



3rd March 2023

REPORT TITLE:	INFORMATION AND ADVICE SERVICE
REPORT OF:	ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: CONSULTANT IN PUBLIC HEALTH

REPORT SUMMARY

This report seeks approval for a contract variation to the Information and Advice Contract to maintain increased capacity to support local communities impacted by the rising cost of living.

The Ask Us Wirral Information and Advice Service plays a pivotal role in supporting residents in Wirral with a wide range of issues including benefits advice, debts, employment, housing, relationships and families, legal, consumer, immigration and asylum, utilities, phones, travel, transport, holidays, tax, education and discrimination. Demand on this service has increased due to the increases in living costs being experienced by residents across the Borough.

To meet increased demand Ask Us Wirral have received additional funding of £155,000 in 2022/23, through one-off grant funding which concludes at the end of the 2022/23 financial year.

Due to ongoing high demand for support from the service it is proposed to utilise the Public Health grant to provide additional funding to the Information and Advice Service to cover the period 1st April 2023 - 31st March 2024. The service will be recommissioned from April 2024 and the recommissioning process will consider the required contract value from this point onwards to deliver service requirements.

This proposal affects all Wards within the borough and the decision is a not a key decision.

The report supports the implementation of the Wirral Plan 2021 - 26 and its core purpose to improve equity for people and place through the provision of a pan-Wirral, commissioned service that directly supports people in need.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Director of Public Health is recommended to vary the Information and Advice Contract, Ask Us Wirral, for the period 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024 to increase capacity of the service so that more residents in need can be supported.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 The Ask Us Wirral Information and Advice Service plays a pivotal role in supporting residents in Wirral with a wide range of issues including benefits advice, debts, employment, housing, relationships and families, legal, consumer, immigration and asylum, utilities, phones, travel, transport, holidays, tax, education and discrimination. Demand on this service has increased due to the increases in living costs being experienced by residents across the Borough. Maintaining additional investment in this service for the 2023/24 financial year is required to ensure we are mitigating the impacts of the rising cost of living on local residents. The service will be recommissioned from April 2024 and the recommissioning process will consider the required contract value from this point onwards to deliver service requirements.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 Increasing capacity within the Ask Us Wirral Information and Advice Service reflects the ongoing needs reported by local communities and is also evidenced by data therefore other options such as not providing any additional investment, although considered, are not recommended.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 Ask Us Wirral is the current Information and Advice Service in Wirral. It provides advice and information to all Wirral residents. The service assists with a wide range of issues including benefits advice, debts, employment, housing, relationships and families, legal, consumer, immigration and asylum, utilities, phones, travel, transport, holidays, tax, education and discrimination.
- 3.2 A one year contract, with the option to extend for a further one year, was awarded to Wirral Citizen's Advice Ltd as the lead provider for Ask Us Wirral following a tender process in 2021. This contract commenced in April 2022, was extended for a further year in April 2023, and is due to end on 31st March 2024.
- 3.3 The existing contract value is £1,112,499 per annum and the service is a joint commission between a number of directorates across the Council and the NHS. Wirral Council contributes £735,499 from the Public Health Grant, with a further £35,000 from Housing, and £42,000 from Children's Services. Local NHS fund the service to the value of £300,000 per year. Ask Us Wirral have also received additional funding of £155,000 in 2022/23 for specific fuel poverty initiatives, through one-off grant funding which ceases at the end of the 2023/24 financial year.

- 3.4 The service currently supports approximately 60,000 residents a year and is performing at 180% over target and capacity due to demand. There has also been a 40% increase in more complex cases and clients presenting with multiple needs requiring intensive case work.
- 3.5 Alongside these changes several third sector organisations who were supporting clients alongside the service have ceased operation or are no longer providing advice which has also contributed to the increase in service demand. The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded these challenges along with the increases in cost of living. The service has seen a major increases in demand for issues such as food poverty, fuel poverty, employment, unemployment, benefits, tribunal support and domestic abuse.
- 3.6 Cost-of-living pressures are affecting people in every part of our borough. Price rises are having an impact on most households, with those on the lowest incomes likely to be hardest hit, particularly as wage and benefit uplifts do not align with inflation.
- 3.7 By driving people deeper into poverty, or by pushing those who had previously been just coping into financial hardship, it is very likely that the continued rise in the cost of living is going to intensify health inequalities.
- 3.8 Extensive qualitative and quantitative analysis has been collated to understand current and projected impacts on residents, as well as reviewing evidence for local action that can be taken to mitigate the impacts; this can be found here: <https://www.wirralintelligenceservice.org/state-of-the-borough/cost-of-living-crisis-2022-23/>
- 3.9 The current contract runs until the end of March 2024 with a new contract required from April 2024 onwards. The recommissioning process will consider the required contract value from this point onwards to deliver the required service requirements.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The proposed contract variation for 2023/24 will increase the contract value by £155,044, which will be funded from the Public Health Grant. The value and availability of the Public Health Grant for 2023/24 onwards has been recently announced and provides each local authority with a 3.3% cash terms increase.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Local Authorities must comply with the Public Contract Regulation 2015 and the Council's Contract procedure Rules. The proposed variation exceeds the threshold limits within the Contract Procedure Rules and as such the contract has received a waiver from the Director of Finance in line with rule 13.1. The variation is also with the compliance thresholds in s72 of the Public Contract Regulations 2015.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 Staff have been recruited to these roles as part of existing contract arrangements and will continue to deliver services until the grant funding ceases.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 The Public Health Grant allocation for Wirral in 2023/2024 has not yet been confirmed. The Budget and Spending Review 2021 detailed that the Public Health budget for the next three years is protected. However, if there is any reduction in the level of funding associated with the Public Health Grant or a change in priorities identified in relation to the Grant conditions, it may be necessary to withdraw or reduce funding.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 The Services described within this report are designed based on and respond to findings from a range of insight, including research conducted with local communities throughout the last year and through working with the Community, Voluntary and faith sector forum and wider Community, Voluntary and Faith Sector in Wirral.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision or activity.
- 9.2 The Equality Impact Assessment for these decisions can be found <https://www.wirral.gov.uk/communities-and-neighbourhoods/equality-impact-assessments/equality-impact-assessments-january-202-6>

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 Through providing support for residents related to energy usage and fuel poverty the support provided by this service is anticipated to have a positive impact on greenhouse gas emissions.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 The additional money that this funding provides will improve the health and social outcomes of some of the borough's most vulnerable residents impacted by the pandemic. This funding will allow trusted, third sector organisations to increase the capacity of their services and support those communities most in need.

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APPENDICES

N/A

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Wirral Citizen's Advice Bureau Ltd Wirral Council Public Health Services Contract (DN568876)

Cost of Living Crisis - <https://www.wirralintelligenceservice.org/state-of-the-borough/cost-of-living-crisis-2022-23/>

The Health Foundation, Debt and Health, <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/debt-and-health>

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee	8 th September 2021
Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee	29 th November 2022