

Summary of Responses

Citizens Advice North and West Kent:

(Existing agreement is £95,000, suggested 10% reduction would take the grant to £85,500 per year for 4 years).

You explained in your email of 13 January 2020 that Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council (TMBC) is proposing a 10% reduction in local authority funding from £95,000 to £85,500 for the year commencing 1 April 2020. You asked for an outline of the impact this would have on the service we deliver and whether this would present significant difficulties for us or whether the reduction would be manageable for Citizens Advice in North & West Kent (CANWK).

Background:

In 2016, Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council (TMBC) reduced the funding for Citizens Advice from £111,000 to £95,000, a 15% reduction. As a result a new SLA was agreed with TMBC and we reduced the drop in service from four days to three days per week, whilst the telephone service was maintained at five days per week but reduced from six hours to five hours per day and we replaced the outreach services in the North end of the borough with a roaming supervisor on one day per week.

In the summer of 2016, TMBC relocated us to premises in Tonbridge Castle. Whilst the move has increased the office space available and allowed us to develop our specialist project work, it has been more difficult to provide suitable space for our clients, especially those with mobility issues, who drop in for advice. It has also resulted in a significant increase in our rental costs. The reason for this is twofold; the lease for the Castle premises costs £22,000 per annum and rises by RPI on an annual basis and in order to accommodate our clients with mobility issues downstairs at the Castle, we have had to rent additional rooms at an approximate cost of £8,000 per annum. The lease for River Walk cost £18,900 (heating and lighting were additional costs).

Present day CANWK:

We are very grateful for the funding TMBC has continued to provide over many years and understand the financial pressures that the council is working under. We are therefore keen to respond to your request by absorbing the reduction in funding whilst aiming to maintain the best service achievable for our community. The core funding TMBC provides is vital to our organisation in that we would not have access to the project funding without the basis of core funding.

Our finances are currently break even so any reduction in long-term funding will need to be matched by either a reduction in cost or an increase in project funding in order to maintain a breakeven position. Although our free reserves are forecast to be healthy at the end of this financial year, we will be reliant on our free reserves to cover the budgeted deficit forecast in 2020/21. Failure to achieve targeted project funding in 2020/21 will reduce our reserves even further.

At present our project funding consists broadly of 50:50 funding between TMBC and project funding. These projects consist of specialist advice services with the specific aim of reducing homelessness and maximising the income of our clients. Funding for projects is important to us in that it allows us to enhance our advice services and subsidises the costs of some of our local advice work particularly around debt, benefits, housing, homelessness and immigration. However, it does require meeting specific targets which can be onerous and sometimes detracts from the advice work we would rather focus on.

Finding project funding has always been problematic and in the last period, probably as a result of the uncertainties around Brexit, it has become more so. Whereas previously there were many opportunities to bid for work, this has for the most part dried up. Our two major projects around housing and immigration advice have only 18 months to go and continuation funding is uncertain. The recent Universal Credit funding (Help to Claim) is on an annual basis and we have not had confirmation it will continue after 1 April this year. Our funding under the Money Advice and Pension Service (MAPS) is highly regulated and as a result the delivery is costly. On this basis, although we will continue to explore all possibilities for future funding, we believe it is more appropriate and prudent, to look to reduce our costs to accommodate the reduction in TMBC funding rather than rely on finding more project funding.

Proposal:

Our initial response to the reduction in the grant is to explore potential changes in the delivery model to look for efficiencies. Currently we deliver through telephone, face to face in Tonbridge Castle and outreach work at Snodland and Larkfield. Face to face advice is limited by affordable room space at the Castle or locations across the borough. Outreaches are costly and provide a service to only a small number of clients

We propose the following changes to our SLA with you:

- A. Continue to maintain a six hour drop in service in Tonbridge but reduce to two days per week.
- B. Continue to maintain a five hour telephone service over five days per week.

- C. In order to save costs we will fully utilise the use of the rooms in the Castle, particularly the reception desk available for our use five days per week, provided under our lease with TMBC and spread our drop in service more effectively over the week. We believe by doing so we could reduce, and possibly avoid, hiring additional interview rooms at the Castle at a cost saving of £8,000.
- D. In order to provide a more effective service across the borough, we will replace our third day of drop in advice session at the Castle (6 hours) which usually benefits residents in Tonbridge with digital services for the same number of hours and in particular a telephone advice service for detailed advice dedicated primarily for those clients living in the north end of the borough or those who are unable to access the drop in service at the Castle.
- E. We would maintain our outreach service in Snodland which is separately funded so long as the funding continues. We will continue to provide an outreach service at Larkfield in so far as we can use our specialist advisers funded under projects to cover the face to face meetings with clients.

We believe that through C, we would be able to maintain the number of face to face clients without increasing our supervisory costs. It would require initially a restructure of staff duties.

The dedicated telephone advice service in D would help to improve our reach across the Borough and whilst it will create challenges over having sight of client's paperwork, we believe this can be overcome through scanning and arranging for collection / posting of documentation.

If TMBC agree to the operational changes described above, we believe that we can continue to support the same number of clients as we currently advise, although with more emphasis on telephone advice and less availability of face to face sessions. However, if a lesser grant reduction was possible (say 5%), we believe that these operational changes could provide a positive opportunity to improve efficiency and actually increase the availability of face to face advice for TMBC residents by around 10%, as we could use the remaining budget for additional room rental.

We will continue to look at these proposals over the coming weeks and examine all options. We would be very happy to discuss these proposals further or to present to your council members, if that would be helpful.

Age UK Sevenoaks and Tonbridge

(Existing agreement is £8,000, suggested 10% reduction would take the grant to £7,200 per year for 4 years).

Any reduction in the grant will cause us problems, as funding is declining in all areas, including fundraising. However I do understand the difficulty that you have.

Like me, my Chairman is disappointed at the proposed 10% reduction in funding, we will need to try to raise additional funding to cover this. Demand in the Tonbridge and Malling area is increasing and will endeavour to try to meet this need. The Trustees will in due course look at the overall funding situation, once KCC contract for Wellbeing has been finalised and what services need to be reduced or stopped. The outcome of KCC will not be known until the end of March 2020.

Maidstone and West Kent Mediation Schemes:

(Existing agreement is £4,800, suggested 10% reduction would take the grant to £4,320 per year for 4 years).

As you have suggested in your email the reduction of the grant funding by 10% is regrettable but not a surprise given the savings that all councils are having to make.

Year on year our funding is reduced not only by councils but by other funders. This is happening at a time when the need for our service is even greater than before. We are all aware of the increase in housing which in turn means an increase in the population. This is the population that will continue to make an increase in demands on all of the already over stretched statutory agencies and local government services.

More than ever before we are receiving referrals from agencies and residents that feel they have nowhere else to refer to because they don't meet the 'threshold' of the Police, NHS, Housing providers, Mental health team and schools, our services are needed. Maidstone and West Kent are envied by other areas of Kent who no longer have a Mediation service due to lack of support and funding, we make a difference and we will continue to offer a free mediation service to those that need it the most,

The certainty of 4 years funding is very welcome however the reduction of 10% for small community charities is bound to impact on our service delivery; all of our core costs will remain the same or even increase. Having said this, we will endeavor to continue to offer our services to the community and hopefully will not have to face a similar situation, that of Canterbury, Swale and Medway mediation, which was to close their service.

Imago:

(Existing agreement is £4,000, suggested 10% reduction would take the grant to £3,600 per year for 4 years).

With regards to the 10% reduction, we do appreciate there are reductions across the board, and are grateful that this has been kept to a minimum. We don't foresee that it will impact too severely on our delivery for TMBC. It is helpful to us to know going forward that the grant will be fixed for 4 years, thank you for that.

Involve:

(Existing agreement is £4,000, suggested 10% reduction would take the grant to £3,600 per year for 4 years).

Regards the 10% reduction, whilst this is not ideal, it is something we can manage, especially with the security of a 4 year agreement. I'm sure you know that we now have social prescribing Link Workers based in GP practices in across Tonbridge and Malling. We are hoping going forward there will be some synergy, so they can identify potential volunteers amongst their patients, who can support the local community. This should mean that we continue to get good numbers coming forward.