

VOLUNTARY ADVICE SERVICES IN NORTHERN IRELAND: AN OVERVIEW OF THE 'OPENING DOORS' STRATEGY

1. This briefing note was prepared for the Committee for Social Development to provide contextual background information on 'Opening Doors', the Department for Social Development's Strategy for the delivery of voluntary advice services to the community. This paper provides a broad overview of the Strategy's key proposals and explores whether there are any comparable voluntary advice service infrastructural strategies in other jurisdictions.

BACKGROUND: DEVELOPMENT OF THE 'OPENING DOORS' STRATEGY

2. In November 2003, the Department for Social Development commissioned Williamson Consulting to review the position of voluntary advice services in Northern Ireland and to work with key stakeholders to develop an integrated strategy. A Steering Group consisting of Voluntary and Community Unit (DSD), and representatives from the three organisations which make up the Advice Services Alliance (Law Centre NI, Citizens' Advice and Advice NI) was established to input into the development of the strategy. This work cumulated in the publication of the draft review of the NI Advice and Information Strategy (known as the '[Williamson Review](#)')¹ in July 2005.
3. In January 2006, David Hanson MP, the then Minister with responsibility for Social Development launched a public consultation on a '[Strategy for Supporting Delivery of Voluntary Advice Services to the Community](#)'². Many of the proposals contained within the consultation document were based upon those contained within the 'Williamson Review'. Lack of co-ordination between funders, variation in the quality and quantity of services across geographical locations, and increasing pressures on public funding for more effective use of public resources were cited as some of the reasons behind the need for an integrated strategy.
4. The public consultation was conducted between 16 January to 7 April 2006 and a range of responses were received from a range of statutory and voluntary sector organisations. The consultation exercise included an online E-consultation exercise facilitated by Advice NI, and consultation workshops with voluntary advice providers and councils facilitated by the Voluntary and Community Unit

¹ Williamson Consulting (2005) NI Advice and Information Strategy.
www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/consultations/archived_consultations2/strategy_for_supporting_delivery_of_voluntary_advice_services_to_the_community.htm

² Department for Social Development (2006) Strategy for Supporting Delivery of Voluntary Advice Services to the Community.
www.dsdni.gov.uk/strategy_for_supporting_delivery_of_voluntary_advice_services_to_the_community.pdf

(DSD). An [‘Equality Impact Assessment’](#) for the Strategy was also published in April 2007³.

5. In September 2007, the Minister for Social Development, published the final strategy entitled [‘Opening Doors: The Strategy for the Delivery of Voluntary Advice Services to the Community’](#)⁴. This was followed by the publication in April 2008, of a [‘Mapping of Advice, Information and Legal Services in NI’](#) background paper. The mapping exercise, compiled by Deloitte MSC Ltd, was commissioned by the Department of Social Development and the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission (NILSC) to map the current provision of generalist and specialist advice, information and legal services across Northern Ireland.
6. Some of the finding emerging from the mapping exercise highlighted that:
 - Organisations providing voluntary advice services are largely gathered around key settlements (e.g. Belfast and Derry). The Greater Belfast Urban Area and Derry areas account for almost two-thirds of clients and enquiries;
 - Over 70% of organisations who responded to the survey indicated that they offered services via drop in, appointment, telephone, home visits and outreach. The most common method for making an enquiry was through face-to-face contact through drop-in services;
 - Almost one in four enquiries were made through outreach contact and on average organisations provided 11 hours of advice services at outreach centres per week. The most common place to undertake outreach was community centres, followed by health care centres or GP practices, hospital or council facility;
 - Benefit enquiries are the most common type of enquiry, constituting approximately one in two enquires. Benefit enquires outnumber the next largest category of inquiry (i.e. Consumer, Trade and Business) by a ratio of five to one; and
 - When asked what particular groups were not well catered for in terms of advice the most common concern were for migrant workers and people from minority ethnic communities who did not speak English. Other groups mentioned included people with disabilities (particularly those with sensory disabilities) and those facing debt problems.

‘OPENING DOORS’: THE KEY PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE DELIVERY OF VOLUNTARY ADVICE SERVICES

7. The aim of the ‘Opening Doors’ Strategy was to *“put in place an integrated, quality advice service across Northern Ireland and a proper framework to ensure that services are planned and delivered in a way which matches resources to*

³ Department for Social Development (2007) Equality Impact Assessment: Strategy for Supporting Delivery of Voluntary Advice Services to the Community.

www.dsdni.gov.uk/equality_impact_assessment_april_2007.doc

⁴ Department for Social Development (2007) Opening Doors: The Strategy for the Delivery of Voluntary Advice Services to the Community. www.dsdni.gov.uk/vc-opening_doors_report.pdf

*need, with a particular focus on meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged in society*⁵.

8. The Strategy document maintains that there is a general recognition within the statutory, voluntary and community sectors of the need for a long term strategy to define an agreed infrastructure for future advice service provision in Northern Ireland. A number of internal and external reasons why a strategy is necessary are identified:

Internal Reasons

- Lack of an overall policy framework within which decisions about advice and information can be made;
- Lack of strategic decision-making process by funders;
- Inconsistent quality and quantity of advice provision across Northern Ireland; and
- To enable DSD to deliver support for advice services consistent with its broader responsibility to tackle disadvantage.

External Reasons

- The Review of Public Administration;
- The need to develop structures which delivery co-terminosity of services;
- The increased role of the voluntary and community sector in the delivery of public services; and
- The work of the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission (NILSC) in developing a mixed model for delivery of legal services.

THE STRATEGY'S PERCEIVED BENEFITS, PRINCIPLES AND VALUES⁶

9. It is anticipated that the **benefits** of the new strategy will include the reduction of duplication in services; the best use of resources; better communication between government, other funders and service providers; better informed decisions by funders through the development of agree quality standards, and monitoring and evaluation systems; and a continued key role for the voluntary advice sector in both service delivery and in identifying and challenging unfair decisions through changes in procedures and policies.
10. The Strategy also sets out its **six key principles and values**, which are to provide:
- Access by all people, the disadvantaged in particular, to a level of advice that meets their needs;
 - High quality services that are sustainable in the long term;
 - Value for money;
 - Quality of provision;
 - Integrated services that address gaps and overlaps and can respond to changing needs; and
 - The best use of the distinctive approach of the voluntary and community sector.

⁵ Ibid, p4.

⁶ Ibid, p11.

KEY FEATURES OF THE PROPOSED INFRASTRUCTURE

11. The Strategy sets out a model advice and information infrastructure based on a network of generalist providers (known as '**Area Hubs**') supported by **local satellite** and **outreach centres**, and **E-Access points**. It was initially proposed that one Area Hub would be required for each of the Super Council areas, with four Area Hubs in the Belfast City Council Area (one based on each of the four constituency boundaries). However, the exact number and location of 'Area Hubs' is yet to be announced. According to the Strategy document, this will be confirmed following completion of the advice information and service mapping exercise. The document also indicated that DSD intended to pilot the new advice structures and that this would include encouraging local councils to become involved.

AREA HUBS, SATELLITE AND OUTREACH CENTRES AND E-ACCESS⁷

12. An '**Area Hub**' is defined as a *locally based advice provider or advice partnership of a complete range of services, including advice, advocacy and high level support on a range of basic and complex general advice issues open to as many people as possible*". The Hub will be expected to deliver advice/advocacy on a range of issues including benefits (e.g. disability benefits, Income Support, Housing, Jobseekers Allowance, Tax Credits, Pension Credits); appeal and tribunal support and representation; money and debt; consumer issues; basic immigration issues; administration of justice; human rights; employment; housing; education; and health and disability. The Hub will offer frontline support to those who have specific needs but will refer more complex enquiries to more suitable specialist organisations.

13. It was envisaged that the Hub would:

- be comprised of 4-8 advisors each of which would be responsible for one or more specialist areas including disability, housing, the needs of minority ethnic communities, older people, lone parents and children;
- have dedicated money and debit counselling services and will have the ability to carry out tribunal work and high level advocacy work;
- would be sited on main public transport routes, ideally sited to where most people live but also open to those in rural areas;
- would meet the highest standards of disabled access and have at least one advisor with a good level of knowledge relating to disability issues;
- would be linked to a range of satellite and outreach provision and have good links with larger community organisations in the area to enable suitable ways to refer clients to be set up.
- would have well established relationships with relevant regional voluntary bodies and support structures so that Hubs could maintain quality through suitable training, access to specialist information, and have access to regular updates of general information.

⁷ Ibid, pp24-26.

14. **Outreach** and **satellite** provision and **E-Access** will be available for those who do not live near 'Area Hubs'. These will comprise of:
- **Full-time permanent satellite advice centres:** in other parts of the new council area(s) with high populations and an identified community need (to be outlined in the mapping exercise);
 - **Outreach services in specific community places:** at local level such as half-day sessions in community centres, doctors surgeries etc;
 - **Outreach services on an occasional basis:** at advice clinics, promotional events etc, in community centres, leisure centres, schools and other public locations;
 - **Outreach home visits:** to those unable to access advice services;
 - **Part-time satellite provision:** such as a two day per week session with a part-time advisor located in an area of high demand.
 - **IT based community E-Access points:** such as single computers based within a community centre, library or a community organisations premises linked by broadband access to the Area Hubs.
 - **All satellite, outreach and E-Access services** to be directly linked to the Area Hub for that Area.
15. It is believed that this model reflects the conclusions of the strategy consultation that, *"it is not practical to provide very specialist advice, which is in relatively low demand, at a very local level. Conversely, advice which is sought regularly by a significant number of people should be as accessible as possible"*. The Strategy reports to adopt *"the basic principle that it is logical to provide the most specialised and complex advice/advocacy at a regional level and to ensure that advice which in high demand (i.e. generalist) is provided locally to facilitate accessibility for all"*⁸.

OTHER KEY FEATURES OF THE STRATEGY

Government advice and information group

16. It was proposed that the issue of long-term sustainable funding for local advice provision would be taken forward by a Government Advice and Information Group which was to be established by September 2007. It was envisaged that this group would provide a forum in which government departments involved in funding advice and information services could share information and ensure the best use of funding. It was further proposed that the Group would monitor the implementation of the Strategy.

Resources

17. The Strategy recognises that the current level of funding for voluntary advice services may not be sufficient to maintain the local advice sector or the proposed new structures and suggests that new sources of funding may be needed to close the funding gap. The Strategy proposes that work should begin on identifying alternative sources of funding and that the following options should be explored:
- Discussions to be held with councils on the possibility of additional resources to be delivered through the Community Support Programme, with the aim of increasing each council's allocation to at least £2 per head;
 - To explore with the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission (NILSC) what opportunities there may be for support advice services and that the

⁸ Ibid, p12.

Commission has already expressed an interest in working to implement a pilot programme as a first step in implementing the Strategy;

- To explore with all Departments what additional support may be available for advice services within the context of Departments buying services from the advice sector; and
- To explore with the advice sector other possible options, e.g. support from the finance sector to support money and debt advice.

QUALITY STANDARDS

18. It was proposed that the Advice Services Alliance (ASA) would facilitate the implementation of the Strategy and ensure that consistent quality standards were established and maintained and that ASA would support advice providers in meeting the required standards. It was envisaged that by 2008/09 only those providers who meet those standards would receive funding. ASA were also given the task of implementing an acceptable IT based case recording system suitable for the comprehensive monitoring of advice services.

19. The ASA set up three working groups to progress the recommendations of the strategy and published three reports in March 2008:

- [‘Report of the ASA IT Working Group’](#)⁹ – recommends a strategy for providing the advice sector with a single IT system and a single case management system and addresses other issues such as data protection and business continuity.
- [‘Report of the ASA Training Working Group’](#)¹⁰ – recommendations include the commissioning of independent research to map the current provision of training against identified needs to highlight gaps; that training provision should be accredited where possible and linked to vocational and occupational standards; minimum vocational standards linked to roles within the sector should be agreed and adopted by all generalist advice providers; continuation of the Training Working Group to co-ordinate future training developments within the sector; a web-based training directory should be collated and published annually; and opportunities to positively contribute to the Government priority of tackling unemployment issues should be encompassed in the training strategy developed for the sector.
- [‘Report of the Quality Working Group’](#)¹¹ – recognises that considerable work on quality has already been carried out by advice agencies and that many had already achieved external benchmarks of quality (e.g. Investors in People, ISO quality standards, LEXCEL). Recommends an allowance of at least £1000 per advisor should be allocated for training in the first year and a minimum of £500 per advisor in subsequent years and at least £150 per annum for the training and developmental needs of volunteers.

⁹ Advice Services Alliance (2008) Report of the ASA IT Working Group.
www.citizensadvice.co.uk/PageFiles/2379/IT%20Final.pdf

¹⁰ Advice Services Alliance (2008) Report of the ASA Training Working Group: Future Proofing the Skills Base of the NI Advice Sector. www.citizensadvice.co.uk/PageFiles/2379/Training%20Final.pdf

¹¹ Advice Services Alliance (2008) Report of the Quality Working Group.
www.citizensadvice.co.uk/PageFiles/2379/Quality%20Final.pdf

The main recommendations of the report (on the condition that funding is available) are that all advice agencies should be able to meet the standards and guidelines contained within the report by April 2010; that standards and guidelines should be reviewed every three years; that all advice agencies should have an externally validated benchmark of quality in place by April 2010; that a framework for measuring the quality of advice should be agreed by September 2010 and implemented by April 2011; and that an agreed financial minimum baseline should be agreed for hubs and satellites by April 2009.

Section 2 of the report sets out indicative *minimum* costings for a hub and satellite based on a 4 person and 8 person advisor model. It is estimated that a four person advisor model would cost £257,194 and an 8 person advisor model £391,172 per annum. It is estimated that one-off starter costs (e.g. computers, furniture etc) would be £27,000 for a four advisor model and £35,525 for an 8 advisor model. The report highlights that these estimates do not take into account any costs which may arise from the ASA working group recommendations on IT, training or quality or any outreach work associated with a hub or satellite.

CONCERNS EXPRESSED BY STAKEHOLDERS DURING CONSULTATION PROCESS

20. The Strategy maintains that the consultation responses strongly supported the development of a strategic framework for the delivery of voluntary advice services. However, it acknowledges that a number of specific concerns were raised with regard to¹²:

- The provision of resources;
- The role of regional specialist organisations; and
- The potential for smaller groups to be overlooked particularly within the categories of Race, Age, Men and Women, Persons with a Disability and Persons with Dependents.

21. Other issues raised by stakeholders include, for example:

- Whether the strategy would be flexible enough to respond to demographic changes or changes in demand¹³;
- The sustainability of funding for specialist organisations and some uncertainty expressed with regards to how specialist advice providers fit in with the overall strategy, e.g. those providing advice services to lone parents¹⁴, specialist advice services for women etc¹⁵;
- That the nature of the language of 'hubs' and 'satellites' may give an impression that there is a hierarchy between elements of the advice sector

¹² Department for Social Development (2008) Opening Doors, op cit, p5.

¹³ Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations. Response to Consultation. www.nifha.org/filestore/documents/responses_to_consultations/NIFHA_Response_to_Strategy_for_Supporting_the_Delivery_of_Voluntary_Advice_Services_070406.pdf

¹⁴ Gingerbread Northern Ireland. Response to Consultation. www.gingerbreadni.org/word.Doc/Social%20Policy/Response%20to%20DSD%20Consultation_Delivery%20of%20Voluntary%20Advice%20Services%20to%20the%20Community_Apr%2006.doc

¹⁵ Women's Support Network. Network News, Issue 17, June 2008. www.wsn.org.uk/files/WSN%20Newsletter%20June%2008.pdf

rather than the equality of distinct but complementary partners¹⁶. The Law Centre suggested changing the term ‘satellite’ with ‘local core advice services’ in order to reflect more adequately its relative importance¹⁷; and

- That 4-8 workers in a hub may be a very low baseline and that the services a four person hub could offer may be dramatically different to what an eight person hub could deliver¹⁸.
22. However, overall the Advice Services Alliance maintained that the Strategy will help *“to formalise the relationship between the voluntary advice sector and DSD from one based on primarily ad hoc arrangements to one that has the potential of developing into a true partnership, where the unique style and skills, approaches and independence that the voluntary advice sector brings will enable better access to services and government departments to fulfil their roles more effectively”*¹⁹.

ARE THERE ANY SIMILAR ADVICE SERVICE INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGIES IN OTHER JURISDICTIONS?

23. For comparative purposes an attempt was made to identify similar Government strategies relating to voluntary advice service infrastructure in other jurisdictions, particularly those that proposed a roll-out of a hub/satellite/outreach model on a regional or other large scale basis. However, there does not appear to be any strategies in other jurisdictions which are strictly comparable to ‘Opening Doors’. However, a model which may be of interest is that which emerged from the [‘ChangeUp’](#)²⁰ framework in England.
24. ‘ChangeUp’ is a £231 million programme for improving support services for frontline third sector organisations. Since April 2006, it has been managed by Capacitybuilders, a non-departmental public body established to administer the programme. ‘ChangeUp’ does not fund frontline organisations directly. Instead, regional and local support providers are given funding to come together in partnerships or ‘consortia’ to work in a strategic and coordinated way and provide new or improved and sustainable services. As of December 2008, 112 partnerships or consortia at regional and local level had been formed as a result of ChangeUp²¹.

Example of a ‘ChangeUp’ Consortium – Greater Merseyside²²

The Greater Merseyside consortium covers a sub-regional area comprising six municipal borough councils and some fringe rural areas. The area has a population of around 1.5 million. The third sector within the area is thought to comprise at least 5,000 frontline organisations. The consortium formed in 2004 as a result of ChangeUp and comprises 18 organisations (e.g. membership groups comprised of groups covering a number of different areas - churches, minority ethnic community groups, community regeneration groups,

¹⁶ Advice Services Alliance. Advice Services Alliance Response to the DSD Strategy. www.adviceni.net/publications/PDF/ASA%20response%20to%20DSD%20Strategy.pdf

¹⁷ Law Centre (NI) (2006) Response to Consultation. www.lawcentreni.org/Policy/Responses/Responses%202006/DSD_response.htm

¹⁸ Ibid, p3.

¹⁹ Ibid, p1.

²⁰ For further information on the ‘Change Up’ Programme see www.changeup.org.uk/overview/introduction.asp

²¹ National Audit Office (2009) Building the Capacity of the Third Sector. P4. www.nao.org.uk/idoc.ashx?docId=70119b9d-e202-44c4-a133-e898dd7cd67e&version=-1

²² Ibid, p15.

disability, youth, refugees, social enterprise, a not for profit technology centre, a volunteer centre). These organisations come together to determine the priorities for developing and improving support services for local frontline organisations. The consortium sets these out in a three-year business plan within a six-year strategy. Up to 2008, the consortium received £2.2 million on the basis of a formula used to allocate funding to consortia within each region. From 2008, this funding is now bid for competitively to deliver specific projects and Capacitybuilders makes the final decision on which to fund within each region.

25. However, it is important to emphasise that the 'ChangeUp' Framework is *not* directly comparable to the 'Opening Doors' strategy as it concentrates on capacity building in the voluntary and community sector in general rather than voluntary advice services specifically. Also unlike the 'Opening Doors' Strategy it does not appear to involve the direct funding of frontline organisations. What may be of interest is that the model, in addition to encouraging the development of consortia and partnership working, also established six national hubs to support the consortia in their work. The national hubs were established as centres of expertise and covered the following six areas - Finance, Governance, ICT, Performance, Volunteering; and Workforce. The hubs, led by a number of different voluntary and community organisations, sought to tackle gaps in support by providing cost effective and easily accessible information, guidance, tools and resources to assist support organisations operating regionally and locally²³.
26. The six hubs were directly funded from central government and sought to tackle gaps in support by providing high quality, cost effective and easily accessible information, guidance, tools and resources to assist support organisations operating regionally and locally²⁴. In 2008, the six hubs were replaced by nine 'National Support Services' which were believed to be better aligned with the strategic and operational needs of frontline organisations. The nine National Support Services are Income Generation; Leadership and Governance; Performance Management; Modernising Volunteering; Campaigning and Advocacy; Equalities and Diversity; Marketing and Communications; Collaboration; and Responding to Social Change²⁵.

28 May 2009

²³ Ibid, p13.

²⁴ Ibid, p13.

²⁵ Ibid, p18.