

**Briefing Paper : Overview and Scrutiny Member Working Group 19<sup>th</sup> October 2023****Item: Customer access and Support to Online Services and Role and Value of Maldon Citizens Advice****Author: Sue Green Assistant Director Service Delivery****1. Introduction**

Following a referral from Cllr Morgan Officers agreed to report back to the working group with more information, including information around customer processes and what customers with digital access can / can't do off-line.

**2. Referral From Councillor Morgan:**

The following is a summary of the referral and officers response is at 3. which it hoped will provide information to reassure Members.

“Following a visit to the CAB in June, concerns had been raised about residents who are unable to access computer facilities to complete online forms when applying for services such as housing benefit and council tax. Members are concerned that reports don't give a true picture of the work the CAB does in helping with this and collecting council tax. Members are keen to understand what is the financial impact of the CAB to the Council and how much income do they bring in that might otherwise be lost? If the Council couldn't support them any more, what would the potential loss be for the Council? “

**3. Officer Response****Customer access to online support**

3.1. Our Digital First approach ensures that wherever possible customers are supported to access line services. We know that being able be online provides many benefits for our customers, enabling them to stay in touch with family and friends, saving money as shopping online is often cheaper, being able to access services including health advice.

3.2. We provide support to our customers in a number of ways:

3.2.1. **Provision of a computer in the Council Offices-** There a computer available for any of our customers to use. This is in a screened area to ensure privacy. This is a great resource for customers that can use digital services but don't have access to a computer or smart phone

3.2.2. **Free Wi-Fi –** Customers who have a Smart Phone but do not have data can use free wifi to access our services online

3.2.3. **In person support-** Our Customer Service staff are able to support customers to use the computer in reception , or to navigate services on a smartphone including completing applications for joining the Housing Register, applying for Council Tax discounts and reductions, or claiming benefits. The computer can also be used by customers visiting our partners such as the Citizens Advice, Job Centre and CVS. Our contractual arrangement with Maldon Citizens Advice (MCA) also requires it to promote, encourage and enable Digital Inclusion as part of contract delivery.

3.2.4. **Supported access via telephone** – Our customer Service team can support customers over the telephone to help them complete online forms or use the Councils Website.

3.2.5. **Signposting** – we are working with to a range of partners who can support digital skills/ assist with access to online services –including the CVS, Essex County Council, Moat and Clairion Housing Associations, Fullbridge Church and Maldon Pioneers. Details are promoted on our website and our customers team promote these support groups

3.2.6. **Mediated access and additional support**– We recognise that there will be situations where a customer cannot use or access digital services, or where this is not the most appropriate method. These will often be our most vulnerable customers. In these situations the customers team are able to submit information on behalf of customers, to arrange for the customer to be called back to deal with the issue, or where appropriate to make an appointment to be seen in person.

3.2.7. **Providing paper copies of forms** – There will be exceptional situations where providing a paper version of a form is the only, or most appropriate solution. Our customer Team are able to send out paper forms where this is the case.

### **Maldon Citizens Advice**

3.3. For many year the Council has provided financial support to the MCA to deliver an advice and support service for our residents on a range of issues. This is a highly valued service and supports some of the most vulnerable in the community.

3.4. Since 2016 the Council has provided its financial support through a contractual arrangement. For 2023/24 the total direct funding to the MCA was £79,771.99.

3.5. In addition to the direct financial support the Council has also provided indirect support through provision of free accommodation both for the MCA staff as well as a dedicated customer waiting area and purpose built interview rooms and access to meeting rooms. In addition the Council also provides a telephone system to MCA at no cost as well as free parking

3.6. MCA delivers a range of valuable and support and advice to residents, and as stated at 3.2.3 it is also required to Promote, encourage and enable Digital Inclusion. Some of the advice services that it provides are:

- Debt and Budgeting
- Income maximisation
- Benefits including support for appeals,
- Consumer issues
- Employment
- Housing

- 3.6. The MCA is a registered charity and as such has a significant number of volunteers who help to deliver the service. In the report to the Strategy and Resources Committee on 7 January 2021 Officers recognised the value of that volunteering. At that time the MCA volunteering model had the equivalent of 12 full time staff (which had increased to 14.6 FTE staff during 2023) , however the same level of funding would only have enabled the Council to employ 2 full time staff, thereby providing significant value for money
- 3.7. The report also acknowledged that the MCA  
“supplements a number of our core statutory services, including debt advice and money management to our Council Tax Payers, and Housing and Homeless Advice”
- 3.8. There is no data available to establish the financial impact of the support that the MCA provide to our residents who are struggling with Council Tax and housing issues, as it would be extremely difficult to measure . However we are able to establish the value of the additional benefits that the MCA have been able to secure for our residents which is annually in excess of £1,000,000.
- 3.9. Whilst it would extremely difficult to quantify the level of income that the MCA directly brings to the Council, we are able to establish the high value of the additional income that is secured for our residents, and the significant number of residents that receive debt advice. This in turn is more likely to result in Council Tax being paid, and housing issues supported. We also know that it would not be possible for the Council to deliver an equivalent service for that level of funding.
- 3.10 On balance the MCA is delivering significant VFM, and this is tested and reported to Members as part of the process to seek approval for the contract to be reprocured each time.

#### **4. Opportunities for improvements to our Services**

- 4.3 We are constantly looking at how we can improve our services, and this commitment to delivering accessible services and improving Digital Inclusion are key aims set out in our emerging Customer Strategy which is due to be presented as a Member Briefing on 20 October 2023.
- 4.4 We have Officer working groups that are focused on improvements to our website, as well as improvements to our online forms and end to end customer processes.
- 4.5 Through valuable feedback from Members, customers and partners such as MCA we are able to identify areas for further improvement and development which are taken forward through these workstreams.

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