

Delegated Decision

23 December 2024



Advice in County Durham Partnership Support Arrangements – Funding Request.

Joint Report of Victoria Murray, Head of Transactional Services and Steve Evans, Head of Corporate Affairs

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To consider DCC funded support arrangements for the Advice in County Durham Partnership for 2025/26.
- 2 To propose that funding is provided to enable an extension to the existing arrangements to support a review of the strategic and financial commitments of the partnership and the development of a sustainable future membership offer.

Executive summary

- 3 Effective information, advice, and guidance (IAG) services play a critical role in enabling residents to access financial support, navigate social welfare systems, access benefits they are entitled to, and address issues related to poverty and social inequality.
- 4 The current model of provision in the county is made up of a large field of IAG services and involves several providers from various sectors.
- 5 The Advice in County Durham Partnership has been in place for several years, providing a network of key organisations across County Durham who offer support and assistance to those needing access to a wide range of free, impartial, and confidential advice services.
- 6 The Advice in County Durham Board provides strategic direction to the activities of the wider network, shares information and intelligence on emerging issues, identifies projects and programmes to further strengthen the advice offering in the County as well as identifying, exploring, and promoting external funding opportunities.

- 7 The board includes representatives from the council, Citizens Advice County Durham, Durham County Carers; Durham Christian Partnership; Age UK and Durham Community Action.
- 8 The partnership model is seen as best practice and is recognised nationally for its collaborative approach and for ensuring County Durham residents have access to a wide range of advice services, facilitated using a referral portal.
- 9 Support for the Partnership is provided through the Partnership Support Officer (PSO) which is currently hosted and funded by the council. The original three-year fixed term contract for the post ended in March 2024 and was extended until March 2025 using residual funding from the original budget and reserves from Corporate Affairs.
- 10 This role is key to effectively supporting the current activity of AICD as well as contributing to future improvement and development work to further strengthen the partnership.
- 11 However, in recognition of the significant changes to the landscape in which the partnership is operating and the ambitions for the development of a sustainable future partnership offer, the Board have recently refreshed the partnership development programme. This has led to the initiation of several projects focused on building sustainability in terms of future resource and funding requirements.
- 12 Early planning work has identified that additional capacity is required to deliver this programme of work whilst continuing to deliver the wide range of business-as-usual support provided by the current PSO capacity as well as 'in kind' resource and capacity provided by all board member organisations.
- 13 It is therefore proposed that a funding contribution of £100,248 is sought from the Welfare Assistance Reserve to compliment wider National Lottery Funding and:
 - (a) extend the current PSO post for a further 12 months to maintain current levels of support whilst ongoing development activity is delivered and;
 - (b) complement existing partnership budget streams through the funding of additional capacity to deliver membership offer development work.
- 14 Progress updates on the membership development project as well as wider programme progress will be shared at regular intervals with the Poverty Action Steering Group with future membership proposals for the Partnership shared in Q3 2025.

Recommendation(s)

- 15 It is recommended that the Corporate Director of Resources, utilising the delegated powers afforded powers to the Corporate Director of Resources under Table 1 Paragraph 4 subsection D of the Council's Constitution and in consultation with the relevant portfolio holder approves the use of Welfare Assistance Reserve to
- (i) Support a proposal to allocate funding to extend the Partnership Support Officer role at DCC Grade 9 for a year until March 31, 2026;
 - (ii) Support a proposal to allocate further funding of £50,000 to enable and support membership development work via Durham Community Action on behalf of AiCD.

Background

- 16 Effective information, advice, and guidance (IAG) services play a critical role in enabling residents to access financial support, navigate social welfare systems, access benefits they are entitled to, and address issues related to poverty and social inequality.
- 17 The current model of provision in the county is made up of a large field of IAG services which involves numerous providers from various sectors.
- 18 The Advice in County Durham Partnership has been in place for several years, providing a network of key organisations across County Durham who offer support and assistance to those needing access to a wide range of free, impartial, and confidential advice services.
- 19 The Advice in County Durham Board oversees the activities of the wider network. The Board has representatives from the council, Citizens Advice County Durham, Durham County Carers; Durham Christian Partnership; Age UK and Durham Community Action.
- 20 The board shares information and intelligence on emerging issues, identifies projects and programmes to further strengthen the advice offering in the county as well as identifying, exploring, and promoting external funding opportunities.
- 21 The network has almost 200 member organisations and operates a referral process, via a referral portal, for ensuring that anyone can get signposted to the right advice and support, no matter where they initially present, thus providing a “no wrong door” approach.
- 22 The Partnership model is seen as best practice and is recognised nationally for its collaborative approach and for ensuring County Durham residents have access to a wide range of advice services, facilitated using the partnership referral portal.

Developments and Achievements since 2021

- 23 The Partnership is the only one remaining nationally from the original initiative and celebrated its tenth year in 2023. This is an incredible achievement and a reflection of the dedication of the network and staff. It is also evidence of the strong and respected partnership working that the County and its organisations are known for.
- 24 AiCD has also developed significantly in the last three years and has delivered a range of support to the network as well as an upgrade to the website and an increase in member organisations.

- 25 The wider network has regular events including ones most recently on Housing and Asylum Seekers and Refugees. These events are well attended and attract national and regional expert speakers on issues that are timely and significant within the sector. The consistency of attendance and interest is testament to the engagement work led by the Partnership Support Officer throughout the year.
- 26 Through the transfer of website hosting from Citizens Advice to DCC functionality has been further developed and expanded with all aspects of the site fully accessible and up to date. It also has a new functionality that enables people to book onto training and events, saving time and enabling partnership resource to be utilised elsewhere.
- 27 The partnership also continue to deliver a comprehensive training programme for members covering a range of subjects including debt advice and universal credit migration which has seen an increase in the number of sessions available as well as the volume of attendees.

Continuing and Proposed Support for Advice in County Durham

- 28 Key to enabling the recent developments as well as the governance, training, information, and maintenance of the referral portal is the support provided by the AiCD Partnership Support Officer.
- 29 The current postholder is employed within the Partnerships Team of DCC on a three-year fixed term contract which was due to end in March 2024, with residual and Corporate Affairs reserves funding utilised to extend this for a further year.
- 30 Other resources are aligned to the work of the partnership, both cash and in kind. This includes National Lottery of circa £60,000 of funding managed by Citizen's Advice Durham on behalf of AiCD which supports website development, networking, and events amongst wider programme delivery as well as council funded training delivery support of circa £40,000.
- 31 Also, in kind time allocated by Board members can be roughly quantified as ten hours per month through their attendance at Board and other meetings. This does not include the less regular events and ad hoc development and delivery work requiring Board member involvement.

Changes in landscape

- 32 The approach to the delivery of IAG services has grown organically over several years, and the socio-economic and welfare reform landscape in which services are delivered to residents has changed significantly over this time.

- 33 The advice sector has faced several financial challenges over recent years which have led to the cessation and / or reduction in historical funding streams. Additionally, changes brought about by welfare reforms, the impact of Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent cost of living challenges have all contributed to a changing landscape.
- 34 The council has recently concluded an Advice Review project, which was included as a key action within the Poverty Strategy and Action plan adopted by Cabinet in November 2022 and was initiated to provide an enhanced understanding of services available, current funding arrangements, as well as known existing demand and unmet needs to inform future service delivery proposals.
- 35 The review has identified that the IAG offer in County Durham is good, that the advice and support needed by residents is available and is accessible from multiple providers and that resident's preference is weighted towards services delivered by the various partners in this space rather than the council's internal offer.
- 36 The review validated that the county wide offer is heavily supported by the VCS is well used and serves the community well in terms of covering key demand. Furthermore, the rural geography of the County makes localised delivery of IAG services essential for accessibility, relevance, and community support.
- 37 However, rising costs of delivery and forecasted increases in demand mean the approach to the council funded model needs to change to protect the offer and ensure a holistic multi-channel service remains available and is easily accessible with a focus on face-to-face access in local communities.
- 38 Furthermore, potential changes in strategic direction from wider funders including the national lottery present additional challenges to the wider sector's advice provision in the future.

Development Proposals

- 39 In recognition of the significant changes to the landscape in which the partnership is operating and the ambitions for future development of the partnership offer, the AiCD Board has recently started work to refresh the partnership development programme (appendix 2). This has led to the initiation of several projects focused on building sustainability in terms of future resource and funding requirements.
- 40 The Board is committed to a sustainable model based on income generation and aims to move away from reliance on the council/shorter term funding streams in the future. During the recent development

session all Board Members discussed a variety of options that would support this approach.

- 41 A key project the Board agreed on is a review of the current membership offer. This was devised when AiCD was formed over ten years ago and offers all members the same support and access to training with no financial remuneration. The resources available to members of AiCD vary significantly yet all access training and events equally.
- 42 To develop a robust and sustainable model, additional resource would be utilised to carry out desktop research into membership models of similar arrangements before further, more in depth work is undertaken with a small number of these organisations to understand implications and necessary stages of implementation. Consultation with AiCD members would then be needed as to their appetite for a membership model before options were developed and agreed by the Board.
- 43 In addition to this significant additional programme of work, other elements of development have been identified, which include:
 - (a) Supporting the delivery of quality advice at first point of contact and reducing multiple referrals and avoidable contact.
 - (b) Better understanding the needs of network members and their clients and enhancing representation of the partnership
 - (c) Enhancing communication and engagement with network members.
 - (d) Enhancing lobbying and advocacy activity on behalf of the sector.
 - (e) Enhancing the current training offer to support delivery of quality advice at first point of contact and reducing pressure on the wider system.
 - (f) Exploring opportunities for the partnership to work in collaboration and increase efficiency and maximise resource and capacity in the sector.
 - (g) Understanding funding challenges and promoting access to sustainable future funding streams.
 - (h) Identifying the AiCD resource requirements of the future.
- 44 Early planning work has identified that additional capacity is required to deliver this series of work, whilst continuing to deliver the wide range of business-as-usual support provided by the current PSO capacity as well

as 'in kind' resource and capacity provided by all board member organisations.

- 45 It is therefore proposed that a funding contribution of £100,000 is sought from the Welfare Assistance Reserve to compliment wider National Lottery funding supporting the development programme to:
- (a) extend the current PSO post for a further 12 months to maintain current levels of support whilst ongoing development planning is delivered and;
 - (b) to fund additional capacity and resource to deliver the above development work.
- 46 It is recommended that the delivery of the additional work is overseen by Durham Community Action on behalf of AiCD.
- 47 This approach will ensure that the invaluable work of the partnership continues offering stability and consistency to all network members whilst critical development work is undertaken.

Financial Implications

- 48 The existing support role is a Grade 9 on the Council's pay scale which, subject to the pay increase yet to be agreed for 2025/26, is projected to cost £50,248.
- 49 The additional request of £50,000 is based on two possible options:
- (a) A Project Manager role based within the VCS of £39,700 plus on costs of 20% or
 - (b) A day rate of £750 plus 20% management fee.

Next Steps

- 50 Should the funding proposal be approved quarterly updates will be shared with PASG on the progress of programme activity with a proposal for future funding and resourcing proposals provided in Q3 2025/26.

Conclusion

- 51 There is a strong evidence base showing the success and need for the AiCD Partnership to continue, and to develop, to continue to meet the increasing needs of local communities in relation to advice and debt services.

52 Whilst a broader development activity takes place throughout 2025/26 to define the partnership approach of the future, maintaining the current offer is necessary to ensure the partnership continues in the interim and therefore funding must be secured. The funding required for the development will ensure the partnership is sustainable and fit for the future both in terms of its strategic and financial commitments.

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The provision of advice and support is made in relation to a range of welfare benefits, which are covered by both statutory and non-statutory regulation.

Finance

To progress the recommendations outlined in this proposal, there will need to be a transfer the Welfare Assistance Reserve to the Corporate Affairs budget as well as a transfer to Durham Community Action.

Consultation

The current postholder will need to be consulted on the proposals to transfer the post into the Council in accordance with the provisions of the TUPE Regulations and associated DCC protocols.

Consultation has taken place with the Portfolio Holder for Equality and Inclusion and the Corporate Director of Resources.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

NA

Human Rights

NA

Crime and Disorder

NA

Staffing

It is proposed that the AiCD Development Officer post is included as part of the Partnerships and Community Engagement establishment. All HR processes and procedures will be followed in line with this activity.

Accommodation

NA

Risk

The existing advice infrastructure in County Durham is good. However, ongoing development work is critical to maintain the quality and level of service currently in delivery and better understand the impact of a range of changes in context as detailed in the report.

Procurement

NA

Appendix 2: AiCD Development Proposals



AICD Summary Development Proposals 2025/2026

Aim

- Build a sustainable future for the Advice in County Durham Partnership.
- Harness the social value of partners.
- Draw on the expertise of members.
- Grow the membership to support hyper local provision
- Generate an income stream to further the principles of *‘No Wrong Door to advice in County Durham’*

Maintain

- Networking activity (including theme focussed working groups)
- Events
- Training
- Referral Portal

Review

Membership & Offer

To consider membership offer and how to build a suitable membership model

- Who is our membership?
 - Refine membership data/engagement
 - Invest in better understanding of AICD benefits and develop a clear framework of shared resourcing
 - Shared understanding of member needs
- What is our offer?
 - Define member benefits
 - Cost of delivering each element of membership offer (Networking/Training/Events/Working Groups etc)
- How do we resource it?
 - Structured membership model
 - Consider fees for AICD Membership / differentiated membership structure

- Generate 'expertise' income stream

Knowledge exchange and quality of advice provision

To consider how to best support access to quality advice

- How do we better 'convene' to assure quality advice/support through networking/training?
- How do we best deliver quality training for our members?
 - Shared expertise/fully funded/charging policy
- How do we reassert membership expectations?
 - define benefits, code of conduct and engagement
 - encourage/promote membership "ticks" or quality marks

Develop

- Shape a mixed and diversified funding model to support future sustainability
- Reassert expectations of members (Code of conduct, onboarding and stepping away...)
- Promote benefits of membership and build on expertise
- Relaunch new enhanced offer that meets the needs of all partners
- Measure the shared value delivered through AiCD