



## Belfast City Council

Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	Response to DSD Area Advice Centre Locations Consultation
Date:	9 <sup>th</sup> December 2009
Reporting Officer:	Tim Husbands, Acting Co-Director of Development
Contact Officer:	Cate Taggart, Community Development Manager, ext 3525

### Relevant Background Information

#### **Department for Social Development:**

At the November 2009 meeting, Committee considered a draft response to the DSD consultation which proposes the optimum number and location of Area Advice Centres. This consultation is set within the broader context of DSD preparations to move to a proposed new model for Advice Services in Northern Ireland following the publication of the *Opening Doors Strategy for the Delivery of Voluntary Advice Services* in September 2007.

The current consultation is restricted to the second phase of 2 further pieces of research, where Phase I mapped existing provision.

DSD indicate their proposals take account of issues of accessibility, deprivation and population size and are intended to provide councils with a methodology for determining locations in the commissioning of these services in the future. They further indicate that the Area Advice Centre Model will provide generalist advice support, first line support for specific needs and be a referral point for specialist advice. The consultation also comments on outreach approaches.

Following this consultation process, DSD has advised that Minister Ritchie intends to publish further guidance "in consultation with councils" before piloting the new advice framework in partnership. DSD has indicated their intention to invite expressions of interest from councils to permit a pilot phase in 2010. Furthermore, implementation of the new framework should take account of and fit the new council areas post RPA. DSD indicated that adoption of the agreed model will coincide with RPA implementation timescales, currently expected to occur in 2011.

**Belfast City Council:**

BCC is a significant investor in the delivery of independent advice services across the City and has developed a successful model of consortia advice provision based on geographical providers (North, South, East, West and City centre). BCC investment focuses on generalist advice provision to the community at large. Funding is allocated on a pro-rata basis based on a deprivation-weighted population.

In 2008 Deloitte completed an independent review of provision across the City. This review was commissioned in order to identify best practice changes required to the current delivery model and to make recommendations on the delivery approach going forward, particularly in light of the new regional strategy.

The consultants recommended that all future provision in the City should build on the significant investment in the development of capacity and relationships (consortia) to date. They proposed how we might consolidate on and improve practice and suggested opportunities to extend the support role of BBC.

In light of the DSD strategy our recent review of the consortium model and to inform advice provision post 2011, the Community Services Business Plan notes the intention to review and refine the BCC Support Strategy for Advice Services post 2011 and a related Action Plan. This work will be developed closely with Members and key stakeholders and will commence early next year. A key component of the strategy development will be to agree the appropriate number and location of Advice Centres and related outreach provision across the City.

**Consultation:**

Given the above, and due to the high level of interest in the consultation topic, Members requested Party Briefings in order to ensure adequate representation of their views within the consultation response.

The attached final draft incorporates responses from all political parties.

The consultation document includes questions directed to advice providers and funders of advice provision. The attached final draft response (Appendix 1) addresses only those funder specific questions.

**Key Issues**

Members expressed broad support for the content of the draft response however requested that officers reflect and reinforce the following:

1. BCC welcomes the opportunity to comment on this regional strategy and support the methodology of determining the location of advice services via population, deprivation and accessibility. Members are however cautious of commenting on any particular issue without reference to the overall strategy or process.
2. As a crucial investment partner, Members believe that any future strategy should allow councils the flexibility to define provision based on our own assessment of local need.
3. BCC has an established pattern and system for our advice services investment in the City. An independent review (Deloitte 2008) concluded that the consortia model represents best practice in advice delivery. Any future strategy should note this

significant investment to date and the positive evaluation of the consortia model.

4. BCC are committed to this consortia approach and to the different providers within the advice sector. Any strategy and future provision must not unbalance the relationships which characterise this joint, co-ordinated working model and which have taken time and resources to build. Indeed, our future strategy should improve and consolidate relationships.
5. Any future strategy must ensure a whole Belfast approach making sure areas of need, including those outside Neighbourhood Renewal areas, are serviced appropriately by advice providers.
6. There is general agreement on the need for a City centre location advice centre. The most effective resource and management option however needs to be further explored.
7. Consortia should define and propose outreach processes to ensure an effective, comprehensive and accessible service including, for example, the use of temporary advice locations, utilisation of established and new technologies, mobile service delivery, etc.
8. The move to advice services being commissioned via a procurement process could have a detrimental effect on the service model in the City. Further discussion should be initiated with local government to agree the most effective methodology to support advice services in order to ensure a high quality and accessible service. BCC are keen to ensure that the agreed methodology will not have a detrimental impact on our current model and the investment to date in capacity and relationships, both of which are key contributors to its success.
9. No mention is made of an appropriate financial model for the investment. BCC reserves the right to consider and define the most effective financial model in the preparation of our strategy for Advice Services Support next year.
10. Opportunity must be taken to maintain and improve standards of service provision (both within advice centres and via outreach provision). DSD might give consideration to an advice standard and clarify the support roles of the regional advice organisations.
11. There is a need to recognise and identify the role of volunteers in advice service provision.
12. The commitment in Open Doors to a single IT system is not covered in the DSD document. BCC is committed to supporting the advice sector to align its IT systems.
13. The consultation document indicates there are no additional funds available to resource the proposals or the reform process. BCC is concerned that the main focus for any additional financial support may fall to councils. This is likely to be a major barrier to progress in terms of implementation of the strategy.

#### **Resource Implications**

There is no recommendation or suggestion of any reduction in services or investment for voluntary advice provision with implementation of the strategy taking place within existing available budgets. However, it is expected that advice services will be commissioned using a procurement process open to competition and leading to contractual arrangements.

#### **Recommendations**

1. Members are asked to consider and agree the attached final draft BCC response to the DSD consultation document on the number and location of Area Advice

Centres.

2. Members are further asked to note the contents of the report and endorse the officer proposal to table a further 2 reports in relation to:
  - BCC interim support for advice services in 2010/11 and
  - Arrangements to identify options and agree any future BCC strategy for Advice & Information Services support post 2011.

#### **Decision Tracking**

1. Following ratification of the draft consultation response the Community Development Manager will issue to DSD noting this is subject to Council ratification.

Time-frame: 18 December 2009

Reporting Officer: Catherine Taggart

2. Presentation of two future Committee reports by Community Development Manager.

Time frame: January 2010 & March 2010

Reporting Officer: Catherine Taggart

#### **Key Abbreviations**

BCC - Belfast City Council

DSD – Department for Social Development

SOA – Super Output Area

#### **Documents Attached**

Appendix 1 - BCC Draft response to DSD consultation