

# **DEVELOPING AN ADVICE STRATEGY**

Report on the development  
of an Advice Strategy  
for social welfare  
information, advice  
and advocacy services  
in **Bedford Borough**

DRAFT 6

November 2010

The work in developing an Advice Strategy has been undertaken by Bedford Borough's **Advice Strategy Planning Group** which consists of representatives from the advice and information sector, Bedford Borough Council, and other interested parties.

The work of the **Advice Strategy Planning Group** has been

**Organised by**



**Facilitated by**



**Supported by**



The Advice Strategy has been developed on behalf of the **Social Inclusion, Community Cohesion and Culture Thematic Partnership**, which is a working group of the **Bedford Borough Partnership**.

**NB** This document and the draft Strategy will need to be taken back to BAF, the Thematic Partnership and the Bedford Borough Partnership Board for consultation and approval before being finalised

# Contents

## 1 Introduction

- 1.1 Background
- 1.2 The importance of advice
- 1.3 The need for an Advice Strategy
- 1.4 Developing an Advice Strategy for Bedford Borough

## 2 The Advice Strategy

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Vision, principles and aims
- 2.3 Key definitions
- 2.4 Scope of the Advice Strategy
- 2.5 Links with other strategies
- 2.6 Advice needs in the Borough
- 2.7 Advice providers in Bedford Borough
- 2.7 Advice services in the Borough
- 2.9 Gaps in current services
- 2.10 Drivers of change
- 2.11 Priority advice needs for Bedford Borough
- 2.12 Proposals for future provision of advice services
- 2.13 Resources
- 2.14 Management, commissioning and funding of advice services
- 2.15 Monitoring and evaluation arrangements

## 3 Implementation Plan

- 3.1 Overview
- 3.2 Action Plan

## Appendices

- Appendix 1 Membership of Bedfordshire Advice Forum**
- Appendix 2 Membership of Advice Strategy Planning Group**
- Appendix 3 Solicitors giving civil legal advice in Bedford Borough**

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Social welfare advice, information and advocacy services in Bedford Borough are provided by a wide range of providers including:

- Bedford Borough Council and other public sector providers
- Voluntary and community sector organisations
- Solicitors and other private sector providers

The development of an Advice Strategy has provided an opportunity for partnership working across a range of providers to identify local advice needs and to decide strategically how to best use resources to help people in the community to access their social welfare advice needs.

The lead body in proposing that an Advice Strategy should be developed was **Bedfordshire Advice Forum**, the network for not-for-profit organisations in Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire, which provide advice or information on social welfare issues.



BAF's main aim is to act is to promote the provision of advice and information services in Bedfordshire. Further information on BAF and its activities can be found on the Forum's website: [www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk](http://www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk)

The members of Bedfordshire Advice Forum are listed in **Appendix 1**

BAF felt there was a need for a strategic approach to the provision of social welfare advice services in the Borough because:

- The current provision, and funding, of advice services is disjointed and uncoordinated
- Advice is a cross-cutting issue that is a key tool in tackling poverty and social exclusion
- An Advice Strategy would ensure that essential advice services are provided to meet the needs of the local community.

## 1.2 The importance of advice

Various research studies and reports have shown the importance of social welfare and civil legal advice.

A good summary of this is contained in the leaflet *The Case for Advice* which has been produced by **Advice Services Alliance**, the umbrella association for the main national advice networks. In the leaflet, which has recently been updated, ASA reflects on the growing body of research about the positive effects of advice, and concludes that advice services have an important impact on at least four aspects of people's lives:<sup>1</sup>

- Health and well-being
- Creating opportunity
- Promoting fairness and overcoming disadvantage
- Improving public services and cutting waste

Similar arguments are outlined in another leaflet produced this year by **Advice Alliance East Midlands**, which lays out the importance of advice work under five headings:<sup>2</sup>

- Prevention
- Weathering the recession
- Social and financial inclusion
- Voice and engagement
- Meeting wider community priorities

Some of the issues highlighted by the leaflets are explored in more detail below.

### Supporting vulnerable people

Not-for-profit advice agencies provide important access points for the most disadvantaged in society. Advice on civil legal issues can help people protect their homes, incomes and civil liberties.

Research by the Legal Services Research Centre illustrates that while all sections of the population can experience problems, such problems are not randomly distributed. The evidence demonstrates that those who are vulnerable to 'social exclusion' are especially vulnerable to civil justice problems.<sup>3</sup>

Evidence confirms that people from poorer neighbourhoods, and from groups experiencing discrimination and disadvantage, are more likely to access independent advice services. For example, ASA figures show that advice agencies help a disproportionate number of disabled people and people from a minority ethnic background.

Advice work is therefore an important tool in helping to tackle social exclusion.

<sup>1</sup> *The Case for Advice*, Advice Services Alliance, 2010

<sup>2</sup> *Engaging the independent advice sector to unlock the potential in communities*, Advice Alliance East Midlands, 2010

<sup>3</sup> *Causes of Action: Civil Law and Social Justice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, P. Pleasance et al (for Legal Services Commission), 2006

### **The economic benefits of advice**

Advice services help mitigate the social and economic impact of civil justice problems. The cost to the public of such problems is substantial, amounting to several billion pounds a year.<sup>4</sup>

Good advice, especially on benefits and debt, can put extra money into the pockets of clients. This brings economic benefits as people on lower incomes spend a higher proportion of their incomes on local goods and services. Research by the New Economics Foundation shows that each additional £1 of income generated by advice services has a value of £1.70, as it is 'recycled' through the local economy.<sup>5</sup>

In the current economic climate, people are facing huge problems with employment and redundancy, benefits, debt and the threat of repossession. For example, enquiries on these issues now count for about 70% of all enquiries at Bedford Citizens Advice Bureau.

The effects of people's problems can sometimes be catastrophic. Problems with benefits and debt can end in homelessness, loss of essential services, or action by bailiffs to seize goods. These costs also impact on the public purse, increasing homelessness applications; reducing Council Tax collection; affecting health, especially mental health; and potentially resulting in intervention by care services. Timely advice can stop difficulties escalating to such a serious level, restoring stability to the household and reducing the demand on public services.

### **Meeting wider community priorities**

The contribution of advice to local communities is often seen only in narrow terms. But by helping to stabilise clients' problems, advice interventions enable people – often the most excluded and disadvantaged – to address other aspects of their lives. Advice makes a difference to mental and physical health, confidence and self-esteem, financial and social inclusion, and community cohesion. Having stabilised their position, people are able to move forward, returning to learning, securing or improving employment, and having the opportunity to play an active part in their communities.

In addition to its usual advice giving functions, the advice sector also fulfils an important role in feeding in statistics and policy initiatives to inform local and national policy objectives.

Many advice agencies also provide formal and informal legal education to individuals and communities so increasing public legal empowerment.

<sup>4</sup> *Causes of Action: Civil Law and Social Justice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, P. Pleasance et al (for Legal Services Commission), 2006

<sup>5</sup> *Engaging the independent advice sector to unlock the potential in communities*, Advice Alliance East Midlands, 2010

Other recent reports and research showing the benefits of advice work include:

- **Someone on my side**<sup>6</sup>

This document acted as the manifesto of **Advice Services Alliance** in the build-up to the General Election in 2010. The document outlined the importance of advice work and reported that one in three people every year have a problem relating to legal issues such as housing, domestic violence, benefits, debt and employment. These problems can cause poverty, homelessness, anxiety and other health problems. Advice services have an important role in ensuring that people receive the support they need.

- **Time Well Spent**<sup>7</sup>

A report by the **Council on Social Action** looked at the importance of the one-to-one relationship between advice workers and their clients. Clients value a good relationship with an adviser who can take time to listen and explain, show empathy, and show respect. The report also found that a good relationship is instrumental to the quality of the work that advisers do with their clients.

- **Take Up the Challenge**<sup>8</sup>

This report, produced for the Government's **Child Poverty Unit**, considered the role of increasing the take-up of benefits and tax credits in tackling child poverty. The report identified that many poor families are not taking up all of the financial support to which they are entitled and it is estimated that about 400,000 children are living in poverty in the UK as a result of families not claiming their full entitlement to benefits. The report identified eight principles of effective service delivery and partnership action for increasing benefit take-up in local areas.

- **Outreach to Children and Families**<sup>9</sup>

This Government research report confirmed the benefits of providing advice and associated support services, through Children's Centres, to families who have debt, housing and benefit problems.

This idea was developed further by **Bedfordshire Advice Forum** in a local research project. The research in Bedfordshire confirmed the need for closer collaboration between advice services and Children's Centres and made a number of specific recommendations to improve the links.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Someone on my side*, Advice Services Alliance, 2010

<sup>7</sup> *Time Well Spent*, Council on Social Action, 2009

<sup>8</sup> *Take up the Challenge*, Child Poverty Unit, 2010

<sup>9</sup> *Outreach to Children and Families*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009

<sup>10</sup> *Advice Services and Children's Centres*, Bedfordshire Advice Forum, 2010

## 1.3 The need for an Advice Strategy

As well as the importance of advice, a number of factors, both national and local, have combined to make this an ideal time to develop an Advice Strategy in Bedford Borough.

### A changing national environment

These factors include:

- **Increasing demands on advice services** due to the recent **recession** because of rising unemployment, personal debt and associated problems. This increase in demand for advice is likely to continue for some time.

- Effective advice services are needed to meet the **statutory duties** under new legislation

The **Child Poverty Act 2010** requires local partnership action to tackle child poverty. Advice services, especially regarding benefit take-up and tackling debt problems, are recognised as key elements of effective child poverty strategies

The **Equality Act 2010** requires local authorities to address social inequality in their area. Again social welfare advice services can be an important tool in tackling inequalities.

- Advice services can play an important role in achieving some of the outcomes for indicators in **Local Area Agreements**.

For example, advice work can affect outcomes for NI 152 (Working age people on out of work benefits) and NI 116 (Proportion of children in poverty), which are both in Bedford Borough's LAA

- Under the **Putting People First** (Transforming Adult Social Care) initiative, local authorities are required to produce a **Universal Information and Advice Strategy** for Adult Social Care Services.

It will be important to link Bedford Borough Council's emerging UIA Strategy with the development of this Strategy on social welfare advice

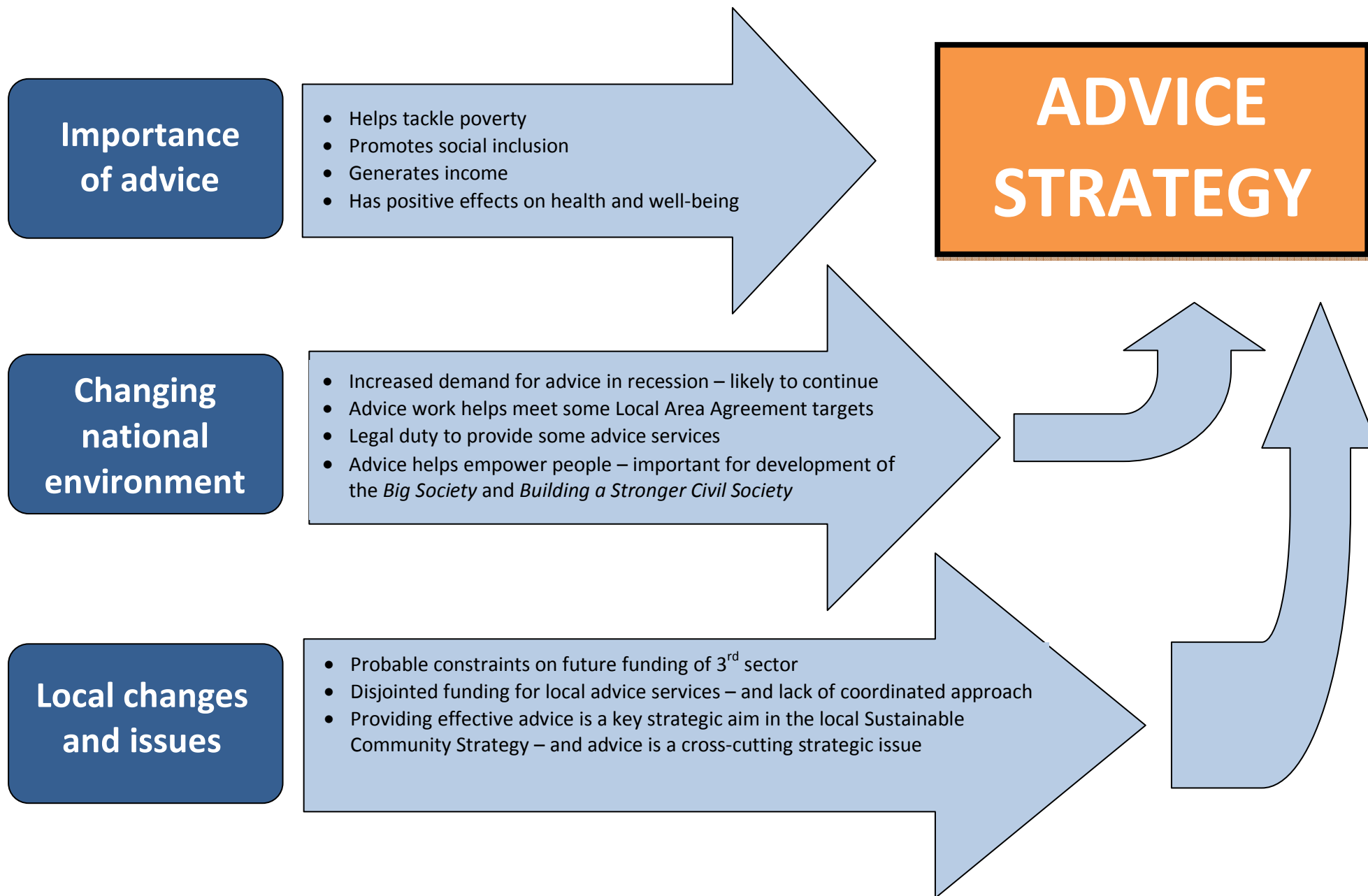
- Advice work can play a role in helping to develop new initiatives that are being proposed by the new Coalition Government.

Under the **Big Society** agenda, individuals are being encouraged to take more responsibility for local community activities. Advice work has a key role in empowering people to take more control of their own lives.

Under the **Building a Stronger Civil Society** proposals, voluntary and community sector agencies will be encouraged to help empower communities and promote social action. Advice services can play an important part in this.

## Local changes and issues

- Bedford Borough is a **new unitary authority area** following Local Government Reorganisation in April 2009, and a range of new strategies are being developed to reflect the area's changing status
- Ensuring that marginalised and vulnerable people receive effective support, advice and advocacy is a key strategic aim in the Borough's new **Sustainable Community Strategy** – and advice provision is an important cross-cutting issue throughout the SCS.
- **Funding for advice** in Bedford Borough is rather disjointed and there is a lack of a coordinated approach
- **Future cuts in Council spending** will probably result in severe constraints on the future funding of 3<sup>rd</sup> sector agencies
- A number of **issues concerning local advice services** have already been identified by BAF and its members:
  - A lack of advice provision in a number of locations, particularly in the rural wards which include pockets of significant need
  - Unmet need in responding to needs of specific client groups
  - Recruitment and staffing difficulties particularly in specialist areas of civil law such as benefits and debt
  - A lack of effective referral between providers
  - An absence of co-ordination and planning mechanisms between statutory, not-for-profit and private practice providers
  - Inconsistent and incomplete collection of data on the outputs and outcomes from advice provision
  - A lack of co-ordination of social policy issues to enable advice providers to influence strategic objectives or contribute to the development of effective public services.
  - A variety of funding formats for advice services, and lack of long term funding commitment to voluntary groups by the local authority



## 1.4 Developing an Advice Strategy in Bedford Borough

Immediately following the Local Government Reorganisation in Bedfordshire in **April 2009**, BAF wrote a letter to the Chief Executives of the two new unitary authorities in the county (Bedford Borough Council and Central Bedfordshire Council) setting out the need for a social welfare advice strategy in each area.

Following positive meetings with senior representatives from both Councils in **June 2009**, BAF then arranged a joint workshop to discuss the development of advice strategies. This first, countywide workshop was held on **6<sup>th</sup> October 2009** and was attended by 23 representatives from BAF members, the two local authorities and other interested bodies. At the workshop there was general support for developing local advice strategies and the next steps were agreed - including the need to draft a Statement of Intent to present to the Local Strategic Partnerships in the two local area. A full report on the workshop can be found on BAF's website: [www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk](http://www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk)

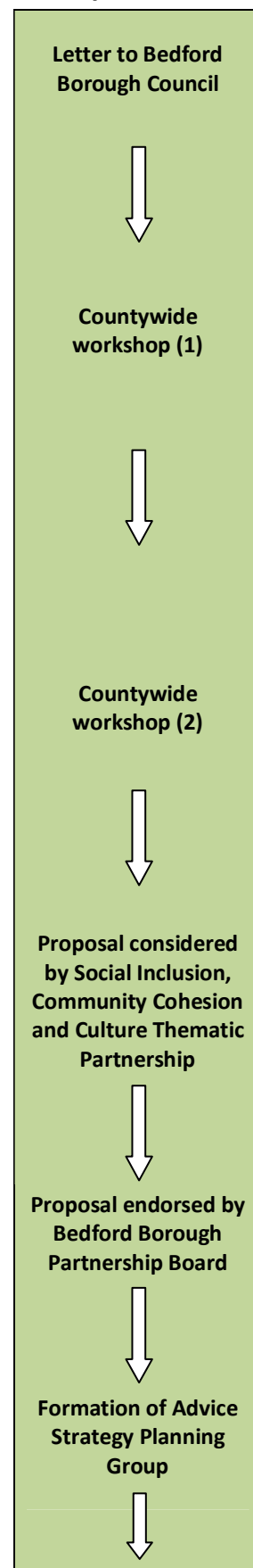
A follow-up workshop was then held on **11<sup>th</sup> November 2009**, which was attended by 13 people. At this meeting the overall vision and strategic aims of the strategies were agreed and a Proposal was drafted for submission to the thematic partnerships responsible for social inclusion issues in the two local areas. A full report on this workshop can also be found on BAF's website.

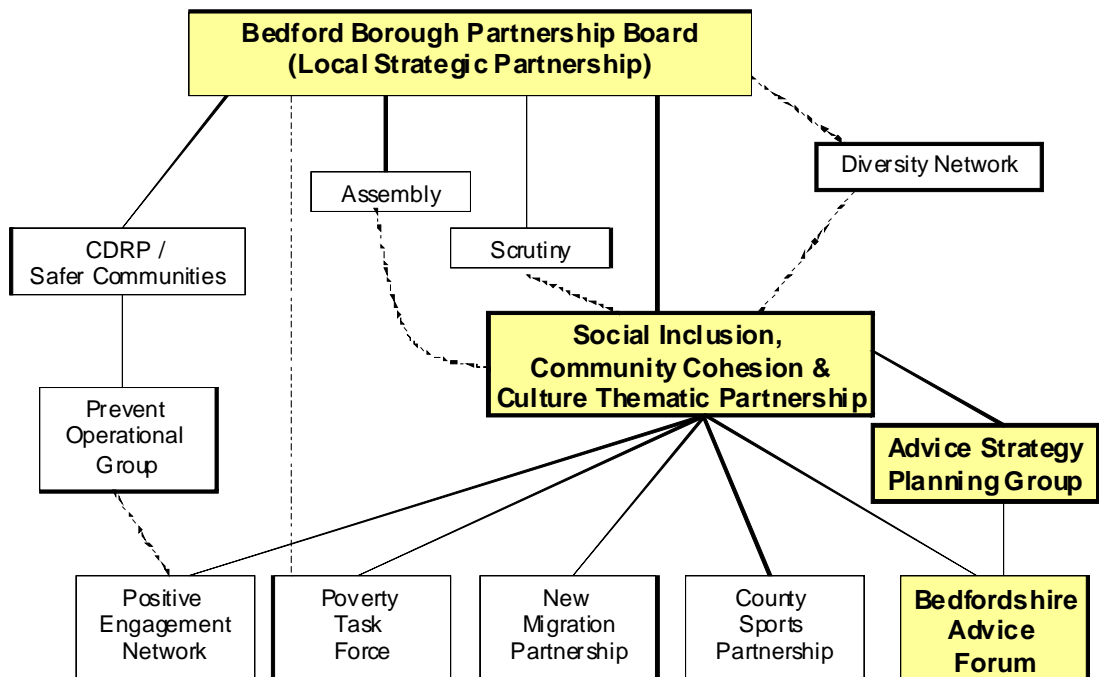
Draft Proposals, for Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire, were then drafted and sent to BAF members and those people on the workshop mailing list for comments. The final Proposal for Bedford Borough was presented to the Social Inclusion, Community Cohesion and Culture Thematic Partnership on **30<sup>th</sup> November 2009**. A copy of this Proposal can be found on BAF's website.

The Proposal for Bedford Borough was endorsed by the Thematic Partnership on **30<sup>th</sup> November** and was then presented to the Bedford Borough Partnership Board on **9<sup>th</sup> December 2009**.

Formal agreement to move ahead with the Advice Strategy in Bedford Borough was then reported back to the Social Inclusion, Community Cohesion and Culture Thematic Partnership on **18<sup>th</sup> January 2010**. At this meeting BAF was requested to form an Advice Strategy Planning Group to take forward the work of developing the Strategy.

### Development activities





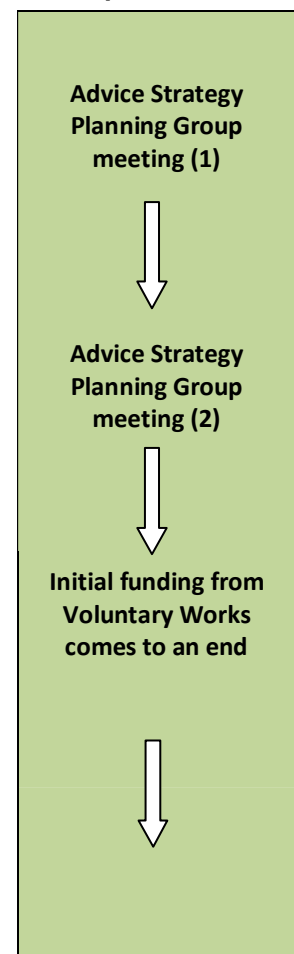
Developing an Advice Strategy - Partnership arrangements in Bedford Borough

#### Development activities

The first Advice Strategy Planning Group meeting for Bedford Borough took place on **25<sup>th</sup> February 2010**. The list of organisations in the Planning Group is given in **Appendix 2**. At the meeting the Planning Group confirmed the remit of the Strategy and agreed an action plan for developing the Strategy. The minutes of the meeting, and the action plan, can be found on BAF's website.

The second Planning Group meeting was held on **13<sup>th</sup> May 2010**. The first draft of this Strategy was discussed and plans were then agreed for finalising the Strategy. The minutes of the meeting can be found on BAF's website.

The initial funding for the development work listed above was provided by Voluntary Works – the consortium for infrastructure organizations in Bedfordshire and Luton. Unfortunately, this funding stream (from Capacitybuilders) ran out in **mid 2010**, which resulted in a delay in the development work.



Fortunately, in **August 2010** Bedford Borough Partnership Board then agreed to provide some extra funding to allow completion of the development work.



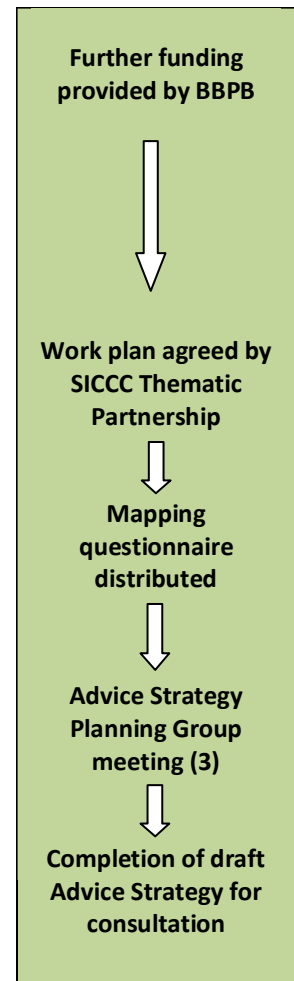
The work plan for completing the Strategy was agreed at the Social Inclusion, Community Cohesion and Culture Thematic Partnership meeting on **6<sup>th</sup> September 2010**.

A questionnaire to map and provide a snapshot of advice service in Bedford Borough was designed and distributed in **September 2010**. Responses to the mapping exercise were analysed in October and then added to this document.

This report was then finalised in **October 2009** and was presented, along with a draft Advice Strategy, to a final Advice Strategy Planning Group meeting on **3<sup>rd</sup> November 2010**.

The draft Advice Strategy will now be finalised and distributed for consultation in **late 2010**.

#### Development activities



Copies of all the **documents** used in, or prepared for, the above development activities can be found on BAF's website: [www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk](http://www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk)



## 2. The Advice Strategy

### 2.1 Introduction

This Advice Strategy has been developed by the **Advice Strategy Planning Group** on behalf of the **Social Inclusion, Community Cohesion and Culture Thematic Partnership**, which is a working group of the **Bedford Borough Partnership Board**.

The members of the Advice Strategy Planning Group are listed in **Appendix 2**.

Further details on the need for this Strategy and how the Strategy has been developed can be found in **Section 1** of this report.

In this part of the document (**Section 2**) the elements of the Strategy are broken down as follows:

- Vision, principles and aims
- Key definitions
- Scope of the Strategy
- Links with other strategies
- Current provision of advice services in the Borough
- Funding and staffing of current services
- Drivers for change
- The local need for advice services
- Priority advice needs
- Proposals for future advice provision
- Resource requirements
- Management, commissioning and funding of advice services
- Monitoring and evaluation arrangements

**Section 3** of this document then goes on to give a proposed action plan for implementing the Strategy.

### 2.2 Vision, principles and aims

This Advice Strategy aims to make a real difference to people's lives and contribute to the reduction of poverty and social exclusion in Bedford Borough.

This Strategy sets out a plan to achieve the following **vision**.

Our vision is to have easily accessible, well-publicised, and high quality social welfare advice, information and advocacy services which meet the needs of the citizens of Bedford Borough

The **principles** of the Advice Strategy are that social welfare advice, information and advocacy services in Bedford Borough should be:

- Available to the whole community and, underpinned by a commitment to equality of opportunity, should also be used to support vulnerable, marginalised or disadvantaged people and communities
- Planned in a coordinated manner to meet local needs, using collaboration and partnership working across the voluntary and statutory sectors
- Provided at different levels, using a diversity of well publicised, easy accessible delivery methods to meet the diverse needs in the community
- Quality services that local people will have confidence to use

The **strategic aims** of the Advice Strategy are:

1. To identify the advice, information and advocacy needs in Bedford Borough
2. To develop co-ordinated advice, information and advocacy services across the voluntary and statutory advice sectors to ensure that all available resources are effectively used to meet the identified needs in Bedford Borough
3. To support continual improvement in the quality of advice-giving by encouraging the development of quality marked advice provision across Bedford Borough
4. To develop a strategic approach to the management, commissioning and funding of advice and information services in the Borough

## 2.3 Key definitions

This Strategy is concerned with social welfare advice, information and advocacy services. To confirm the remit of this Strategy, it is very important to clarify the meaning of these words.

### **Social welfare**

Legal advice in the areas of law, such as housing, debt and welfare benefits, can have a significant impact on individual's lives and their ability to participate in social and economic life. This advice can solve people's legal problems, with result that their leives and lives of their families are improved.<sup>11</sup>

The **Legal Services Commission (LSC)**, which is the public body responsible for the administration of legal aid in England and Wales, uses a narrow definition of social welfare, to tie in with the restricted financial contracts it gives to specialised advice providers. The LSC definition of social welfare includes five areas of law - community care, debt, housing, employment and welfare benefits.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Study of legal advice at local level*, Ministry of Justice, 2009

<sup>12</sup> [www.legalservices.gov.uk](http://www.legalservices.gov.uk)

However, wider definitions of social welfare law can also include other civil legal issues. For example, to become a member of **Bedfordshire Advice Forum** agencies need to show that they provide advice or information on one or more of the following civil legal issues:<sup>13</sup>

- Civil liberties
- Challenging statutory bodies
- Consumer rights
- Debt and money advice
- Educational rights
- Employment rights
- Environmental rights
- Equality rights
- Family issues
- Health disability and community care rights
- Housing rights
- Immigration, nationality and asylum rights
- Welfare benefits

**NB** BAF membership is not open to agencies that provide other sorts of advice such as business advice, careers advice or non-rights advice

## Information

### Information provision - Definition

The giving of basic factual details that are provided without any personal context. This may be in the form of verbal information but is often backed up by written information in leaflets, factsheets and websites.

Information providers can act as an initial point of contact and then often refer or signpost clients elsewhere for advice specific to the client's circumstances. An information service gives clients the information they need, for them to know and do more about their situation. It can include information about rights, policies and practices; and about national and local services and agencies. Responsibility for taking any further action generally rests with the client.<sup>14</sup>

**Example:** A client asks whether she can get help with her Council Tax bill and how to claim. The information provider gives her a leaflet "Help with Council Tax" and details of her local benefits office. The client is also given details of two advice services nearby that give advice on welfare benefits.

<sup>13</sup> Constitution of Bedfordshire Advice Forum, April 2007

<sup>14</sup> *New Quality Mark for the advice sector (Glossary)*, Working Together for Advice Project, 2010

## Advice

### Advice – Definitions

An opinion about what could or should be done about a situation or problem<sup>15</sup>

A proposal for an appropriate course of action<sup>16</sup>

Advice can be provided at different levels.

A **basic advice** service involves:

- a diagnosis of the client's enquiry and the legal issues involved
- giving information and explaining options
- identifying further action the client can take
- some assistance eg contacting third parties to seek information, filling in forms etc.<sup>17</sup>

The advice can be completed with one interview although there may be some follow-up work. With this form of basic advice, the client would generally take responsibility for any further action.

**Example:** A client asks whether he can get help with his Council Tax. The advice provider carries out a benefits check and advises him that he is entitled to Council Tax Benefit of £6.50 a week. The advice provider may help fill in the claim form or direct the client to the local Council benefits office to make an application.<sup>18</sup>

Some advice providers give a more enhanced service that involves **advice with casework**, which includes all the elements of an advice service given above but also involves taking action on behalf of the client to move the case on. It could include negotiating on behalf of the client with third parties on the telephone, by letter or face-to-face. It will usually involve follow-up work and the adviser would take responsibility for this.

**Example:** A client is refused Council Tax Benefit. The advice provider checks the decision letter and finds that the local authority has made a mistake with the client's income details. The adviser calls the benefits service but cannot resolve it by phone. The adviser then writes on behalf of the client to request a revision of the decision giving reasons and enclosing evidence. The adviser makes a note in the diary to check the client has received a reply in two weeks' time. Ten days later a reply is received saying the mistake has been corrected and a copy of a new decision that has been sent to the client.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Wordnet - online dictionary

<sup>16</sup> The Free Dictionary - online dictionary

<sup>17</sup> Glossary - New Quality Mark for the advice sector, Working Together for Advice Project, 2010

<sup>18</sup> *Developing the new quality mark (Guidance paper 1 – Common definitions)*, Working Together for Advice Project, 2010

<sup>19</sup> *Developing the new quality mark (Guidance paper 1 – Common definitions)*, Working Together for Advice Project, 2010

A few advice providers also provide representation services to clients. These agencies are able to deal with specialised casework requiring the presentation of complex legal arguments. Representations can sometimes be made in writing but often involve representation in person at tribunal and court hearings.

**Example:** A client is refused Council Tax Benefit. The client disagrees with the decision. But despite various discussions the Council refuses to change its decision. The advice provider checks the client's legal position and helps her with an appeal. The caseworker then collects relevant evidence and prepares the case for hearing by a First Tier Social Security Appeal Tribunal. On the day of the hearing the adviser formally represents the client at the tribunal.<sup>20</sup>

## Advocacy

### Advocacy – Definitions

The provision of support and encouragement or representation of individuals' views, needs or rights<sup>21</sup>

Representing the views of another person as if they were your own<sup>22</sup>

Agencies providing advocacy services give support which enables people to have a direct say in the issues that affect their lives. Everyone has rights and needs. Most of us can speak for ourselves or have friends and family to support us. Some people, however, are isolated and vulnerable and may be unable to give voice to their wishes and interests. Advocates don't give advice but will work with a client to help them have their voice heard, and to make their own choices.

Advocates may have to negotiate, provide information and communicate with other agencies but, above all, they represent their clients' interests and do so without being judgmental. Advocates provide independent support and representation to those who cannot represent themselves effectively. This can include specialist support for people with a learning disability; older people; and adults who have experience of issues such as mental health problems, substance abuse or domestic violence.

Examples of support for clients include:

- helping them make sense of information they may have received.
- helping them get the right information to make informed choices and decisions.
- helping them to find the right words to put their point across.
- giving them the confidence to speak up for themselves.

Support is given across a wide range of issues including housing, education, care, finance, benefits, family matters, complaints and appeals.

<sup>20</sup> Developing the new quality mark (Guidance paper 1 – Common definitions), Working Together for Advice Project, 2010

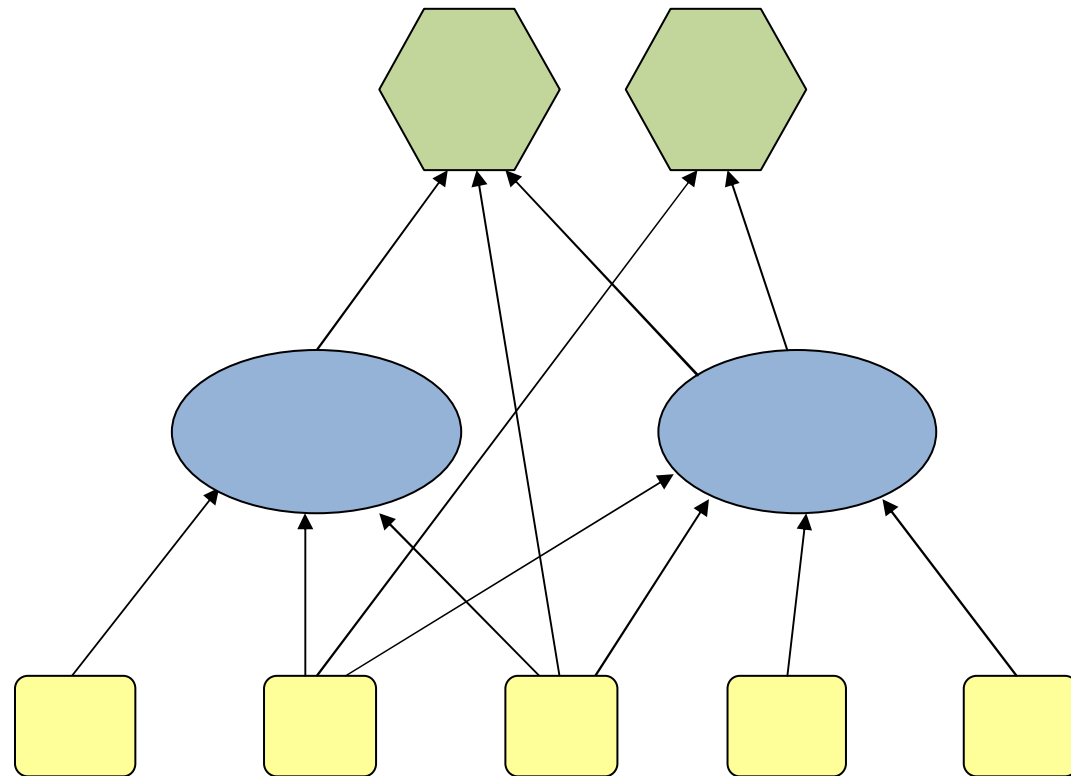
<sup>21</sup> Margiotta et al, 2003:9? (check)

<sup>22</sup> To insert

**Specialist level**  
Representation and complex casework services

**General level**  
General advice and casework services  
– and referring clients for representation

**Information level**  
Information and basic advice services  
– and signposting or referring clients  
for general advice or representation



### The different levels of advice provision

**Notes**

- Many organisations provide services at just at one level – but some provide services at different levels
- Some organisations provide services to the general public – but others only work with certain client groups

## 2.4 Scope of the Advice Strategy

This Advice Strategy covers social welfare advice, information and advocacy services that come under the definitions given in the previous section.

It is recognised, however, that there are other types of information, advice and advocacy that are needed by the community including:

- Information, advice and guidance (IAG) to help people find learning or work
- Simple information on specific local services eg health services, care services, children’s services, sports facilities, local clubs and societies
- Safety information and advice eg on fire alarms, personal safety
- Medical advice - provided by doctors and health professionals
- Financial advice - provided by accountants, financial advisers, tax advisers
- Other legal advice (eg criminal law, commercial civil law) - provided by solicitors

Although this Strategy does not specifically cover the above issues, it should be acknowledged that many agencies provide some of the above services as well as providing social welfare information and advice.

It could be argued that separate strategies also need to be developed for some of the above issues. However, a more effective way forward, in the future, would be for some of the above elements of information and advice to be brought together with this Advice Strategy to provide a **fully comprehensive community information and advice strategy for the Borough.**

**Recommendation:** Consideration should be given to including all relevant aspects of information and advice needs in a comprehensive community advice strategy for Bedford Borough.



**Advice and information needs in Bedford Borough**

## 2.5 Links with other strategies

At present this Advice Strategy clearly links in with other key strategies that have already been produced, or are being developed, in Bedford Borough. These are:

- **Sustainable Community Strategy** (Bedford Borough Partnership)
- **Anti-poverty Strategy** (Bedford Borough Partnership – Poverty Task Force) – including legal requirement for production of a **Child Poverty Strategy**
- **Homelessness Strategy 2007-10** (Bedford Borough Council - Housing Options)
- **Universal Information and Advice Strategy** (Bedford Borough Council - Adult Services)

As mentioned earlier in this report ensuring that marginalised and vulnerable people receive effective support, advice and advocacy is a key strategic aim in Bedford Borough's new **Sustainable Community Strategy** – and advice provision is an important cross-cutting issue throughout the SCS. Because of this Bedford Borough Partnership Board and its **Social Inclusion, Community Cohesion and Culture Thematic Partnership** have commissioned the development of this Advice Strategy, which will in effect become the delivery plan for the strategic aim on advice in the SCS.

## 2.6 Advice needs in the Borough

### General

Add basic information on Bedford Borough and overall data eg population, age breakdown etc.

### Poverty

Although advice services need to be available to the whole community, the levels of demand for advice are closely linked to the levels of poverty and deprivation in an area.

There is an abundance of data showing poverty and deprivation in Bedford Borough. This includes:

Research on child poverty in Bedfordshire, published June 2009, showed that:<sup>23</sup>

- 9 Local Super Output Areas in Bedford are ranked in the top 10% in England for child poverty. These LSOAs are in the wards of Castle, Harpur, Kingsbrook, Goldington, Queens Park, Cauldwell and Kempston North
- 19% of children (over 6,500 children) live in workless families. In the wards of Kingsbrook, Queens Park, Cauldwell and Goldington this figure rises to over 30%
- 39% of children (over 13,600) live in low income families. In the wards of Queens Park, Cauldwell, Kingsbrook and Goldington this figure rises to over 50%

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<sup>23</sup> *Child poverty in Bedfordshire*, Infotrain (for Bedfordshire Child Poverty Network), 2009

### Need to update with latest NI 116 figures

In terms of wider poverty in the community the **Bedfordshire Sustainable Community Strategy** in 2007 stated that the priority groups suffered most from multiple deprivation are:<sup>24</sup>

- Young people, poorly skilled and unemployed (aged 18-25)
- People from Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities
- Black African and Black Caribbean groups
- Incapacity Benefit claimants
- Lone parents
- Older people

### Need to update from Bedford SCS

The Bedfordshire County Council **Joint Strategic Needs Assessment**, for the purposes of tackling inequalities in health and social care, identified the following groups of concern (in no particular order):

- Homeless and rough sleepers
- Bedford prisoners
- Gypsies and travellers
- Looked after children
- Pregnant teenagers
- People who misuse drugs/other substances
- Young offenders
- People with mental ill-health including dementia
- People with the following long-term conditions: HIV, diabetes, Ischaemic Heart
- Disease and stroke
- People from Black and Minority Communities
- People with disabilities including visual and hearing impairments

### Need to update from Bedford Borough JNSA 2010

Some further information and data relating to some of the above vulnerable groups and issues are given below

#### Homelessness

Households	Total accepted as homeless Q1	Rate per 1,000 households	Total accepted as homeless Q2	Rate per 1,000 households
Bedford	82	1.3	76	1.2
East of England	1,610	0.7	1,520	0.7
England	17,230	0.8	15,960	0.8

#### Households accepted as Homeless in Q1 and Q2 2007

### Need to update figures

<sup>24</sup> Bedfordshire's Sustainable Community Strategy (Evidence Base – Page 27), 2007

The figures above show that Bedford Borough's homelessness rate is well above the regional and national rates.

### **Gypsies and Travellers**

Gypsies and Travellers probably have the lowest life expectancy of any group in the UK, with health problems linked to poor environmental conditions and poor access to services.<sup>25</sup> A local study of Gypsy and Traveller housing needs highlighted the need for consideration of access to services alongside provision of accommodation. High levels of illiteracy create difficulties regarding access to information and completion of official forms<sup>26</sup>.

In July 2007, there were 22 Gypsy and Traveller caravans in Bedford Borough, 16 of which were on authorised sites (either privately owned, or rented through Local Authorities or Registered Social Landlords).

Funding has just been obtained (February 2010) to create two more permanent pitches in the borough and nine emergency stopping pitches for families passing through the Borough

**Any outreach advice provision for gypsies and travelers in Bedford Borough?**

### **Prisoners**

In 2006/07 there were 481 prisoners in Bedford prison, on average.<sup>27</sup> Bedford CAB currently provide a fortnightly outreach session, advising between 5 and 10 prisoners at each session but this falls well short of meeting the demand.

### **Indices of deprivation**

Bedford Borough has 102 Super Output Areas, each of which equates to approximately 1,000 homes in size. When compared against SOAs throughout England & Wales (32,482), there are 3 SOAs in the top 10% deprived and 9 in the top 20% deprived.

In terms of population (154,700 mid year estimate 2006), this accounts for 4,088 residents (2.6%) in the top 10% and 12,908 residents (8.3%) in the top 20%.

The intensity of this deprivation at neighbourhood level is fairly high. Detailed analysis each SOA in each domain highlight the contrasts between and even within ward boundaries.

The use of SOAs as opposed to ward level indices highlights the more intense pockets of deprivation. For example, one SOA in Castle is in the top 10% most deprived and another is in the bottom 20% least deprived. This gives a more exact picture of what is going on at neighbourhood level.

**Need to add reference**

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<sup>25</sup> *Gypsy & Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment, 2006, DCA*

<sup>26</sup> *Bedfordshire Black and Minority Ethnic Accommodation Needs Study, 2004, Richard Tomlins, De Montfort University*

<sup>27</sup> HMPS, Annual Report and Accounts 2006-2007

Deprivation is most intense in the inner urban wards of Castle, Harpur, Cauldwell, and Kingsbrook. There is a cluster of deprivation surrounded by other areas that are fairly deprived.

Deprivation levels are measured for different domains, these being: overall deprivation, income, employment, health and disability, education skills and training, barriers to housing and services, income deprivation affecting older people (IDAOPI), income deprivation affecting children index (IDACI)

Each of the wards below score in the top most deprived in more than one domain and in more than one SOA (number of SOAs shown in brackets):

- Cauldwell (6)
- Castle (6)
- Harpur (6)
- Kingsbrook (6)

#### Add further details

In general, the Borough is ranked approximately half way down the list of districts nationally at 183<sup>rd</sup> out of 354 (also includes London Boroughs and Unitary Authorities), and 15<sup>th</sup> out of 48 Councils in the East of England Group which puts Bedford Borough in the top third most deprived. Therefore, the Borough compares better nationally than regionally.

**NB** Rank is 1 = most deprived, 354 = least deprived

#### Ethnicity

	Bedford	East of England	E & W
BME Population Non 'white British'	19.2%	8.6%	12.5%

Need to update and add further details

#### Job Seekers' Allowance claimants

	Bedford (numbers of JSA claimants)	Bedford (%)	East of England (%)	England and Wales (%)
All	3,935	4.1	3.4	4.0
Male	2,918	5.8	4.8	5.7
Female	1,017	2.2	1.9	2.2

Check dates – and update – and add comments

#### Migrant workers

Could add details?

## Disability

Need to add details

## Older people

Need to add details

## Estimating advice needs

Could include the following info from Hackney Advice Strategy - below

The chief survey of advice needs and peoples experience of advice-seeking is the *English and Welsh Civil and Social Justice Survey* carried out in 2004. The focus of this survey is on civil justice matters, and respondents are drawn from across the general population in order to include those people who would like to pursue an action but have not been able to do so.

Whilst these are national studies we can reasonably safely assume that the findings and lessons learnt would also be broadly representative of Bedford Borough. The survey's key findings are summarised in the table below:

<b>Social exclusion</b>	People vulnerable to social exclusion are more likely to experience civil justice problems. These groups included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• people with long-term health problems or disabilities</li><li>• lone parents</li><li>• those living in rented or high density accommodation</li><li>• the unemployed and those on very low incomes</li></ul>
<b>Clustering of problems</b>	Three distinct clusters of problem were identified: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• family cluster (domestic violence, divorce, relationship breakdown and children)</li><li>• homelessness cluster (rented housing, homelessness, welfare benefits)</li><li>• economic cluster (consumer transactions, money/debt, employment, rented/owned housing and personal injury)</li></ul>
<b>Impact of problems</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 9% of problems which were not health-related led to physical ill-health</li><li>• 27% of problems led to stress-related illness</li><li>• 17% of problems affected peoples' confidence</li><li>• 16% of problems led to a loss of income or employment</li><li>• 6% of problems led to a loss of home</li><li>• 4% of problems which were not family-related led to a relationship breakdown</li></ul>
<b>Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• People gave up trying to resolve 18% of problems</li></ul>
<b>Common reasons for not getting advice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Belief that nothing could be done</li><li>• Not aware of local services</li><li>• Overall, 15% of people who tried to get advice failed to do so</li></ul>
<b>Risk of referral fatigue</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Each time an individual receives a referral, the chance that they will pursue their issue to a conclusion lessens dramatically</li></ul>

The Department for Constitutional Affairs' report *Getting earlier, better advice to vulnerable people* (2006) – sets out a strategy for helping people, especially the vulnerable and socially excluded, to better resolve the problems they face and the disputes in which they become involved.

Its key findings were:

- a third of adults had one or more problems (including housing, debt, disputes with neighbours, discrimination, domestic violence or employment)
- rates of people reporting problems were significantly higher for certain groups: victims of assault (68%), single parents (66%), the unemployed (54%), those living in high-density housing (52%), those on benefits (46%), and the disabled or ill (43%)
- unresolved problems and disputes have negative effects on people's lives (and result in significant costs to public services)
- many people experience more than one problem and problems were seen to "cluster", particularly amongst people who were most vulnerable
- those most at risk of developing problems were also the least able to deal with them due to lack of a support network and difficulties in engaging with the people and services who could help
- people who are unable to resolve their problems end up in a vicious cycle of decline which can result in loss of jobs and income, stress related illness and relationship break downs
- vulnerable people needed greater levels of support to resolve their problems, and expressed a high preference for face-to-face or telephone advice which was independent of the organisation with which they had a difficulty
- advice is often focused on solving issues in isolation; advice is too often hard to access and is focused on problems rather than people
- this has the greatest effect on vulnerable people — those who try but fail to get advice when they need it are left with twice as many unresolved problems than those who get advice
- publicly funded and commissioned advice services are fragmented and uncoordinated.

The report by the Department for Constitutional Affairs (2006) suggests that the problems that people experience are often found in 'clusters'. These clusters of difficulties are often combined; for example – housing, debt, and health. It is not unusual that when a person presents to an advice agency for one problem, other difficulties are also present. The challenge for advice providers is to develop services which are aimed at addressing complex needs of the individual because meeting those needs is likely to require very well integrated and accessible provision of a wide range of diverse advice.

## 2.7 Advice providers in Bedford Borough

There are a wide variety of social welfare advice services provided in Bedford Borough. Some of these are provided by **statutory bodies**, some by **voluntary and community organisations**, and some by **commercial providers**.

### (a) Statutory bodies

#### Bedford Borough Council

The Council currently has four teams that provide social welfare advice services

- **Customer Advisory Team** – welfare benefits advice
- **Housing Options** – homelessness and housing advice
- **Trading Standards** – consumer advice
- **Welfare Rights Team** – welfare benefits support (for social workers)

The above four teams/sections in the Borough Council are all members of **Bedfordshire Advice Forum**.

As well as the above recognised advice providers, there are also various Council staff and in-house services that provide information (and sometimes basic advice) on social welfare issues as part of their wider work. Examples are:

- Children's Centres staff
- Education Welfare staff
- Family Information Service staff
- Library staff
- Social workers and financial assessment staff - Adult Services
- Social workers and financial assessment staff - Children's Services

Some of these staff and services have built up close links with other local advice providers. For example:

- Community finance officers and social workers in Adult Services (and in Children's Services) are supported by the Council's Welfare Rights Team
- The Borough's Library Service has recently joined Bedfordshire Advice Forum
- Some local advice agencies provide outreach advice sessions at some of the Children's Centres in the Borough - and research was carried out by BAF in 2009/10 to identify and improve the links between the Children's Centres and advice agencies

#### Other statutory bodies

Some staff in other statutory agencies, for example health visitors in the **NHS**, give information (and sometimes basic advice) on social welfare issues as part of their wider work. Similarly staff at the **Jobcentre Plus** and **Pension Service** offices give information on benefit entitlement as part of their role in administering state benefits.

## **(b) Voluntary and community sector organisations**

### **BAF members**

There are currently **xx** members of **Bedfordshire Advice Forum** in the voluntary and community sector that deliver social welfare information and advice services in Bedford Borough.

These are:

- Age Concern Bedfordshire
- Anchor Staying Put
- Bedford CAB
- Bedford College – Student Services
- Bedford Race Equality Council
- Bedford YMCA
- BPHA - Money Advice Team and Employment Support Team
- Bedfordshire Refugees and Asylum Seeker Support
- Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity – Carers Support Bureau
- Homestart Bedford Borough
- King's Arms Project
- Money Advice at St Andrews
- Polish British Integration Centre
- Rutland Road Church – Debt Advice
- Sight Concern Bedfordshire
- Thai 3 Counties
- The Disability Resource Centre
- The Salvation Army - Debt Advice Service
- Surestart Cauldwell
- Voices for All (Advocacy Alliance)



The above services have developed in the local area to meet the needs of the local communities. However, the development of these different social welfare advice services in the Borough has been very ad hoc and, until now, has not been planned in any strategic way. A brief history of the local advice sector is given overleaf.

The BAF members working in the Borough provide a very wide range of information and advice services in terms of categories of advice, levels of advice, and client groups served. Some are information providers, some provide generalist advice, and some provide specialist advice services.

Further information on the services provided by BAF members, and their full contact details and opening times, can be found in the **Bedfordshire Advice Directory**. This new online Directory was designed and launched at the end of 2009. (See page 29 for further information on the Directory.)

## History of advice services in Bedford Borough<sup>28</sup>

The first recognised advice agency in the area was **Bedford and District Citizens Advice Bureau** which opened in February 1940 as part of the national network of CABx that was established to help the public during World War 2.

The 1960s and 1970s also saw a large growth in advice work across the country. For example, in the local area, **Bedford Race Equality Council** opened in 1966 and the Housing Action Group was formed in 1969. (The HAG later became **Bedfordshire Housing Aid Centre** in 1983).

The 1980s saw the development of in-house advice services at Bedfordshire County Council with the **Welfare Rights Unit** being formed in 1988.

Other agencies have started providing an advice service more recently. For example, the largest local housing association, **BPHA**, added a welfare rights officer to its staff in 1998 and then in 2007 expanded the team and its remit to also include money advice for its tenants.

Changes in the national and local environment have also brought about the need for new services. A good example is the development of **Bedfordshire Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support (BRASS)** which opened in 1999 to provide services for the growing number of refugees and asylum seekers coming to the local area.

Recent years have also seen the growth of a number of smaller organisations which specifically help local community groups that have grown in Bedford eg **Polish British Integration Centre, Thai3Counties**.

With personal debt becoming an ever increasing problem, a number of agencies have opened in recent years that specialise in providing debt advice eg **The Salvation Army (Debt Advice Service), Money Advice at St Andrews**.

Funding for local advice services is also very ad hoc with seemingly little strategic planning involved. Some advice services are grant-funded by the local authority, and others are funded in a variety of other ways including from the Big Lottery Fund, Capacitybuilders, the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, and the Legal Services Commission. In some cases organisations are funded through contracts to provide specific services to enable the local authority and public sector bodies to deliver statutory duties.

It is important to remember that the history of the local advice sector is not all about expansion and new advice agencies opening - there have also been closures of centres and reductions in services, especially in recent times. For example:

- **Bedfordshire Housing Aid Centre** was forced to close due to cuts in funding in 2007
- **Bedford Community Rights Centre** had to close in 2009 after over 25 years of providing advice for the local community
- The County Council's **Welfare Rights Unit** was disbanded following LGR in 2009 (and welfare rights support to social workers in the Borough's Adult Services is now provided by two part-time workers)

There is, of course, a great danger that, in the current economic climate with large cuts planned in Council funding, there will be further reductions in local advice services – ironically exactly at a time when advice services will be most needed with the foreseen increases in unemployment, housing problems and personal debt.

<sup>28</sup> Based on section in *Advice Services and Children's Centres*, Bedfordshire Advice Forum, March 2010

# Bedfordshire Advice Directory

**BEDFORDSHIRE  
ADVICE FORUM**  
Promoting and supporting  
advice and information  
services in Bedfordshire

*Helping you get access to advice and information services in Bedfordshire*

[www.bedsadvisedirectory.org.uk](http://www.bedsadvisedirectory.org.uk)



Bedfordshire Advice Forum is pleased to announce the launch of the new online **Bedfordshire Advice Directory**

You can use this Directory to:

- Signpost or refer clients to local advice agencies in Bedford Borough or Central Bedfordshire
- Find out more about the services provided by BAF members
- Find links to other useful contacts

## Action to take

- 1) Bookmark the Directory  
[www.bedsadvisedirectory.org.uk](http://www.bedsadvisedirectory.org.uk)
- 2) Use the Directory
- 3) Tell other people about the Directory

Want an entry in the Directory? Contact [baf@infotrain.co.uk](mailto:baf@infotrain.co.uk)

We will be continually improving and updating the Directory and your feedback regarding accessibility and usefulness is appreciated. Please contact BAF with any comments you may have.

## Other voluntary and community sector advice providers

There are some other advice providers in the Borough that are not currently members of BAF.

### Immigration and Advisory Service

IAS has an office in Bedford and provides free (means-tested) advice and assistance on all immigration, asylum and nationality issues. They also provide representation at refusal appeal hearings for all those with a right of appeal. IAS operates a non-profit making service for those ineligible for free legal help – example charges are £120 (+VAT) per hour for advice, £295 (+ VAT) for a standard immigration application, and £360 (+VAT) for lodging an appeal.

### Small community groups

Although some small agencies that are providing information and advice services to specific groups in the community are members of BAF (eg Polish British Integration Centre, Thati3Counties, Queens Park Women's Centre), there are almost certainly many other community groups that are providing informal information and advice to specific local communities.

In 2006 Bedford Race Equality Council undertook a **mapping exercise of BME groups** in Bedfordshire as part of the Government's Change Up initiative.<sup>29</sup>

In the course of the research, 86 groups were consulted and it was found that a high proportion of these were involved in the provision of information and advice to members of their community. Some of the groups consulted for the research have since gone on to develop their skills in advice provision and some, such as the Polish British Integration Centre and Bangladeshi Women's Group took part in a pilot project to develop a quality system (Q-cas) for groups providing advice and information.

It is also interesting to note that, in the **State of the Sector** report published by the local CVS in July 2006, over 100 local groups (9% of the total number of groups) were listed as giving advice, guidance and information. This made the "information and advice" sector the biggest sub-sector in the local voluntary and community sector.<sup>30</sup>

However, the figures from both the BREC and the CVS research reports must be approached with some caution, as far as this Advice Strategy is concerned, because they did not use the specific definition of "information and advice" that has been used in this Strategy. Therefore it is not clear if all the agencies that said they gave information and advice are actually giving information and advice on social welfare issues. Some further research would be needed to obtain more details on this.

**Recommendation:** Some further research should be undertaken to fully map the extent of information and advice on social welfare issues provided by community groups in Bedford Borough

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<sup>29</sup> To insert

<sup>30</sup> *The State of the Voluntary and Community Sector - Bedford District*; Community and Voluntary Service; July 2006

## **(c) Commercial providers**

### **Solicitors**

While local solicitors have not been directly involved in the development of this Advice Strategy, it is important to acknowledge the social welfare work done by solicitors and to highlight gaps in provision of certain specialist areas of law, such as immigration advice.

There are currently 17 solicitors in the Borough providing civil legal advice, mainly in the area of family law. Ten of these provide advice under the Legal Help scheme, one of them runs a free drop-in session on a Wednesday morning for advice on family law, and another has a free evening surgery once a week on family law. A further four firms offer a free initial interview (ranging from 15 to 30 minutes) but again these are all in the area of family law.

According to the Law Society website, 11 local firms offer advice on employment law, six offer debt and money advice, two offer welfare benefits advice and two immigration advice.

A list of local solicitors and their specialist provision can be found in **Appendix 3**.

To increase awareness of the services provided local solicitors, and to improve cross-referrals between BAF members and solicitors, it will be important to develop better links between solicitors and not-for-profit provider in the Borough.

**Recommendation:** BAF should establish and develop closer links with local solicitors to improve liaison between the not-for-profit and the commercial social welfare advice providers in the Borough

### **Other commercial advice providers**

In some areas of the country some commercial advice providers have begun to take over Legal Services Commission contracts for social welfare advice. Prime examples are in Gateshead and Leicester where private firms have won LSC contracts ahead of traditional voluntary and community sector advice providers.

Although there are no obvious commercial advice providers in Bedford at the moment, this could change in the future.

If the situation does change in the future, this Advice Strategy will need to be reviewed to take account of those changes.

## 2.8 Advice services in the Borough

As part of the development of this Advice Strategy, a basic mapping exercise was undertaken to get a snapshot of advice services in the local area. In September 2010 a questionnaire was sent to BAF members to collect information on the current provision of advice services in the Borough and to identify gaps in services.

The questionnaire asked for various details about the information and advice services provided including:

- Type of service
- Quality marks and quality standards
- The importance of the information/advice service within the whole organisation
- Funding
- Numbers of staff and volunteers
- Number and type of enquiries
- Number of cases

A summary of the findings from this mapping are given below.

The questionnaire also asked for information about gaps in advice services in the organisation and in the Borough as a whole. The responses to these questions are given in **Section 2.10** of this report.

### Social welfare services

In total **Xx** BAF members provide information, advice or advocacy on social welfare issues in Bedford Borough.

### Level of service

Of the **xx** BAF members working in the Borough:

- **Xx** provide information services
- **Xx** provide advice services
- **Xx** provide advocacy services
- **Xx** provide representation services (representing clients in formal settings)

**NB** Some organisations provide more than one level of service

### Quality Marks

Xx agencies have a quality mark for their information/advice service. These include:

CLS Quality Mark (Specialist Help Level) - ??  
- ??

CLS Quality Mark (General Help Level)	-	??
	-	??
CLS Quality Mark (Information Level)	-	??
	-	??
OISC (Level 1)	-	??
	-	??
OISC (Level 2)	-	??
	-	??
Q-cas (Silver Level)	-	??
	-	??
Q-cas (Bronze Level)	-	??
	-	??
Other quality marks	-	??
	-	??

## Importance of information / advice / advocacy in organisations

Of the **xx** BAF members working in the Borough:

- In **Xx** organisations, information / advice /advocacy is the sole of main activity in the organisation
- In **Xx** organisations, information / advice /advocacy is not the sole of main activity in the organisation but the organisation has a dedicated person or team providing the service
- In **Xx** organisations, information / advice /advocacy is just part of the organisation's work

## Funding

Funding for services came from a variety of sources including:

- ??
- ??
- ??
- ??
- ??

In terms of the type of funding

- **Xx** organisations received core funding
- **Xx** organisations received project funding

**NB** Some organisations received more than one type of funding

Much of the funding that is received is time limited for short-term projects.

## **Staffing**

In the **xx** BAF members working in the Borough there are:

- **xx** paid staff (FTE) – who directly provide, or support, information / advice / advocacy services
- **xx** volunteers – who help provide, or directly support, information / advice / advocacy services
- **xx** paid staff (FTE) – who use part of their time to provide, or support, information / advice / advocacy services
- **xx** volunteers – who use part of their time to help provide, or support, information / advice / advocacy services

There are therefore at least **xx** people involved in providing information / advice / advocacy services in Bedford Borough.

The total actual figure is likely to be higher than this as the mapping only involved BAF members and did not include staff and services from the wider range of organisations that may provide information and advice as part of their work.

## **Enquiries**

BAF members working in the Borough dealt with a total of **xx** enquiries in 2009/10.

In their responses some members also provided figures for 2010/11 (April – August 2010) and this amounted to **xx** enquiries

The enquiries broke down as follows:

- Benefits and tax credits
- Debt and money advice
- Housing rights
- Employment rights
- Family issues
- Consumer rights
- Immigration rights
- Health, disability or community care rights
- Other issues

## **Casework**

BAF members working in the Borough opened a total of **xx** cases in 2009/10.

In their responses some members also provided figures for 2010/11 (April – August 2010) and this amounted to **xx** new cases.

## 2.9 Gaps in current services

The basic mapping of advice services given in Section 2.8 immediately shows obvious gaps in services in the Borough. The main ones are:

- **Lack of Immigration advice providers** - there is only 1 agency in the Borough that is able to provide immigration advice above the basic Level 1 (which by law restricts agencies to only providing information on immigration issues)
- **Rural gaps** – all of the main providers are based in the urban area of Bedford and Kempston and few provide specific outreach services in the rural areas of the Borough. People living in the rural wards either have to use the telephone for advice or have to travel into Bedford
- **Lack of choice for the public** – with the closure of Bedford Community Rights Centre in 2009, there is now only one agency (Bedford CAB) providing general advice to the wider public. This is stretching the CAB's capacity to its limits and is severely limiting choice for the public.

As part of the development of this Strategy, a questionnaire was also sent to BAF members to ask about specific gaps in services. The main gaps identified in the responses were a lack of:

- Immigration advice above OISC level 1
- Housing advice
- Home visiting service
- Benefits advice
- General form filling service – and specialist help with form filling for younger people
- More joined up services for clients through innovative and partnership working
- Physical space for confidential interviews
- Representation at Tribunals – for social security and employment appeals
- Representation in County Court - for consumer issues
- Consumer advice (with forthcoming demise of Consumer Direct)
- Debt advice and debt education/preventative work

## 2.10 Future changes

In **Section 1.3** of this report, a number of factors were identified that have influenced the need for an Advice Strategy. Some of these drivers are considered in more detail in this section.

## **Increasing demand for advice services**

In the last year advice enquiries nationally, in areas such as housing, employment, welfare benefits and debt, have risen by nearly a fifth.<sup>31</sup>

This recent rapid increase came on top of the steadier increases in demand for advice services that were seen earlier in the decade.<sup>32</sup> And the recent increase also came on top of the large increases in enquiries at the beginning of the recession in 2008, with enquiries on redundancy advice increasing by 162% and enquiries on mortgage arrears increasing by 40% in 2008 compared to 2007.<sup>33</sup>

Locally the largest advice agency in the Borough, Bedford CAB, has also had similar increases in enquiries across all the main enquiry areas. For example, in the period April – June 2010, there were 3,930 enquiries compared to 2,996 in the equivalent period in 2009 ie a 31% increase in enquiries over the year.

With planned cuts in public services, restrictions in benefits, and the general economic situation in the country unlikely to improve for some time, it is almost certain that there will be increases in unemployment, claims for benefits, housing problems and personal debt over the next year or so. This will then result in further increase in demand for advice services.

## **Cuts in social security benefits**

The Coalition Government has announced various changes to social security benefits in recent months. The announcements, made by the Chancellor in the Budget in June, at the Conservative Party Conference in October and in the Spending Review in October, will lead to restrictions in benefit entitlement that could save up to £18 billion a year.

The main changes relate to:

- A new maximum cap on Housing Benefit payments
- Tighter assessment rules for Disability Living Allowance claimants
- Increased assessing of claimants of Employment and Support Allowance
- Cuts in length of entitlement to contributory Employment and Support Allowance
- Limits on Savings Credit payments (in Pension Credit)
- Increases in the working hours threshold for Working Tax Credit for couples with children
- Restrictions in entitlement to Child Benefit for higher rate tax payers

These changes will no doubt result in increased benefit enquiries as people become confused about their entitlement or want to challenge a cut in their benefit. It is also predicted that the changes will affect the poorest sectors of the community the hardest which will result in increases in poverty and social exclusion. This could then trigger increase in other enquiry areas relating to housing issues, debt, and family breakdown.

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<sup>31</sup> *The Case for Advice*, Advice Services Alliance, August 2010 (from Citizens Advice annual advice statistics 2009/10)

<sup>32</sup> *Advice Forward: developing skills for the future, workforce development plan for the legal advice sector*, ADP Consultancy, 2006

<sup>33</sup> *Local authorities and the recession*, Citizens Advice, January 2009

## **Growing legal duty on local authorities**

Although providing information and advice is generally a discretionary activity, which is very often undertaken by voluntary and community sector organisations, there is a growing requirement in different legislation for advice services to be provided, or at least considered, by local authorities. Examples of this are:

### **Housing Act 1996**

Local authorities have a legal responsibility to provide free advice and assistance to people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

This advice is provided by the Council's Housing Options team and independent advice is also provided at Bedford CAB.

### **Various consumer legislation**

Trading Standards have a statutory duty to enforce a wide range of consumer laws (eg Consumer Protection Act 1987) and the power to provide consumer advice services.

Locally this advice is provided by Consumer Direct through Trading Standards.

### **Fairer Charging Policies for Home Care and other non-residential Social Services 2003**

This guidance from the Department of Health, which local authorities providing social services functions are required to follow, makes it clear that "Councils should ensure that comprehensive benefits advice is provided to all users at the time of a charge assessment. Councils have a responsibility to seek to maximize the income of users where they would be entitled to benefits ...".

The guidance also gives a list of good practice including promoting benefit take-up by new and existing users, and providing expert advice to help users maximise their income.

In the Borough Council this expert welfare rights support is provided by the Council's Welfare Rights Team.

### **Putting People First – Transforming Adult Social Care 2007**

Under the Department of Health's transformation initiative people will be given more control over their care and support needs. As part of this all councils responsible for adult care services will have to produce a Universal Information and Advice Strategy in 2010 that will be fully implemented from April 2011.

In Bedford Borough, this UIA Strategy is currently being developed by the Council's Transformation Team. Meetings have already been held with between the team and BAF to see how this UIA Strategy can link in with the Advice Strategy for social welfare issues.

## **Child Poverty Act 2010**

Local authorities, and their partners, are required to develop a Child Poverty Needs Assessment and a Child Poverty Strategy by April 2011. Government guidance on the Act stresses that one of the “building blocks” to put into the Child Poverty Strategy will be “financial support”.<sup>34</sup>

The need for advice services (especially regarding advice on benefits and tax credits) to be used as a tool to ensure families are accessing their full entitlement to financial support was highlighted in a report from the Government’s Child Poverty Unit. The strong recommendation from the report was for local authorities and partners to develop strategies to promote the take-up of benefits and tax credits, and the report identified eight principles for effective ways to do this.<sup>35</sup>

A Poverty Task Force has been set up in Bedford Borough to help develop a Child Poverty Strategy for the area. It will be important to include the provision of advice services for families in that Strategy.

One element to include in the Child Poverty Strategy should be advice provided to families through local Children’s Centres. Research carried out by Bedfordshire Advice Forum in 2009/10 found that many Children’s Centres would welcome closer links with advice agencies. Family workers at the Centres are increasingly being called upon to provide advice and information on issues such as benefits and relationship breakdown to the parents who use the centres. They are not trained to provide such advice, but recognise that the provision of accurate and timely advice can be of great benefit in tackling child poverty. The Centres were therefore keen to set up outreach and referral systems with local agencies.<sup>36</sup>

## **Equality Act 2010**

Under this new Act local authorities have a public duty to consider reducing social and economic inequalities when taking strategic decisions. It could be argued that providing or commissioning effective local advice services, especially in areas of greatest disadvantage, could help a local authority meet this duty.

## **Other drivers of change**

### **The need for social justice**

The advice sector provides information and advice to members of the public about their rights, entitlements and responsibilities under law. Advice services are part of the infrastructure of civil justice and play a pivotal role in tackling social exclusion.

As far back as the 1970s, access to advice was being acknowledged as a fundamental right of citizens. In an important review of local advice services in 1977 it was even suggested that the right to information and advice was the next (fourth) stage in the development of civil rights – after the earlier acquisition of liberty and freedom (eg free speech, religious rights, rights to justice), political

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<sup>34</sup> *Draft Statutory Guidance for local duties on child poverty (Child Poverty Act 2010)*, Child Poverty Unit, March 2010

<sup>35</sup> *Take up the Challenge - The role of local services in increasing take up of benefits and tax credits to reduce child poverty*, Child Poverty Unit, 2009

<sup>36</sup> *Advice services and children’s centres*, Bedfordshire Advice Forum, March 2010

rights (eg right to vote, right to join trade unions), and social rights (eg right to a minimum standard of life, right to access health and welfare services).<sup>37</sup> More recently, in 2005, an **Access to Justice Alliance** was formed by nearly 30 national charities, community groups and lawyers and advice groups who felt strongly that justice should remain accessible to all. The Alliance was concerned about proposed cuts to legal aid and the creation of “advice deserts” in some parts of the country.<sup>38</sup>

This year the **Justice for All** campaign has been started to ensure that all people can access justice, no matter the circumstances they are in. The campaign’s publicity leaflet highlights that demand for advice services is outstripping supply, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the public to get expert advice and representation, and advice services help the most vulnerable in a community.<sup>39</sup> Evidence also shows that the right advice early on can save £10 for every £1 invested and can keep families together in their homes, and in work and education.<sup>40</sup>

### **The importance of independent advice**

It has been recognised for some time that a mixed supply of advice services, in the statutory and voluntary sectors, can provide the best range of services for the public.<sup>41</sup>

However, it is essential that the public can access advice that is independent of public bodies, especially those that are acting as the decision makers on certain entitlements or rights eg decisions on benefit claims, homelessness applications, community care assessments.

The importance of independent advice was stressed by the main advice sector networks in the lead up to the 2010 general election. For example, the Law Centres Federation called for the development of a framework for community-led legal services which included five principles for promoting advice services at a national and local level.<sup>42</sup>

AdviceUK, the national network for independent advice providers has also stressed the independence of advice as a key element in its list of qualities for advice agencies to provide “smart advice”. AdviceUK’s assertion is that independent advice services are a vital part of a democratic society, enabling people to exercise their civil rights and responsibilities.<sup>43</sup>

### **The need for quality services**

To complete  
Quality agenda - CLS QM, new Quality Mark and Q-cas

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<sup>37</sup> *The fourth right of citizenship – A review of local advice services*, National Consumer Council, 1977

<sup>38</sup> *A right to justice – Policy Briefing*, Access to Justice Alliance, 2005

<sup>39</sup> *Justice for All*, Justice for All campaign, 2010

<sup>40</sup> *The socio-economic value of law centres*, Law Centres Federation, 2008

<sup>41</sup> *The fourth right of citizenship – A review of local advice services*, National Consumer Council, 1977

<sup>42</sup> *Law centres’s calls to the next government*, Law Centres Federation, 2010

<sup>43</sup> *Smart advice: smart funding*, AdviceUK, 2010

## The need to reduce inefficiencies

In the current economic climate, the drive to reduce inefficiencies is gathering considerable pace.

Recently there have been a number of initiatives relating to the advice sector in terms of this.

Add Systems Thinking  
Total Place  
I&DeA/LGA

## The need for greater partnership working

Add COMPACT - and partnership working  
Total Place

## Cuts in public funding – and a need for strategic funding for advice services

Despite all of the above drivers which are generally calling for an increase in local advice services, the major concern is of course that cuts in local council and other public funding, as announced in the Government's recent spending review, will eventually result in reduced funding for local advice providers.

It is therefore even more essential for there to be a strategic approach in the way that funding decisions are made for advice services.

AdviceUK has recently outlined seven factors for funders to apply “**smart funding**”.<sup>44</sup> These are:

- Follow the eight principles of good commissioning (as recommended by the Improvement and Development Agency in its national programme for 3<sup>rd</sup> sector commissioning)
- Recognise and resource the role of advice as part of the democratic process
- Recognise and resource the contribution independent advice makes to the achievement of national and local priorities
- Recognise and respect the value of grants to support a diversity of provision, choice and access of advice services
- Reduce the emphasis on narrow activity-based target setting
- Design collaboration and partnership working into advice services
- Follow Compact principles

When considering changes to the funding of advice services, local authorities and other public funders should also take account of the research undertaken concerning the funding options for improving advice services. This research analysed the early lessons that had been gained from changes made in certain areas relating to the development of Community Legal Advice Centres (CLACs) and Networks (CLANs).<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *Smart advice: smart funding*, AdviceUK, 2010

<sup>45</sup> *Early lessons from changes to legal advice provision and funding: the local authority experience*, Tribal, I&DeA and Local Government Association, 2010

## **2.11 Priority advice needs for Bedford Borough**

From the work in developing this Advice Strategy, the following priority advice needs for Bedford Borough have been identified.

- ??
- ??
- ??
- ??

To be completed following discussion at Advice Strategy Planning Group meeting on 3/11/10

## **2.12 Proposals for future provision of advice services**

To be completed following discussion at Advice Strategy Planning Group meeting on 3/11/10

## **2.13 Resources**

The increase in demand for advice services is set against the limitations of a funding environment that tends to be based on a range of time-limited contracts, many of which are targeted at specific client groups as opposed to long-term core funding for advice delivery.

Examples of funding streams include the Big Lottery "Advice Plus" Fund. Whilst notable, these are singular and time-limited programmes. Responding to the demand for services created by these funding streams and sustaining these services in the long-term will pose a significant challenge to the advice sector in the future.

This Advice Strategy therefore takes as its starting point for 2010/11 that current advice service levels need to be sustained to ensure access to advice for the most vulnerable in the Borough.

## **2.14 Management, commissioning and funding of advice services**

To be completed following discussion at Advice Strategy Planning Group meeting on 3/11/10

## **2.15 Monitoring and evaluation arrangements**

To be completed following discussion at Advice Strategy Planning Group meeting on 3/11/10

## **3. Implementation Plan**

### **3.1 Overview**

To be completed following discussion at Advice Strategy Planning Group meeting on 3/11/10

### **3.2 Action Plan**

To be completed following discussion at Advice Strategy Planning Group meeting on 3/11/10

# APPENDIX 1

## Members of Bedfordshire Advice Forum

There are currently 42 members of Bedfordshire Advice Forum

- Advice UK
- Advocacy Alliance – Voices for All
- Age Concern Bedfordshire
- Anchor Staying Put
- Aragon Housing Association – Housing Department
- Bedford and District CAB
- Bedford Borough Council – Care Standards Review and Welfare Rights Service
- Bedford Borough Council - Customer Advisory Team
- Bedford Borough Council - Housing Options
- Bedford Borough Council - Library Services
- Bedford Borough Council – Trading Standards
- Bedford College
- Bedford Credit Union
- Bedford Housing Link
- Bedfordshire Child Poverty Action Group
- Bedfordshire Police - Welfare Department
- Bedfordshire Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support (BRASS)
- BPHA – Employment Support
- BPHA – Money Advice
- Bedford Race Equality Council (BREC)
- Central Bedfordshire Council - Library Service
- Central Bedfordshire Council – Trading Standards
- Central Bedfordshire Council – Welfare Rights Service
- Disability Resource Centre
- Dunstable and District Citizens Advice Bureau
- Home Start North and Mid Beds
- Hospice at Home Volunteers – Leighton Buzzard
- Kings Arms Project
- Langley House Trust
- Leighton Linslade CAB
- Luton Irish Forum
- Luton Law Centre
- Luton Rights
- Mayday Trust
- Mid Bedfordshire CAB
- Money Advice at St Andrew's
- Polish-British Integration Centre
- Rutland Road Church
- Salvation Army
- Sight Concern Bedfordshire
- Surestart – Cauldwell
- Thai3Counties
- The Bedford Charity
- United Sustainable Energy Agency



- YMCA Bedfordshire

## APPENDIX 2

# Members of Bedford Borough Advice Strategy Planning Group

The following groups are represented on the Planning Group

Organisation	Representative(s)
Advice UK	Anjila Sinha
Advocacy Alliance (Voices for All)	Vicki Airs, Diane Hoare, Barnaby McConnell
Age Concern Bedfordshire	Steve Perry, Irene Tindall
Bedford and District CAB	Lorraine Gunther
Bedford Borough Council - Adult Services	George Hunt
Bedford Borough Council - Customer Advisory Team	Sue Audin, Karen Cook
Bedford Borough Council – Family Information Service	Charnjeet Dhillon
Bedford Borough Council - Housing Options	Dawn Parker
Bedford Borough Council - Library Service	Kerry O'Neil
Bedford Borough Council - Policy and Partnerships	David Brewer
Bedford Borough Council – Trading Standards	Alexandra Austin, Lynn Gell
Bedford Borough Council - Transformation Team	Gillian Abbott, Jo Hawthorne
Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity	Janet Ridge*
BPHA – Community Development	Nicky Dahl
BPHA – Money Advice	Annette Pacey, Amanda Ryan
Bedford Race Equality Council	Wendy Anderson-Welsh, Glenis Orkisz
Disability Resource Centre	Carl Davies, Liz Morgan
Home Start Bedford Borough	Wendie Lovatt
Luton Irish Forum	Noelette Hanley
Polish-British Integration Centre	Mags Brady, Robert Brady
The Regency Training Foundation	Patricia O'Malley

\* Janet Ridge is also the Chair of the **Social Inclusion, Community Cohesion and Culture Thematic Partnership**, which instructed the Planning Group to develop the Advice Strategy on behalf of the **Bedford Borough Partnership**.

The Planning Group has been facilitated by Len Simkins and Linda Wood (**Infotrain**) on behalf of **Bedfordshire Advice Forum**.

Funding for the work of the Planning Group in 2009/10 was provided by **Capacitybuilders** through **Voluntary Works**. Extra funding for 2010/11 has now been given by **Bedford Borough Partnership Board**.



## APPENDIX 3

# Solicitors giving civil legal advice in Bedford Borough

To complete