



Strategy for Advice Services in Southwark 2010/2012

Executive Summary

1. Introduction to the Strategy

The strategy has been developed by a partnership of independent legal advice providers in Southwark: The Southwark Legal Advice Network (SLAN).

The purpose is to set out the current background of advice provision in Southwark, and to look at how this can be developed to meet some of the perceived advice needs, particularly for more vulnerable residents.

The strategy examines the community profile and factors that indicate the need for legal and general advice. It also aims to demonstrate how the provision of high quality advice can assist commissioners to deliver effective services, meet their priorities, and promote stronger communities.

The strategy is a living document, with a work plan which will be reviewed and updated on a six monthly basis, taking into account important factors such as the results of Legal Service Commission tenders, and findings from the 2011 census.

A full copy of the strategy is available on the SLAN website: www.southwarkadvice.org.uk, or from Sarah Rose, SLAN administrator: slan@southwarkcabservice.org.uk or 020 7740 1744.

2. Key Findings

There are high levels of deprivation in the Borough, and evidence of a need for independent advice particularly in the areas of debt, welfare benefits, housing, employment and immigration. The personalisation of care may lead to a further need for community care advice.

The diverse community in the Borough, with a large number of more recently arrived people, means that we have a high level of residents in the Borough whose first language is not English. This, together with low literacy levels, indicates that residents need more support to be able to access their rights and responsibilities.



There is an increasing level of indebtedness, and the level of rent, mortgage and Council Tax arrears is a major cause for concern, both within the voluntary advice sector and for the Local Authority.

The provision of free and independent advice by the voluntary sector has typically been targeted at those who are most vulnerable or marginalised: people who need help to live independently, those without a job or on a low income, or those from particularly disadvantaged groups and communities. The profile of the advice agency users confirms this.

The advice sector has a key role to play in helping to improve the health and well-being of Southwark residents, by increasing income, removing barriers to returning to employment and reducing the stress caused by debt, employment and housing problems. This is recognised in the Mayor for London's Health Inequalities Strategy.

The provision of high quality debt advice can reduce pressures that families may be experiencing; improving health and well-being, and removing some of the barriers to parents returning to work. Debt and housing advice prevent homelessness for families.

Housing advice, particularly for private tenants, can improve housing conditions for families. Unfit housing is a strong indicator of child poverty.

Employment and discrimination advice can help parents retain jobs and avoid slipping into poverty.

The advice services are all concerned about reductions in funding, and are responding in creative ways, and by strengthening partnerships. A good deal of targeted outreach advice is provided. Advice targeted at specific groups, such as refugees and recently arrived migrants, and language-specific advice services, can assist with the objective of 'narrowing the gap', and reducing inequalities by ensuring that parents and young are aware of their legal rights and responsibilities.

Outreach advice in settings such as Sure Start and Children's centres has been shown to be an excellent way of reaching families with young children.

It is felt that there may be a lack of awareness about discrimination and Human Rights issues amongst frontline staff in the Borough, particularly the areas that have more recently entered legislation such as sexuality, age and religion. This means that a lot of issues that should be tackled are not spotted, and if they are, there may not be local capacity to take cases on.



Given funding constraints, it will be essential for the independent advice sector to further develop partnerships with statutory bodies and other community agencies, particularly those serving more recently arrived communities. There may be a role for established advice providers to provide mentoring support for community groups. Certainly, the Southwark Advice Forum provides a good opportunity to provide training and peer support.

Feedback from service users shows a high level of satisfaction with the quality of advice they have received, but there are issues about initial access to services, waiting times, and the lack of clarity about what to expect from advice services.

This often results in residents visiting or ringing several agencies before they find the person who can help them, and can lead to problems escalating.

3. Key Recommendations and work plan.

The findings of the strategy have been distilled into 5 key objectives. Progress towards meeting these targets will be carried out by the SLAN partnership and reviewed in January 2011.

Objective	Tasks	Timeline
1. Maintain current levels of funding for advice services in Southwark.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion and marketing of advice services with local and national commissioners of services. • Improved collection of statistical information between SLAN partners. • Annual report of the advice services produced with impact and outcome report. • Opportunities for joint funding bids identified and actioned. 	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>By September 2010</p> <p>By September 2011</p> <p>Ongoing</p>
2. Improve the client experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of SLAN public website. • To develop an adviser area on the SLAN website to keep community agencies updated on relevant training opportunities, meetings, 	Completed with monthly review and update



	<p>events and consultations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of the website. Book marks and Flyers produced. • Develop triage checklists in key areas of law, to adopt a common assessment framework. • Provide quarterly training workshops at Southwark Advice Forum meetings. • Provide 6 monthly networking meetings for frontline workers to assist with effective referrals. • Provide training for council officers on effective referrals to advice agencies. • Carry out an annual consultation with community groups on effectiveness of information on signposting and referrals. 	<p>July 2010</p> <p>October 2010</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>Ongoing target: 1 per quarter</p> <p>January 2011</p>
<p>.3. Further develop partnerships between advice agencies, community groups, and the statutory sector, to minimise the impact of the recession.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a special Council Tax debt drop-in service. • Continue to co-ordinate the Southwark Financial Inclusion Forum, and the Keep Warm. Keep Well partnership. • Develop stronger links with the Housing benefit Department. • Develop stronger links with Private Tenants Department. • Diversify the membership of SLAN and SAF to include 6 additional smaller community 	<p>Ongoing: Piloted May 2010</p> <p>Roll out: September 2010</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>November 2010</p> <p>September 2010</p> <p>By January 2011</p>



	groups.	
4. Increase access to advice for some of the more disadvantaged sections of the community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote the website so that the public are aware of how to access advice services and are able to access a range of self help information to inform them of their rights and responsibilities. • Develop special housing allocations advice service. • Ensure that agencies are providing appropriate interpretation and translation of key information in the community. • Develop closer links with agencies working with people with sensory impairment. • Explore ways of providing information and advice for people who are deaf and or blind. • Provide training for advisers aimed at increasing awareness of issues facing people with visual impairment. • Provide training for advisers on mental health issues. • Contribute to local equalities and human rights services, including hate crime. • Explore increasing access to advice in geographical areas currently poorly served by advice services. 	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>October 2010</p> <p>Ongoing</p>
5. Improve policies and services affecting Southwark residents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribute the experience of advice service clients to relevant local consultations. • Participate in Southwark Voice. • Develop the potential of the website as a mechanism for 	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>January 2011</p>



	collecting social policy evidence.	
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4. Summary and aims of the Southwark Legal Advice Network

The Southwark Legal Advice Network builds on the existing Southwark Community Legal Services Partnership, which includes voluntary sector advice providers, private practice solicitors, and community and statutory agencies. The project aims to link more effectively with statutory services and ensure that the wider community sector is able to make effective referrals to legal advice providers.

The core partnership consists of:

- Southwark CABx
- Blackfriars Advice Centre
- Southwark Law Centre
- Cambridge House Law Centre
- Southwark Refugee Project
- Multi Lingual Community Rights Shop
- Afro Asian Advisory Service
- Pierce Glynn Solicitors
- Anthony Gold Solicitors.
- Southwark Council Community Engagement Department

The Network itself is open to all agencies that have an interest in the provision of advice at a strategic level. Network meetings are generally held on a quarterly basis.

Southwark Citizens Advice Bureaux Service is the lead partner and employs a development manager and a part time administrator to co-ordinate the work of the Legal Advice Network. The central co-ordination of the project is funded until June 2012 by the Big Lottery Fund, and the outcomes it has achieved will be independently evaluated by March 2012.

For more information visit www.southwarkadvice.org.uk, or contact

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