, with 75,103 issues, which were often interconnected, complex, and required a holistic approach.
- 4.34 Cost-of-living pressures continue to cause hardship for many of the residents helped by the service, who are often the most disadvantaged in society. On the basis that most income for these residents is spent on food and housing costs, the significant fall in “real” disposable incomes causes residents to become more reliant on credit cards, overdrafts, and borrowing, and potentially also unaffordable loans and illegal lenders.
- 4.35 The service was delivered at 21 locations across the county, including offices in each borough and district, and outreach locations such as community centres, libraries, and job centres, targeting areas of higher deprivation and inequality.
- 4.36 In the face of mounting pressures on the service, steps were taken to help stretch capacity and resources, including the introduction of a single countywide phone line which connects residents to their local office, and the introduction of an out of hours phone line on Monday evenings. The countywide phone line is funded separately to the main service, via the cost-of-living funding agreed by Cabinet in October 2022 originating from the Revenue Investment Fund. The countywide phone line will boost call capacity from circa 3,500 calls per year to circa 13,000 per year.
- 4.37 The service continued to strengthen its volunteer base, which is critical to delivery. 144 volunteers gave 45,180 hours in a variety of roles, including advisors, caseworkers, receptionists, administrators, and trustees for the supplier’s governing bodies, alongside 87 paid staff.
- 4.38 The service was aligned to other, separately funded activity including:
- energy-related projects;
  - a welfare advice scheme;
  - a Building Better Opportunities programme for unemployed people;
  - Making Every Contact Count training;
  - outreach projects within local food banks, Children and Family Centres and community pantries; and
  - an accredited specialist debt advice service, which supported 3,000 people with more than 16,000 debt issues during 2022/2023.

*Equalities Service, supplied by the Equality and Inclusion Partnership*

Lot 1, Discrimination and hate crime support.

4.39 Key metrics for the service were:

- 32 new discrimination cases handled;
- 10 new hate crime cases handled; and
- 28 new hate crime reports.

4.40 The above metrics reflect intensive case work, providing emotional and practical support for the residents involved. The hate crime element provides an alternative method for residents who face barriers in reporting incidents to the Police to receive appropriate support. The difference between the number of hate crime cases handled and reported reflects ongoing sensitivities around the willingness of residents (victims) to take advantage of the support available.

Lot 2, Provision of equalities training and guidance.

4.41 92 community organisations were the beneficiaries of training, with 100% rating this as “good”, “very good” or “excellent”. 98% of organisations reporting behavioural changes because of the training.

4.42 The supplier organised a series of one-hour online awareness raising sessions on areas of interest to Warwickshire’s Equality Network with the focus on equality, diversity, equity, and inclusion. The network provides an opportunity for partners to share expertise and raise any newly identified equality issues and trends, with the aim of strengthening partnership working.

Lot 3, Engagement and cohesion

4.43 Over its first year the service played a vital role in providing advice and information and delivering projects and initiatives in relation to equalities, working in partnership with services across the County Council as well as several external partners.

4.44 In partnership with the County Council’s Community Safety team, the supplier co-hosted the Warwickshire Safer Partnership’s Big Conversation event in June which was informed by earlier We Stand Together events organised by the supplier. The countywide events brought together community members, the Police, Victim Support, and other stakeholders to understand the criminal justice process and use real-life experiences to raise awareness of hate crime, and to understand both the strengths of communities and challenges faced by communities in addressing hate crime.

- 4.45 Over the year the supplier played a significant role in improving access to support and services aimed at addressing cost-of-living pressures within disadvantaged groups. Additionally, the supplier continued to influence the Council's response to cost-of-living pressures by advocating for the need for provision of resources in different formats to ensure that under-represented communities are better informed and empowered to seek support.
- 4.46 Working closely with the Communities and Partnerships Service, the supplier collaborated with the Trussell Trust and Public Health Warwickshire in organising the Kind Communities, Kind Food event in March 2023. This event, which aligned to the Warwickshire Food Strategy 2023-2026, focused on improving affordability and sustainability of healthier, culturally appropriate food supplies. The event was well received and repeated in September and October 2023.

## **5. Timescales associated with the decision and next steps.**

- 5.1 The services run to 31 March 2025. The Council has the option to extend the services for periods of up to a further 24 months up to 31 March 2027.
- 5.2 Further progress reports will be presented to Committee.

## **Appendices**

1. Appendix 1 VCSE Sector Support Service, Annual Report April 2022 to March 2023.
2. Appendix 2 Advice Service, Annual Report April 2022 to March 2023.
3. Appendix 3 Equalities Service, Annual Report October 2022 to September 2023.

## Background Papers

None

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

Local Member(s): Not applicable

Other members: