

Rother District Council

Report to	-	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date	-	25 November 2019
Report of the	-	Executive Director
Subject	-	Voluntary Sector Service Level Agreements

Recommendation: It be **RESOLVED:** That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends to Cabinet the renewal of the following four year Voluntary Sector Service Level Agreements (unless another term stipulated) from 1 April 2020, and subject to a six month termination clause:

- 1) Hastings Advice and Representation Centre – £19,000 per annum
- 2) Hastings and Rother Mediation Service – £8,400 per annum.
- 3) Rother District Citizens Advice Bureau – £85,000 per annum, to be reviewed after two years and:
 - I. the Council assist the organisation with sourcing and, if required, relocating to suitable premises within Bexhill Town Centre; and
 - II. further funding through Parish Councils be explored.
- 4) Rother Voluntary Action – £38,000 per annum and grant applications be made to the Council for individual projects.
- 5) Bexhill Museum – £8,500 per annum with a review after two years.

And, it be **RESOLVED:** that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommend to Cabinet:

- 6) the four year unrestricted contribution of £1,000 per annum be renewed from 1 April 2020 to Rye Harbour Nature Reserve and a business plan be provided; and
- 7) that core funding to the Hastings Furniture Service and Action in Rural Sussex cease but that they are encouraged to continue accessing other Council funding streams.

Introduction

1. The purpose of this report is to bring to the Committee the results of recent work by the Service Level Agreement (SLA) Task and Finish Group and to seek Member approval for onward recommendation to Cabinet.
2. The Task and Finish Group (T&FG) comprised Councillors Dixon (Chairman), Mrs Barnes and Drayson. In summary, the T&FG undertook a scrutiny of a number of existing SLAs with the voluntary sector and considered its recommendations for the future. The SLAs seek to capture the working relationship between the Council and a small number of voluntary sector organisations providing services which strongly complement and support our own provision.

3. The T&FG met on two occasions and took evidence from a range of witnesses.
4. The T&FG was made aware of the contextual issues impacting on their considerations. Primary among these are the current financial pressures facing the authority and the impact of funding cuts to its own services. The work of the T&FG was informed by the financial outlook contained within the Medium Term Financial Strategy.
5. It should be noted that the recommendations in this report are subject to Cabinet approval and further negotiation of the specific terms and conditions. No commitment to future funding is made or implied by the use of figures in this report.

Service Level Agreements: Background

6. The importance of the role of the Member Representative in driving value from the SLA was recognised by the T&FG. Member Representatives are appointed each year at the Annual Meeting of the Council. It is a requirement that funded organisations recognise the role of Member Representatives. The appointed Member is charged with ensuring a good relationship and close working between the organisation and the Council. The Member Representative is asked to work closely with the responsible officer to provide a written annual report on the organisation for publication in the Members' Bulletin. The responsible officer will be charged with budget responsibility and ensure that all proper payments are made and that performance against targets is well managed. A six monthly performance review will be carried out as a minimum and any problems will be addressed at the first opportunity.
7. In consultation with the Assistant Director Resources, it is recommended that each agreement be fixed for a term of four years, April 2020 to March 2024. The funding certainty that this brings the voluntary organisations is known to be very welcome. The controlled termination or variation of any agreements that fail to meet their performance targets or do not achieve the agreed outcomes in any way is built into the detailed terms and conditions governing the agreements. This in effect means that any service not meeting our requirements can be stopped within six months. It is further recommended that to assist financial planning for the Council all agreements work to a fixed fee structure, with no indexing against inflation.

Recommendations: Service Level Agreements

Hastings Advice and Representation Centre (HARC) Member Representative Counsellor Coleman

8. This well-used service offers independent advice to Rother residents on complex welfare benefits and tax credit matters. As the case load is complex, this service avoids tying our own officers up in complicated and time-consuming benefits work, supporting some of the most vulnerable households in the area. The service is preventative, avoiding homelessness and job loss.
9. Over the last two and a half years, HARC has secured over £933,600 for Rother's residents in previously unclaimed, enhanced or reinstated benefits.

10. HARC has requested a £2,840 increase on the current annual SLA fee of £16,160, which would then equate to the salary and overheads of a part-time (0.5 Full Time Equivalent) specialist welfare benefits advisor. HARC currently provides services to Rother residents valued in excess of this amount. If funding is reduced or withdrawn, the service could be at risk; the Council do not have the in-house expertise to offer a comprehensive service and would have to refer clients to other organisations, which may not necessarily be local or accessible. The T&FG acknowledged the excellent work HARC do to support Rother residents and agreed to recommend an increase of £2,840.
11. It is recommended that the agreement be continued at an annual fee of £19,000 subject to detailed terms and conditions. The Revenues and Benefits Manager will monitor this agreement.

Hastings and Rother Mediation Service

Member Representative: Counsellor Thomas

12. This organisation provides an independent, impartial and confidential mediation service, helping to reduce conflict between neighbours, reducing the potential for violence, harassment, stress and tension. This delivers on the Council's duties to securing safer communities and avoids the deployment of officers on this task, delivering considerable savings to the authority.
13. During 2017/18, the Mediation Service worked on 45 Rother referrals, 21 of which were covered by RDC funding and 74% recorded an improvement in the situation. Referral agencies reported that mediation involvement led to a reduction in calls to statutory agencies e.g. the Police or housing associations, leading to reduced anti-social behaviour and the accompanying potential for violence and stress, making communities stronger and safer.
14. Additional funding has been achieved through various avenues including Blaggrave Trust, Children in Need, the Police, Optivo and local charitable organisations. However, despite good arrangements with these organisations, funding is not guaranteed year on year. The T&FG noted that funding is not received from Hastings Borough Council, and therefore referrals are not accepted from them.
15. It is recommended that the agreement be continued for a four year term, at an annual fixed fee of £8,400, subject to detailed terms and conditions. The current annual payment is £8,400. The Environmental Services and Licensing Manager will monitor performance against targets.

Rother District Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)

Member Representative: Counsellor Courtel

16. The Rother CAB provides a well-established free, confidential, impartial and independent advice service for residents of Rother.
17. Over the 2018/19 financial year, 4,557 clients were seen with 9,714 advice issues appraised. The CAB's volunteers have contributed over 24,000 hours of time at no cost. The total estimated benefit to Rother district was £2.5million, of which the value of benefits advice was £1.9million, of debt advice was £633k, and of consumer advice was £21,500.

18. T&FG Members were informed that the CAB is required to vacate their premises resulting from the landlord's decision to redevelop the building; however to date no suitable alternative accommodation has been found. Members were mindful of the CAB's predicament and agreed that their current location was ideally situated, being across the road from the Council's offices and accessible to the town centre. Members therefore recommended that the Council assist the CAB with sourcing and, if required, relocating to suitable premises within Bexhill town centre.
19. A reduction or withdrawal of funding would impact directly on the delivery of the CAB's service to the public and could mean that the service would cease to exist. An increase in funding was requested to £113,000 per annum to meet staffing costs which would ensure requirements of the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureau and overheads of the main office in Bexhill and as many outreaches as possible are met. Members of the T&FG were advised that funding had been received through Parish Councils in the past and agreed that this should be explored further.
20. It is recommended that the Council's core support be set for four years, to be reviewed after two years, at an annual fixed fee of £85,000, subject to detailed terms and conditions. The current annual payment is £85,000. Additionally it was agreed that the Council should assist the CAB with sourcing and, if required, relocating to suitable premises within Bexhill town centre, and that further funding through Parish Councils should be explored. The Housing Needs Manager will monitor performance against targets.

Rother Voluntary Action (RVA)

Member Representative Councillor Brewerton

21. RVA provides support services to the community and voluntary sector, with advice and guidance, fundraising and development work given freely to local groups. RVA aims to strengthen the social and economic well-being of local communities by building sustainability within the voluntary and community sector. They have been operational since 2006 and have a strong relationship with the Council.
22. Over the previous funding period, RVA have supported and helped 345 different organisations across the Rother district with governance, funding start-up, dispute resolution, decision making advice, as well as training.
23. RVA has introduced cost efficiency measures and savings have been achieved through cheaper rents, utility costs, and partnership working.
24. An uplift to £45,000 per year (from the current annual payment of £38,000) has been requested by RVA to ensure service delivery continues at current levels. In terms of additionality, RVA had suggested they may be able to provide further support to the Council in the administrative functions of the Community Grant Scheme. The Grant Scheme is due to be reviewed in spring 2020 and this will be included within the scope for the review.
25. It is recommended that the agreement be continued for four years, at an annual fee of £38,000, subject to detailed terms and conditions, and that RVA approach the Council for additional grant funding for specific projects if

required. The Housing Development, Programme Office and Policy Manager will monitor performance against targets.

Bexhill Museum

Member Representative: Councillor Thomas

26. Established in 1914, Bexhill Museum aims to challenge and inspire audiences of all ages by promoting learning and encouraging discovery. The museum holds unique collections on local history, archaeology, the history of costume, technology and engineering, the arts, ethnography, geology and social history, all housed in a distinctive building combining a traditional Edwardian museum with a modern extension. The museum runs a range of special events, activities and workshops throughout the year for families, adults and local groups and associations.
27. The Bexhill Museum has requested a 2% year on year increase on the current annual SLA fee as a contribution to raised costs due to inflation.
28. It is recommended that the agreement be continued for four years, at an annual fee of £8,500, subject to detailed terms and conditions. The current annual payment is £8,500. The Neighbourhood Services Manager will monitor performance against targets.

Recommendations: Unrestricted Contributions to Core Funding

Action in Rural Sussex (AiRS)

29. This organisation provides services across East and West Sussex, representing the needs of rural communities and working to improve the lives of those living in our rural areas. The Council's contribution is nominal and unlikely to impact adversely on AiRS' finances and it was agreed to recommend ceasing the funding agreement. Opportunities for further joint project working with AiRS will be explored on a case by case basis.

Hastings Furniture Service (HFS)

30. Hastings Furniture Service, from their base in London Road, Bexhill, helps Rother residents on low incomes to furnish and equip their homes affordably. They collect and re-use furniture and electrical goods, preventing surplus items from going to waste. They also offer training and support to enable the unemployed and in particular young people to gain qualifications, skills and confidence. The T&FG agreed to recommend that the Council fund HFS for specific works and projects only, rather than on an annual basis and that the funding agreement ceases.

Rye Harbour Nature Reserve (RHNR)

31. The RHNR is managed by a partnership between Sussex Wildlife Trust, the Environment Agency, the Friends of Rye Harbour Nature Reserve and private landowners. The partners carry out habitat management, nature conservancy, public access and education within this internationally renowned site. The organisation is much respected and the reserve is of national and international significance. It is recommended that the funding be continued

for four years at an annual unrestricted contribution of £1,000 and a business plan to be provided.

Conclusion

32. The T&FG wish to acknowledge the valuable contribution of the voluntary sector in Rother which they have witnessed in taking evidence for this scrutiny review and to thank all those that contributed. Rother clearly has a highly productive track record in this area of partnership working. The T&FG believes that there is great potential still to come for creating alternative, more cost-effective ways to deliver public services and harnessing voluntary and community activity. Members are requested to consider the Group's recommendations.

Dr Anthony Leonard
Executive Director

Risk Assessment Statement

A number of strategic and financial risks will attach to the final decisions of the Council in relation to voluntary sector agreements. At this scrutiny stage, the key risk is one of managing expectation, ensuring that all affected parties are aware that we are not yet at the stage of making a financial commitment but are nonetheless committed to a strong and effective relationship with key partners.