

## **Advice Services Review and Commissioning Members' Briefing Note – December 2012**

### **Introduction**

The Advice Agency Project Board and Steering Group (made up of representatives from Leeds City Council and NHS Leeds Public Health) are reviewing the advice services they currently fund. This is in response to the significant increase in demand for advice brought about by the welfare reforms, and the subsequent need to deliver advice services that can meet this rising, and increasingly complex, demand.

The review is an opportunity to build on the large amount of good practice already being delivered by the advice network in Leeds, and to also identify where provision can be remodelled or modernised in order to support more clients, more quickly. This work will inform the development of a new advice service for Leeds to be underpinned by longer-term Council funding of at least three years. The Council's Welfare Rights Unit is a major contributor to the review, and will remain a key provider of advice on welfare-related issues alongside the new service.

### **Background and context**

Demand for free and independent advice continues to increase as the ongoing impact of the recession and the Government's welfare reforms are felt across the city. The highest areas of current demand are related to debt, housing and welfare benefits, although demand for advice on immigration and employment also remains high. At the same time, the amount of Government funding for advice provision is decreasing.

These factors are putting extra pressure on advice providers, including the Welfare Rights Unit, to support more clients but with the same or less resource. Therefore, there is an ongoing need for the Council, and its partners, to continue to identify and implement new and improved approaches to delivering advice services that can meet the needs of all localities. It is equally important that the Council's funding for advice is administered in an open, accessible and transparent manner, and that it is made available over a longer period to improve planning and sustainability of provision.

In July 2012, the Council's Corporate Leadership Team agreed that detailed work should be undertaken to inform how advice provision across Leeds is commissioned and delivered. This would need to focus on the implementation of the key recommendations from the review into welfare advice undertaken by the Chief Officer for Revenues & Benefits in July 2011. In essence, the work would need to inform what the Council wants to buy from advice agencies and how it wants to buy it. The aim will be to put in place a more coordinated and accessible service that makes best use of technology, innovation and public sector assets to meet the rising demand for impartial and high quality advice.

### **Current Advice Provision in Leeds**

The combined value of advice services in Leeds commissioned by the Council and NHS Leeds (Public Health) in 12/13 is approximately £1.8m. Environment and Neighbourhoods provide the majority of this (70%) via the advice agency grant, which currently supports three advice agencies as follows:-

- Leeds CAB (£726,735)
- Chapeltown CAB (£334,062)
- Leeds Law Centre (£164,987).

This funding supports the delivery of a range of services, from initial assessment and referral, through to detailed ongoing casework. It is primarily delivered face-to-face via 'drop-in' surgeries and appointments, and via a telephone gateway.

Different parts of the Council are also involved in advice provision, including the Welfare Rights Unit (advice and support related to benefit claims and appeals), Adult Social Care (advice for people with disabilities and mental health problems) and Children's Services (advice for parents via the Children's Centres network). In addition, NHS Leeds (Public Health) commission advice services via GP surgeries, health centres and day care centres. Some of these services are co-commissioned with Adult Social Care e.g. Leeds DIAL and the Mental Health Outreach Service.

### **Consultation**

To date, the review has focussed on consultation with advice providers across the city (such as the two CABs, Burley Lodge Advice Agency; St Vincent's Advice Centre, Ebor Gardens Advice Centre and DIAL Leeds), with other key stakeholders and with current users of advice services. A questionnaire to all providers and key stakeholders was distributed in September, which asked for views on a wide range of issues, including key areas of demand for advice, access routes and good practice to be built on. Advice providers are now consulting with their clients to determine how, where and when people want to access advice. The findings from the consultation will be used to directly shape and inform the new service.

### **Market Sounding and Commissioning**

The Council has just commenced a market sounding exercise via its electronic tendering system. This is to gain a clearer understanding of which organisations have the experience, expertise and appetite to deliver an advice service for a city as large and diverse as Leeds. The exercise lasts until the end of January 2013 and will be used to determine the most appropriate approach to commissioning the new service. Timescales for the new service commencing will also be dependent on the outcome of the market sounding, but at this stage we anticipate that the latest start-date will be from April 2014.

It is important to note that current funded provision will remain in place up to the point that the new service begins, and that any potential changes to funding agreements with current providers will be handled in a sensitive and supportive manner.

### **Ongoing Communication**

The Council is committed to keeping the advice sector in Leeds fully up to date with the review and commissioning process. To date, this has included updates at meetings of the Advice Leeds Network and the Financial Inclusion Steering Group, and we expect these to remain the primary communication channels moving forward.

Regular briefings will also be produced for Members and senior officers, with the next following in February 2013 on conclusion of the market sounding exercise.

If you require any further information about this work, please do not hesitate to contact Henry Rigg or Julie Staton in Environment & Neighbourhoods on 0113 2476752 / 2475951, or [henry.rigg@leeds.gov.uk](mailto:henry.rigg@leeds.gov.uk) / [Julie.staton@leeds.gov.uk](mailto:Julie.staton@leeds.gov.uk)