

BOROUGH SERVICES POLICY AND REVIEW PANEL

Meeting held on Monday, 11th September, 2017 at the Concorde Room, Council Offices, Farnborough at 7.00 pm.

Voting Members

Cllr A.R. Newell (Chairman)

Cllr T.D. Bridgeman

Cllr Liz Corps

Cllr A.H. Crawford

Cllr S.J. Masterson

Cllr Marina Munro

Cllr B.A. Thomas

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Cllr R.L.G. Dibbs and Cllr M. Staplehurst.

8. MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 12th April, 2017 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

9. CITIZENS' ADVICE RUSHMOOR

The Panel welcomed Ms. Alex Hughes, Chief Executive Officer, Citizens' Advice who attended the meeting to give a presentation on the recent activities of the organisation. Citizens' Advice offered an advice service via face-to-face contact, over the phone, via live webchat and through a comprehensive website to help people with a wide range of issues. Rushmoor's Citizens' Advice was financed through a variety of funding streams including, the Council, Pension Wise and the local Clinical Commissioning Groups.

The Panel noted the trends in issues tackled. The highest proportion of issues related to benefits and tax credits, and finance and capability, on which the introduction of Universal Credit and Welfare Reform was a significant factor. Advice assessments and face-to-face contact were the two main channels for delivery of support, although there had been an increase in contact via the web. Citizens' Advice were there to help everyone and reached 4.4% of any local population, this raised to 9% in areas of deprivation.

Ms Hughes explained that over 300 independent local charities made up the national Citizens' Advice network. The 36 million customers, nationally, using the website benefited from realtime updated information and the 2.7 million face to face customers had access to 2,900 locations across the country. National statistics showed that two in every three clients had their problem solved.

Housing advice was a large part of the work carried out by Citizens' Advice. Knowledge, legal advice and an understanding of local processes were the key things that Citizens' Advice could bring to a client in need, this resulted in savings to the local authority and social services to the sum of £24,000 – £30,000 per individual. During 2016/17, Citizens' Advice had generated savings in the region of £203,000 through reducing the risk of homelessness in Rushmoor.

On benefits and tax credit advice, the introduction of Universal Credit and Welfare Reform had resulted in an increase in clients requesting support in this area. Through working with the Council, Citizens' Advice had reduced financial difficulties to over 1,300 clients and prevented the need for more critical and costly state intervention.

It was noted that debt advice had reduced in recent years, although numbers were still high with 626 clients with 1686 debt problems contacting the Citizens' Advice in 2016/17. Some clients had successfully rescheduled a total of £722,881 of debt, an average of £5,146 per client and 45 clients had written off £889,135 of debt, an average of £19,784 each. The advice offered by the Citizens' Advice had been around the prevention of escalation and stabilising finances now and in the future.

Ms Hughes explained that the advice provided by Citizens' Advice had a significant impact on the lives of its clients. It was noted that clients were less stressed, had more money and felt more in control of their finances, had a more secure housing situation, felt their physical health had improved and had better relationships with others.

It was noted that Citizens' Advice carried out educational work in a variety of areas to help customers, these included building confidence and skills, financial capability, Energy Best Deal (an initiative to inform decisions on energy deals) and Scam Awareness talks. Locally, specific campaigns and engagement had centred around gambling, "Welfare Reform and Working Families" and "Settled and Safe, a Renter's Rights". A multi agency advice provision, where Citizens' Advice team worked with VIVID, PeoplePlus, Job Centre Plus, Home Group and the Council, was also in place to offer a smoother journey for clients and allowed adaption to meet local needs, an example of which was the Nepalese drop in service which had been established in 2016 to provide specific information/advice to the Nepalese community. Pensionwise, which offered advice on pensions and Heathlands, a provision that offered advice to patients with mental health issues, were also examples of the work adapted for the community with Rushmoor.

The Panel was informed of the value and vital role of volunteers to the Citizens' Advice, it was reported that 121 volunteers had worked with the organisation during 2016/17. Volunteering helped the individuals build confidence and self esteem and also provided wider economic and social benefits.

In response to a query, it was advised that the one in three cases that didn't get resolved were more complicated and couldn't be dealt with at the advice interview stage of the processes, these cases generally required more specific advice and the client would be referred to a third party, such as a solicitor.

It was noted that the work carried out with the Nepalese community ran alongside the provisions provided by the Gurkha Welfare Society who offered advice and assistance with more statutory needs, such as Ministry of Defence, Department of Work and Pensions and visa issues. Citizens' Advice could advise on the more day to day issues around benefits and household bills.

The Chairman thanked Ms. Hughes for her presentation.

10. ELECTIONS REVIEW UPDATE

The Panel welcomed Mr. Andrew Colver, Head of Democratic and Customer Services, who attended the meeting to give an update on the current review of electoral services and recent electoral events.

The Panel noted the unprecedented electoral events that had taken place over the previous two years and the challenges and workload these had created for the Elections Team. There had been an increase in the electorate since the May 2016 local election and the turnout for the EU referendum had been 74%. Different types of elections created different challenges, local and Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections took more organisation whilst other national electoral events generated greater customer contact. Some issues had emerged during 2016/17, including requests to review some of the polling stations, a review of the arrangements around the issue of postal votes, complexities of the PCC ballot paper, increased contact from overseas electors and the difficulties in registering military personnel.

The Panel noted the Government's position on making democracy work for everyone. The key focus was to ensure the electoral system worked better and addressed the potential for fraud and improved processes. The Government proposed to tackle fraud and the perception of fraud through the testing of the impacts of ID checking in polling stations, a pilot for which would be carried out during 2018 local elections in areas where there had been issues in the past. Further work would also be required to improve security around postal votes, registration and polling station processes.

It was advised that the Boundary Commission was currently carrying out a Parliamentary Constituency Review. The second consultation period was now complete and the responses were being assessed. The proposals would mean a change for the Aldershot Constituency to include Crookham East, Crookham West and Ewshott. It was noted that if revised proposals were made a further eight week consultation period would commence at the beginning of 2018 and recommendations made to the Government by September 2018.

The Panel was informed of the Law Commissions Reform Project, the Commission had requested a review in 2012 of administrative law, offences and legal challenges. An interim report had recommended consolidation and rationalisation of the laws and processes to address inconsistencies and modernise out of date laws. The review was currently at the Government review stage but had been delayed by activities around Brexit.

The Panel reviewed the elections timetable for the period 2018 – 2022 and it was noted that a European election in 2019 was unlikely. Mr. Colver explained that Individual Electoral Registration (IER) had been introduced in 2014/15. The system had moved from being property based to person based and additional funding had been provided to meet the extra costs of the system. The IER system presented new challenges, which the Government recognised, and it was noted that it was keen to progressively remove mandated processes, make registration simpler, more digital and data driven and more efficient. An annual assessment of the register was also likely to be carried out to assess accuracy and completeness. It was reported that the project had been generally successful, in particular the use of digital services to register and confirm details; however many applications made were duplicates. The Panel noted the changes in the register since 2006, key increases had been the influx of overseas voters, from 29 in 2006 to 330 in 2017. The number of service voters had fluctuated over the years, it was advised that married quarters were canvassed in the same way as non-military properties, but those resident in barracks were harder to access and letters were often returned as undelivered.

The Panel noted that, following the implementation of IER, the Elections Team had commenced a wide-ranging review of its services, using “systems thinking” principles. The team were focusing on improving the service to customers, addressing the amount of paperwork and waste work, integration with other Council services and reductions in cost. A considerable amount of work had been carried out to understand customer demand and processes and currently a consultation was being carried out with residents to assist in the review of the service/process. Electoral services were governed by conditions and legislation which affected the way the service operated; these include Electoral Commission guidance and standards, IT systems and prescribed forms, all of which were detailed/prescriptive and needed to be understood to influence the review.

The Panel noted the next steps, which would involve the findings being collated and fed back to the Elections Group and Panel as required. The redesign of the system would need to be trialled and the team would work with the Cabinet Office to modernise the process, should pilots for any changes be required.

The Panel discussed the option of online voting and it was noted that the Government was reluctant at present to progress any e-voting initiatives.

The Panel **NOTED** the presentation and requested an update on the review at a future meeting.

11. **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Panel was advised that, in response to the Notice of Motion raised at the last meeting of the full Council on 27th July, 2017 regarding fire safety issues in the Borough, representatives from the Hampshire Fire and Rescue Authority and Accent Housing would be in attendance at the next meeting of the Panel on 13th November, 2017. An invitation would be extended to all Members, in particular Cllr Jeremy Preece who had submitted the Motion, and the Cabinet Members.

The items scheduled for the November meeting would be rescheduled for the meeting on 22nd January, 2018.

The meeting closed at 8.56 pm.

CLLR A.R. NEWELL (CHAIRMAN)
