

**SUPPORTING OUR COMMUNITIES THROUGH ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES**

**Agenda Item 6b**

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**Background Papers:-** None  
**Financial Implications:-** Contained in report  
**Equalities Implications:-** Equalities Inclusive  
**Legal Implications:-** None  
**Options:**  
A) To approve all the recommendations to support communities through economic difficulties  
B) To approve some of the recommendations to support communities through economic difficulties  
C) To offer no extra support and promote current provision only.  
**Risks:**  
The Council may be viewed as uncaring if it is not shown to be supporting communities during the current economic climate.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Council has a role as a Community Leader and during these difficult times of economic downturn, which has impact upon many of the most vulnerable within the District, it is important that the Council supports its community through identifying and prioritising :-

- a) what service provision is currently available to support our communities during the economic downturn
- b) proposals for additional provision to support those most in need within the community subject to affordability.

**DECISION**

That Members support the recommendations to provide additional support to communities to help them through the economic difficulties and approve

- A) the additional funding requested by the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) of £15,000 per annum for 3 years for improved delivery of advice to their users as part of the 2009/10 budget process and
- B) the additional £9,500 to cover the extra help and advice to the community

## SUPPORTING OUR COMMUNITIES THROUGH ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES

### 1. Background

- 1.1 The economic downturn will impact on all businesses and communities. There will be tighter borrowing for front-line businesses, rising unemployment and shrinking household incomes. This will bring new challenges to the Council to cope with increased pressure on services to support our communities through these difficult economic times.
- 1.2 The Council has always supported its businesses and communities and is now working harder with its partners such as the Primary Care Trust (PCT), Essex County Council (ECC), Age Concern, and the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), to address the impact of the recession on the District and provide extra advice and help to residents.
- 1.3 The focus will be on helping individuals, community organisations and businesses identify problems early and provide advice and practical support to be effective in turning the situation round.
- 1.4 There has been an increase in the number of customers requiring Housing benefits and benefits advice since September and the Citizens Advice Bureau has reported a huge increase in clients requiring debt and other advice. This is predicted to rise. Housing services are also anticipating an increase in demand.

### 2. Current Provision

The Council is already providing a range of Services to support communities and these are highlighted below. Some of these services are provided with our partners and they are promoted via our website, leaflets and the media to ensure communities and businesses are fully aware of what help and advice is provided and where they can access these services.

- 2.1 Benefits
  - ◆ Increased number of take up campaigns
  - ◆ New claims and changes of circumstance processed as quickly as possible (16 days and 6 days respectively) since September
- 2.2 Payments
  - ◆ We aim to pay local suppliers as soon as possible and no later than within 14 days
- 2.3 Business Rates
  - ◆ Discretionary Rate Relief is given to clubs, post offices and charities plus shops and public houses in the rural areas
- 2.4 Community Services-
  - ◆ Provision of funding to CAB and BDVSA (£123,960 and £21,240 respectively)
  - ◆ Working in partnership with ECC, PCT, Police, and voluntary sector to provide training/workshops for the young, elderly and disadvantaged
  - ◆ Provision of community transport that provides three subsidised transport services for those residents with Mobility difficulties, those who are wheelchair users or non profit-making groups. On average 4,500 journeys are made each month.
  - ◆ Provision of Concessionary Fares for all residents aged 60 or over and those with special needs.

- ◆ Assistance to migrants, and other hard to reach groups
- 2.5 Leisure -
- ◆ Leisure Card discounts of up to 75% for those on benefits, unemployed or over 60
  - ◆ Heart and Sole – free health walks aimed at the over 60s
- 2.6 Asset Management -
- ◆ Rent-free periods for new businesses and nominal rents for community organizations for 1-3 months depending on the length of the lease.
- 2.7 Environmental Services -
- ◆ Stray dogs returned to owners on benefit for 50% of the stated cost
  - ◆ Give away free energy saving light bulbs, water saving devices and, for customers on benefits, power down devices for home computers
  - ◆ Promote insulation schemes for benefit recipients and those over 70
  - ◆ Offer £1,000 funding for the installation of renewable energy technology (eg solar hot water, wind turbines etc)
  - ◆ Grant assistance of up to £3,000 for those on low incomes for housing repairs
  - ◆ Loan assistance up to £15,000 to bring homes up to the decent homes standard
- 2.8 Partners
- ◆ Greenfields Housing Assoc provide a Handy-Person Service to all tenants to undertake small jobs around their home for a small charge of £5 per hour.
  - ◆ Hanover Home Improvement Agency specialises in helping the over 60s or people with a disability. They can assist with housing advice and support covering repairs, gardening, advice on legal entitlement, welfare benefits etc.
  - ◆ Braintree District Voluntary Services Association (BDVSA) run a Green Fingers gardening service for elderly and vulnerable people at a small charge

### **3. Proposals for Additional Support to Communities**

The Council has been exploring what additional support can be provided to communities during the current economic difficulties and proposals have been developed as shown below that will apply to all communities in the District. Many of the proposed actions can be provided through existing resources or with our partners and those which involve extra costs are shown

- 3.1 Benefits
- ◆ Visit businesses who are facing the possibility of making redundancies
  - ◆ Top up the Discretionary Allowance by 10% which would cost £2,500
- 3.2 Housing
- ◆ A Performance Reward Grant bid of £75,000 has already been made to secure an additional Housing Advisory Officer to strengthen the housing advisory support. The outcome of this bid is due in December.
  - ◆ Train staff who visit customers to be more aware and have knowledge of other services that help and support people.
- 3.3 Street Scene
- ◆ Special collections discounts of 50% to be extended to all residents over 65. Cost £7,000
  - ◆ Allow businesses to pay for their trade waste by direct debit spread over 12 months rather than 10 months to reduce the monthly payment.

### 3.4 Website and Communications

- ◆ Ensure the website raises awareness and promotes the services available and has links to Partner organisations. Have an “Advice Page”, Update information and produce FAQs. Provide leaflets and information to enable people to help themselves and point them in the right direction
- ◆ Explore the possibility of having a “Help Line”.
- ◆ Producer leaflets to promote services available in doctors surgeries, shops etc

### 3.5 Working with Partners

- ◆ Discuss with Parish Councils opportunities for surgeries to be set up in rural areas to provide additional help and advice on Benefits
- ◆ Agree the CAB request for extra funding of £15,000 per annum for the next 3 years to cope with extra demands and provide extra advice to users. This is currently in the MTFS as a bid.
- ◆ Work with the PCT, Police, Age Concern and Voluntary Sector to provide extra activities, training and workshops for residents to provide practical help (e.g. Older Peoples Day)
- ◆ Work with Greenfields Housing Association to provide additional Debt Advisers for the next 2 years and make a bid to the CHIP Fund.
- ◆ Set up a group including key support agencies to provide community leadership and advice during the current economic climate.

## 4. Conclusions

In addition to our current services, the additional support proposals will enable communities to be more aware of all the help and assistance the Council and its Partners can offer. They will help ensure that businesses, individuals and communities can seek and get help early to prevent hardship and cope with the economic difficulties they face.

## 5. Recommendations

Members support Option A and approve all the proposals outlined in section 3 above that can be carried out within existing resources and agree

- (a) the additional funding requested by the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) for improved delivery of advice to their users as part of the 2009/10 budget process and
- (b) the additional £9,500 to cover the extra help and advice to the community

