



Subject:	Funding Request from Belfast Advice Group
Date:	6 th February 2024
Reporting Officer:	David Sales, Strategic Director of City Services
Contact Officer:	Nicola Lane, Neighbourhood Services Manager Margaret Higgins, Lead Officer, Community Provision

Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.	
Insert number	<input type="text" value="3"/>
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Information relating to any individual2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime	
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sometime in the future	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues								
1.1	<p>The main purpose of this report is;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To provide further detail in relation to the requests outlined in correspondence received from the Belfast Advice Group on 20th December '23 and the group's presentation to February committee. 								
2.0	Recommendation								
2.1	<p>Members are asked;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To note the detail of the report and the information provided by Belfast Advice Group at February committee and To advise if they wish to refer this request to SP&R for consideration 								
3.0	Main Report								
	Background information								
3.1	Belfast Advice Group will deliver a presentation to the February committee meeting in support of their request and to outline the services that they provide.								
3.2	<p>Members will be aware that Council provides significant funding for advice services through the Community Support Programme (CSP) (funded by Department for Communities - DfC) and through direct council funding. In the last financial year, over £1.5 million was provided to support the following services across Belfast.</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Advice Grant</th> <th>Welfare Reform Mitigation</th> <th>Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service</th> <th>Total Advice Payment</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>£999,657</td> <td>£234,779</td> <td>£349,715</td> <td>£1,584,151</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Advice Grant	Welfare Reform Mitigation	Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service	Total Advice Payment	£999,657	£234,779	£349,715	£1,584,151
Advice Grant	Welfare Reform Mitigation	Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service	Total Advice Payment						
£999,657	£234,779	£349,715	£1,584,151						
3.3	Support is currently provided through funding agreements to five area consortiums to deliver generalist advice services across all geographies within the city.								
3.4	In November 2012, these groupings came together to establish the Belfast Advice Group (BAG) to develop specialist advice services. BAG submitted a proposal to Belfast City Council to support the Citywide Tribunal Service (BCTS) and that service has been supported primarily through Belfast City Council funding on an annual basis since 2012. As previously reported, this funding has been provided through in year awards drawn from underspends.								
3.5	<p>The Belfast Advice Group wrote to Council on 20th December to request additional funding for generalist advice, provide an update on current financial support for the Citywide Tribunal Service and request funding for 24/25 for the service. A copy of the letter is provided in Appendix 1. Members were advised of the correspondence at the January Committee meeting and had asked for the group to deliver a presentation. In the interim, Officers have considered the implications of these requests and have outlined relevant information in relation to each below.</p> <p><u>Request from BAG - Generalist Advice Provision</u></p>								

<p>3.6</p>	<p>1. Council commit to covering the shortfall in funding to ensure that salary uplifts that were provided to staff can be maintained for 23/24 and going forward.</p> <p>These salary uplifts were provided to staff in 21/22 through an additional award in the CSP LoO. DfC provided funding to enable maintenance of this uplifted salary payment in 22/23 and 23/24 and these awards have been/are being passed on to advice organisations. DfC have indicated that it is likely that this uplift will be maintained in the 24/25 CSP LoO, although there is no confirmation of this. It is recommended that Council agree to the request to ensure the uplift is maintained since it is likely that this cost will be covered through CSP funding from DfC. However, members should note that no additional uplifts have been provided by DfC since 2021, funds are only available to maintain salaries at the 21/22 level.</p>
<p>3.7</p>	<p>2. Council build annual cost of living increases into funding awards for advice services</p> <p>Members should note that for the 24/25 year there is no additional budget to enhance generalist advice service provision and that Council does not apply cost of living increases to other annual funding awards. The initial cost of living increase that was applied by DfC in 21/22 was 7% and a 2% uplift was applied thereafter.</p> <p>BAG has indicated that they will seek an overall annual increase of 2-3% for all areas of costs, including those listed in point 3 below. This uplift will relate to the £999,657 provided for generalist advice, which would be a cost of between £19,993 and £29,989 per annum for all costs.</p>
<p>3.8</p>	<p>3. Council increase the Generalist advice grant to enhance support for management costs, running costs and overheads on an annual basis, going forward.</p> <p>The comments detailed above in relation to the overall request to increase awards on an annual basis by 2/3% also apply to this request.</p> <p>Members will recall that council recently completed an independent review of Advice Services. This report outlined some actions to ensure the provision of consistent, quality advice across the city. Some of these recommendations have associated cost considerations, for example, increased responsibilities placed on lead partners and enhanced requirements for relevant software licences. These are additional costs that are not covered within current funding awards.</p>
<p>3.9</p>	<p><u>Request from BAG - Citywide Tribunal Service</u></p> <p>4. Council fund the service at the sum of £269,063 for 24/25</p> <p>Council receives an annual request for funding of the BCTS. DfC have advised that it is likely that they will make an allocation of £70,400 from CSP in 24/25, this would mean a BCC contribution of £198,663.</p> <p>Members have also asked that officers arrange a further meeting with DfC and other relevant government departments including DoH and TEO. Officers are arranging this meeting but it is worth noting that;</p>

- DfC are nearing completion of a regional review of advice services and aim to have proposals ready for public consultation by late Spring 24, this will include a position on appeals services.
 - DfC have reiterated on several occasions that they will not provide additional funding for Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service. Appeals services are delivered as part of the overall advice funding programme in all other council areas and the DfC position is the same for Belfast.
5. That the underspend in relation to the 23/24 award for BCTS is carried over into 24/25 thus reducing the 'ask' for 24/25 from £269,063 to £156,516.

Members should note that underspends are considered within year, so this request cannot be facilitated.

Financial and Resource Implications

Members should note that for the 24/25 year there is no additional budget to enhance generalist advice service provision beyond the agreed level of £999,657. The anticipated available budget for BCTS is £70,400 from DfC, but council is not yet in receipt of a Letter of Offer for 24/25. Any additional funding awards for 24/25 and future years will have to be brought to SP&R for consideration.

In relation to the request for 24/25 funding to the BCTS, traditionally, this has been requested on an annual basis by BAG and is awarded from underspends within year. The request from BAG amounts to:

- Annual 2/3% uplift (approx. £20,000 - £30,000)
- Annual funding for BCTS - £198,663 Council contribution for 24/25

Members may wish to consider the requests for funding from BAG, separately as above or in totality.

Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

Belfast City Council's agreement for the provision of this service will seek to ensure that the service is provided on an equal basis to all communities across the city, including section 75 groups and areas of rural need.

The Review of Advice Services identified the need to develop a new funding model that more effectively targets need. This model will be developed in 24/26 and will be screened for equality and rural needs implications.

Council does not have a policy on implementing annual inflationary increases to funding agreements. A decision to introduce an increase for one funding agreement is likely to set a precedent and have an impact on other funding programmes.

4.0	Appendices - Documents Attached
4.1	Appendix 1 - Correspondence from G Tubritt on behalf of Belfast Advice Group