

Advice NI Briefing Paper
on the
DSD Advice & Information Strategy

February 2006

This Briefing Paper aims to provide guidance on the potential impact of the strategy on members and service users. It also aims to put forward some suggestions as to how members can seek to capitalise on the potential opportunities of the strategy

Infrastructure

The DSD Advice and Information strategy puts forward a model for advice provision based on what the strategy terms 'area hubs'. Area hubs will provide a range of comprehensive range of advice services, incorporating 4-8 advisers, linked to satellite, outreach, home-visits and e-access provision, 80% of the population should live within 5 miles of the hub, with referral mechanisms to specialists – albeit the role of specialists will be on a limited scale. The strategy states that *“the number, location and size of hubs will be based on need, taking account of deprivation, population size and overall level of funding available”*.

Possible pros	Possible cons
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. sustainable, strategic structure2. hubs will provide high level support on a complete range of issues3. referral mechanism to specialist services4. all advice local services linked to area hub5. sustainable service6. long term job security for advice staff7. quality of provision can be supported & developed8. fosters closer partnerships between local providers	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. based on RPA¹, hub model would have major impact on service provision2. this in turn would have a huge impact on service users in terms of accessibility, choice and responsiveness to local need3. the strategy is inadequate in terms of addressing the needs of local providers and specialist providers4. attempting to balance rationalisation with ensuring greater access to services5. no attempt to integrate with statutory / private sector provision

Potential Opportunities to Advice NI Members

The strategy does offer a strategic framework for the development of the advice sector in Northern Ireland and it does try to address the issue of sustainability. Advice NI members are in an advantageous position in that generalist members provide a targeted service in response to local need and specialist providers provide a focussed service on one particular issue / to a particular client group – often focussed on Section 75 groups. However the strategy does not specifically address the resource needs of providers which target local need / provide specialist services. This being the case, the onus will be on Advice NI and members to highlight and reinforce these areas

¹ www.rpani.gov.uk

of service provision; to provide supplementary evidence which affirms the need for the service (ideally this would include highlighting government's own priorities where they impact on your service provision for example Neighbourhood Renewal or Investing for Health); to demonstrate how the service can be included within the context of the strategy and to call for more detail on the shape of this provision and on how these areas of service provision will be resourced.

Resources

The strategy estimates that the total cost of frontline generalist advice provision currently amounts to £4million per year. This excludes funding for specialist providers and the regional support organisations. Total funding from Councils for this generalist provision amounts to around £1.8million. The other £2.2million comes from a variety of sources including Health Trusts and charitable trusts. The strategy estimates a funding gap in the future of £1.5million for frontline advice provision based on these figures. The strategy proposes possible alternative sources of funding as follows:

- a. Additional funding from Councils, in particular following any reorganisation under RPA;
- b. Additional funding as a result of legal aid reform in Northern Ireland;
- c. Additional funding as a result of advice services being bought in by other Government Departments;
- d. Additional funding from other sectors including the finance sector regarding money and debt advice;

Possible pros	Possible cons
1. sustainability of core frontline advice services 2. best use of available of resources 3. formation of Government Advice and Information Group	1. promotes a model which is not fully costed 2. driven by financial expediency 2. no detail in respect of services targeting local need / targeting particular social issues & groups 3. possible marginalisation of these services 4. additional funding may prompt traditional funders to reduce their funding of advice services

Potential Opportunities to Advice NI Members

By not being side tracked by the Treasury-led efficiency savings mantra that is dominating the public sector, members (both generalist and specialist) can concentrate on highlighting essential advice service provision targeted towards meeting the needs of deprived areas / disadvantaged social groups. Other Government strategies, obligations and research in many ways evidence the

real need for these services². Indeed newTSN talks about “targeting efforts and available resources towards people, groups and areas in greatest social need”. The strategy must take an inclusive approach to advice provision and set out a comprehensive resource framework for the sector as a whole – and insodoing will allow decisions to be taken on an inclusive, informed and holistic basis. Members must take the opportunity to press for this approach and not allow the DSD advice and information strategy to take an overly simplistic approach, to the long term detriment of the advice sector, and more importantly to the detriment of service users.

Quality

The strategy implies that there are concerns about the quality of service provision amongst the wide range of advice providers. It then focuses on the role of the Advice Services Alliance (ASA) *“in ensuring that consistent quality standards are established and maintained”*. Areas such as quality, training and access are highlighted along with I.T. reporting systems, premises and adherence to core values. The strategy appears to see the ASA having a facilitating, supporting, administering, monitoring and evaluating role.

Possible pros	Possible cons
1. establishment of consistent set of quality standards 2. establishment of Specialist Advisory Panel 3. ASA to take lead responsibility	1. no mention of resourcing providers on the issue of quality 2. ability of ASA to deliver 3. possible introduction of bureaucratic ‘proxy’ measures of quality which do not really impact on the quality of advice given 4. lack of detail on how quality will be monitored

Potential Opportunities to Advice NI Members

Advice NI and members have to a large extent led the quality assurance debate in recent years. The membership criteria has been revised with a view to focussing on exactly what subjects are advised on by members, to what level, with what information resources and with what training³. Part of this work has been about members being clear as to what they provide advice on (knowing

² www.democraticdialogue.org/PSEtsvqxf.pdf.pdf Bare necessities:Poverty and Social Exclusion in NI
www.dsdni.gov.uk/neighbourhood_renewal
http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/ending_fuel_poverty_-_a_strategy_for_ni.pdf Ending fuel poverty: a strategy for NI
http://www.equalityni.org/yourrights/equality_law.htm Equality legislation applicable to NI
<http://www.newtsni.gov.uk> Towards an anti-poverty strategy
³ http://www.adviceni.net//page.cfm/area/information/page/Join_Us

their limitations) and having appropriate sign-posting and referral systems in place. This integrated / partnership approach is reflected in the strategy, and members are ideally placed to demonstrate real partnership working. The Investor in People standard has underpinned this work, and indeed many members are progressing towards achieving this and other externally accredited generic standards. Specifically regarding advice provision, the revised membership form highlights the fact that advisers are committed to ongoing training and development – ensuring that their knowledge and skills are updated and that a quality advice service is provided. Practical steps on monitoring the quality of advice provided often include carrying out client satisfaction surveys.

At a grassroots level, members continue to provide essential advice services to local communities of need / particular social groups and it is essential that this provision be supported in an inclusive fashion. This provision must not be alienated or marginalised by prohibitive standards which reflect bureaucratic need rather than practical need.

Using existing resources effectively

The strategy suggests that the advice sector needs to *“improve levels of co-operation, to rationalise and minimise duplication of services”*. It goes on to focus on the need for a single IT-based case recording and information system. It also highlights the need for an integrated training plan for the advice sector.

Possible pros	Possible cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. improved co-operation 2. members may be able to integrate their training within the integrated training plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ‘rationalisation’ meaning reduced resources 2. advice providers already working to full capacity 3. any reduction in resources will effectively mean greater unmet need 4. ensuring maximum accessibility for those in greatest need 5. issue of current unmet need (both geographic and issue based) of greater significance than duplication issue 6. lack of evidence to support duplication charge 7. no attempt to address duplication in terms of statutory advice provision – need to channel

	resources from statutory to voluntary advice sector
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8. no attempt to explore whether or not the IT systems can be more closely aligned without having to choose one over the other

Potential Opportunities to Advice NI Members

On the issue of IT systems, members using AIMS may wish to highlight the benefits of the system in terms of it's reporting capabilities; configurability; flexibility to be tailored to suit the needs of individual centres and the back-up / support provided by Advice NI and LASA. One size does not fit all. To restrict an organisation's ability to report on what they are doing is unnecessary and stifles the diversity and uniqueness of the independent advice sector. With regards to training, those members involved in the delivery of training have the opportunity to have this training included in an integrated sector wide training plan. On the issue of service delivery members should take the opportunity to highlight their key role in providing services to socially excluded people who would otherwise suffer by not being aware of their rights, not being able to exercise their rights effectively and having nowhere to turn for independent help and advice.