

Advice Strategy - for Bedford Borough

Update since last workshop

At the last (countywide) planning workshop on 11th November the Advice Strategy Group agreed a Proposal, to develop an advice strategy, which could be submitted to the relevant Thematic Partnerships.

In Bedford Borough the Proposal was discussed and agreed at the **Social Inclusion, Community Cohesion and Culture Thematic Partnership** on 30th November.

The Proposal was then submitted by the Thematic Partnership to the **Bedford Borough Partnership Board**. It was discussed and agreed at the Partnership Board meeting on 9th December.

Other things to note since the last workshop are:

- The advice strategy development work in Bedfordshire was discussed at a special meeting at **AdviceUK** (the national network for independent advice providers) on 8th January. The development work we have done in Bedfordshire is recognised as a model of good practice.
- **Voluntary Works** (the Consortium of VCS infrastructure organisations in Bedfordshire and Luton) has awarded some further funding to Bedfordshire Advice Forum to continue to support the development work until the end of March.
- **Central Bedfordshire Local Strategic Partnership Board** has recently agreed to the Proposal to develop an Advice Strategy in Central Bedfordshire



Today's meeting

The meeting today is the first meeting of the **Advice Strategy Planning Group** for Bedford Borough to take forward the work in developing an Advice Strategy.

Key issues to discuss are:

- What is the remit of Advice Strategy
- Definitions of key terms
- Work plan (and resources needed) for drafting the Strategy

Remit of Advice Strategy

The suggestion to develop an Advice Strategy for Bedford Borough (and Central Bedfordshire) was originally initiated by **Bedfordshire Advice Forum**. The Forum is the network for local not-for-profit organisations providing advice and information on civil legal matters.

An **Advice Strategy Group** was then formed with representatives from the advice sector, from Bedford Borough Council and Central Bedfordshire Council, and from other interested partners. The Group met twice in the Autumn and developed a formal Proposal to develop an Advice Strategy in each Council area.

The agreed **Vision of the Advice Strategy** was:

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

In the initial discussions, and when agreeing the above vision, the phrase "social welfare and information services" was (presumably) assumed by Advice Strategy Group to relate to "**civil legal advice**" - which is the remit of BAF members.

However, after the various discussions at the Thematic Partnerships and LSPs, it has become apparent that we need to clearly define the remit of the Advice Strategy and the definition of "advice" - because "advice" can mean different things to different people.

As the discussions have gone on, it has become clear that it is not only agencies from the advice sector that are interested in the development of an Advice Strategy. A wide range of different sectors are now beginning to show an interest including:

- **Advice sector (BAF members)** - providing advice and information services on civil legal issues such as welfare benefits, employment, debt, housing and relationship breakdown
- **Guidance / Learning and Skills sector** - providing information, advice and guidance (IAG) on helping people find employment and training and develop their careers
- **Adult Social Care Sector** - under "Putting People First" all local authorities must produce a "Universal Information and Advice" Strategy (by April 2010) to ensure that the public are informed about care and support needs
- **Various other sectors** - providing a range of information and advice services eg. Children's Centres (advice on childcare services, better parenting etc.); NHS (advice on giving up smoking, better diets etc), Police (advice on security issues); Fire Service (advice on smoke alarms)

There are also lots of other types of advice that are given in the community eg criminal legal advice (by solicitors), medical advice (by doctors and other health professionals), financial advice (by accounts and other financial advisers) etc. etc. Should they also be included in Advice Strategy? Where do we draw the line?

The Planning Group therefore needs to be clear about the definition "advice" and the scope of the Advice Strategy.

Definitions of Advice

Dictionary definitions

An opinion about what could or should be done about a situation or problem.

From Wordnet - online dictionary

A proposal for an appropriate course of action.

From The Free Dictionary - online dictionary

Criteria for BAF membership

Members must provide advice and information on civil legal issues. This covers advice and information on

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

Legal Services Commission

The LSC define "**social welfare advice**" as "the provision of information, advocacy, representation and support to enable people to claim their rights and entitlements as governed by social welfare legislation"

In the setting up of the Community Legal Advice Centres and Networks across the country the LSC refers to "five social welfare law categories":

- Community care
- Debt
- Employment
- Housing
- Welfare benefits

Advice or information?

Information provision is the giving of basic factual details provided without any personal context via eg leaflets or websites. For example, information on how to access JobCentre Plus services, and information on the range of benefits available, but with no attempt to advise which benefits, or calculate at what level, a particular client might expect to receive.

Information providers can act as initial point of contact and refer/signpost clients elsewhere for advice specific to the client's circumstances.

Advice provision also involves the giving of information but tailoring this information to a client's particular circumstances. This can comprise some or all of the following elements:

- Listening to clients
- Diagnosing the problem
- Giving information
- Advising on the options available
- Taking action on behalf of clients
- Negotiating on their behalf
- Representing clients' cases at tribunals and courts
- Referral where appropriate
- Enabling or empowering the individual to take informed action on his or her own behalf
- Undertaking social policy work and highlighting the need for specific changes in law or practice

Other issues to clarify

In the original vision we stated that services should be "easily accessible", "well publicised" and "high quality".

All of these statements will need to be defined in some way.

Work plan

The work plan for drafting the Advice Strategy will also need to be discussed at today's meeting. However, it will be important to clarify all of the above issues first.

Len Simkins
BAF Secretary
25/2/10

Today's meeting has been:

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

Facilitated by  **infotrain**
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