

ADVICE STRATEGY

2011 - 2014

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



June 2011

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 a strategic approach to the planning, funding and delivery of social welfare advice services in the Borough. These services, which are essential 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

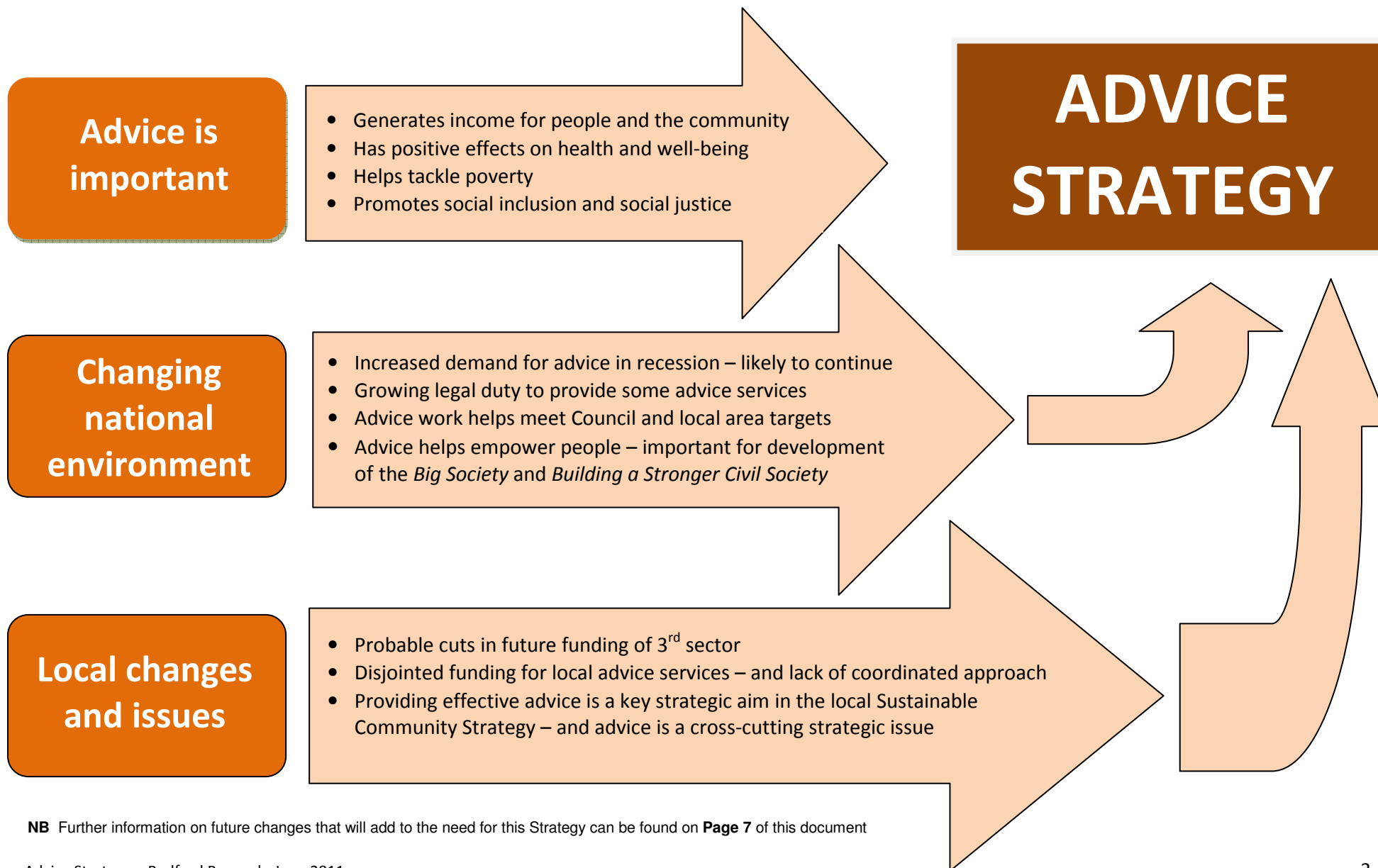
In addition, having this strategy will help us to meet some of our wider **community priorities** by supporting vulnerable people, tackling poverty, promoting social inclusion and community cohesion, and empowering local people.

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 Voluntary Works and Bedford Borough Partnership Board who have provided funding for the development work.



Why do we need an Advice Strategy in Bedford Borough?



NB Further information on future changes that will add to the need for this Strategy can be found on **Page 7** of this document

What does the 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 on the following page.

Social welfare

Legal advice on social welfare issues such as debt, employment, housing and benefits, can have a significant impact on individuals' lives and their ability to participate in social and economic life.

“At any time, but particularly now in difficult economic times, the provision of social welfare law is of prime importance. Legal advice, in the fields of housing, debt, and welfare benefits, can solve people’s legal problems, with the result that their lives and lives of their families are improved. It can literally change people’s lives.”

Lord Bach (in Foreword of Study of Legal Advice at a Local Level, 2009)

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 signpost or refer a client 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.

Advocacy services should work closely with information and advice providers to develop a seamless service for their users.

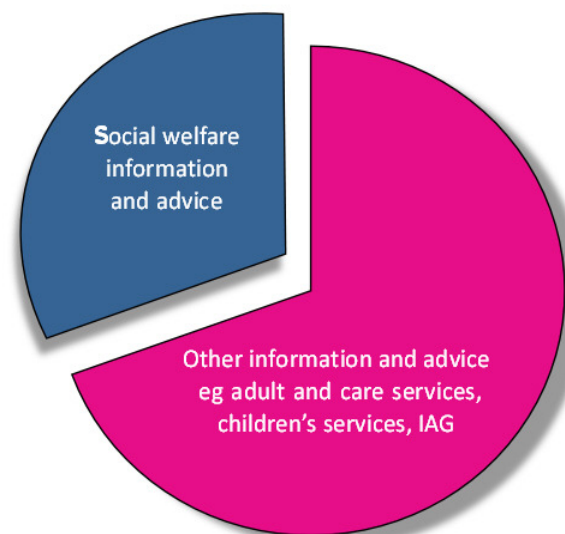
Scope of this Advice Strategy

This Advice Strategy covers **social welfare information, advice 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 stage in developing a wider information and advice strategy for Bedford Borough.



Information and advice needs in 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 a fully comprehensive community information and advice strategy for Bedford Borough.**

To do this it will be important to make sure that this Advice Strategy is closely **linked with other relevant strategies**, that either already exist or are being developed, in the Borough – including the Sustainable Community Strategy; the Anti-Poverty Strategy; the Universal Information and Advice Strategy (for adult social care); the Homelessness Strategy; the Community Safety Strategy; and the Healthy Bedford Borough Strategy.

As well as linking in with other strategies it is important for the **impact on advice needs and advice services** to be assessed when new strategies and plans are developed in Bedford Borough by the Borough Council or by other public bodies.

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 shown 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 information, advice 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 Advice 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



NB The list of drivers given above is not exhaustive. The current pace of change, with new Government policy initiatives being announced on a regular basis, is likely to also bring other, **unforeseen changes** that will lead to an increase in demand for advice and a growing need for advisers to keep-up-to-date with changes in social welfare legislation

AIM 1

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

What we know

Up until now there has been **limited strategic planning** in the Borough regarding the provision of advice and information, and local services have opened, developed, and sometimes closed, 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.

In October 2010 we undertook some **mapping of current services** based on survey responses from 16 organisations that provide social welfare advice or information services in Bedford Borough. These organisations vary considerably in size, type and purpose. Some services are in-house Borough Council services but most are in the voluntary and community sector. Some provide general advice/information on a range of issues to the general public whereas others only provide advice/information on specific issues and sometimes only to specific client groups. Five organisations in the Borough provide specialist representation services.

In Bedford Borough there are about **60 paid staff** working in organisations that provide advice/ information services and an estimated **135 volunteers**, who provide real added value in the sector. The organisations responding to the survey dealt with **over 31,500 advice enquiries** in 2009/10 and opened **over 2,100 advice cases**.

In terms of **funding for advice**, again there has been no strategic approach. Advice work is currently funded from a variety of sources including: Bedford Borough Council; Equality and Human Rights Commission; Big Lottery Fund; European Social Fund; Legal Services Commission; EEDA and some local funders.

From the recent mapping that was undertaken, various **gaps in advice provision** were identified in Bedford Borough. The main gaps were:

- **Lack of Immigration advice providers** - only one agency in the Borough (BRASS) can legally provide immigration advice above the very basic Level 1 service.
- **Rural gaps and access issues** – all of the main advice providers are based in the urban area of Bedford and Kempston with few outreach services provided in the rural areas of the Borough. Many people living in the rural wards either have to use limited telephone services for advice or have to travel into Bedford.
- **Lack of provision of advice services for the general public** – there is only one agency in the Borough (Bedford CAB) that provides general advice to the wider public. The others serve special groups in the community.

Further details on the above can be found in the report on the development of this Advice Strategy. Go to: 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 local 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 its Action Plan, 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, collaborative funding, and maximising the impact of funding. This funding plan should link in with a wider strategy for the funding of the voluntary and community sector in the Borough and should address the priority advice needs for the Borough (see **Action Point 10**)

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 methods for linking advice work and the Advice Strategy to other relevant community strategies

The Borough Council and other public bodies should be encouraged to “advice proof” new strategies and plans to assess the impact on advice needs / services. Also a matrix could be developed to show, and 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 information, advice and advocacy in Bedford Borough

What we know

Although all sections of the population can experience problems, those who are vulnerable to social exclusion are especially vulnerable to civil justice problems. People from poorer neighbourhoods, and from groups experiencing discrimination and disadvantage, are more likely to access independent advice services, and advice agencies help a disproportionate number of disabled people and people from a BME background.

There are **considerable advice needs in Bedford Borough:**

- Over the next 10 years the population is expected to rise by 8%, and there will be increases in the numbers of older people, people living in rural areas, and the BME populations.
- Three areas (in parts of Castle, Harpur and Cauldwell wards) are among the 10% most deprived areas in England.
- There are pockets of deprivation in some rural areas – especially in the wards of Eastcotts, Wilshamstead and Wootton, and a key issue is the lack of access to essential services.
- There are 7 LSOAs in the 10% most deprived in England in terms of income deprivation affecting pensioners, and 5,600 pensioners (20.1%) in the Borough were also receiving Pension Credit.
- There are 9 LSOAs in the top 10% most deprived nationally in terms of income deprivation affecting children. 6,095 children (20.1%) are living in households that were considered to be in poverty.
- There were 3,725 people claiming JSA in Bedford Borough (September 2010). This was 3.7% of the working age population.

- There is over 6% unemployment in Cauldwell, Castle and Queens Park
- 11,410 people of working age were claiming out-of-work benefits. This was 11.1% of the working age population.
- The latest NEET rate (ie young people not in education, employment or training) is 6.5% for the Borough but this rate rises to over 11% in some of the more deprived areas in the Borough.
- There are an estimated 15,600 carers in the Borough
- 141 households were accepted as homeless in Bedford Borough
- There were 22 Gypsy and Traveller caravans in Bedford Borough
- It is estimated that there are between 5,780 and 7,400 new migrants living in Bedfordshire
- 14.9% of household residents in the Borough indicated that they had a limiting long-term illness or disability. Over 9,700 are disabled and claiming disability benefits.
- There are about 500 short-term prisoners in the Borough in Bedford Prison

Further details on the above can be found in the report on the development of this Advice Strategy. Go to:

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
- Ensure that **priority advice needs** in the Borough are met especially in supporting vulnerable, marginalised or disadvantaged people and communities

Recommended action

Evidence on advice needs

7. Conduct a regular review of advice needs in Bedford Borough

This review would be undertaken for the Advice Management Group. The review should take place annually, although additional reviews may be needed if urgent changes to advice needs need to be considered between annual reviews

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 of the new policy or legislation. Evidence on these effects could be provided by BAF members. The briefing papers would be considered by the Advice Management Group.

9. Provide responses to proposed central and local government changes that will affect the advice sector

For example, 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 come 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. Another possible initiative would be to organise benefits take-up campaigns in the Borough to make sure residents were claiming their correct entitlement to benefits.

Priority advice needs

10. Ensure that local advice services are planned to meet the priority advice needs in the Borough

The Advice Management Board will need to make sure that any strategic plans agreed for advice provision (see **Action Point 1**) and any funding plans developed (see **Action Point 3**) link with the agreed advice priorities for the Borough. The plans for local advice services should ensure that services are available to the whole community and meet the needs of vulnerable, marginalised or disadvantaged people and communities

AIM 3

To enhance collaboration between agencies in the information, advice 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 30 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 – Library Service
- 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 – Money Advice Team
- BPHA – Employment Support
- Bedfordshire Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support (BRASS)
- Home-Start Bedford Borough

- 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)

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 has been little in the way of direct collaboration between local advice agencies.

Further details on BAF can be found at: 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

Bedfordshire Advice Directory

Helping you get access to advice and information services in Bedfordshire

www.bedsadviceforum.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.bedsadviceforum.org.uk
- 2) Use the Directory
- 3) Tell other people about the Directory

Want an entry in the Directory? Contact 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.

Recommended action

Collaborative working

11. Provide ongoing opportunities for local advice providers to discuss and develop ideas for collaborative working

For example, an event could be organised to help local providers consider how they could work more effectively together. Issues that could be discussed include: sharing of resources; joint purchasing of supplies; improved signposting and referral procedures; joint training; peer review of casework. Another possibility would be the appointment of a facilitator to support local advice agencies develop collaborate ideas.

12. Develop closer links between the not-for-profit advice sector and other providers

One obvious group where closer links are needed is with local 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

13. Maintain the Bedfordshire Advice Directory

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

14. 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 a growing need for organisations to show that they are providing **quality services** – especially amongst funders. However, from the recent mapping of current services we discovered that only 6 organisations (out of 16 survey responses) have a quality mark for their advice or information service. These are:

- Bedford and District CAB
- Bedford Borough Council - Welfare Rights Team
- Bedfordshire Race and Equalities Council (BREC)
- Bedfordshire Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support (BRASS)
- Polish British Integration Centre
- Money Advice at St Andrews

There is also evidence that there are a large number of local community groups that are providing information and advice to users but 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 2000. Under this system CLS Quality Marks were available at three main levels - Information Help, General Help, and Specialist Help. 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.

The national advice sector should be launching a new quality mark at the General Help level in 2011 to replace the CLS Quality Mark. However, 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 2008 and so far 6 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. Go to: 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

15. Identify information and advice providers in Bedford Borough that need support to enhance the quality of their service

Assistance could be provided to agencies that are identified as needing support. For example, support programmes are currently available to help community organisations work through the Q-cas quality system. This type of support can help to develop consistent quality services across Bedford Borough.

16. 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 help develop skills and maintain knowledge on social welfare issues.

17. Increase the membership of Bedfordshire Advice Forum

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.

18. Increase the number of local information and advice providers that have a quality mark for their advice services

All local providers should be encouraged to get an appropriate quality mark for their information and advice services. Small community groups should be encouraged to use Q-cas as their quality system. This would ensure a consistent approach to

AIM 5

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

What we know

National evidence shows that those most at risk of developing legal problems are also the least able to deal with them. Vulnerable people need greater levels of support to resolve their problems, and express a high preference for advice which is face-to-face or on the telephone.

Research also shows that people who are unable to access advice 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. Unresolved problems and disputes have negative effects on people's lives and can result in significant costs to public services.

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

Our local **mapping of current providers** in October 2010 showed that, there were gaps in services in the Borough causing access problems for many citizens. Especially noticeable is the limited:

- Outreach services
- Home visiting services
- Telephone advice services
- Alternative methods of accessing advice

The mapping also showed that, in terms of location, **most agencies are based in the urban area of Bedford / Kempston**. Some agencies based outside the Borough, provide services in the Borough but again these tend to be focussed in Bedford. Although some agencies provide outreach services these tend to be in locations in Bedford / Kempston with very few services being provided in rural areas.

Under the Equality Act 2010, public sector bodies of the Bedford Borough Partnership have a statutory equality duty in carrying out services and functions to advance equality of opportunity, eliminate discrimination and foster good relations within communities. A key principle of this Strategy is that advice services should be available to the whole community and there should be a commitment to equality of opportunity, and supporting vulnerable, marginalised or disadvantaged people and communities.

Further details on the above can be found in the report on the development of this Advice Strategy. Go to: www.bedsadviceforum.org.uk

What we need to do

Suggestions for future action are:

- 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
- Develop better **telephone access** to advice for clients
- Develop effective **access to written information** in Bedford Borough
- Regularly analyse the impact of the Advice Strategy in advancing **equality of opportunity** and supporting vulnerable, marginalised or disadvantaged people and communities

Recommended action

Face-to-face advice

19. Promote the need for a balanced mix of “face-to-face” information and advice services at different levels in Bedford Borough

Citizens in Bedford Borough, especially the most vulnerable, need to have access to a range of providers giving “face to face” services 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 diagram on **Page 18**.

20. Promote the need for advice services in both urban and rural areas in Bedford Borough

As well as ensuring that generalist advice services are available in Bedford and Kempston, it is important to have effective services for citizens living in the rural areas of the Borough. This could be done by things like outreach sessions, home visiting services, mobile advice services, and developing links with existing services and networks in rural areas.

Telephone advice

21. Consider the feasibility of developing of a central access point for telephone advice in Bedford Borough

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

Written information

22. Develop a plan to improve access to written information for Borough citizens

This would help effectively plan, and avoid duplication in, the provision of leaflets and other written material on social welfare legal issues in Bedford Borough. It would also be very useful to have a single internet access point for advice. A central website would contain clear links to local information and advice providers, and would provide links to websites for information on social welfare issues. The Bedfordshire Advice Directory website could be developed to act as this central internet access point.

Equality of opportunity

23. Regularly analyse the impact of the Advice Strategy in advancing equality of opportunity

This analysis will help to ensure that all the strategic themes of the Advice Strategy advance equality of opportunity especially for vulnerable, marginalised or disadvantaged people and communities. The equality analysis will: measure progress; identify areas for improvement; and ensure all opportunities to advance equality of opportunity are identified and maximised, within resources.

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:

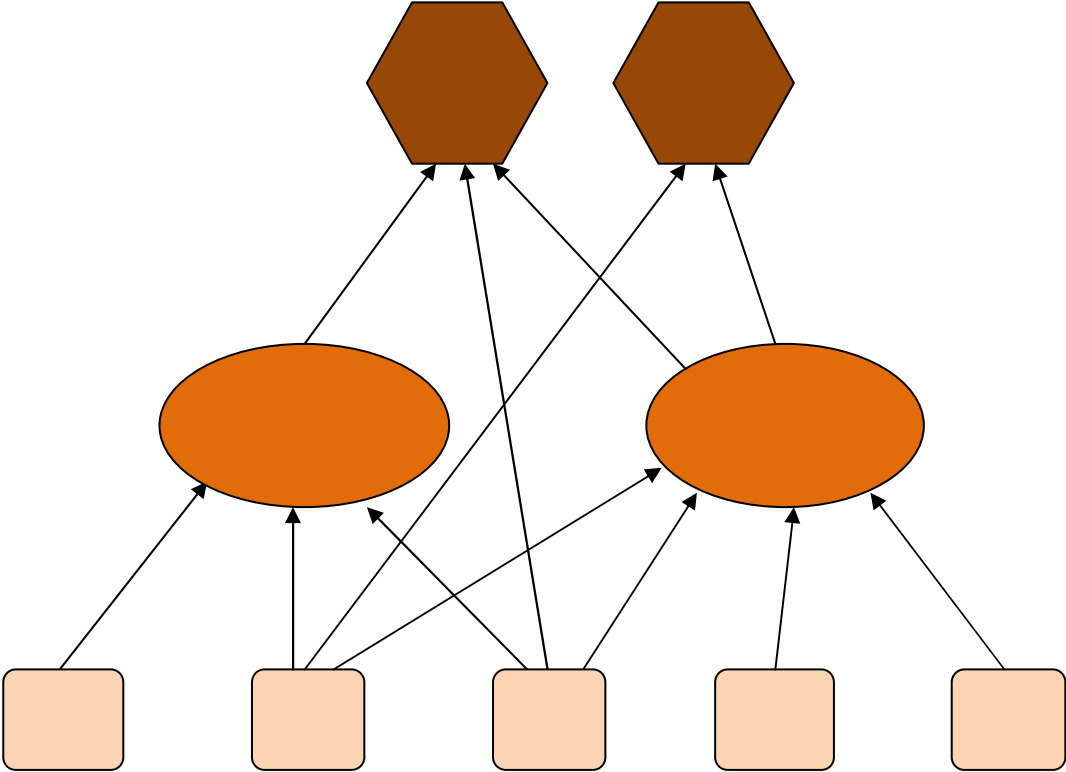
Bedford and District Citizens Advice Bureau

Information level

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

Current example:

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