

EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE - 15 JUNE 2000

EAST AYRSHIRE WOMEN'S AID - CUMNOCK AND DOON VALLEY

Report by the Chief Executive

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To advise the Committee of the recommendations of the Evaluation Panel following the outcome of the investigation undertaken by the Solicitor to the Council and other outstanding matters identified during the evaluation process of the Cumnock and Doon Valley Women's Aid Refuge for Women/Children Project.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Policy and Resources Committee at its meeting held on 2 December 1999, agreed the arrangements for the evaluation of Urban Programme projects, including the Cumnock and Doon Valley Refuge for Women/Children Project, terminating in the financial year 2000/2001. The Committee also agreed to establish an Evaluation Panel to visit each project, with local Members being invited to participate and Local Committees having the opportunity to comment on the findings prior to the Panel reporting back to the Policy and Resources Committee.
- 2.2 At its Overview Meeting on 9 February 2000, the Evaluation Panel expressed support in principle for the services provided by the Refuge for Women/Children Project, but noted the need (a) to undertake a full financial appraisal to assess issues raised in relation to Housing Benefit; and (b) for an investigation to be undertaken by the Solicitor to the Council following receipt of an anonymous complaint.
- 2.3 At a subsequent overview meeting held on 17 February 2000, the Evaluation Panel noted that the investigations referred to in 2.2 above, had yet to be concluded and, as a result, agreed to recommend to the Policy and Resources Committee of 25 February 2000 that:-
- (i) support in principle the express for the services provided by Cumnock and Doon Valley Women's Aid;
 - (ii) that the Evaluation Panel be asked to continue consideration of the matter and to submit final recommendations following the outcome of the investigation;
 - (iii) that, for budgeting purposes, the Committee agreed that a sum of £49,934 be ring-fenced in respect of the project; and
 - (iv) that the Policy and Resources Committee receive a final report from the Evaluation Panel following the outcome of the investigation.

- 2.4 The Policy and Resources Committee of 25 February 2000 fully endorsed the recommendations of the Evaluation Panel as detailed in 2.3 above.

3. OUTCOME OF EVALUATION PANEL

- 3.1 The Evaluation Panel met for a further overview meeting on Thursday 8 June 2000 to consider a report by the Chief Executive on a number of matters detailed in Paragraphs 4 to 8 below.

4. INVESTIGATION OF COMPLAINT

- 4.1 As referred to in 2.2 above, an anonymous letter was circulated in January 2000 to several Members representing Wards in the Southern Area. This letter made various detailed allegations concerning the activities of the Cumnock and Doon Valley Women's Aid Group, including their financial management.
- 4.2 In particular, allegations were made in respect of the group's employment policy, the operation of its emergency out-of-hours service, its staffing levels and the hours of operation of the group's office, together with various financial irregularities.
- 4.3 These allegations were the subject of an extensive joint investigation by Legal Services and Internal Audit, which identified:-
- (a) certain operational issues - which it is recommended be addressed through the ongoing adjustment of the proposed Service Level Agreement (SLA) between the Council and the group; and
 - (b) certain weaknesses in the group's financial and cash handling procedures which have already been partially addressed by the group and the remainder of which they group will be expected to address in early course through implementation of various recommendations contained within an Action Plan prepared by Internal Audit.
- 4.4 Notwithstanding the above, the primary conclusion of the Investigation Officers is that their findings would neither require nor justify discontinuation of the financial support by the Council.

5. HOUSING BENEFIT ISSUES

5.1 Changes in the Housing Benefit System (Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Circular A47/99)

- 5.1.1 The issue of Housing Benefit was first raised in the project's final evaluation report prepared by the Director of Social Work and the Evaluation Panel subsequently requested a full financial appraisal to assess issues raised in relation to Housing Benefit. Following this, discussions were held by the Council's Benefits Section to establish benefit entitlement for the Women's Aid properties.
- 5.1.2 The recent change in the range of activities and costs, in relation to general counselling and support that can be included in the Housing Benefit

the Transitional Housing Benefit Scheme) will remain in force until April 2003 and, at which point, will transfer to the Supporting People budget administered by the Social Work Department.

- 5.1.3** The Social Work Department, together with Housing Benefits staff, have issued the necessary paperwork to allow both the Kilmarnock and Cumnock and Doon Valley Women's Aid organisations to submit details of support and counselling costs associated with the Refuges. Following receipt of this information, the Benefits Section will award Housing Benefit in terms of the guidelines set out in Circular A47/99.
- 5.1.4** A global figure of £84.14 per week per unit for the provision of general counselling and support has been supplied by Cumnock Women's Aid. However, this figure gives no breakdown of the charges provided, therefore it is difficult to establish the eligibility or the reasonable method of the overall charge provided.
- 5.1.5** Based on the 75% occupancy rate, this would result in an annual benefit award of £26,250.
- 5.1.6** A more detailed breakdown of the rent and service charges relating to general care and support has been requested by the Council's Benefits Section from Women's Aid to establish fully the eligibility and reasonableness of this figure.

5.2 Annual Rental of Properties

- 5.2.1** Work has been concluded by both Property Services and Homes and Technical Services to determine the most appropriate rental value for accommodation in each of the Refuges in East Ayrshire, both in relation to the nominal charge to service users and the rent due to the Council.
- 5.2.2** In relation to the Refuge at Auchinleck, the Principal Surveyor has indicated that a revised annual rental of £20,000 is appropriate, funded through a weekly rental charge to service users of £65 per room (recovered through Housing Benefit). This amount takes account of an annual occupancy level of 75% in the Refuge, which is considered to be reasonable given knowledge of past usage.

6. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- 6.1** The Social Work Department has highlighted that this project is an essential service which should continue to provide refuge accommodation, practical assistance, advice and information to women and children. Within the evaluation report, the Department highlighted additional staff requirements to "ensure the project is able to properly provide the required service", namely:-
- (a) extending the Children's Worker post from part-time to full-time; and
 - (b) the recruitment of an Administration Worker, graded GS3, to undertake the tasks of book-keeping/administration and payroll.

During the evaluation process, the Panel of Members agreed with the assessment provided by the Director of Social Work that there was a need for

these additional resources in view of the administrative difficulties which had been experienced by the project and the needs of the children involved.

- 6.2** The Refuge has been operational since September 1997 and is now at the stage where degree of refurbishment is required in order to replenish household items and furnishings and to redecorate the premises. An interim expenditure of £3,960 has been authorised to replace essential items such as bed linen, towels and kitchen equipment. Women's Aid have also highlighted the need to address the restricted accommodation and limited playroom facilities. It is proposed the staff work with Women's Aid to develop an appropriate funding package to extend the existing play facilities.

7. FINANCIAL ASSESSMENT

- 7.1** The background to the funding of the Refuge was set out in the Urban Programme Final Evaluation report (Ref 5f/4/95). Since that report was prepared, a review of the Refuge's general financial position indicated that the ring-fenced budget sum of £49,934 referred to in Paragraph 2.3 (iii) above, is in excess of the amount needed to maintain the Refuge's facilities.

- 7.2** The funding requirement within the current financial year of Cumnock and Doon Valley Women's Aid, including the Refuge and including the costs associated with the proposals set out in Paragraph 6 above, is **£94,096.60** (combined full year and part-year costs).

| | | |
|------------------|---|---------------------------|
| Employee Costs: | 1 Project Worker - AP3 (full-time) | |
| | 2 Refuge Workers - AP3 (full-time) | |
| | 1 Child Care Worker - AP3 (part-time) | £62,491.00 |
| | Extension of Child Care post to full-time | |
| | 1 Administrator - GS3 (part-year cost) | £14,137.60 |
| Property Costs: | Refuge and Women's Aid Office | £ 5,869.00 |
| Admin Costs: | | £ 6,831.00 |
| Transport Costs: | | £ 2,168.00 |
| Other Costs: | | £ <u>2,600.00</u> |
| TOTAL | | £ <u>94,096.60</u> |

- 7.3** The Social Work Committee has previously provided an annual grant to Cumnock and Doon Valley Women's Aid of £30,020. At the Social Work Committee on 2 May 2000, Members agreed to defer the amount of grant subsidy for 2000/2001, pending the outcome of the final recommendation from the Evaluation Panel.

- 7.4** An assessment of Housing Benefit subsidy based on a Refuge occupancy level of 75% has been carried out by the Council's Benefits Section and a level of income from this source is estimated at £26,250.

- 7.5** The Women's Refuge has an existing cash reserve of £16,951. In order to

identified in Section 6.2, the Evaluation Panel agreed to recommend to the Policy & Resources Committee that £10,000 of this reserve be “ring-fenced” as potential match funding for a future funding package. Should it not prove possible to assemble a funding package, it is proposed that this funding be called back into the Policy and Resources Grants Budget.

- 7.6** The recommendation for funding from the Council’s Policy and Resources Committee for 2000/2001 after consideration of the total funding requirement is £30,875.60. A full breakdown of funding sources is highlighted as follows:-

2000/2001

| | |
|--|--------------------------|
| Section 10 | £30,020.00 |
| Housing Benefit (75%) | £26,250.00 |
| * Policy and Resources Committee | £30,875.60 |
| Cash Reserve | £ <u>6,951.00</u> |
| (excluding £10,000 to be ring-fenced as possible match funding) | |
| TOTAL | <u>£94,096.60</u> |

* There is a reduction in the Policy and Resources Committee funding requirement for 2000/2001 due to an existing cash reserve of £16,951 which would be reduced to £6,951 if Committee endorses the proposal contained in Paragraph 7.5 above.

- 7.7** The funding sought from the Policy and Resources Committee for 2000/2001 represents a reduction of £19,058.40 and the level of funding previously ring-fenced by the Committee for this project at its meeting on 25 February 2000. Based on current requirements, the anticipated funding from the Council for the year 2001/2002 would be £44,654, this to be reported for consideration to the Council at the appropriate time.

8. SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENT

- 8.1** As required by the Council, the Social Work Department is seeking to agree a Service Level Agreement. The service provided through the Refuge would be an integral part of the overall Women’s Aid provision for the local area and incorporated within the Service Level Agreement. Initial work has been carried out on the development of this agreement and will be completed following the outcome of this Committee.

9. CONCLUSIONS

- 9.1** The Evaluation Panel noted:-

- (i) the outcome of the investigation by the Solicitor to the Council;
- (ii) that the Director of Social Work would present a report to the Social Work Committee making recommendations on the allocation of Section 10 grant;
- (iii) that the Director of Social Work was in the process of establishing a Service Level Agreement with Cumnock and Doon Valley Women’s

- (iv) that funding arrangements for Cumnock and Doon Valley Women's Aid for 2001/2002 would be reported for consideration to a future meeting at the appropriate time.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1 The Evaluation Panel recommends:-

- (i) the continuation of the Cumnock and Doon Valley Women's Aid and the provision of £30,875.60 funding from East Ayrshire Council for 2000/2001;
- (ii) that £10,000 of the Women's Refuge's current reserve be "ring-fenced" as potential match funding for a future funding package to extend the existing play facilities within the Refuge and that this sum be called back into this Committee's Grants budget should such a funding package not be assembled;
- (iii) that the Director of Social Work's proposals for administrative support and the extension of the Children's Worker to a full-time post as outlined in Section 6 of the report, is approved; and
- (iv) that the Director of Social Work, in conjunction with the Director of Finance, continue to keep the funding arrangements for the Women's Refuge, including the position in relation to Housing Benefits subsidy, under review and reduce the level of funding committed to the project as appropriate, this being subject to the Council's normal budget monitoring procedures.

David Montgomery
Chief Executive

8 June 2000
MM/SR

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

1. Social Work Department - Urban Programme Final Evaluation Report - Refuge for Women and Children, Auchinleck (Reference 5f/4/95).

Any person wishing to inspect the background papers relative to this report should contact Fiona Lees, Depute Chief Executive on telephone number (01563) 576103. Any person wishing further information on this report should contact David Montgomery, Chief Executive, on telephone number (01563) 576002.

Implementation Officer: Fiona Lees, Depute Chief Executive.

AGENDA