

# OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Meeting held on Thursday, 12th December, 2024 at the Council Offices, Farnborough at 7.00 pm.

## Voting Members

Cllr Halleh Koohestani (Chairman)  
Cllr S. Trussler (Vice-Chairman)

Cllr Leola Card  
Cllr A.H. Crawford  
Cllr P.J. Cullum  
Cllr Thomas Day  
Cllr G.B. Lyon  
Cllr M.J. Tennant

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Cllr C.P. Grattan and Cllr Bill O'Donovan.

Cllr Nadia Martin joined the meeting online and was therefore unable to vote on any recommendations taken.

Cllr Sarah Spall attended the meeting as a Standing Deputy.

## 23. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meetings held on 28th November, 2024 were agreed as a correct record, subject to two minor amendments on page 3.

## 24. CITIZENS ADVICE RUSHMOOR - SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENT - ANNUAL REPORT

The Committee welcomed Calum Stewart, Chief Executive Officer, Sue Dowell, Head of Service and Quality and Andrew Levey, Board of Trustees Chair, at Citizens Advice Rushmoor (CAR), who were in attendance to report on their 2023/24 Annual Report, in line with the Service Level Agreement with the Council. In addition, Emma Lamb, Community and Partnership Service Manager was also in attendance to support the item on behalf of the Council.

It was advised that Citizens Advice Rushmoor (CAR) were a local charity who had been providing free, confidential, and impartial advice, in the Borough, since 1940. Part of the Citizens Advice network, CAR were one of over 200 independent charities operating across the country. The volunteer-led charity, with a Board of Trustees and over 50 volunteers, helped deliver services to Rushmoor's residents, ensuring clients were at the heart of what their work.

Mr Stewart, provided an overview of a case which had presented to the team. The case involved a vulnerable adult with learning difficulties who struggled to live independently. The client had received a letter threatening action from bailiffs, if an energy bill wasn't settled. The CAR adviser contacted the energy company and was able to ensure the debt was written off. During the period of contact with the client, the adviser established that the individual was eligible for benefits, which resulted in them being £1,000 better off per month. This was an example of work carried out by CAR, and showed how one issue could result in additional work being undertaken to enhance clients lives and wellbeing. It was noted that 8 out of 10 issues presented, were solved through the advice and intervention provided by CAR advisers. In 2023/24, 5,000 individuals had been supported on over 16,000 issues.

CAR aimed to provide the advice clients needed for the problems they faced, and worked to improve the policies and practices that affected people's lives. Advisers helped clients with a range of problems, through face to face contact, telephone, email and webchat or through outreach activities in the local community. Problems/issues dealt with, included, benefits, debt and money matters, housing, consumer issues, work, family and immigration.

It was noted that, more people were contacting CAR with multiple or complex issues. Most concerns could be dealt with by the team, but sometimes signposting to other services was required. The support provided ranged from brief one off intervention, to in-depth casework, with services tailored to meet individual needs. The high quality, complex and detailed service provided by CAR allowed for a unique insight into the challenges people face in today's society. CAR provided a service that made a difference to people's lives and in addition, generated savings for the government to a value of at least £1.67 for every £1 invested in CAR, alongside, economic and social benefits (£24.22 for every £1 invested in CAR), and value to clients (£7.10 for every £1 invested in CAR). Through partnership working with the Council on the Council Tax Support Scheme it was estimated that 4,800 households in Rushmoor would be better off by over £760,000 in total, in 2024/25. Other partners, which CAR has worked with, and been provided funding from, for specific projects to provide benefits to residents include, the Brain Tumour Charity, the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, the Office for the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) for Hampshire, the Community Grub Hub and Farnborough Food Bank.

It was noted that the Council's funding contributed, in part, to eight posts within CAR's organisational structure. In 2022/23, the Council reduced its funding to CAR by 10%, this was cut by a further 5% in 2023/24. Taking account of inflation, these reductions equated to a 30% loss in spending power since 2021, compared to a year on year increase of 44% in levels of crisis support being provided. It was advised that, CAR had undergone a restructure as a result of these reductions and other increased costs, which had included a number of redundancies, causing a further strain on the services provided. A team of volunteers supported the paid service, and it was noted that they had given an average of 270 hours per week, which equated to £363,877 worth of volunteering hours in 2023/24.

The Committee reviewed CAR's strategic priorities and were apprised of projects and activities for 2024/25, which included work with asylum seekers and refugees, mental health projects and meeting the needs of young people.

During discussions, the Committee requested that the information provided in the SLA report going forward, clearly stated where the need was coming from and key concerns identified on a ward basis. What the Council's grant funded, was also raised, and a request was made for more detail on this and engagement with the Council on how, and on which, projects the funds were used for.

In response to a query regarding the use of English, it was advised that the position had worsened and fewer people were using English as their first language. It was noted that, fortunately CAR had Nepali speakers and advisers but other organisations did not. Language Line was used as a resource to assist with enquiries when English wasn't the first language, but this extended the time of appointments further impacting resources.

In response to a query regarding alternative funding streams, it was noted that funding was sought from other sources, but often was for specific projects/support with limitations on what it could be used for.

Following a discussion on premises costs, it was noted that the lease on the spaces occupied by CAR, owned by the Council, had not been reviewed for four years. The Committee felt it appropriate that a recommendation be made to review the current arrangements with regard to rent and service charges.

With regard to average waiting times on the helpline, it was advised that a new arrangement had been entered into to pool resources across other Citizens Advice offices, to spread the load across volunteers over a wider geographical area. Current waiting times could be up to 30-45 minutes. In addition, it was noted that, in Rushmoor, 12-15% of contact was made via face to face meetings.

During a discussion on funding and how the Council could assist CAR moving forward, it was suggested that a multi-year funding agreement would assist with planning for the future and offer a greater level of certainty for the organisation. In addition, stronger partnership working with the Council would add additional value to the relationship beyond monetary contributions.

In relation to volunteers, it was advised that the process to become a volunteer for CAR was not simple. Volunteers needed to undergo an 11 week training programme, which required commitment from the individual and support from trained supervisors. Working with the local higher education establishments to reach potential volunteers at an early stage was suggested, and CAR would welcome any offers to work with the colleges.

In response to a query regarding Pension Credits, it was advised that should the resources and information be available, a targeted approach could be taken to assist those in need, however data sharing protocols made this difficult.

Whilst discussing the recommendation to the Cabinet, the Committee acknowledged the Council's current financial position and the fact that the funding provided was not a statutory requirement of the Council. The Committee also appreciated that if organisations such as CAR and Rushmoor Voluntary Services (RVS) did not exist,

the Council could feel the impacts of additional support to residents from lost services.

The Committee RECOMMENDED that the Cabinet:

- consider a multi-year funding agreement, taking account of inflationary increases, from 2025/26 alongside a clear set of KPIs to measure performance
- review the rental and service charges associated with the places occupied by Citizens Advice Rushmoor in both Aldershot and Farnborough.

The Chairman thanked, Mr Stewart and Mr Levey and Ms Dowell for their presentation.

## 25. **WORK PLAN**

The Committee noted the current Work Plan and the items for the meeting on 30th January, 2025 which included, updates on the Financial Recovery Plan progress and Cultural Compacts. Also, on 8th January a remote meeting would be held to discuss the issues that would be raised in a letter to Hampshire County Council.

The meeting closed at 9.19 pm.

CLLR HALLEH KOOHESTANI (CHAIRMAN)

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