



An Advice Strategy for Coventry

September 2007

Summary

An Advice Strategy for Coventry was drawn up by Advice Services Coventry, and approved by Coventry City Council, as one of the main funders of advice services, in October 2006. This document updates the strategy. It sets out a future for independent social welfare advice services in Coventry. It acknowledges the critical importance of these services in tackling social exclusion, and therefore will play a vital role in the successful delivery of the city's Community Plan.

The way forward described in the strategy is to develop a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of these services which takes account of other strategies forming part of the Community Plan and complements them. **The outcome being sought is easily accessible, well publicised advice and information services which meet the needs of the citizens of Coventry.**

The vision for an advice service that can achieve this outcome is one that would offer the following:

- coverage of all of the range of social welfare related problems
- easily accessible information provided through a variety of media and in a range of formats about what rights people have, and the ways to exercise those rights

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- a range of 'entry points' to advice, each of which would offer a quality-assured response that would ensure that anyone who had a range of inter-connected problems had them all properly diagnosed, and that a comprehensive package of advice was offered to meet all of their needs
- effective links between the initial entry points and those organisations providing specialist services, including legal advice and representation

This document sets out what has been achieved in the twelve months since the strategy was approved, provides information about the current context for the further development of the strategy, and sets out an action plan to take the strategy through the next phase of its development.

Section 1: Introduction

What is Advice Services Coventry?

Advice Services Coventry (ASC), a consortium of agencies who are classified as providers of independent advice services. . This means services that are **separate from any service delivery function, and does not include information given by service providers about their services**. It does not mean only the voluntary sector, but includes parts of the statutory sector, like Trading Standards, where advice on consumer rights is a discrete activity.

Founder consortium members were:

- Trading Standards (Coventry City Council)
- Coventry Law Centre
- Coventry Citizens Advice Bureau
- Willenhall Advice Centre
- Wood End Advice Centre
- Holbrooks Community Care Association
- Coventry Benefits Advice Line (Coventry City Council)
- Pensions Service
- Age Concern Coventry
- Coventry Cyrenians
- Coventry Refugee Centre

They have been joined by

- Foleshill 396
- Client Support Unit (Coventry City Council)
- Coventry and Warwickshire Family Mediation Service
- St Oswalds Advice Centre

Within this group there is a mix of organisations whose only business is advice, and some who also have a range of other functions. Some are part of

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the local authority, some receive funding from the local authority, and some are completely separate from it.

The group by no means covers all the agencies in the city that are involved in advice work: there are up to 100 others who were contacted as part of an initial mapping exercise in 2006, and who indicated that at least part of their function involves advice work. In addition there are numerous solicitors in Coventry who have Legal Services Commission contracts, and therefore provide advice and representation to the same client groups as those targeted by the consortium.

Why do we need a strategy?

The reasons why a strategy was originally developed in 2006 are set out below. Although the some progress has been made since then, the issues listed below remain relevant.

- The provision of information, advice and, where necessary, representation is acknowledged as playing a key role in tackling social exclusion, and is therefore an essential element running through the city's Community Plan.
- Research by the Legal Services Commission (Pascoe Pleasance et al, 2004) shows that those who are most vulnerable in society are often least likely to be aware of their rights, and that the problems they face may have a legal solution. The research also shows those who are most vulnerable rarely face a single problem, and often have multiple, inter-related problems. Nationally, research shows that 1 million problems go unresolved each year. A proportion of those must be in Coventry.
- The city has a plethora of organisations providing such services (our initial local research collated a potential list of over 300, and we have collected data from over 150). These services operate largely independently. Funding comes from a variety of sources.
- There is no recognised comprehensive list of such services. Providers are not even fully aware of the work of other providers, and referrals between them are limited and vary in their quality.
- There has been no co-ordinated approach to the development and delivery of advice services. The services have grown up in an ad hoc way, largely as a response to a perceived need. There is potentially some overlap of provision and there are gaps.
- From the point of view of the client, the services present a confusing maze, with access to them being mostly a matter of luck. Very few organisations (if any) can provide a truly comprehensive service, which means those with multiple problems rarely receive the holistic response required. Clients get lost between organisations and therefore are not provided with comprehensive solutions

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There are notable examples of good practice in collaboration, and individual agencies achieve excellent results for clients. However, the current position could clearly be improved from the point of view of the client, and better value for money could be achieved for funders with collaboration and co-ordination between providers.

What services does the strategy cover?

The Consortium carried out an initial research exercise which set out to map provision of all types of social welfare advice. This included advice given as a discrete activity, and advice given as part of service delivery.

However, ASC has agreed that the strategy should only try to influence the design and delivery of independent advice services. This means services which are **separate from any service delivery function, and does not include information given by service providers about their services**. It does not mean only the voluntary sector, but includes parts of the statutory sector, like Trading Standards, where advice on consumer rights is a discrete activity, and private sector solicitors who hold Legal Services Commission contracts.

Whilst the strategy is a stand-alone document, ASC recognises that the provision of information and advice is a critical factor for many other partnerships within the city. ASC is committed to working jointly with other groups in order to facilitate a shared approach to such areas of overlap, and to dovetail with the work done by these groups. The 'Coventry Direct Strategy' for access to city council services (and those of its partners) is also acknowledged as being particularly significant, and impacts strongly on the proposals within this strategy for improving access to advice services.

Section 2: Objectives of the Strategy

The overall objective of the strategy is to achieve a situation where the citizens of Coventry are aware of their rights and have knowledge of where to get help and advice with social welfare problems that may have a legal solution.

In particular, those who are most vulnerable and/or socially excluded should have ready access to advice services that meet their particular needs, along with the necessary support to give them the confidence to use those services.

For this to happen, we need

- A co-ordinated approach to the future development and delivery of independent social welfare advice services

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- Provision which meets identified need, with particular emphasis on accessible face to face services for those who are most vulnerable and disadvantaged
- Service pathways which are seamless for clients
- Ready availability of information to both the public and to community groups about individual rights and where to go for help with such matters
- Close links between those organisations who deliver advice services, and those who work to support vulnerable communities
- Positive collaboration on future funding bids, rather than competition between providers, which will give improved value for money for funders

The time frame for the initial strategy was three years. However, it will be reviewed annually, and it is intended to become a 'rolling' strategy for the future.

Section 3: What has been achieved so far?

Advice Services Coventry has formally established itself as a group. The consortium has evolved from the 'working group' which met to develop the initial strategy. First steps have been taken to create a 'corporate' identity, with the design and use of a logo. This 'branding' will gain recognition by other agencies and the public as joint projects under the ASC banner are developed and delivered.

Whilst active participation in ASC has been variable across its membership, there is a nucleus of active and committed members who are driving the strategy forward. The approach of positive collaboration on funding bids has been successful in obtaining Neighbourhood Renewal Funding (NRF) for work to develop the strategy, and has recently also achieved success in attracting funding from Big Lottery. Both projects are collaborative pieces of work to be delivered in partnership by members of ASC.

NRF has enabled ASC to:

- Establish a common data recording format across all partners in ASC, which is facilitating collation of information about who we are reaching and the types of problems we are resolving. The Legal Services Commission Research team has given us access to their model for predicting advice needs using the demographics of an area. ASC is therefore now in a position for the first time to be able to identify the gaps in service provision, and to redesign services to better meet the needs of the population.
- Establish 9 access points for face to face advice in priority neighbourhoods that did not previously have any local advice service. These access points are in a variety of community facilities and the

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Council's One Stop Shops, and they operate on the basis of two surgeries a week in each location. The surgeries are delivered by CAB, Willenhall Advice Centre, Wood End Advice Centre, and Holbrooks Community Care Association.

ASC is using the surgeries to pilot the delivery of advice in a different way: the advisers operating the surgeries have been trained to undertake a holistic diagnostic assessment of the client's problems, and not just to deal with the presenting problem. The expertise of these advisers is to have a very broad base of knowledge, to offer initial information and advice, and to undertake some casework, but to refer on for specialist advice and representation.

This has necessitated the development of more reliable and seamless referral arrangements between partner agencies, and additional training for advisers who had previously concentrated heavily on welfare benefits and debt issues.

It has also enabled ASC to understand the potential for even more seamless delivery of services to clients if closer working with the Council's One Stop Shop staff is developed.

- Commission a (web based) directory of advice services, with details of exactly what is on offer and how to access it. Work on this has only just commenced, and it has the scope to be much more than a directory.

It will potentially offer a vehicle for the provision of information on rights and legislation, or offer links to other websites where this can be found; a way of providing training and updating to all advisers across ASC; a forum for advisers to share problems or to develop social policy issues; and a place where the role and work undertaken by volunteers across ASC can be developed. The intention is for the website to be used by ASC members, other agencies and community groups, and members of the public.

The website will offer the opportunity to develop partnership working to another stage, and will be the first visible sign of ASC as an entity.

In addition, during the last twelve months, ASC has

- Undertaken some work to redesign service pathways to make them work seamlessly for the client. This work needs to be developed further.
- Begun to develop an IT strategy, and started to examine the benefits and some of the difficulties involved in co-ordinating the provision and use of IT across the partnership. There is significant scope to develop

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this work further to both strengthen the work of the partnership, and potentially to save money.

ASC has just been informed that its partnership bid to Big Lottery has been successful, and work has commenced to draw up a detailed business plan for the three year project being funded. It is anticipated that the project will commence in September 2007. The scope of the project is to:

- Establish a new service in partnership with Whitefriars Housing: Willenhall Advice Centre will operate a general advice service using the same holistic approach being pioneered under NRF, but targeted at vulnerable tenants, with the objective of reducing the rate of evictions and abandonments of tenancies in the Willenhall and Lower Stoke area.
- Continue and expand the BME Information and Advice Service run by Age Concern Coventry. This will allow the service to build on existing partnerships with community groups and to build new ones
- Train a solicitor at Coventry Law Centre, as part of a plan to increase the capacity for specialist advice within ASC
- Employ a part-time co-ordinator who will support the work of ASC, and who will specifically
 - undertake an audit of training provision and training needs across ASC, with a view to developing a co-ordinated training programme. This will potentially make better use of resources, and will enable a minimum standard of training to be developed, as a mechanism for ensuring quality
 - undertake an audit of resources available to advisers and to clients, and rationalise this – again potentially saving money, and also ensuring that a minimum standard of information is available across the partnership
 - review the use and involvement of volunteers across ASC, to share best practice, to develop common support and training, and to develop them as a cohort
 - work with the University of Warwick, to develop links with community groups using law students and sociology students. This will involve making links with groups and identifying what their barriers are to accessing advice, and working with them to break down the barriers, including setting up surgeries where appropriate

Section 4: What is the current context within which the strategy needs to move forward?

To understand the best way to develop the strategy further, it is important to take account of other current developments.

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Legal Services Commission

Nationally, the Legal Services Commission is changing the way it funds legal aid services. It has produced a strategy for the Community Legal Service in which it wishes to promote the establishment of Community Legal Advice Centres (CLAC) or Community Legal Advice Networks (CLAN). It wishes to establish these in partnership with local authorities, who it hopes will put their advice service funding into a joint pot with the LSC contract funding and create these models of service delivery.

A CLAC is already in place in Gateshead, and Leicester and Derby are due to be two of the next areas to test it out. A CLAN is to be developed in Cornwall. The approach is not dissimilar to the one being developed by ASC, but ASC resembles a CLAN, rather than a CLAC, which is a single organisation.

In parallel with this the LSC is also changing the contracting arrangements with its specialist franchise holders (in Coventry, this includes the Law Centre and CAB), and it is intending to move to best value tendering by the end of the decade.

The LSC also talks about moving to a position where it has a lead contractor, which sub-contracts other areas of law. This means it wants to move to a 'social welfare law' contract which covers several categories of law, with sub-contracting where necessary to cover the range of areas of law. In this way, it hopes to achieve fully joined up services and it reduces its own administration costs because it will deal with a smaller number of large providers.

It may now be prudent to involve the LSC more closely in the development of the strategy, in order to understand their future funding plans for Coventry, and to establish if there are aspects of the CLAC and CLAN models that it may be helpful to adopt.

Coventry City Council

In common with all local authorities, it seems likely that Coventry City Council will face funding restrictions under the forthcoming comprehensive spending review. It will therefore be keen to ensure that its funding of advice services is providing value for money and is commissioned to meet identified need.

The review of the Local Area Agreement offers the opportunity to be clear about the role of advice services in achieving the key targets being agreed with central government for the revised LAA. This affects not just the council, but its partner statutory agencies. The priorities agreed under the LAA should assist in the commissioning process for advice services mentioned above.

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The City Council has a One Stop Shop (OSS) strategy, which could ultimately see a city centre OSS being created, and a series of local, neighbourhood based, OSSs. These facilities offer ideal locations from which to operate advice services, and this is being tested at Stoke Aldermoor, and Bell Green where it is working well. However, beyond this, there should be an ability to use the LSC demand model to identify which other OSSs might benefit from an advice service within them.

Section 5: What are the next steps?

The next stage in the development of the strategy will involve two parallel sets of activity:

- The momentum created by the availability of NRF and Big Lottery Funding will support the delivery of the projects as outlined above. This will further develop ASC as a partnership, and it will start to move the delivery of advice services in the direction needed to achieve the vision.

ASC has agreed that, to facilitate this development, it will reconfigure, and it will form a core working group of partners, with a wider forum of agencies who are interested in the work of the group and want some participation in it.

There is a need to carefully manage the end of the NRF funding for the 9 neighbourhood based services. The new approach to delivery of services must be fully evaluated and mainstreamed, but there is also a need to consider the loss of access points should the surgeries not continue.

- There is now a need to involve funders more closely in the development of the strategy.

Coventry City Council wants to ensure that it is achieving value for money from its funding of advice services, and to move from a position of awarding grants to commissioning services to meet identified need.

The Legal Services Commission has a strategy and some detailed plans for future commissioning of specialist advice services. It is important to understand what these plans involve in order to design services that will work in a coherent way, and to try to influence their thinking to ensure their plans meet locally identified needs.

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Section 6: Work programme for Year 2

Action	Activity	Further information	Target date for completion
Strategy revised	ASC review and revise the Advice Strategy.		ASC to review strategy in September 2007.
Revised strategy published and endorsement by Coventry City Council sought	Report taken through formal processes in Council	The Council will be requested to adopt the strategy and use it to inform future funding decisions	End of November 2007.
ASC reforms with core working group and wider forum	Agree who will form core working group, and which agencies to encourage to join the forum	There is already a list of potential forum members. An initial meeting will be called for October, and will be used to engage the wider group of agencies in the website and the work of the ASC Co-ordinator	End of October 2007
Co-ordinator appointed	Joint interview during September	<p>Main responsibilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To be the main contact point for ASC, both for members and other agencies • To provide support and co-ordination to the range of projects being undertaken by ASC • To ensure that good practice from the NRF project is mainstreamed within ASC • To take responsibility for the maintenance 	<p>In post by 1st November 2007</p> <p>The milestones and target dates for this work are set out in detail in the business plan for the Lottery project</p>

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Action	Activity	Further information	Target date for completion
		<p>and future development of the ASC website, once it is operating (from April 2008 onwards)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To conduct an audit of current training programmes and training needs within ASC partners • To review resource materials available across ASC • To undertake a review of volunteers across ASC and to work with the University of Warwick to develop their volunteer programme 	
<p>Create a (web based) directory of advice services, with details of exactly what is on offer and how to access it. Use the website to support information exchange and training</p>	<p>Engage wider forum of agencies with this work, and develop the website to support the work being undertaken by the co-ordinator and detailed above</p>	<p>The directory will be used by both providers and the public This will ensure regular information exchange and build confidence in community groups that the advice services will work for their members.</p>	<p>March 2008</p>
<p>Continue the development of an IT strategy for ASC</p>	<p>Develop a strategy that sets out clearly what can be achieved in partnership, and what the benefits to</p>		<p>January 2008</p>

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Action	Activity	Further information	Target date for completion
	service delivery will be		
Put arrangements in place to ensure that all agencies in the partnership undertake a holistic assessment of the problems for any potential client	Agree a checklist for 'signposting', and a shared format for an initial diagnostic interview.	This will mainstream the approach being taken by the NRF advisers	Stage 1 by Sept 2008 – this will be the development of an agreed training programme, and 50% of core group partners having had training
Establish an effective referral process	Detailed work will be undertaken, initially by those organisations in the Consortium, to design service pathways which work seamlessly for the client, and which, in partnership, provide holistic solutions to their problems.	This work will then be extended out to establish improved pathways with all other partners.	Two service pathways to be agreed by October 2008
Analyse central collation of 'client profile information'	NRF evaluator will perform this function, providing analysis to the consortium, and to each agency who participates	The common data collection needs to be sustained after the life of NRF in order to continue to inform the development of the strategy	March 2008
Plan for future service provision in priority neighbourhoods served by NRF surgeries	Identify if there are any opportunities to mainstream this work, or to identify alternative project funding	If this is not possible, the management of the loss of these services will need to be handled carefully	March 2008
Coventry City Council will undertake a review of its funding for advice services	Analysis of spending by agency and also inclusion of costs related to services delivered 'in house'	This will facilitate some understanding of the services paid for by the council	March 2008

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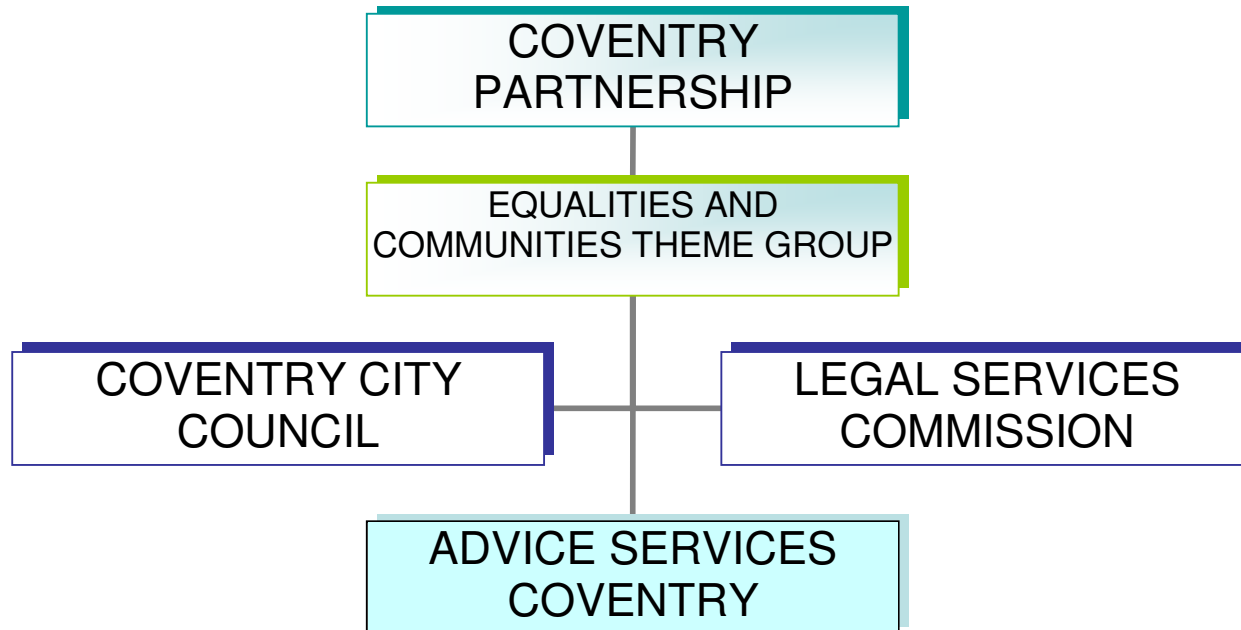
Action	Activity	Further information	Target date for completion
ASC will compile an analysis of other sources of funding for advice services	Each agency produces a breakdown of its funding sources, the period covered by the funding, and the services provided	This will be shared across ASC	March 2008
ASC and Coventry City Council start a dialogue with LSC to better understand their future plans	Agree who will be responsible for this		March 2008
ASC Members and Coventry City Council work together to examine existing services in some detail in order to remove duplication, to enable the development of expertise, to achieve better value by collaboration and potentially offering services in 'groups' (e.g. benefits, debt and housing, or mental health and community care, etc), and to find ways of making first tier advice more accessible.	This is likely to involve a combination of making information available to more people, and face to face services available to those who are vulnerable. To achieve this, it is likely that fundamental changes to the way organisations work, and the work they do, will be needed over time.	The redesign of these services will take account of Coventry City Council's One Stop Shops, being developed under the Coventry Direct banner.	Unknown – a plan with milestones and an overall target date for completion will be drawn up once the funding analysis is complete

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Action	Activity	Further information	Target date for completion
End of year 2 review of strategy	This will involve an evaluation of the achievement of key milestones, as well as a review of the first full year of data of client profiles.	Client profile information will be compared against the LSC model which predicts advice needs using demographics. ASC will also review the strategy against developments from the LSC and the local authority	October 2008
Revised strategy drawn up for year 3	Strategy will be agreed by Consortium and published to all other members in a newsletter	The client profile modelling will inform proposals in the strategy for new services which are needed, and any areas of provision which can be reduced or revised	November 2008

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Relationships with other organisations



As a partnership, Advice Services Coventry reports to the Equalities and Communities Theme Group, and in turn, to the Board of the Coventry Partnership. Individual members of ASC have reporting relationships to Coventry City Council (some are part of the Council, and some are funded by it), and to the Legal Services Commission (who are funders of some of the agencies). All members of ASC have a very wide range of connections to other organisations, from whom they receive referrals.