

Evaluation of Connecting Advice in Dorset project

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report has been commissioned by Citizens Advice in Dorset to evaluate its Connecting Advice in Dorset project. The report has been produced by Tim Clark.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This report seeks to provide you with an independent evaluation of the Connecting Advice in Dorset project. The report will be reviewed and discussed at the Project Advisory Board meeting on 14th December.

Findings from surveys

- 2.2 The Advice Service Transition Fund ('ASTF') was launched in 2013 in order to mitigate the impact of cuts to civil legal aid.
- 2.3 The ASTF funded Connecting Advice in Dorset project comprises 12 partners and has 3 outcomes that are based closely on the ASTF programme criteria.
- 2.4 Partners view the most useful project activities as free training and the fortnightly E bulletins.
- 2.5 Partners view the least useful activities as consultancy support and the guide to using new technology to deliver advice.
- 2.6 Partners consider the greatest benefit of the project to be in the opportunities it provides to work better together and the better signposting and referrals.
- 2.7 Partners consider the least effective benefit of the project to be working together to get funding and improved organisational resilience.
- 2.8 The project activities that partners think are most important to maintain following the end of ASTF funding are reduced cost training and the fortnightly e bulletins, followed by the Local Advice Networks ('LANs') and six monthly conferences.
- 2.9 Most partners say they most need help with maintaining close working relationships with other partners after funding ends.

Findings from interviews

- 2.10 There are mixed views about how successful LANs have been but most partners think they should be continued.
- 2.11 Referrals and signposting have improved, but as a result of improved knowledge and awareness of what other organisations are doing, rather than through use of a standard referral form.
- 2.12 The training programme is universally praised and valued.
- 2.13 The conferences have provided excellent opportunities for networking and information exchange.
- 2.14 The Skype pilots have not worked as well as had been hoped but there is interest in developing new Skype services.
- 2.15 The Urban Adviser and Young Person's Adviser services have worked well for the partners who deliver them, but have not had an impact on the wider partnership or on other project activities.
- 2.16 The E bulletins are universally praised and welcomed as providing timely, relevant and useful information on a wide range of issues.
- 2.17 Partners generally like the Project website although some feel there is scope for confusion between it and the Citizens Advice in Dorset website.
- 2.18 The various guides and reports commissioned or written by the project have had a more limited impact, with some partners not having read them or not finding them relevant.
- 2.19 Partners agree with the proposed bid to Reaching Communities for a specialist advice service.
- 2.20 The core strategy meetings are thought to be very useful.
- 2.21 There are a variety of views expressed by partners about whether each of the 3 project outcomes have been met. On balance partners think outcome 1 has been met; outcome 2 partly met; and outcome 3 has been met in respect of organisations being more effective, but not in respect of them being more resilient.
- 2.22 Partners think establishing a membership scheme is a good idea and a good way of sustaining the project, however there is not a clear consensus about the best model to use.
- 2.23 There are very mixed views about merger or consolidation as a response to future funding pressure.

Analysis and lessons learned

- 2.24 The project has succeeded in achieving a major shift in culture within the local advice sector.
- 2.25 The efforts made by Shelter in providing an inclusive balance of training subjects and locations, and in making a concerted effort to obtain feedback on the courses offered, has paid dividends, making it the single most useful project activity by the end of the project.
- 2.26 The ASTF programme criteria – including the limited duration of two years and the limit on the funding that could be used for direct service delivery - has restricted the overall impact of the project.
- 2.27 The approach taken of bidding for funding for one ASTF project across the whole county was ambitious and unusual, and has led to difficulty in meeting some of the indicators (through no fault of the project team) including, for example, the creation a single telephone entry point or the various targets around funding strategies and bids.
- 2.28 Although many organisations across the county are not ready for merger, there is acknowledgement that potential local authority mergers or closer working may put this on the agenda in the future. The improved joint working achieved through the project should enable mature discussions on this difficult issue to take place when the time comes.

Recommendations

- 2.29 Although not a major requirement in this evaluation the reviewer does make a small number of recommendations designed to help enhance the legacy of the project and address some of the issues that have arisen.

These are summarised below:

- Investigate and make applications to funders who would be prepared to fund the membership scheme
- Consider the feasibility of extending the scheme beyond the boundaries of Dorset to take in neighbouring counties, and perhaps to create a Connecting Advice in Wessex membership scheme
- Consider a further county wide bid to Reaching Communities – in addition to the specialist advice service application – to develop or expand a single telephone entry point to local advice services, and to provide further delivery of services through Skype
- Create a forum for LAN chairs to come together to discuss best practice and LAN development and / or establish a task and finish group to review the optimum future structure for LANs

- Establish links with Wessex Water so that CAID can become the 'go to' organisation for Wessex Water for advice on their financial capability programme and to distribute funding under its grant programme
- Continue to publicise reports and guides already produced to ensure they remain visible, and ensure they are updated with new information and thinking about best practice as it becomes available

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