

**EIT REVIEW ADVICE & INFORMATION SERVICES BASELINE AND OPTIONS APPRAISAL**

1. The baseline information examines:
  - Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council services that fall within the scope of the review and whose core purpose is the provision of advice and information;
  - Contracts and other financial arrangements that the Council has with external organisations that provide advice and information services;
  - Provision of advice and information services by partners and other organisations (eg voluntary sector);
  - Demand for advice and information services;
  - Customer perceptions of advice and information services in terms of accessibility and service quality.

Scope of the Review

2. The range of advice and information services provided across the borough is extensive and varies greatly in terms of complexity and the skills/knowledge of those providing the advice and information. An initial assessment of advice and information provision across the borough revealed a wide spectrum of services provided by the voluntary sector, the Council and partner organisations such as health, the DWP and Job Centre Plus and significant Council activity in commissioning advice and information services from the voluntary sector. It is important that the range of services included in the review is clearly defined in order to avoid scope drift, duplication with other reviews and ensure that the project can be completed within the tight time constraints.
3. The baseline work focuses on the “personal” types of advice and information services provided to residents of the borough and relating to the following themes:
  - Children and Young People;
  - Housing (rented housing, homelessness, grants and adaptations);
  - Economic (money advice, debt, benefits and employment)
  - Health, well-being and social care.
4. Basic advice and information, such as when/how can I pay my Council Tax, advice and information services provided to businesses or relating to services that are included in the EIT Review of Regulatory Services, and specialist advice and information services such as those provided by the Registration Service have all been excluded from the scope of this EIT review.

Internal (SBC) Services that Provide Advice and Information

5. An initial, high-level review identified 24 SBC services that provide advice and information falling into the categories described above. This number was far too great to analyse each service in detail and, in addition, some of these services are scheduled for their own EIT reviews in years 2 and 3 of the programme. In other cases advice and information giving represented only a small part of the work of the service or was secondary, but inherent to the main purpose of the service. It was therefore decided, that for internal services, the review would focus on those whose core purpose is giving advice and

information and services/teams within a service that spend 70% or more of their time giving advice and information. These areas are:

- Welfare Rights
  - IAG (Information, Advice and Guidance) workers in the Children's Centres
  - Families Information Service
  - Connexions Personal Advisors
6. A summary of the costs of providing advice and information services through these teams is attached at **Appendix 3**.

### Welfare Rights

7. SBC's Welfare Rights Unit is based at Billingham Council Offices. This is a team of 7 – the Team Manager, 4 Welfare Rights Officers, a "First Contact" officer and a temporary specialist Independent Living Fund Officer. Local authority Welfare Rights Units themselves are not a statutory requirement. The service contributes to the Council's core aim of "Promoting Achievement, Tackling Disadvantage" by addressing anti-poverty, social and financial inclusion agendas.
8. The objective of Welfare Rights is, "to ensure that all of the residents of the Borough have equal access to the benefits system in order that they may receive those benefits to which they are entitled by law." This is achieved by providing advice, information and representation, encouraging benefit take-up campaigns and providing input into Council policy. The service is open to all residents of the borough and is not means tested (unlike some other agencies where clients have to meet Legal Aid funding criteria). The service does not hold details of the split between its clients that are/are not entitled to CLS funding.
9. During 2008/2009 Welfare Rights dealt with 1450 enquiries, of which 1201 involved detailed casework. The majority of cases are referrals from colleagues within social care and self-referrals from previous clients, or following benefit take-up campaigns. A smaller number of referrals come from the Benefits Service, Tristar Homes, DWP or through word of mouth (friends and family). The service also holds surgeries aimed at BME residents – 85 such surgeries were held during 2008/2009, dealing with enquiries from 676 residents, in excess of 90% of these from a BME community.
10. In terms of performance, the amount of annual benefit entitlement secured for clients has increased significantly over the last three financial years:
- 2006/2007 - £614,157
  - 2007/2008 - £709,286
  - 2008/2009 - £919,537
11. Although not part of the Welfare Rights service (and not part of this review because advice and information makes up less than 70% of their work), Client Financial Services (within CESC) also have a role in maximising the benefits paid to their 3,000 clients. When conducting financial assessments in connection with residents' contribution towards the cost of care they receive from the Council, the team ensure that the client is receiving all the benefit to which they are entitled (any additional income can then be put towards the cost

of paying for care). The service collaborates with the Pension Service to ensure that clients are receiving their full entitlement. When assessing claims for Housing and Council Tax Benefit, the Benefits Service also looks to identify where residents may be entitled to a type of benefit they are not claiming.

### IAG (Information, Advice & Guidance) Workers in the Children's Centre

12. This service meets a statutory duty placed on the Council (under the Childcare Act 2006) to provide advice and information which supports and guides parents as they move into learning and employment, including engaging with learners who face significant barriers to learning. The Council provides these services in-house but they could be delivered via alternative channels. There are two Guidance Advisors, based in the Children's Centres, each covering 2 ISAs.
13. Customers are parents of children aged 0-5 and childcare practitioners within the private, voluntary and independent childcare sector and Children's Centres. Over the last 12 months the Guidance Advisors have undertaken 460 Intensive Guidance support sessions with parents and 22 with childcare practitioners.
14. Parents and carers of children aged 0-5 can self-refer. Alternatively parents and carers are referred to the service by other Children's Centre team members (such as health visitors, midwives or customer care workers) and Job Centre Plus refer parents or carers for "Intensive Guidance Support Sessions". The service also provides advice and information on learning pathways to childcare practitioners.
15. Services provided include skills and careers matching, action planning and signposting to relevant and appropriate services, both internal and external to the Council. The advisors also advise clients in relation to interview skills, CV/application form writing and how to acquire knowledge and skills that will help to secure employment.

### Families Information Service (FIS)

16. This service was originally formed in 2000 to meet a statutory duty placed on the Council to provide advice and information on childcare. The service includes a brokerage service, and advice and information on careers in childcare. The Childcare Act 2006 extended the Council's duty to provide a range of easily accessible information, advice and assistance (prescribed by regulations), which parents may need to make informed choices on services for their families and support their children through to their 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, or up to the age of 25 if the child has learning difficulties or a disability. The responsibilities, objectives and outcomes of the service are set at a national level by the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). The Council delivers the service through an in-house team, but it could be delivered via alternative channels.
17. There are 7.5 FTE posts in the organisation structure, with 1.5 of these currently vacant. The team is based at Bayheath House. The service is provided by telephone, e-mail, face-to-face by appointment, outreach (for example drop-in sessions at Children's Centres, events at Schools or Job Fairs) and via website. Parents and carers can contact the service direct, or may be referred from the Children's Centre, other professionals (such as social workers or health visitors), or Jobcentre Plus (when parents need help finding childcare

or information on financial support towards the costs of childcare in order to get into work).

18. Customers are parents/carers of children and young people up to the age of 20 (25 for young people with disabilities / complex or additional educational needs), prospective parents/carers, childcare practitioners within the private, voluntary and independent childcare sector and the Children's Centres, people wishing to work in the childcare sector and people wishing to set up a business in the childcare sector. Over the last 12 months the service has dealt with 3,454 contacts.
19. The service contributes to a number of priorities and key performance measures including NI118 – Take up of formal childcare by low income families. This is measured by the number of families receiving the Childcare element of Working Tax Credit as a percentage of the number of working families receiving more than the family element of Child Tax Credit. The last reported figures are for 2006/2007 and show Stockton as 17%, which was the same as the national average.

### Connexions Personal Advisors

20. This is a service which meets a statutory duty placed on the Council (under the Learning & Skills Act 2000 and Education & Skills Act 2008) to provide information, advice and guidance on a range of opportunities and issues that affect young people aged 11 to 19 and up to 25 for those who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Topics on which advice and information is given include education, employment, training, healthy lifestyles, relationships, personal development, housing and benefits.
21. The service is located at the Connexions One Stop Shop, 16 Bishopton Lane, Stockton and is also delivered from outreach locations in schools, colleges, work-based learning providers, Jobcentre Plus and Community settings. Advice and information services are provided by Personal Advisors and Keeping in Touch (KIT) Workers who are allocated to one of the four integrated service areas – 3.6 FTE in the Billingham ISA, 4.8 FTE in the Central ISA, 4.0 FTE in the North ISA and 6.2 FTE in the South ISA. Although the service is provided through an in-house team it could be delivered via alternative means.
22. The service currently serves in excess of 14,000 young people, broken down as 9,600 children of secondary school age, 3600 young people in sixth form or further education, 500 taking part in work-based learning and 600 NEET (not in education, employment or training). In addition to working with young people, the service also works with their parents and carers, schools colleges and work-based learning providers and partner agencies.
23. The service contributes to a number of priorities and key performance measures in particular the Local Area Agreement includes a target for young people (aged 16 – 18) not in education, employment or training. This is also a national indicator.

### Signposting Services

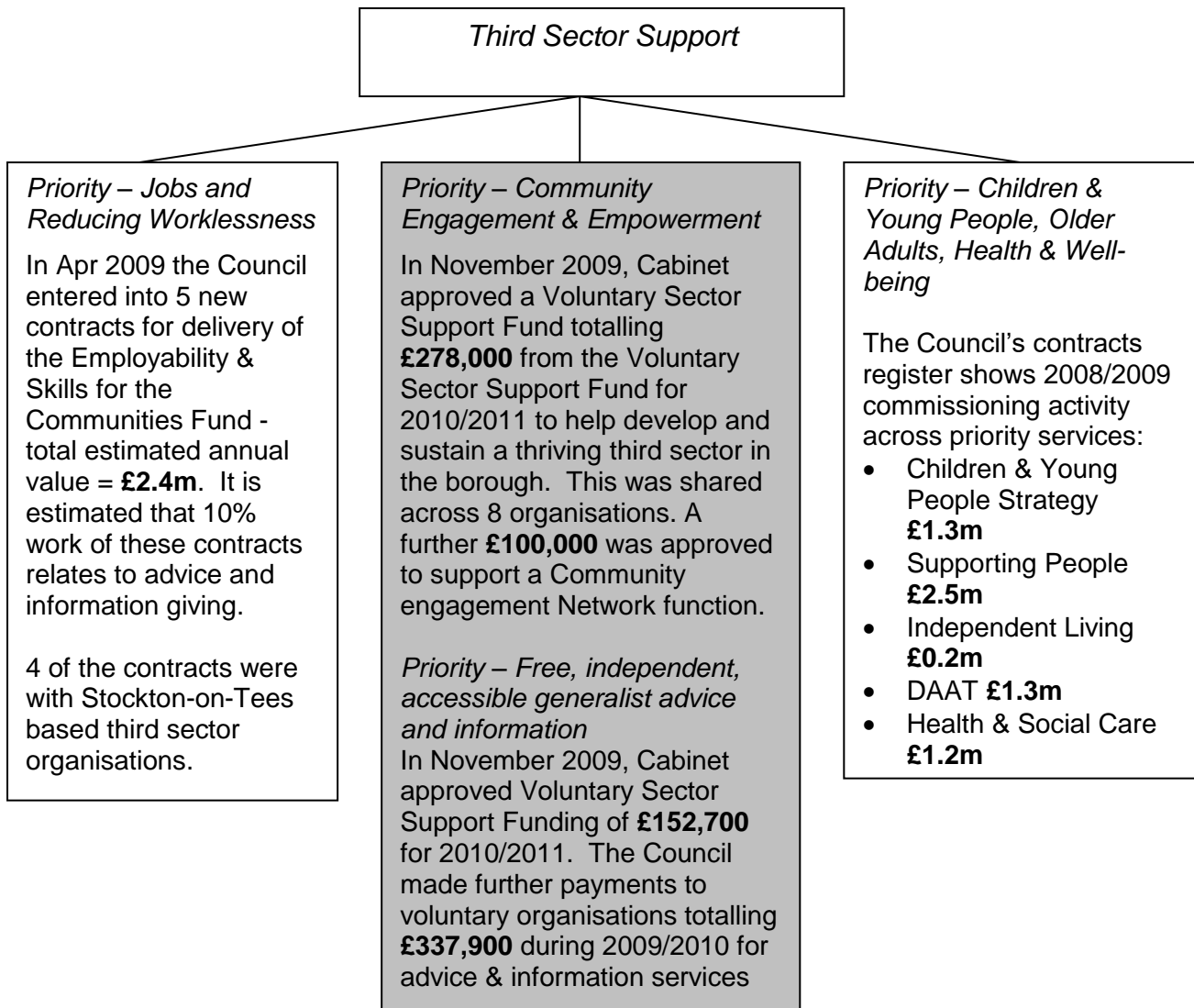
24. An important aspect of work in the advice and information sector is signposting - giving information or referring customers to other organisations that can help them (as opposed to providing specific advice, information and guidance about

a technical subject). The Library Service is a good example of a signposting service. Library staff hold information or know how to access information about all the types of advice and information services covered by this review. The staff do not give advice themselves, they signpost customers to other agencies and make every effort to keep up to date with the variety of organisations offering advice within the borough. Referrals are made to other council services, partner organisations and established advice centres.

25. Signposting is undertaken without comparison or comment to the customer on any particular service. Instead a range of advice services may be suggested through informing what council services are available and what partners or external agencies can provide, including opening times, locations and telephone contact numbers. It is then up to the customer to decide which route they want to take.
26. Research conducted during this baseline stage has revealed an extensive amount of signposting carried out by the 20+ services that initially identified themselves as giving advice and information. This highlights the importance of having a central, easily accessible, comprehensive and up to date information bank to which staff can refer when they need to refer customers on to another part of the Council or another organisation. Such a store does not exist at the moment, some smaller directories are available on the SBC website such as the families information service directory, but they are not easy to find and general staff awareness of these information sources is limited.
27. In many cases staff rely on their personal knowledge of “what’s out there” or tap into colleagues’ knowledge when signposting. This can mean that information given to customers is not always the most reliable or up to date or that referrals are always made to one organisation when in fact there are several options for the customer.

### Contracts and other Arrangements with External Organisations for the Provision of Advice and Information Services

28. With regard to arrangements between the Council and external agencies that provide advice and information on our behalf, research in the baselining phase revealed an extensive amount of advice and information being provided by external agencies and the voluntary sector across a wide range of service specific themes much of which relates to specific advice and information. In 2008-2009, the Council invested approximately £11m in commissioning activity from the third sector (this figure includes national, sub-regional and local third sector organisations). Currently, approximately £2.4m is targeted at skills/jobs/reducing worklessness and another £7m towards health and social care. The Council (through community empowerment initiatives) is also supporting the voluntary sector to provide more general advice and information for example relating to financial inclusion, welfare benefits, debt etc and this type of advice has been the focus of this EIT review. A decision was taken to concentrate on contracts and grants etc where over 70% of the work undertaken by the outside organisation relates to general advice and information. This amounted to 10 “contracts” with an annual value of £490,600 in 2009/2010 (see **Appendix 2**). Seven of these are with Stockton District Advice and Information Service (SDAIS), with an annual value of £340,000 - mainly one year arrangements, funded from a variety of sources. The following diagram illustrates the Council’s commissioning activities with the third sector, the shaded section being the focus of this EIT review.



29. The above diagram also illustrates the links between this EIT review and the Voluntary Sector Support Fund (VSSF) Review that was considered by Cabinet on 26<sup>th</sup> November 2009. Cabinet agreed that, as this EIT review was ongoing, the level of funding provided for advice and information services (via SDAIS) be kept at the same level for 2010/2011 and considered as part of this review.

Service Demand

30. Calls to Welfare Rights' advice line have been consistent in number over the last three full financial years:
- a. 2006/2007 – 1359
  - b. 2007/2008 – 1304
  - c. 2008/2009 – 1345

However the service is experiencing increased demand during 2009/2010 as a result of the recession, and has noted a 25% increase in Advice Line enquiries in the first quarter of the year. Changes in sickness benefit legislation and the

impact of personalisation are also expected to generate increased workload in the future. The number of cases that the service can deal with and the scope of work undertaken, is constrained by the available resources ie size of the team, however there is flexibility to shift resources from pro-active, campaign work to re-active work, when demand necessitates.

31. The Children's Centres' Guidance Advisors have noted increasing demand for services over recent months and appointment waiting times are getting longer. This is likely to be due to the effects of the recession, with residents coping with redundancy and/or seeking to change skills or career pathways. However, one impact of the recession has been a reduction in demand for information on childcare places dealt with by the FIS. Changes to Income Support regulations which are affecting benefit payments to lone parents impact on both Children's Centre Guidance Advisors and the FIS and are expected to increase workload in the longer term.
32. Demand for Connexions advice and information services is linked to the quality and quantity of careers education in schools, the amount of education, employment or training opportunities for young people and the number of young people not in education, employment and training. The recession is impacting on demand for services, with demand going up.
33. On 12<sup>th</sup> August 2009, the Audit Commission released a new publication, "When it comes to the crunch ..... how councils are responding to the recession." This publication reports that 94% of the 193 councils that responded to a survey, reported an increased demand for benefits, debt and welfare advice from residents and a further 3% anticipated increased demand for these services. The report suggests that the role of councils will become increasingly important as the recession spreads from businesses into communities. The report gives the example of the London Borough of Lambeth, which has expanded capacity in its advice centres to provide more financial and debt advice to residents and in contrast reports the case of a district council, struggling to balance its budget, which has introduced a wide-ranging efficiency programme that includes ceasing financial support to a number of voluntary groups including victim support and a women's refuge.

### SDAIS

34. During 2008/2009 SDAIS dealt with 23,365 new enquiries. This represents an 18% increase over the 19,836 new enquiries dealt with during 2007/2008. More specifically SDAIS:
  - Helped residents with debt problems totalling £14.3m;
  - Dealt with 8,189 new debt enquiries;
  - Secured welfare benefits entitlement of £1.2m for local residents;
  - Dealt with 7,631 new welfare benefits enquiries;
  - Dealt with 1,647 new employment enquiries;
  - Dealt with 2,516 new housing enquiries.

### Customer Perceptions

35. Customer feedback can provide valuable insight into the accessibility and quality of advice and information services across the borough. The internal services that form part of this review have all completed the Council's Customer

First Programme and have therefore conducted customer consultation exercises or gathered feedback through the corporate commendations, comments and complaints process. In all cases, positive results were reported and services provided evidence of improvements that had been made as a result of customer feedback.

36. In addition a Viewpoint survey was undertaken to establish residents' views about advice and information provided directly by the Council and by external advice agencies in particular:

- What type of advice and information residents have sought;
- How easy it was to access that advice and information;
- How residents would prefer to access and receive advice and information.

37. Two hundred and seventy six residents responded to the Viewpoint Survey (a response rate of 23%). Of these 123 had sought, or sought and received advice and information services of the type considered within this review. Top level results from the survey include:

- In terms of the organisations that residents had approached for advice and information, the Council was the most popular for all categories, except money/debt advice, where the preference was to seek advice from an external agency;
- Of the different types residents found it most difficult to access advice and information about Benefits;
- Most residents would prefer to have a face-to-face meeting with an advisor if they wanted information or advice, however residents aged between 25-34 stated that they would prefer access to services via the Internet;
- Overall satisfaction with advice and information received:
 

-	Satisfied	75%
-	Dissatisfied	12%
-	<i>Net Satisfaction</i>	63%

#### External Service Providers

38. The role of external advice agencies, particularly the voluntary sector, in the provision of advice and information across the borough is important and needs to be taken into account in this review, for example to identify where there might be duplication. The Council has direct contractual relationships for the supply of advice and information with some of these organisations, and supports others through grants (eg Voluntary Sector Support Fund) and other financial assistance (such as discretionary rate relief). In other cases our partners are providing advice and information, or there is no relationship between the Council and the external organisation.

39. Respondents to the Viewpoint survey were asked to identify which external agencies they had approached for advice and information. The table below identifies the different external agencies that were used by respondents for each type of advice and information.



Type of Information and Advice	External Agencies Providing Information and Advice	
Children and Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None identified</li> </ul>	
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet (eg via 'direct.gov.uk')</li> <li>• Local Education providers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member of Parliament</li> <li>• Student Loan Company</li> <li>• University grants</li> </ul>
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing Associations</li> <li>• Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB)</li> <li>• Go Warm – Dyson Insulations Ltd</li> <li>• Muscular Dystrophy Group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Handyman Service (provided by the Council)</li> <li>• Help the Aged</li> <li>• Age Concern</li> <li>• Mortgage companies</li> </ul>
Money/Debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> </ul>
Employment/Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB)</li> <li>• Connexions</li> <li>• Job Centre Plus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Department of Work and Pensions</li> <li>• NETA Training</li> <li>• Employer</li> </ul>
Adult Social Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age Concern</li> <li>• Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB)</li> <li>• Domiciliary care company</li> <li>• Help the Aged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Saga</li> <li>• Hospital</li> <li>• Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB)</li> <li>• Stockton Independent Living Centre</li> </ul>
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age Concern</li> <li>• Benefits Agency</li> <li>• Help the Aged</li> <li>• Housing Associations</li> <li>• George Hardwick Foundations</li> <li>• Job Centre Plus</li> <li>• Stockton Independent Living Centre</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB)</li> <li>• Doctor</li> <li>• Department for Work and Pensions</li> <li>• Internet (via eg 'entitledto.co.uk')</li> <li>• Stockton Carers Centre</li> <li>• The Pension Service</li> </ul>

### *Catalyst Survey*

40. Catalyst sent a questionnaire out to its members asking for information about the types of advice and information services they supply, the demand for these services and what resources are used to deliver the services. Responses were received from:

- Informnorth – a regional self-development magazine
- SDAIS
- Tees Valley Rural Community Council

- The George Hardwick Foundation
  - Tristar Homes.
41. Feedback from these completed questionnaires of relevance to this review includes:
- The George Hardwick Foundation have two dedicated advice and information workers based at their centres in Stockton and North Tees Hospital, one of which deals specifically with cancer patients or patients suffering from other long-term or life threatening illness and their carers (a Macmillan Advice and Information specialist) and the other is provided through SDAIS to provide more general advice and information. The workers provide economic advice such as money advice, debt, benefits and employment and general advice and information about health, well-being and social care. They also offer counselling and bereavement support. Demand for services is high and there is a waiting time of 2-3 weeks for an appointment. Services are provided Monday – Friday (9am – 3.30pm in Stockton and 9am – 6pm at North Tees hospital).
  - As well as providing advice and information on a range of housing issues Tristar Homes employs a money advice officer to assist tenants with money management, money advice and benefit entitlement issues. The money advice officer deals with 4 appointments per day.
  - The advice and information services provided by SDAIS are wide ranging and include general help level services covering welfare benefits, debt, housing, employment, community care, consumer advice, tax, family, health and education; specialist help level advice covering welfare benefits, debt, housing, employment and community care; representation of clients at tribunals, court and other formal hearings in welfare benefits, debt, housing and employment matters. Services are provided face-to-face by appointment or drop-in, through a telephone advice line and by letter or e-mail. As well as providing responsive services based on client contacts, SDAIS act proactively by delivering preventative work/training around employment rights and financial/budgeting skills and through its social policy work. SDAIS operate advice services from 16 locations throughout the borough. Opening times vary depending on the venue, but generally are Monday – Friday, Saturday morning and Thursday evening. The service comprises of approximately 50 paid staff (including part-time and admin staff) and 30 volunteers.

#### *Community Legal Advice*

42. Community Legal Advice is a service that provides confidential and independent advice for residents of England and Wales on a range of legal issues through its website [www.communitylegaladvice.org.uk](http://www.communitylegaladvice.org.uk) or its national telephone helpline. The service is operated by A4e under a contract awarded by the Legal Services Commission. A4e has been independently assessed as operating at the Legal Services Commission Specialist Quality Mark Standard. Initial advice and signposting is available to anyone free of charge, detailed advice and/or representation for individual cases *is only available to residents that qualify for legal aid*. The range of advice and information services provided by Community Legal Advice is wide:
- Debt, money and tax (debt, credit cards, mortgage)
  - Benefits & tax credits

- Employment (redundancy, unfair dismissal, discrimination)
  - Housing & homelessness (renting, repossession, disrepair)
  - Family & Personal (Children, divorce, domestic abuse)
  - Education & training (bullying, exclusion, attendance)
  - Immigration & nationality
  - Health & social care
  - Consumer affairs
  - Police & crime
43. Legal aid is available for many types of civil legal problems. Whether a resident will qualify for legal aid depends on their “financial eligibility” (household disposable income and capital), the type of legal problem, whether there is a reasonable chance of winning the case and whether it is worth the time and money needed to win. Generally, someone will not be financially eligible if their gross income is more than £2,425 per month or they have more than £8,000 disposable capital.

*Job Centre Plus & the Pension Service*

44. Job Centre Plus offer advice and information about benefits that are available to working age people and how to apply for them, in line with their service objectives which include, “To ensure people receiving working age benefits ...are offered high quality help and support appropriate to their needs,” and “To pay people of working age the correct amount of benefit to which they are entitled at the right time and throughout the period of their claim.” Information is available by telephone, face-to-face and on-line.
45. Similarly, the Pension Service provide advice and information about state and private pensions and general support available from the Government for retired people (eg Winter Fuel Payments). Queries can be made by telephone, e-mail, letter or fax. The Pension Service is proactive in ensuring that people receive the benefits to which they are entitled – the DWP Business Plan for 2009-2010 sets out a national target to increase take-up through at least 255,000 successful new Pension Credit applications.
46. On-line information and services about a range of subjects and services from Government and Local Government can be found on the Directgov website.

*The National Debtline*

47. The National Debtline (part of the Money Advice Trust, a registered charity) provides free, confidential and independent advice on how to deal with debt problems. The service is available electronically (e-mail or website) and by telephone
48. A table showing all the advice and information providers that have been looked at as part of this review, and the range of services they provide is included at **Appendix 4**. Whilst by no means exhaustive, this illustrates the rich picture of advice and information activity that exists across the borough

The following Conclusions emerged from the Baselining Exercise and helped to focus the direction of the review and the development of options for further consideration:

49. The current economic climate is resulting in an increased demand for advice and information services that is proving difficult to meet. At a time when the Council needs to support vulnerable households and seek to minimise the impact of the recession on local communities, it may not be appropriate, at this time, to seek to make efficiencies that will reduce service provision, even though a number of advice and information services provided by the Council are non-statutory. This review has therefore sought to identify ways of making better use of the existing resources that are expended on providing advice and examine the possibility of joining existing services together more effectively whilst recognising that the higher than usual demand driven by the recession should reduce in the medium to longer term.
50. Legal Services Commission (LSC) funding is available in cases, such as welfare benefits and debt advice, where the person seeking advice and information is entitled to legal aid. The review found that the Council could do more to encourage residents to approach organisations such as the Community Legal Advice national telephone helpline and this would help these residents through LSC funding. This could then free up Council resources to support those residents that don't qualify for legal aid. Promoting the Community Legal Advice telephone service might also ease demand on local service provision.
51. There is duplication of service provision around welfare benefits and maximisation of benefit income across the borough, with services available from the Council's own Welfare Rights Service (and to a lesser degree other internal advice and information providers), SDAIS, Community Legal Services and the Carers' Centre. There are also many sources of debt advice, but these are external to the Council. The council is not under any statutory obligation to provide either of these services.
52. There is a need for a comprehensive store of information about the availability of advice and information services across the borough to assist those who are required to signpost residents to an appropriate service. A web-based directory of services, accessible to both residents and staff would be welcome.
53. Approximately one third of SDAIS funding comes from the Council and from different Council budgets. Many of the payments to SDAIS are based on yearly agreements, sometimes due to funding uncertainties. These short-term arrangements lead to uncertainties for SDAIS staff (resulting in staff turnover). There may be economies for the Council and more funding certainty for any external organisation delivering the services, if all these different arrangements were pulled together to be tendered and managed as a single contract.
54. As a result of the baseline work, four options were drawn up for further investigation in the second phase of the review and the remainder of this report describes the analysis of each of these options and makes recommendations for the future
55. The four options investigated were:
  - Consolidation of all the advice and information services that the Council commissions from external organisations into a single specification that could then be tendered, including the advice and information services that are currently included in the Core Funding Agreements that accompany allocations of grant from the Voluntary Sector Support Fund.

- Enter into discussion with A4e, the organisation that is contracted by the Legal Services Commission to operate the national Community Legal Advice Service, to understand their capacity for taking on additional cases and how the Council could best promote the national telephone advice line.
- Further investigation to understand the reasons for the duplication of welfare benefits advice between the Council's Welfare Rights service and external advice and information agencies and whether this could be eliminated via an alternative service delivery model.
- Consider a model for future delivery that ensures more co-ordination and joined up working between all the different parties involved in advice and information giving across the borough.

### **Options Appraisal**

*Option 1 - Consolidation of the advice and information services that the Council commissions from external organisations into a single specification that could be tendered.*

56. The review identified 10 contracts (or similar arrangements) where the Council is paying voluntary sector organisations to give advice and information and where the advice and information giving represents more than 70% of the scope of the contract. These are summarised in the table at **Appendix 3** and total annual expenditure of £490,600 in 2009/2010. This funding ensures that SBC residents can access independent, free advice and information services, even if they do not qualify for Legal Aid funding.
57. It is recommended that the £152,700 awarded to SDAIS for 2010/2011 relating to the direct delivery of advice and information services be assigned to be used to deliver specified key advice and information services that support the Council's priorities around financial inclusion under a new corporate advice and information services contract.
58. The Council has a formal contract with SDAIS to provide a Youth Advice (Outreach) Service and Early Years Children's Centres Advice sessions. The outreach service is delivered from various "young-people friendly" venues across the borough and advice sessions are held at the SDAIS Youth Advice Service, "The Cabin" at Nelson Terrace, Stockton. Although the service has been in existence for a number of years, this, most recent contract was entered into in 2007 and has since been extended on a year-to-year basis, currently due to expire in March 2010. The annual cost is £52,780 funded through a combination of CESC and Connexions funding streams. This type of outreach service is not a statutory requirement, however the contract does enable the Council to fulfil some of its obligations under the Children Act. It is proposed that these services be added to the specification for the new corporate contract for advice and information services and the funding currently used to support this specific service be added to the overall pot to pay for the contract.
59. The Council makes an annual payment of £23,278 to SDAIS to fund a part-time worker to provide a self advocacy service. The service focuses on developing people with learning disabilities so that they can self-advocate rather than depend on others to advocate for them. The payment is funded through the Adult Strategy team budget. It is proposed that self advocacy services be

added to the specification for the new corporate contract for advice and information services and the funding currently used to support this specific service be added to the overall pot to pay for the contract.

60. In 2009/2010 the Council has paid £34,298 (£10,000 of which is funded by the PCT) to fund a worker employed by SDAIS to provide an independent advice and casework service for people with health and social care problems – a representational advocacy service. The service is based at Ragworth Neighbourhood Centre. Targets and desired outcomes have been agreed. It is proposed that representational advocacy services be added to the specification for the new corporate contract for advice and information services and the funding currently used to support this specific service be added to the overall pot to pay for the contract. The available funding amounts to £14,773 (the service is reporting an overspend for 2009/2010).
61. The Council pays a grant to SDAIS on behalf of the Eastern Area Partnership to fund a full-time caseworker to provide debt advice and support (cost in 2009/2010 = £14,999). This could not fall within the scope of an SBC tendering exercise as the Eastern Area Partnership Board determines how their grant should be spent to meet local priorities.
62. The Council has two contracts with SDAIS for the provision of free independent housing advice accessible to all residents regardless of their eligibility for legal aid funding. One, amounting to £42,000 in 2009/2010 is for generalist housing advice, expires on 31.03.10 and will not be renewed. The other relates to a specific mortgage repossession rescue service for any owner-occupier that is in fear of losing their home. Funding for 2009/2010 (£30,000) was provided by CLG and pays for an advice worker, based at Stratford House for 30 hours per week. Funding was for one year only and expires on 31.03.10. Given the current economic climate, there has been a high demand for this service and temporary funding has been secured from existing budgets to fund the service for a further two years and extend it to 37 hours per week. Although there is no on-going source of funding, it would seem reasonable to include a requirement for independent housing advice and information within the service specification for the new corporate advice and information contract albeit at lower volumes in the longer term as the recession comes to an end. Timely interventions of the kind delivered under this contract are key to preventing homelessness situations.
63. The Council pays a grant to Tees Credit Union (lead partner with SDAIS and Five Lamps) on behalf of the Western Area Partnership for advice and information services that will assist residents into financial inclusion, improve their health and enable access to job opportunities (cost in 2009/2010 £18,000). This could not fall within the scope of an SBC tendering exercise as the Western Area Partnership Board determines how their grant should be spent to meet local priorities.
64. The Council has a contract with the George Hardwick Foundation for provision of advice and information to carers including benefits and services available to carers, and help and assistance with carers' assessments. Costs for 2009/2010 are £87,000. Services are delivered on a face-to-face basis at the Stockton Carers' Centre and North Tees Hospital Offices. There is a statutory duty for the Council to provide carers' services as per the Carers (Recognition & Services) Act 1995, Carers (Equal Opportunities) Act 2004 and the Carers and Disabled Children Act 2000 and these statutory services are commissioned

through this contract. The contract is funded through Carers Grant, which is ringfenced. The current contract expires in March 2010. It would seem reasonable to include the generalist welfare benefits advice and information provided through this contract within the new corporate advice and information contract and include the funding in the overall pot.

65. Finally, the Council makes a payment to Away Out for provision of a Youth Alcohol Service (estimated cost in 2009/2010 = £45,600, of which £30,000 is funded by the PCT). It is not appropriate for this to be included in an overall advice and information contract as the work is more specialist in nature and this contract comes to an end on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2010 to be subsumed into a new substance misuse services contract that is about to be tendered.
66. Pooling together the resources that currently feed into the different contracts, gives a total pot of £330,500 per annum to fund a single contract for specified key advice and information services that support the Council's Community Strategy objectives, sourced as follows:

<u>Current Contract</u>	<u>Budget</u>	<u>Annual Amount</u>
Voluntary Sector Support	VSSF	£152,700
Youth Advice (Outreach) Service and Early Years Children's Centres Advice sessions	Children & Young People Operational	£52,780
Self Advocacy Service	Adult Strategy Team	£23,278
Representational Advocacy Service	Adult Strategy Team	£14,773
Advice and Information to Carers	Carers' Grant (ringfenced)	£87,000
<b>Total</b>		<b>£330,531</b>

67. By consolidating the contracts and associated budgets and introducing a new contract covering a three-year period with option to extend for a further two years, there would be greater certainty for the provider and it would be possible to include some of those services such as housing/mortgage repossession advice where there is no longer funding provision in service specific budgets. It would be reasonable to expect economies of scale. The tendering exercise could place a cap on the amount the Council is prepared to pay for these services, say at £310,000 per annum, which would result in savings of £61,500 over a three-year contract, however it is suggested that the specification be worded in a way that gives the Council the option of re-investing these savings to expand the range of advice and information services provided under the contract, as the impact of the current economic climate becomes clearer. The proposed arrangements will balance potential savings with the service improvements that could arise from having a single contract, for example the inclusion of housing/homelessness advice, which under current circumstances cannot be funded beyond 2011/2012 and also provides flexibility given the uncertainties of requirements arising as a result of the recession. Efficiencies will also be realised in terms of tendering and contract management as we move from five contracts to one.
68. TUPE may apply where providers have appointed staff to undertake the work associated with existing contracts. The implications of this would be discussed

with SDAIS and George Hardwick Foundation as the tender documentation and specification are being prepared.

69. **Recommendation** - that the five separate contracts listed in paragraph (66) above and their associated budgets be pooled and the Council develop a new specification for advice and information services that meet residents' needs and the Council's strategic priorities, particularly around financial inclusion and also takes account of the impact of the current economic climate. That the Council embark on a tendering exercise for a three-year contract, with option to extend for a further two years, with a contract start date of 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011.

*Option 2 - Enter into discussion with the Community Legal Advice Service to understand their capacity for taking on additional cases and how the Council could best promote the national telephone advice line.*

70. A4e have provided statistics showing the take-up of their services from SBC residents:

<u>Area of Law</u>	<u>New cases</u>		
	<b>2007/2008</b>	<b>2008/2009</b>	<b>2009/2010</b> (9 months data scaled up to 12)
Housing	51	70	59
Debt	109	132	152
Welfare Benefits	20	66	119
Employment	83	93	100
Education	0	4	9
Family	54	77	105
Total	317	442	544

71. Whilst the volume of calls from SBC residents to the national helpline is increasing, A4e have confirmed that they have the capacity to take on more cases. They have been given additional LSC funding that has enabled a 25% capacity increase and extended opening hours from April 2009 to include Saturday mornings and weekday evenings.
72. We already promote the telephone helpline service at the Thornaby multi-service centre; an advertisement plays on the TV information screen for customers that are seated in the waiting area. Also staff have had some training about the services offered by the helpline so that, where appropriate, they can suggest the service to customers. This is seen as a way of relieving pressure on local service provision and recognises that some customers prefer telephone interaction rather than face-to-face. However, more could be done to promote the service, for example leaflets and posters in other reception areas and libraries and awareness-raising across more staff that come into contact with residents that might need the type of services provided through the Community Legal Advice Service.
73. **Recommendation** - That the availability of free, independent legal advice and information via the Community Legal Advice telephone helpline and website for people who are entitled to Legal Aid be promoted more widely across the Council by displaying posters and leaflets and raising staff awareness of the service so that more signposting takes place.



*Option 3 - Further investigation to understand the reasons for the duplication of welfare benefits advice between the Council's Welfare Rights service and external advice and information agencies and whether this could be eliminated via an alternative service delivery model.*

74. SBC Welfare Rights Service do not operate a time recording system, however estimates of the time the team spends on the different types of welfare benefits work undertaken are:

- Operating the welfare benefits advice line (ie responding to basic enquiries, taking details of incoming initial enquiries and referrals and making outgoing calls (usually a half-hour slot) in response to initial enquiries, which involves giving advice, carrying out basic benefit checks and follow-up work) – **29%**
- Preparing cases and providing representation at Tribunals – **35%**
- Take-up campaigns – **17%**
- BME Surgeries – **10%** (in effect this represents 70% of the work of one member of the team)
- Other work (such as talks/training/information sharing/attending meetings) – **9%**

75. Most of the clients dealt with by Welfare Rights are referred to the service from another source, rather than a direct approach from the client. For example during 2008/2009:

Internal Referrals from colleagues in SBC social care	415
Other internal SBC referrals	98
Referred from Housing Benefits	54
Referred from Tristar Homes	48
Referred from DWP	20
Previous client	262
Self referred in response to a Welfare Rights campaign	221
Recommended by friend/family	124
Not known	<u>68</u>
TOTAL	1310

76. Clients are signposted to SDAIS where:

- They are asking for help with filling in forms;
- They have already approached SDAIS for help with their case (except occasionally where the case has reached tribunal stage and the client needs representation)

77. In terms of the nature of the work, welfare rights services provided by SDAIS are generally the same as those provided by the Council's Welfare Rights service:

- Both take on casework;
- Both represent clients at Tribunals (and up to Commissioner level in a small number of cases). SDAIS attended tribunals on behalf of 126 clients during 2008/2009 and Welfare Rights attended 45 tribunal hearings;
- SBC Welfare Rights delivers BME outreach surgeries in Thornaby and Central Stockton, SDAIS delivers outreach advice and information services in Billingham, Clarences, Albany, Ragworth, Thornaby and Norton.
- Both carry out take-up campaigns.

Although the type of work is the same, the organisations have different sets of clients and are careful not to act for the same client. As indicated above, Welfare Rights clients tend to be referrals from other SBC services whereas SDAIS clients generally self-refer through awareness of the work of the CAB service.

78. There are also some additional aspects of Welfare Rights work that are more closely aligned to SBC services and agendas. These differentiate the SBC Welfare Rights and SDAIS (and the other local voluntary sector) services and there are several examples: SBC Welfare Rights service acts as a reference point for advice and referrals from Social Care staff and undertakes specific work linked to projects within CESC such as LD resettlement and extra care. The Welfare Rights team is recognised as a useful training and information resource, has links with other parts of the Council such as Housing Benefits and Tristar Homes that offer potential for data-matching and targeted take-up work and can be used to work to key local authority agendas such as financial inclusion and economic wellbeing. On the other hand, SDAIS has an effective local network of access points, is a well-known source of advice and information (as evidenced by the results of the Viewpoint survey that was conducted as part of the baseline phase of this review), and holds the Legal Services Commission Specialist Quality Mark.
79. Capacity is an issue that was highlighted during the baseline phase of the review, with both SBC Welfare Rights and SDAIS reporting increase demand over the last year:

<b>SDAIS – approaches by enquiry type</b>	<b><u>Q1 2008/2009</u></b>	<b><u>Q1 2009/2010</u></b>	<b>% Change</b>
Welfare Benefits	1450	2327	+60%
Debt	1748	3198	+83%
Employment	297	517	+74%
Housing	340	680	+100%
Family	128	200	+56%
All enquiries	4589	7956	+73%

SDAIS were reporting waiting lists of over 30 people seeking an appointment with a specialist debt caseworker and waiting times of between 2-3 weeks.

In the same period, Welfare Rights reported a 25% increase in the number of enquiries to their Advice Line.

Whilst we have a situation where the same type of work is being carried out by Welfare Rights, SDAIS and to a lesser extent some other organisations, in the current economic climate there are issues balancing demand for services with supply which needs to be taken into account in the recommendations arising from the review whilst recognising that the higher than usual demand driven by the recession should reduce in the medium to longer term.

80. As part of the review, research was conducted into welfare rights delivery models within other local authority areas. The information was gathered mainly through a survey to members of NAWRA (National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers), follow-up telephone calls, and internet research. The main findings from this research were:

- The most common model is the same as that currently in existence at SBC ie conventional in-house welfare rights team operating in addition to the local voluntary organisations, particularly the CAB. There are varying degrees of joint working between in-house welfare rights and the local CAB. There is no evidence of any co-ordinated joint working between the SBC welfare rights service and local voluntary sector, which means missed opportunities for efficiencies. This is a potential area for improvement.
- There are examples of in-house welfare rights teams forming partnerships and networks that have attracted external funding.
- Some Welfare Rights services deliver advice surgeries in GP practices, reflecting good practice in delivering advice in convenient locations where demand for welfare benefits type advice and information is high. This arrangement attracts PCT funding towards the cost of the service.
- Some Welfare Rights services provide “second tier” services only ie they offer a consultancy service for social work clients. It is a service that supports organisations to support their clients. Those that provide this service occasionally have direct support with the clients where the case is particularly complex.
- The set up in Hull follows a different model where the in-house team works as part of the “Hull Community Legal Advice Centre” (CLAC). Hull City Council ended all the separate contracts it had with external advice providers and re-commissioned a larger advice service, joint funded with the Legal Services Commission. The in-house welfare rights team are still employed by the Council, but work within the CLAC where customers can access the full range of integrated advice and information services at a single location.

81. The research identified a number of examples where in-house welfare rights services are able to achieve financial benefits for the Council by bringing money in, as well as securing additional income for residents as described in the following paragraphs.

### Independent Living Fund (ILF)

82. The Independent Living fund is a national resource funded by central government, dedicated to delivering financial support to disabled people and advancing standards of independent living, enabling disabled people to choose to live in the community, rather than in residential care. It provides discretionary cash payments directly to disabled people so that they can purchase care from an agency or pay the wages of a privately employed personal assistant.

83. Identifying potential claimants for ILF and encouraging/assisting them to apply can result in positive outcomes for the individual and for the Council (which would not have to provide residential care). Within the SBC Welfare Rights Team there is a temporary post “Independent Living Fund Officer” that was introduced some years ago to support the ILF process, however it is accepted that increasing ILF take-up should be the responsibility of all those that act on behalf of clients, ie including social workers, not just an individual within the welfare rights team. A proposal is being considered as part of the Council’s Personalisation project to transfer the temporary ILF officer from Welfare Rights to become part of the temporary specialist support team that is being created under the Personalisation agenda to support the integration of self-directed support into the social work

teams. This review supports such an approach and recommends the transfer take place as soon as possible.

84. **Recommendation** - That the temporary post of ILFO transfer from the in-house Welfare Rights team to the temporary Personalisation Support Team, followed by a further review to consider the optimum place within the organisation for this role, when the work of the Personalisation support team concludes.

Linking in-house Welfare Rights and Client Financial Services teams

85. A number of Councils have identified that close working between their in-house Welfare Rights service and Client Financial Services team (that carries out social services financial assessments) can create financial benefits for both clients and the Council. Effective communication and sharing of information can help to ensure that clients are getting the maximum benefits to which they are entitled. The additional income generated for clients can then contribute towards the costs of personal care, and is viewed as bringing money into the Council. Several authorities have integrated their welfare rights and client financial services teams into a single unit. At Walsall Council the in-house Welfare Rights team carry out home visits to complete financial assessments and as part of the process ensure that the household's income is fully maximised through checking entitlement to welfare benefits and other complimentary services.

86. In Stockton a different approach has been adopted and the two teams are in different locations and managed by different heads of service. This was a deliberate decision to avoid potential conflicts of interest though the scale of conflict has diminished recently in the light of changes to the way that financial assessments are carried out and the approach of the Pensions Service.

87. **Recommendation** – That, subject to consultation with staff and unions, an organisation restructure be undertaken within CESC to merge the rest of the in-house Welfare Rights team with the CESC Client Financial Services team and that the focus of the Welfare Rights team within this new structure be on (but not exclusively):

- supporting social care clients to maximise their income and access other services that might enhance their wellbeing (thereby bringing in additional income for the Council)
- undertaking specific projects linked to other Council services and key Council agendas, particularly how to make use of internal information and customer insight to target campaign work
- acting as a reference point for advice and referrals from Social Care staff
- co-ordinating Advice and Information provision across the borough
- developing referral protocols with the external provider selected to deliver the contract for advice and information services recommended at paragraph 69 in an attempt to cut down some of the task duplication and enable a more specialist approach to certain tasks (such as representation at Tribunals)

88. **Recommendation** - That the service enter into discussions with the PCT to seek to draw in funding by delivering advice sessions at GP practices, similar to models adopted by other local authorities.

*Option 4 - A model for future delivery that ensures more co-ordination and joined up working between all the different parties involved in advice and information giving across the borough.*

89. Before arrangements can be put in place to co-ordinate the activities of all the different parties involved in advice and information giving across the borough, a piece of work needs to be done to actually establish what activities are going on “out there”. There are numerous different types of organisations that provide advice and information of the kind being considered by the review:

- The Council;
- Voluntary Sector;
- Government Departments (such as Job Centre Plus);
- Private Companies (such as the firms of Solicitors that provide welfare benefits and housing advice under the Legal Aid Scheme).

90. As this review has progressed the need for a comprehensive database of providers of advice and information has become evident, both in terms of enhancing the ability of our staff to signpost residents to organisations that can help them and in order to improve the co-ordination of advice and information activities across the borough.

#### Signposting

91. An important aspect of work in the advice and information sector, highlighted during the baseline phase (paragraphs 24-27 and 52 above) is signposting - giving information or referring customers to other organisations that can help them (as opposed to providing specific advice, information and guidance about a technical subject).

92. **Recommendation** – that the Web Development Team, part of the new Communications Team, develop a specification and work with Xentrall ICT to create a directory of Advice and Information providers across the borough.

93. The directory would be web-based with comprehensive search facilities. Each organisation that has an entry in the directory would be responsible for maintaining their entry and keeping it up to date. The directory would be accessed via the SBC website and would therefore be available both to staff and for residents that would like to self-serve. Catalyst has offered to promote this idea and seek initial expressions of interest from third sector organisations that would like to appear in the directory.

94. **Recommendation** - that Customer Services and the Library Service promote the availability of the new directory and become points of contact for customers seeking sources of advice and information in face-to-face situations and over the telephone.

#### Co-ordination

95. In 2000, the Community Legal Services Partnership (CLSP) was launched, “to create a network of quality providers of legal services, supported by co-ordinated funding that delivers services to local communities according to an understanding of local needs.” This included a network of advice and information providers from all the different sectors described in paragraph 89 above, co-ordinated by the

Legal Services Commission. For several years, until the LSC support ended, the network met quarterly and enabled members to obtain information about national and local developments in their field, and work in partnership to improve the quality of advice and information services in the borough.

96. The demise of the CLSP left a gap and missed opportunities to develop joint campaigns and joint training events share plans, knowledge and expertise, avoid duplications and work in partnership to develop advice and information services that meet resident's needs in the most efficient and effective way. The review has identified that improvements could be made for SBC residents if there was better planning, co-ordination of and partnership between the different providers of advice and information services.
97. Many authorities have set up new networks, with similar objectives to those of the CLSP and some have been successful in securing Big Lottery grants to support their work. Big Lottery grants are available to support targeting and take-up campaigns around increasing the number of people that access advice and information, rather than directly funding advisers and caseworkers.
98. If a new advice providers' network were to be created, the Council would have to lead the initiative, given the range of different organisations that would need to be involved. There would also be a position for Catalyst in its role as support and representation for third-sector organisations in the Borough.
99. **Recommendation** – That an advice providers' network be created, with responsibility for setting up and leading this network sitting within the restructured Welfare Rights Team recommended earlier in the report.
100. **Recommendation** – The newly formed advice providers network explore options of bidding for Big Lottery grant to support the activities of the network.

### Advice and Information EIT Review Team

This was an officer led review, reporting-in to the Executive Scrutiny Committee

Lead Officer: Debbie Hurwood (Head of Customer Services and Taxation)  
Support/Challenge: Tony Beckwith (Head of Support Services)  
Financial Support: Stephen Winship (Chief Financial Planner)

A project team was established to gather the baseline information. This team comprised Chris Cooke (Families Information Service Manager), Angela Connor (Social Care Team Manager), Regina Harrington (Housing Options Team Leader Service Development), Andy Hately (IAG Development Manager), Stephen Shaw (Principal Community Officer) and Mike Wray (Development Officer).