

## **ASCHOSC Community Meals Workshop: Meeting Note**

**Present:** Cllrs K Norman (Chair), A Norman, Gilbey, Peltzer Dunn, Buckley; Avril Fuller (LINK co-optee)

Philip Letchfield (ASC)

PL introduced the workshop, explaining that the community meals contract (currently held by WRVS) is due to finish in April 12. The contract can be extended to October 12, with an option to extend for a further 6 months, at relatively low risk of challenge, but beyond this it will be necessary to re-tender (or meet demand by other means).

There are a range of options for the service in the future, all of them in use by local authorities across the country. These include:

- A 'sign-posting/ model where the LA does not provide or contract a community meals service, but simply publicises the range of commercial options available to residents.
- A 'framework' contract where the LA contracts with a number of providers, but does not guarantee any provider a particular volume of work – customers are free to choose the provider they prefer, or to make their own arrangements.
- Re-tendering for a similar contract to the one currently in place (i.e. a single provider which makes its own arrangements with suppliers)
- Re-tendering, but splitting the contract between several suppliers (with each supplier responsible for a particular area etc)
- Re-tendering, but stipulating that the provider(s) must work together with local suppliers, so as to ensure the use of local produce/encourage the local economy etc.

PL told members that there were some very positive aspects of the current contract with WRVS: the service is of a good and consistent standard, customer satisfaction is relatively high. However, the service is subsidised by BHCC, the food provided is not locally sourced or prepared, and the service is not personalised (customers have no choice of providers).

Moreover, there has been a significant fall in demand for community meals over the past few years (although this has recently plateaued). This trend is likely to continue, with the move to personalisation of care seeing more people choosing to develop their own care solutions rather than being reliant on a bulk provider, and the increasing availability of a range of commercial products (supermarket ready-meals etc).

Members were informed that, whilst increasing consumer choice was desirable, it might also have drawbacks, as the cost of community meals

provision is typically predicated on having a very large volume of sales: the unit price is kept relatively low by the size of the overall contract. Since providing greater choice will inevitably see a reduction in activity for any single provider, it may inevitably lead to a significant increase in the unit price. It may also be the case that the current provider, WRVS, would be unable to function with greatly reduced volumes, as it has considerable fixed costs.

Members agreed that they would ideally like to see community meals provided locally from locally sourced fresh produce. They would also like to see the quality of community meals improved.

It was recognised that there was no locally based provider currently able to manage a contract of this size – particularly as provision needs to be absolutely guaranteed and available 365 days a year. However, members thought it might be feasible for a contractor to make much more use of local producers and providers. Members specifically mentioned City College in this context.

Members discussed the issue of subsidising community meals. BHCC currently provides a considerable subsidy, but plans to reduce this, potentially by restricting its subsidy to customers who meet the social care eligibility threshold – currently customers who do not have severe/critical need may still receive subsidised community meals - and increasing the charges for the meals to closer reflect actual costs. Members agreed that there were sound reasons for reducing this subsidy, although any action needed to be phased.

### **Conclusions:**

- Members agreed that, in the long term, the community meals service should provide people with locally sourced and provided nutritious, tasty meals.
- This long term aim may not be achievable in the short term, but the re-tender of the community meals contract should require bidders to work with local producers and providers in order to grow local capacity.
- Subsidies for community meals should be reduced, but this must be phased in so as to minimise the impact upon local residents.
- The possibility of a pilot scheme involving local producers/providers should be explored by ASC.