



## Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee

18<sup>th</sup> July 2022

<b>REPORT TITLE:</b>	<b>INFORMATION AND ADVICE SERVICE COMMISSION UPDATE</b>
<b>REPORT OF:</b>	<b>DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH</b>

### REPORT SUMMARY

This report provides an update to the Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee on the progress made in re-commissioning of the Information and Advice service. Approval was given by committee in November 2022 to re-commission the current service in line with Wirral Council Contract Procedure rules.

The report provides an overview of the findings of the independent evaluation undertaken by Liverpool John Moore's University and the local mapping work that has been undertaken to support the re-commissioning of the service as agreed at Adult Health and Social Care committee on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2022.

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

The proposed actions affect all wards within the borough and is not a key decision.

### RECOMMENDATION/S

The Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee is recommended to note and acknowledge the work that has been undertaken to date to re-commission the Wirral Information and Advice Service.

## **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

### **1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S**

- 1.1 To provide an update to the Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee on the Information and Advice Service re-commissioning process led by Public Health.

### **2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 2.1 Permission was given by Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee in November 2022 to commence the tender process. It is necessary to commission the Information and Advice Service to comply with Public Contract Regulations and Wirral Council Contract Procedure rules. Other options related to contract length and contract value were considered, including an option not to renew the contract, and provide this service in house.
- 2.2 A cross directorate group of council officers formed in 2021 to look at the options however given the current cost-of-living crisis, levels of demand on the current service and in house departments, the skills and qualifications required and the volunteer capacity which subsidises the service to operate it was agreed that the recommission was the best option for economic reasons.

### **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, relationship, 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 and is due to end on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024. To ensure compliance with Public Contract Regulations and Wirral Council contract procedure rules it is necessary to recommission this service.
- 3.3 The COVID-19 pandemic, along with increases in cost of living, have led to increased demand and case complexity. The service has seen a major increase in demand for support related to issues such as food poverty, fuel poverty, employment, unemployment, benefits, tribunal support and domestic abuse. The service currently supports approximately 60,000 residents a year and is performing at 180% over target and capacity. There has been a 40% increase in more complex cases and clients presenting with multiple needs requiring intensive case work. Alongside these changes several third sector organisations who were supporting clients have ceased operation or are no longer providing advice.
- 3.4 Cost-of-living pressures are having impacts on people in every part of our borough. Price rises driven by energy price inflation are having an impact on most households, with those on the lowest incomes likely to be hardest hit, particularly as benefit uplifts

do not align with inflation. 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.

- 3.5 Poverty, poor health outcomes and health inequalities are inextricably linked. Professor Sir Michael Marmot and others have set out that the lower one's social and economic status, the poorer one's health is likely to be. People living in the poorest neighbourhoods in Wirral will, on average, die twelve years earlier than the people living in the richest neighbourhoods. People living in poorer areas also spend more of their lives with a disability – an average total difference of seventeen years.
- 3.6 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/>
- 3.7 The current provider of Ask Us Wirral is Citizen Advice Wirral. The service provides information, advice, and guidance as well as case work for Wirral residents. It is a free and confidential service that provides quality advice and signposting on many issues through providing clients with information around their rights, options, and responsibilities. Issues are explored in an 'holistic' and 'person-centred' way, and the service is keen to 'move clients along' through empowering individuals, with 'hand holding' support where needed. Ask Us Wirral also offer an online element to their service by providing free impartial and confidential advice across two websites; the Ask Us Wirral website and the Citizens Advice Wirral website. Both sites provide a wealth of knowledge, covering a range of topics such as benefits, work, debt, housing, consumer, family, law, discrimination, tax, health, and immigration. The information available online is consistently updated by UK Citizens Advice, meaning service users always receive up-to-date, current advice. Ideally, the website will provide 'self-help', however, in instances where there is an additional need for support, service users can call the telephone number provided on the website or they can submit an email advice form, which allows email advice to be given by a member of the team. The website also provides support via web chat links, which links into national Citizens Advice. On average each month, the website is receiving forty-six thousand visits.
- 3.8 Support at Ask Us Wirral is delivered in a number of different ways, through face-to-face by appointments and drop in, and via telephone or online. Across a two-year period (October 2020-September 2022), 30,497 residents engaged with Ask Us Wirral (this included n=90,745 issues) via in person and telephone support. An additional 119,527 (n=90,663 unique page views) accessed the Citizens Advice Wirral website, with 18,314 (n=9,921 unique page views) engaging with the Ask Us Wirral website for advice and support. Ask Us Wirral can also offer appointments in residents' homes for those who are more vulnerable, elderly or are unable to access the service.
- 3.9 Issues for individuals that required advice and support mainly related to housing, welfare, benefits, fuel and food poverty, debt management, bereavement, health, wellbeing, and mental health. Stakeholders participating in the recent evaluation acknowledged the rising need for residents and the more complex nature of referrals,

with many requiring further support in addition to, and beyond, their original presenting issue.

3.10 The current service has been independently evaluated by Liverpool John Moore's University and the findings will inform the specification development and form part of a clearly defined commissioning cycle, which is designed to maximise return on investment and improve outcomes. The evaluation worked with stakeholders, partners, the current service and residents and clients of the service. Key headlines include:

- Ask Us Wirral utilises a collaborative model, aiming to provide an integrated single service. This brings together services that specialise in working with different groups. This provides an additional layer of support that would not have otherwise been in place at other services or via Citizens Advice Wirral without the Ask Us Wirral contract. As well as providing further reach, this also provides an opportunity to bring together key expertise to better support residents.
- The model provides a structured and formal way for organisations to work together. Communication between partners working within the Ask Us Wirral model was seen as effective and that it reduced the chances of services working in silos, reduced duplication of work, and complemented service offers. Challenges included organisations having their own processes and procedures to follow and different ways of working.
- Findings highlighted how a strong commitment is required to establish and maintain this level of partnership working. Trust was identified as an important factor in developing these key relationships. Partners agreed that there was room within the model for other services to formally contribute in the future. This was also identified as a way of increasing opportunities for organisations who may be limited in parts of their offer or to secure additional funding on their own.
- Advice and support was seen to be action focused to help residents address issues, using a holistic and person-centred model to support them to navigate complex benefit systems in a supportive way, listening to their frustrations and fears and answering any questions they may have. The support to help them address an issue, and for some longer-term case work support meant that they had that support to tackle the problem they were facing. For some this was short-term, for others it was support to access longer-term and wider support through a referral or signposting.
- Clients successfully completed and gained access to the appropriate benefits and financial support that they needed. This led to improved knowledge and understanding of the process and form filling which increased their confidence in carrying out similar tasks in the future. For those who had improved their financial situation through access to benefits and support around debt management, this had reduced anxiety and worries and improved their mental wellbeing. Examples were also provided for improvements in housing situations from support and advice to move and secure housing, and then support to maintain their tenancy.
- The confidential nature of the service was beneficial. Clients also developed stronger support networks and felt less isolated and alone in their situations. Improved health and wellbeing for clients meant that they had improved relationships with their family and other service providers, with one client reporting that support had been 'life saving' for their family. The support helped residents to

build resilience, feel in control of their situation and move forward with their lives. It is evident that the Ask Us Wirral model has also contributed to wider impact across the Wirral community and wider system.

- Partner organisations add value and capacity within their services through the current partnership working and have extended the reach to those in need of but not engaging with support. A number of the wider stakeholders participating in the research believed that without Ask Us Wirral, residents would struggle to know where to go and how to access support. It was agreed with the rising level of poverty and increased inequalities, that there would be a detrimental impact on people’s lives without such a service available to them. There were also concerns how the wider support system across Wirral would cope with increased demands without the provision in place from Ask Us Wirral.

3.11 At the Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2022 it was agreed that mapping be undertaken to support the re-commissioning of this service to understand the level of service provision in the borough. A commissioner workshop was held on 24<sup>th</sup> April 2022 followed by a wider provider and stakeholder workshop on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2022. The workshops looked to understand the definitions relating to information and advice and undertake mapping of local service provision. The provider and stakeholder workshop was attended by 32 people, and the key findings were:

- Information and Advice can mean different things to different people. There is a need for the commission to be clear that this relates to specialist advice and information i.e., complex and specialist interventions.
- There are different levels of information and advice being provided across the system which can be defined as follows:

Level of Support	Intervention	Method of support
Level One	Information, self-help and signposting	Through web access, telephone, or phone web access
Level Two	Triage and Early Resolution	Webchat, telephone, assisted help information and drop ins
Level Three	Generalist advice	Preventative education and face to face, telephone, and web support
Level Four	Complex and Specialist Interventions	Casework and specialist partners

- There are many agencies providing level 1 and level 2 services however very few are delivering level 3 complex and specialist information and advice which this commission is seeking to procure.
- Those other agencies who are delivering level 4 are delivering on a much lower scale or are short term funded.

A copy of the workshop mapping is available in appendix A.

- 3.12 The Ask Us Wirral Service is currently oversubscribed and performing at 180% over current contract targets. This is due to several reasons, the first being since the introduction of the contract, universal credit was introduced in 2018 which had an impact, coupled with the pandemic, and more recently the cost-of-living crisis. The bottle neck in the service is at the front end; we know from the evaluation and service data that once people get through to the service, the support they receive is excellent however getting through, particularly by telephone contact, can be a challenge. The service has online referral forms, and response targets relating to call back and email reply times, but this is proving very difficult in the current circumstances.
- 3.13 Over the last twelve months the service has achieved the following outcomes for Wirral residents:
- £25.2 million awarded to people through benefit claims.
  - £27 million in debt written off/ managed.
  - 82% of people reporting an improvement in their wellbeing
  - 82% success rate with Employment Support Allowance/Personal Independence Payment claims
- 3.14 Ask Us Wirral currently has over 75 volunteers supporting the service. Analysis identified this would equate to an extra £1.2 million staffing costs, without this support.
- 3.15 A cross directorate and partnership group has been formed to inform the development of the specification to avoid duplication across service areas and ensure the aims and objectives of the proposed service are fit for purpose and ensure value for money. Key elements of the proposed specification include:
- Upskilling of the workforce across wider community, voluntary and faith sector organisations, to provide basic information and advice.
  - Continuation of specialist advice and information and providing support for complex and specialist cases.
  - Terminals placed in community settings to allow instant access to advisors.
  - Continuation of hybrid ways of working, both telephone and face to face appointments, across extended community venues.
  - Expansion of partnership and collaboration in the contract to ensure wide reach and those most in need can access in a timely manner, for example Healthwatch contacts.
  - Prevention campaign with residents to help stop people reaching crisis point and knowledge of where to get help when needed.
  - Working with primary care to identify through the health care records patients with long term health conditions and are at risk of being in fuel poverty.
  - Working with discharge teams at Wirral University Teaching Hospital to ensure as part of planned discharge, there is co-ordination of agencies to ensure the home is warm enough and people have the correct financial support through welfare benefits check with an advisor.
- 3.16 The new service specification will be finalised in August 2023 with the tender expected to go live on 26<sup>th</sup> September 2023. The contract award date is

scheduled to be 11<sup>th</sup> December 2023 with the contract due to commence on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024.

#### **4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 This contract is commissioned by Wirral Council with financial contribution from NHS partners. There is confirmation of available funding from the Public Health grant and partners to support the continued commissioning of a local information and advice service.
- 4.2 The value and availability of the Public Health grant for 2024/25 onwards is not yet known. The budget has been allocated based on the grant funding being consistent with this financial year. Should the grant vary and be reduced then contract amounts may need to be varied, and the proposed tender exercises will consider appropriate mitigating measures.
- 4.3 Analysis of social return on investment within the current contract showed that Wirral Citizen Advice generated between £33 and £50 in social value for every £1 invested within the contract. The benefits were seen across the following themes:
- Increased income (£1.8 million)
  - Increased empowerment (£1.2 million)
  - Reduced anxiety (£781K)
  - Increased employability (£390K)
  - Increased security of tenancy (£232K)

#### **5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 The recommissioning of the service detailed within this report will be undertaken in accordance with the Public Contract Regulations and Wirral Council Contract Procedure rules.

#### **6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS**

- 6.1 Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 (TUPE) will be applicable.

#### **7.0 RELEVANT RISKS**

- 7.1 It is necessary to recommission the services highlighted in order to comply with the Public Contract Regulations 2015 and Wirral Council Contract Procedure rules. There is always a risk of disruption to service provision during service redesign, re-commissioning, and commencement of new services. To mitigate against this and minimise disruption, adequate time to plan for, and implement the mobilisation of new services, is built into the procurement process between contract award and commencement.
- 7.2 The procurement process is also subject to scrutiny and at risk of legal challenge. Particular regard is given to contract procedure rules and relevant legislation at all stages of the process and the Public Health team works closely with the Procurement team to ensure compliance.

7.3 In the current challenging financial climate, the impact of any future reductions in budget or policy implications on the amount of funding available for Public Health is unknown. The value and availability of the Public Health grant for 2024/25 onwards is not yet known. This risk will be mitigated by the insertion of appropriate termination clauses in the contract.

## **8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION**

8.1 In order to inform the development and design of the future service, engagement and consultation is taking place with key partners, stakeholders, and local communities.

This includes:

- Engagement with local commissioners of health and care and community services to understand the impact of increasing cost of living.
- Engagement sessions with a wide range of stakeholders to understand their current concerns and challenges that are affecting local residents including any key policy changes.
- Working with third sector and community partners to engage with local communities to understand their needs in relation to information and advice services.
- Qualitative insight work with local residents to understand the impact and ways support can be tailored to meet their needs.

## **9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 Public Health will adhere to Wirral Council's legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work do not discriminate against anyone. As part of the recommission an equality impact assessment (EIA) will be undertaken to ensure all equality impacts are considered and relevant actions are taken to mitigate any potential negative impacts. The current EIA completed in October 2022 is available here:

<https://www.wirral.gov.uk/communities-and-neighbourhoods/equality-impact-assessments>

## **10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS**

10.1 During the procurement process, bids will be evaluated on any social value added to the service. Bidders will need to consider and demonstrate how they can have a positive impact on Wirral's environment and climate. The content and/or recommendations contained within this report are expected to have no direct impact on emissions of carbon dioxide.

## **11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING**

11.1 Community Wealth Building is a people-centred approach to economic growth which reorganises local economies to be fairer and stops wealth flowing out of communities, towns, and cities, and instead places control of this wealth into the hands of local people, communities, businesses, and organisations. This commission will support several of the key outcomes within the strategy.

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## APPENDICES

- Appendix A – Information and Advice Workshop Notes April 2023

## BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Public Health Grant 2022-23
- Wirral Citizen's Advice Bureau Ltd Wirral Council Public Health Services Contract (DN568876)
- Information and Advice Commission
- <http://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/documents/s50080457/PUBLIC%20HEALTH%20INFORMATION%20AND%20ADVICE%20SERVICE%20COMMISSION.pdf>

## TERMS OF REFERENCE

This report is being considered by the Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee in accordance with Section 2.2(c) of its Terms of Reference:

all Public Health functions (in co-ordination with those functions reserved to the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's statutory health functions)

## SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

<b>Council Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee Information and Advice Services Commission	8 <sup>th</sup> September 2021
Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee Information and Advice Services Commission	29 <sup>th</sup> November 2022