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| <b>Report to:</b>           | Cabinet   | 12 <sup>th</sup> March 2024 |
| <b>Lead Cabinet Member:</b> | Cllr John Batchelor – Lead Cabinet Member for Housing                             |                             |
| <b>Lead Officer:</b>        | Peter Campbell – Head of Housing  |                             |
| <b>Key Decision:</b>        | Yes<br><br>The key decision was first published in the January 2024 Forward Plan. |                             |

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## **Lifeline Service (dispersed scheme) and the financial impact of the digital changeover**

### **Executive Summary**

1. The council operates a Lifeline service that enables elderly and vulnerable residents to remain in their home and provides reassurance for themselves and their families, as a means of raising help in the event of an emergency.
2. There are two factors that are having an impact on the lifeline service. Firstly, the change over to digital telephone lines and the analogue units not being fully compatible with these, requiring new equipment. Secondly, an ongoing decline in numbers using the service.
3. The current income levels do not cover the current costs of the service. Added to this will be the cost of replacement units, resulting in the need to either increase the charges to our customers or for the Council to subsidise the scheme. Even if these arrangements were put in place, the ongoing trend of reducing numbers will continue to be a risk to the ongoing viability of the scheme.
4. Consultation has taken place with linked services that may be impacted by this decision. There is concern about losing the Lifeline service due to the level of service provided by the current team and the fact it is locally based.

## **Recommendations**

5. Cabinet approves the recommendation that we bring the Dispersed Lifeline service to an end.
6. It is also recommended, subject to above, that the proposed increase to the fees for 2024/25, as agreed in the Cabinet report from 5<sup>th</sup> December 2023, are not activated so that colleagues can focus on assisting customers to find an alternative supplier.
7. We propose a three-month notice period for bringing the service to an end, so that our customers have sufficient time to find another service and we can offer help and assistance where needed.

## **Details**

8. The council operates a Lifeline service that enables elderly and vulnerable residents to remain in their home and provides reassurance for themselves and their families, as a means of raising help in the event of an emergency. Our equipment is provided by Tunstall, and we have a separate contract with Careium for the call monitoring. There is a dispersed scheme which provides units to customers residing in any tenure across the district, and our sheltered housing residents can also be provided with this service, which is budgeted for separately. This report relates to the dispersed scheme only.
9. The Lifeline service has been planning for the digital changeover to ensure the same service can be delivered. Unfortunately, over time the advice we have received has changed.
10. In addition to this there is an ongoing trend of less demand for our service due in part to similar services that can be provided at a more competitive price or due to alternative technology that is being chosen by families.

## **11. Existing analogue units**

12. The majority of units we currently use are analogue units and we were advised that they would be compatible as they would continue to work with an adapter that Open Reach or the telephone provider would provide.

13. Open Reach are now not supplying these as they are not considered to be reliable.
14. We contacted Openreach to ask for confirmation of their position. Openreach has advised that they do not recommend the use of ATAs (Analogue Terminal Adapters) either provided by the Communications Provider (SKY, TalkTalk, BT etc) or independently attached units, as these do not give the same level of performance as when used on the existing network. They have had a number of Telecare Suppliers into their Test Lab and the results have indicated there are risks associated with taking analogue equipment and trying to make it work.
15. Tunstall has carried out testing and they feel the units will work however, there is no back up in the event of a power cut. We feel this is an unacceptable risk.
16. We currently have 664 analogue units in use (January 2024) within the dispersed scheme.

## **Reasons for Recommendations**

17. There are two factors that are having an impact on the lifeline service:
  - a. The existing analogue units are not fully compatible with digital networks. This may put customers at risk who depend on the service in an emergency. Changing over to the digital units will be expensive for the service and result in increased fees that are uncompetitive or will require subsidising by the Council.
  - b. There is a decline in the number of service users, with people either shifting to new suppliers, or looking to other technology such as Amazon echo devices. This is making the ongoing viability of the service a risk.
18. The final option therefore is to consider ending the service with customers being directed to other providers.
19. We have consulted with services who regularly refer to the service or are linked to the service such as the County Council and health prior to taking this final decision.
20. We also propose not increasing the fees for 2023/24 as set out in the fees and charges report unless the service continues. This will prevent officer time being taken up dealing with this whilst the service is being brought to an end and seems unjust to customers when their service is ending.

21. We would like to provide as much help and assistance as possible to our current customers to help them to secure arrangements with an alternative service. We will provide a list of other service providers, along with details of the service they offer. As the majority of other services post out their equipment, along with installation instructions, our team can be on hand to offer assistance with this as well as explaining the other services available.

## **Options**

### a. Continue with existing units:

22. Based on the advice received we cannot guarantee these units will work following the digital changeover, which will put clients at risk in often emergency situations.

23. Analogue units can continue to be used with landlines.

### b. Purchase of digital units:

24. Lines are being swapped to digital when faults are detected as well as through the roll out on an area-by-area basis. To date we have tried to install 5 units, all of which have been problematic due to the need to pick up a mobile signal. All were resolved by finding an appropriate location for the unit except one where it was just not possible to pick up a signal within the property.

25. It is anticipated that the change to digital will be gradual (up until 2025) and therefore all units do not have to be swapped in one go. Unfortunately, it is not possible to get a schedule of the dates the areas will be changed as the communication providers will do this at their own pace. However, the full process should be completed in 2025.

26. The cost implications of this changing to digital units are outlined below.

### c. End the service:

27. Due to the risks of continuing to use the analogue units, and the cost implications of changing all units to digital units, added to the declining numbers, another option is to no longer provide this service.

28. We have investigated whether we could make an arrangement with another provider which our clients could transfer to and have reassurance of a continued favourable rate. However, such an arrangement would constitute a

Concessionary Services contract and we would need to follow contract regulations and TUPE obligations would apply.

29. We can provide our clients with a list of alternative suppliers for them to contact directly, along with details of the services they offer.

## **Implications**

### **Financial and Fraud Risk**

30. At the moment we are contracted to Tunstall through a Framework Agreement, for the equipment, however, the likely value of a full replacement would also require a fresh tender.

31. We have increased the fees for the Lifeline service for this year and had planned to next year, however, this is based on existing running costs and does not take into account the need to change to digital units.

32. The lifeline service numbers are reducing, which will impact the financial feasibility of the scheme.

33. The call monitoring contract is due to go out to tender – it is anticipated that the charges per contact will increase adding further costs to the service.

34. Digital units will require a sim card/ connectivity cost – up to £60 per year.

35. The cost of a digital unit (from Tunstall) is £199.

36. Existing cost of the dispersed scheme: The current income levels do not cover the costs of the service, even without the need to change the equipment. During this current year there is the potential of an overspend of £27,234. (This does not include the cost of any new equipment, as no purchase has been made to date this year). Whilst we can increase the fees this will have an impact on the declining numbers, as there are cheaper alternatives as well as other technology that families are choosing to use. In addition to this we anticipate that the costs of the call monitoring service will increase when this contract is retendered.

37. Existing cost of the service – sheltered scheme: The costs of providing a Lifeline Service within the Sheltered housing schemes are budgeted for within the Sheltered Housing budgets, which form part of the Housing Revenue account. This does not form part of this report.

38. Cost implications of replacement digital units (January 2024)

|  |                                    |
|--|------------------------------------|
| Number of units (Jan 2024)                     | 664                                |
| Cost of replacing digital units                | £132,136                           |
| Per year over 3 years                          | £44,045                            |
| Annual budget for equipment                    | £12,500                            |
| Additional annual costs (per year for 3 years) | £31,545                            |
| Current charge (fee per client per week)       | £4.75                              |
| Additional fee (per client per week) required  | £0.91                              |
| Connectivity charge (£60 per client per year)  | £1.15                              |
| Total fee required to cover costs              | £6.81 per week<br>£29.51 per month |

Summary: Total additional costs for digital units: £31,545 per year x three years.

39. This would either need to be subsidised by the Council or accounted for within the customer fees.

40. To cover this the weekly charges would need to increase from £4.75 per client per week to £6.81 per week/ £29.51 per month\*

41. \*In addition to the costs of changing the units to digital, higher costs are also expected in relation to call monitoring and due to a further decline in overall numbers, which will have further impact on the weekly charges for the service.

42. Budgetary implications for the dispersed scheme:

| Year              | (Under)/ overspend |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| 2022/23           | (£1,638)           |
| 2023/24           | £27,234 estimated  |
| 2024/25 – 2026/27 | £58,779 estimated  |

43. The above table shows the impact on the budgets of the current dispersed Lifeline Service. The income within the service no longer meets the costs resulting in an overspend from this year. The figures for 2024/25 onwards include a combination of the overspend based on existing running costs and the cost of replacement equipment, if fees are not increased.

44. Fees charged by other Lifeline service providers:

- Life Connect 24 - £14.99 - £18.99 a month.
- Age UK Lifelines - £21.24 monthly.
- Saga - £19.14 a month.
- Carelines - £11.99 - £19.99 per month

## **Staffing**

45. Detail included in Appendix B – Exempt Information.

## **Risks/Opportunities**

46. Risk – There is considerable risk in continuing with the service, due to declining numbers, and the costs of providing new equipment. Any increase in fees is likely to result in a further decline in numbers which will continue to make the service financially unviable.

## **Health and Wellbeing**

47. The Lifeline service enables elderly and vulnerable residents to remain in their home and provides reassurance for themselves and their families, as a means of raising help in the event of an emergency.

## **Consultation responses**

48. Informal consultation is taking place with the staff members effected. Formal consultation will begin once approval to end the scheme is in place.

49. Consultation has also taken place with other services within the district that will potentially be impacted by this decision.

50. Six responses to the consultation were received. From these responses 4 services regularly refer to our Lifeline service.

51. Responses in Appendix 1 show there is some concern about losing the South Cambridgeshire service due to the level of service provided by the current team and the local nature of this. There is also an emergency response service (ERS) linked to the scheme. Should a customer need help or has had a fall and is not hurt, the ERS can respond in a shorter time with lifting equipment instead of calling an ambulance. These arrangements may not be available with other lifeline services, although enquiries are being made to check.

52. As part of the consultation, we also asked if there was any additional funding available (previous discussions have also taken place with the County and Health). Some of the Parish Council's already fund the service for some of their residents, however, are not able to extend on the provisions they have available for this. No other funds are available.

## **Appendices**

Appendix A: Consultation responses

Appendix B: Exempt Information (exempt – not for publication by virtue of Paragraph 4 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972).

### **Report Author:**

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