

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

RECORD OF DECISION OF THE LEAD MEMBER FOR COMMUNITIES AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Decision Made: 27 February 2023

Review of Commissioning Support from the Voluntary and Community Sector

Issue for Decision

Maidstone Borough Council has traditionally provided grants to community organisations for the provision of support to Maidstone residents. Over time the budget for this provision has had to reduce. There are three community grants in place with Maidstone Mediation, CAB and Involve Kent. In January 2017 the Communities, Housing and Environment Committee agreed to reduce the budget for these services by 5% per annum over a five-year period. The current budget for the three community grants is £163,000.

In November 2021, the Communities, Housing and Environment (CHE) Committee agreed to a three-year grant without reducing the overall budget, thereby providing the same level of funding for the supplier.

Legal advice was that as the Service Level Agreements (SLAs) in place were grant agreements, not contracts, there was no procurement tendering process to follow. However, good practice would be to review the arrangements and undertake market testing on what was available.

Responsibility for the oversight of the grants was moved in early 2022 from the Head of Housing and Regulatory Services to the Head of Policy Communications and Governance (now Director of Strategy, Insight and Governance).

To allow time for review, the agreements were renewed on 1 April 2022 for one year only and are due to expire on 31 March 2023.

This record of decision details the review that has been undertaken, its findings, conclusions and recommendations.

The issues for decision are:

To note the findings of the Review of Commissioning Support from the Voluntary and Community Sector; and

To agree changes to the SLAs in place with Voluntary and Community Sector organisations to provide services that the Council either does not provide itself or to supplement services by providing a more in-depth or greater level of expertise than the Council can provide with its own resources.

Decision Made

1. That the findings of the review of Commissioning Support from the Voluntary and Community Sector be noted.

2. That the SLA with Involve Kent is not renewed.
3. That the funding instead be used to commission proactive engagement with seldom heard groups within the community.

Reasons for Decision

Background

The Council has three Grant Agreements (historically referred to as Service Level Agreements or SLAs, the terms are interchangeable for the purpose of this record of decision) in place with Voluntary and Community Sector organisations to provide services that the Council either does not provide itself or to supplement services by providing a more in-depth or greater level of expertise than the Council can provide with its own resources.

These are summarised in the table below:

| Type | Service provided | Provider |
|-----------------|---|---|
| Mediation | Mediation in neighbour disputes; negotiating between family members in homeless cases; mediation services into schools and anger management courses. | Maidstone Mediation |
| Advice | Debt advice & assistance. Employment advice. Benefit advice incl. universal credit. Assistance with preventing homelessness – mortgage/rent arrears, illegal eviction. Consumer advice. | Maidstone Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) |
| Community Links | Act as a conduit between the Council & voluntary sector; maintain a directory of voluntary groups; lead and develop a range of forums (e.g., older persons; BAME). | Involve Kent |

In January 2017 the Communities, Housing and Environment (CHE) Committee agreed to reduce the budget for these services by 5% per annum over a five-year period. Prior to this decision Maidstone Borough Council had in place 11 SLAs with a total budget of £300,000. The current budget for the three SLAs which remain in place is £163,000.

In November 2021 CHE Committee agreed to a three-year grant without reducing the overall budget, thereby providing the same level of funding for the supplier. However, it was noted in the report that additional advice was required whether the grants could continue to be renewed without opening them to market.

Procurement and Legal advice were sought. Legal advice was that as the SLAs in place were grant agreements, not contracts, there was no procurement tendering process to follow. Good practice, however, would be to review the arrangements, undertake market testing on what was available or advertise the availability of grant funding if changes to the current agreements were to be considered. However, there was no legal requirement to do so.

The breakdown of the budget for the current arrangements by organisation is shown below:

Maidstone Citizens' Advice Bureau £133,100

Involve Kent £21,700

Maidstone Mediation £8,200

Total: £163,000

Responsibility for the oversight of the SLAs was moved in early 2022 from the Head of Housing and Regulatory Services to the Head of Policy Communications and Governance (now Director of Insight Communications and Governance).

In order to allow time for review as outlined above, the agreements were renewed on 1 April 2022 for one year only and are due to expire on 31 March 2023.

Review of Grant Agreements with the Community and Voluntary Sector

A review of the SLAs (Grant Agreements) was undertaken and through an evaluation of the service requirements set out in the SLAs, an assessment of performance monitoring and staff consultation, the scope of the review considered:

- The referral process for accessing services and outcomes achieved
- Current and future requirements for residents
- Comparative offers in other local authority areas
- Market appraisal

Performance Monitoring

All three SLAs have performance monitoring requirements in place. These are detailed at section five within each agreement. Maidstone Mediation and CAB are required to provide monthly performance monitoring reports and Involve Kent are required to provide a 6 monthly monitoring report.

The performance monitoring data should include referral/client numbers, the nature or reason for the referral or contact and the level of assistance provided. Detailed demographic information should also be collected. Additionally, in the case of CAB the number of homeless preventions achieved through advice,

information or assistance should be reported on.

The review included an evaluation of the performance monitoring information currently provided. There were two organisations where gaps were identified in the data that need to be addressed. More detailed information is required from the CAB on the types of enquiries received, the type of advice provided to the client as well as ward level demographic information so that the Council is in a better position to respond to changes in need. Involve do not provide enough detail on the type of support and advice provided. As a result, it was difficult to determine the uptake in the digital service offer detailed in the SLA. Information on the Community Forums being delivered to increase engagement with key communities was included in the monitoring report from Involve but the attendee numbers were very low.

Consultation with Key Services

Key service areas in the Council were contacted to gain an understanding of their experiences of utilising the services of Maidstone Mediation, Citizens' Advice Maidstone and Involve Kent. Feedback was generally very positive, with staff also able to identify areas of improvement.

Citizens' Advice Bureau

The organisation was well used and well liked. Service areas were able to provide detail on the range of advice services utilised to support residents. In terms of areas of improvement, it was highlighted that the expertise required in supporting staff with legal advice for Housing decisions referrals was no longer able to be provided by the CAB, as this was partially funded by Legal Aid. It was also identified that the monthly performance data required more detail on the types of support being provided and to who, in order to understand changing need in the community.

Maidstone Mediation

Feedback on Maidstone Mediation was very positive and showed the service provided was well utilised.

Involve Kent

Feedback on Involve was also very positive. The Housing and Inclusion team detailed its longstanding partnership as part of the hospital discharge contract, Helping You Home. It was clear that the services described were well utilised, but that they did not form part of the Community Services SLA (being considered as part of this review) and are funded separately.

It was clear that the services detailed in the SLA with Involve are not being accessed. This includes digital support for the Community and the provision of a local Directory of Community Services.

Since the SLA with Involve was put in place, the Council has invested in Trinity House, the Council's Community Hub, as a place that can provide digital support to individuals and be utilised by community organisations. This is now operational. This offer could be considered sufficient in meeting the Council's Digital Support needs for residents and therefore it would no longer be necessary

for Involve Kent to provide this going forward.

Accessing support services was a crucial need in the Council's response to the pandemic. It was found that the Connect Well website (delivered by Involve) was no longer Maidstone focused as the organisation now supports a wider geographical area. As a consequence, a repository of Voluntary and Community Groups was developed in house.

The final part of Involve Kent's SLA is to provide Community Forums. Performance data has shown that attendee numbers are low and forums are often now only attended by organisations who do not necessarily represent Maidstone residents. It is therefore recognised that the forums are no longer reaching the communities that they need to and a different approach may be needed.

Public Consultation - What Residents Have Told Us

The Council undertook a Resident Survey in 2022 and asked residents about their confidence in knowing where to go to get information and advice for a variety of topics, which was helpful for understanding local need.

There were 5,027 responses to the survey. There were two areas where less than a third of respondents said they were confident in knowing how to access advice and support:

- Debt advice (35%)
- Struggling with your finances (35%)

This response supports the need for services provided by CAB in particular. It also identifies a need for the wider promotion of the support on offer with staff and residents.

Provision of Similar Services in Other Local Authority Areas

As part of the review a benchmarking exercise was undertaken of the Council's CIPFA nearest neighbours. It was possible to evaluate the arrangements of ten other Councils in terms of the ways in which similar support services for Mediation, Advice and Community Links were provided.

All ten Councils had a version of a Voluntary and Community sector grant scheme in place, and funded services very similar to Maidstone. For example, some of the Councils contacted had in place support services that went beyond Maidstone's current SLA remit. These included foodbanks, homeless charities and community centres. It was found that all ten Councils funded either a local CAB or an organisation formally known as a CAB. Seven of the ten Councils allocated funding to a group similar to Involve but only one other Council funded a mediation service.

Market Testing/Alternative Providers

At the advice of Legal Services, organisations providing Mediation, Advice and Community Links across the voluntary and community sector in Maidstone were mapped and their service offers evaluated. The Council's in-house repository of Voluntary and Community Groups (as detailed above) supported this task.

The findings showed that whilst there are organisations that can provide elements of the services currently delivered by Maidstone Mediation, Involve Kent and CAB, there were no other organisations that could deliver the equivalent, inclusive offers currently provided by Maidstone Mediation, Involve and CAB.

The type of Mediation Services the Council requires are for neighbour disputes and negotiating between family members in homeless cases. This type of support could not be found on offer elsewhere. Involve and CAB are also unique in the variety of support and advice services offered. Involve, for example, provides a unique offer in terms of its join up with local partners, the VCS and hard to reach groups.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall staff are satisfied with the services delivered as part of the SLAs with Maidstone Mediation, CAB and Involve. The consultation findings show that the services are, in the main, appropriately utilised to support residents.

The review identified that whilst services reported very positive working relationships with Involve, the services that were being accessed were not part of the SLA being reviewed. The service requirements outlined in the SLA were no longer required as the Council had had to respond to a change in need (i.e., digital support and access to a directory of community groups). However, it is recognised that engagement with communities remains important.

Whilst the forums have had value, they are not a proactive tool to actively increase engagement or reach those communities who are currently disengaged.

The findings of the review on alternative ways in which to deliver the services (i.e., ways on which other Councils deliver similar services) and the market appraisal has demonstrated that the Council would not need to look for alternative providers.

The review did, however, identify some issues with the current SLAs in place. These have been highlighted under the appropriate sections above. In summary:

CAB

The monthly performance data does not provide the necessary level of detail on referrals which is required as part of the existing SLA and an ongoing need.

Involve

Digital support services and the provision of a directory of Community Groups are no longer required.

Alternatives to Community Forums should be identified to maximise engagement with the wider community in Maidstone, specifically groups where there are low levels of engagement such as new and emerging communities and minority groups.

Maidstone Mediation

No changes recommended.

It is therefore recommended as a result of the review that with regard to the three SLAs the Council has in place, the SLA with Involve should not be extended and will come to an end on 31 March 2023.

Consultation Results and Previous Committee Feedback

This issue was considered by the Communities, Housing and Environment Policy Advisory Committee at its meeting held on 14 February and feedback was provided to the Lead Member in support of the proposals.

Alternatives Considered and Why Rejected

1. That the SLA with Involve Kent is not renewed and that the funding be used to commission proactive engagement with seldom heard groups within the community, for which Involve Kent would be eligible to bid for.
2. That the Council continues to fund Involve Kent in line with the current Service Level Agreement.
3. To make an alternative decision which may include to reduce funding or to identify alternative ways that the funding is used.

It is proposed that the SLA with Involve Kent is not renewed and that the funding be used to commission proactive engagement activities. This is based upon the findings of the review outlined in this record of decision.

Background Papers

None.

I have read and approved the above decision for the reasons (including possible alternative options rejected) as set out above.

Signed:_____

Lead Member for Communities and Public Engagement –
Councillor Lottie Parfitt-Reid

Full details of the report for the decision and any consideration by the relevant Policy Advisory Committee can be found at the following area of the [website](#).

Call-In: Should you be concerned about this decision and wish to call it in, please submit a call-in form signed by any three Members to the Proper Officer by: **5pm on 10 March 2023**