

Cabinet – 17 March 2021

Making Connections Walsall – contract extension

Portfolio: Councillor Garry Perry – Deputy Leader and Resilient Communities

Related portfolios: Councillor Stephen Craddock – Public Health

Service(s): Resilient Communities and Public Health

Wards: All

Key decision: Yes

Forward plan: No

1. Aim

- 1.1 To gain cabinet approval for the extension of the Making Connections Walsall contract for an additional one year which will ensure continuity of service to the residents currently being supported.

2. Summary

- 2.1. During the Covid-19 pandemic the Council has operated four community hubs through the Making Connections Work programme ('MCW'). The Council has delivered this service through community partner organisations and these hubs have been a critical part of the Council's response to the COVID-19 pandemic with the providers working with the Council. The hubs' provide a flexible approach and have adapted to the needs of their residents.
- 2.2. MCW is about tackling loneliness and social isolation, improve wellbeing and reduce preventable health and social care service usage. It takes a "strength based approach" to improve the social connectedness of older people across Walsall and also targets the social needs of all adults who are lonely and socially isolated rather than their social care or medical needs.
- 2.3. MCW is delivered through a hub and spoke locality model with each hub connecting residents who are referred to the project to other appropriate community based provision.

- 2.4. The Council is working with a wide range of partner organisations, in an attempt to help to minimise the spread of COVID-19. To achieve this, the Council has applied a resilient communities approach, providing civic leadership, to mobilise a public response through our vibrant voluntary and community sector, in recognised locality 'hub' areas. The approach supports shielded or vulnerable residents in self-isolation to stay safely at home and provides essential food to individuals and families in financial hardship, without building long-term dependency on the Council. It also aims to build long lasting connections between local residents, enhancing cohesion, neighbourliness, and reducing social isolation for vulnerable people.
- 2.5. In order to continue MCW for one additional year, the Council needs to provide £135,000 of funding for the 4 hubs and West Midlands Fire Service. This will ensure continuation of the programme, particularly during a time when referrals are still increasing and more support is being provided to our shielded and Clinically Extremely Vulnerable residents.
- 2.6. In addition Cabinet is being asked to allocate another £100,000 to support the wider MCW networks.
- 2.7. The hubs provide vital support to residents who may feel lonely, isolated, require help accessing food, collecting prescriptions or signposting to activities within their community. The Hubs also have strong links with Council services. West Midlands Fire Service role is to take initial referral calls which are then put on a system and referred to the relevant hub. .
- 2.8. As part of the resetting agenda within the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and as lockdown eases, the hubs will be better placed to refer residents they are currently supporting to attend community activities within their locality.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 That Cabinet notes the continuation of the Making Connections Walsall programme for the period 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 by extending contracts with the 4 hubs which are Bloxwich Community Partnership, Old Hall Peoples Partnership, Accord Age Matters and Manor Farm Community Association and also West Midlands Fire Service at a total additional cost to Council of £135,000.
- 3.2 That Cabinet approves a further allocation of £100,000 to support organisations in the wider MCW network. This money will be allocated through smaller grants in conjunction with the MCW hubs and will be used to improve social prescribing capacity in the MCW network.

- 3.3 That Cabinet delegate authority to the Executive Director for Economy, Environment and Communities, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Resilient Communities, to authorise any variations to the contractual arrangements for the services identified above, should this be required at any time during the term, in line with Public Contract Regulations and the Council's Contract Rules.
- 3.2 That a future report is brought to Cabinet on any future plans to continue the successful delivery of a social prescribing model in Walsall, which will ensure befriending, advice and guidance and referral to community activities is continued for Walsall residents.

4. Report detail - Know

- 4.1 On 10 February 2021 Cabinet approved the Council's continuing commitment to MCW. The initial MCW contracts were awarded in 1 July 2017 for 2 years, expiring on 30 June 2019 to the 4 hubs (Bloxwich Community Partnership, Old Hall Peoples Partnership, Accord Age Matters and Manor Farm Community Association) and West Midlands Fire Service. The project was then extended on 1 July 2019 for an additional year. Due to the pandemic and the increase in demand from residents, the contracts were further extended to 31 March 2021.
- 4.2 The Council has considered the following options:

Option 1 - Do nothing, which would result in a withdrawal of services at a critical time in the response to the pandemic. This withdrawal would result in the need to create an in-house service for supporting the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable, additional pressure on in-house services due to demand currently supported through MCW, increased pressure on residents during a critical point in Walsall's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the loss of a key part of our COVID-19 response infrastructure.

Option 2 - Extend the MCW contracts for an additional year to 31 March 2022 in order to allow sufficient time to undertake an appropriate procurement process to be completed 31 March 2022. **This is the recommended option.**

- 4.3 The existing MCW initiative has been expanded, to offer additional support for vulnerable residents and families who need to self-isolate during the COVID-19 emergency and has become a key link in delivering services. The four hubs are operating across the following areas:
- **NORTH** - Bloxwich Community Partnership, (Bloxwich East, Bloxwich West, Birchills Leamore, Blakenall);

- **EAST** - Manor Farm Community Association (Pelsall, Brownhills, Aldridge North, Rushall-Shelfield and Walsall Wood, Aldridge South, Streetly, Pheasey Park Farm);
- **SOUTH** - Accord Age Matters (St Matthews, Paddock, Palfrey, Pleck);
- **WEST** - Old Hall Peoples Partnership (Bentley and Darlaston North, Darlaston South, Willenhall North, Short Heath, Willenhall South).

4.4 MCW is a 'strength based' approach aligned to the Resilient Communities providing an opportunity for residents to gain appropriate support within their localities with appropriate signposting to services including statutory services and VCS support and community activities.

4.5 The locality nature of the model encourages local solutions appropriate to the demographic. MCW works with a network of organisations to support this local delivery. These organisations play a key role in the MCW response. If Council accept the preferred recommendation then a further £100,000 will be allocated to support these smaller organisations and networks.

4.6 The Community Hub buildings are not open to the public at this time. They receive referrals via email or via the Making Connections telephone line (which is answered by the West Midlands Fire Service). The main types of support offered by the hubs are:

- Befriending (telephone calls to people who need support or are lonely);
- Support to encourage vaccinations;
- Shopping (which residents pay for);
- Collection of prescriptions;
- Delivery of food parcels (only for individuals in significant financial hardship);
- Other types of support for individuals in crisis e.g. collecting and delivering of free school meals for families self-isolating, arranging emergency boiler repairs, welfare benefits and financial advice are also offered (where appropriate).

4.7 The hubs are being supported by a network of other community sector organisations, public and private organisations operating within locality areas. A team of dedicated volunteers are giving up their time to help and during the height of the pandemic Council staff were deployed and from other partner organisations to support the civic response. Bloxwich Community Partnership produced a video during the height of the first pandemic which showed the

variety of support that they and the other MCW hubs were delivering <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7QAuIL1rQM>

- 4.8 The hubs have taken a key role in actively supporting Walsall shielded residents which to date stands at just over 20,000. Residents are asked to register on a national Government system; their resident's details are then forwarded to the relevant hubs who will then make contact with the resident. The types of support provided is access to priority shopping slots, befriending calls, access to local food delivery and also the delivery of activity packs.
- 4.9 At the start of the pandemic, the most requested support was for food parcels. During March 2020 to August 2020, there were 6257 food parcels delivered to vulnerable residents who were supported through MCW. However, once residents were more confident in finding alternative ways of accessing food, the demand for services changed to befriending. There are many community organisations who have been supporting residents during the pandemic and still continue to do so. Walsall Black Sisters Collective CIC has supplied food parcels and befriending to residents within the South Locality. They have produced a video showcasing their work <https://youtu.be/FDFRMjpp6hA>

From 1 August 2020 to date the following services have been delivered by the hubs:

- Initial contact with 20,000 residents on the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable list;
- Follow up contact with 9611 residents on the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable/shielded list;
- 11550 befriending calls;
- 518 food parcels;
- 1070 activity packs.

This has reflected the change in demand over time from provision of food to befriending to support residents who feel lonely and isolated. A special gentleman who now volunteers at Old Hall People Partnership as a befriender is Ron. A BBC report was completed on Ron about the impact of loneliness and how through originally receiving befriending calls through MCW he is now a befriender making weekly contact with local residents. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-birmingham-55004753>

Appendix A highlights some case studies from MCW.

The programme was evaluated in February 2020 by Public Health which led to an evaluation event on 26 February 2020 which was attended by practitioners and

professionals. The evaluation identified that the project improved sociability, improved mental health, gave residents a purpose, kept them occupied and also improved their physical health. The project had supported almost 800 people and was stated as being a valued service which addressed loneliness and social isolation and developed lasting partnerships.

Council Corporate Plan priorities

- 4.10 This proposal supports the Council's response to the Covid 19 pandemic and the role the Council plays in providing civic leadership and mobilising the public to support our community response to Covid-19.
- 4.11 This proposal links to the Council's corporate priority 'Communities are prospering and resilient'. It supports the most vulnerable to be protected from avoidable harm, by enabling them to stay safely at home, and takes pressure off the NHS and social care colleagues. It will also enhance the quality of life for many people who are suffering ill-health and are socially isolated.

Risk management

- 4.12 MCW has played a key part in the Council's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a critical need to continue with the service and not to destabilise it at this critical point in the pandemic and any recovery period. The funding of another year of activity prior to a re-procurement process is a sensible approach in the context of a worldwide pandemic. The ceasing of the service would create high risk at a critical time in the recovery from the pandemic.

Financial implications

- 4.13 The report recommends that £135k is made available to award the 4 x community hubs and West Midlands Fire Service to ensure continuity of support to Walsall residents. In addition a further £100k is recommended to be allocated to fund the MCW network. The funding has been allocated from Control Outbreak Management Fund Covid grant.
- 4.14 The council has been allocated Control Outbreak Management Fund funding of £4.57m to the end of January 2021. The planned usage of this grant submitted to government in February 2021 includes the commitment to fund these costs in 2021/22.

Procurement Implications/Social Value

- 4.15 Procurement advice has been sought in relation to the extension of these

contracts. All procurement activity will need to be undertaken in compliance with Public Contract Regulations 2015 (the Regulations) and the Council's Contract Rules. Procurement and legal services will coordinate to ensure that there is a consistency of advice and approach.

- 4.16 The proposed contract variations will increase their combined value by £135,000. This will mean that the overall contract value will be £655,000 which will be below the threshold of £663,540 in the Regulations for the 'light touch regime' for social and other specific services (which these services fall under). This increase however does bring the contract value to over £500,000 which would make it a 'strategic contract' under the Council's Contract Rules, and therefore requiring Cabinet approval.
- 4.17 Regulation 72 of the Regulations sets out some specific conditions around contract modifications. As these contracts are under the threshold set out above, this regulation would not apply, it is important to note that the spirit of these regulations have been adhered to and these conditions have been fulfilled.
- 4.18 Procurement have advised that the proposed extension term of 12 months should be sufficient to enable the Council to continue to support its residents during the COVID-19 pandemic and also enable an effective re-procurement of these contracts at an appropriate time.
- 4.19 Where required, procurement will continue to provide detailed specific advice in relation any issue arising out of these contract variations and will ensure that any notices which might need to be published in order to comply with the Regulations and guidance published by the Cabinet Office are completed.

Legal Implications

- 4.20 This additional proposed extension was not provided for in the Contract originally. The extension will be implemented in accordance with legal and/or procurement advice, in a manner that is compliant with the Public Contracts regulations 2015 and the Councils Contract Rules.

Health and wellbeing implications

- 4.21 Taking a proactive approach to support vulnerable and shielded individuals to remain safe at home during the Covid-19 pandemic will reduce the risk of harm experienced by community members and take the pressure off the NHS and social care colleagues.
- 4.22 It is not in the public interest, nor that of the VCS providers, not to support the ongoing public or civic response to Covid-19 that has been mobilised through the hubs.

Staffing implications

- 4.23 There are no staffing implications arising out of this report.

Reducing Inequalities

- 4.24 MCW is responsive to the demands in its local communities. It appropriately signposts to over service providers including Food Banks and Council services to ensure support for residents is maximised to help reduce inequalities. An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed.

Consultation

- 4.25 Appropriate consultation will be built into the procurement process in readiness for a new MCW contract from April 2022.

5. Decide

- 5.1. Cabinet is requested to consider the content of this report and to note and support the recommendation as outlined in section 3, above. The options to be considered are:

Option 1 - Do nothing, which would result in a withdrawal of services at a critical time in the response to the pandemic. This withdrawal would result in the need to create an in-house service for supporting the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable, additional pressure on in-house services due to demand currently supported through MCW, increased pressure on residents during a critical point in Walsall's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the loss of a key part of our COVID-19 response infrastructure.

Option 2 - Extend the MCW contracts for an additional year to 31 March 2022 in order to allow sufficient time to undertake an appropriate procurement process to be completed 31 March 2022. **This is the recommended option.**

6 Respond

- 6.1. Extending the current contracts with the four hub providers and West Midlands Fire Service will allow MCW to continue until 31 March 2022 but in the

meantime further discussion needs to take place regarding the future of this project beyond this date.

7. Review

- 7.1. The arrangements with regards to the hubs and West Midlands Fire Service will be managed and reviewed in line with ordinary Council procedures. The monitoring of the expenditure will continue to be overseen by Resilient Communities.

Background papers

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Appendix A

1. The resident made direct contact to the hub; her family were in extreme financial distress. We organised a food parcel and some activity packs/toys for the children. Following conversations, over the next week and after a few calls we agreed a referral to welfare support so that some professional help could assist her family. She made contact to us a few days later to thank us for the support and that welfare had contacted and were supporting her. She said I am facing this head on now. The immediate crisis for food for her family was resolved and also a more long-term solution is being explored with welfare.
2. The resident was thrust into a situation of isolation and lockdown being in the vulnerable category having diabetes and 84 years of age. Initial contact discovered a number of worries:
 - He had a district nurse coming to see him regularly, but was unsure she would still come?
 - He had regular appts for Chiropody he was unsure whether and how he would be able to ensure his feet were looked after?
 - He has no family and was concerned about his food.

The only thing that he knew was that he would receive his medication, because that was delivered from the pharmacy. Carers were put in place and one of the carers even brought him their microwave, as she was concerned, he was not eating properly. Food parcels were arranged for him and provided befriending calls, he loved a little chat when he called to arrange his food parcel-especially the fresh bread, knowing he was diabetic we worked with him, tailoring a food parcel that would meet his needs. He was supported to access Munchies who now provide hot meals three times a week and he can't praise them enough, currently working his way through the menu and is chuffed with a main course and a dessert for a fiver. He has been helped with a delivery to the post office and to ensure that his bills are being paid by direct debit as he used to do them all manually. This provided great reassurance and took away a worry. The resident has said that his phone has been his lifeline. The combined efforts of everyone across agencies has ensured his medical, physical and wellbeing has been supported through this crisis has enabled Client 2 to progress through lockdown knowing he not alone.

3. A resident whose wife was in recovery following a long illness made contact. She was just starting to improve as the pandemic broke. Her husband shielded with her and they took many precautions to keep their selves safe. They managed to get priority shopping delivered however as the weeks progressed, they felt their mental wellbeing was being affected. They contacted Manor Farm hub for support, and we chatted about their interests and hobbies. They had enjoyed their garden but never had time to really dedicate to it. The feedback on their 'grow your own' pack has been great. It gave focus and something to concentrate on. They have set up a small area for growing their own vegetables. This has also encouraged them to spend

time out of the house, albeit in their own garden. The hub provided everything they would need to start their patch so no need to go out to buy, we even dropped them some extra canes as their plants progressed. To date we have delivered 76 Grow your own packs to residents in the east, including families, unemployed and shielded residents.

4. A resident who was referred to us was very concerned about the 12 week isolation and was panicking about how she would get her shopping done or food delivered. She was signposted to Walsall Black Sisters who delivered a food parcel initially, but have also kept in touch and fetched any shopping that was required. The client said that they were an absolute god send.
5. We have supported a resident with shopping, she suffers medical conditions meaning she wanted to self-isolate and felt she was 'putting on' her daughter who had young children and was fetching her shopping. She had seen the COVID-19 contact number and rang for support. She said that she felt she had regained some independence by using our shopping service as she was not asking her daughter and loved that she could pay over the phone, she even referred her sister who lived opposite her. Both ladies have used the shopping service several times, and have said the service made them feel in control again.
6. We recently had a man call to request support for his elderly father, he explained that he couldn't help him out financially as he had lost his agency employment due to the Coronavirus crisis. After further discussion we were really pleased to be able to help not only the father but also the man who rang due to his change in financial circumstances, he didn't realise he would be eligible and was very happy to receive support.
7. We have made good links with Rowlands Pharmacy, their branch based at Pinfold medical centre serves many of our North Walsall residents. On occasions where urgent prescriptions have come through and they have not had any delivery drivers available, they have given our number out directly. Several people who have called in these instances have called the service 'a life saver' and one lady in particular has said that she's found real peace of mind to know that we have been able to ensure her poorly husband gets his medication when there has been no delivery services available at the pharmacy.
8. A young lady suffering with long term mental health conditions that we have been supporting through our befriending service sadly informed our befriending staff that she had been in hospital after taking an overdose. This lady's prescription was ready to be collected and delivered by one of our WHG drivers at Coalpool Pharmacy. When we received the update from the befriending staff, we consulted with the pharmacy, who understood the concerns, were grateful to have been made aware and made the decision to deliver one tablet themselves to the lady every day, in order to ensure she was taking her medication safely. She is still being supported through our befriending service and has been taking her medication regularly and is starting to feel a little better.

