



Report to: Development Committee

Subject: Consultation: A strategy for the delivery of generalist advice services in Northern Ireland 2015-2020

Date: 20 January 2015

Reporting Officer: John McGrillen, Director of Development, ext 3470

Contact Officers: Catherine Taggart, Community Services Manager, ext 3525

1	Relevant Background Information
1.1	The Council has been asked to respond to DSD's arrangements for a proposed new strategy for the delivery of generalist advice services for the period 2015-2020. This new strategy is intended to follow on from the current strategy, "Opening Doors", which was the first ever strategy on the delivery of voluntary advice services in Northern Ireland. Opening doors was launched in 2007 and was charged with changing the approach to the delivery of voluntary advice services across the region. The strategy was geared to put in place an integrated, quality advice service across Northern Ireland.
1.2	A formal evaluation of Opening doors has been completed by the Department for Social Development (DSD). The evaluation report recognises that, whilst progress towards all five strategic objectives in Opening Doors has been made, there has not yet been wide spread and significant change in the delivery of advice services across the region. The evaluation report points to a growing recognition of the need for better collaboration across the Advice Sector, with some examples of successful integration and collaboration emerging. It recognises that the strategy's overarching aim of putting in place integrated quality advice services across NI and its five strategic outcomes remain valid and appropriate. Going forward, work already done to implement the Opening Doors Strategy has provided a good starting point to build upon.
1.3	<p>The 2015-2020 document sets out, for consultation, arrangements for a proposed new strategy for the delivery of generalist advice services. The public consultation aims to facilitate a wide ranging discussion on the main challenges facing advice services in Northern Ireland, The consultation document sets out:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A proposed new vision for the strategy, together with underpinning values - A series of high level strategic objectives - Key priorities and proposals geared to support delivery of the strategic

	objectives
1.4	Development of the new strategy, will guide the delivery of generalist advice services, strengthening and supporting service delivery in a changing environment, over the period 2015-2020.
1.5	Generalist advice includes advice on issues like welfare benefits, housing, finance, consumer issues and employment issues. It involves the provision of initial broadly based advice services with the option for referral to organisations which can provide more in-depth support. Generalist advice services are currently provided throughout Northern Ireland by Citizens Advice Bureau and Advice NI.
1.6	The emerging strategy recognises the key challenges arising from key policy drivers such as the Reform of Local Government, the planned Welfare Reforms and the Financial Capability Strategy. The strategy also recognises the need to maximise the impact of scarce resources by securing services which represent value for money and which make a real difference to people's lives. The proposals contained in this emerging strategy are geared to address these challenges whilst building on the recognised strengths of the Advice Sector.
1.7	This consultation does not address specialist advice services which are typically linked to a specific issue such as disability or debt or to those Advice providers that deal with specific target groups rather than the population as a whole.
1.8	It is planned that the new strategy will be structured around a vision statement underpinned by a number of values. The strategy will also set out a series of key high level strategic objectives which will be supported by key priorities and proposals which are, collectively, geared to guide and strengthen the provision of generalist advice services over the next five years.

2	Key Issues
2.1	The consultation seeks views on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the suggested vision and underpinning values; - the proposed strategic objectives and the identified priorities and proposals.
2.2	<u>The Vision and Values for a new strategy</u> It is proposed that the vision for the provision of generalist advice services is "to have in place accessible, quality generalist advice services for the people of Northern Ireland"
2.3	It is proposed that the vision is underpinned by the following values: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Impartiality - provide an impartial service to everyone regardless of race, religious belief, political opinion, age, sex, sexual orientation or disability. - Accessibility - provide an accessible service to everyone. - Confidentiality - provide a confidential service to clients and meet all data protection legislative requirements - Independence - Be independent of political parties, statutory organizations and government. Be free from political interference

	<p>and any conflicts of interest.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Effectiveness – provide an effective service to all clients and the community and show effectiveness through demonstratable and measurable outcomes. - Accountability – provide a service which is accountable to users and others who work with advice providers. - Free to the user – all generalist advice should be provided at no cost to the user.
2.4	<p>The vision with underpinning values are set alongside seven strategic objectives outlined as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To empower and enable people to help themselves - To have an aligned and complementary approach to the delivery of advice services - To have a sustainable Advice Sector which maximises the impact of resource - To maximise accessibility to quality generalist advice services - To encourage the role of the Advice Sector in contributing to the policy development cycle - To support the delivery of the strategy - To deliver the strategy
2.5	<p>Within the consultation, each of these strategic objectives has a number of priorities and proposals for consideration and response by stakeholders.</p>
2.6	<p>In order to have a robust and considered response to the strategy Community Services also sought and collated the view of other relevant internal departments. Their responses have been included in the provisional draft response.</p>
2.7	<p>The draft council response to the strategy is attached at Appendix 1 using the Advice Strategy Consultation questionnaire provided as the preferred method for responses to be submitted. It responds to questions set out in the consultation document. The key elements of the response include:</p>
2.8	<p><u>Vision and Values for a new Strategy</u> Perhaps the vision statement should state that advice is to be free, i.e. ‘To have in place free, accessible, quality generalist advice services for the people of Northern Ireland.’</p> <p>When it comes to independence, there must also be the perception of independence, especially when political parties are involved in advice provision. This seems to be more of an issue for smaller councils in rural areas rather than Belfast.</p>
2.9	<p><u>Objective 1: to empower and enable people to help themselves</u> There is broad agreement with the priorities outlined. The move towards an online service is in keeping with modern society. Online services is a useful tool in helping to empower individuals to help themselves rather than being totally dependent on an advisor.</p> <p>Importantly, it also helps to free up appointments for those who might benefit more from one to one assistance.</p>

	<p>Whilst self service provision is to be encouraged, we should be mindful of individuals who are not computer literate and those who do not have access to computers or internet access. We also need to ensure facilities are in place for individuals who cannot speak English.</p> <p>2.10 <u>Objective 2: To have an aligned and complementary approach to the delivery of advice services</u> We strongly agree that service delivery should be organised to take account of changes from the Reform of Local Government. The responsibility for delivery of the strategy should not rest entirely with DSD. There is a case for joined up working between regional and local government as well as NI Advice Service Consortium and representatives from frontline advice providers. The regional bodies need to work closely with member groups to support them in delivering the various aspects of this strategy.</p> <p>CAB is a well recognised brand name but brand recognition is lacking when it comes to independent Advice providers. Promotion and branding of the independent advice sector is something which Advice NI could do in conjunction with their member groups.</p> <p>Joint training between CAB and Independents is an action which should be encouraged and facilitated between advice providers.</p> <p>2.11 <u>Objective 3: To have a sustainable Advice Sector which maximises the impact of resources</u> We strongly agree there is a need to find new and innovative ways to provide better value for money and enhance the sustainability of the Advice sector. There is agreement of the need to review organisational structures and create a more efficient delivery model through the adoption of common systems and pooling of resources. In terms of maximising the impact of resources, Belfast has led the way. We have worked with delivery organisations to develop area based advice consortia and we have funded a citywide tribunal service which is the first of its kind in NI.</p> <p>There is the need for the advice sector to become more business like to ensure best use of resources. It has been the case that many providers have provided a type of handholding service to clients but the environment is changing and given the ever increasing demand on the sector, clients now need to be encouraged and supported to help themselves. Advisors need to free up their time to deal with individuals with more complex cases and those to require more in-depth support</p> <p>2.12 <u>Objective 4: To maximise accessibility to quality generalist advice services</u> We strongly agree that good quality advice services are available to those who need them, that services are readily available and easily accessed and there is a need to increase the provision and use of telephony and digital services.</p> <p>The introduction of a single IT recording system to be used by advice sector groups has been encouraged and financially supported by the Voluntary and Community Unit within DSD. Not all groups are using this system and this is something which should be reviewed with the aim of getting all groups on to the one IT system.</p> <p>In order to maximise accessibility, advice providers should promote web-based</p>
--	---

	<p>resources such as 'how to' guides, FAQ pages, pdf information leaflets, etc.</p> <p>CAB is moving towards Information Kiosks in public places (shopping centres, libraries, etc). This is to be encouraged and supported as it is complementary to face-to-face advice provision and encourages more self empowerment on the part of individuals. It is also an excellent way of providing accessible information outside of normal office hours (weekends, evenings, etc).</p> <p>A move towards a telephony service as the main method of accessing information is being promoted by some providers (eg. CAB). This makes good business sense in an environment of limited resources and increasing demands. It also enables face-to-face appointments to be available for those who need them most. A triage system for people contacting advice providers is to be encouraged as it promotes better business efficiency.</p> <p>There is agreement with having consistent Quality Standards in place: perhaps this should be linked to the principles for achieving vision.</p>
2.13	<p><u>Objective 5: To encourage the role of the Advice Sector in contributing to the policy development cycle</u></p> <p>The Advice Sector should have a role in contributing to policy development as they are the people who see firsthand how governmental policies are working. There is a need for evidence based policy contribution as opposed to anecdotal input. Their input will be invaluable in assisting policymakers to develop policies and procedures which are in keeping with day to day experiences of individuals. The advice sector should be involved at a consultative level in every stage of policy development.</p>
2.14	<p><u>Objective 6: To support the delivery of the strategy</u></p> <p>We strongly agree with the priorities of having consistent training, quality standards and IT systems across the advice network. There is a need to enhance communications structures locally and regionally amongst the advice sector. The local consortia model developed in Belfast could be used as an example in other council areas where there are a number of advice providers in operation.</p> <p>We recognise volunteers are one of the biggest resources within the generalist advice sector. There is agreement that experienced volunteers should be recognised for their contribution and the on-going contributions they make to a sector which is heavily reliant on voluntary workers. There is also the need to develop new volunteering opportunities. It is acknowledged that without volunteers the sector would falter. All volunteers should be adequately trained and supported. An audit of volunteer needs would help identify the various needs and measures to be put in place to help support and encourage volunteering in the advice sector.</p> <p>The regional bodies need to work closely with member groups to support them in delivering the various aspects of the strategy. In addition, an action plan to accompany the strategy should be developed with key milestones and robust review mechanisms to ensure effective delivery of the strategy.</p>
2.15	<p><u>Objective 7: To deliver the strategy</u></p> <p>The responsibility of delivering the strategy should not rest entirely with DSD. There is a case for joined up working between regional and local government as well as NI Advice Service Consortium and reps from frontline advice providers.</p>

2.16	Finally, the strategy and its implementation should be reviewed on a regular basis, by all stakeholders and, where necessary, steps taken to ameliorate difficulties at an early stage.
------	---

3	Resource Implications
3.1	There are no resource implications attached to submitting the consultation report.

4	Equality and Good Relations Considerations
4.1	There are no Equality and Good Relations implications attached to this report.

5	Recommendations
5.1	Members are asked to approve the draft Belfast City Council (BCC) response to the consultation and raise any additional issues, relating to the consultation document, that they would like to be included.

6	Decision Tracking
John McGrillen – Director for Development Catherine Taggart – Community Development Manager	

7	Key to Abbreviations
DSD – Department for Social Development CAB – Citizens Advice Bureau	

8	Documents Attached
Appendix 1: Consultation questionnaire: Draft Response to DSD strategy for the delivery of generalist advice services in Northern Ireland 2015-2020	