

Report to:	RESILIENT COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Relevant Officer:	Adam Pearson, Infusion Service Manager.
Date of Meeting	9 June 2016

INTRODUCING INFUSION

1.0 Purpose of the report:

1.1 To provide an overview of the Infusion research and consultation service now based at Blackpool Council.

2.0 Recommendation:

2.1 To consider the new arrangements for Infusion, the work it delivers and its potential for improving the quality of research and consultation in the area.

3.0 Reasons for recommendation:

3.1 To ensure Members are aware of the work of Infusion, how it operates and the value it is adding and could add to the organisation in order to undertake effective scrutiny.

3.2a Is the recommendation contrary to a plan or strategy adopted or approved by the Council? No

3.2b Is the recommendation in accordance with the Council's approved budget? N/A

3.3 Other alternative options to be considered: N/A

4.0 Council Priority:

4.1 The relevant Council Priorities are 'The economy: Maximising growth and opportunity across Blackpool' and 'Communities: Creating stronger communities and increasing resilience.'

Infusion is an income generating service within the Council with the potential to grow its offer over time, to improve local research capacity and quality and to create (or protect) more jobs within the Council.

One of the primary functions of Infusion is to gather the views and perceptions of local people and stakeholders to inform public service delivery and involve them in the Council's decision-making processes.

5.0 Background

5.1 Since 2004 Infusion operated as a local authority research and consultation partnership hosted at Pendle Council, comprising of the East Lancashire district councils and the NHS East Lancashire CCG. These organisations effectively 'subscribed' to research and consultation services through an annual contribution. Blackpool Council joined the partnership in 2013, initially to improve corporate consultation in the organisation at a time of staffing reductions. Since this time, Infusion has been delivering a range of consultation and research projects across Blackpool Council, including:

- Consultation on Public Space Protection Orders in the summer of 2015 with over 1,000 responses (including 750 street interviews)
- Programme of consultation on changes to library opening hours in late 2015, with over 650 responses from library users and the wider public
- Consultation on the Council Plan in 2015 through a combination of online, paper-based and face-to-face methods
- Illuminations visitor survey in 2015 with over 800 street interviews to inform ongoing evaluation of the LightPool project
- Delivery of a research and engagement project into perceptions of Blackpool town centre in 2014, with over 1,000 responses covering a range of methods

5.2 Over recent years Infusion has increasingly focused on undertaking commissions for other Lancashire councils outside of the partnership, in an effort to compensate for reducing subscription levels from the East Lancashire district councils. As a result, Infusion extended its reach in areas of the county including Blackburn with Darwen, Preston, Wyre, Chorley, West Lancashire and Lancaster, with particular success delivering staff surveys, resident surveys and budget consultations.

5.3 In an effort to realise the potential of the service and secure its long-term sustainability, a review was commissioned through the Local Government Association Productivity Expert Programme in 2015. A commercial consultant worked with the service manager and partners and identified expansion opportunities were the service to transfer to a larger organisation. After considering a proposal from Blackpool Council, Infusion partners unanimously agreed to transfer the service to Blackpool from January 2016.

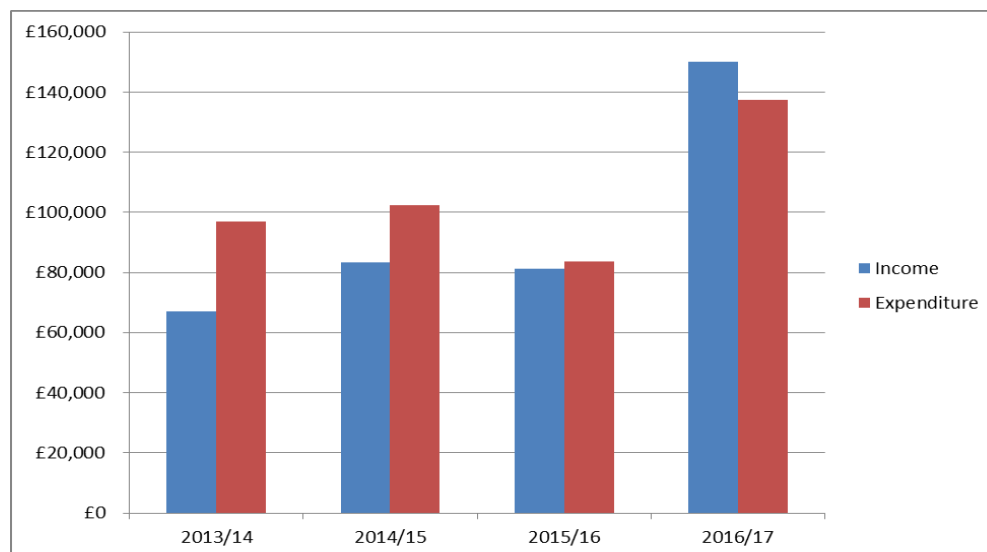
6.0 Infusion at Blackpool

6.1 Infusion continues to offer a range of research and consultation services to Blackpool Council services and other public sector organisations, including:

- Range of surveys including online, postal, face-to-face/ street and telephone for a variety of audiences, both internal and external
- In-house fieldwork resource for primary research in Blackpool and across the Fylde Coast (street interviews)
- Focus groups and other qualitative research
- Consultation and research training

6.2 Operating on an entirely income generating model, Infusion ensures both Blackpool Council departments and other public sector organisations have access to value-for-money, cost effective research services as and when they need them. Since January, demand for Infusion's services has continued to grow. This has included a host of insight and research projects for Blackpool Council's Public Health team, staff surveys and resident surveys for other local authorities, evaluation of Coastal Communities Fund projects across the Fylde Coast and delivery of the Lancashire Combined Authority consultation.

6.3 The chart below shows the growth of Infusion over recent years and the success already evident since the move over to Blackpool. Even in May, income secured for the 2016/17 financial year is close to double that achieved in previous years when the service was hosted in Pendle (with 2016/17 expenditure based on full-year costs).



6.4 Infusion is currently growing the team to meet this demand and to ensure Blackpool Council has the best possible research service at its fingertips with local capacity, extensive knowledge and experience of issues and best practice at a regional level. By balancing the potential to deliver cost-effective primary research and consultation services to other public sector partners with the requirements of Blackpool Council services, Infusion can become more resilient and offer even better value-for-money to the Council.

6.5 Now that the Infusion service has successfully migrated over to Blackpool, a refreshed business plan is in development to map out future opportunities for the service and to establish a longer term vision for Infusion. This includes:

- More awareness and engagement within Blackpool Council to ensure departments are getting best value, quality and reach from any research and consultation with local people
- Developing relationships with partners in the town, such as health and arms-length companies, again with the aim of improving local research
- Working with other local authorities in the region, offering collaborative research opportunities as they present themselves

7.0 Witnesses/representatives

7.1 The following person has been invited to present on this item:

Adam Pearson, Infusion Service Manager, Chief Executive's Department

Does the information submitted include any exempt information? No

7.2 List of Appendices:

7.3 None

8.0 Legal considerations:

8.1 Infusion supports the Council's legal duty around consulting on issues such as budgets and savings proposals across departments, ensuring access to a service with skills and experience to deliver consultation to best practice standards.

9.0 Human Resources considerations:

9.1 With the anticipated growth of the Infusion service it is likely that there will be an ongoing recruitment drive to meet demand, including development of the casual fieldwork resource and bringing more researchers into the team.

10.0 Equalities considerations:

10.1 Infusion's experience engaging "seldom heard" groups such as Black and Minority Ethnic communities and young people will ensure that methodologies are used which cover groups with protected characteristics.

11.0 Financial considerations:

11.1 The Infusion operating model differs to the way other council services are run, with it entirely reliant on generating income, whether that is recovering costs for delivering research for other departments or other local authorities commissioning Infusion for their research projects.

12.0 Risk management considerations:

12.1 As a service which relies on generating its own income, the biggest risk is not being able to generate the income necessary to cover running costs. However, Service Level Agreement arrangements have been agreed for the next two years with a number of East Lancashire district councils and the ever-growing demand for Infusion's services suggests that the growth potential outweighs any risk.

13.0 Ethical considerations:

13.1 None

14.0 Internal/ External Consultation undertaken:

14.1 Consultation was undertaken with partners of Infusion prior to transferring the service over from Pendle Council.

15.0 Background papers:

15.1 None