

REGENERATION & SOCIAL INCLUSION SCRUTINY COMMISSION		
Scrutiny Involvement in Advice Strategy	Classification Public	Enclosures
	Ward(s) affected All	

1 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 In 2006 the Council resumed work towards development of a Hackney Advice Strategy, with the aims of developing co-ordinated advice and information provision across the Council, voluntary, statutory and private sectors; identifying the borough's priority advice and information needs to help inform the commissioning of advice services from 2008; improving the quality of advice-giving by encouraging the development of quality marked advice provision across the borough; encouraging advice and information agencies to develop a referral system in the borough; and promoting joined up working across key Council directorates involved in advice and information provision.

The Cabinet Member for Community Services proposed a role for scrutiny in participating in, and providing a challenge element to, the process of developing the strategy.

This report details scrutiny involvement and summarises the main issues Members perceived to emerge, for the benefit of new Commission Members and to help in the consideration of the draft strategy.

- 1.2 Terms of reference for scrutiny involvement were agreed as follows:

- To test whether the Council has correctly identified priority service areas by reviewing the work of the Hackney Advice Strategy Project Group and analysing gaps in provision and levels of need in the borough;
- To facilitate community involvement in the Advice Strategy and assess whether there has been adequate and appropriate stakeholder consultation;
- To assess whether resulting proposals for the Advice Strategy reflect the outcome of the consultation and meet the needs of all of Hackney's diverse communities;
- To assist in development of the Advice Strategy by researching best practice and guidance from other local authorities and specialist advice organisations;

- To make recommendations to feed into the Advice Strategy and develop a means of monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of the Advice Strategy.

Cllr Oguzkanli led a working group comprising Cllrs Stops and Vernon.

1.3 Scrutiny involvement has taken place as follows:

- Review of initial strategy scope at Commission meeting 11 July 2006.
- Informal working group meetings with officers to review evidence base and discuss consultation plan 6 September and 16 October 2006.
- Review of consultation brief at Commission meeting 9 January 2007.
- Participation in consultation events - Hackney Playbus 27 February, HCVS 28 February, Age Concern 1 March, advice providers 20 March.
- Informal working group discussion of consultation events 8 May 2007.
- Participation in a Members' Workshop on the strategy 10 May 2007.
- Cllr Oguzkanli and Cllr Stops met Hackney Advice Forum (representing 110 independent advice organisations) members 17 September 2007.
- The Commission considered a draft copy of the Advice Strategy 2007-2010 at its meeting on November 8th and declared itself satisfied with the work undertaken. The Commission also endorsed this report of its involvement in the development of the strategy and heard from voluntary sector representatives who also appeared satisfied with the outcomes of the exercise.

Members were aware that officer work on the strategy would involve consultation with the Legal Services Commission, national advice umbrella organisations and local authorities and therefore did not attempt to duplicate their research.

Some key documents setting out the national context with regard to advice needs, structuring of provision and referrals were however considered to inform the challenge function of the review. These were the Community Legal Service (CLS) Strategy, *Making Legal Rights a Reality* launched in 2006, which sets out the future direction of CLS-funded advice and information services (the CLS pays around £8.5m to Hackney-based solicitors out of a total of around £20.5m spent on advice provision in the borough); *Causes of Action: Civil Law and Social Justice*, an analysis of the role of advice and legal services in the fight against social exclusion

published by the Legal Services Commission (LSC) in 2006; *A Trouble Shared, Legal Problems Clusters in Solicitors' and Advice Agencies*, a Department for Constitutional Affairs Research Series paper published in 2006 examining clients presenting with multiple problems; and *Putting Advice Where The Need Is*, an evaluation of the LSC's money advice outreach pilots published by the Legal Services Research Centre in 2007.

Members have also had regard to the Hackney Advice Forum submission to the Council's consultation exercise, which sets out the Forum's strategy for developing advice services in the borough.

2 ISSUES ARISING DURING SCRUTINY INVOLVEMENT

2.1 Priority Service Areas

2.1.1 The highest advice priorities for Hackney identified by the Council in 2003 were welfare benefits, debt and mental health. On revisiting the strategy prior to consultation, officers identified two further priority areas: housing, and employment support for those with disability or long-term illness.

2.1.2 Members observed that consultees at the Age Concern, Playbus and HCVS events raised a number of issues concerning housing and liaising with Hackney Homes estate offices. Attendees of the Members' Workshop also noted they deal with a lot of housing-related casework.

Advice provider consultees on 20 March appeared to be in general agreement with the five priorities outlined and particularly endorsed the need for housing advice (specifically regarding homelessness, domestic conflict, support housing and housing for specific groups such as drug users) as a high priority, as well as a further unmet need around immigration advice.

While they agreed that Hackney is in need of an Advice Strategy, Hackney Advice Forum representatives raised their view with Members that there is an over-emphasis on this topic-based prioritisation process; needs for advice amongst Hackney residents are high across many topics.

More generally, Members were concerned at what they saw as evidence of a growing underclass (young people under 25, drug users, people with mental health problems, refugees/asylum seekers and families with long-term unemployed heads of households) in Hackney.

2.1.3 Members noted the national research suggesting that advice users in areas of high deprivation tend to experience multiple problems in particular clusters. *A Trouble Shared* found that between 43% and 56% of clients in their research had two or more problems across problem types. The

strongest clusters were rented housing, benefits and debt, and, to a lesser extent, mental health problems; relationship breakdown, children, home ownership and domestic violence; and discrimination and employment. This broadly matches the three clusters identified in *Causes of Action*, namely a family cluster, a homelessness cluster, and an economic cluster.

2.2 Delivery of Advice Provision

- 2.2.1 The strategy aims to ensure there are no gaps in provision. This includes examining how to deliver services that are easily accessible and meet the needs of local people. Should they consider it appropriate, local authorities can bid to the LSC to fund a Community Legal Advice Centre (CLAC) as a single access point for advice on a range of issues.
- 2.2.2 Members observed discussion at the consultation events around the relative advantages of providing services in a central hub or dispersed throughout the borough.

Amongst the Age Concern group consultees there was some resistance to a centralised advice facility in Mare Street. Consultees at the HCVS event were anxious that small community organisations are valued and funded as part of the advice network.

This point was also made by the Hackney Advice Forum representatives who considered diverse provision to be a strength and were concerned about perceived attempts to rationalise provision in the borough. They stated that there is little or no support for a CLAC amongst existing independent advice providers in the borough. They also wanted more information on the rationale behind the move to commissioning services and the practical consequences. They were concerned that groups whose grant-funding is taken away but who are not commissioned may also find it difficult to retain match-funding they receive from other sources.

Consultees at the advice providers event on 20 March noted the importance of localised services in terms of access and providing different types of locations and services to meet different needs, although the lengthy queues outside the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) did indicate that many people either preferred to use an established, central service or were unaware of smaller local services. Some considered there is a need for generalist advice services that are capable of understanding a range of problems and Hackney Advice Forum representatives also raised their view that generalist advice agencies should be prioritised.

Providers and users/potential users also stated the importance of translation and interpretation services in providing effective advice in Hackney. Hackney Advice Forum representatives reiterated that there is

great demand for community and language groups, pointing to the example of the need for different groups to provide for different sections of the Turkish/Kurdish community.

Consultees at the Playbus event stated a preference for receiving advice face to face than over the telephone, which was backed up by the experiences of Members who attended the workshop.

- 2.2.3 Members noted from the CLS Strategy that CLACs are being proposed in recognition of the need for an integrated service for clients with multiple problems. However they also noted concerns that they may experience capacity problems and have problems dealing with issues falling outside their areas of specialism, which would cause difficulties if funding is concentrated in them to the exclusion of other providers. *A Trouble Shared* observed that as local authorities will be joint funders of CLACs, robust mechanisms would need to be in place to ensure that such centres are not tempted to under-represent clients with problems to be pursued against local authorities in areas such as housing and council tax.

Putting Advice Where the Need Is found that the most disadvantaged people welcome money advice in locations they are familiar with, such as housing offices, community centres and prisons. Many of those interviewed were unaware of CABs or solicitors located near them and instead sought advice from inappropriate sources, such as creditors, family and friends.

2.3 Service Quality

- 2.3.1 The Advice Strategy also aims to improve the quality of advice provision across the borough. In 2005/06 51% of funded advice and information services in the borough held the LSC Quality Mark. However Quality Mark assessments have subsequently been suspended by the LSC and therefore the Council was seeking an independent assessment of the quality of Council-funded and Council-commissioned advice services.

- 2.3.2 Advice provider consultees on 20 March queried the extent to which Quality Mark did in fact measure service quality rather the ability of organisation to carry out various administrative tasks. They considered the Council should instead focus on rigorous auditing processes for the organisations it funds.

They noted the need for more training for advisers, which was echoed at the Members' Workshop.

The Hackney Advice Forum would like to work with Council on designing appropriate and useful methods for assessing quality and offering accountability to funders.

Consultees who had used advice services in the borough expressed a general level of satisfaction with services, including with CAB though issues were raised around customers care.

2.4 Referrals

2.4.1 Another aim of the Advice Strategy is to ensure that people who need advice can access it easily by exploring an effective referral system for the borough. No known system is in place.

2.4.2 Advice provider consultees on 20 March noted that most organisations in Hackney try to resolve issues themselves rather than referring people elsewhere. They are often reluctant to refer because of the potential for people to drop-out of the process. Well-known sources of advice, such as the Citizen's Advice Bureau, do not have capacity to deal with everyone who comes to them and therefore do make more referrals, but not always appropriately.

They agreed on the importance of networks and collaboration between providers for making informed referrals, and of an accreditation system for ensuring confidence in other agencies, but also noted the danger of such networks becoming talking-shops.

Scrutiny Members raised concerns that providing vulnerable people with another telephone number is not always helpful and suggested officers explore the feasibility of ensuring that the first point of contact takes responsibility for individuals.

A related point was made at the Members' Workshop, that Members often take responsibility for contacting organisations on behalf of their constituents rather than referring them on. It can be difficult for Members to refer constituents to 'unknown' agencies as they are held responsible if any problems are experienced, and they are often unaware as to levels of advice provided by services. Playbus consultees appeared to have little awareness of the potential role of councilors in assisting them in this way.

2.4.3 Members noted the problem of referral fatigue identified in *Causes of Action* - that the likelihood of respondents obtaining advice declines as respondents visit more advisers. The report also found that some types of adviser, such as CABx, routinely refer people on while others, such as solicitors, do so less frequently, and identified issues around the quality of signposting and referrals.

The CLS strategy of providing integrated advice centres and networks reflects these concerns around referrals. However *Causes for Action* considered referrals could be improved by better public education so that people seek help from appropriate sources, by education and support for

less qualified advisers to improve signposting, and by clear and simple gateways to good quality advice.

2.5 The Consultation Process

At their first meeting, Scrutiny Members noted that they often see individuals with advice needs at their surgeries and therefore can provide a useful source of information, and so were pleased that the consultation strategy included a survey and workshop for Members.

Scrutiny Members were particularly interested in ensuring the views of hard-to-reach groups who do not currently access advice services and smaller community organisations were heard in the consultation, as well as those of larger providers and well-informed residents.

This appeared to be achieved in the events they attended, which included users/non-users/providers from BME and hard-to-reach groups such as the Orthodox Jewish Community and refugee community action groups, and participants who had not previously taken part in Council consultations.

The Hackney Advice Forum representatives considered they had been consulted in the appropriate ways, although they would have welcomed closer involvement. They did not feel that their perspective had been adequately taken into account.

Scrutiny Members expressed positive views about the consultation activities they attended, particularly those that took place at existing events (Age Concern and Hackney Playbus) and therefore did not rely on people coming to consultation events. They noted that the consultation has been submitted as a Best Consultation Campaign entry at the Chartered Institute of Public Relations awards 2007.

Lead Councillor: Cllr Deniz Oguzkanli

Scrutiny Officer: Sarah Harrison

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The following documents have been relied on in the preparation of this report and were either presented to the Scrutiny Commission or referred to during the meetings:

Agendas and Minutes of meetings of the Regeneration and Social Inclusion Scrutiny Commission held on 11 July 2006, 9 January 2007

A Trouble Shared, Legal Problems Clusters in Solicitors' and Advice Agencies, Department for Constitutional Affairs 2006

Causes of Action: Civil Law and Social Justice, Legal Services Commission 2006

Making Legal Rights a Reality, Legal Services Commission 2006

Putting Advice Where The Need Is, Legal Services Research Centre 2007

Developing An Advice Strategy for Hackney: A Response to the Council's Consultation Exercise from the Independent Advice Sector – Hackney Advice Forum 2007

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