

Policy and Sustainability Committee

10.00am, Tuesday, 9 January 2024

Advice Shop Service Delivery Update

Executive/routine
Wards

Routine
All

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 Policy and Sustainability Committee is asked to note this update on the Advice Shop, including the actions underway to improve service delivery.

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Advice Shop Service Delivery Update

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This report responds to the request from the Council for details on the performance of the Advice Shop and notes the steps being taken to improve accessibility to enable as many people as possible to be assisted with welfare benefit and debt matters.

3. Background

- 3.1 The Advice Shop provides an independent, free information and advice service for welfare benefit and debt matters to Edinburgh's citizens. The purpose of the service is to prevent and alleviate poverty through maximising income, addressing personal debt and engaging customers with support services.
- 3.2 The COVID-19 pandemic had significant impact on all advice providers in Edinburgh. A combination of increased demand, short-term reduced accessibility, and long-term channel shifts from telephone to email access have impacted service delivery.
- 3.3 On 28 September 2023, the Council considered the [Annual Performance Report 2023/24](#). The Council [requested](#) an urgent report to the Policy and Sustainability Committee in two cycles which sets out the details behind the significant fall in the number of residents supported through the Advice Shop, and the actions that have been taken, particularly around recruitment and retention to improve performance, including benchmarking of staff pay in the contact centre.

4 Main report

Summary of Performance

- 4.1 Appendix 1 provides a summary of the performance of the Advice Shop since 2019/20, including the service's key performance indicators (KPIs). The KPIs are measured and monitored on a monthly basis.

Number of People Supported

- 4.2 The information presented to the Council in the Annual Performance Report 2022/23 showed the number of people supported with welfare rights queries by the Advice Shop in 2022/23 as 3,075, against the target of 5,400. This was lower than in the previous two financial years.
- 4.3 A major factor which has impacted on performance is the switch from having two historic case management systems to a single system for the whole Advice Shop. This took place gradually from Autumn 2022 to Spring 2023 and it has taken some time to fully utilise the recording and reporting capabilities of the new system. However, the system is now fully embedded and therefore the data for 2023/24 will more accurately reflect the number of cases dealt with by the Advice Shop.
- 4.4 In addition, as noted in the background section, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant channel shift. Where historically the Advice Shop was contacted by telephone, the service is now receiving a greater number of cases by email. This is changing the way in which the service operates and impacted on service performance in 2022/23. The impact of this is summarised in paragraph 4.10.
- 4.5 Reflecting the recruitment and retention challenges which the Council has been experiencing in recent years, the Advice Shop has also faced challenges. To address this, a number of posts that were funded on a fixed term basis have now been made permanent so that all posts across the service will become permanent in the next few months. This has increased staff retention in 2023/24.

Debt Advice

- 4.6 During COVID-19, measures were put in place to protect debtors by preventing creditors from pursuing actions to recover debt. This meant that demand for debt advice reduced significantly. This demand has now gradually built up, as mitigation measures have been removed and people in debt are now subject to recovery action that was previously paused.
- 4.7 Reflecting these changes, the last 12 months have seen an increase in demand for debt advice and the service is now experiencing the highest number of new referrals for several years. This is being reflected across the sector.

Welfare Rights advice provision in Edinburgh

- 4.8 The data in table 1 of Appendix 1 shows the number of new clients assisted by the service each year since 2018/19, together with the total number of people who were assisted in each year. The reduction in volume reflects the shift in the channel through which people seek advice and the staffing challenges faced by the service.
- 4.9 In the initial period following the implementation of COVID measures, demand for advice grew as people sought to understand their entitlements where their circumstances changed. This increase was significant, as at that time, access to the service became restricted due to moving all contact to a telephone messaging system and email access.
- 4.10 The data shows that the number of email enquiries grew rapidly. One consequence of this is that fewer client details are recorded, as communication is often by email only and people do not need to give their full details, in order to receive advice and

therefore this information cannot be recorded. Officers do try to obtain details in order to keep a record of cases, however often enquirers prefer to remain anonymous.

- 4.11 There was no face-to-face advice provision for two years from March 2020, until the drop-in at 249 High Street recommenced in March 2022. There are now, on average, 80 people accessing advice provision face-to-face each month, this is a return to pre pandemic levels and is likely to be result of awareness that the service is now available again. However, recording client details at drop-in visits has only been effective since September 2023, when a revised process was put in place to help reflect volume of work undertaken.
- 4.12 Further information on how the delivery of welfare rights in Edinburgh has been affected by national factors over the last four years is provided at Appendix 2.

Advice Line

- 4.13 Prior to COVID-19, the Advice Line was operated by a team of four Customer Service Advisors (CSAs), supported by a team leader who was also responsible for the debt advice team. The fixed term nature of the role made recruitment and retention challenging.
- 4.14 Staff turnover has continued to be a major issue for the Advice Line team. Advisors from all sections of the Advice Shop service are covering this role, meaning that there has been a reduction in the number of new clients who can be supported by the service at times.
- 4.15 During 2023, the operating hours of the Advice Line reduced to 15 hours per week (9am to 1pm Monday, Wednesday, Thursday; and 10am to 1pm on Tuesdays. The Advice Line is closed on a Friday).
- 4.16 There are three dedicated CSAs managing calls when the line is open, with assistance from colleagues at busy times. A new CSA is expected to be in post shortly, bringing capacity back to pre-COVID levels.
- 4.17 From January 2024, it is anticipated that the Advice Line opening times will increase. Due to the increase in demand by email, the service will continue to monitor the volume of calls through the Advice Line and will adjust the service accordingly to meet service user needs more effectively.
- 4.18 Promotional activities are also underway to ensure that during the current opening times, the number of calls is maximised. Communications focus on encouraging people to call for a benefit check to identify entitlements and promoting the service through social media and through the Warm and Welcoming initiative.
- 4.19 The Advice Shop delivered three sessions to customer facing staff from a range of Council services during 'Talk Money Week' from 6 November 2023. These sessions were well received and are part of a range of sessions and training planned to increase awareness of money advice for frontline staff across the Council.

Homelessness Prevention Activity

- 4.20 In 2021, new provision to prevent and alleviate homelessness was developed within the Advice Shop. The Multi-Disciplinary Team was created to work closely with Council tenants to support those with significant rent arrears who faced eviction.

- 4.21 In addition, a team of Income Maximisation officers was created to work with people who had presented to the Council as homeless, so that benefit entitlement could be maximised and assistance provided, to enable them to navigate their way through the welfare benefit system, in preparation for accessing a permanent tenancy.
- 4.22 Both elements of the service have been successful in providing positive options for clients, where a number of potential evictions have been avoided, as well as savings for the Council in terms of rental income and reduced time being spent in temporary accommodation.
- 4.23 These initiatives now form part of the permanent offer within the Advice Shop.
- 4.24 In addition, an Income Maximisation Development Officer has been proactively building capacity across Council teams and voluntary sector services, to identify issues regarding benefit entitlements and accessibility to services. A summary of the outcomes of these services is included at Appendix 1.

5 Next Steps

- 5.1 The service is part of the ongoing organisational review within the Housing and Homelessness Service. This has been through the engagement phase of the Council's Managing Change policy, and once a draft structure has been finalised, this will work through the consultation phase. Benchmarking of grades will be undertaken through this process.
- 5.2 Services will continue to be monitored to ensure that resources are targeted to meet demand. Promotional activities will continue and service provision in localities will be increased, working closely with more community-based services to promote access, especially for those experiencing housing-related issues.
- 5.3 The service will continue to develop its relationships with other advice providers and key stakeholders such as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Social Security Scotland (SSS), housing providers and NHS Lothian, to ensure that the integrated advice provision that the city needs – as identified through the Edinburgh Partnership Advice Review.

6 Financial impact

- 6.1 The cost of the Advice Shop is met from the Council's revenue budget. Recognising the recruitment and retention challenges experienced by the service, action has been taken to increase the number of permanent positions within the Advice Shop.
- 6.2 Table 3 (Appendix 1) shows the financial gains achieved for service users in recent years. A significant proportion of this income is actually payment for rent for Council tenants and Council Tax Reduction both of which bring income into the Council.
- 6.3 There are no known financial risks associated with Advice Shop activity.

7 Equality and Poverty Impact

- 7.1 An Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) was completed and found positive impacts from the projects contained within the dashboard relating to equality, health and wellbeing and human rights and economic impacts.

8 Climate and Nature Emergency Implications

- 8.1 As a public body, the Council has statutory duties relating to climate emissions and biodiversity. The Council

“must, in exercising its functions, act in the way best calculated to contribute to the delivery of emissions reduction targets”

(Climate Change (Emissions Reductions Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019), and

“in exercising any functions, to further the conservation of biodiversity so far as it is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions”

(Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004)

- 8.2 The City of Edinburgh Council declared a Climate Emergency in 2019 and committed to work towards a target of net zero emissions by 2030 for both city and corporate emissions and embedded this as a core priority of the Council Business Plan 2023-27. The Council also declared a Nature Emergency in 2023.

Environmental Impacts

- 8.3 There are no environmental impacts as a direct result of this report.

9 Risk, policy, compliance, governance and community impact

- 9.1 Advice Shop services prevent and alleviate poverty through maximising income and addressing personal debt and engaging customers with support services, supporting the Council's objective to end poverty in the city.

10 Background reading/external references

- 10.1 Review of Advice Services in Edinburgh Final Report [review-of-welfare-rights-and-debt-advice-in-edinburgh- \(edinburghpartnership.scot\)](https://www.edinburghpartnership.scot/review-of-welfare-rights-and-debt-advice-in-edinburgh-)
- 10.2 Edinburgh Poverty Commission Report: A Just Capital [20200930 EPC FinalReport AJustCapital.pdf \(edinburghpovertycommission.org.uk\)](https://www.edinburghpovertycommission.org.uk/20200930_EPC_FinalReport_AJustCapital.pdf)

11 Appendices

Appendix 1 – Outputs and Outcomes Data

Appendix 2 – Welfare Rights operating context

Appendix 1 – Outputs and Outcomes Data

Table 1: Debt and Welfare Rights outputs; source CEC Internal Data

	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24*
Debt	297	190	109	101	135	92
Welfare Rights						
- new clients	2,267	1,951	1,751	1,757	1,399	880
- all clients	4,711	4,686	5,752	3,720	3,079	1,934
Email enquiries	650	680	4,938	3,912	4,387	2,200
Advice Line calls						
- received	13,125	11,221	7,186	8,011	6,664	2,558
- answered	8,984	9,509	5,618	5,978	4,863	2,131

*6 months

Table 2: Homelessness Prevention outcomes; source CEC Internal Data

	2022-23	2023-24*
The no. of households who continue to sustain their tenancy, avoiding temporary accommodation measured at point of case closure (Multi-Disciplinary Team)	41	21
The no. of households supported to move out of temporary accommodation more quickly (Income Maximisation)	42	22
Number of training sessions delivered by Income Maximisation Capacity Building Officer	99 sessions to 751 staff	39 sessions to 480 staff

*6 months

Table 3: Financial Gains for Clients and Client Debt Levels; source CEC Internal Data

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24*
DEBT					
New Debt	£1,696,418	£592,581	£581,788	£1,175,629	£1,061,385
Gains	£441,066	£503,924	£238,894	£206,963	£138,503
WELFARE RIGHTS					
Gains	£11,497,227	£8,524,682	£6,997,030	£6,518,972	£2,128,026

*6 months

Appendix 2 - Welfare Rights operating context

- 1 Personal Independence Payments (PIP) have been replaced by the Adult Disability payment, which is administered by Social Security Scotland (SSS). To deliver this, SSS has employed 20 staff in Edinburgh which has resulted in a reduction in PIP-related casework, as the high volume of reviews that the service previously dealt with for this benefit has almost ceased.
- 2 The continued growth in the number of Universal Credit claimants triggered by the pandemic and the end of new claims for 'legacy benefits', has reduced the financial gains available for many people. This has therefore had an impact on the financial gains recorded for advice agencies, including the Advice Shop.
- 3 The number of benefit claims has reduced, with the introduction of Universal Credit, there are fewer Housing Benefit and Employment Support Allowance claims being progressed.
- 4 Several advice providers have reported that casework has become more time-consuming since the pandemic. The Advice Shop has seen an increase in time spent per client of around 10%.
- 5 This is, in part, explained by the service taking greater responsibility for assisting clients through a more holistic provision, but is also due in part to the complex nature of clients' social issues which impact on their ability to engage effectively with benefit processes and requirements with officers spending an average of 140 minutes on casework with each client.
- 6 In addition, in 2022/23, the European Union Settled Status programme contributed to an increase in enquiries related to benefit entitlement. This has now been resolved and therefore there are few, if any, new cases being received.