

Submission to Oxfordshire County Council Working Party on Debt

About AdviceUK

AdviceUK is a membership organisation of over 850 voluntary and community organisations that give free advice and support to members of the public. Our members work throughout England, Scotland and Wales, helping over 2 million people a year solve the legal and social welfare problems they face. In Oxfordshire we have 11 member organisations.

Independent advice services provide advice, support, advocacy and representation in one or more areas of social welfare law – such as welfare benefits, debt, housing, community care, employment and immigration. Independent advice services often grow out of community action and self-help groups – local people finding solutions to local need. They typically focus on supporting the poorest and most marginalised.

What do we mean by debt advice, and how is quality maintained?

By debt advice, AdviceUK means the structured framework used to enable clients to manage and resolve their debt problems. We would expect debt advisers to meet the generalist and caseworker competences set out in the Money Advice Trust's Money Advice Standards. These can be found on the AdviceUK website:

<http://www.adviceuk.org.uk/supporting-you/money-advice/moneyadvicetraining>. We would also expect advisers to follow the Institute of Money Advisers' Money Advice Statement of Good Practice. This can be found on the IMA website at: http://www.i-m-a.org.uk/pdfs/statement_of_good_practice.pdf. AdviceUK members that give debt advice can opt to be part of our group debt counselling licence – it is a requirement of the Consumer Credit Act 1974 that any business or organisation that helps people with their debt problems must be licensed by the Office of Fair Trading.

Why are links with other social welfare advice services and support services important?

We believe that debt advice cannot be effective if it is provided without reference to other services. For example, debt advice provided alongside help to maximise the client's income will result in better long-term resilience to debt. Debt advice provided alongside support to clients who are vulnerable in other ways – for example, people with health problems or older people in fuel poverty – will result in advice that is acted upon and followed up. Debt advice provided in the context of support to help a client look for work – for example, making sure that the person concerned has a home – will bring better outcomes. Local advice services with a long-term commitment to local communities have the networks to enable this kind of ongoing, locally-based support to be provided.

What's involved in giving advice (including debt advice)?

An **advice service** involves: diagnosis of the client's enquiry and the legal issues involved; giving information and explaining options; identifying further action the client can take; and some assistance: e.g. contacting third parties to seek information; filling in forms. It would usually be completed with one interview although there may be some follow-up work. The client would take responsibility for any further action.

An **advice service with casework** involves all the elements of an advice service previously listed, with the following in addition: taking action on behalf of the client to move the case on; negotiating on behalf of the client with third parties, and follow-up work. The advice service and its advisers would take responsibility for this ongoing work.

An **advice service with specialist casework** involves: all the above elements with additional casework requiring the presentation of complex legal arguments, representation and litigation at court, and tribunal hearings. It may include applications to higher courts or tribunals, instructing experts – such as barristers – for representation in higher courts, and negotiation with the opposing party in a dispute (or other third parties).

For a detailed description of the above definitions, please see:

<http://www.adviceuk.org.uk/projects-and-resources/projects/wtfa/qualitymark>

Voluntary sector advice services in Oxfordshire and Oxfordshire Money Advice Group

AdviceUK has been involved in supporting voluntary sector advice services in Oxfordshire. We have produced [a Google map of local advice services](#), giving basic information on service provision across the county. Oxfordshire Money Advice Group (contact Dal Warburton dal.warburton@adviceuk.org.uk or Jane Phipps Jane.Phipps@citizensadvice.org.uk for further details) is a hub for those involved in managing and delivering free and independent money advice services in Oxfordshire. We meet four times a year to:

- exchange and share information on money advice issues
- promote collaboration between money advice providers to make services more coordinated, effective, efficient, and responsive to diverse needs
- improve access to money advice services for Oxfordshire residents, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable
- develop relationships with other key stakeholders that have an interest in our work, including funders, decision makers, creditor organisations, financial capability networks, and organisations working with vulnerable groups of Oxfordshire residents
- work together to draw in additional sources of funding for money advice services
- give local money advisors opportunities to access training and other events that equip them to provide a better service to clients

As members of the Working Party may be aware, we are involved in running an event focusing on tackling debt and managing money in Oxfordshire – which will take place on September 28. See <http://oxfordshiremoneymatters.eventbrite.com/> for further details. The outcomes of the day and information gathered as a result will give us an excellent basis to plan further work to ensure residents have access to the support they need.

We would also like to highlight the work of the Oxford Advice Centres Forum and Citizens Advice Oxfordshire, two other networks that are key to effective advice provision by the voluntary sector in Oxfordshire, and understand that they will also be contributing to discussions about debt advice provision in the county.

Value of advice services and why local advice services should be a priority

AdviceUK has demonstrated why it makes good economic sense for local authorities to fund local advice services, how advice can cut waste and bureaucracy, and the economic benefits that advice brings to communities. In July 2010, the Minister for the Cabinet Office, Francis Maude, and Minister for Civil Society, Nick Hurd, wrote an open letter to the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors asking them to share ideas about how they could help reduce the deficit. [This was our response](#). For more information about how costs and waste in public services can be reduced, please read our research about [advice outcomes](#).

It is clear that investment in financial capability programmes (helping people manage their money more effectively) results in long-term gains for local people and the local economy, and reduces the burden on public services by helping people to avoid crises. This work is already being carried out by local voluntary sector advice services, for example Rose Hill and Donnington Advice Centre's work in youth clubs, or the Save Xmas and Energy Best Deal programmes being delivered by local Citizens Advice bureaux.

It is also clear that Oxfordshire is particularly vulnerable in the current economic situation because of the high percentage of jobs that are dependent on public sector employers and funding streams. Supporting people through redundancy and preventing repossessions and evictions will make the county more resilient to the impact of such cuts.

Key steps that could be taken by Oxfordshire County Council

We are grateful for the support the County Council already gives to voluntary sector advice services, for example the help given to put on the Money Matters event later this month.

We would recommend that:

- advice service provision by individual organisations is accorded a high priority when making spending decisions – this will lessen the impact of cuts on the poorest and most vulnerable, those who are least able to weather hard times
- Oxfordshire County Council works together with the networks described above to develop collaborative, coordinated strategies for the provision of services
- Oxfordshire County Council considers providing low-cost support to networks that already coordinate advice service provision – for example, free meeting room space at County Hall to Oxfordshire Money Advice Group; a page acting as a portal to voluntary sector advice services for Oxfordshire residents hosted on the council's website
- Oxfordshire County Council encourages dialogue between advice services and its own in-house services to identify waste and address systemic failures in policy and practice