

25th November

The Chair ran through the minutes page by page for members.

It was proposed by Councillor Leather, seconded by Councillor Langford and –

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 25th November be agreed as a correct record.

Vote for 5 against 0 abstained 1

113. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

No requests for public participation were received for this meeting.

114. ACTION LIST

The Chair reviewed the action list from the meeting on 25th November updated members regarding progress.

115. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Members were reminded that declarations of interest should be made as and when the specific agenda item to which they related was under discussion.

116. AGREEMENT OF AGENDA ITEMS PART I AND II

There were no Part II Items.

117. URGENT MATTERS BROUGHT FORWARD WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE CHAIR

There were no matters arising.

118. CITIZENS ADVICE

Vicki Rowe (Chief Executive Officer for Citizens Advice Torridge North Mid and West) joined the Committee remotely and provided members with an overview of the current service provision, and the impact of the pandemic for the people they support.

The Chief Executive Officer highlighted the 6-month impact report for Citizens Advice, sent to Councillors in October. She summarised that in the first 6 months of the financial year the service:

- Helped around 14,000 people with 3,000 issues.
- Provided approximately £819,000 of income lift to the families they supported - through access to grants and welfare benefits they were entitled to.

- Projected figures for the end of this financial year show the service will have supported 3,000 Torridge residents with over 7,000 issues and added £1.8 million of income back into the local economy.

The Chief Executive Officer confirmed that support remains mostly via the telephone, email, website and via Facebook messenger. Some of the more vulnerable people will be supported through face-to-face appointments if this is necessary. Currently the service runs as 90% digital and 10% face-to-face service.

There are plans to gradually increase face-to-face appointments in Torridge, but it was explained the benefits of the new ways of working had been recognised and adaptations the service had made during the pandemic would likely remain for the majority of people they support.

The face-to-face appointments were identified by the team, as well as working with key partners like Torridge District Council to identify those who cannot access the service digitally.

It was confirmed that Citizens Advice would be selling the property in Bridgeland Street. This was the result of a premise review and also a result of the service finding more agile ways of working. From a digital perspective the service are helping around 50% of the people that currently need support in Torridge and the 3 other areas the service they support. This is also the case for Devon and nationally for the service.

The Chief Executive Officer provided member with an overview of the support the service offer, this was mostly work around understanding or issues with welfare benefits – universal credit, legacy benefits and tax credits were provided as examples. 34% of the services work is around benefits. Housing and advice on debt were also highlighted as issues that are coming up a lot alongside benefit advice – often people will need support in relation to all 3 of these issues.

Councillor Wiseman joined the meeting at 18:11

In total welfare benefits, housing advice and debt make up 70% of the work of the service. Generally, those experiencing debt are the people who will need the face-to-face support, due to the complexity of the issues and most will fall into the vulnerable category.

The Chief Executive went on to highlight funding for their debt advice. There are currently 2 funders:

Department for Work & Pensions are a historic funder of this work locally and nationally. It was explained the contract for the Money & Pension Service is due to end in March this year and the tendering process started; this means it's not clear currently who will provide this service going forward. It was confirmed that the commissioning process has stalled, so Citizens Advice will be delivering the service until June (slight extension). The Money & Pension Service are made up of 2 paid case workers, an administrator and team leader / technical supervisor.

The Henry Smith Trust and have 3 year funded project to deliver a similar service to local service users. The team are due to start the second of the three years funding this year and is made up of one debt advisor, one supervisor and one administrator.

It was explained how this was a concerning situation for Citizens Advice given the expected 60% increase in people coming to the service over the next 2 financial years.

Members were asked if they had any questions, and the following discussion took place.

Members asked about the potential increase of people accessing the service in relation to debt linked to energy bills. There is a project on Fuel Debt across Devon, so there is resource for those who are experiencing fuel debt and the service is linked in well with some of the larger companies who have customers that may be experiencing fuel debt. It was explained that the service will not be able to meet the demand due to the continued escalation of fuel costs. The Chief Executive Officer explained that there is information available on the website and people can phone or make contact via Facebook for advice, but face-to-face appointments would be prioritised for the most vulnerable complex debt cases.

There is work taking place with other Citizens Advice services in Devon and nationally to gain more funding for this area of work and to advocate for change. One of the campaigns currently is focused on energy suppliers and costs, particularly around pre-paid meters – who often pay more.

Locally Citizens Advice are working with Torridge District Council and Devon County Council on the Household Support Fund, but this is only available to end of financial year.

Members mentioned an episode of Money Box that looked at Individual Monetary Arrangements, which people take when seriously in debt and it highlighted the poor advice of some services provide in the sector. CA were highlighted as the place to access for good advice.

The Chief Executive Officer confirmed that they are providing this advice and were seeing more people with higher levels of debt who need more specialist advice. As well as people they wouldn't have expected to access the service pre the pandemic.

It was explained that a lot of people have taken payment holidays and relied on credit cards and are now having to reschedule this debt and are seeking the support of the service as a result. It was explained that Citizens Advice is expecting to see a 60% increase in those coming to the service for debt advice, and that the specialist debt casework can be resource intensive (average of 9 hours per person), usually via face to face and the service the resources to provide the service, but these are limited.

Members raised the possible inequality experienced between working age and pension age people – energy crisis was mentioned and the impact of increased NI contributions and the age profile of the area. Not something that been raised nationally, but the Chief Executive Officer arranged to take this away from the meeting and investigate further.

Members queried if the service is only able to help 50% of those that come to service. Only able to meet 50% of the demand trying to access the service (digital). Face to face demand is harder to understand due to current situation due to covid. Those who cannot access the service either self-help via the webpages or access other services, but some will drop through the net.

Funding and resources are issue. It was explained that demand is increasing, and the service is looking at an 11% increase this financial year. At the same time volunteers in the service have gone from 150 volunteers before the pandemic (40 that were Torridge Volunteers) to 70. It was explained how it was hard to recruit volunteers and the impact this can have. Citizens Advice are currently recruiting volunteers, but not the level previously, or the level needed to meet demand.

Following a question regarding wait times it was confirmed by the Chief Executive Officer that for those making contact by phone or over the web they should receive support within the first week of contact. Face-to-face contact is around 4 weeks unless the person is considered a priority – the example of homelessness was given.

The Chief Executive Officer explained that debt, housing and benefits are the top 3 issues the service support people with, and through the pandemic they have seen an increase in relationship problems and people who were experiencing domestic violence and abuse. The Chief Executive Officer asked members to make contact if there were specific issues that members wished to know more about.

It was confirmed that the Facebook Messenger page is a local service run by paid staff from the local service and this is one of the quickest access routes into the service at the moment.

The phone line is also a local service that is run by Torridge North Mid and West Citizens Advice. If no one is available to take a call then calls then there is a national overflow, which means that the call will be picked up. The aim of having this as a more locally run service is that the service will be able to focus on local demand and meet peak times.

Webchat is a nationally run service, which Torridge staff help to support.

There was a query about neighbourly disputes and whether this this on the increase. No data but anecdotally yes. Possibly down to more people being at home. The service link with local mediation services so people can access these services.

Members asked how Torridge District Council could support the service and the Chief Executive Officer highlighted the work taking place with the Head of Communities & Place and the Head of Legal and Governance & Monitoring Officer to improve the pathways between the services for clients and bridge the gaps to support the most vulnerable clients and stop people falling through the net.

Members raised a case study within the Citizens Advice Impact Report 2021 and highlighted the help provided to a client who had a child with learning disability. Members were impressed with the results of the work Citizens Advice did with the client, which resulted in an annual uplift of £10,459 and was described by them as a 'lifesaver'.

There was a question in relation to the retention of paid staff and it was confirmed that the service has managed to retain all their paid staff. They have also been able to recruit a few more staff as a result of funding streams related to the impact of Covid. The Chief Executive Officer referred to the service as a growing organisation, which is looking at income generation and funding avenues to meet the demand they are seeing.

Members asked how much funding Torridge District Council are currently providing to the service at the moment. The Chief Executive Officer wasn't clear on the total amount, but stated that it was approximately £32-38 thousand pounds and this was looking to be continued for the next financial year.

Following a conversation about funding the Chief Executive Officer arranged to speak with the Head of Legal and Democratic Services & Monitoring Officer regarding funding for 2022-23.

Members queried where face-to-face appointments would be taking place when Citizens Advice move from the Bridge Street property. The Chief Executive Officer highlighted some of the discussion that are taking place and said the service was open to options.

Members thanked the Chief Executive Officer for attending the meeting.

Following a discussion about funding for Citizens Advice, it was proposed a recommendation was put forward to Community and Resources Committee. It was suggested this should ask the Committee to consider an uplift of the grant provided to Citizens Advice to £50,000 for the next financial year. It was felt this was justified by the increased work that the energy crisis will present for the service.

The Head of Legal and Governance & Monitoring Officer provided members with some context to the funding that is provided to Citizens Advice and how this is used to support people in the community around heating costs, as well as the partnership work taking place with the service and the support Torridge is providing around accommodation.

It was proposed by Councillor Newton, seconded by Councillor Cottle-Hunkin and

Resolved:

To recommend that Community & Resources Committee consider an uplift of the grant provided to Citizens Advice from £38/32,000 to £50,000 for the next financial year

Vote: For 7, 1 Against, 1 Abstained

It was suggested that the Economic Development Officer be contacted in regard to the Torrington Work Hub and asked to offer this to Citizens Advice staff as a base. It was agreed that the Lead Electoral and Democratic Services Officer would contact the Economic Officer.

119. CONSIDERATION OF THE FORWARD PLAN

Chair advised that Democratic Services would be looking to review the format of the current Forward Plan design.

Chair confirmed the future meeting dates and highlighted the date change for the next Committee to 9th February, this was so partners from Health could attend.

Democratic Services stated they had received confirmation that the people attending from Health on the 9th February will be able to cover the queries raised by members and would also be raising awareness of the Our Future Hospitals Programme. It was agreed that Democratic Services will query if Dental Provision could also be covered.

The Committee in April was discussed, and it was agreed that Democratic Services would work with the Chair to confirm who will attend from South West Water and the Environment Agency and firm up the focus of the meeting.

Following discussion regarding a Letter from Mid-Devon. It was agreed that Councillor Manley would contact the Chair of Mid-Devon Scrutiny Committee for more detail. It was queried if this request should be put forward to the Local Plan group or the Climate Change Working Group.

Chair highlighted a letter from Natural Devon, and it was agreed to invite representatives from Natural Devon to attend the Committee on 01 June 2022.

Chair thanked members for attending and closed the meeting.

The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm and closed at 7.06 pm

Chair:

Date: