

# ADVICE STRATEGY

2011 - 2014

A strategy for social welfare  
information, advice and advocacy services  
in **Bedford Borough**



Draft 2 – November 2010

## Foreword

By **Janet Ridge**

Chair of Bedford Borough's  
Social Inclusion, Community Cohesion and  
Culture Thematic Partnership



I am very happy to introduce our first Advice Strategy for Bedford Borough.

This document proposes, for the first time, a strategic approach to the planning, funding and delivery of social welfare advice services in the Borough. These services, which are very important for our community, are currently provided by a wide variety of organisations in both the voluntary and community sector and the statutory sector. This is the first attempt to provide a strategic framework in which they can operate.

There is no doubting the importance of information, advice and advocacy for people and their communities – especially during these very difficult economic times. There is a good deal of evidence to show that effective advice can have beneficial effects on a wide range of **personal** issues such as income and financial management, legal rights, health, confidence and general well-being. Further details can be found in the report that we have produced on the development of this Advice Strategy, available from [www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk](http://www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk)

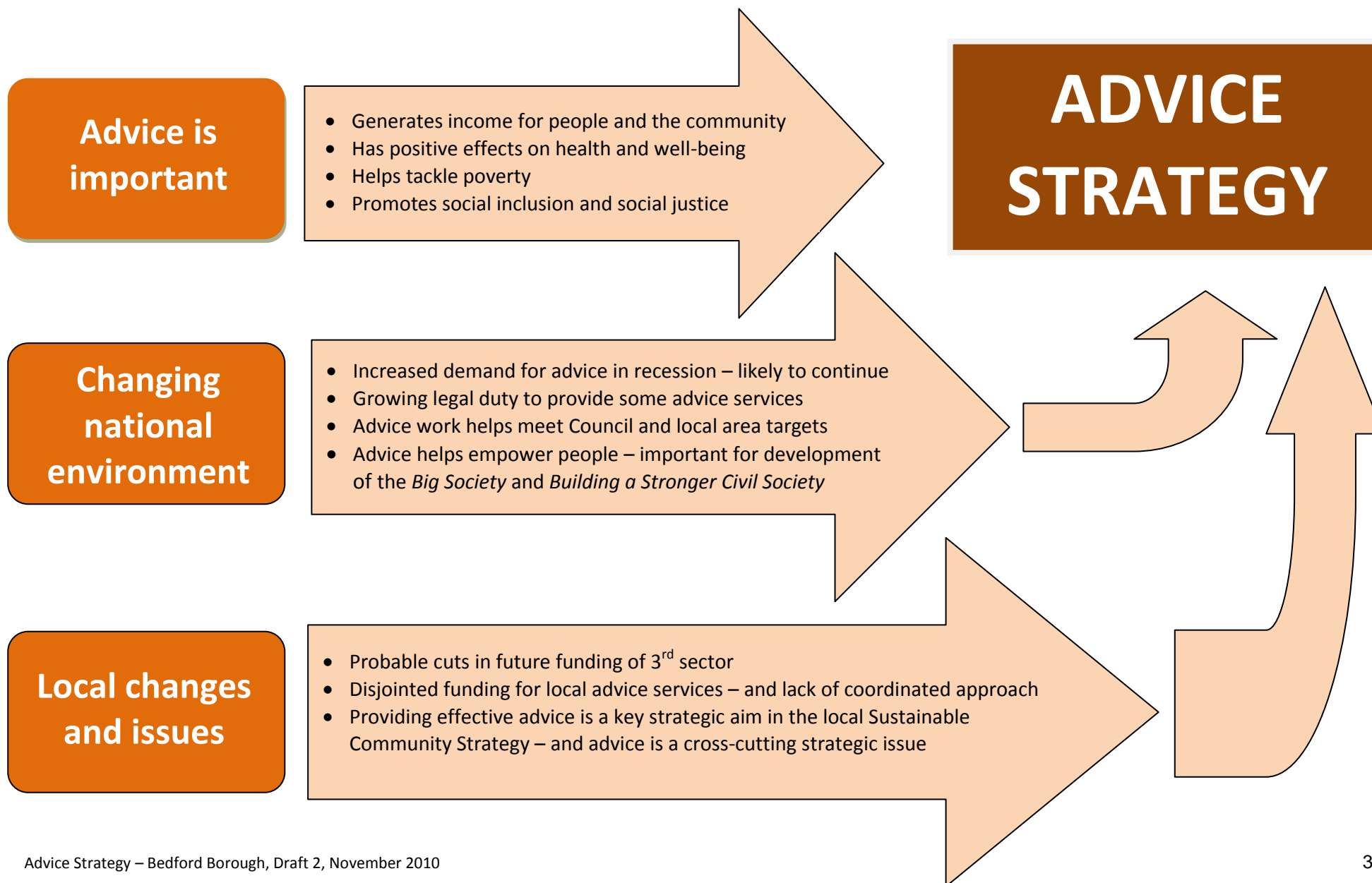
In addition, having this strategy will help us to meet some of our wider **community** priorities by supporting vulnerable people, tackling poverty, promoting social inclusion and community cohesion, and empowering local people.

It is therefore not surprising that “*ensuring that marginalised and vulnerable people receive effective support, advice and advocacy*” has been adopted as a key aim in the Sustainable Community Strategy produced by the **Bedford Borough Partnership Board**. The development of this Advice Strategy was commissioned by the Board, through the **Social Inclusion, Community Cohesion and Culture Partnership**; it will now act as the delivery mechanism for this key aim.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has helped in the development of the strategy, including members of the **Advice Strategy Planning Group** from Bedfordshire Advice Forum and Bedford Borough Council; Advice Bedfordshire and Infotrain who have managed the project; and Voluntaryworks and Bedford Borough Partnership Board who have provided funding for the development work.



## Why do we need an Advice Strategy in Bedford Borough?



## What does this Advice Strategy cover?

This Advice Strategy is a strategy for social welfare information, advice and advocacy services in Bedford Borough.

The **key terms used in the Strategy** are explained below and the overall **scope of the Strategy** is explained overleaf.

### Social welfare

Legal advice in the areas of law, such as debt, employment, housing and welfare benefits, can have a significant impact on individual's lives and their ability to participate in social and economic life.

Social welfare advice can solve people's legal problems, with result that their lives and the lives of their families are improved.

### Information

**Information** provision is 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.

### Advice

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.

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.

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 at tribunal and court hearings.

### Advocacy

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 do not give advice but will work with a client to help them have their voice heard, and to make their own choices.

## Scope of this Advice Strategy

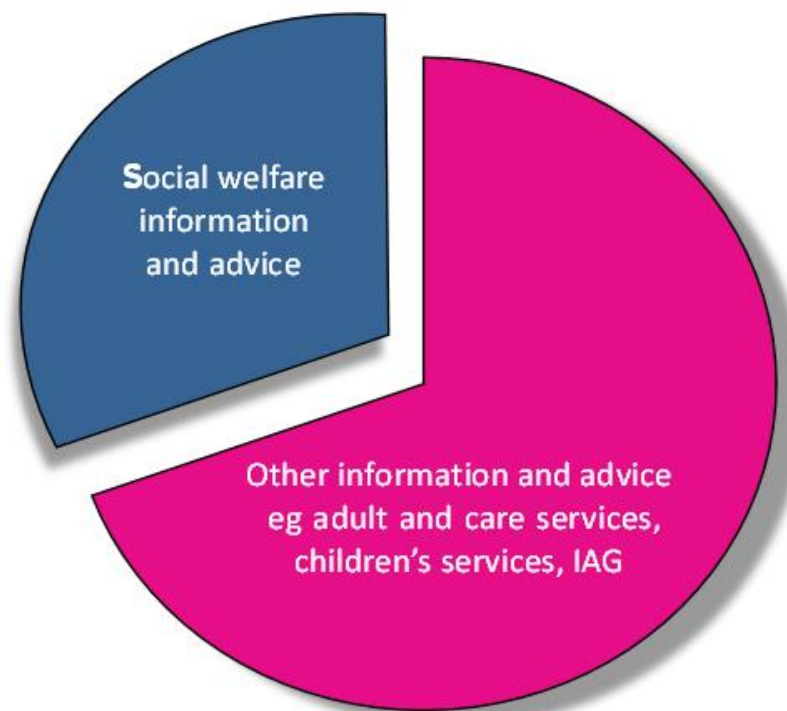
This Advice Strategy covers **social welfare advice, information and advocacy services** that come under the definitions given on the previous page.

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
- Information on adult care and health services
- Information on services for children and families
- Information on general local facilities or services eg sports facilities, cultural 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

It is therefore acknowledged that production of this Advice Strategy (on social welfare issues) may just be the first step in developing a wider information and advice strategy for Bedford Borough.

It is recommended that an important next step after the launch of this strategy will be to bring together some of the above elements of information and advice to develop provide a **fully comprehensive community information and advice strategy for Bedford Borough**.



**Advice and information needs in Bedford Borough**

## What is in the Advice Strategy?

The **vision, principles and strategic aims** of the Advice Strategy are given below. The identified **drivers of change** that will affect the provision of social welfare advice over the next few years are then on page 7.

Pages 8-18 of the document then look at each of the **strategic aims** in more detail – outlining what we know already, what we need to do, and our recommended action.

Once this Advice Strategy is adopted, we will then produce a more detailed **Action Plan** to begin taking some of the recommended action forward in 2011/12. The amount of recommended action that can actually be implemented will obviously depend on the **resources** available.

## Vision

**Bedford Borough will be an area where people experience less poverty and social exclusion, because their needs are being met effectively through easily accessible, well-publicised and high-quality social welfare advice, information and advocacy services across the voluntary and statutory sectors**

## Principles

Information, advice and advocacy services in Bedford Borough should be:

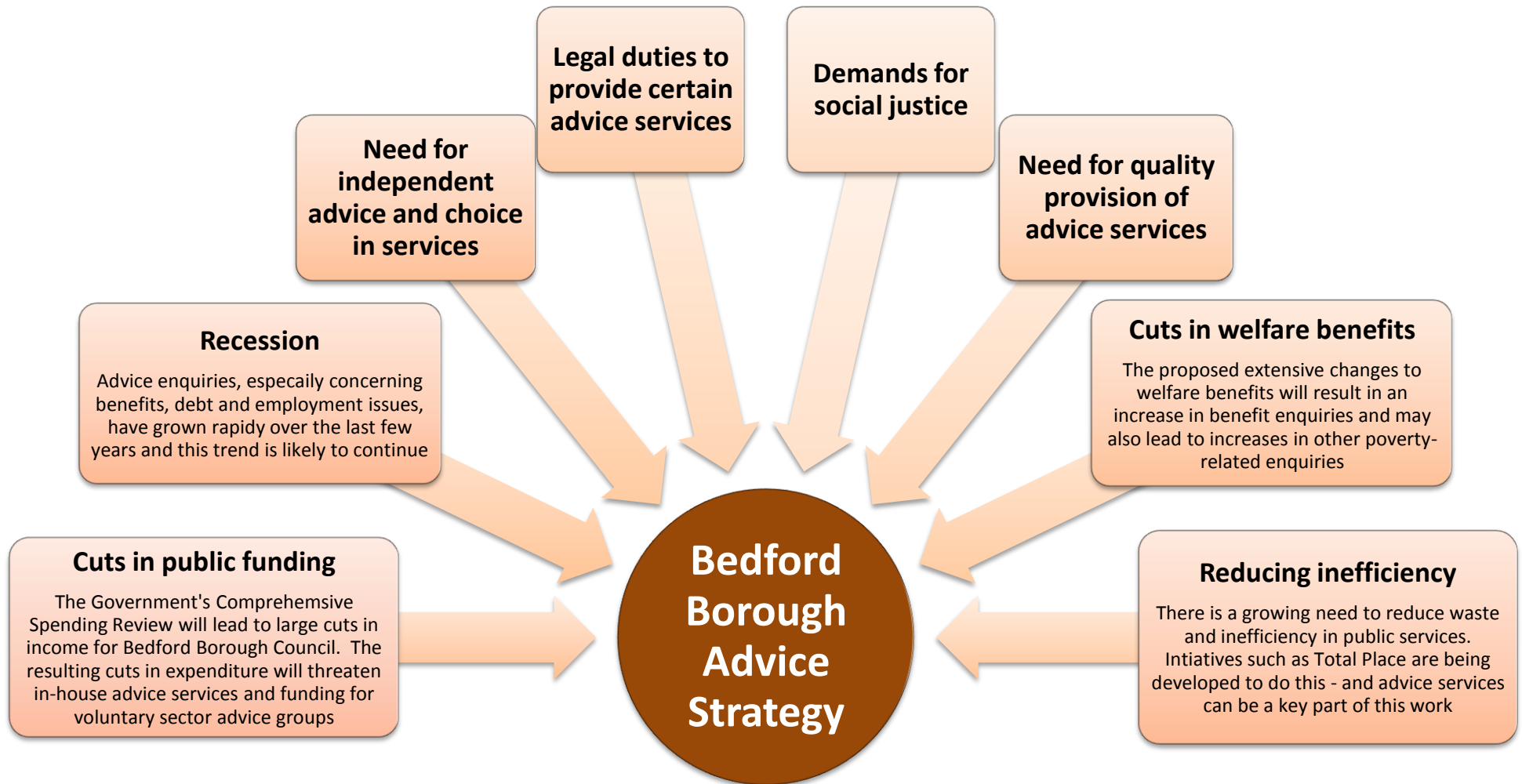
- Planned in a coordinated manner to meet local needs, using collaboration and partnership working across the voluntary and statutory sectors
- Available to the whole community and, underpinned by a commitment to equality of opportunity, should also be used to support vulnerable, marginalised or disadvantaged people and communities
- 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

## Strategic Aims

1. To develop a strategic approach to the planning, funding and provision of advice, information and advocacy services in Bedford Borough
2. To respond effectively to the changing needs for advice, information and advocacy in Bedford Borough
3. To enhance collaboration between agencies in the advice, information and advocacy sector in Bedford Borough
4. To ensure the quality of advice services by supporting the development of quality marked advice provision across Bedford Borough
5. To improve access to advice, information and advocacy services in Bedford Borough

## Drivers of change for social welfare advice

There are a number of factors and changes which will have an impact on the provision of social welfare advice over the next few years, many of which will make the successful implementation of the Strategy even more important. Further details on these drivers can be found in the report on the development of this Advice Strategy, which is available from: [www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk](http://www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk)



## AIM 1

To develop a strategic approach to the planning, funding and provision of advice, information and advocacy services in Bedford Borough

### What we know

Up until now there has been no strategic planning in Bedford Borough regarding the provision of advice and information, and services in the local area have developed in an ad hoc manner.

The importance of advice services is well evidenced and it is clear that advice and information provision is an issue that cuts across various community sectors such as health, adult services, and children's services – as well as being an important tool in tackling poverty and social exclusion, and promoting economic well-being.

Our mapping of current services in 2010 shows that:

Insert details of the type and level of service

In terms of **funding for advice**, again there has been no strategic approach. Advice work is currently funded from a variety of sources including:

Insert details of funding of advice services

It must also be remembered, however, that many parts of the advice sector are strongly supported by **volunteers**. This provides real added value in the sector. In Bedford Borough there are ?? paid staff working in the advice sector but over ?? volunteers.

From the recent mapping that was undertaken, a number of **gaps in advice provision** were identified in Bedford Borough.

Insert details of gaps

Further details on the above can be found in the report on the development of this Advice Strategy. You can get a copy of the report at: [www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk](http://www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk)

### What we need to do

Suggestions for future action are:

- Develop a robust **planning framework** for local advice provision
- Develop a **collaborative approach to the funding** and resourcing of advice services
- Ensure that there are strong **links between the Advice Strategy and other relevant community strategies**

## Recommended action

### Planning framework

#### 1. Set up an Advice Management Group for Bedford Borough

This Group would be responsible for implementing the Advice Strategy and overseeing advice provision in Bedford Borough. It would consist of members from the local advice sector, Bedford Borough Council and other key stakeholders

#### 2. Appoint a “Champion for Advice”

This person would chair the Advice Management Group and would be the “voice” for advice services in Bedford Borough. This person could be invited to sit on, or report to, the LSP Board.

### Collaborative approach to funding

#### 3. Develop a funding plan for advice provision in Bedford Borough

This plan will map the current funding of advice services in Bedford Borough and look at ways of improving funding – through optimising funding streams and collaborative funding bids

#### 4. Develop a plan for sharing resources between advice providers in Bedford Borough

This plan will map the current use of resources by advice services in Bedford Borough and look at ways of reducing costs by the effective sharing of resources

### Links with other relevant strategies

#### 5. Develop a matrix to show links between the Advice Strategy and other relevant community strategies

This matrix should show, and help to enhance, the links with strategies such as the Sustainable Community Strategy, Child Poverty Strategy, Homelessness Strategy and Universal Information and Advice Strategy

#### 6. Support the development of a comprehensive information and advice strategy for Bedford Borough

This wider Strategy would link together the various components of advice and information needs in Bedford Borough

## AIM 2

To effectively respond to the changing needs for advice, information and advocacy in Bedford Borough

### What we know

Bedford Borough is

Insert general information about Central Beds

The current priority needs for advice services are

Insert details of advice needs

In Bedford Borough we need an effective mix of services that meet the needs of local citizens. This means having services at different levels provided a good choice of providers in the voluntary and statutory sectors. However, there is not a good mix of services at present and there are threats to certain services in the future.

Further details on the above can be found in the report on the development of this Advice Strategy. You can get a copy of the report at: [www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk](http://www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk)

### What we need to do

Suggestions for future action are:

- Regularly **collect and analyse evidence about changing advice needs** in Bedford Borough
- Regularly discuss and **analyse the effects of government policy and new legislation** on local advice needs

## Recommended action

### Evidence on advice needs

#### 7. Publish a regular report on advice needs in Bedford Borough

This report would be considered by the Advice Management Group. The report should be produced annually, although additional reports may be needed if urgent changes to advice needs need to be considered between annual reports

### Government policy and legislation

#### 8. Produce regular briefing papers on the effects of government policy and new legislation on local advice services in Bedford Borough

These briefing papers would need to be produced to estimate the effects on advice services of new policies or legislation before they are introduced. Update reports could also be issued to evaluate the effects after the introduction on the new policy or legislation. The briefing papers would be considered by the Advice Management Group.

#### 9. Provide a specific response to the Coalition Government's proposed changes to welfare benefits

The Government is planning major changes to the benefits system over the next few years. Various training courses will need to be arranged to help keep benefit advisers up-to-date with the changes. Local benefit advisers will also need to be brought together to discuss these changes and the effects on their clients. This could be done by setting up a new network for local benefit advisers.

## AIM 3

To enhance collaboration between agencies in the advice, information and advocacy sector in Bedford Borough

### What we know

Most information and advice providers in Bedford Borough are members of **Bedfordshire Advice Forum (BAF)**, and there are currently **xx** BAF members that deliver social welfare information and advice services in the Borough. These members are:



- Age Concern Bedfordshire
- Anchor 'Staying Put' Bedford
- Bedford & District CAB
- Bedford Borough Council - Benefits and Community Welfare Service
- Bedford Borough Council - Housing Options
- Bedford Borough Council - Trading Standards Service
- Bedford Borough Council - Welfare Rights Team
- Bedford College - Student Services
- Bedford Housing Link
- Bedford Credit Union
- Bedfordshire Race and Equalities Council (BREC)
- Bedford YMCA
- Bedfordshire Police - Welfare Department
- BPHA – Community Development Team
- Bedfordshire Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support (BRASS)
- Home-Start (North & Mid Beds)
- Kings Arms Project

- Langley House Trust
- Mayday Trust
- Polish-British Integration Centre
- Rutland Road Church - Debt Advice Service
- Sight Concern Bedfordshire
- Surestart Cauldwell
- Thai3Counties
- The Disability Resource Centre
- The Salvation Army - Debt Advice Service
- United Sustainable Energy Agency
- Voices for All (Advocacy Alliance)

The flyer for the Bedfordshire Advice Directory features the title 'Bedfordshire Advice Directory' and the BAF logo. It includes the website URL [www.bedsadvisedirectory.org.uk](http://www.bedsadvisedirectory.org.uk) and a map of Bedfordshire with Bedford Borough highlighted in purple and Central Bedfordshire in green. The text on the flyer states: '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.' An 'Action to take' box lists: 1) Bookmark the Directory [www.bedsadvisedirectory.org.uk](http://www.bedsadvisedirectory.org.uk); 2) Use the Directory; 3) Tell other people about the Directory. Contact information is provided as [baf@infotrain.co.uk](mailto:baf@infotrain.co.uk).

Further information and contact details of BAF members can be found in the online **Bedfordshire Advice Directory**.

BAF provides a variety of infrastructure support services for its members including arranging forum meetings and training courses.

Although networking between BAF members is generally good, there is little in the way of direct collaboration between local advice agencies.

Further details on BAF can be found at: [www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk](http://www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk)

### What we need to do

Suggestions for future action are:

- Develop ideas for **collaborative working between local providers** in the information, advice and advocacy sector
- Support the provision of **infrastructure support services** to local information, advice and advocacy providers

## Recommended action

### Collaborative working

#### **10. Organise an event for local advice providers to discuss ideas for collaborative working**

This event could consider how local providers could work more effectively together. Issues that could be discussed include: sharing of resources; joint purchasing of supplies; referral procedures; joint training; peer review of casework

#### **11. Develop closer links between the advice sector and key stakeholders**

One obvious group where closer links are needed is with solicitors. It will be important to look at ways of increasing awareness of local not-for-profit advice services with solicitors and developing better cross-referrals.

### Infrastructure support services

#### **12. Maintain the Bedfordshire Advice Directory**

Support should be provided to help maintain the online Directory which gives contact and service details of BAF members.

#### **13. Provide support for Bedfordshire Advice Forum**

BAF is the network of local not-for-profit advice providers. Support for BAF would enable it to organise forum meetings, represent the advice sector in strategic meetings, and provide training courses for BAF members.

## AIM 4

To ensure the quality of advice services by supporting the development of quality marked advice provision across Bedford Borough

### What we know

There is, however, a growing need for organisations to show that they are providing a quality services – especially amongst funders. However, from the recent mapping of current services we discovered that only a minority of BAF members have a quality mark for their advice service.

Insert details about quality marks

There is also evidence that there are a large number of community groups that are providing information and advice to users that are not part of BAF. These agencies are unlikely to have any form of quality mark and may need support to develop their capacity.

The Government developed a quality mark system through its Community Legal Service (CLS) which was launched in ?? Under this system CLS Quality Marks were available at three main levels - Information Help, General Help, and Specialist. Although the Legal Service Commission will continue to provide audits for the Specialist Help level of the Quality Mark for agencies that have legal contracts with the LSC, the other levels of the Quality Mark are being phased out. Although the national advice sector should be launching a new quality mark at the general help level in 2011, there is no such replacement planned at the Information Level.

Because of the lack of an effective quality mark for agencies providing information and basic levels of advice, BAF has worked in partnership with Bedfordshire Race and Equalities Council to develop a local quality system that focuses on small community advice organisations. This local quality system is called **Q-cas**.



Q-cas was launched in ?? and so far ?? agencies in Bedfordshire have been awarded a Q-cas award.

Further details on the above can be found in the report on the development of this Advice Strategy, which is available from: [www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk](http://www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk)

### What we need to do

Suggestions for future action are:

- Provide support to local providers to ensure that high **quality information and advice** is provided in Bedford Borough

## Recommended action

### Quality of advice

#### **14. Conduct research into the quality of information and advice provided in Bedford Borough**

This research will help identify the support needed to develop consistent quality services across Bedford Borough

#### **15. Provide training programmes to help agencies improve quality**

Training could be provided on a variety of issues including: developing policies; advice recording; confidentiality; equal opportunities etc. Training for advisers is also needed to develop skills and maintain knowledge.

#### **16. Encourage all local information and advice providers to join BAF**

To help develop quality in the sector, all information and providers should be encouraged to join BAF to take advantage of the infrastructure support services that are provided – especially in terms of networking, training and quality development.

#### **17. Encourage all local information and advice providers to get a quality mark**

All local providers should be encouraged to get an appropriate quality mark. Small community groups should be encouraged to use Q-cas as their quality system. This would ensure a consistent approach across Bedford Borough.

## AIM 5

To improve access to advice, information and advocacy services in Bedford Borough

### What we know

Our mapping of current providers in 2010 shows that, in terms of location, most agencies are based in towns in Bedford Borough.

**Insert details of local advice services**

The mapping also showed there gaps in services in Bedford Borough causing access problems for many citizens. Especially noticeable is the lack of:

- ??
- ??

Further details on the above can be found in the report on the development of this Advice Strategy. You can get a copy of the report at: [www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk](http://www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk)

### What we need to do

Suggestions for future action are:

- Develop better **telephone access** to advice for clients
- Develop better **internet access** for advice in Bedford Borough
- Ensure that there is a good mix of **“face-to-face” advice services**, at different levels, and in different geographical areas, to meet the needs of local citizens

## Recommended action

### Telephone advice

#### **18. Develop a centralised access point for telephone advice in Bedford Borough**

A centralised telephone number for advice would simply and improve access for local citizens. The helpline could help provide basic information to callers but would primarily signpost callers to the most appropriate source for the information or advice required

### Internet access

#### **19. Develop a common internet access point for advice for Bedford Borough citizens**

As well as having a centralised telephone access point, it would be very useful to have a single internet access point for advice. The website would contain clear links to local advice and information providers, and would provide links to websites for information on social welfare issues. The Bedfordshire Advice Directory website could be developed to become this central internet access point.

### Face-to-face advice

#### **20. Ensure that a balanced mix of “face-to-face” information and advice services is provided at different levels**

As well as access to telephone and internet information, citizens in Bedford Borough need to have access to a range of face to face provider including: a variety of information providers in their local community; a generalist advice agency in their local area; and some specialist level support (in key enquiry areas such as benefits, debt and employment) in Bedford Borough as a whole. (See page 18).

#### **21. Ensure that advice services are effectively provided both in urban and rural areas in Bedford Borough**

As well as ensuring that generalist advice services are available in the urban area (in Bedford / Kempston), it is important to provide effective services for citizens living in the rural areas of the Borough. This could be done by things like outreach sessions, home visiting services, or mobile advice services.

# Ensure that a balanced mix of information and advice services is provided at different levels

## Specialist level

Representation and complex casework services

### Current example:

Welfare Rights Service – Bedford Borough Council

## General level

General advice and casework services  
– and referring clients for representation

### Current example:

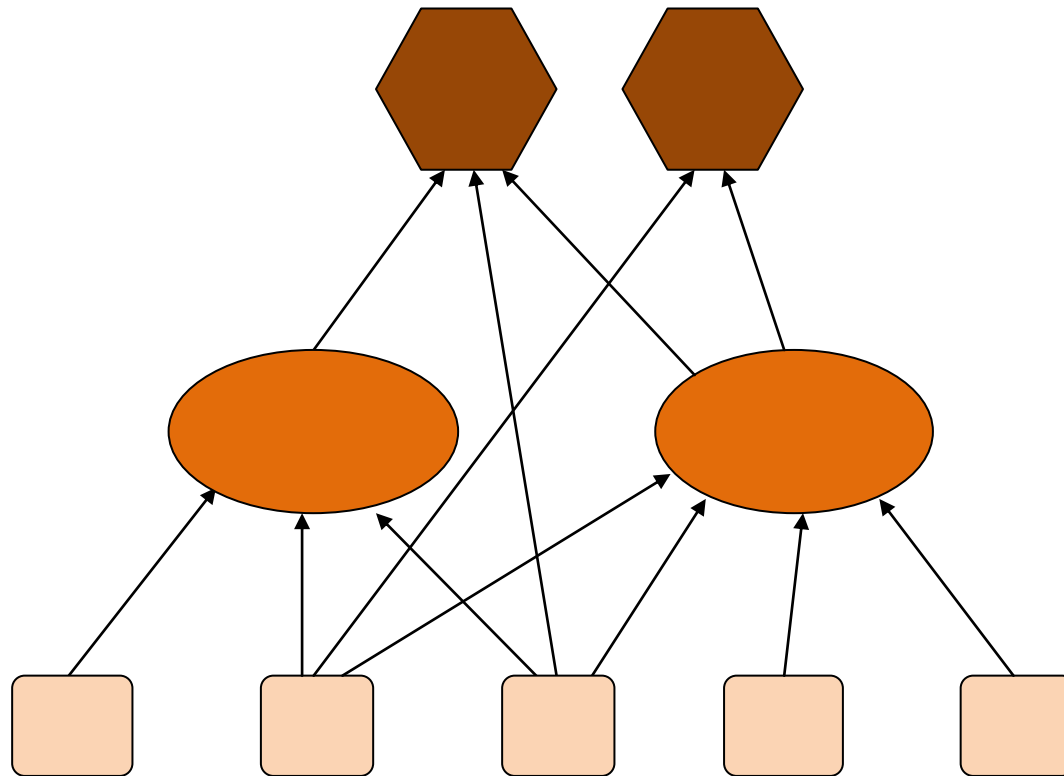
Bedford Citizens Advice Bureau

## Information level

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

### Current example:

The Disability Resource Centre



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
- Some organisations provide **advocacy services**, which help users access other organisations that provide information or advice