



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

# Advice Services Review: Final research report

Executive summary

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## Advice Services Review: Final Research Report Executive Summary

This review of advice services in Wales was instigated by the Minister for Local Government and Communities and the Finance Minister. It was done in the light of the unprecedented challenges being faced by Not for Profit (NfP) advice providers as a result of funding decreases across Wales alongside rising demand due to the current economic downturn. The review concentrated on the NfP advice sector, but also considered the wider range of information, advice and guidance services provided by the public and private sectors to build a holistic picture of advice services in Wales.

### Key Themes

**Six Key Themes** were identified from the literature review, mapping exercise and consultations:

- **Promoting Advice Networks and Collaborative Working** offers the opportunity to develop a more strategic approach to advice delivery in Wales, encourage partnership working and sharing of resources, with the aim of generating improved outcomes for advice seekers. Networks should be developed from existing networks and relationships developed at a local and regional level, with appropriate guidance and support from Welsh Government.
- **Funding and Commissioning Approaches** that are longer term and outcome-focused would enable providers to plan more effectively, invest in partnership working, and offer greater flexibility in how they manage their services. Providers working collaboratively together with funders would enable local service design to reflect local needs and demand pressures, and eliminate waste from the system.
- **Quality Assuring Service Standards** was highlighted as being a key area for development to promote greater consistency across the sector and enable greater partnership working, based on trust, understanding and respect for different working practices. Welsh Government should support the development of National Standards for Information and Advice, working with the advice sector, and based upon existing standards and frameworks.
- **Delivering Advice** at a *specialist* level was highlighted as key to ensuring complex problems are dealt with by people with the relevant knowledge, training, skills and access to appropriate resources. *Generalist* advice, inclusive of providing guided self-help support, appears to be of varied quality throughout Wales, with calls to improve this function.
  - *Multiple channels of advice delivery are needed*, with recognition that face-to-face advice is often the preferred channel for clients and providers although there is limited capacity for this, meaning that people who can resolve their problems through other channels should be encouraged to do so. Expansion and improvement in telephone and online advice offers an area for development, however research questions remain regarding their efficacy, cost and what levels and types of advice can be best delivered this way.
  - *Specialist housing, welfare benefits, debt and discrimination advice were highlighted as being under threat in Wales post April 2013* due to funding reductions, resulting in the loss of specialist knowledge and support to generalist advisors across the sector.
- **Understanding Demand for advice services in Wales** through the mapping exercise showed only a self-selected picture of the sector at a point in time, which due to imminent funding cuts will be very different post April 2013. There is no agreed method of forecasting demand for advice, although there is agreement that it will continue to increase, alongside a drop in supply for specialist advice affected by Legal Aid reform and other funding.

- **Welfare Reform** will increase the demand for advice services at the same time as specialist welfare benefits advice is being significantly reduced by Legal Aid funding, decreasing the sector's number of specialist advisors and affecting the overall capacity for delivering welfare benefit advice during a period of rapid change. The DWP 'digital by default' agenda poses additional challenges due to issues regarding digital access.

## The Scope of the Review

The scope of the review was limited to primary advice provision by the third and public sectors, taking into account private sector provision and organisations which offer advice as a secondary part of their aims, in order to consider the fuller picture of advice provision in Wales. The following were defined as '*in scope*' for the review:

- Social welfare law information services
- Social welfare law advice services
- Specialist debt advice
- Specialist welfare benefits advice
- Specialist housing advice
- Specialist employment advice
- Specialist consumer advice
- Specialist discrimination advice.

All other advice was considered '*out of scope*'.

In addition, the review considers generalist advice on a range of subjects provided by advice suppliers as well as the different level of advice given, categorised as:

- Low level provision = Information services, e.g. signposting, and providing information for the client to pursue such as leaflets or verbal information.
- Medium level provision = Advice services, e.g. benefit eligibility check, help with form filling, contacting someone behalf of the client, repayment arrangements, advice on rights
- High level provision = Specialist advice, e.g. due to a client's multiple and complex needs or in-depth pieces of work specialist legal knowledge is required to resolve the issue.

## Format of the Review

The review was comprised of four stages, in accordance with the terms of reference:

- **Stage 1: Literature review** a desk-based review of published literature on advice services
- **Stage 2: Mapping exercise** covering local authority and NfP advice providers
- **Stage 3: Stakeholder consultation** of verbal and written contributions from over 160 sources
- **Stage 4: Final report** which considers and presents the information gathered during the review, concluding with recommendations. This executive summary provides an overview of the full report and is part of stage 4.

The review was supported by expert knowledge from those with interest and experience in advice services, via internal and external stakeholder reference groups who provided comment, advice and guidance throughout.

## Stage 1: Summary of the Literature Review

- **Welsh Government** recognises that access to information, advice and guidance is an enabling and preventative service, aimed at helping citizens to make informed decisions relating to their lives, to improve their health and wellbeing and to reduce reliance on public services.
- **Many people do not seek advice or support to resolve their problems.** Studies have found that only 30% of people seek formal advice from both family and friends, as well as from information and advice services.
- **People experiencing multiple problems are more likely to be on low income and/or from protected characteristic groups as defined by the Equality Act 2010.** The protected characteristics in the Act are age, disability, gender reassignment, sex, race, pregnancy and maternity, sexual orientation and religion or belief. In a similar manner, problems appear in clusters, with an increased likelihood of one problem leading to another, e.g. having problems with welfare benefits often causes debt and housing problems.
- **There is a link between having a problem, stress and physical ill health** with approximately a third of advice seekers reporting stress related ill health as a result of their problem(s).
- **Outcomes of advice show positive social, economic and health benefits for the individual** including improved mental health and living standards, as well as cost savings to the state through prevention of problems escalating. These 'savings' are given below where possible, but it is noted that they are not agreed within the literature findings nor sector as a whole, and can therefore only be taken as indicative amounts. The advice sector also achieves outcomes via its social policy work through informing and lobbying for change to state systems to promote social inclusion, equality and access to justice.
  - Accessing welfare benefit advice leads to improved take-up of entitlement, delivering significant financial gain for individuals and their families. It is estimated this potentially saves the state £8.80 for every £1 spent on welfare benefit advice.
  - Debt and money advice lead to individuals' improved financial circumstances and understanding, health and wellbeing, and help to prevent cost escalation to the state. It is estimated this potentially saves the state £2.98 for every £1 spent on debt advice.
  - Housing advice is seen as a preventative measure to offset the cost of homelessness to the state and to promote improved health and wellbeing outcomes for individuals. It is estimated this potentially saves the state £2.34 for every £1 spent on housing advice.
  - Employment advice is mostly used by those from protected characteristic groups who are more likely to experience unfair treatment or discrimination in the workplace. It is estimated this potentially saves the state £7.13 for every £1 spent on employment advice.
  - Specialist discrimination advice in Wales is patchy, with limited access for the general public or advisors. Funding for this area of work is insecure in Wales.
- **In Wales the effect on Legal Aid funded social welfare law advice provision is estimated to reduce free face-to-face sessions provided by the NfP advice sector from 19,841 to 3,144 per annum.** Other funding reductions already experienced or forecast for the sector will result in loss of staff and knowledge for welfare benefit, debt, housing and discrimination specialist advice provision. The

availability of specialist advice is set to decrease, which is likely to lead to a growing gap between supply and demand.

- **Welfare Reform is anticipated to continue the current trend of increased demand for specialist welfare benefit, debt and housing advice** as well as for financial inclusion advice.
  - **Specialist welfare benefit advice** is being significantly reduced under legal aid funding which is likely to lead to a significant reduction in availability of specialist case work support, as well as reduce overall staff knowledge and capacity across the sector.
- **Outcomes based commissioning provides better results for funders, providers and advice seekers** through: giving greater flexibility to providers in the delivery of their services; preventing ‘revolving door’ clients; and enabling services to be tailored to meet local need. Funders and advice providers can work collaboratively to resolve the root cause of people seeking advice, leading to system wide savings and reduced demand for advice.
- **There are a range of standards and quality assurance methodologies in place for the advice sector** which organisations can choose or be compelled by funders to subscribe to.
- **Face-to-face advice delivered through outreach offers the advantage of widening access to advice to hard to reach communities.** Through adapting delivery to suit local needs and using trusted venues and people to raise the profile of the advice service, engagement is increased with hard to reach groups. Examples of this can be seen in Wales through the use of Communities First locations for outreach debt and generalist advice sessions.
- **Telephone advice appears most suited to initial advice and guided self-help as opposed to supporting people to address complex problems.** It appears to be used more by people in higher socio-economic groups compared to people in lower socio-economic groups or disabled people.
- **Online advice services are still relatively new and under development with little research into their impact on resolving people’s problems, despite its rapid growth in recent years.** There are some good online resources available, where they are appropriately funded and invested in, but their use remains patchy, with digital exclusion affecting people’s ability and willingness to go online for advice.

## Stage 2: Mapping Advice Services in Wales

The mapping exercise sought to capture the wide range of information, advice and guidance services provided by the NfP, public and private sectors in order to build a holistic picture of advice services which the citizens of Wales can access. The purpose of the exercise was to identify and physically map the current range, location, levels and types of advice services being delivered by both generalist and specialist providers across Wales.

Due to self-selection and completion by providers, as well as issues relating to distribution of the exercise, the results do not reflect the full picture of advice services in Wales. It only shows providers’ funded capacity to deal with demand, and a snap-shot in time. The picture will be very different across Wales in April 2013.

## Overview of Findings from the Mapping Exercise

The findings from the mapping exercise can show the self-completed responses as written. Therefore it should be noted that advice providers’ varied interpretation of how *advice* is defined, or the levels at which a provider may give advice, skew the findings as different organisations work in different ways but use the same terminology. Of note, the term ‘*specialist*’ is inconsistently interpreted across the sector, which affects the findings, e.g.

those who stated they were 'specialists' providing 'discrimination advice' for their specific target user group may be providing in-depth legal advice in relation to discrimination and equality related legislation, or consider themselves 'specialists' due to working in a particular manner with their target group.

Both the internal and external stakeholder reference groups clearly stated that the findings of the mapping exercise did not reflect their knowledge of independent social welfare legal advice provision in Wales with significantly more services identified than were known. It was highlighted that the self-reporting of responses created a picture of provision that did not match experience on the ground, where advice providers across the board could not match the demand from advice seekers.

The findings are summarised below, and should be considered within the context that the self-reported responses have altered the picture of advice provision in Wales to that experienced by advice providers and funders on the ground:

- **204 providers responded** with registered social landlords and large (national and regional) organisations providing a range of advisory services over a wide geographical areas. The number of organisations who responded included 27 national organisations and 14 Local Authorities listing a total of 73 different advice services.
- 121 services provided some data regarding their levels of funding, ranging from approximate figures to annual statements with forecast funding reductions. From the data given a **total of over £31 million is being spent on advice services in Wales.**
- Responses providing details of **known and anticipated funding changes totalled a loss of over £3.36 million across Wales with over 50 FTE posts being made redundant by April 2013.**
- **Local Authorities are the main funders for advice services throughout Wales**, as well as being one of the largest delivery bodies for advice providing a range of advice from social care to consumer advice, welfare benefits to housing advice.
- **155 advice services operate from more than one location**, either through outreach or multiple office locations for larger organisations
- **123 provide a home visiting service to vulnerable clients**, where 'vulnerable' is defined in a variety of manners, but focused on disability, age, access to transport, poverty and need
- 201 provide generalist advice, with further details reporting:
  - 113 provide advice at a 'high' level
  - 188 provide advice at a 'medium' level
  - 189 provide advice at a 'low' level
- 300 responses identified delivering 'specialist' advice split into:
  - 61 provide specialist debt advice
  - 90 provide specialist welfare rights advice
  - 41 provide specialist housing advice
  - 24 provide specialist employment advice
  - 30 provide specialist consumer advice
  - 23 provide specialist discrimination advice
  - 30 state they are 'specialists' but did not specify in what.

### **Stage 3: Stakeholder Consultation - *What you told us***

Discussion and consultation with a range of stakeholders and the qualitative responses submitted through the mapping exercise, can be summarised into the following key points:

- **Advice Services in Wales** would benefit from having clear leadership and strategic direction from Welsh Government, alongside Local Authorities keeping local delivery,

oversight and responsibility. Promotion, investment and support to building partnership work across the sector are required.

- **Networks** were widely acknowledged as offering benefit for funders, providers and clients through promoting a more joined-up approach to advice services. It was highlighted that having a networked approach should enable more effective cross referral, better use of specialist resources, shared resources (e.g. training and printed materials) and the ability to develop flexible responses to local need and/or service pressures as they arise. Control, design and delivery of advice services need to be determined at a local level, preferably against local authority area footprints to reflect: localised issues and priorities; the needs of the clients; skills and knowledge of the workforce; and established networks and partnerships.
- **Advice Seekers** access different advice channels through their journey to resolve their issue. This is dependent on why they are seeking advice, their current situation and their individual capacity. Someone may initially access online information, and then move on to seek telephone or face to face advice and support in order to resolve their problem. The *vulnerability* of advice seekers was stressed as relating to the level of advice and support individuals need, as opposed to because a person is from a protected characteristic group.
- **Specialist Advice** was highlighted as key to ensuring complex problems are dealt with by people with relevant knowledge, training, skills and access to appropriate resources. There was sector-wide acknowledgement that while specific client groups may have their advice needs met by generalist advice providers delivering their service in a specific manner to match their client groups preferences, 'dabbling' in areas requiring specialist legal knowledge (e.g. welfare benefits during the current period of rapid reform) can lead to poor advice and increase the problems of the advice seeker.
  - Providers consistently commented that with decreased funding for advice, information and support in the community, the preventative role of advice will be greatly diminished in Wales. Legal Aid funding is reducing dramatically, alongside the withdrawal of funding for many specialist areas of advice, which providers report will severely impact on their ability to deliver specialist services due to job losses and reduced face-to-face provision.
- **The primary method of delivering advice was face-to-face**, also citing this as clients' preferred delivery method. It remains the sector-wide preferred option for working with vulnerable clients, and an effective means of holistic assessment and support. The importance of face-to-face advice being delivered in community locations was stressed as an enabler of access for all, in particular for vulnerable clients with high or specific needs.
- **Telephone and online advice services are increasing in Wales** in response to reduced funding and technological advances, particularly the use of telephone advice in rural areas in recognition of travel and fuel costs for both advice seekers and providers. It was highlighted that online delivery does not meet all people's needs, due to issues such as access to the internet, computer literacy, user comprehension, confidence and cognition functioning.
- **Funding for Advice Services is likely to continue to decrease** due to funding cuts following on from several years of no annual increases or decreased funds. In addition, many advice providers are also facing large funding cuts as a result of Legal Aid reform. Providers clearly and consistently emphasised the need for funding to be awarded on a longer-term basis of at least 3 years, to address the current effects of short-term funding on the sustainability of organisations and their ability to recruit and retain workers with specialist knowledge.
- **Competitive tendering and service level agreements focused on outputs were identified as being anti-collaborative, forcing providers into competition with**

**each other for both money and clients.** Therefore, while there was general consensus that in order to save money better collaboration was needed, there was also the acknowledgement that current commissioning approaches create competition.

- **It would be beneficial for funders to recognise the role of proactive work and social policy work within funding allocation** to target those in need, prior to problems escalating into crisis or reactive work, and prevent problems occurring in the first place.
- **The variety of Quality Assurance and Service Standards were identified as contributing to the issue of distrust between providers** due to differences in how they operate, how they check the quality of advice given, and the standards of training, knowledge and supervision of staff. It was suggested that through creating national standards, the sector would develop more relationships built on a greater level of trust, understanding and appreciation, contributing to greater partnership working across Wales.
- **Impact of Welfare Reform on Advice Provision**, for particular local authority areas and across Wales as a whole, was consistently highlighted as a priority to be addressed at both a local and national level.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The review of advice services in Wales identified the likely increase in advice seekers requiring specialist welfare benefit, debt, and housing advice as well as money advice as a result of Welfare Reform and the ongoing economic downturn. This will occur at the same time that these specialist services are diminishing under Legal Aid Reform as part of a range of unprecedented challenges being faced by NfP advice providers. The recent changes and decrease in funding of specialist discrimination advice in Wales is also creating a growing gap between supply and demand for this service. Although there is no agreed method of forecasting demand for advice, the findings indicate that it will continue to increase and the report estimates the demand for specialist advice services is to increase per annum until 2017 as follows:

- Debt advice between 8-10%
- Employment advice between 7-9%
- Consumer advice between 3-5%
- Welfare benefits between 8-10%
- Housing advice between 12-14%
- Discrimination advice between 12-14%

The reduced access to specialist advice will affect the public directly as well as indirectly through generalist advisors having diminished ability to manage complex problems due to fewer specialist resources to draw upon for advice, guidance, and training. Of particular concern is the effect on access to specialist welfare benefit advice at a time of rapid change and reform to the benefits system leading to reduced capacity to ensure awareness and understanding of the changes to the system and their effects on the people of Wales for both public, staff within the advice sector, and the wider third and public sector.

The following recommendations are made in light of the pressures arising for these particular social welfare specialist advice areas.

## Developing Advice Networks

Organisations in the NfP advice sector need to work together effectively and efficiently to compensate for the increase in demand during a decrease in available funding. Making better use of existing and available resources through working better together across all sectors to eliminate waste in the system, take advantage of new technologies and share resources where appropriate offers opportunities to maximise the ability of the advice sector to meet this rise in demand. It is therefore recommended that:

1. Welsh Government should establish a resourced National Advice Network to ensure strategic coordination of advice services, increase shared learning and make best use

of available resources. This network would include a cross-section of representatives from the advice sector, key funders and stakeholders, and Welsh Government departments. The National Advice Network would provide strategic oversight to the sector and would be responsible for:

- Ensuring that developments in information, advice and advocacy services in health, social care, housing and equality are closely linked to social welfare advice providers in order to maximise the range of outcomes achieved for advice seekers.
  - Working to mitigate the impact of Welfare Reform on the citizens of Wales through:
    - Identifying and making use of funding opportunities, including the recently announced DWP Local Support Framework funding, to support both generalist and specialist advice services that provide welfare benefit, debt or housing advice
    - Developing consistent information messages for the public and frontline staff
    - Enabling shared learning opportunities across all providers of social welfare advice
  - Working with regional and local advice providers and networks in order to collate, disseminate and promote good practice approaches to the design, commissioning and delivery of advice services
  - Developing a sector wide agreed National Standards Framework for Advice and Information (see 10 for further details)
    - Developing a national register of providers that meet the Standards Framework
    - Encouraging the use of standard information from registered providers for use in public information leaflets, websites and training materials to ensure consistent messaging and best use of limited resources.
2. Welsh Government, through the National Advice Network should support the development of Regional and Local Advice Networks built upon, and linked to, existing structures and partnerships such as those engaged with addressing welfare reform, financial inclusion activities, or achieving improved health and wellbeing outcomes. To enable this, Welsh Government should seek engagement and direction from the Public Services Leadership Group to ensure the appropriate networks and partnerships are identified to achieve the strategic coordination of advice services within both the Regional Collaborative Areas and Local Service Board areas.
3. Regional Advice Networks should be responsible for the strategic direction of advice services at a regional level. These Networks would cross the public and third sectors to ensure that advice services work together to achieve a range of outcomes inclusive of health and wellbeing, tackling poverty and promoting equality. They would work to encourage joint funding and commissioning across public sector bodies, including Local Health Boards and Local Authorities in order to meet their identified regional needs and priorities. Through gathering, analysing and comparing local data, the Regional Advice Networks would be able to consider the supply and demand for advice, ensuring that their services are designed to best meet the needs within their region. They would be supported by the Welsh Government's National Advice Network to consider approaches to improve the sustainability, delivery, consistency and levels of access to advice services. They would be supported to consider:
- Developing joint commissioning approaches for specialist advice services
  - Identifying and applying for funding to meet identified gaps in advice provision
  - Working together as funders and providers to understand and eliminate the root cause of people seeking advice for areas within their control
  - Improving sector wide knowledge and understanding through shared learning

- Improving delivery, e.g. through making better use of new technology, shared referral processes between providers, and targeting resources to reflect the levels and type of advice identified as needed.
4. Local Service Boards should ensure that Local Advice Networks work with advice services on a Local Authority area basis to address predominantly delivery-focused issues. They would be supported by the National Advice Network to further develop the local mapping information gathered through the advice services review. Through collation of more detailed, verified information, a clear picture of supply, demand, capacity and the range and level of advice available will be developed to feed up for regional consideration. This information should be used to identify service gaps for consideration at a local and regional level, and to identify opportunities for funders to consider joint commissioning to achieve joint outcomes. Local Advice Networks, using available resources, would consider how best to support, develop and target advice services through:
- Sharing locations and promoting use of accessible locations that the public are already engaged with, e.g. Communities First, Families First, GP surgeries and health centres, and Council 'One stop shops'
  - Identifying and agreeing the different delivery channels required to meet the local need for advice
  - Sharing information between providers, funders and frontline staff to improve awareness and understanding of the range of advice available to local citizens.

## **Funding, Commissioning and Delivering Advice Services**

The review recognises the funding pressures expressed by the advice sector, as well as the opportunities that joint funding and commissioning can offer to provide greater sustainability and coordination for the sector and improved outcomes for advice seekers. As outlined previously, making better use of resources offers opportunities to maximise the sector's ability to deliver targeted advice that meets localised need in the most effective and efficient manner available. It is therefore recommended that:

5. Welsh Government should ensure ongoing internal coordination of its reviews of housing advice, Family Information Services, and the development of the 111 service, as well as work being carried out under the Social Services and Wellbeing Bill which contain elements of information, advice or guidance in order to develop a more joined up approach. As part of this work Welsh Government should consider developing a consistent approach to the outcomes required where advice services are an element of commissioned services to enable cross departmental funding and commissioning opportunities.
6. Welsh Government should prioritise supporting the NfP advice sector to mitigate the impact of Welfare Reform and Legal Aid Reform where resources permit within available funding in light of the strategic priority to address the rise in demand for specialist advice generated by welfare reform and the ongoing economic situation.
7. Welsh Government should use the National Advice Network to enable good practice examples and guidance to be shared on commissioning and developing advice services to meet localised need based on understanding demand. As part of this work Welsh Government should consider support to develop a robust evidence base to ensure that funders and commissioners can achieve value for money for contracted or internally delivered advice services. Welsh Government should therefore undertake research to consider the outcomes of advice and best means of achieving these through the different delivery methods available.
8. Regional and Local Advice Networks should prioritise identifying joint funding

opportunities in order to promote the efficient use of their available resources.

9. Welsh Government should work across departments to identify available resources and funding to develop, with the advice sector, an all Wales service to provide specialist discrimination advice in order to address this identified service need and in light of the commitment within the Programme for Government to ensure equality of opportunity for the citizens of Wales. This work should explore the use of new technologies to deliver training, advice, information and case work guidance to generalist advisors throughout Wales, alongside supporting individual casework through an appropriate referral and client support. Learning from this initiative could then be considered and shared by the Networks to inform future specialist advice service developments on an all-Wales or Regional basis to make best use of available resources.

## **Developing National Standards for Information and Advice**

In recognition of the varied approaches across the advice sector in delivery, levels of generalist and specialist advice, recording clients and measuring and reporting on outcomes, the review identified the need to develop greater consistency for the sector. Developing a more consistent understanding and approach within the sector would help ensure better quality advice giving to the people of Wales, with more widely understood and anticipated outcomes by advice seekers and funders alike.

10. Welsh Government should, within available resources, develop a Framework of Standards for Advice and Information through the National Advice Network based on existing quality marks and standards. Through the involvement, consultation and engagement of key stakeholders the Framework would be developed to include:
  - Passporting processes for the current range of existing quality marks, standards and quality assured processes applicable to advice providers, to prevent creating an additional layer of bureaucracy, audit or management and enable the range of advice providers to be Welsh accredited
  - Standards for the different channels of advice giving, as well as for generalist and specialist levels of advice to promote consistency across the sector
  - Good practice guidance that takes into account specialist client groups' needs, to consistently improve resources and practice across the sector
  - Clear information and guidance to for commissioners, providers and the public regarding what the '*National Standards Framework for Advice and Information mean for me*'
  - Development of a national register of advice providers who meet the Framework of Standards to enable providers, commissioners, and the public to have a clear understanding of the level of service that can be expected
  - Standards of recording and monitoring the outcomes of advice to enable a clearer understanding of demand, delivery and outcomes of advice giving in Wales.