

## HEREFORD CITY COUNCIL

### FINANCE AND POLICY COMMITTEE 4<sup>th</sup> June 2020

#### PROPOSALS FOR A SECOND DONATION TO ROTARY IN SUPPORT OF THEIR FOOD PROVISION PROJECT

##### **1. Background and Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 At its meeting of 14<sup>th</sup> May Council resolved to refer the decision on a possible further donation to Rotary in support of their food provision project to this Committee for a decision by mid June. There was some brief discussion of whether it could be done more quickly than that, balanced against the mandate to try and obtain much fuller information on the wider picture of food provision projects across the city, and assess whether there were needs other than food provision that ought to be addressed.
- 1.2 As the Deputy Town Clerk is already involved in regular joint working with HVOSS and Herefordshire Council on a wide range of community projects and grants, that officer has lead on drawing together a wider picture. This is a complex task as the provision is something that grew very quickly as a spontaneous community response to a sudden and very large crisis. There was no strategy in the early days of Covid 19 response and many small local activities started, some continue to this day and are self-sustaining. The hub for information and requests for help is Talk Community set up by Herefordshire Council. This agency refers requests to appropriate local organisations, which might be the Food Bank, Rotary, a local church run or hosted group (especially in the South Wye area this has been a notable feature of community response). There is now a project brief for a thorough review which will inform Members of how the community response stands now and how it might be improved. Given the scale and complexity of that, a report from that work is not likely before mid July, so it cannot be relied upon to meet the Council mandate to this Committee to resolve the matter before mid June. It will nonetheless be of value in assessing future grant applications and for monitoring the response of the community groups to the gradual release of lockdown.
- 1.3 The Clerk focussed on direct communication with Rotary, something which had not been effective up to the Council meeting and had led to Members receiving information directly from Rotary and reports from the Clerk written without the benefit of direct discussion with Rotary. That situation has improved, and Rotary have supplied answers to some key questions which enables the Clerk to write this report with the benefit of their information. Wherever possible any claims made about their service, either from Rotary or other parties, have been cross checked and corroborated so that the information presented to Members in this report is balanced and factual rather than an argument for or against a particular proposition.
- 1.4 The two areas of most importance in the debate are the extent to which the Rotary compliments and supplements other food providers and how the evidence of need is assessed and verified. This report sets out what has been found in answer to these questions and confirms the sources of corroborative information.
- 1.5 It is always the case that when a situation is changing and there are many new factors (such as the many local groups that have sprung up), a search for information can reveal questions as well as facts. It is a similar situation to an explorer who can always see another hill to climb over to see what is on the other side, only to find another hill in a continuing range. At some point, to make a decision, Members need to decide that they have enough reliable

information. It is the Clerk's view that a reasonable body of verified information has been obtained and Members may feel this is a sufficient basis for a decision.

## **2. Clarification from Herefordshire Council**

2.1 Two officers have responded from Herefordshire Council to queries raised with them about the Rotary project.

2.2 Amy Pitt the Assistant Director in Adults and Communities Department (responsible for the Talk Communities Programme) confirmed the following points. A list is being developed of food providers, both groceries and hot meals, (this is the basis of the larger project referred to in the previous section). The government is also providing parcels directly to people who are shielded because of health issues that make them especially vulnerable. The Council (Herefordshire) have provided one off box deliveries until a suitable voluntary organisation is found to take up a regular commitment where it is needed. No direct modelling has been done in relation to how any disruption to food supplies might result in an increasing calls, however the Talk Community hub has recently been scaled back as need is declining, partly because regular voluntary sector deliveries are now in place for many people. Consideration is being given to modelling to longer term impact of Covid on deprivation, it is already known that those already in deprivation will be hardest hit in any recession or ongoing period of reduced economic activity. Herefordshire Council has not directly funded any voluntary groups but is doing long term work in developing a food sustainable county. (Since that was written some community groups have received both help in kind with HC staff being deployed as volunteers and direct financial support.)

2.3 Ms Pitt referred to a colleague for more detailed information and Lindsay Machardy from Public Health (precise role not identified) added the following. There is a robust system for recording families who are eligible for free school meals through a school census which is undertaken three times a year, assessed against strict criteria using an electronic form. The last census was in January and there were 2,770 children in the county recorded as eligible. This includes around 1,000 in the City. The summer census was cancelled due to the pandemic. The voucher scheme has been difficult to navigate (Members are referred to Councillor Hornsey's note on how to do this which suggests there is indeed an issue here). In summary, Ms Machardy stated that:

Rotary have liaised with local food banks to ensure there was no duplication of effort

They have liaised with public health to ensure healthier options are available to encourage self-reliance, recognising that this can't be done in a one off delivery

Rotary have provided an opportunity to check in with families (albeit at a safe distance)

They have an efficient and responsive service and good warehousing and distribution

They are trustworthy

They have a system that could support families through the summer holidays

2.4 Rotary have been able to add updated information on these points. The schools contact the families and conduct a welfare assessment (this is the census referred to above). If the families are waiting to hear about benefits or there have been sudden changes the schools can refer

them to Rotary and do. Rotary accept the schools' professional judgement and do not take self-referrals.

- 2.5 In summary it seems there is evidence to justify a belief that the service provided by Rotary is responding to need reported through reputable public bodies (the schools) who are relying on information from a census and then by personal contacts with other families whose economic situation may change at very short notice, and with whom the schools have ongoing and quite well informed contact. There is no mechanism for a formal means test, but nor is there for any other food provider.

### **3. Liaison and Co-operation with the Foodbank**

- 3.1 This was an area of considerable uncertainty at the time of the initial donations to both bodies and the Salvation Army, agreed by Council at the beginning of April. It was also an area of persistent questioning when Council reviewed Rotary's second application for funding.
- 3.2 Rotary have asserted that there is no competition between the two organisations, no cross-over of client groups and no desire to take over or replace. They have referred to both donations from individual Rotarians (which is a personal matter and not entirely relevant here) and from the organisation itself to the Food Bank and to help in kind.
- 3.3 The Food Bank have confirmed two key elements of this. Rotary did make a financial donation of £500 on 1<sup>st</sup> April which was donated in lieu of a cancelled Rotary dinner and have made donations in the past to support the Food Bank. The Food Bank have also confirmed that at a time of particular difficulty in procuring particular items, notably tinned meat, Rotary offered and delivered some assistance through one of their member's business connections to arrange supply. In effect they acted as purchasing agents for the Food Bank and were reimbursed. That offer of procurement assistance remains open, but has not been needed more recently as the supply chains are in better shape now than they were in early or mid April. This there is corroboration that both donations and support in kind through procurement assistance has been provided.
- 3.4 Food Bank suggested a joint operation whereby Rotary managed the procurement and raising of donations and the Food Bank handled the packing and distribution. This was not agreed.

### **4. Other Food Providers**

- 4.1 This is a rapidly changing picture and there has been some contraction since the epidemic and lockdown started. A major voluntary provider operates out of St Martin's Church co-ordinated by a local resident and harnessing volunteers to cook and prepare food and volunteer drivers to deliver 200-220 hot meals a day. Until recently this was a two-course meal, but financial difficulties mean that, at least for a while, it will be one main course only. A second similar provider operating out of the Spread Eagle and Little Dots café has ceased operating, either because of funding or they perceived the need was no longer there. These projects are quite different from a monthly drop off of key groceries which is the core of the Rotary project.
- 4.2 The work referred to in the introduction to this report about a longer term review of how all the various organisations were formed, or simply grew, and how they were co-ordinated (or not co-ordinated) will inform the future awarding of funds to new or ongoing projects. It may also lead to a framework being developed for small local groups to work within in the event of any future crises, learning from experience of the community response to both floods and epidemic. This is not in place yet, and certainly was not in place in April when Rotary started

their operation. It would therefore be unreasonable to judge them in terms of how they worked within a framework for co-ordination which has still not been fully settled. The Talk Community hub was a rapid response and a largely successful one, in gaining information about needs and trying to make sure local groups were guided to where they could do the most good. Many local groups rely on this for their referral, Rotary use a discreet network based on the schools as described above.

- 4.3 Clearly there is work to do to inform the context of future decisions about funding but that is not a factor in a decision now about Rotary. Nor is there any possibility that information will emerge soon that would justify a short delay in making a decision on Rotary. It is likely to be mid July before the map of community activity is complete, and even then it may need constant revision to keep it up to date as lockdown is released.
- 4.4 The summer holidays are likely to be difficult for families especially if they may be without food vouchers. Rotary wish to continue the scheme while the need remains which is likely to be until there is a full school return which will not happen before September.

## **5. Other Sources of Funding**

- 5.1 Rotary have clarified their position on this somewhat since the Council meeting. £10,000 will enable continuation of the service at a rate of 400 parcels per month through to the end of August. The reference to 800 parcels in earlier reports refers to the funding that was in place for an earlier stage of the operation. This is an area where the lack of communication between Rotary and Council officers before the Council meeting was unhelpful. Rotary have had a grant of £10,000 from the Lottery and, if numbers remain as they are, they can continue to the end of July. There is no other source of funding identified so continuation into August would depend on the application to the City Council being successful. There will be no use of City Council funds outside the City, nor to any groups other than the school referrals. The veterans support alluded to at Council was confirmed as funded by a ring fenced donation specifically for that purpose.
- 5.2 The City Council funding goes entirely on food provision. Administration and running costs are met by personal donations from Rotarians.

## **6. Future Decisions and Governance**

- 6.1 As a result of the Covid 19 outbreak and its impact on the local community, and as a result of the disruption to normal Council working from the same cause, special arrangements have had to be made for decision making. Initially this was through delegated decision making by the Clerk, supported by email consultation and polling of Members' views. Now we are able to call meetings by Zoom, but the calendar has been disrupted and special meetings to discuss single urgent issues have been called. This is entirely appropriate to respond to urgent community need and the Council should be proud of its ability to flex its normal arrangements to respond to those needs.
- 6.2 Nonetheless, the disruption to normal decision making has been problematic at times, and certainly a Council meeting called to discuss one issue that is not able to come to a final decision because of a lack of necessary information is not a successful one. The referral to this committee was for good reason and was certainly better for Rotary than an outright rejection or a referral to the next Council meeting due on 23<sup>rd</sup> June.

6.3 It would not be reasonable to remain on “emergency” decision making now the epidemic is a well established fact and the country is moving slowly and cautiously towards a return to something more like normality, although the pace and nature of that change is far from certain. The Council has a well established grants procedure and a committee with delegated authority to make grants of up to £3,000, or to recommend larger grants to Council. That Committee is due to meet by Zoom on 9<sup>th</sup> June and will be discussing a wide variety of items, including some grants. It would therefore be appropriate to conclude the emergency phase of donations by special meeting and bring the wider issue of Covid 19 response and ongoing community support back into the remit of the Committee that competently leads on this through the grants process. The recommendation set out below reflect this.

## **7. Conclusion**

7.1 There is a body of corroborated evidence upon which Members may feel they can ground a well considered decision. Further delay is unlikely to improve that body of evidence significantly. Council asked for a decision by mid June but if it can be given earlier without compromise to the quality of that decision it would be of great benefit to Rotary and those who rely on their project to have that assurance.

## **8. RECOMMENDATIONS**

**8.1 That the Committee accepts that there is now sufficient corroborated evidence upon which to safely ground a decision.**

**8.2 That no more applications from any source for donations be treated as emergency matters and that all applications for ongoing or new financial support on any matter related to the Covid 19 outbreak from external organisations be channelled through the grants procedure and considered by Community Development Committee.**

**8.3 That a definitive and final decision is made on the application of Rotary for a further £10,000 to enable their food provision project to continue until the end of August.**

**8.4 That if a further donation is made, Rotary continue to publicise this through inserts into the food packages confirming the City Council funding together with any wider publicity thanking donors during or at the end of the scheme.**

**8.5 That Rotary be asked to provide a detailed report at the end of the project to confirm how the Council funds were used.**

Steve Kerry

Town Clerk