

DEVELOPING AN ADVICE STRATEGY

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

June 2011

The Advice Strategy has been developed on behalf of the **Stronger Communities Thematic Partnership**, which is a working group of Central Bedfordshire Together (the Central Bedfordshire Local Strategic Partnership).

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

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

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

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

- Central Bedfordshire 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.



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

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

BAF felt there was a need for a strategic approach to the provision of social welfare advice services in Central Bedfordshire 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.

Although some strategic plans on advice provision were discussed in 2003, through the Community Legal Service Partnership that was in place at the time, the CLSP became defunct soon after and no strategic approach for advice work has been taken since then.¹

¹ *Community Legal Services – Strategic Plan; Mid and North Bedfordshire, CLS Partnership, 2003*

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:²

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

Similar arguments are outlined in another leaflet recently produced by **Advice Alliance East**, which lays out the importance of advice work under five headings:³

- 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.⁴

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.

² *The Case for Advice*, Advice Services Alliance, 2010

³ *Engaging the independent advice sector to unlock the potential in communities*, Advice Alliance East, 2011

⁴ *Causes of Action: Civil Law and Social Justice*, 2nd 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.⁵

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.⁶

In the current economic climate, people are facing huge problems with employment and redundancy, benefits, debt and the threat of repossession.

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.

⁵ *Causes of Action: Civil Law and Social Justice*, 2nd edition, P. Pleasance et al (for Legal Services Commission), 2006

⁶ *Engaging the independent advice sector to unlock the potential in communities*, Advice Alliance East, 2011

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

- **Just what the doctor ordered**⁷

This report, from **Age Concern**, looked at the growing body of evidence that suggests that welfare benefits advice linked to **healthcare services** can improve the well-being, mental health and quality of life of service users – especially for older people. It confirmed the need for adequately funded, independent advice services to be developed in appropriate healthcare settings.

- **Someone on my side**⁸

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.

- **Towards a business case for legal aid**⁹

This research by **Citizens Advice** looked at the **economic value of advice** especially relating to the savings in public expenditure that result from specialist advice services (funded by Legal Aid). The research found that:

- for every £1 of legal aid expenditure on housing advice, the state potentially saves £2.34
- for every £1 of legal aid expenditure on debt advice, the state potentially saves £2.98
- for every £1 of legal aid expenditure on employment advice, the state potentially saves £7.13
- for every £1 of legal aid expenditure on benefits advice, the state potentially saves £8.80

- **Time well spent**¹⁰

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.

⁷ *Just what the doctor ordered*, Age Concern England, 2008

⁸ *Someone on my side*, Advice Services Alliance, 2010

⁹ *Towards a business case for legal aid*, Citizens Advice, 2010

¹⁰ *Time well spent*, Council on Social Action, 2009

- **Take up the challenge¹¹**

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 families¹²**

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.¹³

- **Outcomes in advice¹⁴**

This report looked at the outcomes of advice work for individuals, the wider community, and for strategic policy development. The research, which was based on pilot work in Coventry, found that:

- Advice agencies should be recognised for achieving outcomes for their clients and the community – rather than simply for meeting targets in terms of advice “transactions”
- Quality providers deliver better outcomes – and investing in quality advice provision delivers cost savings across council budgets
- Information provided by independent advice agencies can have a constructive influence on the development of local public services

¹¹ *Take up the challenge*, Child Poverty Unit, 2010

¹² *Outreach to children and families*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009

¹³ *Advice services and children's centres*, Bedfordshire Advice Forum, 2010

¹⁴ *Outcomes in advice*, AdviceUK and New Economics Foundation, 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 Central Bedfordshire.

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 inequalities in their area. Again social welfare advice services can be an important tool in tackling inequalities and discrimination.

- Advice services can play an important role in achieving some of the targets and outcomes in the **national strategies and initiatives that affect local areas.**

Under the current Local Area Agreement for Central Bedfordshire advice work has affected, for example, the outcomes for NI 152 (Working age people on out of work benefits) and NI 116 (Proportion of children in poverty). LAAs will be replaced by a new system for setting and measuring local targets in 2011. It will be interesting to discover how advice work can help influence these new targets.

- 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 Central Bedfordshire Council's emerging UIA Strategy with the development of this Strategy on social welfare advice

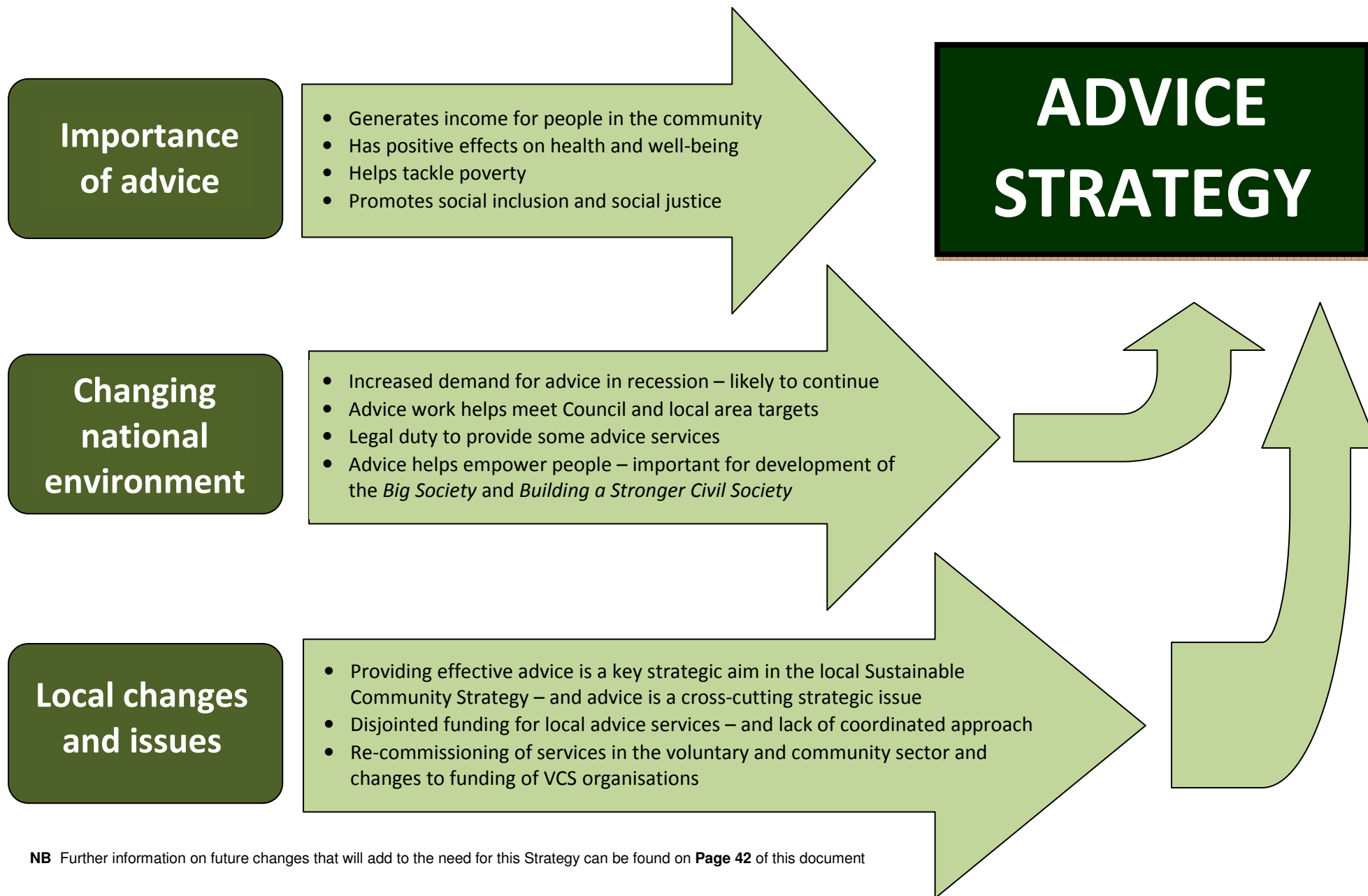
- Advice work can play a role in helping to develop new initiatives that are being proposed by the new Coalition Government.

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

- Central Bedfordshire 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
- Providing easily accessible, high quality welfare advice and information services is a key strategic aim in Central Bedfordshire's new **Sustainable Community Strategy** – and advice provision is an important cross-cutting issue throughout the SCS.
- An important element in the recently published **Child Poverty Strategy** for Central Bedfordshire is making sure families in poverty are accessing all available financial assistance available to them. Providing high quality welfare advice and information is identified as an essential part of this.
- **Funding for advice** in Central Bedfordshire is disjointed and there is a lack of a coordinated approach
- **Future cuts in Council spending** will result in the re-commissioning of services in the voluntary and community sector and changes in funding for VCS organisations
- 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 some 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



NB Further information on future changes that will add to the need for this Strategy can be found on **Page 42** of this document

1.4 Developing an Advice Strategy in Central Bedfordshire

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 **6th 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

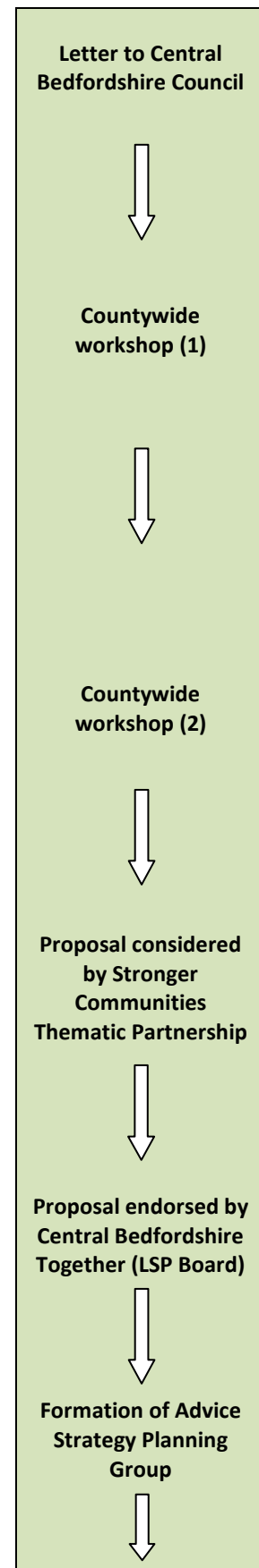
A follow-up workshop was then held on **11th November 2009**, which was attended by 13 people. At this meeting the overall vision and strategic aims of the strategies were agreed and a Proposal was drafted for submission to the thematic partnerships responsible for social inclusion issues in the two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

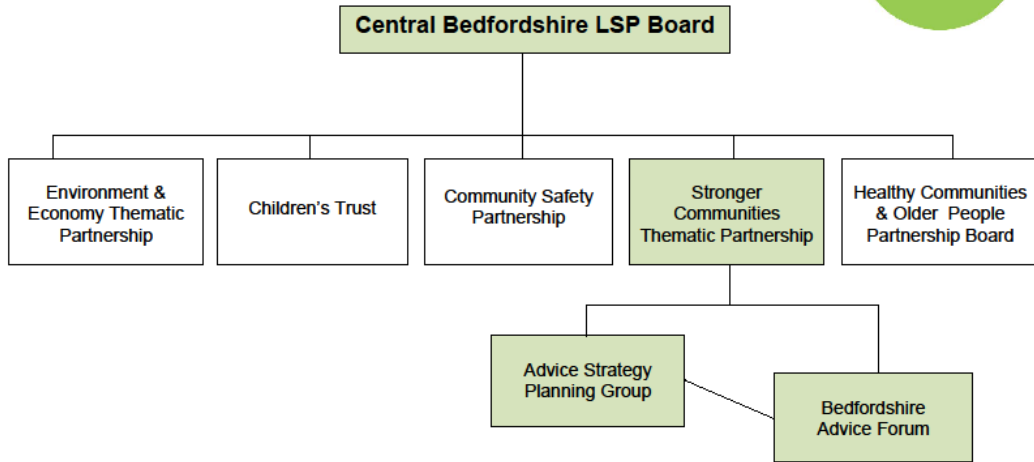
Draft Proposals, for Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire, were then drafted and sent to BAF members and those people on the workshop mailing list for comments. The final Proposal for Central Bedfordshire was presented to the Stronger Communities Thematic Partnership on **2nd December 2009**. A copy of this Proposal can be found on BAF's website.

The Proposal for Central Bedfordshire was endorsed by the Thematic Partnership on **2nd December** and was then presented to the Central Bedfordshire Together (the Local Strategic Partnership Board) on **11th February 2010**.

Formal agreement to move ahead with the Advice Strategy in Central Bedfordshire was then reported back to the Stronger Communities Thematic Partnership on **18th March 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 Central Bedfordshire

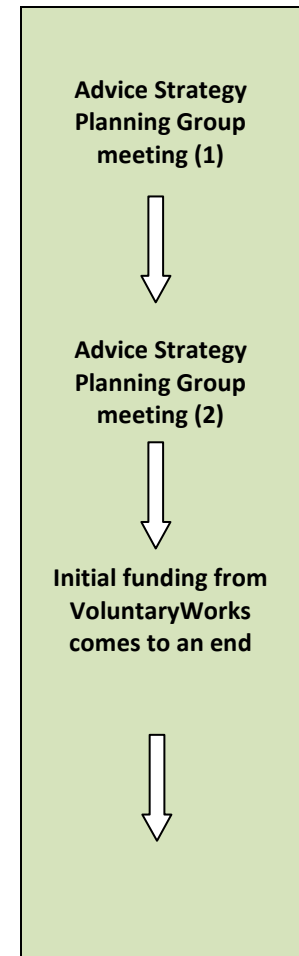
NB This local partnership structure is currently being reviewed and may change in 2011

Development activities

The first Advice Strategy Planning Group meeting for Central Bedfordshire took place on **21st April 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 **7th June 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 VoluntaryWorks – the consortium for infrastructure organisations in Bedfordshire and Luton. Unfortunately, this funding stream (from Capacitybuilders) ended in **mid 2010**, which resulted in a delay in the development work.



Fortunately, in **August 2010** VoluntaryWorks then agreed to allocate some extra funding to allow completion of the development work.



The work plan for completing the Strategy was agreed at the Stronger Communities Thematic Partnership meeting on **14th September 2010**.

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

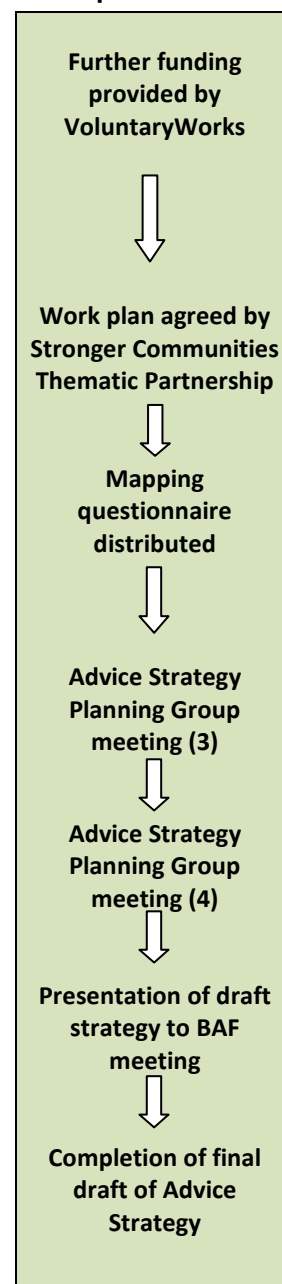
A draft of this report was then presented, along with a draft Advice Strategy, to another Advice Strategy Planning Group meeting on **5th November 2010**.

A further draft of the Advice Strategy was then agreed at an Advice Strategy Planning Group meeting on **10th December 2011**.

The draft Strategy was presented to Bedfordshire Advice Forum members at the BAF meeting on **17th February 2011**.

The final draft of this report and the Advice Strategy was presented to the Stronger Communities Thematic Partnership meeting on **25th May 2011**. The draft Advice Strategy will now be presented to Central Bedfordshire Together (LSP Board) on **5th July 2011**.

Development activities



BAF, through its trading company, **Advice Bedfordshire**, commissioned **Infotrain** to facilitate the above development activities. The work was undertaken for Infotrain by **Len Simkins** and **Linda Wood**.

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



2. Evidence for the Advice Strategy

2.1 Overview

To help develop an Advice Strategy, the Advice Strategy Planning Group needed to consider various issues and evidence relating to the provision of information, advice and advocacy in Central Bedfordshire.

The various evidence collected during the development period can be found in this section of the report under the following headings:

- Key definitions
- Scope of the Strategy
- Links with other strategies
- Advice needs in the Borough
- Advice providers in the Borough
- Current advice services in the Borough
- Gaps in current advice services
- Future changes and drivers

The conclusions drawn from this evidence, and some suggested future action, can be found in **Section 2.10**.

2.2 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.¹⁵

“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)

¹⁵ *Study of legal advice at local level*, Ministry of Justice, 2009

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.¹⁶

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:¹⁷

- 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.¹⁸

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.

¹⁶ www.legalservices.gov.uk

¹⁷ Constitution of Bedfordshire Advice Forum, April 2007

¹⁸ *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.¹⁹

A proposal for an appropriate course of action.²⁰

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.²¹

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.²²*

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.²³*

¹⁹ Wordnet - online dictionary

²⁰ The Free Dictionary - online dictionary

²¹ Glossary - New Quality Mark for the advice sector, Working Together for Advice Project, 2010

²² *Developing the new quality mark (Guidance paper 1 – Common definitions)*, Working Together for Advice Project, 2010

²³ *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.*²⁴

Advocacy

Advocacy – Definition

Taking action to help people say what they want, secure their rights, represent their interests and obtain services they need.²⁵

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.

Advocacy is a process of supporting and enabling people to:

- express their views and concerns
- access information and services
- defend and promote their rights and responsibilities
- explore choices and options²⁶

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

It is clear that advocacy services should work closely with information and advice providers to develop a seamless service for their users.

²⁴ Developing the new quality mark (Guidance paper 1 – Common definitions), Working Together for Advice Project, 2010

²⁵ www.actionforadvocacy.org.uk

²⁶ www.mind.org.uk

The different levels of advice provision

Specialist level

Representation and complex casework services

Current example:

Very limited provision in Central Bedfordshire
– no advice agencies have a specialist level quality mark

General level

General advice and casework services
– and referring clients for representation

Current example:

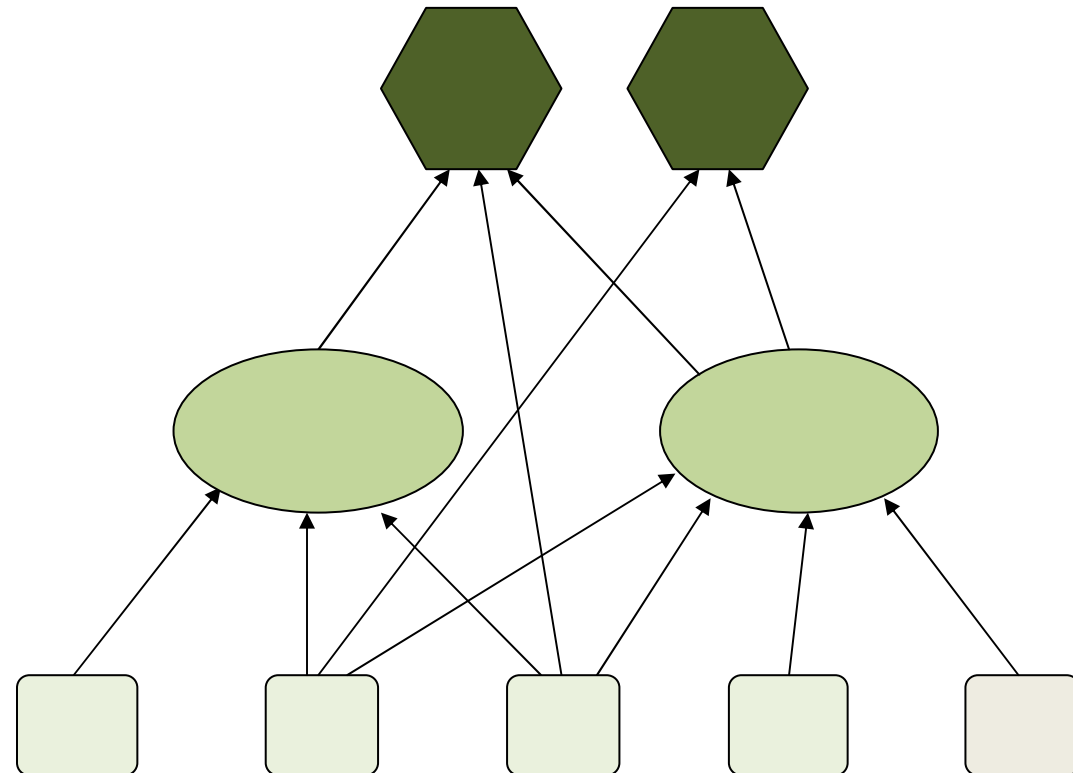
Amphill and Biggleswade Citizens Advice Bureau

Information level

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

Current example:

The Disability Resource Centre



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
- Details of the organisations providing information and advice at the different levels in Central Bedfordshire can be found in **Sections 2.6 and 2.7** of this report

2.3 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
- Information, advice and guidance on volunteering opportunities
- Information on adult care and health services
- Information on services for children and families
- Information on general facilities or local 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

Although this Strategy does not specifically cover the above issues, it should be acknowledged that a number of 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 Central Bedfordshire**.

Suggested action: Consideration should be given to including all relevant aspects of information and advice needs in a comprehensive community advice strategy for Central Bedfordshire.



Advice and information needs in Central Bedfordshire

2.4 Links with other strategies

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

- **Sustainable Community Strategy** (Central Bedfordshire Together)
- **Child Poverty Strategy** (Central Bedfordshire Children's Trust)
- **Homelessness Strategy** (Central Bedfordshire Council)
- **Healthier Communities Strategy** (Central Bedfordshire Together)
- **Universal Information and Advice Strategy** (Central Bedfordshire Council - Adult Services)
- **Health and Well-Being Strategy** (Central Bedfordshire Health and Well-Being Board)
- **Volunteering Strategy** (Voluntary Works)

As mentioned earlier in this report ensuring that easily accessible, high quality welfare advice and information services are provided is a key strategic aim in Central Bedfordshire's new **Sustainable Community Strategy**²⁷ – and advice provision is an important cross-cutting issue throughout the SCS. Because of this Central Bedfordshire Together and its **Stronger Communities Thematic Partnership** have supported the development of this Advice Strategy, which will in effect become the delivery plan for the strategic aim on advice in the SCS.

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 Central Bedfordshire by the Central Bedfordshire Council or by other public bodies. To help with this an **Advice Proofing Framework** has been developed by Advice Alliance East to provide a mechanism that can be used to ensure that advice needs in the community are taken into account in the development and delivery of plans, policies and procedures.²⁸

Suggested action: There should be strong links between this Advice Strategy and other relevant community strategies, and Central Bedfordshire Council and other public bodies should be encouraged to ensure that the advice needs of the community are taken into account in the development and delivery of strategic plans, policies and procedures.

²⁷ *Sustainable Community Strategy 2010-2031* (Page 17); Central Bedfordshire Together; 2010

²⁸ *Advice Proofing Framework*; Advice Alliance East; 2008

2.5 Advice needs in Central Bedfordshire

Estimating advice needs

Social welfare advice can be needed by anybody in the community at any point in their lives, as the need for advice often arises after unexpected events such as sickness, job loss, family breakdown, a death in the family.

It is therefore difficult to predict with any real certainty the exact levels and types of community advice needs in advance. However, research has shown that, while all sections of the population can experience problems, such problems are not randomly distributed, and those who are vulnerable to social exclusion are especially vulnerable to civil justice problems.²⁹ For example, evidence shows that people from poorer neighbourhoods, and from groups experiencing discrimination and disadvantage, are more likely to access independent advice services, and that advice agencies help a disproportionate number of disabled people and people from a minority ethnic background.

The chief survey of advice needs and people’s experience of advice-seeking is the *English and Welsh Civil and Social Justice Survey* which was carried out in 2001, 2004 and 2006-08. Whilst these were national studies we can reasonably assume that the findings and lessons learnt would also be broadly representative of Central Bedfordshire. The survey’s key findings (from 2001 and 2004) are summarised in the table below:³⁰

<p>Social exclusion</p>	<p>People vulnerable to social exclusion are more likely to experience civil justice problems. These groups included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people with long-term health problems or disabilities • lone parents • those living in rented or high density accommodation • the unemployed and those on very low incomes • people aged between 25 and 44
<p>Clustering of problems</p>	<p>Three distinct clusters of problem were identified:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family cluster - domestic violence, divorce, relationship breakdown and children • homelessness cluster - rented housing, homelessness, welfare benefits • economic cluster - consumer transactions, money/debt, employment, rented/owned housing and personal injury
<p>Impact of problems</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16% of civil justice problems (that were not health-related) led to physical ill-health • 27% of problems led to stress-related illness • 17% of problems affected peoples’ confidence • 16% of problems led to a loss of income or employment • 6% of problems led to a loss of home • 4% of problems (that were not family-related) led to a relationship breakdown

²⁹ *Causes of Action: Civil Law and Social Justice*, 2nd edition, P. Pleasance et al (for Legal Services Commission), 2006

³⁰ *Causes of Action: Civil Law and Social Justice*, 2nd edition, P. Pleasance et al (for Legal Services Commission), 2006

A Government report on the importance of advice for vulnerable people confirmed these research findings and also looked at the types of advice and support that people need. The key findings were:³¹

- 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%)
- 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
- 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
- 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
- Unresolved problems and disputes have negative effects on people’s lives (and result in significant costs to public services)

Suggested action: It is important to ensure that there is a good mix of “face-to-face” and telephone advice services to provide effective support for vulnerable people.

The following pages give details of the demography of, and deprivation in, Central Bedfordshire – both of which give an indication of advice needs in the area.

For the future it will be very important to keep abreast of the changing needs for advice in Central Bedfordshire and plan services accordingly.

Suggested action: Evidence on changing advice needs in Central Bedfordshire should be collected regularly and the effects of changes in government policy and legislation should be regularly analysed.

³¹ *Getting earlier, better advice to vulnerable people*; Department for Constitutional Affairs; 2006

Demography of Central Bedfordshire

In this section we have given some details of the general demography of Central Bedfordshire, which will help give an approximate idea of some of the advice needs, and trends, in the area.

Further information is available from: <http://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/statistics/population.aspx>

Population - General

The population of Central Bedfordshire is about 252,900 (in 2009).³²

The population in the area has risen from 234,000 in 2001, and is expected to rise further to 292,100 in 2021.

Just from this projected rise in the general population, **there is likely to be an increase in demand for advice services over the next 10 years.**

Population – Age structure

The age breakdown of the population in Central Bedfordshire is:

- 62,100 people (25%) under 20
- 152,900 people (60%) aged 20-64
- 37,900 people (15%) aged 65+

Although the proportion of older people (14.9%) is lower than that in the East of England (17.2%) and England (16.3%), there has been significant growth in the older population over the last decade.

While the total population rose by almost 8% in the period 2001–2009, those aged 65+ increased by 19%. This trend is likely to continue with the 65+ population expected to increase by 35% by 2021 and the 75+ population set to increase by 61% in the same period.

Therefore **there is likely to be an increase in advice enquiries from older people over the next decade.**

Population – Towns and parishes

130,200 people (51% of the population) live in 6 larger towns in Central Bedfordshire – Dunstable, Leighton Linlade, Houghton Regis, Biggleswade, Flitwick and Sandy.³³

The other 122,700 (49%) live in 72 smaller towns and parishes in Central Bedfordshire - which are the more rural areas.

³² *Population estimates and forecasts 2009*; Central Bedfordshire Council; 2010

³³ *Population estimates and forecasts 2009*; Central Bedfordshire Council; 2010

Over the next few years (until 2014) about half of the growth in population in Central Bedfordshire will be in the larger towns particularly Leighton Linlade, Dunstable and Biggleswade.

Therefore **there is likely to be an increase in advice enquiries from people living in the larger towns in Central Bedfordshire over the next few years.**

Population – Household type

There are about 99,300 households in Central Bedfordshire (in 2006). This is expected to rise to 105,000 in 2011 and to 125,600 by 2021.³⁴

Over 59,000 households in the area (60%) are couple households, either married or co-habiting.

About 7% of households are lone parents with children.

Most of the remaining households are one person households (28%).

Over the next decade there are expected to be larger increases in the number of co-habiting couples and one person households. The vast majority of the growth in one person households will be among the over 50s.

Therefore **there is likely to be an increase in advice enquiries from people living in co-habiting couples and older people over the next few years.**

Population – Ethnicity

There is a lower proportion of people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups in Central Bedfordshire compared to national figures. In Central Bedfordshire, in 2007, 11.0% were not “White British” whereas in England 16.4% were not “White British”.³⁵

Within the BME population in Central Bedfordshire the largest groups were “White Other” (3%), “Indian” (1%) and “White Irish” (1%).

The size of the BME population will have been affected by the fact that almost 5,000 migrant workers entered Central Bedfordshire in the period 2002 – 2008.³⁶ The number of migrant workers entering the area increased every year from 2002 to 2007, however, the numbers then decreased in 2008 and 2009.³⁷

A significant number of the migrant workers entering Central Bedfordshire have been from the A8 EU countries in Eastern Europe, especially Poland. The forthcoming relaxation of benefit rules for A8 EU nationals may result in an increase in benefit enquiries from migrant workers.

³⁴ *Population estimates and forecasts 2009*; Central Bedfordshire Council; 2010

³⁵ *Central Bedfordshire Key Facts and Figures*; Central Bedfordshire Council; January 2011

³⁶ *Evidence base for the Sustainable Community Strategy 2010-2031*; Central Bedfordshire Together; 2010

³⁷ *Central Bedfordshire Key Facts and Figures*; Central Bedfordshire Council; January 2011

Deprivation in Central Bedfordshire

In this section we have given some details of poverty levels in Central Bedfordshire, which will also give an approximate idea of some of the advice needs in the area.

Further information is available from: <http://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/statistics/population.aspx>

Deprivation - General



The Index of Multiple Deprivation 2007 provides a national ranking of deprivation using a combined measure of deprivation covering a series of combined domains eg income, employment, crime etc.

The Index provides a comparative measurement for local authority areas but data is also available at ward level and at Lower Super Output Area level. (LSOAs are smaller areas containing about 1,500 people within wards).

Generally Central Bedfordshire has low levels of deprivation. However, there are some areas within Central Bedfordshire that have relatively higher levels of deprivation. For example, three of Central Bedfordshire's 154 LSOAs are in the top 10% most deprived regionally and a further six are in the top 20% deprived regionally.³⁸

LSOA*	Ward	Rank in Central Bedfordshire
602	Houghton Regis (Parkside)	1
594	Dunstable Downs (Manshead)	2
601	Houghton Regis (Parkside)	3
618	Houghton Regis (Tithe Farm)	4
619	Houghton Regis (Tithe Farm)	5
596	Northfields – Dunstable	6
609	Plantation – Leighton Linlade	7
400	Flitwick East	8
433	Sandy (Pinnacle)	9
605	Leighton Linlade Central (Planets)	10

* The LSOA code represents the last 3 digits of the full ONS code eg E01017602 has been shortened to 602

	10% most deprived regionally
	10-20% most deprived regionally

³⁸ *Indices of Deprivation – Index of Multiple Deprivation*; DCLG; 2007

Deprivation – Rural poverty

There is evidence to show that the Indices of Deprivation do not adequately highlight deprivation in rural areas, which tends to occur in isolated pockets or is hidden at LSOA level. For example, research has shown that only 2.4% of rural LSOAs nationally are in the 20% most deprived, but 19% of households in rural areas are living below the poverty line.

A key issue in rural areas is the lack of access to essential services including GPs, schools, post office and supermarkets – and advice services. Three LSOAs in Central Bedfordshire are in the top 10% most deprived in England for barriers to housing and key local services. These areas are in the wards of Maulden & Houghton Conquest, South West Bedfordshire and Toddington.³⁹

Deprivation – Child poverty

The main measure of child poverty is NI 116 (one of the national indicator datasets) which shows the proportion of children living in families receiving out-of-work benefits or tax credits and whose income is less than 60% of median household income.

In August 2008, 6,865 children in Central Bedfordshire (12.1% of all children) were considered to be living in households in poverty.⁴⁰ Although this rate is considerably lower than the national average (21.6%), there are some local areas with much higher levels of child poverty. For example, five wards in Central Bedfordshire have child poverty rates of over 20% - Tithe Farm, Parkside, Manshead, Northfields, and Houghton Hall. (**NB** These 2008 ward figures use the old ward names and boundaries in Central Bedfordshire).

Also in Central Bedfordshire, four LSOAs have child poverty rates of over 35%. These four LSOAs are in the (new) wards of Dunstable Downs (1 LSOA) and Houghton Regis (3 LSOAs).

Deprivation – Pensioner poverty

The income deprivation affecting older people index (IDAOPI), which is part of the indices of deprivation, shows that part of Sandy ward is in the top 10% most deprived nationally for older people. 38% of residents aged 60+ in this area live in income deprived households.⁴¹

A further four LSOAs in Central Bedfordshire are in the top 10-20% most deprived for older people. These are in Dunstable Downs (2 LSOAs), Houghton Regis and Flitwick East. In these four areas 30-34% of residents aged 60+ are income deprived.

In Central Bedfordshire there are approximately 7,850 claimants of Pension Credit, which is the main means-tested benefit for people over 60.⁴²

³⁹ Evidence base for the Sustainable Community Strategy 2010-2031; Central Bedfordshire Together; 2010

⁴⁰ Child poverty statistics; HMRC; Snapshot as at 31st August 2008; http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/stats/personal-tax-credits/child_poverty.htm

⁴¹ Evidence base for the Sustainable Community Strategy 2010-2031; Central Bedfordshire Together; 2010

⁴² DWP Tabulation Tool: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=tabtool>; August 2010

Deprivation - Worklessness

High levels of worklessness are associated with adverse social and economic outcomes and are strongly correlated with deprivation levels. The numbers of people who are workless includes those that are unemployed and those that are economically inactive.

A simple measurement of unemployment is the number of people who are claiming Jobseeker's Allowance. However, it should be noted that this is an underestimate of unemployment as it does not count unemployed people who want to work but are not entitled to JSA.

Generally unemployment is lower in Central Bedfordshire than in England. In February 2011 there were 4,198 people claiming JSA in Central Bedfordshire. This was 2.5% of the working age population, which compares to 3.7% in England as a whole.⁴³

However, at ward level there are large differences in unemployment rates (ie JSA claimant rates) with over 4.0% unemployment in Houghton Regis, Dunstable Downs and Northfields (in Dunstable).

Department of Work and Pension figures also show that in August 2010, 15,450 people of working age were claiming out-of-work benefits. Of these people 6,070 were receiving Employment and Support Allowance (or Incapacity Benefit), 3,820 were receiving Jobseeker's Allowance, and 2,060 were lone parents.⁴⁴

In terms of **younger people** the average NEET rate (ie young people not in education, employment or training) in April 2010 was 5.4%. The wards with the highest number of young people who are NEET are Manshead, Northfields, Sandy Pinnacle (16), Parkside, Planets, Tithe Farm and Dunstable Central.⁴⁵

Deprivation – Fuel poverty

Fuel poverty occurs when a household is unable to afford adequate warmth due to the combined effect of low income, high fuel bills, and cold homes. It is usually defined as where a household has to spend more than 10% of its income on fuel.

Fuel poverty tends to be more of an issue in rural areas and those areas with high levels of rented accommodation. In Central Bedfordshire, four LSOAs are in the worst 20% in England for fuel poverty. These areas cover Woburn (plus Potsgrove, Battlesden, Milton Bryan, Ridgmont and Eversholt), Houghton Regis, Cranfield, and Southill and Old Warden.⁴⁶

⁴³ Unemployment Rates 2011; Central Bedfordshire Council; February 2011

⁴⁴ DWP Tabulation Tool: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=tabtool>; August 2010

⁴⁵ *Evidence base for the Sustainable Community Strategy 2010-2031*; Central Bedfordshire Together; 2010

⁴⁶ *Central Bedfordshire Key Facts and Figures*; Central Bedfordshire Council; January 2011

Deprivation - Vulnerable groups

Certain groups are more likely to be affected by inequality and deprivation than others. These vulnerable groups, that are often socially excluded, are also groups that have levels of demand for advice services.

Data on some of these groups (eg BME communities, lone parents, older people, residents of deprived areas, young people not in education, employment or training) have been given earlier in this section.

Some further information and data relating to some of the other vulnerable groups is given below.

Carers

In 2001 there were over 21,400 people providing unpaid care in Central Bedfordshire. The number of unpaid carers is likely to increase significantly as Central Bedfordshire's population ages in coming years.⁴⁷

Homeless and people in poor housing

In 2010, 107 households were accepted as homeless by Central Bedfordshire Council.⁴⁸ The scale of homelessness is larger in the south of Central Bedfordshire.

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.⁴⁹

A study of Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs across Bedfordshire and Luton was carried out in 2006. It found that there was unmet housing need within the local Gypsy and Traveller community. The study concluded that in order to meet the needs of local people, 74 new pitches should be provided on sites across Bedfordshire and Luton between 2006 and 2011. The study recommended that 20 of these pitches should be in the north of Central Bedfordshire, and 34-40 should be in the south (with the remainder in Bedford and Luton).

In July 2009, there were 322 Gypsy and Traveller caravans in Central Bedfordshire. Almost 80% of these were on authorised sites (either privately owned, or socially rented).⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2010*, Central Bedfordshire Together; 2010

⁴⁸ www.communities.gov.uk

⁴⁹ *Gypsy & Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessments*; Department of Communities and Local Government; 2007

⁵⁰ *Evidence base for the Sustainable Community Strategy 2010-2031*; Central Bedfordshire Together; 2010

People with disabilities and long-term health problems

In the 2001 Census, 13.1% of Central Bedfordshire residents stated that they had a limiting long-term illness or disability (LLTI). This rate increased dramatically for people aged 65+ with 45.9% having a limiting long-term illness. This LLTI rate is likely to continue to increase as the population grows older.⁵¹

In August 2010, there were 7,930 claimants of Disability Living Allowance (the benefit for people who have personal care or mobility needs and claim before the age of 65) and 5,160 claimants of Attendance Allowance (the benefit for people who have personal care needs who claim at 65 or over). There are therefore at least 13,090 people in Central Bedfordshire who can be counted as “disabled”.⁵²

Although generally affluent, there are significant health inequalities in Central Bedfordshire. In particular, two LSOAs, one in each of Dunstable Downs and Houghton Regis wards are among the 10% most deprived regionally on the health deprivation indicator.

Life expectancy varies by six years in Central Bedfordshire. For example, life expectancy in the most prosperous wards is 82 years (which is higher than the national average), whereas it is shortest in the former wards of Houghton Hall (76.2 years), Dunstable Central (76.5) and Tithe Farm (76.6). These areas are among the most deprived and disadvantaged in Central Bedfordshire.⁵³

⁵¹ Evidence base for the Sustainable Community Strategy 2010-2031; Central Bedfordshire Together; 2010

⁵² DWP Tabulation Tool: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=tabtool>; August 2010

⁵³ Evidence base for the Sustainable Community Strategy 2010-2031; Central Bedfordshire Together; 2010

2.6 Advice providers in Central Bedfordshire

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

(a) Statutory bodies

Central Bedfordshire Council

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

- **Library Service** – information on various social welfare issues
- **Trading Standards** – consumer advice

NB The Council's **Welfare Rights Service** which provided welfare benefits support for social workers closed at the end of March 2011

The above two teams/sections in the Council are both 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
- Customer Service Centre staff
- Education Welfare staff
- Family and Youth Information Service staff
- Social workers and financial assessment staff - Adult Services
- Social workers and 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) were supported by the Council's Welfare Rights Team
- Some local advice agencies provide outreach advice sessions at some of the Children's Centres in Central Bedfordshire - 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 and staff at GP surgeries 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 17 members of **Bedfordshire Advice Forum** in the voluntary and community sector that deliver social welfare information and advice services in Central Bedfordshire.

These are:

- Age Concern Bedfordshire
- Ampthill and Biggleswade CAB
- Aragon Housing Association – Money Advice
- Bedford Credit Union
- Bedfordshire Race & Equalities Council
- Bedfordshire Police – Welfare Department
- Bedfordshire Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support
- Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity – Carers Support Bureau
- Dunstable CAB
- Hospice at Home Volunteers (Leighton Buzzard)
- Leighton Linslade CAB
- Luton Law Centre
- Luton Rights
- Polish-British Integration Centre
- Sight Concern Bedfordshire
- The Disability Resource Centre
- 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 Central Bedfordshire 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 Central Bedfordshire 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 32** for further information on the Directory).

Suggested action: Support should be provided to help maintain the new online Bedfordshire Advice Directory.

History of advice services in Central Bedfordshire⁵⁴

The first recognised advice agency in the area was **Dunstable Citizens Advice Bureau** which opened in 1959.

The 1960s and 1970s also saw a large growth in advice work across the country. For example, in the local area, Leighton Linlade CAB opened in 1975, Mid Bedfordshire CAB in 1979 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, **Aragon Housing Association**, added a money adviser to its staff in 2008 and then, in 2009 appointed two extra staff to create a **Money Advice Service**.

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 Bedfordshire eg **Polish British Integration Centre, Thai3Counties**. These agencies tend to be based in Bedford but also provide services to people who live in Central Bedfordshire.

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
- The County Council's **Welfare Rights Unit** was disbanded following LGR in 2009
- Central Bedfordshire Council's **Welfare Rights Service** was closed at the end of March 2011

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.

⁵⁴ 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



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
- 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.

Other voluntary and community sector advice providers

There are some other advice providers in Central Bedfordshire that are not currently members of BAF.

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, Thai3Counties), there are almost certainly many other community groups that are providing informal information and advice to specific local communities. Obvious examples would be groups connected to the Mind, Mencap and Headway networks, and the Village Care Schemes, which are part of a Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity.

In 2006 Bedford Race Equality Council undertook a **mapping exercise of BME groups** in Bedfordshire as part of the Government's Change Up initiative.⁵⁵

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 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 Voluntary and Community Action in July 2006, over 200 local groups were listed as giving advice, guidance and information in the old Mid and South Bedfordshire areas. This made the "information and advice" sector the biggest sub-sector in the local voluntary and community sector.⁵⁶

However, the figures from both the BREC and the VCA 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 Central Bedfordshire. Groups providing information or advice services should be encouraged to join Bedfordshire Advice Forum.

⁵⁵ *Black and Minority Ethnic Infrastructure Research – A Study of the Infrastructure of BME Groups in Bedfordshire*; BREC; 2006

⁵⁶ *The State of the Voluntary and Community Sector – Mid and South Bedfordshire*; Voluntary and Community Action; 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 19 firms of solicitors in Central Bedfordshire providing civil legal advice, in the areas of family law, employment, welfare benefits and debt. The firms are situated in the main population centres of Dunstable, Leighton Buzzard, Flitwick, Ampthill, Shefford, Biggleswade, Sandy and Marston Moretaine. Ten of these firms provide advice under the Legal Help scheme, all in the area of family law with one firm also providing employment advice under the Legal Help scheme.

If clients are prepared to pay for advice, then according to the Law Society website, 10 local firms offer advice on employment law, 1 offers debt and money advice, 3 offer welfare benefits advice. However, no firms in Central Bedfordshire offer immigration advice, although there are numerous firms based in Luton offering advice on immigration and other areas of civil welfare law.

A local solicitor (Noble Solicitors in Shefford) has also recently been awarded a legal aid contract by the Legal Services Commission for benefits, debt and housing casework in Bedfordshire.

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 providers in Central Bedfordshire.

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 Central Bedfordshire

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 Central Bedfordshire 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.

2.7 Advice services in Central Bedfordshire

As part of the development of this Advice Strategy, a basic mapping survey 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 Central Bedfordshire and to identify gaps in services.

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

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

Following on from the distribution of the questionnaires, various telephone calls were made in October and November to encourage return of the questionnaires and to gather further information if questionnaires had not been fully completed.

In total information was gathered from 9 BAF members providing social welfare advice services in Central Bedfordshire. A summary of the findings from this mapping are given below. It is acknowledged, however, that this snapshot of advice services in the area does not give the full picture as a number of BAF members did not return the questionnaire.

NB There are currently 19 BAF members providing services in Central Bedfordshire. The response rate to the questionnaires was 47%

Suggested action: More in-depth mapping of advice services in Central Bedfordshire should be undertaken in the future.

The questionnaire also asked for information about **gaps in advice services** in the organisation and in Central Bedfordshire as a whole. The responses to the questions about gaps are given in **Section 2.8** of this report.

Agencies that responded to the survey

The 9 BAF members that responded to the survey were:

- Ampthill and Biggleswade CAB
- Bedfordshire Race and Equalities Council (BREC)
- Bedfordshire Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support (BRASS)
- BPHA - Money Advice Team
- Central Bedfordshire Council – Libraries
- Central Bedfordshire Council – Welfare Rights Service
- Disability Resource Centre
- Dunstable CAB
- Leighton Linlade CAB

Importance of information / advice / advocacy in organisations

As can be seen from the list above, the organisations providing advice and information services differ widely in size and type. Some services are part of Central Bedfordshire Council 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.

Of the 9 organisations that responded to the survey:

- In 3 organisations (33% of total), information, advice or advocacy is the sole or **main activity in the organisation**. The 4 organisations in this group were:
 - Amptill and Biggleswade CAB
 - Dunstable CAB
 - Leighton Linlade CAB

- In 4 organisations (45%), information, advice or advocacy is not the sole or main activity in the organisation but the organisation has a **dedicated person or team providing the service**. The 8 organisations in this group were:
 - Bedfordshire Race and Equalities Council (BREC)
 - BPHA - Money Advice Team
 - Central Bedfordshire Council – Welfare Rights Service
 - Disability Resource Centre

- In 2 organisations (22%), information, advice or advocacy is just **part of the organisation's work**. The 6 organisations in this group were:
 - Bedfordshire Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support (BRASS)
 - Central Bedfordshire Council – Libraries

Level of service

Of the 9 BAF members working in Central Bedfordshire that responded to the survey:

- 8 provide information services
- 8 provide advice services
- 2 provide advocacy services
- 3 provide representation services (representing clients in formal settings)

NB Some organisations provide more than one level of service

At first glance it would seem that there must be some duplication in services with, for example, 8 different agencies providing advice services in the area. However, as described above, it must be remembered that these agencies vary considerably in their remit and often provide services on specialist issues to specialist client groups rather than providing a general service to the public as a whole. There is therefore little overlap between the agencies in terms of their clients, and they are all meeting specific community needs.

Quality Marks

Of the 9 agencies that responded to the survey, 6 agencies (66%) have a quality mark for their information/advice service.

Details of the agencies with quality marks are given below. An overview of the different quality marks is given on the following page.

- 1 agency has a **CLS Quality Mark (Specialist Help Level)**
 - Central Bedfordshire Council – Welfare Rights Service

NB This service closed at the end of March 2011

- 4 agencies have a **CLS Quality Mark (General Help Level)**
 - Ampthill and Biggleswade CAB
 - Bedfordshire Race and Equalities Council (BREC)
 - Dunstable and District CAB
 - Leighton Linlade CAB

- 1 agency has an **OISC Registration (Level 2)**
 - Bedfordshire Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support (BRASS)

- 4 agencies have an **OSIC Registration (Level 1)**
 - Ampthill and Biggleswade CAB
 - Bedfordshire Race and Equalities Council (BREC)
 - Dunstable CAB
 - Leighton Linlade CAB

- 1 agency has a **Q-cas award (Silver Level)**
 - Bedfordshire Race & Equalities Council (BREC)

- 1 agency has a **Q-cas award (Bronze Level)**
 - Bedfordshire Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support (BRASS)

NB Some organisations have more than one quality mark

Overview of quality marks for advice providers

Over recent years different quality marks have become available for advice providers.

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 Level**
- **General Help Level**
- **Specialist Level**

These quality marks were audited by the Legal Services Commission.

Although the Legal Services Commission will continue to provide audits for the Specialist Help level of the Quality Mark for agencies that have advice work contracts with the LSC, the other levels of the Quality Mark are being phased out by the LSC.

To replace the CLS Quality Mark (General Help level), **Advice Services Alliance**, the network of national advice provider networks, has developed standards for a new quality mark which should be launched in 2011. However, there is no such replacement planned for the CLS Quality Mark at the Information Level.

Because of the lack of an effective quality mark for agencies providing information and basic levels of advice, Bedfordshire Advice Forum 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.

Since 2001 agencies that provide immigration advice must be registered with the **Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner**. OISC registration is given at 3 levels:

- **Level 1** – Initial advice
- **Level 2** – Casework
- **Level 3** – Specialist

Funding

Funding for the advice / information services in the 9 agencies that returned questionnaires came from a variety of sources including:

- Central Bedfordshire Council
- Bedfordshire Probation Service
- BPHA
- Equality and Human Rights Commission
- Local trusts
- Town Councils
- Parish Councils

Some organisations that provide countywide services also had funding from Bedford Borough Council.

In terms of the type of funding received:

- 3 organisations received funding for their core service
- 2 organisations received core funding and extra funding for specific projects
- 4 organisations only received project funding

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

Staffing

In the 9 BAF members working in Central Bedfordshire that responded to the survey, there are:

- **12 paid staff** (FTE) – who directly provide, or support, information, advice or advocacy services. The majority of these staff (75%) work in the voluntary and community sector.
- Approximately **115 part-time volunteers** – who help provide, or directly support, information, advice or advocacy services

There are therefore at least **127 people involved in providing information, advice or advocacy services** in Central Bedfordshire.

The total actual figure is likely to be considerably higher than this as the mapping only covered 16 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.

Advice enquiries

The BAF members working in Central Bedfordshire that responded to the survey dealt with over **13,090 advice enquiries** in total in 2009/10. The three CABx in the area alone dealt with almost 10,000 enquiries covering nearly 33,000 separate enquiry areas.

In their responses some agencies also provided figures for 2010/11 (April – August 2010) and these amounted to approximately 5,500 enquiries.

Where organisations were able to break down their total enquiries by subject area, these are given below (from a total of 10,463 enquiries in 2009/10 that could be broken down).

- Benefits and tax credits – 3,057 enquiries (29% of total)
- Debt and money advice – 2,378 (23%)
- Employment rights – 1,374 (13%)
- Housing rights – 845 (8%)
- Family issues – 556 (5%)
- Consumer rights – 379 (4%)
- Health, disability or community care rights – 103 (1%)
- Immigration rights – 86 (1%)
- Other issues – 1,685 (16%)

Advice casework

The BAF members working in Central Bedfordshire that responded to the survey opened a total of **680 advice cases** in 2009/10.

In their responses some members also provided figures for 2010/11 (April – August 2010) and this amounted to **220 new advice cases** opened so far this year.

The following organisations are currently undertaking advice casework in Central Bedfordshire:

- **Amptill and Biggleswade CAB** – general casework (with some specialist disability benefits and employment casework)
- **Bedfordshire Race and Equalities Council** – employment discrimination casework
- **BPHA (Money Advice Team)** – money advice and debt casework (for BPHA tenants)
- **Central Bedfordshire Council (Welfare Rights Team)** – welfare benefits casework (for clients of the Council's adult and children's services)
- **Dunstable CAB** – general casework (with some specialist debt casework)
- **Leighton Linslade CAB** – general casework (with some specialist debt casework)

NB Some other agencies also provide casework services where advice work is sometimes part of the overall case. However, these cases have not been included in the above details – only cases wholly related to advice work have been included.

2.8 Gaps in current services

The basic mapping of advice services given in Section 2.7 immediately shows obvious gaps in services in Central Bedfordshire. The main ones are:

- **Access to advice** – all of the main providers are based in towns and some are even based outside Central Bedfordshire. Few agencies provide specific outreach services in the rural areas. People living in the rural wards either have to travel into a town (or outside the area to Bedford or Luton) or have to use the limited telephone or home visiting services for advice.
- **Capacity / resource issues** – many of the agencies providing advice in Central Bedfordshire have limited capacity and resources, including limited office space and interviewing capacity
- **Lack of specialist level advice** – very few agencies in Central Bedfordshire provide specialist level advice in the key advice areas – benefits, debt, housing, employment, immigration. None of the organisations responding to the questionnaire received any funding from the Legal Services Commission for the provision of civil legal advice. And the only agency with a CLS Quality Mark at the Specialist Level (Central Bedfordshire Council's Welfare Rights Service) closed at the end of March 2011

As part of the development of this Advice Strategy, the questionnaire sent to BAF members (see **Section 2.8**) also asked about specific gaps in services. The main gaps identified in the responses were:

- Access is a significant issue due to limited opening times of providers – a pilot project on evening opening at one CAB brought in clients who had never previously accessed the service
- The spread of specialist provision is too thin – specifically, there is not enough debt provision in rural communities in north of the area
- Lack of home visiting provision
- Not enough advocacy services
- Inadequate access to representation at tribunals and court
- Insufficient provision of face-to-face advice provision in rural areas
- Limited access to civil legal aid is a real problem

Suggested action: Gaps in advice services need to be regularly monitored, and planning for advice services should take account of changing priority needs.

2.9 Future changes and drivers

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 factors will continue to have an effect in the future. These factors and other drivers are considered in more detail in this section.

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

Despite the many drivers that will bring about an increase in the need for local advice services over the next few years (see following pages), the major concern is, of course, that cuts in both central and local government funding, as announced in the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010, will result in reduced funding for local advice providers.

Already in the information and advice sector in Central Bedfordshire we have seen closure of the Council's Welfare Rights Team, cuts in Council's Library Service, and restrictions on funding for voluntary sector advice agencies.

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, the national network of independent advice providers, has recently outlined seven factors for funders to apply "**smart funding**".⁵⁷ These are:

- Follow the eight principles of good commissioning (as recommended by the Improvement and Development Agency in its national programme for 3rd 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).⁵⁸

Suggested action: A more collaborative and strategic approach to funding advice services should be developed in Central Bedfordshire

⁵⁷ *Smart advice: smart funding*, AdviceUK, 2010

⁵⁸ *Early lessons from changes to legal advice provision and funding: the local authority experience*, Tribal, I&DeA and Local Government Association, 2010

Increasing demand for advice services

Nationally, in the last year, advice enquiries, in areas such as housing, employment, welfare benefits and debt, have risen by nearly a fifth.⁵⁹

This recent rapid increase came on top of the steadier increases in demand for advice services that were seen earlier in the decade.⁶⁰ And the recent increase also came on top of the large increases in enquiries at the beginning of the economic recession in 2008, with enquiries on redundancy advice increasing by 162% and enquiries on mortgage arrears increasing by 40% in 2008 compared to 2007.⁶¹

In Central Bedfordshire there is also clear evidence of increasing demand for advice. For example, Leighton Linslade CAB saw a 15% increase in enquiries from 2008/09 to 2009/10, which followed a 20% increase in the previous year. About half of all enquiries in 2009/10 related to benefit issues and/or debt.⁶²

With the current 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 increases in demand for advice services.

Cuts in social security benefits

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

Some cuts have already been introduced in April 2011 and others will follow when the current Welfare Reform Bill becomes law. The main changes relate to:

- Reductions in Housing Benefit payments - initially for private tenants and then later for tenants in social housing
- Various cuts in tax credits including a reduction in the childcare element
- Increased assessing of claimants of Employment and Support Allowance and cuts in length of entitlement to contributory ESA
- A maximum cap on benefit payments
- Tighter assessment rules for Disability Living Allowance claimants
- 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 increases in other advice enquiry areas relating to housing issues, debt, and family breakdown.

Although some benefits will be cut, there is still a case for benefit take-up campaigns to be organised in future in Central Bedfordshire to ensure that local residents are receiving their full entitlement to benefits. There is considerable evidence to show the overall benefits of welfare rights advice to claimants and to the community.⁶³

⁵⁹ *The Case for Advice*, Advice Services Alliance, August 2010 (from Citizens Advice annual advice statistics 2009/10)

⁶⁰ *Advice Forward: developing skills for the future, workforce development plan for the legal advice sector*, ADP Consultancy, 2006

⁶¹ *Local authorities and the recession*, Citizens Advice, January 2009

⁶² *Annual Report 2009/10*; Leighton Linslade CAB; 2010

⁶³ *The benefits of welfare rights advice*; National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers, 2006

Growing legal duty on local authorities and public bodies to provide advice services

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 and other public bodies. Examples of this are:

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 currently provided by Consumer Direct through Trading Standards.

Housing Act 1996

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

Initial advice on this is provided by the Council's Housing Options team.

Human Rights Act 1998

Ensuring equality of access to legal redress is an important state obligation under the Human Rights Act. In this context the provision of both affordable and publicly funded legal services is vital to citizenship. It can be argued that that central and local Government therefore need to ensure that adequate advice services are available for the community.

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 Central Bedfordshire, welfare rights support is provided by the Council's Community Finance Officers.

Pre-Action Protocol for Possession Claims (rent arrears) 2006

Courts dealing with rent arrears cases expect local authorities and other social landlords to advise their tenants to get assistance from the CAB, debt advice agencies or other appropriate agencies, before starting court proceedings – as rent arrears may be part of a general debt problem.

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 "personalisation" of services there will be increased needs for users to get advice and support. All councils responsible for adult care services will have to produce a Universal Information and Advice Strategy that will be fully implemented from April 2011.

Central Bedfordshire Council has produced a draft UIA Strategy. It will be important to see how the 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 (CPNA) and a Child Poverty Strategy. Government guidance on the Act stresses that one of the "building blocks" to put into the Child Poverty Strategy will be "financial support".⁶⁴

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.⁶⁵

Bedfordshire did have a good history of **benefit take-up** in the 1990s with regular campaigns organised by Bedfordshire Rights and Information Exchange Forum (BRIEF), which had recorded potential benefit gains of over £1.5 million in the period 1990 – 2004.⁶⁶ There is an argument to re-instate these regular campaigns.

A **Child Poverty Task Group** has been set up in Central Bedfordshire to help develop a CPNA and a Child Poverty Strategy for the area. Providing easily accessible, high quality, welfare advice and information services is a key part of Objective 2 in the recently published Strategy. It will be important to build in appropriate action relating to advice services to support this objective.

One example of possible action would be to build up the links between advice providers and 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, to the parents who use the centres, on issues such as benefits, debt and relationship breakdown. Centre staff 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.⁶⁷

Equality Act 2010

Under this new Act local authorities have a public duty to consider reducing inequalities when taking strategic decisions. Providing, or commissioning, effective local advice services, especially in relation to providing discrimination and equalities advice, could help a local authority meet this duty.

⁶⁴ *Draft Statutory Guidance for local duties on child poverty (Child Poverty Act 2010)*, Child Poverty Unit, March 2010

⁶⁵ *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

⁶⁶ *Benefits Advice in Bedfordshire*, Tackling Poverty Together Group, August 2005

⁶⁷ *Advice services and children's centres*, Bedfordshire Advice Forum, March 2010

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 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).⁶⁸

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.⁶⁹

Last year the **Justice for All** campaign was 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.⁷⁰

Cuts in legal aid provision

In November 2010 the Ministry of Justice announced that they plan to make substantial changes to the Civil Legal Aid Scheme as part of the Government’s cost cutting exercise. The Government is currently consulting on these changes.

The proposals include:

- **Changes to the eligibility conditions** – which will result in some claimants having to pay increased contributions, and many claimants not being eligible for legal aid at all
- **Changes to categories of law** – which will result in the withdrawal of legal aid contracts for social welfare issues such as debt, education, employment, housing, immigration and welfare benefits (except where there is a risk to anyone’s safety or liberty or a risk of homelessness).

This will mean that Citizens Advice Bureaux and other social welfare advice providers will lose their legal aid contracts in future.

Opposition to these cuts is being led by **Justice for All**. It is argued that the changes will have a detrimental impact on access to justice, especially for the most vulnerable people

⁶⁸ *The fourth right of citizenship – A review of local advice services*, National Consumer Council, 1977

⁶⁹ *A right to justice – Policy Briefing*, Access to Justice Alliance, 2005

⁷⁰ *Justice for All*, Justice for All campaign, 2010

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.⁷¹

However, it is essential that the public can access advice that is independent of public bodies, especially those that make decisions on certain entitlements or rights eg decisions on benefit claims, homelessness applications, and community care assessments. This need for independent advice and advocacy organisations is recognised by a number of funders including the Bareng Foundation.⁷²

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.⁷³

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.⁷⁴

Independent advice can also provide a good social return on investment. Evidence shows that effective advice early on can save £10 for every £1 invested and can keep families together in their homes, and in work and education.⁷⁵

The need for quality services

As in many types of service provision, ensuring quality is a very important factor for the advice sector and for funders of advice providers – and ultimately for clients.

Over recent years different quality marks have become available for advice providers. Initiatives in the advice sector have included:

- Development of the **Community Legal Service and CLS Quality Marks** for information and advice providers
- Introduction of a legal duty for agencies that provide immigration advice to be registered with the **Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner** and have an **OISC quality marks**
- Development of a new national quality mark, to replace the CLS QM at the General Help level from 2011, by **Advice Services Alliance**, the network of national advice provider networks. This quality mark will include organisational standards and, for the first time, quality of advice standards
- Development of a new local quality mark (**Q-cas**) for community advice services, to replace the CLS QM at the Information Help level, by **Bedfordshire Race and Equalities Council and Bedfordshire Advice Forum**

NB Further details on the quality marks mentioned above can be found on **Page 38**.

⁷¹ *The fourth right of citizenship – A review of local advice services*, National Consumer Council, 1977

⁷² *Rights with meaning*; The Bareng Foundation; 2009

⁷³ *Law centres’ calls to the next government*, Law Centres Federation, 2010

⁷⁴ *Smart advice: smart funding*, AdviceUK, 2010

⁷⁵ *The socio-economic value of law centres*, Law Centres Federation, 2008

An important part of our local Advice Strategy should therefore be to ensure that quality advice services are provided throughout Central Bedfordshire.

Suggested action: Further support should be provided to local advice providers, especially smaller community groups, to ensure that high quality information and advice is provided in Central Bedfordshire

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 and reports relating to the advice sector in terms of considering reducing inefficiencies. These include:

- **Systems Thinking** – This research and pilot project in Nottingham was facilitated by AdviceUK, the network for independent advice providers. The project found that over 40% of the capacity of advice services is spent dealing with work that is generated by the problems with internal systems (often resulting from inefficiencies due to the reporting requirements of funders) or the failure of external organisations whose actions have an impact on clients and their need for advice. The project recommended various improvements to reduce waste and improve ways of working.⁷⁶
- **Smart Advice** - Following its work in Nottingham, AdviceUK launched a campaign to promote intelligent thinking about advice services. They claimed that an obsession with competitive tendering, output-heavy service specifications and standardisation is leading advice organisations away from focusing on the needs of people. This has led to increased waste in advice agencies and, in some places, a dehumanisation of advice. AdviceUK calls upon the Government, local councils and other funders to use new approaches to advice services to reduce cost and waste and improve public services. It is argued that that smartly funded and designed advice services could save millions of pounds.⁷⁷
- **Total Place** – Total Place pilots around the country have looked at ways of improving local services for residents and reducing inefficiencies. One of the pilot programmes was in Central Bedfordshire and Luton. This project identified access to benefits as a key community issue but found that “Customers are baffled, frustrated and often unaware of the benefits they might be entitled to”. The report also found that the complexity of the benefit system consumes the resources of a vast array of other agencies and, for example, nearly a third of Citizens’ Advice Bureau time is spent helping people understand and claim their entitlements. The report identified a number of opportunities to reduce the cost of delivering benefits and greatly improve customer service, one of which was to develop a simpler process “... with a triage service available to provide rapid access to expert help and advice whenever needed and bring together the disparate agencies currently providing these services”.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ *Radically re-thinking advice services in Nottingham*; Advice Nottingham, AdviceUK & Nottingham City Council; November 2009

⁷⁷ *Smart Advice – Intelligent thinking about advice services*; AdviceUK; 2010

⁷⁸ *From dependence to self reliance*; Total Place report from the Luton and Central Bedfordshire pilot; February 2010

Suggested action: A more collaborative approach to the sharing of resources in the advice sector should be developed to try to reduce costs and improve efficiency

The need for greater partnership working

There is a growing need for organisations to be working together in partnership across the voluntary and statutory sectors.

One driver has been the development of the **Bedfordshire and Luton Compact**, which is the agreement between local statutory organisations and the voluntary and community sector to improve and develop their relationship for the benefit of the local communities. This Compact shows the commitment of the two sectors to work in partnership to improve people's quality of life and to encourage and support voluntary and community activity.⁷⁹

The launch of the **Total Place** pilot initiatives was another move towards trying to get the various public bodies and the voluntary and community sector to work together.

Some **funders** are now also encouraging bids from partnerships on collaborative projects. A good example of this is the Big Lottery Fund and their funding for the development of Luton Advice Network, which is a collaborative venture featuring the main advice agencies in Luton.

In Bedfordshire the local advice sector comes together through **Bedfordshire Advice Forum**. (See **Page 2** in this report for further details of BAF). There are very good examples of general networking between BAF members. However, there has been little in the way of formal collaborative or partnership working in terms of service provision.

Suggested action: Opportunities for further collaborative working between BAF members should be developed

Regionally there has also been better networking between advice networks in recent years with the creation of **Advice Alliance East** in 2007. AAE links together advice agencies that are members of AdviceUK, Age UK, Citizens Advice, Disability East, Law Centres Federation, Refugee Action and Shelter. AAE is now beginning to provide a regional voice for the advice sector.

In other areas of the country there is also good evidence of growing partnership working in the advice sector with the creation of a variety of networks and partnerships including:

- Advice Nottingham
- Advice Services Coventry
- Brighton and Hove Advice Services Network
- Torbay Advice Network

Some of these partnerships have led to the development of advice strategies, for example in Coventry,⁸⁰ Hackney⁸¹ and Torbay.⁸²

⁷⁹ *Bedfordshire and Luton Compact – Getting it right together*, July 2004

⁸⁰ An advice strategy for Coventry; Advice Services Coventry; 2007

Other future changes

Various other forthcoming changes will almost certainly have an impact on demand for advice services including:

- The relaxation of the benefit rules in May 2011 will allow **migrant workers from A8 European Union countries**, such as Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary, to claim means-tested social security benefits. This will probably lead to an increase in demand for advice on benefits.
- The abolition of **Educational Maintenance Allowances** for 16-19 year olds still in education, and increases in **university tuition fees** for students, may lead to an increase in enquiries about debt and associated problems.

Proposals to introduce **flexible tenancies** for new tenants in social housing could see some new housing association tenants losing their homes, if their circumstances change. This could lead to an increase in housing related enquiries

2.10 Conclusions and suggested action

Conclusions

The **main conclusions** from the development work for this Advice Strategy are that:

There is an important and urgent need for a social welfare Advice Strategy

- Social welfare information, advice and advocacy is **essential for our community** – especially during the current difficult economic times
- Effective information, advice and advocacy 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
- Advice work can also help meet **community priorities** by supporting vulnerable people, tackling poverty, promoting social inclusion and community cohesion and empowering local people – and providing easily accessible, high quality welfare advice and information services is a key strategic aim in Central Bedfordshire's Sustainable Community Strategy
- Up until now there has been **limited strategic planning** for the provision of advice in Central Bedfordshire and no strategic approach to the funding of advice services

⁸¹ *Advice Strategy 2007 – 2010*; London Borough of Hackney; 2007

⁸² *Advice Strategy*; Torbay Advice Network; 2007

A social welfare Advice Strategy, although essential, will not cover all the information and advice needs in Central Bedfordshire

- There are a **wide range of information and advice needs** in Central Bedfordshire including: social welfare, civil legal information and advice; IAG services to help people find learning and work; information and advice on volunteering opportunities; information on adult care and health services; and information services for children and families

The social welfare Advice Strategy will link in with other key community strategies

- There are clear **links between the Advice Strategy and other community strategies** including: Sustainable Community Strategy; Child Poverty Strategy; Universal Information and Advice Strategy; Health and Well-Being Strategy; and Volunteering Strategy.

There are considerable advice needs in Central Bedfordshire and these are likely to increase over the next few years

- Although all sections of the population can experience problems, and need advice, such **problems are not randomly distributed**, and 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 minority ethnic background.
- In Central Bedfordshire:
 - The **population** is expected to rise from 252,900 to 292,100 by 2021 and there is likely to be an increase in demand for advice services.
 - The **population will age** over the next 10 years and there is likely to be an increase in advice enquiries from older people.
 - Most future growth in population over the next few years in Central Bedfordshire will be in the **larger towns** and there likely to be an increase in advice enquiries from people living in those towns
 - Three areas (in parts of Houghton Regis and Dunstable Downs wards) are among the 10% most **deprived areas** in the East of England. A further six areas are among the 20% most deprived regionally (2007).
 - There are pockets of **deprivation in some rural areas** – and a key issue is the lack of access to essential services including GPs, schools, post office and supermarkets – and advice services.
 - Five wards in Central Bedfordshire have **child poverty** rates of over 20%. 6,865 children (12.1% of all children in the area) are living in households that were considered to be in poverty (2008).

- Part of Sandy is in the 10% most deprived in England in terms of income **deprivation affecting pensioners**, and a further 4 areas are in the top10-20% most deprived for older people (2007). 7,850 pensioners in Central Bedfordshire were also receiving Pension Credit which is often regarded as the “poverty line” for pensioners (August 2010).
- There were 4,198 people claiming **JSA** in Central Bedfordshire (February 2011). This was 2.5% of the working age population. There is over 4% **unemployment** in the wards of Houghton Regis, Dunstable Downs and Northfields (in Dunstable).
- 15,450 people of working age were **claiming out-of-work benefits** (August 2010).
- The latest **NEET rate** (ie young people not in education, employment or training) is 5.4% for Central Bedfordshire.
- Four areas in Central Bedfordshire are in the worst 20% in England in terms of fuel poverty
- There are an estimated 21,400 **unpaid carers** in Central Bedfordshire
- 107 households were accepted as **homeless** in Central Bedfordshire in 2010
- There were 322 **Gypsy and Traveller** caravans in Central Bedfordshire (July 2009)
- Almost 5,000 **migrant workers** entered Central Bedfordshire in the period 2002- 2008
- 13.1% of residents in Central Bedfordshire stated that they had a limiting **long-term illness or disability** (2001). Over 13,090 are disabled and claiming disability benefits (August 2010).

There are a wide variety of social welfare advice providers in Central Bedfordshire

- **Central Bedfordshire Council has 2 in-house teams** providing social welfare information and advice services and there are also various other Council staff and in-house services that provide information (and sometimes basic advice) on social welfare issues as part of their wider work. Some staff in other statutory agencies also give information (and sometimes basic advice) on social welfare issues.
- There are currently **17 voluntary and community sector agencies** (which are members of Bedfordshire Advice Forum) that deliver social welfare information and advice services in Central Bedfordshire. These agencies 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.

- The development of these different social welfare advice services in the local area has been very ad hoc and, until now, **development has not been planned** in any strategic way
- **Bedfordshire Advice Forum** provides a range of infrastructure support services to the not-for-profit advice sector in Bedfordshire, including the development and maintenance of the online Bedfordshire Advice Directory
- There are some other not-for-profit information and advice providers in Central Bedfordshire that are not currently members of BAF – especially a number of **small community groups**.
- There are also 17 firms of **solicitors** in Central Bedfordshire providing civil legal advice, mainly in the area of family law.

A wide variety of social welfare advice services are provided in Central Bedfordshire

NB The information collected was from a survey of 9 BAF members in Autumn 2010. Some of the figures are therefore an underestimate of the actual total figures

- There is a **mixture of levels of advice service** provided. Most agencies provide information (89%) and advice services (89%). Some also provide advocacy services (22%) and specialist representation services (33%)
- Organisations providing advice and information **services differ widely in size and type**. 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.
- Only 33% in the survey solely provide information, advice or advocacy services. In 45% of the organisations, information, advice or advocacy is not the sole of main activity in the organisation but the organisation has a dedicated person or team providing the service. And in 22%, information, advice or advocacy is just part of the organisation's work
- 6 organisations (66%) in the survey had a recognised **quality mark** for their information, advice or advocacy services. These were: Ampthill and Biggleswade CAB; Bedfordshire Race and Equalities Council; Bedfordshire Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support; Central Bedfordshire Council – Welfare Rights Team; Dunstable and District CAB; Leighton Linlade CAB.
- **Funding** for the information and advice services in Central Bedfordshire comes from a variety of sources including: Central Bedfordshire Council; Bedfordshire Probation Service; BPHA; Equality and Human Rights Commission; local trust; town councils; and parish councils. Funding is a mixture of funding for core services and funding for specific projects. Much of the funding that is received is time limited for short-term projects.
- From the survey **127 people** are involved in providing information, advice, advocacy services in Central Bedfordshire – including 12 paid staff and 115 volunteers.

- The organisations that responded to the survey dealt with over 13,000 **advice enquiries** in total in 2009/10.
- The enquiries covered a **wide range of civil legal issues**: benefits and tax credits (29% of total); debt and money advice (23%); employment rights (13%); housing rights (8%); family issues (5%); consumer rights (4%); health, disability or community care rights (1%); immigration rights (1%); other issues (16%)
- The organisations that responded to the survey opened a total of over 680 **advice cases** in 2009/10 mainly on benefits, debt, employment and discrimination issues.
- There was no **evidence of duplication of service**. The different agencies vary considerably in their remit and often provide services on specialist issues to specialist client groups rather than providing a general service to the public as a whole. There is therefore little overlap between the agencies in terms of their clients, and they are all meeting specific community needs.

There are some gaps in current services

- There are problems with **access to advice** services – all of the main providers are based in towns and some are even based outside Central Bedfordshire. Few agencies provide specific outreach services in the rural areas. People living in the rural wards either have to travel into a town (or outside the area to Bedford or Luton) or have to use the limited telephone or home visiting services for advice.
- **There is limited capacity and resource in the local advice sector** – many of the agencies providing advice in Central Bedfordshire have limited capacity and resources, including limited office space and interviewing capacity
- **There is a lack of specialist level advice** – very few agencies in Central Bedfordshire provide specialist level advice in the key advice areas – benefits, debt, housing, employment, immigration. None of the organisations responding to the questionnaire received any funding from the Legal Services Commission for the provision of civil legal advice. And the only agency with a CLS Quality Mark at the Specialist Level (Central Bedfordshire Council's Welfare Rights Service) closed at the end of March 2011
- The **gaps in service**, identified by BAF members in a survey in Autumn 2010, include a lack of: access to advice services; a very thin spread of specialist advice provision – especially in debt provision in rural communities in the north of the area; a lack of home visiting provision; not enough advocacy services; inadequate access to representation at tribunals and court; insufficient provision of face-to-face advice provision in rural areas; limited access to civil legal aid.

There are a number of future changes and drivers that will make the successful implementation of an Advice Strategy even more important

- Future changes and drivers include: cuts in public funding; increasing demand for advice services in the recession; cuts in social security benefits; growing duties on local authorities and public bodies to provide advice services; and the need to reduce inefficiencies

Suggested action

When collecting the evidence for this Advice Strategy, and in reaching the above conclusions, **various suggestions** have been made for future action.

Suggested action: A comprehensive community advice strategy should be developed to include all relevant aspects of information and advice needs in Central Bedfordshire

Suggested action: There should be strong links between this Advice Strategy and other relevant community strategies, and Central Bedfordshire Council and other public bodies should be encouraged to ensure that the advice needs of the community are taken into account in the development and delivery of strategic plans, policies and procedures.

Suggested action: It is important to ensure that there is a good mix of “face-to-face” and telephone advice services to provide effective support for vulnerable people.

Suggested action: Evidence on changing advice needs in Central Bedfordshire should be collected regularly and the effects of changes in government policy and legislation should be regularly analysed.

Suggested action: Support should be provided to help maintain the new online Bedfordshire Advice Directory.

Suggested action: Some further research should be undertaken to fully map the extent of information and advice on social welfare issues provided by community groups in Central Bedfordshire. Groups providing information or advice services should be encouraged to join Bedfordshire Advice Forum

Suggested action: 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 Central Bedfordshire

Suggested action: Further support should be provided to local advice providers, especially the smaller community groups, to ensure that high quality information and advice is provided in Central Bedfordshire

Suggested action: Gaps in advice services need to be regularly monitored and planning for advice services should take account of changing priority needs

Suggested action: A more collaborative and strategic approach to funding advice services should be developed in Central Bedfordshire

Suggested action: A more collaborative approach to the sharing of resources in the advice sector should be developed to try to reduce costs and improve efficiency

Suggested action: Opportunities for further collaborative working between BAF members should be developed

The Advice Strategy Planning Group has considered the above **conclusions** from the development work and the **suggested action** and has agreed on a draft Advice Strategy to take things forward.

The **draft Advice Strategy** is outlined in **Section 3**.

3 The Advice Strategy

3.1 Introduction

This Advice Strategy has been developed by the **Advice Strategy Planning Group** on behalf of the **Stronger Communities Thematic Partnership**, which is a thematic working group of **Central Bedfordshire Together** (the Local Strategic Partnership for Central Bedfordshire).



3.2 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 Central Bedfordshire.

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

Central Bedfordshire 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 community and statutory sectors

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

- Planned in a coordinated manner to meet local needs, using collaboration and partnership working across the voluntary and community 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 free of charge at the point of delivery
- 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 develop a strategic approach to the planning, funding and provision of information, advice and advocacy services in Central Bedfordshire
2. To respond effectively to the changing needs for information, advice and advocacy in Central Bedfordshire
3. To enhance collaboration between agencies in the information, advice and advocacy sector in Central Bedfordshire
4. To ensure the quality of advice services by supporting the development of quality marked advice provision across Central Bedfordshire
5. To improve access to information, advice and advocacy services in Central Bedfordshire

3.3 Recommended action

Aim 1

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

Develop a robust planning framework for local advice provision	1. Set up an Advice Planning Board for Central Bedfordshire
	2. Appoint a Champion for Advice
Develop a collaborative approach to the funding and resourcing of local advice services	3. Develop a collaborative funding plan for advice provision in Central Bedfordshire
	4. Develop a plan for sharing resources between advice providers in Central Bedfordshire
Ensure that there are strong links between the Advice Strategy and other relevant community strategies	5. Develop methods for linking advice work and the Advice Strategy to other relevant community strategies
	6. Support the development of a comprehensive information and advice strategy for Central Bedfordshire

Aim 2

To respond effectively to the changing needs for information, advice and advocacy in Central Bedfordshire

Regularly collect and analyse evidence about changing local advice needs	7. Conduct a regular review of advice needs in Central Bedfordshire
Regularly discuss and analyse the effects of government policy and new legislation on local advice needs	8. Produce regular briefing papers on the effects of government policy and new legislation on local advice services in Central Bedfordshire
	9. Provide responses to proposed central and local government changes that will affect the advice sector
Ensure that priority advice needs in Central Bedfordshire are met	10. Ensure that local advice services are planned to meet the priority advice needs in Central Bedfordshire

Aim 3

To enhance collaboration between agencies in the information, advice and advocacy sector in Central Bedfordshire

Develop ideas for collaborative working between local providers in the information, advice and advocacy sector	11. Provide ongoing opportunities for local advice providers to discuss and develop ideas for collaborative working
	12. Develop closer links between the not-for-profit advice sector and other advice providers
Support the provision of infrastructure support services to local information, advice and advocacy providers	13. Maintain the Bedfordshire Advice Directory
	14. Provide support for Bedfordshire Advice Forum
	15. Increase the membership of Bedfordshire Advice Forum

Aim 4

To ensure the quality of advice services by supporting the development of quality marked advice provision across Central Bedfordshire

Provide support to local providers to ensure that high quality information and advice is provided in Central Bedfordshire	16. Identify information and advice providers in Central Bedfordshire that need support to enhance the quality of their service
	17. Provide training programmes to help agencies improve quality
	18. Increase the number of local information and advice providers that have a quality mark for their services

Aim 5

To improve access to information, advice and advocacy services in Central Bedfordshire

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	19. Promote the need for a balanced mix of “face-to-face” information and advice services at different levels
	20. Promote the need for advice services both in urban and rural areas in Central Bedfordshire
Develop better telephone access to advice for clients	21. Consider the feasibility of developing a central access point for telephone advice in Central Bedfordshire
Develop effective access to written information in Central Bedfordshire	22. Develop a plan to improve access to written information in Central Bedfordshire

4 Next steps

4.1 Draft Advice Strategy

The recommended action given in Section 3.3 will form the core of the **Advice Strategy for Central Bedfordshire 2011-2014**.

A separate document has been produced which expands on the recommended action and this will now act as the actual draft Advice Strategy.

4.2 Consultation

An initial draft of the Advice Strategy has already been presented to the following meeting for discussion:

- **Bedfordshire Advice Forum** – 17 February 2011

The final draft of the Advice Strategy will now be presented to:

- **Stronger Communities Thematic Partnership** – 25 May 2011
- **Central Bedfordshire Together (LSP Board)** – 5 July 2011

A formal period of consultation may then be required before the Strategy is officially launched.

4.3 Action plans

Annual action plans will need to be produced to take forward the recommended action.

An **Action Plan for 2011/12** has been produced for implement the Strategy.

The annual action plans will need to be **reviewed each year**.

4.4 Review of the Advice Strategy

As well as reviewing the annual Action Plans, the overall Strategy will need to be reviewed in 2014, or possibly sooner if circumstances require a major change to the strategic aims or recommended action.

These reviews will be the responsibility of the Advice Planning Board, which will be set up when the Advice Strategy is launched.

4.5 Resource requirements

Given the current financial climate it will be important that the Action Plans that are developed to take forward the Advice Strategy are as low-cost as possible to make the action as achievable as possible.

However, this Advice Strategy takes as its starting point for 2011/12 that current advice service levels need to be sustained to ensure adequate access to advice for the most vulnerable in Central Bedfordshire.

It will then be important for the changing needs for advice, and the likely increase in demand for advice services, to be taken into account when making funding decisions for 2012/13 and beyond.

A large proportion of current funding for advice services (see **Page 39** in this report) comes from 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. Extending or renewing this type of funding, and sustaining these services in the long-term, will pose a significant challenge to the advice sector in the future.

APPENDIX 1

Members of Bedfordshire Advice Forum

There are currently 44 members of Bedfordshire Advice Forum

- Advice UK
- Age Concern Bedfordshire
- Aragon Housing Association – Money Advice
- 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 – Student Services
- Bedford Credit Union
- Bedford Housing Link
- Bedfordshire Child Poverty Action Group
- Bedfordshire Police - Welfare Department
- Bedfordshire Race and Equalities Council (BREC)
- Bedfordshire Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support (BRASS)
- BPHA – Employment Support
- BPHA – Money Advice
- Central Bedfordshire Council - Library Service
- Central Bedfordshire Council – Trading Standards
- Christians Against Poverty
- Disability Resource Centre
- Dunstable and District Citizens Advice Bureau
- Home Start Bedford Borough
- Hospice at Home Volunteers – Leighton Buzzard
- Kings Arms Project
- Langley House Trust
- Leighton Linslade CAB
- 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 – Debt Advice Service
- Sight Concern Bedfordshire
- Surestart – Cauldwell
- The Bedford Charity
- The Learning Partnership
- United Sustainable Energy Agency
- Victim Support
- Voices for All - Advocacy Alliance
- YMCA Bedfordshire



APPENDIX 2

Members of Central Bedfordshire Advice Strategy Planning Group

The following groups were represented on the Planning Group

Organisation

Advice UK
Age Concern Bedfordshire
Bedfordshire Race and Equalities Council
Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Central Bedfordshire Council – Adult Services
Central Bedfordshire Council - Library Service
Central Bedfordshire Council - Policy and Partnerships
Disability Resource Centre
Dunstable CAB
Leighton Linlade CAB
Luton Law Centre
Luton Rights
Mid Beds CAB
Voices for All - Advocacy Alliance

Representative(s)

Anjila Sinha
Steve Perry, Irene Tindall
Wendy Anderson-Welsh, Glenis Orkisz
Janet Ridge*
Liz Cray, Lola Williams
Nicola Avery, Barry George
Peter Fraser, Giles Probert
Carl Davies, Liz Morgan
Becky Kirby
David Wood
Gillie Sharp
Rumi Chowdhury
Jenny Hedges
Vicki Airs, Diane Hoare,

* Janet Ridge is also the Chair of the **Stronger Communities Thematic Partnership**, which instructed the Planning Group to develop the Advice Strategy on behalf of **Central Bedfordshire Together**.

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

Funding for the initial work of the Planning Group in 2009/10 was provided by **Capacitybuilders** through **VoluntaryWorks**. Extra funding from **VoluntaryWorks** was also allocated for 2010/11.

