

FALKIRK COUNCIL

Minute of meeting of the SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (EXTERNAL) held in the Municipal Buildings, Falkirk on Thursday 12 May 2016 at 9.30 a.m.

COUNCILLORS:

David Balfour
Gordon Hughes
Steven Jackson (Convener)
Charles MacDonald
Brian McCabe
John McLuckie
Rosie Murray
Depute Provost John Patrick

OFFICERS:

Sally Buchanan, Welfare Reform Project Manager
Caird Forsyth, Corporate Policy Officer
Jack Frawley, Committee Services Officer
Iain Henderson, Legal Services Manager
George Paul, Team Leader, Housing

SE1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

SE2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

SE3. Minute

Decision

The minute of meeting of the Scrutiny Committee (External) held on 10 March 2016 was approved.

SE4. Following the Public Pound (FPP): Advice Services

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services which provided an update on the work of external organisations in receipt of funding in whole or in part, who provide debt and money advice services, and who fall within the Following the Public Pound (FPP) reporting and monitoring arrangements. Sally Buchanan provided an overview of the report.

(a) Forth Valley Macmillan Money Matters Project

George Paul provided an overview of the report, advising that Forth Valley Macmillan Money Matters Project received a direct grant of £40,000 in the reporting period.

Decision

The committee approved the report and acknowledged progress by Forth Valley Macmillan Money Matters Project.

Councillors Hughes and McLuckie entered the meeting at this point.

(b) Falkirk & District Credit Union

Sally Buchanan provided an overview of the report, advising that Falkirk Credit Union received a direct grant of £17,511 in the reporting period and highlighted that the credit union also received in-kind support of free lets in Council buildings for their collection points.

Members commented on the ambition of the organisation and asked what its maximum level of growth would be. Sally Buchanan advised that an upper limit on membership numbers had not been explored and that the organisation was keen to sustain its growth.

The committee asked how the organisation performed in comparison to other credit unions. Sally Buchanan advised that she would liaise with the development worker and then provide the information to members. She highlighted that the development worker had assisted in the production of the organisation's volunteers' handbook.

Members asked how many schools the credit union was involved with. Sally Buchanan stated that there was active involvement in five High Schools and two Primary Schools which was supplemented by promotional work in community centres, at Forth Valley College and at the Council. The organisation was focussed to ensure that its positive relationships were maintained and expanded.

The committee asked about the rates which were available through the organisation. Sally Buchanan stated that she would confirm this information and provide it to members after the meeting. She advised that the 'Quick Loan' attracted a slightly higher rate than the standard product.

Members asked if the organisation had a desire to open branches and where these would be. Sally Buchanan stated that the organisation had been looking into this with the support of the development worker. A collection point would be situated at Forth Valley College which would be available to both students and the public in general. However, these collection points required

volunteers to staff them and thereby had a resource cost to the organisation. The organisation was also looking at utilising payroll deductions and online systems.

The committee then asked for an update on the implementation of online banking facilities. Sally Buchanan advised that online joining had been fully implemented and that allowed someone to join the credit union at any time. It was anticipated that online management of accounts would be fully rolled out by June 2016.

Members asked what support was available to board members particularly in relation to capacity building. Sally Buchanan stated that support had been offered to the board but that how much this was taken up was left to them. The board was keen to drive toward self sustainability. The monitoring officer still met regularly with the organisation but no longer attended their board meetings at the request of the credit union.

In response to a question on membership levels and the number of dormant accounts, Sally Buchanan stated that more people were joining than leaving and that a large number of dormant accounts had been closed in the previous year. This was due to the transfer of accounts following amalgamation with Grangemouth. All accounts which held less than £5 when charged their annual fee were closed after their holders were written to advising them of the process.

The committee asked if there had been any evaluation of the impact of credit unions on payday lenders. Sally Buchanan stated that she was not aware of any evaluation of impact and commented that although the markets may partially overlap many people using payday lenders would not be able to access credit union loans if they had no savings history there. The credit union tried to help people develop savings before making loans available. George Paul stated that the Council's Debt Advice team worked closely with the credit union when people in multi debt positions presented at the service.

Decision

The committee requested further information on specific aspects of the service provided by Falkirk & District Credit Union, namely:

(i) performance information providing a comparison with that of other credit unions, and

(ii) the interest rates applied to the organisation's products.

(c) Falkirk, Grangemouth, Denny & Dunipace Citizens Advice Bureaux

Sally Buchanan provided an overview of the report considering the performance of Falkirk, Grangemouth, and Denny & Dunipace Citizens Advice

Bureaux. She advised that a direct grant was received by each organisation in the following amounts for the reporting period:

- Falkirk – £186,986 (including £30,000 of core funding retained during 2015/16 as a contribution towards the refurbishment of new premises)
- Grangemouth – £113,163
- Denny & Dunnipace – £107,321.

The committee asked what was included within core funding and if this related to managers salaries. Sally Buchanan advised that salaries of paid staff accounted for approximately 80% of the organisation's costs.

In relation to the increased number of appointments relating to welfare benefits, members asked if the organisation's majority of work related to welfare benefits. Sally Buchanan confirmed that this was the case and that she could provide members with a percentage figure as a total of all enquiries after the meeting.

The committee asked about the amount of client gains achieved relating to bankruptcy/trust deeds. George Paul stated that where debts were written off that was counted as a gain for the client as they no longer needed to pay the amount.

Members asked about the figures in relation to appeals and what types of decisions were being appealed. George Paul stated that the majority related to disability benefit claims. He advised that the figures were comparable to the national levels. Following discussion regarding the role of the Council's Welfare and Benefits Team he clarified that where appellants desired the attendance of someone as a support this would most often be done by the Council's staff but that written submissions were often compiled by Citizens Advice Bureaux volunteers.

The committee discussed that within the district there were three distinct organisations with three identities and respective Chief Executives and asked if partnership working was encouraged. Sally Buchanan advised that there was a joint action group in place which included the three Citizens Advice Bureaux, Citizens Advice Scotland and the Council. Training and recruitment was carried out across the three organisations.

Decision

The committee approved the report and acknowledged progress by Falkirk, Grangemouth, Denny & Dunipace Citizens Advice Bureaux.

(d) Falkirk Armed Services Advice Project

Caird Forsyth provided an overview of the report, advising that Falkirk Armed Services Advice Project received a direct grant of £18,000 in the reporting period.

Members asked how many veterans utilising the service reported post traumatic stress disorder. Caird Forsyth stated that he could get a further breakdown of the figures and provide this to members following the meeting.

The committee asked if there was any impact on the resources of the Denny & Dunnipace service through hosting the Armed Services Advice Project. Caird Forsyth stated that referrals went directly to the Armed Services Advice Project officer and that although they could go through the general office they would be referred on.

Members asked about the future projections of demand on the service. Caird Forsyth stated that there would be a continued need for the service due to the age of clients who presented and that they could come to the service for assistance for many years after finishing their service.

Decision

The committee approved the report and acknowledged progress by the Falkirk Armed Services Advice Project.