

# Human Resources Committee

16 March 2007



## Telephone Counselling Service – Contract Renewal

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### Report of Kim Jobson, Head of Human Resources

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#### Purpose of the Report

- 1 To advise on the provisions for the future of the existing telephone counselling service, as well as the trauma response counselling service.

#### Background

- 2 The confidential telephone counselling service has been in operation since December 1996. It has been provided throughout by the Lancaster Group. Although this company was sold to First Assist Services Ltd in 2005, the service provision has continued under the name 'Lancaster'.
- 3 We sought tenders in 2003 for a two-year contract and this contract was again extended in 2005. A further tender exercise has recently been completed to extend the service for two more years and a report was agreed at the Corporate Management Team on 27 February 2007.
- 4 The scheme has been provided for the benefit of all County Council employees and their immediate families<sup>1</sup>. It is based around a Freephone access facility and functions for 24 hours per day and for 365 days per year.
- 5 There were several reasons for initially setting up the counselling service and they still have validity now:
  - A demonstration of commitment towards supporting our employees and their families;
  - Provision of a defence against legal action linked to workplace stress issues;
  - The possibility of financial savings from a contribution to keeping absence levels down.
- 6 The telephone counselling service also links to our corporate aim of promoting strong healthy and safe communities as well as the People Strategy priority of caring for our people. More recently, the availability of the service also formed an important piece of positive evidence in our successful campaign to achieve the Bronze Health at Work Award.

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<sup>1</sup> Those immediate family members living at home as well as dependent children up to the age of 25 in full-time education living away from home.

- 7 In early 2006, colleagues in Adult & Community Services requested the transfer of their existing trauma response counselling service from their previous supplier to the contract with First Assist. This provides a facility that can be used to enable support during a critical incident or emergency in the county for both employees and members of the public<sup>2</sup>. The contract arrangements allowed this service to be added without any additional retainer at that time as charges are levied only when this particular service is activated. Payment for this specific service comes from the Adults & Community Services budget.

### Current Position - Statistics

- 8 The Lancaster Group provide analysis of calls to the telephone counselling service on a quarterly basis. The number of calls has remained fairly constant in recent years as shown in *Figure 1*.

*Figure 1: Calls to the Telephone Counselling Service 1997-2006*

Period	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Calls	449	387	326	199	124	125	248	219	257	209

- 9 As ever, it remains important to keep reminding our employees about the availability of the service. This continues to be done through mailshots, poster campaigns and electronic releases via the Intranet and Extranet. Information is also given out to new starters through the induction cycle. Our Occupational Health Service continue, where appropriate, to advise those using their service about telephone counselling as an option – for example, giving a leaflet out with any literature provided for employees. Similarly, the Staff Care Service in Adults & Community Services leaves a message on their answer phone, when they are unavailable, that the telephone counselling service is an option. The service was also promoted and represented through the Working on Well Being events carried out during September 2006.
- 10 The number of first time callers has dropped in the last two years to 62% (76% for 2003-04). The number of calls made during ‘day time’<sup>3</sup> has risen slightly to 72% from 70% in 2004. However, the importance of a 24-hour service remains as a significant number of people still use the service during ‘night hours’.
- 11 For the last 18 months, Lancaster have been asking callers whether they were happy to declare which Service they worked for. *Figure 2* provides a breakdown of this data.

<sup>2</sup> The trauma service can be provided by both a telephone hotline or by on-site counsellors being provided to assist individuals or groups.

<sup>3</sup> Day calls are recorded between 9am and 5pm and night calls between 5pm and 9am.

Figure 2: Service Breakdown – June 2005 – December 2006

Service	Percentage of calls
Social Care & Health / Adults & Community Services	38%
Education / Children & Young People Services	27%
Service Direct	5%
Other Services	6%
Not Specified	24%

- 12 The calls are logged under different primary categories. In the last two years, 31% of the calls were classed as 'Emotional' issues (up from 24% in 2004). Many of the calls about emotional problems are linked to anxiety, distress, depression or stress. However, some of the calls are recorded more specifically, for example, topics have included childhood abuse, addictions, phobias and suicidal thoughts.
- 13 The number of calls linking directly to 'Employment' factors has risen from 9% to 13%. There have been over 20 calls in the last two years linked to work-related stress. Other subjects include job dissatisfaction, bullying, disability discrimination, workplace relationships, disciplinary issues and sick leave.
- 14 There are also calls that are recorded against a number of other categories – many of these relate to marital, relationship or family issues. However, subject matter has also included bereavement, debt, sleep problems, worries over HIV/Aids, violence, eating disorders, caring issues and crime. There are also a number of miscellaneous calls such as inquiries about how the service operates.

### Current Position – Feedback & Opinion

- 15 We have again sought feedback from those who might have used the telephone counselling service in recent times. Of the ten users who replied, the vast majority advised that they found the service very supportive, provided practical support and beneficial. Several people commented that it was particularly useful to be able to contact the service at any time or make arrangements to speak to the same counsellor. In addition, work with two internal (employee) Stress Management Focus Groups<sup>4</sup> identified the telephone counselling service as one of the strengths that currently support employees suffering from stress.
- 16 The replies received from managers were more general, but comments were generally positive and usually expressed a view that the service should be retained. One or two comments were received indicating a preference for face-to-face counselling. Our Occupational Health Service may, following their assessment, refer individual employees for face-to-face counselling in certain circumstances – this service is not provided for the County Council by Lancaster.
- 17 The Adults & Community Services Staff Care function have also commented that when they have promoted the service to staff they have had positive

<sup>4</sup> Work being carried out to develop a Stress Management Toolkit in support of the Stress Policy.

feedback that people feel reassured the service is in place. They have strongly supported the retention of the facility as, for example, it provides an external option and has also proved useful to family members.

- 18 Turning to the trauma response counselling service, this was activated as part of our response to the Chester-le-Street Park incident where an inflatable exhibit escaped its moorings and killed two people. While there were some initial problems in setting up a support telephone line these were quickly resolved and the service provided was effective, efficient and professional<sup>5</sup> - bearing in mind the service is available for the general public as well as employees. It is felt to be rapidly accessible in an emergency situation and there is greater value for money through this payment structure. In addition, the service also provides an important supportive element in terms of any pandemic and Business Continuity issues.
- 19 From a wider perspective, the UK Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA) state that services of the type covered in this report address the “twin focus of employee well-being and organisational performance”. A recent study by the Institute of Work Psychology<sup>6</sup> highlighted that most of the UK’s top 100 companies have some sort of employment assistance programme as they are deemed to be a “good value, low-cost solution”. Guidelines following a Court of Appeal ruling in 2002 acknowledged the benefits of employment assistance programmes particularly in relation to claims involving work related stress – “an employer who offers a confidential advice service with referral to appropriate counselling or treatment services, is unlikely to be in breach of a duty of care”.

### **Current Position – Costs for Renewing the Existing Contract**

- 20 The current contract for the telephone counselling service was based on a total figure of £39,000 (plus VAT) for the two years, with an allowance for a Retail Price Index increase for the current year. There are no additional costs dependent on usage.
- 21 The trauma counselling support service for the last year has been based around charges for individual on-site support and group support:

#### ***Individual on-site support***

Half-day (up to 4 hours) - £450 + VAT + cost of counsellor / trauma responder’s travel per day;

Full day (up to 7 hours) - £650 + VAT + cost of counsellor / trauma responder’s travel per day;

#### ***Group support***

1 group (max 10 people per group) - £650 + VAT + cost of counsellor / trauma responder’s travel per day;

2 groups in one day - £950 + VAT + cost of counsellor / trauma responder’s travel per day;

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<sup>5</sup> The support telephone line was set up within an hour of the initial request and advertised over local radio and television.

<sup>6</sup> Research carried out at the University of Sheffield and released in early 2007.

- 22 Estimated charges for the activation at the Chester-le-Street Park incident are in the region of £1,500 – largely based around the setting up and usage of a separate telephone line.
- 23 The County Council have sought tenders from three organisations who provide employment assistance programmes. However, only one tender was received from the existing providers, First Assist. They have submitted a fee for providing the telephone counselling service for the next two years of £27,800 plus VAT (£13,900 per year)<sup>7</sup>. In addition, they have quoted the following rates for the trauma response service:
- Trauma Response Counselling Telephone Service - £78 per hour;
  - Trauma Response Counselling Telephone Service Set Up Fee - £250;
  - Trauma Response Counselling Service Individual On-Site Support - £92 per hour subject to a minimum of £500;
  - Trauma Response Counselling Service Group (up to 10 people) On-Site Support - £700 per day plus £300 for a second session on the same day.
- 24 Costs for the trauma service will continue to be funded by Adult and Community Services.

### **Recommendations and reasons**

- 25 This report has been included for information purposes and outlines the reasons and cost for the extension of the telephone counselling service and the trauma counselling service. The former has now supported many employees for ten years and feedback has mainly been very positive. It remains an important element of support within the Council's approach to the welfare of our employees and within the overall strategy of trying to reduce ill-health figures.
- 26 The trauma counselling arrangement helps us maintain our required role in responding to civil incidents of the nature described earlier – the service being provided for the community, as well as employees. The current arrangements are also providing better value-for-money than the retainer method with previous suppliers.

### **Background Papers**

Corporate Management Team: 1 February 2005 and 27 February 2007

Lancaster Group: various quarterly returns 2005-2006

Internal feedback from various correspondents

Helping Hand – article in 'Supply Management' (February 2007)

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<sup>7</sup> The reduction in cost is largely linked to the take-over of the service by First Assists Services Ltd and resulting economies of scale.

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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**Finance** – costs are shown as £27,800 for the telephone counselling contract over the next two years. Costs for the trauma response service depend on actual usage of the system.

**Staffing** - none

**Equality and Diversity** – Lancaster are able to generate publicity material in alternative formats, if required. Access to the service is provided to all employees of the Council.

**Accommodation** - none

**Crime and disorder** - none

**Sustainability** - none

**Human rights** – retention of the service allows us to demonstrate a ‘positive obligation’ in providing a service that protects and supports the employees.

**Localities & Rurality** - none

**Young people** - none

**Consultation** – there has been wide ranging consultation with users of the service, managers, OHS and Staff Care. In addition, the trade unions have been asked for their views on the development of the service.

**Health** – the provision of a telephone counselling service was a significant element in our achievement of the Bronze Health at Work Award.