

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Meeting held on Thursday, 28th October, 2021 at the Council Offices, Farnborough at 7.00 pm.

Voting Members

Cllr M.D. Smith (Chairman)
Cllr Mrs. D.B. Bedford (Vice-Chairman)
Cllr S.J. Masterson (Vice-Chairman)

Cllr Gaynor Austin
Cllr Jib Belbase
Cllr M.S. Choudhary
Cllr R.M. Cooper
Cllr K. Dibble
Cllr Nem Thapa

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Cllr L. Jeffers and Cllr Mara Makunura

15. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 24th August, 2021 were **AGREED** as a correct record.

16. COMMUNITY SERVICE ORGANISATIONS

The Committee welcomed Alex Hughes, Chief Executive of Citizens' Advice Rushmoor, and Donna Bone, Chief Executive of Rushmoor Voluntary Services, who were in attendance to give presentations on the services provided by each organisation, funding and governance arrangements, service during the pandemic and future work and challenges. The Cabinet Member for Democracy, Strategy and Partnerships, Cllr Adrian Newell, was also in attendance.

Ms Hughes, gave some background to Citizens' Advice (CA). It was noted that CA had been present in Aldershot since 1940 and was there for everyone, but especially for those that needed the service the most, to help people move forward with their lives. The organisation was a local volunteer led service, routed locally within the Rushmoor community. The national infrastructure of CA benefited the local offer with access to training, information and resource. CA Rushmoor had a Board of Trustees which comprised of a Chair and nine Board Members, two of which were elected Councillors. The staff structure showed different teams offering a variety of help which were funded from different sources. Currently CA Rushmoor had over 100 volunteers that delivered services in a number of different roles from initial contact with clients, discrete advice, detailed advice, casework and administration support.

CA Rushmoor received a diverse range of funding. Pensionwise were the primary funder, providing 37% of the total annual funds, Rushmoor Borough Council provided 29%, Frimley CCG 8% and smaller contributions were received from 13 other organisations, including AFCF Domestic Abuse, the Brain Tumour Charity and the Broadhurst Trust. It was noted that eight of the 13 smaller contributors, had provided sources of funding that would cease at the end of the financial year.

The response to the pandemic had shown a shift from in person engagement with clients to a remote/online offer. Cloud technology had allowed volunteers to work from home and all had adapted to the change quickly. However, it was noted that in person engagement was slowly being re-introduced.

Ms Hughes advised on activities around reaching the most vulnerable in local communities, in particular the Nepali community. At the beginning of the lockdown, 200 leaflet packs had been produced in Nepalese, on health advice, isolation and keeping safe; these had been distributed around the community in appropriate locations to get the message out. A Nepali advice line had been established to cover issues previously dealt with via the Nepali Drop In Service. It was noted that over 1,000 issues had been dealt with through this service.

Monitoring took place across service areas to ensure all in need were being reached, and partners were aware of the services on offer. An Overcoming Barriers Group had been established to address barriers accessing the service provision. As a result, a referral tool was now available on the website to allow partners/agencies to directly refer local individuals in need of help and advice. Direct access to help would be considered further moving forward, to look closely at how in person engagement would continue.

Ms Hughes reported on the types of issues dealt with by CA Rushmoor over the past two years, the main areas included: benefits/tax credits, employment, universal credit, housing, relationships and debt. The change in demand had been mirrored by Government announcements relating to, for instance, furlough scheme, self-employment and Universal Credit.

During 2020/21 CA had made significant impacts financially in a number of areas, these included:

- £6.5 million worth of gain in new/increased benefit awards
- £1.2 million worth of debt written off
- £1.4 million worth of savings to the DWP by keeping people in work
- £2.5 million worth of fiscal benefits to Government
- £8.8 million worth of direct benefits to clients
- £26.8 million worth of value to society as a whole

It was reported that a number of new issues were emerging as a result of the pandemic and the recovery process, these included issues around mental health, debt, housing and benefits. For example, the 12% increase in energy bills and the withdrawal of the £20 uplift on Universal Credit, could have a wider impact on households, which could result in more people becoming in debt.

Moving forward the CA were looking at a redesign of their service model. This would incorporate hybrid working, learning from past experience, a continued focus on core need and building resilience within the team.

The Committee discussed the presentation and raised a number of issues regarding funding, in particular how funding was allocated, potential reductions and impacts on the service. It was noted that some funding was provided for specific projects, for which staff were employed on a short term basis to provide the service. Other funding, such as that provided for the introduction of Universal Credit would have a larger impact on the service provision once it was removed. The implications of reductions in funding were potential staff reductions and a rethink of service provision and accessibility to ensure those most in need got the help they needed.

In response to a query regarding the CA's relationship with the Council, it was noted that relations were positive, in particular with those areas with which the CA worked closely, such as, housing and council tax. There were no formal KPI's in place but a service level agreement (SLA) had been in place between the Council and CA, which outlined how funds could be used, this had been supported by regular meetings with the Council's Head of Democracy and Community.

The Chairman thanked Ms Hughes for her presentation and invited Ms Bone to give her presentation on Rushmoor Voluntary Services (RVS).

Ms Bone advised that RVS was a core service charity that supported other charities and were part of a network of Community Voluntary Sector (CVS) groups across Hampshire. Its mission was to enable residents to play a full and active part in the life of the local community and to provide support, information and guidance to community groups and organisations.

Within Rushmoor a supported volunteering team was in place called Blooming Marvellous. The team provided community gardening work and supported and helped maintain community areas such as the Aldershot Library garden, the A325 flower beds and the incredible edible boxes situated in the town centres. In addition, support was provided, on an ad hoc basis, to individual residents who required support with their gardens, e.g. to meet the requirements of tenancy agreements.

RVS also offered practical assistance, this was delivered via a quarterly Voluntary Sector Forum which the Council regularly attended to provide updates on Council initiatives, such as the food waste collection service, it also gave stakeholders the chance to promote opportunities. Other practical assistance included access to DBS checks, mini bus and driver hire, training courses (such as first aid and safeguarding), equipment loan i.e. collection buckets, hi-vis jackets etc. and access to a pool of ad hoc volunteers.

It was noted that RVS currently had 364 organisations registered of varying types and sizes. These organisations benefited from a variety of resources, including funding events, networking, representation and shared information and best practice.

In addition to the core services, RVS offered client services which were aimed at supporting people to remain in their own homes independently. The services offered

included: home help/household chores, social inclusion/befriending services and Dial-a-Ride/Fleet Link. RVS also sub-contracted a HIV support service in Hampshire and assisted with the Sparko initiative, which allowed socially excluded people to access services and online video conferencing through their televisions. It was noted that RVS volunteers were also involved in supporting the Afghan Evacuee Settlement Programme.

Ms Bone reported on the team structure within the organisation. It was noted that RVS was managed by a Board of Trustees whose role was to ensure effective governance and scrutinise the work undertaken. The Board included one elected Councillor.

In relation to funding, it was noted that some short term funding had been secured in the previous two years as a result of the pandemic, however other funding from services such as Home Help and Dial-a-Ride had reduced during the lockdowns; these were slowly increasing as people were getting out into the community more. The Council's contribution to RVS equated to around 20% of the annual budgeted income.

It was advised that Hampshire County Council (HCC) had decided, early in the pandemic that the work relating to the community response would be lead via the CVS's across Hampshire, in close partnership with local authorities. For RVS, this had resulted in a shift from the day to day running of the service to initially scoping a local helpline service for those needing information, support, food and medication. Being newly located in the Council Offices had allowed collaborative working and access to services which would have not been possible at the previous office space. It was advised that a centralised helpline had been set up by HCC, the number for which had been promoted across the Borough; all calls that could not be dealt with via the centralised number were then referred to the local helpline to be triaged and signposted accordingly. It was noted that Council staff had been redeployed from the start to answer calls seven days a week, as required.

Outside RVS, local groups, within the community, had been established across the Borough to support local communities/neighbourhoods. RVS made the decision to assist these groups to ensure that support was offered safely and well. Operation Rushmoor Community Action (ORCA) had been established to recruit volunteers and produce policies and procedures, training, guidelines and assurances to keep both volunteers and residents safe. It was noted that around 450 volunteers had been maintained throughout the pandemic.

It was advised that a number of partnerships had developed with local organisations, in particular, the Greater Rushmoor Nepali Community who offered translation services, the Vine Centre who offered food delivery and CA Rushmoor. RVS staff and volunteers had been redeployed in various roles, such as shopping and prescription deliveries, town centre ambassadors and marshals and buddying. RVS volunteers had also been involved in the operation of the vaccination and testing sites working with the NHS Clinical Commission Group (CCG).

It was noted that with the move to the recovery stages from the pandemic, RVS had stepped back from some, pandemic related roles, to pick up the day to day work as a

CVS. A number of challenges had arisen from the pandemic for the voluntary sector; these included funding, demand, capacity to manage increased health and safety measures, recruitment of trustees/staff/volunteers, adapting to service delivery/activities post pandemic, digital skills and morale of staff/volunteers.

Learning from the pandemic and the recovery process RVS hoped, moving forward, to work in a more holistic hub type environment, working together with partners to maximise efficiencies.

The Committee discussed the presentation, in particular funding, it was noted that work was underway to invest in client services to maximise income and scope funding opportunities. With regard to the HCC direct grant it was advised that the funding would be secured for the next two years, however, the larger amount from HCC for the Dial-a-Ride service, would be affected if the service went out to tender in the following two years and RVS were not successful.

In response to a query regarding the relationship with the Council, it was noted that regular conversations were held with the Council's Head of Democracy and Community and the need for partnership working during the pandemic had nurtured mutual respect and strengthened knowledge and understanding of each other's services and activities. At present there was no formal SLA in place between the Council and RVS, however discussion were underway to establish one.

A further discussion was held around the provision of food to those in need, it was noted that requests came from a variety of living situations, including families, single people with no alternative support network and those who had lost their jobs. It was advised that getting to the source of the issue was vital to ensure the support required by the individuals was provided. The Council's Portfolio Holder for Democracy, Strategy and Partnerships advised of the Food Strategy and the forthcoming Grub Hub at Windsor Way, Aldershot. The Hub would not only provide food parcels to those in need but offer cooking lessons and a safe place to talk and be signposted to support networks.

In summary, it was noted that Service Level Agreements would be established and updated for both RVS and CA Rushmoor, taking account of the learning from the pandemic and how that could be taken forward. It was also important to have something in place to measure the performance of both organisations. Once the SLA's had been developed it was agreed that the Committee would be given the opportunity to review them.

The Chairman thanked Ms Bone for her presentation and remarked on the essential role both organisations played in the Borough and their significant contributions in tackling the pandemic locally.

17. **WORK PLAN**

The Committee **NOTED** the current Work Plan.

It was noted that the next meeting would include a presentation on the Supporting Communities Strategy and Action Plan and the Grub Hub.

Members also suggested items on the following for future meetings:

- Local Primary Care Networks and doctor services
- Disability - ensuring Council buildings were compliant, engagement with disability advisory groups around the town centre regeneration programmes
- Progress report on climate change work
- Farnborough Airport - activities affecting lives of residents in particular number of flights, noise levels

The meeting closed at 9.05 pm.

CLLR M.D. SMITH (CHAIRMAN)
