

# Report

<b>Report to:</b>	<b>Executive Committee</b>
<b>Date:</b>	<b>3 November 2021</b>
<b>Prepared by:</b>	<b>Executive Director (Finance and Corporate Resources)</b>

<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Review of Financial Advice and Support</b>
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## 1. Purpose of the report

1.1. The purpose of the report is to: -

- ◆ Provide the Executive Committee with a summary of the review of financial advice and support and the key improvement actions that have been identified.

## 2. Recommendations

2.1. The Executive Committee is asked to approve the following recommendation(s): -

- (1) that the summary of the review of financial advice and support be noted
- (2) that the range of actions in section 6 (and appendix 2) detailing improvements to internal systems and processes, customer engagement, investment in staff and joint working with Citizens Advice Bureau are noted
- (3) that the transfer of Money Matters Advice Service from Social Work Resources to Finance and Corporate Resources be approved

## 3. Background

3.1. The purpose of the review was to appraise the range of financial advice and support services provided by the Council and to identify improvements that could be made to service delivery through changes to structures, the introduction of new technology and improvements to processes. The services included in the review were Money Matters Advice Service (MMAS), Benefits are Changing Team (BACT) and Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF).

3.2. The review covered the following:-

- ◆ An overview of the range of financial support and advice services
- ◆ Consideration of the demands placed on the services and current performance levels
- ◆ Consideration of the measures used to assess performance levels
- ◆ Explanation of the links and dependencies to other Council services and organisations
- ◆ Identification of improvements to the service delivery model for Council services

3.3. As the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) provide a range of financial advice and support services similar to those provided by the MMAS and receive funding from the Council for this purpose, the review also sought to identify opportunities for improved joint working with the CABs.

- 3.4. The review was expected to conclude during 2020/2021, however, this was delayed by the impact of the health pandemic.

#### **4. Current Position**

- 4.1. The core provider of financial advice and support in the Council is the MMAS.
- 4.2. Appendix 1 provides the performance levels for the services included in the review. Overall, increases in both performance and activity levels are reported from 2018/2019 to 2019/2020. Other services across the Council do provide a level of advice and support integrated with other core functions (for example, the Benefits and Revenues section provide benefit support via Council Tax Reduction).
- 4.3. In addition to MMAS, the CABs are also a key provider of financial advice and support operating across all 4 South Lanarkshire localities with an office presence in each.
- 4.4. Interventions delivered by CABs contribute to the Tackling Poverty programme and Child Poverty Action Plan and Community Plan. In 2019/2020 CAB provided financial gain of £5.673m from either debt written off or from benefits awarded based on 8,085 people receiving advice.

#### **5. Review Activity**

- 5.1. The review work was progressed by two working groups, one focussing on the provision of Council services and the other on improvements to the joint working arrangements with CABs.
- 5.2. To obtain up to date feedback from customers, a limited service user engagement exercise was undertaken during August 2020 to seek the views and experiences of local people who had used the services. Overall, 89% of service users confirmed they were satisfied with the services provided. Key recommendations from the exercise were enhancement of the online presence and carry out regular customer satisfaction surveys.
- 5.3. The customer contact routes were also assessed with services offering a variety of ways to contact the service including face to face, telephony and online. Differences in approach was also apparent with online contact not available for MMAS and BACT with SWF providing telephone and online contact.
- 5.4. This exercise highlighted opportunity for improvement in the following:-
- ◆ Development of a range of digital solutions to improve customer access and information
  - ◆ Establish an effective triage and referral process to identify service required and appropriate method of delivery e.g., vulnerability requiring face to face contact
- 5.5. The above review work fed into the assessment of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This was considered a key stage in the review to identify what is being done well and areas for further improvement. The main points from the assessment are provided below:-
- ◆ Strengths: there is a skilled, experienced, and well-motivated workforce that know their client base well
  - ◆ Weakness: the ability to engage digitally with customers and internal services
  - ◆ Opportunity: to adopt a more agile way of working across services

- ◆ Threat: The effects of the current COVID-19 pandemic are expected to see many more people require the support services offered by the Council. This may put a strain on existing resources.

5.6. The review groups also considered how the impact of Covid-19 has affected the way in which services have been accessed and delivered. Since the start of the health pandemic, face to face services were suspended and all customer contact was delivered via telephone or online. This has become a catalyst for change and has demonstrated that both customers and services have adapted to a different service delivery model.

5.7. While the extension of the national furlough scheme to 30 September 2021 and the support provided by the various business grant schemes prevented greater numbers of people seeking financial support, there is still an expectation that demand for financial advice and support services will remain high for the foreseeable future.

5.8. The Scottish Government provided additional funding to councils to allow for increased financial support to be provided to those households affected by the pandemic. During 2020/2021, member briefings have provided information outlining how this funding has been used to support families and communities. Most of this funding has been paid out to households by the Benefits and Revenues service.

## **6. Improvement Actions**

6.1. To provide a wide range of actions for improving the way services are delivered and the working arrangements with CAB, an options appraisal exercise was completed by both working groups.

6.2. The actions identified will improve the service provided to customers by:-

- ◆ providing further investment in technology and staff
- ◆ joining up services where a strong business case exists
- ◆ giving better information on the services available to customers
- ◆ improving customer service

6.3. There are 16 improvement actions to be taken forward from the review as detailed in Appendix 2. The main recommendations include:-

- ◆ Implementation of IT system for the MMAS for management of client cases and to support management of advisors' caseload. This will also improve the ability to engage digitally with customers
- ◆ Establishment of a consistent standard for the provision of financial advice when customers contact services. This would ensure consistency of approach and greater coverage, both in relation to the advice that can be offered at the time of the call and in providing follow-up services and signposting information
- ◆ Include MMAS, SWF, Benefits and Revenues, Customer Services, Wellbeing support under a wellbeing, financial advice, and customer services structure
- ◆ Introduction of regular customer satisfaction surveys and improved performance data across advice and support services
- ◆ Introduce a range of improvements in the operation of the SWF including the use of a freephone number, increase the level of referrals from partners, target higher award rates and further develop the on-line form to make it easier to complete
- ◆ Creation of a joint council / CAB forum to provide a more structured approach to the sharing of good practice and the development of initiatives

6.4. It was recognised by the group that benefits would arise from the move of MMAS within Social Work Resources to Finance Transactions within Finance and Corporate Resources. This would provide a range of benefits including:-

- ◆ contributing to a higher profile of wellbeing services and improved joint working across management teams (e.g., between Benefits and Revenues who operate the SWF and MMAS)
- ◆ closer links with the Community Engagement Team within Finance and Corporate Resources and their remit over tackling poverty and community planning
- ◆ closer links with the Wellbeing Team within Finance and Corporate Resources and the provision of support to customers

6.5. The manager for MMAS would report directly to the Head of Finance (Transactions) and the service would operate entirely independently of the Benefits and Revenues service. Advisors within the MMAS would continue to provide support to clients that was in their best interests and in line with the statutory frameworks and guidance for managing debt. The service will also work towards accreditation through the Scottish National Standards for debt advice administered by the Scottish Legal Aid Board over the next 2 years and this will further demonstrate the professional standing, independence and competence of the service.

6.6. There is also an opportunity to review the structure of the MMAS considering the move to agile working and the future implementation of a new case management system.

6.7. Presentation of the new service structure showing the addition of the MMAS is shown in Appendix 3.

## **7. Employee Implications**

7.1. The action to transfer MMAS to Finance (Transactions) would result in the transfer of 54.96 FTE. Staff within MMAS have been briefed on the planned transfer.

7.2. There has been representation from UNISON throughout the review.

## **8. Financial Implications**

8.1. The MMAS as the main provider of financial support and advice has an annual budget of £1.853m. Work will take place with Social Work Resources to ensure funding to cover the posts is identified to fund the service as part of the transfer.

8.2. The known funding implications from the improvement actions can be met from existing budgets. However, the development of business cases for the introduction of additional customer contact methods and a specialist employment advice service will be subject to further appraisal.

## **9. Climate Change, Sustainability and Environmental Implications**

9.1. There are no implications for climate change, sustainability or the environment in terms of the information contained in this report.

## **10. Other Implications**

10.1. The review identified two key risks. The first of these related to the demand for services outweighing the available resources, however, the general move to agile working and the introduction of a new case management system for MMAS is expected to free up resources. The second was the perception that customers may

feel unable to access key services provided agilely either due to a vulnerability or due to considering themselves to be digitally excluded. Various contact channels are expected to be available for vulnerable customers with additional telephone support.

## **11. Equality Impact Assessment and Consultation Arrangements**

- 11.1. There is no requirement to equality impact assess the content of this report. An EQIA would be completed prior to the introduction of a new service delivery model for MMAS.

**Paul Manning**

**Executive Director (Finance and Corporate Resources)**

17 October 2021

### **Link(s) to Council Values/Ambitions/Objectives**

- ◆ Accountable, effective, efficient and transparent

### **Previous References**

- ◆ None

### **List of Background Papers**

- ◆ None

### **Contact for Further Information**

If you would like to inspect the background papers or want further information, please contact:-

Craig Fergusson, Head of Finance (Transactions)

Ext: 4951 (Tel: 01698 454951)

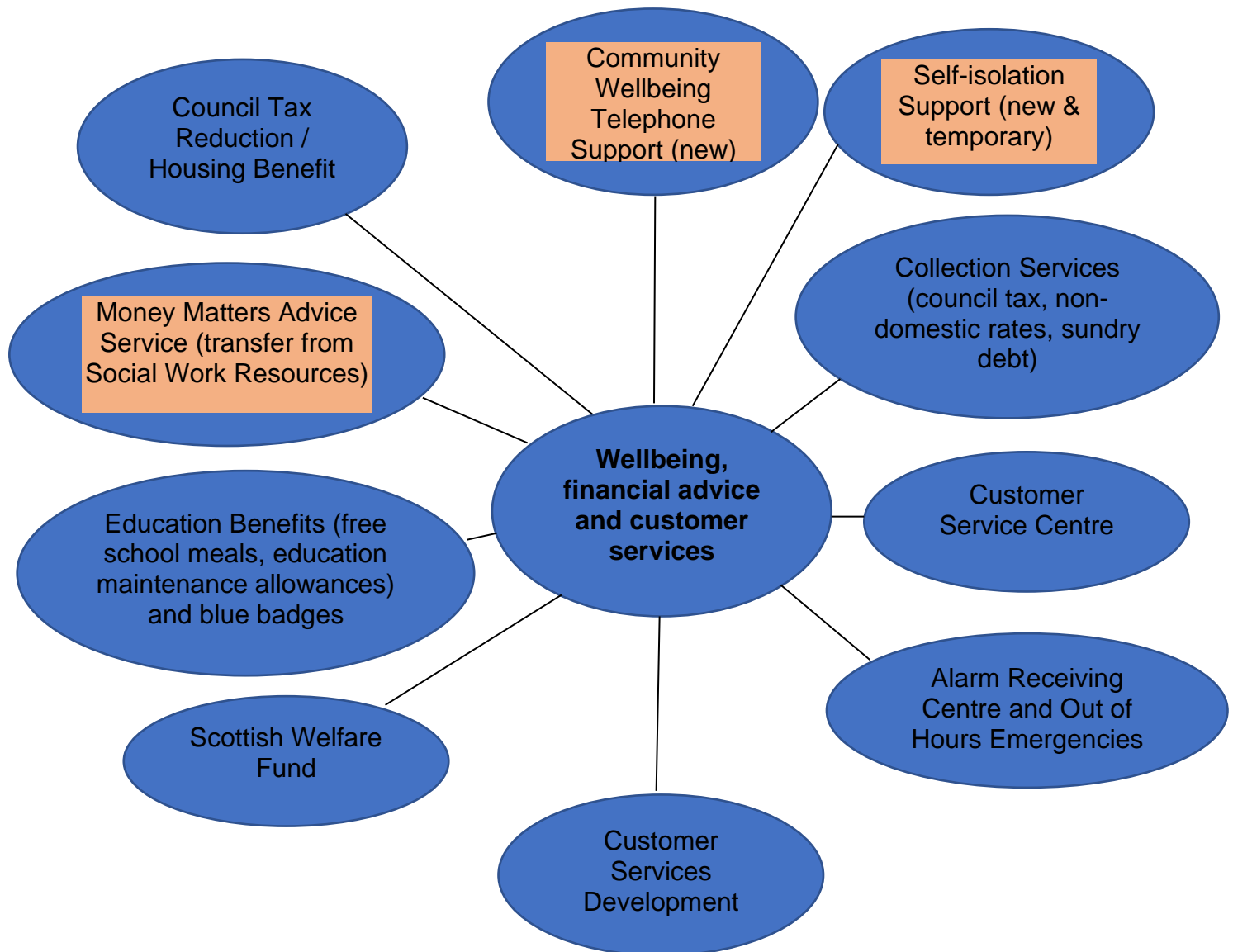
E-mail: [craig.fergusson@southlanarkshire.gov.uk](mailto:craig.fergusson@southlanarkshire.gov.uk)

### Performance Summary

Service	2019/20
Money Matters Advice Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New cases 6,450</li> <li>• General enquiries 6,535</li> <li>• Total dealt with £8.7m</li> <li>• Total debt written off £2.3m</li> <li>• Total financial gain for South Lanarkshire residents = £38m.</li> </ul>
BACT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 91% of tenants affected are successfully contacted within assessment period in 18/19, this rose to 95% in 19/20</li> <li>• 100% of portal requests dealt within timescales</li> <li>• Universal credit rent collected increased from 84% in Q4 2018/19 to 97% in Q4 2019/20.</li> </ul>
Scottish Welfare Fund	<p>Crisis Grants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applications 7,354</li> <li>• Awards 3,524</li> <li>• Award Rate 48%</li> </ul> <p>Average Processing times - 2 days for crisis grants (Scottish Government set - 2 working days)</p>
	<p>Community Care Grants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applications 5,905</li> <li>• Awards 3,696</li> <li>• Award Rate 63%</li> </ul> <p>Average Processing times - 14 working days for clothing grants (Scottish Government -target 15 working days)</p>

## Improvement Proposals

No.	Description
Council Group:	
1	Implementation of new case management system for the MMAS for management of client cases and to support management of advisors' caseload.
2	Introduction of webchat and call back services and greater use of online forms (subject to feasibility).
3	Upgrade of web content to improve links between the information provided by the various services.
4	Establishment of a consistent standard for the provision of financial advice when customers contact services.
5	The creation of a learn online training course for practitioners would provide staff with a basic level of information on money and debt advice.
6	The establishment of a new telephone support line staffed by trained customer service assistants to support customers presenting with multiple needs or unsure of who to speak to.
7	Establish formal internal referral routes to MMAS.
8	Include MMAS, Scottish Welfare Fund, Benefits and Revenues, Customer Services, Community Alarms under a wellbeing, financial advice, and customer services structure.
9	Introduction of regular customer satisfaction surveys and improved performance data across advice and support services.
10	More comprehensive management reporting across services.
11	Development of a career development / modern apprenticeship scheme for trainee money/debt advisors.
12	Introduce a range of improvements in the operation of the Scottish Welfare Fund including the use of a freephone number, increase the level of referrals from partners, target higher award rates and further develop the on-line form to make it easier to complete.
13	Rename BACT to Rental Income Support Team.
CAB Group:	
14	Creation of a joint council / CAB forum to provide a structured approach to the sharing of good practice and the development of initiatives.
15	Development of a business case for the introduction of an employment specialist shared across the organisations to offer advice to those experiencing difficulties with their existing employment or redundancy.
16	Explore avenues for the generation of additional funding for initiatives identified by Council and CAB officers.

**Service Structure**

Excludes the following other services within Finance Transactions: Procurement, Purchasing, Risk Management & Insurance, Accounts Payables, VAT and Social Work transactions.