

Engagement Report

Information and Advice strategy and proposal for specialist advice service

Consultation

July 2015 to September 2015

1. Purpose of this document

This document is a report following a public consultation on the **Information and Advice strategy for Adult Social Care** and our proposal for a **specialist advice service**.

2. Timescale

Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) embarked upon this consultation from 13 July 2015 to 11 September 2015.

3. Process and Methodology

An online engagement method on the Oxfordshire County Council website via the consultation portal was used which provided three key documents; Information and Advice Strategy, Service and Community Impact Assessment and Specialist Advice Service Proposal and an online survey. The link to the consultation was sent out to over 30 identified stakeholders and the link promoted to all staff in the Adult Social Care Directorate via the Adult Social Care Weekly Roundup e-mail.

4. Background

This consultation covers our **Information and Advice strategy for Adult Social Care** and our proposal for a **specialist advice service** which will provide free, independent advice to assist people with benefits, debt, budgeting and other financial and welfare issues.

'Information and advice' is an umbrella term, covering a range of activities and interventions that help people to become more self-reliant and better able to manage situations and circumstances in their lives.

We believe that the availability and provision of timely, relevant, comprehensive and accurate information and advice should help to promote wellbeing, increase people's abilities to exercise more personal choice and control, support them in their decision-making and contribute to the prevention or delay of the need for care.

The information and advice strategy for Adult Social Care

The information and advice strategy sets out how we are responding to the information and advice requirements for local authorities as stated in the Care Act 2014, whilst ensuring that the financial resources we have available to invest in the provision of information and advice are used effectively so that the council is able to meet its statutory obligations.

We have therefore determined the following priorities for information and advice:

PRIORITY 1: Increasing general awareness of information and advice and supporting people to 'self-serve' wherever possible

PRIORITY 2: Ensuring access to more specialised advice and support which enables individuals to fully understand the range of options available to them to meet their care and support needs

PRIORITY 3: Focusing on our statutory responsibilities to support and safeguard the county's more vulnerable residents such as older people and adults with disabilities

5. Summary and key themes

The survey received 13 online responses and all responses were anonymous. Overall, the strategy and specialist service proposal were supported by respondents to the online survey.

There was support for all components of the service proposal; face to face outreach support in particular for more vulnerable people who would not be able to access telephone support or online information and advice.

The Telephone Helpline was mentioned positively as a way to reach and support more people, but equally, concern was raised that the Telephone Helpline might be a barrier for vulnerable people receiving support due to communication issues, for example. For this reason, outreach was considered to be an important component, to enable those people who are unable to use the Telephone Helpline to get support.

Appeals and Representation, and Training and Consultancy were mentioned less frequently and were not prioritised as greatly as the Telephone Helpline and Outreach, although still considered important by some respondents.

Concerns were expressed that a reduction in funding, particularly for local advice centres, and a focus on the council's statutory responsibilities could have a negative effect on preventing crises, supporting people to maintain their independence and prevent needs for care and support.

The suggested amount of face to face support proposed was questioned, and concerns were raised that people were not just signposted to other services. Also, respondents asked how people would identify the support service.

At each end of the spectrum, the importance of availability of services for young people and older people was highlighted and that the service will be equitable to all who need it countywide.

Prevention and ensuring that people's situation do not worsen, was a key theme running through responses to the survey, and that the new service would not be robust enough to prevent people from falling into crisis. It was considered that in the long term this could have a greater impact on people's lives and the services and organisations in place to support them.

People felt that it was important to recognise what other services are available countywide, to reduce duplication and enable cohesive partnership working.

There were a number of detailed responses from advice organisations. The following quotes highlight the most common concerns mentioned:

"While we welcome the decision of the council to consider funding a much needed specialist advice service we are concerned that the service will rely on signposting

individuals to local advice agencies or Citizens Advice while cutting funding to these agencies."

"To take funding from advice centres providing specialist advice in some of the most disadvantaged areas of Oxfordshire in order to fund the Council's statutory responsibilities under a specific Act seems very difficult to justify, especially in the light of the social impact that such cuts are likely to have because of the increasing difficulty of finding replacement funding. Such a course of action also threatens simultaneously to undermine the success of the proposed advice service. Instead, the Council should build on the accumulated expertise, and local knowledge and trust, of these advice centres by ensuring that they are incorporated into any provider contracts for the specialist advice service and by continuing to fund the specialist advice that they provide."

6. Analysis

Information and advice strategy

Question 1. Do you agree with the three information and advice priorities?

Priority 1: Increasing general awareness of information and advice and supporting people to 'self-serve' wherever possible

There were 13 responses to this question. They ranked the priorities as follows:

Strongly Agreed	5
Agree	7
Neutral	1
Disagree	0
Strongly Disagree	0

Priority 2: Ensuring access to more specialised advice and support which enables individuals to fully understand the range of options available to them to meet their care and support needs

There were 13 responses to this question. They ranked the priorities as follows:

Strongly Agreed	8
Agree	5
Neutral	0
Disagree	0
Strongly Disagree	0

Priority 3: Focusing on our statutory responsibilities to support and safeguard the county's more vulnerable residents such as older people and adults with disabilities

There were 13 responses to this question. They ranked the priorities as follows:

Strongly Agreed	8
-----------------	---

Annex 3

Agree	2
Neutral	2
Disagree	1
Strongly Disagree	0

Further Comments

"These all seem reasonable priorities."

The focus on vulnerable Oxfordshire residents was welcomed; although concerns were expressed that restricting to statutory responsibilities may cause greater pressures as the ability to support people before they are most vulnerable could be reduced. Also, the County Council has a much broader remit to increase the wellbeing of all Oxfordshire residents.

It was stated that providing legal advice and information to people to whom the council does not yet have a statutory duty will potentially save the council considerable future expense.

Concerns

Concern was expressed that people are provided with services and are not just signposted to other organisations. Also mentioned was concern about how people will find out about services.

"The strategy proposed will not ensure access to specialised advice and support"

There was a concern that a restricted focus on minimal statutory responsibilities alone may be unlikely to be cost-effective, given the greater efficiency of providing comprehensive specialist advice to prevent the need for social care and other social and community services provision (such as children being taken into care).

Question 2:

Is there anything else we should include in the priorities and why?

Comments included: Support to services providing the essential information and advice, ensuring that there is access to specialist information and advice for young people. The services listed are predominantly for the over 50s and that service should be equitable across the whole of Oxfordshire.

One respondent stated that the priorities should be widened to include people with long term health needs to whom OCC has no statutory duty.

Also there was a comment raising concern regarding how new services would be evaluated for effectiveness to ensure that future contracts reflect the needs of users.

Question 3:

Are there any other comments that you would like to make about the information and advice strategy?

Annex 3

"We are pleased to see specialist services and advice supported in the Strategy; however the specialist area of support to older people appears to have been diminished in the proposed service specification by making it an all age service"

Concern was raised that commissioned services could be duplicated by other organisations. Also, that there may be a mismatch between the aim to focus on statutory activity and the aim to provide early intervention activity.

General comments

"We welcome the fact that some funding has been preserved for specialist advice"

"Providing good legal advice and information has a significant impact in improving people's mental health and wellbeing and is one of the best preventative measures the council can take to reduce the number of people, especially older people who need social care and support."

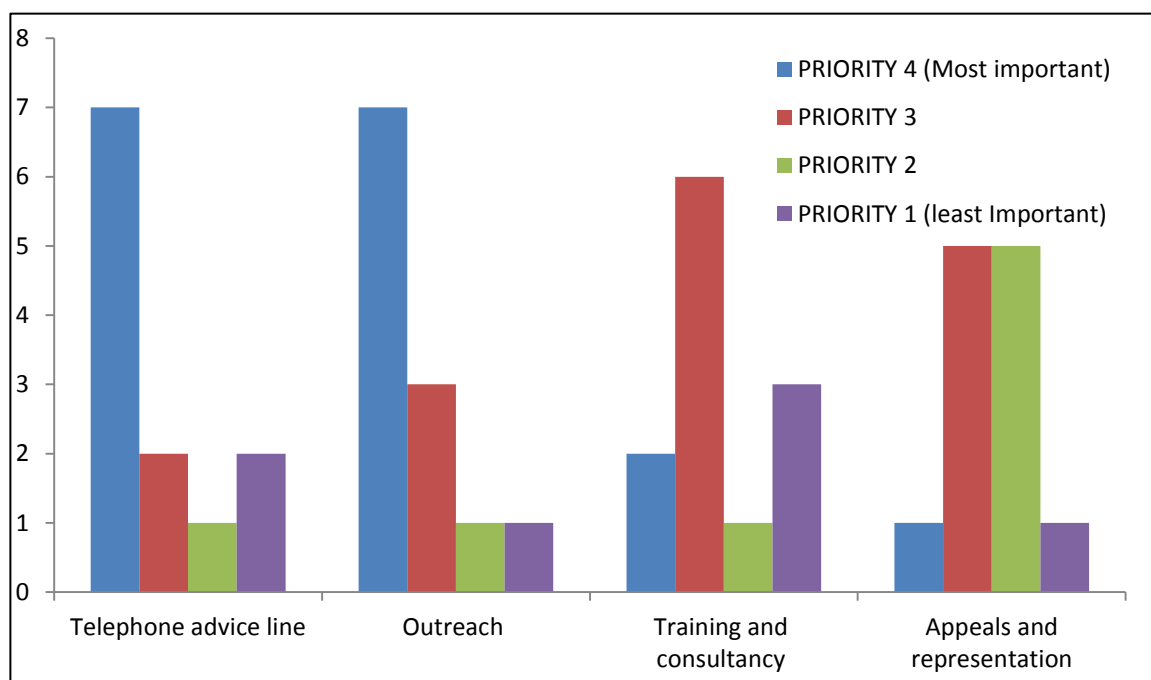
"We welcome the recognition in the strategy of the importance of information and advice and the preventative value of prompt and accurate advice. We would encourage the maintenance of a broad definition of information and advice – ie not simply relating to care and support. The desire to commission a specialist advice service acknowledges the fact that information about care and support on its own will not provide the holistic support on inter-related topics such as benefits, debt, housing and employment which is needed to maintain independence. We welcome this approach."

The Specialist Advice Service

Analysis

Question 1: Please rank the four elements of the proposed service in order of priority.

Due to the small number of respondents (12) to this question, it is difficult to detect an overall trend. However, from those that responded, answers indicate that the Outreach and Telephone Advice Line are considered a greater level of priority. Appeals and Representation and Training and Consultancy, whilst not being rated as a highest priority, are still seen as important.



However, concerns were raised regarding costs and efficiency:

"The outreach service envisaged, based mostly on home visits, is unnecessarily time-consuming, expensive and inefficient."

"A telephone helpline is not adequate to enable individuals to maximise their income and reduce their debts. It can only be useful to provide very basic information to those who are already competent and confident. Face-to-face advice and support is essential for most of those who need this service."

Question 2:

Your highest priority component of the proposed service - please tell us why you consider this the most important

Many respondents felt that all the components of the proposed service were important and were unable to rank them.

However, of those who responded, the Telephone Helpline was considered a high priority as it created the "easiest access to greatest number of people". Also, *"because this is the most effective way of providing advice, and will lead to the most efficient outcomes"*.

It was also stated that the Telephone Helpline enables more people to access information and advice at an earlier point (before crisis, so preventative) and enables them to retain more control.

"It is important that clients can access the service by telephone and this should be the first point of contact for clients. As much specialist advice as possible should be given by phone to protect the face to face services for those who are most vulnerable. Telephone services can provide information and advice for clients who are confident or who have family support to enable them to follow up the advice with what are often complex tasks."

Yet *"because the most vulnerable people in society are often unable to access online information and advice"* there is still considered a need for face-to-face and outreach services. *"Maximum value will be secured from the available budget by ensuring that as much funding as possible can be used to enable action on behalf of clients who are not able to act for themselves"*.

One provider stated: *"Our experience shows that face to face visits supported by on-going communication by telephone and letter provide the best quality services with the highest outcomes for clients"*

A further comment received stated that face-to-face support and advice is essential to properly assist the groups of people for whom the county council has statutory responsibilities. It was felt that face to face support creates better outcomes for people when dealing with complex issues such as benefits and debt.

Question 3:

Your lowest priority component of the proposed service - please tell us why you consider this the least important

In some instances, respondents did not rank priorities as it was felt that they are all closely interconnected and make such a positive contribution to people's lives. Whilst the Telephone Helpline was listed as a high priority, a number of respondents also considered it a low priority. This was because *" a telephone helpline cannot deliver outcomes to match those of face-to-face services and that is particularly true for two groups of clients - those with language or literacy issues and those with disabilities including learning difficulties or mental health problems"*.

"The efficacy of telephone advice in particular for this group of clients has been shown to be limited. They will need face to face advice from specialist advisors who can deal holistically with their complex needs and problems whilst being able to see the paperwork associated with claims, debts etc."

All elements of the service are considered important to most of the respondents. However, whilst it was stated that training and consultancy can be achieved through

diverse national means and is therefore of a lower priority, it is still considered to be important as consultancy and training make a significant contribution to ensuring that front line staff in other agencies and organisations can respond appropriately to queries.

Also, whilst appeals/tribunal representation may be needed in fewer cases, the impact on individuals of claims failing or of poor administration are devastating and the additional costs of failed appeals could impact on council budgets elsewhere.

Question 4;

Any other suggestions for the new specialist advice service, or comments;

A respondent suggested that a lot of the low level, initial information and advice could also be accessed via the Community Information Network.

Other comments included:

"Local advice centres should be included as partners in the specialist advice service"

"I think you need on-line as well as telephone based with live chat"

"Joint provision with other services especially CCG's and district or city councils."

"Increasing the signposting of clients to advice agencies, while at the same time removing funding from some of those agencies which enables them to respond to clients when they present, will potentially undermine key objectives of preventing the need for care and support and maintaining independence".