

**EPHING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF GRANT AID REVIEW TASK AND FINISH SCRUTINY PANEL
HELD ON THURSDAY, 29 OCTOBER 2015
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 7.00 - 8.40 PM**

Members Present: C P Pond (Chairman), A Mitchell, G Shiell and B Surtees

Other members present: K Angold-Stephens and H Kane

Apologies for Absence: J Knapman, A Boyce and S Murray

Officers Present G Wallis (Community, Health & Wellbeing Manager), C Overend (Community, Policy and Grants Manager) and M Jenkins (Democratic Services Officer)

17. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

There were no substitutions made at the meeting.

18. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

(a) Pursuant to the Member's Code of Conduct, Councillor G Shiell declared a non pecuniary interest in the following item of the agenda by virtue of being the District Council representative on the Epping Forest Citizens Advice Bureau. She indicated that she would remain in the meeting for the consideration of the item:

- Item 5 Presentation by Epping Forest Citizens Advice Bureau

(b) Pursuant to the Member's Code of Conduct, Councillor K Angold-Stephens declared a non pecuniary interest in the following item of the agenda by virtue of being the District Council representative on the Loughton Roding Citizens Advice Bureau. He indicated that he would remain in the meeting for the consideration of the item:

- Item 5 Presentation by Epping Forest Citizens Advice Bureau.

19. MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 28 September 2015 be taken as read and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

20. PRESENTATION BY EPPING FOREST CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAU

The Panel received a presentation from R Poulter, Manager at Epping Forest District Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and J Woods, Chairman of the Citizens Advice Bureau Trustee's Board regarding the services and activities of the CAB in Epping Forest.

R Poulter began the presentation and highlighted the following:

- (a) CAB clients experienced complicated problems, 3 out of 4 clients felt a negative impact from their experiences.
- (b) 73% of clients were below the average income threshold. However following consultation with the CAB 2 out of 3 clients had their problems solved.
- (c) Every £1.00 invested in the CAB generated £3.10 in fiscal benefits, £15.83 in public value and £19.58 in benefits to the individuals who used their service.
- (d) A saving of £96,000 had been made in reducing homelessness by the CAB.
- (e) Epping Forest CAB had 56 volunteers and had recently recruited an extra 6 volunteers.
- (f) The Epping Forest CAB had provided advice to 2,497 people in 2014/15.
- (g) 33% of enquiries to the Epping Forest CAB concerned benefits and tax credits.
- (h) Over 25% of CAB clients had a disability or long term health problem.
- (i) 4 in 5 CAB clients felt less stressed after receiving their advice.
- (j) 2 in 3 CAB clients had their debt problem solved.

J Woods spoke next about the finances of the CAB. Funding for the CAB came from District Council grants, CAB fundraising, Parish and Town Councils and donations. However the bulk of funding came from specific projects which the CAB had applied for.

The CAB had cut staffing costs from April 2014 and they made savings through sourcing second hand office furniture and equipment where this was possible. However they needed top of the range IT equipment, particularly for assessing official websites.

It was explained that the 3 CAB branches currently open in the district were needed as the district was 131 square miles and had poor public transport in some places. The branches provided face to face contact which was preferred by 92% of the CAB's clients. R Poulter advised that the CAB were planning to move two of their branches to Loughton Library and Hemnall Street, Epping.

The Chairman thanked the representatives from the CAB and asked for Panel questions.

- (i) Councillor B Surtees asked if there was any information on client satisfaction in terms of problem solving.

R Poulter replied that from the client feedback forms satisfaction was around 95%.

- (ii) Councillor B Surtees enquired about difficulties experienced by some clients in obtaining appointments.

R Poulter advised that anybody could drop into a bureau but there was a waiting period before being seen. Clients would be greeted immediately on arrival and their priorities assessed, this allowed for more pressing enquiries to be dealt with sooner. Appointments could be arranged for more complicated enquiries. The CAB were trying to put experienced staff on the door to their bureaus to assess more readily the immediate needs of clients.

(iii) Councillor G Shiell asked if clients had confidential sessions at the CAB.

R Poulter replied that they issued a form for filling in to their visitors. Everybody was interviewed confidentially. The Panel was informed that whereas some problems could be dealt with quickly, most were more complicated, some sessions could last an hour. It was advised that there could be a range of other tasks involved in assisting clients such as paperwork and phone calls to be made.

(iv) Councillor H Kane asked if the CAB made home visits.

R Poulter replied that the CAB had a limited capacity for home visits but were working with VAEF on this.

(v) The Panel Chairman asked if the Epping Forest CAB supported people outside the district.

R Poulter advised that in regard to drop ins and appointments, their staff would only see Epping Forest residents. However the Epping Forest CABs did deal with telephone queries on a county wide basis.

(vi) The Chairman asked where would the Outreach services be re-located?

R Poulter advised that Outreach would be at Limes Farm and Abridge. They were working with GPs and they had plans to use Ongar Library at some stage.

The Assistant Director (Housing Operations), R Wilson, informed Members that he was shortly submitting a report to the Finance, Performance Management Cabinet Committee in November which would request the funding of two debt advisors for a year. They would be playing a crucial part in offsetting the potential impact from welfare budget cuts, helping to reduce homelessness. The District Council's temporary accommodation residence, Norway House at North Weald, was currently full to capacity and it was proving difficult to move tenants into the private rented sector. The authority was attempting to reduce the numbers of people in Bed and Breakfast accommodation as well. A close working relationship had been established between Housing officers and the CAB, for example they had quarterly meetings together.

The Policy Officer, C Overend, added that the CAB's clients, particularly those who had debt problems, generally had other issues which complicated the process helping them. This in turn made funding difficult because of the different categories in which support fell.

(vii) The Policy Officer, C Overend, asked the CAB representatives what bids for funding worked?

R Poulter replied that a bid to Essex County Council on supporting mental health patients on wards had failed. However a funding bid for debt mitigation had

succeeded this year. There had been 9 – 10 bids made to the County and local councils recently of which only two were unsuccessful.

(viii) Councillor K Angold-Stephens asked if businesses were providing any support to the CAB.

R Poulter replied that they had recently received a donation of office equipment from a bank, they used Epping Re-Use as well for finding office furniture and equipment.

(ix) Councillor B Surtees asked if there were excessive levels of supervision for volunteers at the CAB?

R Poulter advised that the CAB had very experienced advisors, good training was needed for staff and volunteers. Some people needed supervising.

(x) Councillor G Shiell asked about debt advice on Limes Farm estate.

R Poulter said that in some cases clients had been referred to debt specialists elsewhere.

The Chairman thanked the CAB representatives for their presentation and their answers to the Panel's questions.

21. REVIEW OF GRANT AID SCHEME - SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENT WITH VOLUNTARY ACTION EPPING FOREST

The Panel received a report from the Policy Officer, C Overend, regarding the Review of the Grant Aid Scheme Service Level Agreement with Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF).

When the terms of reference for the Task and Finish Panel were determined, it was agreed that the arrangements in respect of Service Level Agreements (SLAs), including those for VAEF, would be reviewed during the second stage in 2015/16. Therefore the Chief Officer of VAEF, J Foile, gave a presentation on services and activities they provided at the Panel meeting on 28 September 2015.

The VAEF existed to support the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors, and was established district wide during the early 1990s. The District Council had provided financial support to VAEF by way of an SLA for many years. The funding agreed for 2015/16 was £39,120 which had remained unchanged since 2009/10. From this sum, VAEF paid the Council annual accommodation costs of £11,360 for use of the premises at Homefield House.

Members were asked to consider the current funding arrangements and make recommendations with regard to any funding to VAEF from 2016/17 onwards. Given the current uncertain financial climate faced by local government, it was vital that any funding agreement with VAEF included a range of key performance measures and an "added value" requirement through that agreement. The Policy Officer, C Overend, felt that the VAEF lacked spearheading and required stricter performance measures. The Community, Health and Wellbeing Manager, G Wallis, echoed this view by suggesting that setting targets would help with performance. She felt that there should be potential for a large pool of volunteers which could be recruited locally which could help the VAEF's profile.

Although funding continuity for the VAEF was important, it was equally important not to enter into a long term agreement at this stage, between VAEF and the District Council, so that effective service monitoring could take place. Councillor H Kane, Leisure and Communities Portfolio Holder advised that, as with funding for the Citizens Advice Bureau, working practices needed to change and evidence was important in justifying the investment made by the District Council.

RECOMMENDED:

- (1) That the District Council maintain provision for longer term funding to Voluntary Action Epping Forest from 2016/17 onwards, based on performance management benchmarking closely monitored on an annual basis; and
- (2) That a draft benchmarking arrangement for Voluntary Action Epping Forest would be brought to the Panel.

22. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business for consideration at the meeting.

23. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Task and Finish Panel would be held on Monday 23 November 2015.

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