

Leicester
City Council

WARDS AFFECTED
All wards

FORWARD TIMETABLE OF CONSULTATION AND MEETINGS

Strategic Planning & Regeneration Scrutiny Cabinet

Advice Services Review – Final Proposals

Report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration & Culture

1. Purpose of Report

To provide proposals for a future configuration of selected advice services so that those services best meet the corporate priorities of the Council. In addition the review delivers a level of savings as identified in the Council's budget strategy.

2. Summary

2.1 Advice services are provided across the city by individuals, companies and voluntary organizations. Advice on a range of issues is available in libraries, solicitors offices, help lines both national and local, as well as in drop in centres and by appointment.

2.2 A small part of that activity is within the influence of the Council. A yet smaller part falls within the remit of the Regeneration and Culture Department. In order to make sure that those advice services supported by the Regeneration and Culture Department were in line with new Council priorities, a corporate Advice Services review was commissioned to:

- Implement the Council's revenue budget strategy decisions, with respect to advice services, made by Cabinet and full Council on 23rd February and 25th February 2004 respectively.
- Propose a reconfiguration of advice services with the remaining revenue to ensure that services are focused on corporate priorities and make the best use of available resources.

Assessment of Savings Proposals

2.3 This review is limited to the services funded by the Regeneration & Culture Department, although it has been aware of and influenced by the wider strategic delivery of advice and information services across the city. That wider mix of provision, independent of the Council, alongside the priority services proposed for support by the Regeneration & Culture Department, will ensure that residents have the fullest range of sources of information and advice available to them¹.

¹ For information concerning additional Council services that provide advice and information, see Appendix 3

- 2.4 The Council's revenue budget strategy identified savings from advice services across the authority totaling £659k for year 1 of the budget strategy (£49k from Housing, and £610k from the Regeneration & Culture Department). The Housing reduction has been realised by withdrawing support for the voluntary sector SHARP project.
- 2.5 In addition, the Education and Lifelong Learning Department previously funded 1.5 fte advice posts to support adult learning services. However, the Learning & Skills Council grant to the local authority does not contain any element of guidance for adult learners. The recent review of Lifelong Learning services has therefore deleted these posts as no resources are available to support them. The Lifelong Learning review is subject to the Council's protocol for organisation change. That protocol includes consultation on the outcomes of the review.
- 2.6 The proposals put forward to achieve the required level of budget savings within the Regeneration & Culture Department are listed in the table at para 1.4 of the Supporting Information. Steps have been already been taken to realise savings of £150K from the Consumer Protection Advice Service. This paper therefore deals with the remaining £460k savings identified for the Regeneration & Culture Department.
- 2.7 Members should be aware that the savings proposals put forward in this paper form part of the Budget strategy for 2004/05. Due to delays in concluding this review the Regeneration and Culture Department is currently overspending at the rate of £38,000 per month.
- 2.8 In the short term the proposals in this paper will reduce capacity to deliver advice services at the Law Centre, Hitslink, Saffron and the Bangladeshi Youth & Cultural Shomiti by 30% of all current enquiries and 45% of cases. However, the proposals to fund alternative services such as the Healthy Income Project; the Debt Reduction Project; and the provision of community based advice sessions in New Parks and Highfields, will reduce that loss of capacity to approximately 5%.
- 2.9 The proposal to make increased use of telephone advice services from April 2005 will increase capacity in this area beyond that of the current configuration². The loss of capacity in casework services will be offset to a degree by increased referral to national, specialist, telephone advice services.
- 2.10 In order to ensure that there is no drop off of provision of initial face to face assistance, this paper proposes a greater use of neighbourhood venues, including libraries, to deliver basic information to a quality assured standard. The Education & Lifelong Learning Department have now obtained the Community Legal Service's Quality Mark standard for Leicester's libraries in this respect.

Reconfiguration of Services

- 2.11 The Review has drawn on the work of the Best Value Review of Social Welfare Advice Services in 2001, and on the performance management framework for advice services introduced by the Regeneration & Culture Department in April 2003. Officers have also been mindful of the East Midlands Regional Legal Services Commission Regional Report for 2003, which sets out the Commission's priorities for future funding. In particular, the review recognises the role of the Legal Services Commission in

² Based on the new entry point dealing with 20,000 enquiries per year, the proposed configuration would increase access to that level of service by approximately 40%.

resourcing specialist casework services, and its recent roll out of additional specialist telephone advice services in welfare benefits and debt³.

2.12 Reconfiguring advice provision is needed so that services are focused on the Council's core priorities, as set out in the Council's Corporate Plan. We have therefore undertaken an assessment of the role that advice services can play in helping to deliver these and prioritised our allocation of resources accordingly. The links between advice provision and the Council's priorities were informed by stakeholder responses to a discussion document issued by the Regeneration & Culture Department in November 2003, and more recently formed part of the detailed proposals issued for formal consultation in February 2004.

2.13 The proposed priorities for advice services are:

- **Healthy Living** – A focus for welfare benefits provision on the needs of the elderly, people with disabilities (including both children and adults) and their carers, to raise disposable incomes and contribute to healthier living. Supporting independent living, and helping to raise income for the authority through chargeable revenue and in the calculation of the Formula Spending Share.
- **Working Age** – This priority delivers benefits and debt advice to help with the transition to work and to make work pay. Employment advice to ensure fairness at work, and to create a level playing field for businesses in the city. Services to be planned in partnership with other key agencies (e.g. to support vocational advice provision provided by GAIN and Connexions, or to support JobCentre Plus) and the recently approved Job Service Partnership project to be funded from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. The aim is to provide a seamless package of advice and assistance for people moving into work.
- **Maintaining Homes** - Debt and benefits services should demonstrate a greater focus on the reduction of Council debt (rent and Council tax arrears) and the prevention of homelessness. Welfare Benefits services need to assist in satisfying the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's criteria for a Council strategy to improve take-up of Housing and Council Tax benefit amongst key groups. Training for Housing Officers and Housing Related Support Services, particularly the STAR⁴ team, has been identified as a priority by the corporate review.
- **Joined up and accessible services** – this priority requires advice provision to operate cohesively and deliver consistent customer care standards. At the present time, the access points to advice services are confused and variable depending on the area of advice or the profile of the user. In addition, closer working relationships between advice services and the Council's libraries and other community venues could result in improved dissemination of information concerning rights and entitlements. The potential for cutting costs by sharing

³ CLS Direct, providing additional specialist services in welfare benefits and debt was launched by the Legal Services Commission on 14th July.

⁴ Supporting Tenants and Residents (STAR) provide a range of tenancy support services to vulnerable people in the city. These include advice on benefit entitlement and money management. STAR is expected to provide an ongoing service to approximately 450 people per year.

common ICT systems and call centre functions with other Council services will also be explored.

The proposed services that will deliver on these priorities are set out in Section 2 of the Supporting Information.

- 2.14 This paper also proposes a review of the authority's Welfare Rights services currently provided in both Social Care & Health and Regeneration & Culture. That review will create a joint training unit to meet the demand from staff in both Social Care & Health and Housing, whilst preserving the level of support currently provided to social work teams. Any savings to be found from this review could be re-invested in front-line services.

3. Recommendations

3.1 Cabinet are recommended to approve:

1. the proposed savings measures as set out in the table at para 1.4 of the supporting information
2. the proposed priorities for future advice service delivery as set out in para 2.13 above and 3.4 of the supporting information
3. the proposed future configuration of advice service provision as set out in the table at para 2.1 of the supporting information
4. that officers conduct a review of directly delivered welfare benefits functions with a view to re-investing any savings that may arise in the service.

4. Headline Financial and Legal Implications

Financial Implications

- 4.1 The proposals set out in this report will deliver the annual savings of £659,000 as detailed in the budget strategy from 2005/6 onwards. However due to the lengthy consultation relating to this review, implementation has been delayed until August 2004. The consequence of this implementation delay is a shortfall in 2004/5 of approximately £200,000, which will be managed within the Regeneration Division or the Department as a whole. Any further delay will increase the pressure on the 04/05 budget.
- 4.2 Other pressures such as the Healthy Income project & the creation of a telephone entry point for advice services amounting to £47,000 in 2004/5 will be offset by increased management income and a reduction in spend on directly delivered services.

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Legal implications

- 4.3 The proposals in the report will affect grant-funding contracts. With the exception of the contract with Leicester Law Centre these contracts are due to come to an end of their extended term on 31st July 2004. The organisations concerned have been fully involved by the Council in the review. The Council notified all grant funded agencies of the proposals on 13th February 2004, and provided a 12-week consultation period. Copies

of the responses to the proposals have been placed in the Members Area and a summary of the responses, together with comments from officers on the points raised is included as an Appendix to this report.

- 4.4 For these organisations there is no contractual right to consultation over the termination of their contract, or any decision to offer a funding contract, or service level agreement, on other terms. However, these organisations have contributed as part of the review and their comments must fairly be taken into account. In the case of Leicester Law Centre their grant funding contract runs to 31st March 2005. However, it is possible to modify the funding awarded under that contract, the Council acting reasonably and in consultation with the Law Centre, on three months notice.
- 4.5 Under the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000, the Council has a duty to promote race equality. This duty means that the Council must have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and promote good relations between people of different racial groups. The Council is also required to publish a Race Equality Scheme setting out the functions or policies that are relevant to meeting the duty, and the arrangements that will help to meet the duty in the areas of policy and service delivery. In having “due regard” this means that the weight given to race equality implications should be proportionate to its relevance to a particular function.
- 4.6 The functions that are relevant to the provision of advice services relate in particular to the promotion of social and economic “well being”, information about services available from the Council or from government departments, assistance to voluntary organisations to provide for information and advice concerning individuals rights and obligations, advice and assistance as to homelessness and the prevention of homelessness, and advice for the benefit of consumers of goods and services within the City. The Council has no direct functions concerning immigration although many functions of the Council are relevant to persons from abroad as service users or persons in receipt of benefit in particular.
- 4.7 The Race Equality Scheme must set out the arrangements for assessing and consulting on the likely impact of the proposed policies on race equality. If the assessment or consultation shows that the proposed change in policy is likely to have an adverse impact or harm race equality then the Council will need to consider how it is going to meet the general duty to promote race equality, in particular what provision could be made to remediate adverse effects or, if needs are identified, how these needs can be met, or indeed if it is more appropriate to find another way to meet the Council’s aims. Paragraphs 1.59 to 1.74 consider these issues.
- 4.8 Some services reviewed, WERAS and the Healthy Income Project, are internal teams within the City Council. Reference is made above as to some of the legal powers more commonly used in undertaking these functions. However, in legal terms they can never be truly independent of the Council, nor, as presently constituted, capable of being a separate entity from the City Council. Some powers (for example, the power to give assistance to voluntary organisations concerned with individuals’ rights) obviously require there to be a voluntary organisation for the receipt of assistance, although in terms of direct provision, well being powers are cast sufficiently widely, and are

intended to be so, to enable the Council to act directly to assist where it furthers “well being”.

- 4.9 With the passage of time, further information as to performance and out-turn has obviously become available and this has been taken into consideration, along with other stated criteria and method. Officers have, in their response to consultation as detailed in the appendix to this report, considered that, overall, taking all the criteria into consideration as envisaged by the methodology of the review, that any updated information does not amount to such material change so as to affect the conclusion.

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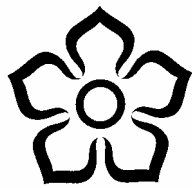
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Cabinet**

Advice Services Review – Final Proposals

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Report

1. Background

- 1.1 In December 2003, Corporate Directors Board established an officer group to undertake a review of advice service provision. The group was tasked with:
- (i) Assessing the level of budget reductions currently proposed for advice services across the Council and drawing up a plan for achieving these; and
 - (ii) Reconfiguring the remaining budget for advice provision so that services meet Council priorities and maximise the use of sources of external revenue. If additional savings can be made then these will be identified.
- 1.2 The review group drew on the work of the Best Value Review of Social Welfare Advice Services conducted in 2001 which had found advice services to be “poor, but probably going to improve”, and on an ongoing review of advice services initiated within the Regeneration & Culture Department in May 2003. The latter review had been focused on assessing the performance of advice services according to a performance management framework introduced into advice services contracts in April 2003.
- 1.3 The initial findings of the group are in respect of the proposed budget reductions within current draft Departmental Revenue Strategies. A total of £659k of reductions for advice services is proposed, comprised of £49k reduction in funding for SHARP Housing Advice project contained within the Housing Department Revenue Strategy and £610k within the Regeneration & Culture Department.
- 1.4 The £610k reduction within the Regeneration & Culture Department comprises of a £150k reduction in funding for Consumer advice services, previously agreed as part of the Council’s budget strategy, and a further £460k from the Advice Services Group. Following public consultation, the proposals put forward to realise the £460k savings requirements from this group are as follows:

Measure	Rationale	Savings (full year effect)⁵
Reduce funding for specialist casework services and reconfigure general help benefits services.	Advice provision is currently imbalanced, with a high level of expenditure on specialist casework. Performance results are generally poor when compared to “enquiry” level services (see para 4.72, below,). The provision of advice via teams targeting priority clients through intermediaries is preferred to fixed point delivery – see Appendix 1 paras 4.26 to 4.39).	Saffron £21,700 Hitslink ⁶ £142,600 Leicester Law Centre ⁷ £190,300 Bangladeshi Youth & Cultural Shomiti £13,200 Sub Total: £367,800
Find alternative funding for Leicester Lesbian, Gay & Bisexual Centre from October 2004	The Centre does not provide advice services in a traditional sense, but instead links with an equalities agenda – including providing training on sexuality issues to statutory agencies. Following completion of the NRF supported “Sexuality Matters” research the centre is in an improved position to access alternative sources of funding.	£33,900
Reduce main program spend on debt advice services	Refocus the service on local priorities, taking into account the creation of a national debt helpline service. The reduction in funding will be largely offset by commissioning services using the Housing Revenue Account (see para 5.4 below)	Leicester Money Advice £35,600
Efficiency savings from directly delivered services	This includes the deletion of a vacant part time administrative post, and the reduction of supplies and services budgets for printing and research.	£22,700
Total		£460,000

1.5 Income from the management of externally funded services, and revenue from the provision of training services is expected to provide an additional £30,000 for investment in services in year 1, increasing to £70,000 in years 2 and 3. This will be needed to support the development of a telephone based entry point to advice services from April 2005 onwards.

⁵ Amounts relate to the 2003/04 budget figures.

⁶ The saving in respect of Hitslink arises due to the reduction of a debt advisor post, as well as the centralisation of specialist welfare benefits and employment advice.

⁷ This is the amount of saving in year 1. However, proposals for future configuration include the development of a telephone based “entry point” to advice services that would replace the existing initial advice service provided by the Law Centre from 1st April 2005. A further £120k of funding currently provided to the Law Centre would be transferred to the provider of the new entry point at that time.

2. Proposed Reconfiguration of Services

2.1 This review proposes that the Council reconfigure advice services as follows:

	Service	Priorities	Comments and Supporting Information paragraph references
1	Telephone entry point to be developed for April 2005.	Joined Services Up	(Para 5.22 – 5.27) £200,000 is estimated to be needed for the development of this service in 2005/06, and a paper detailing options for its delivery will be brought forwards in September 2004.
2	Reconfigured specification with Leicester Money Advice Ltd.	Working Age Maintaining Homes	(Para 5.4 – 5.5) Greater emphasis will be placed on the priorities within the new specification and referral systems adopted to provide for Council tenants in rent arrears to receive early assistance. A pilot using HRA funding has been agreed with the Housing Department in order to test whether these services could deliver savings to the authority. The court-based scheme currently provided will remain to provide a service for people facing repossession. 6 fte's at a specialist level will be supported.
3	Welfare Rights Training, Take-up and Casework Services to be provided directly by the local authority. A review of welfare benefits teams in the authority to be conducted in 2004/05.	Healthy Living Working Age Maintaining Homes	(Para 5.12 – 5.21) A greater emphasis on training and take-up work than at present, but with a role to provide supervision and support to community based benefits workers and take on casework that arises. These staff will also provide publications such as factsheets for use in libraries and on the internet. A total of 5.5 fte specialist caseworker posts will be provided in 2004/05.
4	Voluntary sector advice provision for the elderly and for people with disabilities	Healthy Living	Services provided by Mosaic, Age Concern, and SSAFA Forces Help will be continued. Total funding for these organisations will be £101,200 in 2004/05.
5	Directly delivered welfare rights services offering checks on entitlement and assistance with completion of claim forms	Healthy Living Maintaining Homes	(Para 5.12 – 5.21) A total of 11 fte posts will be supported which will take referrals from social work teams, GP's and housing officers, and hold community based advice sessions.
6	Directly delivered employment rights advice provision to promote fairness at work and make work pay.	Working Age	(Para 5.11, below and paras 4.53 – 4.62 Appendix 1) The Council's main programme will fund a co-ordinator, tribunal worker and a worker at General Help level (3 fte's), running 3 community based sessions per week in Highfields and Belgrave. The unit will also house the Minimum Wage project (1 fte). The NRF funded Job Service Partnership will provide an information officer post (1 fte) and fund employment support workers (2 fte's).

7	Voluntary sector support for Refugees with housing, benefits and employment.	Healthy Income Working Age Maintaining Homes	<p>Targeting refugees who need assistance at the end of NASS support to begin to participate fully in the city by addressing initial housing and benefit needs and assisting with access to employment and training opportunities.</p> <p>Main programme funding of £18,500 is required to support this project with £69,000 provided by the European Refugee Fund, subject to confirmation from the Home Office (see paras 4.32, 4.49 & 4.76 for details of the project)</p>
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2.2 This review has considered:

- the priorities of the Council
- current provision, utilising monitoring information and assessing this in the light of the Community Legal Service Partnership's mapping exercise
- opportunities to maximise the use of resources and draw down external funding

3. Priorities

3.1 A consultation exercise concerning the role of advice services to meet corporate priorities was conducted in November 2003. Responses⁸ indicated the following set of priorities:

	Department	Priority	Current Service
1	Social Care & Health	Welfare benefits services that increased incomes of vulnerable groups including the elderly and people with disabilities and contributed to their ability to raise chargeable income for care services.	This function is being performed by the Benefits Support Team within Social Care & Health which also provides training to social work teams. Welfare rights advice in Regeneration & Culture also contribute to this function.
2	RAD	To add value to customer services by providing advice sessions at New Parks Customer Care Centre and to expand this to Braunstone in April 2005	These services were being piloted at New Parks by the Welfare & Employment Rights Advice Service within Regeneration & Culture and have been successful in increasing benefit take-up.
3	Education & Lifelong Learning	To add value to the role of libraries and community centres by providing an increased level of assisted information on advice matters within these settings.	E&LL have since obtained the Community Legal Service Quality Mark for all Leicester's libraries.

⁸ A summary of responses was published in February 2004 together with an officer position statement on the points arising.

4	Housing	<p>To see debt and benefit services provided to tenants facing financial difficulties and to have a training resource on benefits issues that could be accessed by projects receiving funding from the Supporting People programme. (e.g. STAR)</p> <p>To ensure that a decent home is within of every citizen by providing housing advice services and effectively managing the Council's housing stock.</p>	<p>No direct provision on debt and benefit services. Housing advice on access to Council housing and homelessness issues provided in-house.</p> <p>A need to improve the take-up of Housing Benefit has also been identified by the Benefits Fraud Inspectorate.</p>
5	Regeneration & Culture	<p>To provide services that address barriers to the labour market and increased incomes in local communities through benefit take-up. To address growing problems of financial exclusion and contribute to a reduction in the levels of deprivation of a number of key wards in the city.</p>	<p>A variety of service provision that had been historically funded in the voluntary sector, and an internal Welfare & Employment Rights Advice Service.</p>

- 3.2 The results of a mystery shopping exercise of existing R&C funded advice services were reported in December 2003. This revealed significant problems with access to advice services in the city and recommended that a “one service “ approach be adopted with clear standards of customer care. A separate report on the process and conclusions of the Mystery Shopping has been submitted to the Strategic Planning & Regeneration Scrutiny Committee and forms part of the background papers to this review.
- 3.3 Finally, the findings from the MORI survey of residents views of Legal Advice Services (2001) were also considered. These highlighted the need to raise awareness of advice service provision, and supported increased delivery of advice over the telephone as well as the provision of face to face services in local community settings.
- 3.4 These considerations have been drawn together and four priority areas identified. These form the basis on which reconfiguration is proposed. The proposed priority areas are:
- **Healthy Living** – A focus for welfare benefits provision on the needs of the elderly, people with disabilities (including both children and adults) and their carers, to raise disposable incomes and contribute to healthier living. Linking to the Corporate plan priority to “help people with disabilities and the growing number of older people to experience more independence.” Welfare benefits

services have a role in helping to raise income for the authority through chargeable revenue and in the calculation of the Formula Spending Share.

- **Working Age** – Benefits and debt advice to help with the transition to work and to make work pay. This links to the Corporate Plan priority to “promote prosperity and new jobs while safeguarding people’s health and development interests”. Employment advice to ensure fairness at work, and to create a level playing field for businesses in the city. Services to be integrated with those of key partners (e.g. to support vocational advice provision provided by GAIN and Connexions) in order to provide a seamless package of advice and assistance for people moving into work.
- **Maintaining Homes** - There is no specific role outlined in the Corporate Plan in respect of the aim to “regenerate the city’s housing”, however, debt and benefits services can contribute to the goal of “investing in continuous improvement in a well managed organisation” by helping to reduce Council debt (rent and Council tax arrears) and by preventing homelessness. Welfare Benefits services assist in satisfying the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate’s criteria for a Council strategy to improve take-up of Housing and Council Tax benefit amongst key groups. Training for Housing Officers and Housing Related Support Services has been identified as priority by Housing colleagues.
- **Joined up and accessible Services** – There is a need for advice provision in the city to operate with cohesion and to consistent customer care standards. At the present time, the access points to advice services are confused and variable depending on the area of advice or the profile of the user. In addition, there is scope to improve information provision on rights and entitlements and take advantage of opportunities for dissemination, via libraries and other community venues. The potential for cutting costs by using and sharing ICT and telephone infrastructure with other Council services will also be explored.

4. Current Provision

4.1 Officers have carried out an assessment of current provision, and have considered the associated potential service developments.

Need and Supply of Advice Services - Levels of Advice

4.2 In 2001, the Community Legal Service Partnership (CLSP) for Leicester conducted an assessment of the need for, and supply of, advice services in the city. This found that Leicester had a high need for advice at all levels⁹ and in all areas of social welfare law with the exception of Consumer advice.

4.3 However, the CLSP qualified this finding by highlighting that the most obvious gaps in provision occurred at General Help or General Help with Casework levels, as opposed to the more specialist levels of advice which would deal with Tribunal and court representation.

4.4 For example, in respect of welfare benefits advice provision the CLSP Strategic Plan for 2001 commented¹⁰:

⁹ For a definition of the levels of advice used in this report see Appendix 3

¹⁰ Page 25, Leicester CLSP Strategic Plan 2001/02, July 2001

“Leicester has a good supply of providers at the specialist level in welfare benefits and with the increased allocation of NMS¹¹ for solicitors this is sufficient to meet need... Specialist practitioners in not for profit agencies...identify a need to improve signposting and referral from agencies operating at the General Help level.

“There is inadequate General Help with Casework available in the category of welfare benefits particularly in relation to benefit assessment and completion of forms. This is compounded for some groups by the limited availability of home visiting advice services and language support – notwithstanding the targeted home care support offered via Leicester City Council’s Social Services Department.”

4.5 The CLSP Strategic Plan further indicated that there was a need to improve provision of debt advice at the General Help levels, but that a significant gap existed at the specialist level for debt related housing problems.

4.6 This absence of adequate provision of services at the General Help and General Help levels was commented on more recently by the East Midland Regional Legal Services Commission:

“Specialist contracts will only be appropriate where there is a minimum level of generalist/ general help provision available...as [without this] specialist legal advisors will find themselves having to perform a generalist role and deal with large volumes of work at the general help level. Having specialist legal advisors act as generalists is, of course, a very inefficient way of providing services.”¹²

4.7 The current configuration supports 9.4 fte posts working at a specialist level in welfare benefits and is estimated to cost £267,975 in salary costs alone. The actual performance for these services in terms of benefits raised for the whole year is just over £1,087,000.

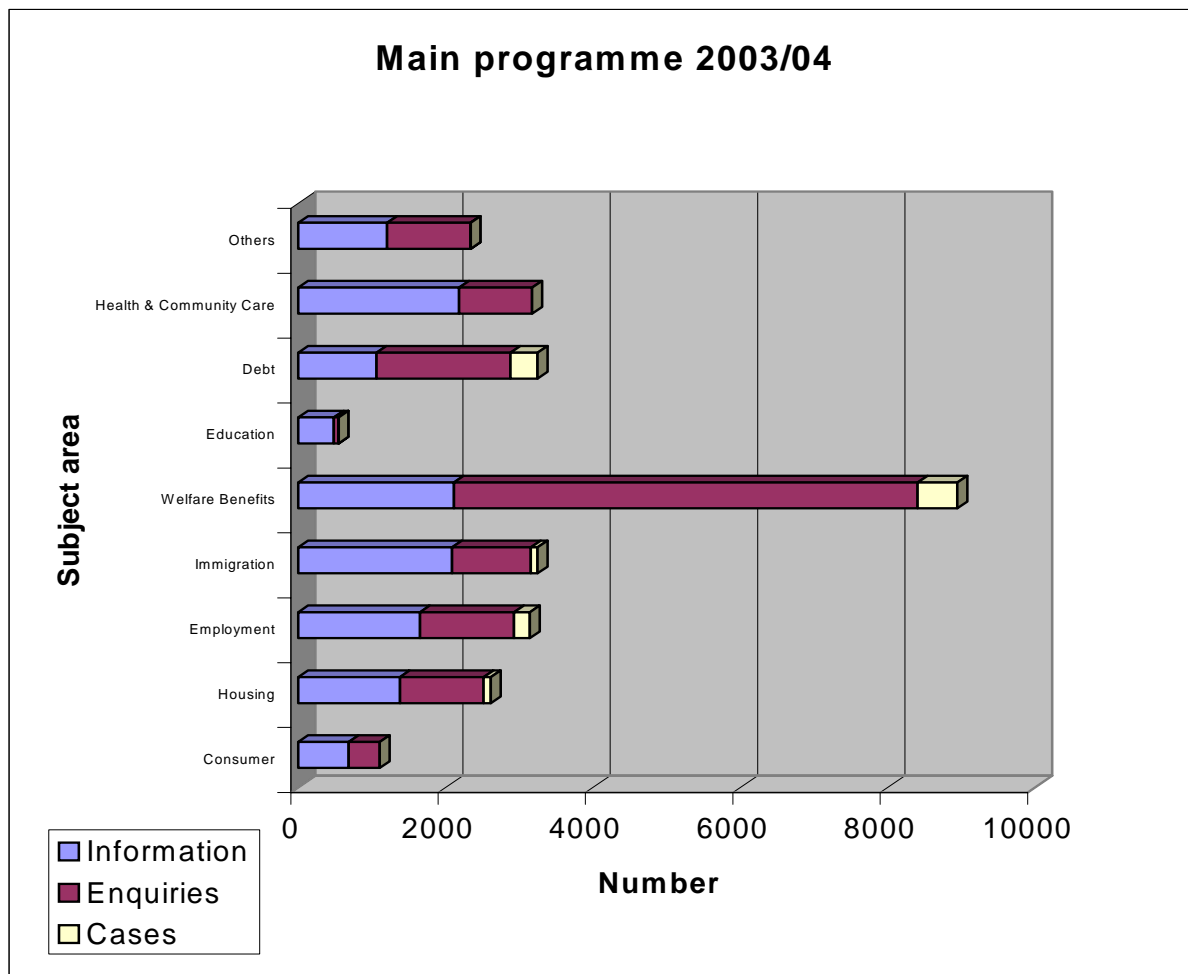
4.8 By comparison, piloted services in welfare rights that operate at the General Help level are forecast to cost £78,000 from the main programme in 04/05 and last year obtained over £2 million for users.

4.9 The chart below¹³, indicates that despite a focus of current resources on supporting specialist posts, the vast majority of advice work conducted in the city is done at information or general help levels.

¹¹ New Matters Starts – the number of specialist cases to be funded in solicitors and not for profit agencies by the Legal Services Commission

¹² Page 17, East Midlands Regional Legal Services Commission 2003 Regional Report

¹³ These are the user figures for services delivered by or commissioned from the Regeneration & Culture Department’s Advice Services Group from main programme funds for 2003/04. They do not include users of the Department’s Consumer Protection Advice Service or the Housing Department’s Housing Options Service. Figures for that service are contained in para 2.0. Figures relating to the Housing Department’s Housing Options Service can be found at para 2.8



- 4.10 Whilst it is clear that effective services at the ‘General Help’ level require training and support from specialist caseworkers there is scope for rationalising caseworker support into a smaller number of teams and linking general help services directly to them. Support for general help with casework services is also now available over the telephone from Legal Services Commission specialist providers operating at a regional level.
- 4.11 Concerns about this suggested approach have been raised by a number of agencies during the consultation process. These pointed out that increasing access to general help services would necessarily increase the demand for specialist services. However, the success rates of piloted General Help services in welfare benefits suggest that this may not be as significant an issue as first feared with two pilot projects started in 03/04 indicating that over 80% of initial applications for benefits will be successful.
- 4.12 In addition, the Legal Services Commission has a specific role to ensure that there is access to specialist services in the city. The Council needs to consider whether or not it is seeking to plug gaps in resourcing services at that level or seeking to provide services that match its corporate priorities and achieve the maximum benefit for residents as a whole for the level of funding available.
- Legal Services Commission Funding for Specialist Services**
- 4.13 Established by the Access to Justice Act, 1999, the Commission is responsible for contracting for the provision of specialist advice services with solicitors and not for profit

agencies. However, it is unable to fund services operating at the General Help or General Help with casework levels.

- 4.14 The Council's Advice Strategy of 2001 set out a policy of seeking to wrap its own funding around that of the Legal Services Commission. The Council highlighted its intentions to move resources away from the funding of specialist advice services and towards general help and general help with casework services and highlighted the potential impact of the policy at that time.

"For example, the Council is less likely to fund specialist services in welfare benefits as the majority of people receiving these services will be eligible for LSC funding and could receive LSC funded services."¹⁴

- 4.15 This policy was further highlighted¹⁵ for the Council's Strategic Planning and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee in 2002 when it received a report detailing the progress made towards the aims of the Strategy one year on from its adoption. That Committee was also informed of the intention to review advice provision and to bring forward proposals in February 2004 for a reconfigured service.

"... a review of service provision [will be conducted] that makes use of the performance management information collected and proposes to make detailed recommendations for the reconfiguration of services for Cabinet consideration in February 2004. Decisions at that time are likely to be difficult given the expectancies of current providers to retain existing contracts and the potentially high need for main programme funding to support projects that will have been piloted with the use of external funds."¹⁶

- 4.16 Spending by the Legal Services Commission on specialist work in Leicester totalled £3,344,401 in 2003/04, and included spending of over £1.8 million on immigration casework, by far the single largest category of spending from the Commission. Welfare benefits casework accounted for £186,600, and housing and debt spending amounted to £137,000 each.

- 4.17 The table below compares the actual numbers of new matter starts funded by the Commission in Leicester with those of Derby and Greater Nottingham for 2001/02. The final row of the table presents the number of new matter starts as a % of the total population of each CLSP area, and demonstrates that Leicester fell in the middle of the three with respect to specialist advice service provision. This is consistent with the local authority rankings in the 2004 Index of Multiple Deprivation¹⁷.

¹⁴ Para 2.11 Advice Strategy, Cabinet, February 2002

¹⁵ See para 1.33, Advice Services Annual Review, Strategic Planning & Regeneration Scrutiny Committee, 20th February 2003

¹⁶ Para 2.3, Advice Services Annual Review

¹⁷ Nottingham ranks as the 7th most deprived local authority area, with Leicester ranked 31st, and Derby 69th.

New Matter Starts 2001/02

Subject area	Leicester	Gtr Nottingham	Derby
<i>Debt</i>	695	1968	217
<i>Employment</i>	94	300	121
<i>Welfare Benefits</i>	1183	2269	476
<i>Housing</i>	1084	2508	928
<i>Immigration</i> ¹⁸	12	559	73
<i>Asylum</i>	1538	869	187
Total	4606	8473	2002
As % of population	1.65%	2%	0.9%

- 4.18 Since 2001/02, the Commission reports that the number of new matter starts has been falling across the region. Solicitors have moved out of the provision of social welfare law as a result of the contractual requirements of the commission. In some areas of law, such as welfare benefits, this has been offset by increases in the numbers of case starts undertaken by not for profit agencies, but in others such as housing, this has not been the case. There are now only four providers of specialist housing advice services in Leicester which have contracts with the Commission specifically for housing work. These include Leicester Law Centre and SHARP and two firms of solicitors. However, the Commission states that there is some flexibility for solicitors with contracts in other areas of law to undertake elements of housing law under 'tolerance'.
- 4.19 The Commission has itself been subject to significant financial pressures in recent years, and has not been able to increase new matter starts in some areas of law, such as housing, to compensate for the fact that solicitors are no longer providing these services. However, it has indicated that the provision of debt advice services may provide a solution to this problem:

“Ensuring an effective level of debt advice should take priority over ensuring effective levels of welfare benefits or housing advice. This is because debt advice at the specialist level will nearly always cover maximising income for the client and so will, by necessity, ensure that the client receives welfare benefits advice if appropriate. In addition, mortgage or rent payments often make up a significant proportion of any debt burden, and so effective debt advice will normally include advice about these major areas of housing law.”¹⁹

- 4.20 As a result of this position, and the fact that there are clear links between the provision of debt advice and the Council's corporate priorities, it is intended to maintain as far as possible the overall level of specialist debt advice services. However, by increasing the focus of those services on the needs of Council tenants and drawing down resources from the Housing Revenue Account, savings of £35,600 can still be realised. Increasing access to national services, where appropriate, will ensure that local resources are used more effectively.

¹⁸ The allocation of New Matter Starts for the following year was significantly increased to 1,678

¹⁹ page 12, Regional Report 2003, EMRLSC

- 4.21 During the consultation on these proposals, the Council also outlined its intention to reduce support for specialist immigration advice services. This met with opposition from a number of respondents including Leicester Law Centre. However, the regional report of the East Midlands LSC makes clear their position that there is currently an oversupply of specialist immigration advice within the city of approximately 1140 case starts.
- 4.22 Concerns were raised during the consultation process by the Law Centre that this calculation did not accurately reflect the degree of need for immigration casework, as it did not address the need for non-asylum work. However the Regional Report of the EMLSC clearly states that this issue has been considered when allocating new matter starts:

“Not all immigration cases are asylum cases. The case start total is further enhanced by 25% to add in case starts necessary for non asylum work, such as advice relating to leave to enter or leave to remain. The only exception to this rule is Leicester, where the enhancement for non asylum work is set at 40%. This takes account of the fact that Leicester is expected to be the first city in the United Kingdom where the black and minority ethnic community will form the majority of people in the city in the next few years.”²⁰

- 4.23 Reducing Council support for specialist immigration work – which in the year 2003/04 amounted to 90 closed cases – is unlikely to have a major impact on the ability of residents to access this type of service given the level of Legal Services Commission funding for this area of law.
- 4.24 With respect to advice on employment matters, the Commission’s mapping exercise in 2001 found that there was a need to increase advice at all levels, including specialist services. However, whereas with other areas of law the Commission is able to provide resources to meet a significant need for specialist advice, the eligibility requirements – specifically a means test – make this difficult in the case of employment advice. This often means that people in employment are unable to obtain free specialist advice from the Commission as a result. For this reason, the review proposes to provide a dedicated management post to co-ordinate advice in this area and to maximise funding from external sources.

Need and Supply of Advice Services - Geographical Need and Supply

- 4.25 As well as determining the need for advice by subject area and at different levels of specialism, the CLSP mapping exercise used small area statistical information from the 2000 census to predict differing levels of need for local communities within the city.

²⁰ Page 45, Regional Report 2003, EMRLSC

4.26 The need for advice within the old wards of the city is set out in the table below²¹:

Ward ranking (total need)	Welfare Benefits	Debt	Housing
1	Wycliffe	Wycliffe	Wycliffe
2	Beaumont Leys	Beaumont Leys	Beaumont Leys
3	New Parks	North Braunstone	Castle
4	Saffron	New Parks	Westcotes
5	North Braunstone	Saffron	Saffron

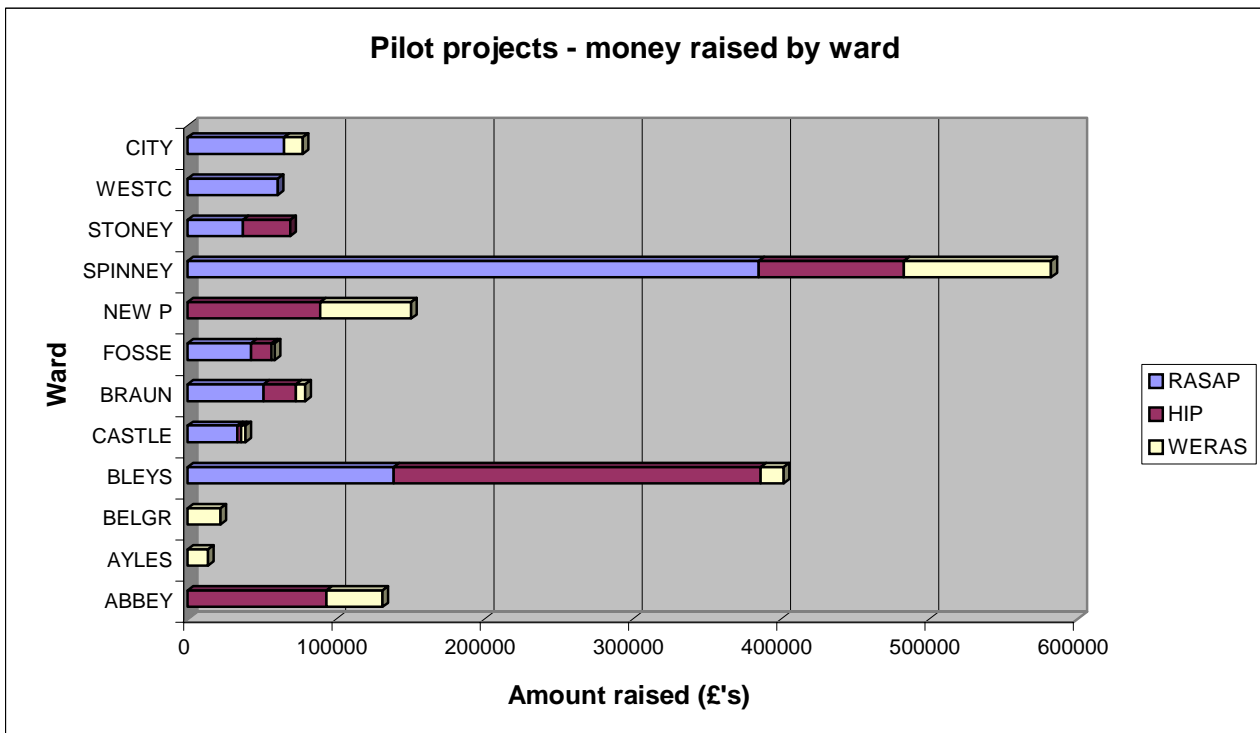
4.27 Whilst the old Wycliffe ward had the highest predicted need for advice within the city, there were also significant levels of need in the outer estates of Beaumont Leys, New Parks, Braunstone, and in Saffron.

4.28 The CLSP has not repeated a mapping exercise for demand for advice services since 2001. However, it is possible to demonstrate how the current pattern of supply for advice services fails to meet the needs of deprived estates in the city by mapping the provision of advice services against the Index of Deprivation 2004. The results are shown below.

²¹ From CLSP Strategic Plan 2001

Replace with the MAP!

- 4.29 The monitoring figures for 2003/04 indicate that the Law Centre is well used by residents of the Highfields wards (23% of all Law Centre users are from Spinney Hills and Stoneygate wards). This, combined with provision at Hitslink and the Bangladeshi Youth and Cultural Shomiti, largely explains the bias in the current provision of advice towards residents in that area of the city.
- 4.30 However, residents of the Highfields area do also access advice services that are provided by telephone²², and at community based sessions that have been run through the Healthy Income Project or WERAS. In addition, the provision of the Refugee & Asylum Seekers Advice Project has a significant impact on the residents of the area.
- 4.31 In respect of employment advice, the area also has access to the Highfields Minimum Wage project. The project receives 100% of its funding from the Department of Trade & Industry.
- 4.32 The chart below indicates that the Healthy Income Project, WERAS community based sessions and RASAP have together realised nearly £600,000 in increased benefit incomes for residents in Spinney Hills in the course of the last year.



- 4.33 The impact of the reduction in provision of advice at fixed locations in the Highfields area at Hitslink and the Bangladeshi Youth & Cultural Shomiti is likely to be offset by the continued provision of RASAP, the Healthy Income Project and community based sessions run by WERAS through intermediary organizations.
- 4.34 The proposed provision of welfare benefits services through RASAP, HIP and WERAS also allows for more flexibility and ensures provision of services in Beaumont Leys and

²² For example, WERAS reports that residents in the Spinney Hills ward account for over 7% of its users, the highest single ward proportion for that service.

New Parks in addition to provision in Spinney Hills. These are both areas with high advice needs but which do not currently have any dedicated advice provision resourced through the Council's main program.

- 4.35 Finally, in respect of the proposal to remove funding for Saffron Resource Centre, it should be noted that the Saffron area, together with Humberstone²³, will be targeted by the rent arrears reduction project, funded from the Housing Revenue Account. This will focus on providing benefits and debt advice to residents on referral from Housing officers and the STAR team and will be resourced with two full time equivalent benefit workers and a debt specialist. The current provision at Saffron is a 0.8 full time equivalent benefit worker post.

Need and Supply of Advice Services - Client Groups

Age

- 4.36 Information relating to the age of advice service users has not been available to the review in respect of voluntary sector agencies but is available for directly delivered services in the Welfare & Employment Rights Advice Service. That service runs a benefits and employment telephone advice line, and data relating to access by age group can therefore be used to inform the proposal to create a telephone entry point for all advice services. The table below reveals that access to advice over the telephone appears to be an appropriate method for people of most age ranges.

Age Group	Leicester population % of	WERAS users %
16 – 19	4.9	6.29
20 – 24	6.0	7.17
25 – 29	6.6	7.9
30 – 44	22.55	30.16
45 – 59	18.93	27.08
60 – 64	4.89	7.61
65 – 74	8.39	6.73
75 – 84	5.64	5.12
85 – 89	1.3	0.8
90+	0.65	0.5

- 4.37 The needs of elderly people should be well catered for in the proposed configuration. A main program contribution will be made to the Healthy Income Project, which operates by taking referrals from GP surgeries in New Parks, Beaumont Leys and the Highfields areas, and has a high pensioner client base. Continued provision of services by the Council's Benefits Support Team which links to social work teams in contact with vulnerable elderly people, and the home visiting services of Mosaic and SSAFA, are also proposed.
- 4.38 This has advantages for the Council in reducing the demand for social services, and where additional Attendance Allowance and Disability Living Allowance take-up occurs

²³ The intention is to focus the service on the Netherhall estate which reports high levels of rent arrears and turnover of tenancies.

of increasing the personal social services grant in the Council Financial Spending Share assessment with Government.

- 4.39 However, during the course of the consultation on our proposals, considerable concern was raised with regard to the proposal to cut services at Age Concern. It is clear from the performance information available that provision of services such as the Healthy Income Project would not have been adequate to offset the effect of a withdrawal of service to the elderly at Age Concern. That service provided advice to 1300 elderly people in 2003/04 and raised in excess of £500,000.
- 4.40 The Social Care & Health scrutiny committee and the Council's Forum raised concerns about the proposal to withdraw funding from Age Concern for Older People. As a result of those concerns, and the fact that the funding of advice provision at Age Concern was originally supported by the Social Care & Health Department in pursuit of their departmental priorities, it is proposed that Age Concern continue to receive funding under the final proposals.
- 4.41 The decision of the local Pensions Service to enter into closer working arrangements with the local authority by October 2005 may have a bearing on future provision in this area, however, as the Pensions Service currently conduct outreach sessions at Age Concern's premises in Clarence House.
- 4.42 The proposed review of directly delivered welfare benefits functions will consider the potential impact of the creation of a joint local authority and Pensions Service team and will also need to consider the potential implications of such a development on provision at Age Concern.

Ethnicity

- 4.43 With respect to minority ethnic communities, information was available to the review from all advice services and reveals significant use of the current configuration of services by residents of ethnic minority origins.

Ethnic Group	Leicester %	Advice Services %
White	63.86	40.41
Asian	29.92	35.79
Black	3.08	17.07
Other	0.83	6.72

- 4.44 This finding reflects the general bias of resources towards the Highfields wards in the current pattern of service delivery, with the Bangladeshi Youth & Cultural Shomiti receiving 1,742 enquiries (12% of the total number of enquiries) entirely from minority ethnic communities – 80% Asian, 20% Black.
- 4.45 Hitslink, also based in the Highfields area, accounts for a similar proportion of the total number of advice services users (12.4%) and reports that 73% of its users are Black and a further 18% of Asian origin.
- 4.46 Reducing support for these projects is anticipated to reduce capacity by 24% of enquiries and 12% of cases and the proportionate reduction in service to Black and Minority Ethnic groups is set out in the table below.

Ethnic Group	Total enquiries (current services)	Hitslink & BYCS reduction	% reduction of advice services to BME communities.
Asian	5082	1729	34
Black	2424	1617	66

- 4.47 An additional impact would also be made on the capacity of casework by reducing funding for Leicester Law Centre which last year closed 340 specialist cases (22% of the total for all advice services) and has a high proportion of ethnic minority clients (51% are Black or Asian).
- 4.48 However, the proposals for reconfiguration would offset some of these effects by providing services via the Refugee and Asylum Seekers Advice Project (RASAP), the Healthy Income Project, and by running community based sessions in the Highfields area. In 2003/04, these services raised £582,274 in additional benefits for residents of Spinney Hills, and a further £69,169 for residents of Stoneygate. This compares to actual benefit gains of £247,645 at Hitslink and a further estimated £310,000 at Bangladeshi Youth and Cultural Shomiti.
- 4.49 RASAP deals with 700 users per year, all of which are from minority ethnic communities, including approximately 30% from the Somali community. The service by necessity responds to the needs of emerging communities in the city, and has witnessed an increase in the numbers of Kurdish users - a group which have not been accessing other advice services in the Highfields area in large numbers. The Healthy Income project and WERAS community based sessions, covering both welfare benefits and employment matters, add an additional capacity to deal with approximately 1200 users per year within the Highfields and St. Matthews area.
- 4.50 Three sessions of face to face advice will be offered per week in the Highfields area with some sessions targeted at specific minority ethnic groups, including the Bangladeshi and Somali communities, by pre-booking interpreters and advertising these sessions using translated materials in community venues and libraries in the area. (see para 2.15, below). An additional, externally funded, post will also operate in the Highfields area to provide assistance to residents who are not being paid the minimum wage.
- 4.51 Referrals for welfare benefits and employment casework can be made from the community-based sessions to the proposed directly delivered specialist services in these subjects and the Council is able to meet the costs of interpreting requirements for these purposes. The Council has also created and recruited to a dedicated Asian welfare benefits worker post to assist in this area.
- 4.52 With regard to the proposal to increase the use of telephone advice, evidence from Mosaic's advice line shows that this is well used by Leicester's Asian communities, with 33% of all enquiries from those groups. The Council's Welfare & Employment Rights advice lines are also reflective of the city's population as a whole (Asian 28%, Black 3.5%).
- 4.53 It is likely therefore that a telephone entry point would be accessible to minority ethnic communities in broadly the same proportions as they are present in the community. The proposal to deliver additional face to face advice sessions in the Highfields and St.

Matthews areas will build on that core provision in recognition of the high advice needs in those areas.

- 4.54 The planning of face to face sessions will also be able to respond flexibly to changing needs in the city over time. The current model of fixed-point delivery – i.e. the employment of advice staff by agencies targeted at single client groups or located in specific areas of the city – does not provide this.
- 4.55 The growth of need in Beaumont Leys and New Parks areas, is therefore currently ignored by the provision of fixed-point services at Hitslink and the Bangladeshi Youth & Cultural Shomiti. A different approach, providing services to a number of high need wards can be accommodated in a model of a single team of face to face workers operating from a variety of community locations across the city.
- 4.56 This need to engage with all communities in Leicester, and particularly to achieve balanced provision between the outer estates and minority ethnic communities in the inner city areas, has been highlighted by the Council's Community Cohesion strategy. Funding of £700k has been allocated to the Community Cohesion Fund and this is currently open for bidding.
- 4.57 The Council's Race Equality Scheme also highlights the importance of making information available about Council services in minority ethnic languages, and utilises the network of libraries and community centres in the city to disseminate this. This approach will be mirrored in respect of information on advice matters, and in 2004/05 there will be an increased level of information in the newer minority ethnic languages, including Somali, Farsi, and Dari. Packs giving information to basic entitlements have been produced by the Council's New Arrivals Project, and these are currently being distributed via a wide range of community groups. This project is being funded by the European Social Fund.

Disability

- 4.58 People with disabilities are also likely to be well served by the proposed reconfiguration. The Healthy Income Project secured £445,000 in additional disability benefits in 2003/04 and Mosaic continued to provide an holistic service to disabled people, whilst also discharging the authority's statutory obligations to provide an information service to this client group.
- 4.59 The use of telephone advice lines reveals a high degree of usage amongst people with disabilities. For example, Mosaic's advice line is targeted at disabled people or their carers, and the WERAS advice line received in excess of 2000 calls in 03/04 of which 41% came from people with disabilities. This is encouraging as regards the proposal to develop a telephone based entry point for access to advice from April 2005 onwards.
- 4.60 Directly delivered welfare benefits advice in the Benefits Support Team also ensures that the most vulnerable disabled people are able to access advice via social work teams. This is added to by provision of services through the STAR team to provide tenancy support services, including advice on benefits and money problems.

Sexuality

- 4.61 The proposal to withdraw support for the Leicester Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Centre is based on the fact that this service does not primarily provide advice on welfare issues, but instead is focused on providing peer support and counselling to people experiencing problems as a result of their sexuality. Although recent research conducted with NRF funding reveals that the lesbian and gay community do experience significant problems with housing, and employment, and on other welfare matters as a consequence of their

sexuality, the service that is currently provided would direct people to other sources of assistance in the event of complex enquiries on the law relating to these matters. It therefore has a wider role in ensuring that mainstream services are aware of sexuality matters and take account of these in their service delivery. This is needed within advice services as much as any other area of service provision, but does not justify funding of the Centre's core costs from the advice services budget alone. In view of this, it is proposed to give the Centre until the end of October 2004 to make out a case for funding from alternative sources.

Need and Supply of Advice Services - Performance

- 4.62 The Council set out the available information on the performance of advice services either provided or commissioned by the Regeneration & Culture Department in a consultation document in February 2004.
- 4.63 The information presented in that document related to actual performance within the first three quarters of 2003/04, the first year in which the framework for monitoring performance had been put in place. During the consultation, however, considerable concern was expressed as to the validity of the comparisons being made from the data
- 4.64 A number of those concerns appear valid and the performance information on which the original proposals were based does have a number of flaws, particularly due to the difficulties of accounting for performance against the Council contract where an agency also receives funding from the Legal Services Commission, and because of some differences in recording methods across services.
- 4.65 In particular, the Law Centre challenged the reliance on the amount of money raised for clients as a reliable indicator of performance, and presented new figures that included the results of cases that they had completed which had been funded by the Legal Services Commission.
- 4.66 Also included in the Law Centre's submission was an amount of money 'potentially raised' i.e. an estimate of the likely award of benefit for clients advised by the Centre.
- 4.67 When these amounts are taken together the Law Centre's performance appears to be better than that of the directly delivered WERAS team, with the Law Centre raising £1,203,303 and WERAS raising £1,056,806, and with both teams having 3.5 fte caseworkers.
- 4.68 Neither Hitslink nor the Saffron Resource Centre record 'potential gains' for clients in this way and so cannot be assessed on the same basis.
- 4.69 Some other results from the monitoring of services suggest that the Law Centre is not performing strongly, however. For example, the Law Centre reported that it won 30% of all cases in the past year, compared to 61% at Saffron, 69% at WERAS, 74% at Age Concern and 100% at Hitslink.
- 4.70 However, the general proposal to reduce funding for specialist casework, was primarily based on the strong performance of piloted services such as the Healthy Income Project and community based sessions at WERAS and the apparent degree to which General Help and General Help with casework services were outperforming specialist services.
- 4.71 During the course of the consultation, a number of agencies indicated that specialist workers also undertook general help work but did not record those outcomes within the monitoring returns as this is not required of them in the service level agreements. Whilst this is undoubtedly the case, it reflects the fact that there are significant gaps at

the General Help level and that specialist caseworkers are being drawn into filling these. As indicated by the Regional Legal Services Commission (para 1.35, above), this is an inefficient use of specialist resources.

- 4.72 The performance figures for General Help services remain compelling, however, with £2,101,467 raised in 03/04 despite the Healthy Income Project and community based sessions starting in May of that year and needing to spend some time establishing the service. By contrast the specialist services have raised a total of £1,087,933 at significantly higher cost to the authority.
- 4.73 The proposal to then centralise the remaining specialist welfare benefits casework within the authority was based on both the information relating to performance available to the authority in January 2004, and on consideration of the need for specialist services to support the proposed General Help services, assist with take-up of Housing Benefit, and provide training to social work teams and the Housing Department. In order to progress these aims, a review of directly delivered welfare benefits services will take place in 2004/05.
- 4.74 In respect of employment advice, the proposal to provide services directly is based on the need to link up previously disparate provision in the city, and to tie employment rights advice provision more closely to work being done to improve employment rates in the city. The Council had previously taken a lead in the development of employment rights work, having secured external funding to support the Minimum Wage Project in Highfields, and having recently been successful in obtaining NRF funding for a project that will provide a support service to people entering into the labour market which will cover rights at work.

Need and Supply of Advice Services - Opportunities to Maximise External Funding

- 4.75 The proposals to proceed with support for the Healthy Income Project and the rent arrears reduction pilot offer the opportunity for formal evaluation to assess the impact of advice services on health outcomes and on the reduction of Council tax and rent arrears. Both projects therefore offer potential in the medium term for further leverage against either PCT budgets or the Housing Revenue Account. The combined leverage from these sources in 2004/05 will amount to £164,000.
- 4.76 The proposal to direct some main program resources into support for the Refugee and Asylum Seekers Advice Project is directed at leveraging in further funding for this project from the European Refugee Fund (ERF) of £69,000 in 2004/05. A bid has been made to the ERF for this amount and a decision expected in June 2004.
- 4.77 A successful bid has also been made to the Leicester Partnership for £600,000 to provide a project to increase employment rates amongst minority ethnic communities, to refugees, and to people outside the labour market as a result of health problems. This includes provision for information on employment rights to be provided to people looking to enter the labour market and for up to 13 weeks after obtaining a job. The project will also commission additional services to support people into employment, and could include the commissioning of welfare rights services to provide assistance with claims for tax credits.
- 4.78 Some concerns have been raised that if the proposals were approved then this would affect the viability of the Law Centre, SHARP, and Hitslink, all of which draw down additional resources from the Legal Services Commission for specialist casework services. However, our understanding is all of these agencies have been offered

contracts with the Commission and that neither the Law Centre or SHARP are likely to be unviable organisations as a result of these proposals. Work is ongoing at Hitslink to maintain the organisation with Commission funding (again, a contract has been offered by the Commission, and with funding from Highfields Sure Start for a welfare benefits worker). In the event that Hitslink is unable to survive without Council funding then it is possible that the Commission will reallocate their funding according to priorities across the East Midlands. This could therefore result in the loss of £56,000 of Commission funding to the city.

5. Further Details of the Proposed Service Configuration

- 5.1 The withdrawal of support for Consumer protection advice services affects in the region of 13,800 users of which approximately 10,000 would need advice and 3,000 access to basic information about their rights and 800, advocacy and representation.
- 5.2 Some public demand for information and advice will be picked up by the creation of a national Consumer Helpline, which is in progress. Consumer Direct will provide basic advice to telephone callers and will seek to refer complex enquiries and people needing face to face consultation to local advice providers.
- 5.3 The Council is considering preparing a bid to provide the East Midlands regional helpline. The bidding round for the helpline service started in April 2004 and the service is to be delivered from April 2005. A potential synergy was identified by the Group between this development and the move to create a corporate call centre within RAD. It was agreed that the option of co-location and the sharing of ICT infrastructure be further explored.

Debt Advice

- 5.4 As a result of the budget constraints, support for a single debt adviser post at Hitslink will be discontinued, and savings sought from the contract with Leicester Money Advice Limited. However, the effect on overall capacity will be minimised by the start of a rent arrears reduction pilot financed by the Housing Department. This will provide two workers to take referrals from Housing officers and to undertake income maximisation work and low level debt advice. The pilot will also support a dedicated specialist post at Leicester Money Advice which will provide a fast track service for Council tenants who are identified as having multiple debts, or who need county court representation.
- 5.5 From April 2005 this paper proposes that initial access to advice will come through the phone entry point, and remove the need for Leicester Money Advice to operate a public phone line themselves. Instead we will seek to agree a referral process and call back arrangements, so that people in need of specialist advice can be passed to Leicester Money Advice Limited where necessary. Residents who may be able to use national money advice services, or who only require information would not need to contact a specialist service.

Housing Advice

- 5.6 Debt advice services provided at Leicester Money Advice Ltd, also play an important role in the dealing with threats of housing repossession, and a court based drop in service is provided to pick up emergency cases in this regard. This has been successful in preventing 151 housing possessions in the year and has intervened successfully at the point of eviction proceedings in 107 further cases.
- 5.7 Further advice on housing matters is provided to Refugee and Asylum Seekers at RASAP, and this has been successful in obtaining positive housing outcomes for 81 individuals, assisting 20 people who presented to the project as homeless.

- 5.8 However, the bulk of housing advice in the city is provided directly by the Housing Department, which deals with in the region of 1,000 enquiries per quarter.
- 5.9 Concerns have been raised during the consultation on these proposals that the authority has failed to acknowledge the importance of independent housing advice, which is in declining supply as a result of solicitors firms withdrawing from this area of work. Whilst wishing to see supply increased in this area, the Council is unable to contribute significant resources at this time. Even the Regional Legal Services Commission, which has accepted the need to increase provision in this area of law, has been unable to do so because of funding constraints. The Council has therefore taken account of the Commission's recommendation in its 2003 Regional Report that provision of housing related debt advice services take priority in the allocation of resources.

Employment Advice

- 5.10 Employment advice services are currently split across three providers – at Hitslink (1 post), Leicester Law Centre (1 post) and in the directly delivered Welfare & Employment Rights Service (1 post). Employment advice was also highlighted as a priority for investment by the local Community Legal Service Partnership at all levels of advice.
- 5.11 The proposal is to create a unit within the local authority and to provide funding for a co-ordinator, tribunal worker, and general help level adviser from the main program. The minimum wage worker will also be located within this unit and it will link to the NRF funded Job Service Partnership Project that has been approved for funding by the Leicester Partnership. That project will provide funding for an information officer to develop materials covering employment rights issues, and two front-line workers who will provide support to people entering the labour market who encounter difficulties at work. Bids have also been submitted for external funding to supplement this provision further.

Welfare Benefits

- 5.12 There are two main proposals – firstly to shift resources away from specialist provision and into General Help and General Help with casework services, and secondly to centralise the remaining specialist provision within the Council. A limited exception is made in the case of Leicester Law Centre which will be sustained as a viable organisation to enable it to deliver the contracts that it holds with the Legal Services Commission²⁴.
- 5.13 The Healthy Income project and the Rent Arrears Reduction Project will be jointly managed and house 4 fte front-line equivalent workers offering face to face advice on benefit issues and providing assistance with the completion of claim forms. This will be supplemented by services at Mosaic and Age Concern which offer city-wide services to the elderly and disabled people and, in the case of Mosaic, provide in excess of 500 home visits per year. Services will also continue to be provided by the Benefits Support Team in Social Care & Health, which employs 6 fte workers to undertake home visits to vulnerable adults to check benefit entitlement and improve the take-up of disability benefits.
- 5.14 An additional welfare rights worker will be employed by the city council to provide sessions at community venues and these will be targeted to the areas with the highest need for face to face provision. This is currently to include the New Parks and

²⁴ The decision to provide support for the Law Centre and not Hitslink is based purely on the value of the contracts held by those agencies with the Legal Services Commission.

Highfields areas. 3 sessions per week will be offered on a drop in basis and some of these sessions will be targeted at specific communities including the Bangladeshi and Somali communities by pre-booking interpreters and publicising this in community venues.

- 5.15 Specialist welfare benefits provision is currently provided by the Council's Benefit Support Team and the Welfare & Employment Rights Advice Service (6.5 fte caseworkers), and in the voluntary sector at Hitslink (2fte's), the Law Centre (1.91 ftes), Saffron Resource Centre (0.8 fte) and Age Concern (1 fte).
- 5.16 The post at Age Concern supports volunteers to provide a general help level service and it is not proposed to affect that arrangement. Other specialist posts, however, will need to be reduced in order to make savings in accordance with the requirements of the budget strategy and it is proposed to withdraw funding for welfare rights posts at Saffron, Hitslink and the Law Centre. A review of specialist welfare rights functions will then take place within the Council's directly provided services.
- 5.17 In deciding to withdraw support from voluntary sector welfare rights services, the review considered the need for specialists to provide support to the proposed general help teams, and to be able to deliver training to internal staff including social workers and tenancy support officers, as well as the likely data protection issues arising from the running of take-up campaigns using information from a number of Council Departments. The decision to remove funding from Hitslink for debt advice and employment rights, and the need to provide a city-wide service were also relevant.
- 5.18 In addition, there is the potential to review management and administrative costs for welfare rights services within the authority and a need to create a joint training unit that meets the needs of SC&H and Housing services²⁵. This opportunity would be delayed if the current welfare rights service provision within R&C were to be outsourced at this time.
- 5.19 After consideration of these issues, it is recommended that specialist casework provision of welfare benefits be maintained as a directly delivered service.
- 5.20 Access to welfare benefits advice that is independent of the authority was raised as an important principle by a number of respondents to the November discussion document, and again in the responses to the formal consultation document. This will still be available to residents, however, provided the Regional Legal Services Commission continues to contract with voluntary sector agencies to provide these services. In order to facilitate that, the Council will continue to fund Leicester Law Centre to provide an initial drop in point for advice in the city pending the development of a telephone based entry point, and provide an additional £50,000 to support the Law Centre's core costs. This should enable them to continue to deliver the Commission contracts, and it is understood that plans are in place at the Law Centre to restructure in order to maintain themselves as a viable organization for this purpose.
- 5.21 The position is less certain at Hitslink, although the organisation is making efforts to maintain itself with funding from the Commission and Highfields Sure Start. The assumptions made in this report are that Hitslink will close, and that there is the possibility of the loss of £56,000 of Commission funding to the city.

²⁵ See para 1.59 below.

Telephone entry point

- 5.22 In order to respond to the outcomes of the MORI survey which highlighted a need for more telephone advice provision, and the results of the Mystery Shopping of advice services which recommended a 'one service' approach be considered, the review looked at the potential for creating a telephone based entry point for advice services that could share the benefits of co-location with RAD and a possible Consumer Helpline service. Under that model, and based on early estimates of capacity from Citizens Advice phone services, it is expected that approximately 20,000 information requests and enquiries could be managed each year.
- 5.23 Citizens Advice have pointed out that they feel the service could meet that level of demand only by providing an initial contact center service, with average call times lasting six minutes, and by then referring onto other services or posting out information materials. This approach has attractions as it would free up specialist services that currently operate public phone lines from dealing with non-specialist matters. The entry point could also arrange for specialists to call back enquirers where a complex problem needed more in depth advice or book appointments for people needing face to face advice.
- 5.24 However, the proposal also has dangers in creating expectations for advice that cannot then be met by the reduced level of specialist services. To some degree, this risk is mitigated by the additional provision of specialist telephone services that are being rolled out regionally by the Legal Services Commission. The local entry point could arrange access to those services and the Commission has expressed an interest in working with the City Council on the detailed arrangements for this. Referrals could also be made to the proposed national money advice service trailed in the DTI's White Paper on Consumer Credit at the start of the year, and the proposed regional consumer advice helpline.
- 5.25 The entry point will therefore play an important role in determining whether or not access to local specialist services is needed, primarily because of the urgency of the case or the needs of the client. It will also be able to refer people to the community based sessions for assistance with form filling or refer to the Healthy Income Project and the Rent Arrears Reduction Pilot where appropriate.
- 5.26 There have been concerns raised during the consultation that the proposed level of resources earmarked for the entry point of £200,000 per year will be inadequate to resource the service. However, this would cover the salaries of the staff necessary to handle 20,000 enquiries per year and supplies and services. Some fundraising around start up costs may be required although there is also the potential to reduce these by sharing premises and ICT systems with other proposed telephone services.
- 5.27 However, more work needs to be undertaken in this respect and it is not proposed to seek to introduce a phone based entry point until April 2005 to provide for a more detailed consideration of this proposal. A paper will therefore be provided setting out the options for development of a phone service in the early autumn and in the interim services will continue to be provided at Leicester Law Centre.

6. Financial, Legal And Other Implications

Financial Implications

6.1 The proposals set out in this report will deliver the annual savings of £659,000 as detailed in the budget strategy from 2005/6 onwards. However due to the lengthy consultation relating to this review, implementation has been delayed until August 2004. The consequence of this implementation delay is a shortfall in 2004/5 of approximately £200,000, which will be managed within the Regeneration Division or the Department as a whole. Any further delay will increase the pressure on the 04/05 budget.

6.2 Other pressures such as the Healthy Income project & the creation of a telephone entry point for advice services amounting to £47,000 in 2004/5 will be offset by increased management income and a reduction in spend on directly delivered services.

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Legal Implications

6.3 These have been set out in full in paragraph 4.3 – 4.9 of the Summary Report.

Joanna Bunting

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7. Other Implications

OTHER IMPLICATIONS	YES/NO	Paragraph Within Supporting References information
Equal Opportunities	Yes	4.36 – 4.61
Policy	Yes	4.14 – 4.15
Sustainable and Environmental	NO	
Crime and Disorder	NO	
Human Rights Act	No	
Elderly/People on Low Income	Yes	4.36 – 4.61

8. Risk Assessment Matrix

	Risk	Likelihood L/M/H	Severity Impact L/M/H	Control Actions (if necessary/or appropriate)
1	Any legal challenges or further delays to the implementation of the proposals would result in greater pressure on the Regeneration & Culture budget for 2004/05.	L	M	The proposals have been subject to legal advice and although there remains the possibility of a legal challenge it is considered to have a low probability of success.

2	Hitslink becomes unviable and Commission funding of approximately £56,000 is reallocated to other East Midlands priorities	M	M	Leicester has been recognised as a high priority area for investment in welfare rights services by the Commission. Any reallocation of resources would need to take this into account.
3	The phone entry point costs escalate to beyond £200,000.	L	M	Failure to establish the phone entry point would affect the ability to regain lost capacity to deal with enquiries. However the loss is limited to 5% as a result of proposals to increase advice through General Help teams. The failure to deliver the entry point would however impact on the ability of residents to access advice services. A detailed paper on options for delivery will be provided in September 2004.
4	The pilot rent arrears reduction project fails to make a case for ongoing support for advice provision from the Housing Revenue Account	L	H	This would result in the loss of £75,000 of funding for Advice Services in 2005/06. A joint Housing and Advice Services Steering Group will oversee the development of the project.
5	The bid for funds to the European Refugee Fund for support to RASAP is rejected.	L	H	The project has received support for the past two years and has been recognised as a beacon project after independent evaluation. Loss of funding would impact on the Highfields area of the city.
6	The Healthy Income Project fails to secure ongoing support from PCT's.	L	H	Support has been forthcoming for 2004/05 and an independent evaluation of health outcomes will now take place.

L - Low
M - Medium
H - High

L - Low
M - Medium
Medium
H - High

9. Background Papers – Local Government Act 1972

- Best Value of Social Welfare Law Services, Audit Commission 2001
- Community Legal Service Partnership Strategic Plan (2001)
- Community Legal Service Partnership Medium Term Strategic Plan (2002 – 2005)
- Leicester City Council Advice strategy (February 2002), Cabinet
- Leicester City Council – Advice Services Annual Review (February 2003), Strategic Planning and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee
- East Midlands Regional Legal Services Commission, Regional Report 2003
- Improving Advice Services, Discussion Document, Leicester City Council, October 2003

- Advice Services – Priorities and Proposals, Strategic Planning and Regeneration Scrutiny, 1st April 2004
- Mystery Shopping of Advice Services, Strategic Planning and Regeneration Scrutiny, 4th May 2004
- Legal Advice Services Survey, 2001 - MORI

10. Consultations

Consultee	Dates
Corporate Advice Services Review Group	18/12/03, 8/1/04, 26/1/04
Strategic Planning & Regeneration Scrutiny Committee	15/1/04, 1/4/04, 4/5/04
Forum for Older People	10/3/04
Highfields Area Forum	29/3/04
Community Legal Service Partnership for Leicester	27/11/03, 28/11/03, 22/1/04
Departmental Finance Officer	8/6/04
Legal Services	10/6/04

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