

Advice NI response to
The draft Local Government (Community Planning Partners) Order
(Northern Ireland) 2015

Background

Advice NI is a membership organisation that exists to provide leadership, representation and support for independent advice organisations to facilitate the delivery of high quality, sustainable advice services. Advice NI exists to provide its members with the capacity and tools to ensure effective advice services delivery. This includes: advice and information management systems, funding and planning, quality assurance support, NVQs in advice and guidance, social policy co-ordination and ICT development.

Membership of Advice NI is normally for organisations that provide significant advice and information services to the public. Advice NI has over 60 member organisations operating throughout Northern Ireland and providing information and advocacy services, dealing with over 270,000 enquiries on an extensive range of matters including: social security, housing, debt, consumer and employment issues. For further information, please visit www.adviceni.net.

Advice NI's latest annual statistics (2014) reflect the growing demand upon advice services, some keynote information includes:

- 270,000 enquiries dealt with by Advice NI members;
- Local frontline, Council-funded, 'generalist' advice providers provide assistance to those in greatest need, with social security enquiries accounting for 77% of their workload;
- Debt Action NI (an Advice NI service, funded by DETI) is the first integrated debt advice service in Northern Ireland and between April 2013 – March 2014 the service dealt with over 5,200 clients with £62.3 million of debt;

- Advice NI has delivered the SSA Benefit Uptake Programme targeted exercise contract for the last number of years (25,000 people targeted) and achieved record breaking results in terms of benefit uptake generated (£4.1 additional income generated for older people in 2012/13);

Comments

Advice NI believes that local advice provision, funded via local Councils, represents a significant resource in terms of funding commitment and equally represents vital service provision in terms of enabling people to access independent advice and information.

Advice NI believes that local government reform does present opportunities for greater local accountability and local decision making. In particular community planning responsibilities are particularly important – to the extent that Advice NI considered responding to the Local Government (Community Planning Partners) Order (NI) 2015 consultation to the effect that a representative advice sector organisation should be specified as a community planning partner of a council. Our rationale was that the Community Planning provisions require participation of community planning partners at all stages of the process and we felt that the provision of advice services was so important that it would be beneficial to have advice sector involvement.

However we note that the list of specified organisations are all statutory organisations, therefore potentially DSD / VCU may be the more proper organisation to be specified as community planning partners so that all councils do in reality consistently have “due regard” to the advice strategy and the importance of advice service provision. Advice NI envisages this will be particularly important in the context of the removal of ring fencing of funding for council-funded frontline advice services – indeed we would call for the reintroduction of funding for advice services.

In terms of further guidance issued to Councils on the issue of community planning, we believe that Councils should be encouraged to engage with the community & voluntary sector generally and the advice sector in particular given the importance of the role performed by local community groups and local advice providers.

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