

Advice Dorset Partnership: Outline Strategy 2020 – 2024

1 May 2020

INTRODUCTION: The current situation

Everyone has one focus as of now: working together to support our communities in these most exceptional times. The current Covid-19 outbreak is having an unprecedented impact on people's lives, and this is likely to affect information advice and guidance services in a number of ways. The Advice Dorset Partnership, collectively through its Steering Group and the entire membership, is well placed to assist the needs of our communities at this challenging time. Areas where these needs exist include:

- Increased need for advice on the range of new measures introduced to mitigate the impact of the shutdown.
- Advice agencies offering services in different ways (web-based, email, phone, video calls) and working to meet the particular challenges for helping the most vulnerable clients.
- Managing more people "in crisis" as measures impact almost all aspects of daily living, especially for the more vulnerable
- Agencies that use volunteers facing a significant dwindling of the workforce.
- Reduced opportunities to apply for renewal or new funding opportunities particularly those that need partnerships to be developed.

Advice agencies have demonstrated over the last six weeks that they are able to rise to the challenge and ensure services are available, adapting service offerings as required to assist with the different needs from those usually seen, and provide data and intelligence on trends and issues. Our members in both local authority areas (Dorset and BCP) were immediately approached to join and contribute to local community response plans, offering resources to core service providers and demonstrating flexibility to work differently to best support the people of Dorset.

This has included increased collaboration between advice providers and other key Voluntary and Community Sector agencies such as Dorset Community Action and

the Volunteer Centre in Dorset County, and Community Action Network in BCP. The Advice Dorset Partnership has also increased the frequency and circulation of its E News bulletin to provide updates on rapidly changing information on issues such as benefits, employment, housing, other Government support, local support services, and organisational support (eg. grant funding).

We are now developing our **Recovery Plan**. We anticipate that we will have to continue to offer services in a different way for some months, but we will be working with statutory organisations to see how limited and safe face-to-face advice can be re-introduced, as we know there are very vulnerable clients out there for whom phone or web-based services simply do not work. We are also planning for the types of advice needs that will emerge once lock-down is eased and some of the time-limited support measures end. This is likely to include:

- More people with priority debts: rent and mortgage arrears, Council Tax, utilities.
- Evictions, particularly for those in the private rented sector.
- Increased street homelessness, with the ending of temporary accommodation for those who were homeless, and the implications for those who have been accommodated despite previously having had 'no recourse to public funds'.
- Overpayment of benefits and Universal Credit; potential fraud investigations for failure to inform DWP or HMRC of a change of circumstances.
- Employment issues: people facing a permanent change to their contract such as reduced hours and pay, a greater expectation that they will work 'flexibly', a high level of "furloughed staff" not having a job to return to, redundancy etc. leading to a spike in new Universal Credit applications
- Small business unable to resume trading, leading to closure and business debts.
- Implications of inadvertent non-compliance, eg. immigration status not updated, tax returns and tax credit reviews not submitted, etc .

We have demonstrated that as a group of advice providers we are able to step up and work with you to provide the support and solutions in the short term. We now look forward to working with you over the medium and longer term.

Tina Barton: Independent Chair – Advice Dorset Partnership

A Strategy for 2020-24

The **Advice Dorset Partnership** has a well-established presence across **geographic** Dorset with a strong history of community provision and impact.

Background and Context

The Advice Partnership is a group of agencies that provide **information, advice and guidance** across geographic Dorset, covering the Dorset and Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council areas.

The Partnership was set up in 2016, following the production of the **Dorset Advice Strategy 2016 – 2021** (produced for the then Dorset County Council by Citizens Advice). It was agreed in January 2020 that the Strategy was due for review; since that decision we have found ourselves in a new and challenging situation, with longer term impacts as outlined in the Introduction above. However, we agreed it was even more important to carry out the review and communicate it to our partners and other stakeholders.

There are over 50 partners involved in this partnership and lead partners are represented on the Steering Group by senior officers from organisations including: Ansbury Guidance, Citizens Advice, Dorset Race Equality Council, Help & Care, Age UK, and Shelter. Dorset Council is also represented.

Activities are planned and co-ordinated by the steering group led by an independent chair.

This review of the Advice Dorset Partnership is timely for the following reasons:

- Following Local Government Reorganisation, two new authorities have been in place since April 2019 – Dorset Council and Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole Council – and both have recently produced their Corporate Plans covering the next 4-year period.
- Both unitary authorities face severe budget pressures.
- Dorset Council is reviewing grant funding for the VCSE, and many agencies that provide advice are voluntary sector organisations.
- The need for independent, free and quality assured information, advice and guidance is increasing due to a range of factors:
 - Major changes to the Welfare Benefits system including the introduction of Universal Credit.
 - Pressure on statutory services in particular adult social care, as well as support services.

- The increasing trend for services to be ‘digital by default’.
- The demographics and socio-economic features of the area, such as significant older population and a wider than average discrepancy between average income and average house price.
- Increasing diversity across the population of Dorset, beyond the older generation.
- Rurality and access issues in the Dorset Council area.
- Pockets of severe and at times hidden deprivation in urban and coastal communities.

We have reviewed the 2016 objectives and redefined them to meet the current challenges – and opportunities.

The objectives of the Partnership are to:

- Support a joined up advice sector with all partners maximising their ability to participate, collaborate and contribute.
- Develop the skills and knowledge of front line teams.
- Provide accurate and relevant information to all front line teams in a timely and concise manner
- Encourage the development of sustainable and transparent funding processes, embedding accountability and value for money.

We believe if we can do this then the outcomes for those needing our services will be:

1. More people will get the right advice when they need it.
2. People will benefit from a ‘no wrong door’ culture with improved inter-agency signposting and referral.
3. Fewer people will get to a crisis point and require more costly interventions by statutory services.

A strong advice sector across Dorset can actively support both new councils to deliver their priorities. We can also work with other public bodies such as NHS and CCG as they develop new ways of working such as the Integrated Care Service and Social Prescribing. The Strategy can complement other work in the VCSE such as the Dorset Voluntary Sector Transformation Plan. In addition the Strategy can work across

'borders' between the two new councils within geographic Dorset and also support people in need in other bordering areas such as Hampshire, Wiltshire and Somerset.

The Advice Dorset Partnership has a strategic importance to work with all to deliver better together. It does not exist in isolation or as a group which is separate from the statutory services, but plays an intrinsic role in the delivery of services whilst supporting the statutory services to deliver. We recognise the benefit of joint activities which are able to improve outcomes with total impact exceeding the sum of the parts.

Other benefits from the ADP

The advice sector also has a combined 'ear to the ground' providing services to some of the most vulnerable residents, collecting data on advice issues, identifying trends and emerging issues, spotting 'advice deserts', and seeing at first-hand how national and local policies impact on people.

The ADP provides an important 'overview' role and a link to the people using the services, not just services in one sector but across sectors, allowing evaluation of how services best work together, and assisting with a co-ordination role within this to help link services.

Many agencies make use of volunteers who bring considerable added value, and often use their volunteer time to gain new skills as a way to get back into paid work.

In addition, the sector brings in significant external funding for projects and initiatives.

What do we need to do this?

The ADP currently relies on Dorset Council funding to Citizens Advice to support the steering group and the activities which keep the sector up-to-date (regular E News, training events etc). This is set to continue during 2020/21 with the administrative support provided by Caroline Buxton working at Citizens Advice Central Dorset.

Developing joint solutions

We welcome the opportunity to work with our partners in local authorities, health and other settings to identify and develop key activities that benefit our residents. Within the ADP we already work together informally and in more formal

partnerships. One such example is Prejudice Free Dorset, a partnership of like-minded agencies coming together to provide advice and information to reduce the amount of prejudice in Dorset.

The Advice Dorset Partnership is a well-run established group of like-minded organisations who are dedicated to continuing to improve the lives of all in the communities we serve, and look forward to further successes during the next four years.

Independent Chair of the Advice Dorset Partnership: Tina Barton

For further information contact Caroline Buxton:

caroline.buxton@centralca.org.uk