

Agenda Item 7 response from Citizens Advice West Oxfordshire

Thank you for giving Citizens Advice West Oxfordshire the opportunity to address the cabinet today. The points I would like to make are related to Item 7 on the Agenda: 'Future Funding of Homeless Pathway Supported Housing' and the proposal to withdraw funding to Citizens Advice West Oxfordshire for housing and debt advice with effect from 1st April 2017.

We appreciate the council is facing difficult decisions with competing priorities for funding, but would respectfully ask that the decision to terminate the grant to Citizens Advice is delayed until a full assessment of the resulting financial impact on the council is undertaken.

Whilst considering this item, we would ask you to note the following:

Our service was commissioned by the Council in 2003 specifically to provide homelessness prevention advice and to help reduce the growing number of people presenting at the council as homeless or potentially homeless. The council knew that people were not seeking advice from them before asking to be placed on the homelessness register and so were keen to commission an independent service that residents would trust and that could form one of the flagship services in its homelessness prevention strategy. The service has helped over 1500 families and its success can be seen in the reducing numbers of people presenting at the council as homeless or potentially homeless.

The council provides £24,000pa to CA not the £32,000 as stated in the paper. We employ a legally qualified specialist housing and debt adviser on a salary of £25,000 (far less than the £45,000pa mentioned in the paper). The small amount of remaining funding goes on the staff members pension, travel costs etc. and on meeting quality controls set by the Financial Conducts Authority. We are the only locally based free debt advice agency in West Oxfordshire authorised by the Financial Conducts Authority to deliver debt advice and we have to achieve exacting standards to maintain this authorisation.

Withdrawal of this funding would mean the loss of a valuable and trusted service and the services of a highly qualified expert who works closely with the council sharing office space and expertise. This level of expert advice could not be replicated by our volunteer generalist advisers as proposed in the paper as they have neither the breadth of knowledge nor experience to offer such complex advice.

Last year we supported 102 households with homelessness prevention advice. In quarter 4 alone, 17 households sought advice on possession actions. Following our advice not one of these households presented at the council as potentially homeless. Research by Shelter has shown that the cost to councils of dealing with people who present as homeless or potentially homeless can cost councils as much as £7500 per family. Based on these figures, withdrawal of this service has the potential to add significant additional costs to the council's homelessness budget.

We therefore ask the cabinet to delay a decision to withdraw funding from Citizens Advice while a full analysis is undertaken of the benefits to the council of this service and the financial impact to the council of ceasing this service.