

## ASSEMBLY

23 FEBRUARY 2011

### REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR OF CUSTOMER SERVICES

<b>Petition regarding Advice Centre, Bastable Avenue, Barking</b>	<b>For Decision</b>
<p><b>Summary:</b></p> <p>The Council has received a petition containing 288 signatures and addresses requesting that the Council 'save Thames Side Community Support', an advice centre based in Bastable Avenue, Barking. In accordance with the Council's procedures for petitions, the lead petitioner Ms M Woolston, has been invited to the meeting of the Assembly to present the petition and answer any questions members may have to help them respond to the petition. The relevant Cabinet Member has also been invited to respond to the petition.</p> <p>Residents are concerned that a lack of funding is causing the advice centre on Bastable Avenue to close. A petition has been completed seeking funding for the centre, and forwarded to the Council by Margaret Hodge MP.</p> <p>The petition states:-</p> <p><b><i>'Lack of funding is causing us to close: the advice centre has been on the estate for 25 years helping local people and is needed more than ever. This will be sent to Margaret Hodge MP. We, the undersigned, are concerned citizens who urge our leaders to act now to Save Thames Side Community Support'</i></b></p> <p>The Council recognises the valuable contribution made by the advice centre to the local community for many years. However, in 2010 the Council commissioned a Community Legal Advice Centre (CLAC) which has significantly increased the scale and quality of general and legal advice across the borough, including outreach provision. This model is designed to deliver better value for money in the context of limited resources. The Council is unable to provide financial support for advice services over and above this borough-wide service, particularly since the savings required arising from the cuts imposed by the Coalition Government.</p> <p>However, the Council does provide support to the Council for Voluntary Service which in turn provides advice and support to local voluntary and community organisations. The advice centre is recommended to use this support to help it in developing a business plan and making applications for funding elsewhere.</p> <p><b>Wards Affected:</b> Thames</p>	
<p><b>Implications:</b></p>	

**Comments of the Chief Financial Officer:**

There are no specific financial implications with regard to this Petition report.

In the current financial climate, caused by significant cuts in funding to local councils by the Coalition Government, it is essential that decisions are made which offer the greatest value for money to local residents across the borough. Having entered into a contract with the CLAC to provide generalist and specialist advice services across the borough, funds are not available to provide local advice services in addition.

**Comments of the Legal Partner:**

There are no specific legal implications associated with this report.

The Council's petition scheme is referred to in the Constitution and set out in detail on the Council's website.

Under the Council's petition scheme petitioners are entitled to a debate at full Assembly if the petition has the support of 100 or more signatures from different addresses in the borough. The report confirms that 288 signatures from separate addresses have been received which therefore triggers the requirement for a debate at Assembly.

Members will note that if the petitioners are not satisfied by the response of members at the Assembly meeting they have a right to have the matter referred to the appropriate Select Committee as determined by the Designated Scrutiny Officer. In this instance that would be the Safer and Stronger Select Committee.

**Options appraisal:**

When the decision to tender for the CLAC service was taken, this was identified as the best option available since it would deliver increased quality and geographical coverage of advice services across the borough, and would be more affordable for the borough through partnership working with the Legal Services Commission.

In the current financial climate, there are no additional funds available which could be used to support separate advice services on the Thames View estate over and above those provided by the CLAC. Financial support by the Council for both the CLAC and separate provision on the Thames View estate is therefore not an option.

**Recommendations:**

The Assembly is asked to agree:

- (i) To acknowledge the concerns of the residents;
- (ii) To note the work of the Community Legal Advice Centre in providing generalist and specialist advice services across the borough;
- (iii) To note that, due to the current financial climate, it is not possible for the Council to fund separate local advice services in addition to borough-wide provision by the Community Legal Advice Centre.

<b>Reasons:</b>		
To inform Assembly of the wider context to the request for financial support for Thames Side Community Support.		
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## 1. Background

- 1.1 In previous years the Council provided funding (£12,000 revenue funding per annum) to the Thames View Advice Centre to support the delivery of advice services on the Thames View estate.
- 1.2 In December 2008 the Executive, in a report which gained approval for the programme of voluntary sector grants and commissions for the following year, was informed that

*‘...the Citizen’s Advice Bureau, the Gascoigne Aid and Advice Centre and Thameside Community Support currently provide generalist advice services that will in future be commissioned through a tendering process to be run by the Council working in partnership with the Legal Services Commission.*

A further report, which gained approval for the grants and commissioning programme for 2010/11 in February 2010, noted that:

*‘The Executive was notified on 16 December 2008 that an integrated social welfare law service would be commissioned before 2012 (see minute number 104, paragraph 1.3). This commissioning process is being led by the Legal Services Commission, though it has not been completed yet. It is envisaged that the new law service (the Community Legal Advice Centre – “CLAC”) will begin delivering services from 1 April 2010. As a consequence, the current contracts with the Citizens Advice Bureau, Thames View Advice Centre and Catch 22 (in the Gascoigne Ward) have been extended for further six months from October 2009 – March 2010’.*

- 1.3 Through partnership working with the Legal Services Commission, the Community Legal Advice Centre has brought additional capacity and services to the borough which were previously unavailable. In addition to a full generalist advice service, specialist legal advice is available on the following subjects:

- Family issues
- Employment
- Housing

- Welfare benefits
- Debt
- Community care

- 1.4 The plans to replace provision in Thames and Gascoigne with the new Community Legal Advice Centre have therefore been clearly signalled in advance, and discussed in monitoring meetings with Thames Side Community Support.
- 1.5 The advertisement of the Community Legal Advice Centre commission was widely publicised, and local advice organisations were briefed that consortium bids would be welcome. There was therefore the opportunity for smaller local providers to join with larger providers in a consortium bid for the contract. In the event, the commission was won by the Citizens Advice Bureau working in partnership with Edwards Duthie solicitors.
- 1.6 The Community Legal Advice Centre opened to the public in May 2010. Based in Ripple Road, Barking, the Centre is open 5 days a week, with evening opening on Wednesdays: additionally, there is Saturday opening every other week. The Centre also provides outreach sessions at 6 venues around the borough. One of these is the Sue Bramley Children's Centre on Bastable Avenue, fortnightly, on Tuesday afternoons.
- 1.7 The Community Legal Advice Centre (CLAC) has been highly successful, exceeding early targets for the provision of advice services to local people.
- 1.8 The generalist advice team dealt with 1,530 unique client queries in the three months from August to October 2010. This is an average for the second quarter of 478, against a target of 467, per month. 131 of these were from the Thames Ward, representing 8.6% of the total for the borough (Thames ward residents make up 5.8% of the borough population). The specialist advice team dealt with 410 unique client queries in the three months from August to October 2010. Of these there is ward information available for 174. 8 of the 174 client queries were from the Thames Ward, representing 4.6% of the total.
- 1.9 In view of the success of the CLAC in reaching local people across the whole of the borough, including those living in Thames ward, and in the context of limited financial resources it is not possible for the Council to provide any further financial support to Thames Side Community Support to provide an advice service in the area. However, the Council does fund the Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) to support local voluntary and community organisations: the CVS will be able to advise local groups such as this on alternative sources of funding, and how to develop fundraising applications and business plans.

## 2. Other Implications

- 2.1 Customer Impact, Safeguarding Children and Adults** In light of the economic and social profile of the residents of the borough of Barking and Dagenham, it is essential that local people have access to good quality advice services, particularly with reference to employment, welfare benefits and debt advice. The move to commission the CLAC was informed by the aim of ensuring that access to quality advice services was provided to residents throughout the borough, whereas previously services were concentrated in a few areas.

Older people, people with disabilities and women with young children are more likely to find it difficult to travel out of the immediate area in which they live in order to access services. The risk that they might not access advice services at the CLAC in Ripple Road, Barking, is mitigated by:

- Improved transport links (particularly the East London Transit) between the Thames View estate and central Barking
- The provision of regular outreach sessions at the Sue Bramley Centre

### **3. Background Papers Used in the Preparation of the Report:**

Petition submitted by Ms Woolston