

Report to Cabinet

7 December 2022

Subject:	Grant funding for advice services 2023/24 – 2025/26
Cabinet Member:	Cabinet Member for Adults, Social Care & Health (Health inequalities) Cabinet Member for Children & Education (Reducing child poverty) Cabinet Member for Communities (Development of stronger communities, community cohesion & resilience) Cabinet Member for Housing (Welfare rights)
Director:	Director of Housing Gillian Douglas Director of Public Health Lisa McNally Director of Children’s Services and Education Michael Jarrett
Key Decision:	Yes
Contact Officer:	Heather Chinner Heather_chinner@sandwell.gov.uk

1 Recommendations

- 1.1 That approval is given to allocating the following grants to voluntary organisations with effect from April 2023 until March 2026:

Organisation/service	2023/24 £	2024/25 £	2025/26 £
Citizens Advice Sandwell (generalist open door, debt service and phone service)	585,728	585,728	585,728
Citizens Advice Sandwell (homeless prevention project)	70,000	70,000	70,000



Citizens Advice Sandwell (Resilient Residents/ budgeting support)	25,260	25,260	25,260
Sandwell Consortium (generalist open door & advice in children's centres)	240,305	240,305	240,305
Sandwell Consortium (advice in children's centres)	100,265	100,265	100,265
Smethwick Pakistani Muslim Association (generalist open door)	31,458	31,458	31,458
Brushstrokes (immigration advice)	32,719	32,719	32,719
Total	1,085,735	1,085,735	1,085,735

2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 This report brings together proposals in relation to advice provision and to budgeting support. It seeks approval to a further 3 year period of grant funding, from April 2023 until March 2026, for voluntary sector advice providers and for the budgeting training provided by Citizens Advice Sandwell to frontline staff. Stable funding will enable providers to retain skilled advisers and to continue to work well together to deliver high quality services that respond flexibly to changes in need. This is particularly important as residents are facing increased hardship as a result of the cost of living crisis and the need for free, high quality, community based benefits, debt and budgeting advice is more important than ever.
- 2.2 It is proposed that the following 3 year grants are approved:

Organisation/service	2023/24 £	2024/25 £	2025/26 £
Citizens Advice Sandwell (generalist open door, debt service and phone service)	585,728	585,728	585,728
Citizens Advice Sandwell (homeless prevention project)	70,000	70,000	70,000
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This will be funded by the following budgets:

Budget/funding source	2023/24 £	2024/25 £	2025/26 £
Public health grant	896,235	896,235	896,235
Voluntary sector support budget general fund (children's services)	118,000	118,000	118,000
Housing – Flexible Homeless Support Grant	70,000	70,000	70,000
Voluntary sector support budget general fund (housing)	1,500	1,500	1,500
Total	1,085,735	1,085,735	1,085,735



This compares to funding of £1,115,632 during the period 2020/21 – 2022/23. Savings have been achieved primarily by cancelling the subscription to BetterOff Sandwell (replaced by [Resilient Residents](#)).

Cabinet should note that at this stage there is no clear guidance on the continuation of Public Health Grant beyond 2023/24. The programme would need to be very significantly reappraised should there be a material change to this funding in the future.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

	<p>Best start in life for children and young people</p> <p>In 2021/22 Sandwell Consortium supported 790 families through the children's centres, helping them to gain £1,122,022 in confirmed benefit gains. 20 of these families were in housing crisis.</p> <p>In addition to targeted support through children's centres all advice providers support families.</p>
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	<p>People live well and age well Poverty has a huge impact on every aspect of life, particularly health and well being Provision of free advice increases household income, helps to deal with problem debt and reduces money worries. Outcomes for residents include improved health and wellbeing.</p>
	<p>Strong resilient communities Tackling poverty through free, high quality advice helps to create and maintain strong and resilient communities</p>

4 Context and Key Issues

4.1 The integrated advice system

In 2013 a co-design approach was taken, working with voluntary sector advice providers to develop an integrated advice system. Since then there have been a number of modifications linked to changes in both needs and resources. In 2022 the integrated advice system is made up of the following:

- Specialist welfare rights service delivered by the council's welfare rights team (primarily by phone or on-line)
- Specialist debt service delivered by Citizens Advice Sandwell & Walsall
- Specialist immigration advice delivered by Brushstrokes
- Citizens Advice Sandwell & Walsall: open door generalist advice provision in Smethwick, Oldbury, Tipton and Cradley Heath, telephone and web chat advice service. Work is underway to find locations in West Bromwich and Wednesbury
- Targeted services - a mix of open door and flexible outreach in secular settings by local organisations rooted within the community - delivered by members of Sandwell Consortium and SPMA
- Advice provision in children's centres delivered by Sandwell Consortium
- Budgeting support is the responsibility of all advice workers, using [Resilient Residents](#) as a tool. Training in how to approach budgeting is provided by Citizens Advice Sandwell & Walsall and is available to all frontline staff (for example food bank and food pantry volunteers, family support staff in schools)
- Providers are joined together in a strong and effective [Sandwell Advice Providers Network](#). All funded providers have to comply with SAPN service standards and quality is assured through regular audits by the welfare rights team (Appendix 1)



In total the council invests **£2,132,000 pa** on the integrated advice offer available for residents (£1,043,000 on the in-house welfare rights team and £1.089,000 on voluntary sector advice services).

The role of specialists:

The council's welfare rights team provide quality assurance of welfare benefits work through audits of the work of each provider at least once a year. They also provide regular briefings for advice workers. VCS advisers are able to deliver benefits advice up to mandatory reconsideration level and are expected to refer appeals to the welfare rights team who are experienced in representing clients.

Citizens Advice (debt) provide briefing on debt advice and providers are expected to refer complex debt cases to them.

Brushstrokes (immigration) lead on the provision of immigration advice up to OISC level 3. They convene an immigration advisers support network for OISC level 1 qualified advisers.

Budgeting support

Rather than trying to run a specific budgeting support project, the approach has been to make budgeting everyone's business, by training frontline workers to integrate budgeting support into their work. [Resilient Residents](#) brings together on-line information and support on benefits, employment and budgeting all in one place. It is an increasingly important tool in our approach to face to face budgeting support, ensuring that it is the "go-to" site for information about money saving information (water rates, phone charges, energy).

Training in how to approach budgeting in a sensitive and appropriate way is provided by Citizens Advice Sandwell & Walsall. In recent months training has been delivered to Sandwell Childrens Trust staff, the SHAPE youth forum, Citizens Advice staff and is underway for staff in Warm Spaces and Barnardo's staff. Citizens Advice Sandwell are also supporting a Sandwell forum of frontline staff delivering budgeting support to their clients



Self help

Information is available to enable those residents who are able to help themselves and their families to take action themselves:

Help with debt – [free debt advice on-line](#)

Money saving tips – [budget planners](#)

Wherever possible advice providers are encouraging people to do more so that they can focus services on the most vulnerable.

Working together effectively to tackle poverty in Sandwell - Building Resilient Residents Group

This interagency group focuses on advice, budgeting and employment support, ensuring that services are well joined up, visible and respond to changing needs. Appendix 2 gives more information. This group has lost some momentum as a result of the pandemic and needs to be strengthened to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the cost of living crisis.

The integrated advice system has been grant funded since 2014/15 to deliver a blend of open door and targeted advice to residents. Stable funding and a collaborative approach has led to skilled advice workers and a focus by providers on planning ahead and delivering service improvements.

4.2 Outputs delivered by voluntary sector providers

Numbers of unique clients supported

Organisation	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23 6 months
Citizens Advice	14,657	12,072 including 11,959 phone enquiries	5782 face to face (30%) + 13,683 phone	951 face to face +6,659



			enquiries (70%) 19,465	7,610
Sandwell Consortium open door	4,261	2,260	3,053	2,700
Sandwell Consortium children's centres	648	358	790	514
SPMA	675	328	551	453
Brushstrokes (funding began 2020/21)	-	577	951	849
Total	20,241	15,595	24,810	12,126

Welfare rights advice confirmed gains

Organisation	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22 *	2022/23 6 months
Citizens Advice	£1,813,018	£1,493,994	£2,383,853	£864,106
Sandwell Consortium open door	£4,994,466	£3,399,118	£4,272,101	£1,541,213
Sandwell Consortium children's centres	£1,416,966	£787,779	£1,122,022	£638,204
SPMA	£1,817,332	£2,184,396	£3,411,865	£1,875,537
Brushstrokes (funding began 2020/21)	-	£288,267	£659,804	£242,379
Total	£10,041,782	£8,153,554	£11,849,645	£5,161,439

*These figures include benefit gains and any one -off charitable grants



All providers are funded to carry out generalist advice. Welfare rights forms an important part of their work.

Debt outputs April 2021/22

The Citizens Advice debt advice service is jointly funded by Sandwell Council and by the Money and Pensions Service. SPMA are funded by the Henry Smith Charity. Outputs were as follows:

Organisation	Funder	Total level of client debt 2021/22	Estimated amount of debt written off 2021/22	Amount of debt managed/moved to payment plans 2021/22
Citizens Advice	Sandwell Council	£3,761,760	£276,030	Data not collected routinely - best estimate £51,300
Citizens Advice	Money and Pensions Service	£11,341,211	£976,751	£158,902
SPMA	The Henry Smith Charity	£6,576,432	£3,924,069	
Total		£21,679,403		

Housing advice – support provided to people in housing crisis

Citizens Advice and Brushstrokes receive specific funding from the council to provide housing advice to residents at risk of homelessness.

Organisation	2019/20 No of clients	2020/21 No of clients	2021/22 No of clients
Citizens Advice	3,291	2,506	1,396



Sandwell Consortium open door	17	21	28
Sandwell Consortium children's centres	34	7	20
Brushstrokes	N/A	121	187
SPMA	31	19	8
Total	3,373	2,674	1,639

4.3 Continuous improvement

Advice providers are all committed to service improvement. In 2021/22 their achievements include:

- maintaining face to face services for the most vulnerable
- continuing to support public health by promoting Covid safe behaviour and vaccine take up
- keeping up to date with the range of financial support available to residents, such as Household Support Fund
- Phase 1 of 'i-act' training for advice workers to enable them to promote positive mental health and wellbeing among their clients.

Looking ahead to 2023/24

In 2023/24 the biggest challenge will be the impact of the cost of living crisis on Sandwell residents:

- cost of living crisis affecting everyone
- more people in crisis
- increasing numbers of people with no recourse to public funds
- digital challenges
- impact of Brexit – EUSS, those with pre-settled status will have limited rights
- fewer places where people can get face to face help
- seeing more complex cases, particularly newcomers with very poor language skills
- short term support likely to continue (rather than longer term changes in benefits etc)
- providers helping residents to access a patchwork of grants and one-off charitable payments



- budgeting support essential

Priorities for advice providers will include:

- ensuring that budgeting support is well integrated into advice and that there are appropriate referrals into employment support
- supporting clients to do more for themselves
- showing clients how to use the internet
- referring clients to Sandwell Language Network
- debt advice – encouraging clients to seek help at an early stage
- improved levels of warm referrals into other services such as Community Offer
- re-starting the training programme for advice workers including re-introducing face to face training and network meetings
- ensuring that data about debt and budgeting is captured on monitoring systems by providing additional training for advisers
- re-starting the programme of regular audits
- rolling out phase 2 of the programme of i-act training for advisers.

Challenges facing advice providers:

- difficulties in recruiting volunteers to replace those who left during the pandemic
- difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff
- increasing demand for services
- more time required to provide the right level of support

5 Alternative Options

5.1 Reduce levels of funding to vcs providers – this is not a viable option when demand for services are increasing because of the cost of living crisis.

5.2 Move to contracts - this is highly likely to cause disruption and uncertainty amongst providers just at a time when we need a stable advice offer for our residents to support them through the cost of living crisis. We need providers to continue to focus their energy and creativity on delivery - meeting residents' needs, rather than competing with each other to secure continued funding.



6 Implications

Resources:	There are sufficient resources in the identified budgets to fund the proposed grants. No inflation has been included in the proposed grants.
Legal and Governance:	The recommendation is in line with Sandwell Compact and the VCS Funding Protocol The statutory power to provide grant funding is contained in section 1 of the Localism Act 2011 (general power of competence). Grant funding is not subject to the requirements for competition under the Public Contracts Regulations 2015.
Risk:	Having a range of providers all able to meet the quality standards ensures that risks around capacity and demand are spread across the whole network. The collaborative model of co-designing services ensures that providers work together to find creative ways of responding to changes in the environment facing residents. Recent examples include: maintaining services throughout covid, re-opening face to face services, supporting newcomers (Afghan and Ukrainians), responding to growing demand as a result of the cost of living crisis.
Equality:	The range of services provided ensure that free advice can be accessed by a wide range of communities.
Health and Wellbeing:	Poverty has a huge impact on every aspect of life, particularly health and well being Provision of free advice increases household income, helps to deal with problem debt and reduces money worries. Outcomes for residents include improved health and wellbeing.
Social Value	Volunteers are an integral part of service delivery. Many of the advice workers are Sandwell residents. All providers have a long term commitment to the wellbeing of Sandwell residents
Climate Change:	Provision of budgeting support as part of the advice offer will help people to reduce their energy consumption.



7. Appendices

Appendix 1 Sandwell Advice Providers Network summary of service standards

8. Background Papers

[Sandwell Advice Provider Network Annual Reports](#) 2019/20, 2020/21, 2021/22.





Sandwell Advice Providers Network SUMMARY OF SERVICE STANDARDS Revised November 2021

Introduction

The purpose of these service standards is to ensure that clients receive a high quality service and that there is consistency across different providers so that, regardless of where they get advice, clients receive a similar service. These standards have been developed and adopted by the Sandwell Advice Providers Network. Only those providers meeting the standards will be able to display the Sandwell Advice Providers Network logo. Sandwell council funds a number of advice providers and compliance with these service standards is a condition of funding.

The expectation will be that the interpretation of standards will be proportionate depending on the level of funding and / or the level of service provided (signposting, referral, advice/ advice and assistance, casework)

Accessibility

- The service should be appropriate to the needs of the local / target community
- Awareness of the service – it should be well marketed and promoted
- Equality of access – issues for clients are understood and addressed
- The provider has target maximum waiting times for walk in appointments
- The provider has target maximum waiting times for appointments
- The provider has clearly documented times and procedures for follow up (review/ action/ chase up etc) during casework or follow up work
- Use of the “Sandwell Advice Provider” brand will be dependent upon full compliance with service standards

Seamless Service

- Where a provider cannot provide the service needed by the client, they must inform the client and direct them to an alternative service provider, where available
- Clients should receive a timely service from an appropriate source either as a result of referral or supported/handholding referral. If it is not possible to make a referral then clear information should be provided to signpost the client to the right service.

Well Managed Organisation

- A clear management structure that identifies the roles and responsibilities of individuals in the delivery of the service.



- Providers ensure availability of resources to provide the service when and where it is needed – making best use of available resources at all times
- Effective financial control
- Sufficient levels of Professional Indemnity Insurance
- Performance management systems to enable the provider to keep clear records to identify (i) the demand and need for its service (ii) the types of enquiries it receives (iii) the level of service provided i.e referral, advice/advice and assistance, casework and the outcomes delivered

Well Managed People

- Staff (paid or volunteers) possess the skills and knowledge required to meet the clients' needs and are able to develop these.
- Commitment to equal opportunities
- Appropriate access to basic and specialist advice training and continuous development are provided for paid staff and volunteers.
- Appropriate access to customer care training and development are provided for paid staff and volunteers
- Appropriate qualified and experienced support and specialist supervision in advice work is provided to all paid staff and volunteers

Quality Service and Quality Assurance

- A clear commitment to high quality services and regular review of performance.
- Processes and procedures to ensure clients get advice from the most appropriate source taking account of the knowledge and skills of staff – so that the client feels confident in and gets the appropriate level of advice
- In the case of welfare rights advice, the welfare rights team will assess capability and at least one advice worker assessed as good or excellent will be available at each location
- Training - each year all advice workers must attend a minimum of:
 - 1 welfare rights course (benefit calculation refresher or new adviser training),
 - 1 council tax reduction scheme (benefit calculation refresher or new adviser training),
 - and at least 2 topic based network sessions
 - plus appropriate on-line training.

Training records will form part of the audit process.

- Processes and procedures in place to underpin, monitor and review the delivery of quality services for the client.
- Quality is maintained where part of the service is delivered by someone else.
- There is a clear, transparent customer satisfaction, complaints & compliments process
- Client's feedback is encouraged and there is opportunity to participate in the development of the advice services provided.

Well Managed Service

- Processes and procedures that ensure an effective and efficient service to their clients



- Client information and case files are well organised
- Records are held on an appropriate case recording software system
- Independent audit/review of quality of work and appropriate follow-up.
- Feedback process for service and performance reviews for staff and volunteers
- Agreement to independent audit by Sandwell Council as the funding body

Meeting Client Needs

- Clients receive timely and accurate advice and information
- Clients receive advice and information relevant to their needs
- Service is confidential – the provider has a clear confidentiality policy with all exceptions made clear.
- Advice is independent and impartial – conflict of interest policies and procedures are in place
- Client records documenting the needs, advice given and the actions to be taken next and by whom are kept and made available to the client
- Clients are informed where advice given includes action that the organisation may not be able to undertake and the reason.
- Advice is provided at **no cost/ free of charge**
- Clients are informed of any potential costs such as those arising from referrals to other agencies that may charge.
- Clients are kept fully informed about the progress of a case, including changes, actions, actions required by them, outcomes achieved and closure of case
- Clients will receive clear accurate and timely written records of any advice and services
- Clients are entitled to confidentiality, privacy and fair treatment

Client Consent and Client Records

- Ensure that client consent forms include a privacy notice compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018
- Obtain clients specific consent to act on their behalf/as an 'advocate' – signed & dated at time of contact
- Obtain clients consent to pass information to other organisations
- Up to date accurate records kept for all client interventions
- A documented process for how client records are stored and maintained including letters and third party correspondence
- Keeping client records for the appropriate period of time after the case is closed

Helping Clients to meet their own needs and build their Financial Resilience

- Ensure that time is spent discussing with each client how they could be supported to help themselves
- Promote Resilient Residents as a source of information for clients
- Help with budgeting **must** form part of the advice offer
- Provide warm referrals to other support such as ESOL classes, help getting on-line, employment support,

Engagement in and Commitment to Sandwell Advice Providers Network



- Commitment to attending & supporting
- Commitment to seeking additional funding
- Sharing training and development opportunities
- Sharing learning from practice
- Continuous improvement - joined up improvement plans

Quality Standardisation Across Service Providers

- Opening hours/contact details of other services available across the network
- The same service from all providers advertised through logos
- Common terminology that describes the different levels of service provided

Signposting

This is when a client attends an advice outlet with an enquiry or issue that can be best dealt with by another agency and is given information, for example a leaflet, about that service. The client is not helped in any other way to access the agency

Referrals.

This is when a client attends an advice outlet with an enquiry that could be best dealt with by another organisation, for example, a client comes in with a housing enquiry and is referred to Shelter.

The adviser actively helps the client to access Shelter by phoning or emailing the clients details to Shelter and in some cases by arranging the appointment for the client.

Advice/ Advice and Assistance.

This is where a client is given advice regarding their enquiry, for example, the client wishes to know if they are receiving the correct amount of benefit. This is checked and if correct the client leaves or, if it is discovered that they are entitled to an increase in their benefit entitlement, the adviser assists the client to complete the form for claiming.

Casework.

This is where the adviser takes over the client's case, the client signs a consent form, (not to be confused with the data protection consent form) making the advice agency their agent to act on their behalf. All letters are sent out on letter headed paper with responses being sent back to the advice agency who will keep the client informed of the progress of the case.

