

CITIZENS ADVICE WOKING – APPLICATION FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Executive Summary

Citizens Advice Woking seeks to provide the advice people need for the problems they face and improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives. The Centre holds the Advice Quality Standard (AQS) quality mark at General Help with Casework in Welfare Benefits and Debt, and Specialist level in Housing. Core activities are 'individual' focused and aim to deliver advice and support to the community of Woking. The Centre also operates the successful Financial Capability Project, funded primarily by Woking Borough Council, a Court helpdesk and outreach services.

The Centre has approached Woking Borough Council with a request for continued financial support in the coming year. The request totals £239,500, broken down into the core service (£218,000), the financial capability project (£11,500) and the Guildford County Court Help Desk (£10,000). In addition it is proposed that the Council continues to cover the service charge of the offices in Provincial House (circa £53,000).

The effects of Covid-19 on the organisation and its users have been severe, with a small number of staff working in the office and co-ordinating the remaining staff and volunteers working remotely. The services have continued to be provided by telephone and email, although the intention is to return to face to face appointments once the pandemic has passed. Citizens Advice Woking has set out the adverse impact on its users due to the altered working arrangements; noting that it tries to assist as many people as possible who are facing financial difficulty, often worsened due to redundancy or deteriorating mental health conditions.

Close working continues to take place with Council teams such as Housing Options, Sheerwater Regeneration, Social Prescribing, Family Support, Careline and Homelink. The Centre receives referrals from a range of organisations including New Vision Homes, Your Sanctuary, the York Road Project and The Lighthouse. Prior to the pandemic, 18 members of the Social Prescribing, Careline and Homelink teams attended a Welfare Benefit training course.

Taking into account the effect of Covid-19 on those who benefit from the work of Citizens Advice Woking along with consultee comments set out in this report, it is recommended that the level of support towards core costs should be set at £218,000 for 2021/22, with the sum of £10,000 being allocated towards the Guildford County Court Helpdesk at the same level as for 2020/21. It is proposed that the sum of £11,500 continues to be awarded towards the Financial Capability Project and that the Council continues to cover the service charge element under the revised lease (circa £53,000).

Accordingly, the total level of support proposed for 2021/22 equates to approximately £239,500, plus the service charge as set out above. In considering the financial support, it is worth noting additional support of circa £34,000 is also provided in the form of the offices in the Town Centre through the Council's Community Lettings Policy.

Recommendations

The Executive is requested to:

RESOLVE That, subject to the outcome of the Council's budgetary process,

- (i) core funding of £218,000 be awarded from the Community Grants Budget to continue to support the core service of Citizens'

Citizens Advice Woking – Application For Financial Assistance

	<p>Advice Woking;</p> <p>(ii) funding of £10,000 be awarded from the Community Grants Budget towards the costs of the Guildford County Court Help Desk; and</p> <p>(iii) funding of £11,500 be awarded from the Community Grants Budget to ensure the continuation of the Financial Capability programme;</p> <p>(iv) the Council continues to cover the service charge for the accommodation at Provincial House from the Community Grants Budget, which for next year will be circa £53,000.</p>
Reason for Decision	To enable the organisation to provide its services to Woking residents.
Legal Authority	S142 Local Government Act 1972
Confirmation of funding	<p>This award is provisionally made on the expectation that the Council's budgets for revenue and capital projects remain at the same level allocated for the current financial year. The Council's overall budget, including the sums allocated for community grants, will be determined by Council at its meeting on 11 February 2021. In the event the grant budgets are set at the anticipated levels, confirmation of the Council's support will be sent to successful applicants. Groups should not plan for the 2021/22 funding until this confirmation has been received.</p> <p>Should the budgets be reduced as part of the Council's efforts to achieve savings to offset the impact of Covid on the Council's financial position, a special meeting of the Executive will be held to review the provisional awards and allocate the funds available on a priority basis.</p>
Conditions	<p>Accounts. The Organisation must submit audited accounts for the year in which the grant is awarded, including an income and expenditure account and balance sheet. Please note that accounts for other years may also be required.</p> <p>Monitoring Information. The Organisation must submit quarterly monitoring information as a measure of its achievements. Failure to provide details will jeopardise the award. E-mail requests will be sent to the applicant on a quarterly basis.</p> <p>Publicity. Where possible, the Organisation is required to publicise the support received from Woking Borough Council, including on all literature and leaflets produced.</p> <p>Payments. Unless exceptional circumstances exist all invoices must be received quarterly with details of the costs incurred and monitoring information for the previous quarter.</p> <p>Payment Period. Final quarter claims must be made by the second week in March. Unclaimed awards will not be available at a later date unless exceptional circumstances can be demonstrated to the Council before the end of the award year.</p> <p>Joint Working. WBC expects the Organisation to engage positively on health and wellbeing multi-agency joint work affecting Woking. Groups which refuse may place their Council support at risk, e.g. grant, concessionary rent and other assistance.</p>

Citizens Advice Woking – Application For Financial Assistance

	<p>Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. Following the introduction of new legislation from April 2018, the council will expect the support of partner agencies in identifying people at risk of homelessness as early as possible to maximise the opportunities to prevent such. Partner agencies / organisations will be expected to be engaged in joint working arrangements to assist in finding suitable housing and support solutions, and where appropriate to undertake and respond to the new 'duty to refer'. Groups which do not support this new legislation and way of working positively, may put their Council support at risk.</p> <p>Venue Hire. Woking Borough Council has a duty to ensure that publicly-owned venues and resources do not provide a platform for extremists and are not used to disseminate extremist views. This duty extends to organisations that work with the local authority so this includes recipients of any grants from Woking Borough Council. If you hire out your venue/s you should ensure you have good processes in place for record keeping and checking if they are an appropriate group to be making the hire arrangements. The following are some of what should be considered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Basic details should be recorded to include speakers address, mobile phone number & organisation details.• Has the identity of the speaker been confirmed & is their organisation bona fide? Are they known to you?• Is the speaker from the area? Are they UK citizens or from overseas & will they travel specifically for this event?• Consider checks on the internet to confirm the status of speaker to include website, YouTube or social media sites.• How many people are likely to attend (check previous or similar events either locally or online).
Performance Indicators	<p>Users. The Organisation to provide a breakdown of the users in the past quarter.</p> <p>Activities. The Organisation to provide details of activities and events held during the last quarter.</p> <p>Enquiries. The Organisation to provide a breakdown of the enquiries received during the last quarter.</p> <p>Publicity. The Organisation to advise how the Council's support has been publicised over the last quarter.</p> <p>Statement of Use. The Organisation to provide a statement stating the use to which the grant money has been put.</p>
Future Support	<p>Due to the impact of Covid-19, the financial pressure on the Council's budgets is higher than ever and is expected to continue in the coming years. Accordingly the overall level of support available in future years may be reduced. The applicant is therefore to be advised that the award of funding for 2021/22 does not imply that a similar application in 2022/23 would be supported. In particular, it is emphasised that the Council is extremely unlikely to be in a position to award any sums above the 2021/22 levels.</p> <p>In view of this, the applicant is to be advised to ensure that contingency plans for the Group's operations for 2022/23 have been drawn up in the event that the Council is unable to continue its support beyond April 2022. All applicants are strongly recommended to</p>

Citizens Advice Woking – Application For Financial Assistance

pursue alternative sources of funding and are encouraged to approach Woking Borough Council's Community Support Team for advice and support.

The Executive has authority to determine the above recommendations.

Background Papers:

2021/22 Application Form.

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Date Published:

2 December 2020

Citizens Advice Woking – Application For Financial Assistance

1.0 Summary of Application	
1.1 Status and Aims	<p>Citizens Advice Woking (CAW) was established in 1939. It is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. CAW belongs to the umbrella organisation, the National Organisation of Citizens Advice Bureaux, and is audited every three years to ensure it continues to meet the membership standards and whether it should be awarded the Advice Quality Standard (AQS) quality mark for General Help with Casework in the areas of welfare benefits, debt and housing.</p> <p>The aims and principles of CAW are to provide independent, impartial, confidential and free advice to all of the residents of Woking and anyone who works in the Borough. CAW values diversity, promotes equality and challenges discrimination.</p> <p>There are two main objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to provide the advice people need for the problems they face and to support them to decide what options to take to improve or resolve their situation • to raise local and national issues to help improve policies and practices that affect peoples' lives. <p>CAW's main activities are to provide information and advice offered at its main town centre offices and outreach sessions as well as its telephone and email advice service. It also operates the Guildford County Court Help Desk which supports clients who have been served with Possession Proceedings with the aim of keeping them in their homes.</p>
1.2 Employees	<p>16, including the Chief Executive (37.5 hours per week), the Operations Manager (37.5 hours per week), 2 x Administration Officer (30 and 7.5 hours per week job share), 3 x Advice Sessions Supervisors (2 x 18 hours job share and 1 x 15 hours), the Training Supervisor (21 hours each per week), a Money Caseworker and Financial Capability Coordinator (21 hours per week), 2 x Welfare Benefit Caseworkers (26.5 and 15 hours per week), Home Visiting Caseworker (20 hours per week), Welfare Benefit Caseworker (15 hours), Universal Credit Help to Claim Advisor (21 hours), Housing and Court Desk Advisor (26 hours per week), Court Desk Advisor (25 hours per week).</p>
1.3 Volunteers	<p>93.</p> <p>The different types of work carried out by volunteers are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - advisers who give information and advice to members of the public either face to face, on the telephone or via email and webchat; - receptionists who meet members of the public when they first arrive at the town centre office or at one of its outreach sessions; - Trustees who are responsible for ensuring the governance of CAW and that it complies with Company and Charity Law; - specialist caseworkers who take on additional responsibilities in certain advice areas; - experienced generalist advisers who check the quality of the

Citizens Advice Woking – Application For Financial Assistance

casework;

- being part of the Research and Campaign work being carried out to change policies and practices;
- working on particular Projects and Contracts;
- general administrative tasks which need doing on a regular basis;
- attending community events and helping to raise awareness of CAW; and
- helping to fundraise and taking part in fundraising events

The team of volunteers are dedicated to providing the best possible service to the clients who contact the Group, either by training to become fully trained advisers or supporting those advisers to deliver the advice. They provide over 39,000 hours of volunteering each year.

When committing to the training to become an adviser, volunteers undertake a rigorous training programme which lasts 6-8 months and results in being awarded a Certificate in Generalist Advice.

Volunteers will carry out an initial interview to establish the help required by the client. If the client needs actual advice about their issue they are offered a further appointment when they would be seen by a fully qualified adviser.

All volunteers have to train in the following topic areas: welfare benefits, family and relationships, money advice and financial capability, housing and employment. Volunteers also have knowledge about immigration, consumer, health and education queries. They must be aware of how clients may be discriminated against in all areas.

All volunteers have to be IT literate and become fully conversant with the case recording system. Twelve volunteers have trained to become Healthwatch Surrey advisers on a telephone advice line. Others assist clients who live in fuel poverty to switch energy supplier and make sure their energy is being used efficiently.

Trustees who volunteer for the Board attend four Board meetings a year. In addition they support the Chief Executive Officer to ensure the correct governance of the Service.

1.4 Clients/Users

2019-20

Clients – 6,632, comprising:

2,852 male

3,780 female

3,051 disabled (or long-term health condition)

1,592 ethnic minority

6,499 resident in Woking

5,107 aged 19-65

1,525 aged 65+

Issues – 22,192

Activities – 19,470

The largest number of clients are based in Canalside, followed by Hoe Valley and Goldsworth Park.

Citizens Advice Woking – Application For Financial Assistance

	<p><u>2018-19</u> Clients – 6,565 Issues – 20,278 Activities – 17,927</p> <p><u>2017-18</u> Clients – 6,500 Issues – 16,912 Activities – 15,642</p> <p>In addition to individual clients set out above, users include community groups, housing associations, faith groups, statutory organisations, local authorities, health organisations and voluntary organisations.</p>
1.5 Members	N/A
1.6 Sum Requested	£239,500 plus service charge, circa £53,000 (Revenue)
1.7 Project	<p>Citizens Advice Woking is applying for a grant to enable it to continue providing its core service (£218,000) to the residents of the Borough as well as maintaining support for the financial capability project (£11,500) and the Guildford County Court Help Desk project (£10,000).</p> <p>CAW can be contacted in a number of ways, the main route prior to the pandemic being attending an advice session held for 5 days a week between 10am and 4pm, with late night opening on Tuesdays in the Town Centre. Outreach sessions were available at the Vyne, MASCOT in Sheerwater and Trinity Methodist Church. Telephone, email and webchat facilities are also available, with the Adviceline run jointly with Citizens Advice Surrey Heath. Home visits were also available for people who are either physically unable or too vulnerable to travel. Each user would have an initial assessment with referrals where appropriate to caseworkers for specialist support.</p> <p>There is a team of around 14 volunteers supported by specialist caseworkers under the supervision of the Operations Manager. There is also a home visiting service. The main areas requested for advice are Welfare, Benefits and Tax Credits; Debt; Housing; Relationships and Family; and Employment.</p> <p>Operated since 2008, the Financial Capability Project increases knowledge of finance and empowers people to make the right choices when managing their money. It is aimed at clients experiencing debt issues, young people and community groups.</p> <p>The Guildford County Court Help Desk provides support to the most vulnerable in the community who are at risk of homelessness due to Possession Proceedings in the County Court being started by a landlord or mortgage advisor.</p> <p>The aims of the Help Desk are to prevent homelessness and stabilise a client's housing situation, as well as improving access to legal assistance and maximising clients' household income. The number of clients assisted in 2019/20 was 294, increasing by 5% in comparison with the previous year at 280, with homelessness prevented in 95% of cases. 165 of the 294 clients reside in Woking. The Group notes that</p>

Citizens Advice Woking – Application For Financial Assistance

	<p>there has been an increasing demand for the service year on year and that the Homelessness Reduction Act provides the Council with a duty to help anyone at risk of homelessness within 56 days.</p> <p>The total cost of operating the Helpdesk is stated to be £30,500, a slight increase from 2020/21 due to increasing the hours of a member of staff to deal with the demand. No confirmed income has been announced for the Helpdesk, however the Group will be applying as usual to grant-giving bodies during the year ahead.</p>
1.8 Cost breakdown:	<p>The funding request for 2021/22 is £239,500, comprising:</p> <p>A request for £218,000 to continue the core service;</p> <p>A request for £11,500 to continue the financial capability project; and</p> <p>A request for £10,000 to support the Guildford Court Help Desk Project.</p>
1.9 Community Benefit	<p>Examples of the community benefit are set out below.</p> <p><u>Financial gain</u></p> <p>The Centre aims to record as many outcomes as possible against a client's enquiry and one of these would be whether the advice resulted in them making a financial gain. This could be due to being awarded a benefit they did not know they were entitled to, a compensation following an employment dispute, or successfully suing a third party for a debt owed. The Group's data for 2019/20 shows an income gain of £2,140,491 for all the clients helped during the year.</p> <p><u>Debt</u></p> <p>Clients struggle to cope with debt, which can cause stress, anxiety and relationship breakdown. Helping people to manage their debts and finances has a benefit. In 2019/20 £428,765 of debt was written off, almost twice the level of the previous year.</p> <p><u>Preventing Homelessness</u></p> <p>The aim of the County Court Help Desk is helping clients avoid becoming homeless, stated to be achieved in 95% of cases. Clients are then helped to ensure they continue to live in their homes and not have to return to Court again. The 5% who do leave their homes are helped by the adviser who asks the Court to allow as long as possible for finding alternative accommodation. Clients also liaise with Housing Options. CAW states that its work in preventing evictions had a total saving of £628,879 for the Council during 2019/20 due to not having to place residents in temporary accommodation.</p> <p><u>Sharing of Knowledge within the Community</u></p> <p>CAW works with other agencies to share resources so that people in need can be helped. An example of this is the working relationship with the Community Mental Health team at Bridgewell House to help people with a particular benefit or debt issue.</p> <p><u>Raising Awareness of Policies and Practices which need changing</u></p> <p>Local and national issues are identified and raised with Citizens Advice nationally, with the aim of trying to achieve change. Social media is used to raise awareness of the issues or campaigns taking place.</p>

Citizens Advice Woking – Application For Financial Assistance

1.10 Covid-19 Impact

In March 2020, CAW began the transition towards home working, for both staff and volunteers, and supporting clients by telephone and email, using their own IT equipment. In addition, a small team was working in the office to co-ordinate the teams working remotely, whilst also dealing with the Healthwatch Telephone Information and Adviceline (with some of the calls being diverted later on to home workers).

Calls and emails were received from new clients in financial difficulties and unable to pay their rent or mortgage. There were high numbers of Universal Credit – Help to Claim requests for assistance. Social media was used and posters displayed to advise people how to contact the organisation.

Close working continued with Housing Associations, with referrals being received from Bridgewell House, Catalyst and the Bradley Unit at the Community Hospital. The Home Visiting Caseworker has been assisting clients by telephone.

The County Court Helpdesk has assisted 86 clients in Woking between April and July. The Helpdesk Advisors have continued to work proactively to help clients by contacting those who had a Suspended Possession Order to ascertain whether they needed further support, along with those who were struggling to pay their rent or mortgage.

Volunteer training now takes place by Zoom and recruitment took place for the new training group which began in September. Following the completion of Risk Assessments it was decided that a maximum of ten paid staff and volunteers could be in the office at any one time. The organisation is investing in new hardware to further facilitate its remote working service.

CAW has set out the issues which have affected its users:

- No face to face service, particularly difficult for those with a disability or mental health issue, low literacy, those for whom English is not their first language; or users having a lack of IT equipment;
- Length of time before the telephone is answered, sometimes being around 30 minutes due to Advisors being busy dealing with other calls;
- Costs of waiting on the telephone;
- Frustration at waiting times or not being able to speak to the same Advisor as before;
- Groups of people CAW has not been able to reach, for example those not making contact due to shielding, a deterioration in mental health, or a victim of domestic abuse;
- The length of time everything takes, for example completing a form over the phone takes far longer than with face to face contact.

2.0 Financial Background

Citizens Advice Woking – Application For Financial Assistance

2.1 Budget	<p>At the time of the application, the Group held £199,394 in the bank. CAW administers the Wenceslas Fund on behalf of Woking Lions to assist those who are facing fuel poverty and meeting the criteria of the scheme. The organisation also has restricted Projects for which £38,019 had been allocated.</p> <p>The Group has submitted a budget for 2021/22 which shows an anticipated income of £364,350 against an anticipated expenditure of £375,118, resulting in an anticipated deficit of £10,768.</p> <p>Anticipated income includes WBC Grant (£218,000), Universal Support (£33,000), Court Help Desk (£33,000), projects - Energy Best Deal / Healthwatch (£21,600), financial capability (£11,500), and donations (£10,000). Items of expenditure include payroll (£259,268), computer expenses (£10,000) and printing, postage and stationery (£6,500).</p>
2.2 Accounts	<p>The Group has submitted accounts for 2019/20 which show an income of £359,285 (£326,851 in 2018/19) against expenditure of £351,842 (£307,055 in 2018/19), resulting in a surplus of £7,443 (a surplus of £19,797 in 2018/19). The sum of £187,717 was carried forward at the end of the 2019/20 year.</p>
2.3 Support over the past five years	<p>2020/21 – £239,500 plus service charge 2019/20 – £231,500 plus service charge 2018/19 – £231,500 plus service charge 2017/18 – £231,500 plus service charge 2016/17 – £231,500 plus service charge</p>

3.0 Assessment of Application		
3.1 Key Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Constitution ○ Registered Charity ○ VAT Registered ○ Equal Opportunities Policy ○ Safeguarding Policy ○ Reserves Policy ○ Quality Mark ○ Other funding sources pursued ○ Other support by the Council ○ Fundraising ○ Two quotes ○ Regular monitoring provided previously <p>* Mandatory rate relief, discretionary rate relief, concessionary rent, five year fixed term lease with a 12 month break clause for a peppercorn rent of £1 a year, ten voluntary sector car parking spaces. In addition, the Council pays the service charge and the buildings insurance</p>	<p>Yes</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>No</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Yes*</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>N/A</p> <p>Yes</p>

Citizens Advice Woking – Application For Financial Assistance

	premium under the terms of the lease.	
3.2 Consultee Comments	<p><u>Liz Macintyre, Funding Officer</u></p> <p>This local charity has attended Funding events organised by Volunteer Woking and is in receipt of regular Funding newsletters. They were also selected as one of a small number of local charities for a 1-2-1 with the National Lottery Partnership funding team earlier this year but I have not heard the outcome. The charity is known to provide valuable support to the residents of Woking, engages and upskills a large number of volunteers and appears to be working hard to find other sources of funding for their work.</p> <p>I would support this application for Community Grant funding, although the level of funding will be dependent upon funds available.</p>	
3.3 Assessment	<p>Citizens Advice Woking seeks to provide the advice people need for the problems they face and improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives. The Centre holds the Advice Quality Standard (AQS) quality mark at General Help with Casework in Welfare Benefits and Debt, and Specialist level in Housing, awarded in September 2019 for a period of three years. Core activities are 'individual' focused and aim to deliver advice and support to the community of Woking. The Centre also operates the successful Financial Capability Project, funded primarily by Woking Borough Council, a Court helpdesk and several other new outreach services. A Healthwatch project is also undertaken.</p> <p>CAW provides a nationally recognised service which delivers advice on whatever subject the client asks about, along with ongoing assistance to those who have nowhere else to turn to. The majority of clients require ongoing support and for complicated issues this can be for several months. Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A client may have a vulnerability due to their physical or mental health which makes it more difficult for them to manage their affairs; • A client may have an addiction which prevents them from coping with everyday tasks; • English may not be the client's first language so understanding systems and procedures, whether spoken or written is very difficult; • Relationships end which could be because a partner leaves or dies. Or there could be domestic violence or illness which changes the basis of a relationship; • Care packages can be reduced or removed entirely so support previously relied upon disappears but it does not mean a client suddenly knows how to cope on a daily basis. <p>Clients in the above scenarios are more at risk of losing their homes, jobs and incurring debt which can affect their health and relationships. The Group's aim is to ensure these problems do not get out of control and the client is supported to stabilise their situation, aiming to reduce their reliance on statutory agencies. Referrals are received from agencies such as Social Care, Bridgewell House, Bedser Hub, Your Sanctuary and Housing Associations.</p>	

Citizens Advice Working – Application For Financial Assistance

Fundraising remains a challenge, particularly since Covid-19. A fundraising event was held in June 2019 with 10 people taking part in the London Legal Walk (£5,000 raised) and a Quiz Night was held in March 2020 (£2,500 raised). Donations from users are encouraged.

During 2019/20 CAW received a grant from national Citizens Advice for 12 months to deliver the Universal Support Help to Claim project, which was renewed for a further 12 months until March 2021. Two service level agreements are delivered for Healthwatch Surrey, also extended by 12 months to March 2021. Due to the success in delivering the Energy Programme in October 2019, two years' funding was awarded to deliver a certain number of energy appointments by March 2021.

The Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy awarded national Citizens Advice funds at the outset of the pandemic and as a local office the sum of £3,200 has been received towards purchasing IT equipment, with £4,000 towards increasing the number of emails dealt with, both on a one-off basis. An application has also been submitted for £10,000 to the Community Foundation for Surrey to cover the cost of an additional Welfare Benefit Adviser.

Taking into account the effect of Covid-19 on those who benefit from the work of CAW along with consultee comments set out in this report, noting that users have continued to be supported through altered working arrangements, it is recommended that the level of support towards core costs be continued at £218,000 for 2021/22, with the sum of £10,000 being allocated towards the Guildford County Court Helpdesk, at the same level as for 2020/21. It is proposed that the sum of £11,500 continues to be awarded towards the Financial Capability Project and that the Council continues to cover the service charge element under the revised lease (circa £53,000).

Accordingly, the proposed level of support for the coming year is recommended as follows:

£218,000 for core services;

£10,000 towards the costs of the Guildford County Court Help Desk;

£11,500 towards the Financial Capability project; and

Circa £53,000 towards the service charge element for the offices in Provincial House (paid within the Council as an internal transfer).

Accordingly, the total level of support proposed for the 2021/22 equates to approximately £239,500, plus the service charge as set out above. In considering the financial support, it is worth noting additional support of circa £34,000 is also provided in the form of the offices in the Town Centre through the Council's Community Lettings Policy.

REPORT ENDS