

Response to A Strategy for the Delivery of Generalist Advice Services in Northern Ireland 2015 – 2020

1. Introduction

Housing Rights Service (HRS) was established in 1964 and is the leading provider of independent specialist housing advice services in Northern Ireland (NI). We work to achieve positive change by protecting and promoting the rights of people who are in housing need and our policy work is based on the experience of our clients. Our services are delivered throughout NI and focus on the key areas of preventing homelessness, accessing accommodation, tackling affordability and poor housing conditions.

Although HRS is a specialist housing advice agency, we welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation on a new strategy for the delivery of generalist advice services in NI. We have a long standing history of working closely with generalist advice agencies as partners, especially through our Community Housing Advice Partnership (CHAP) (see 4.2 later), and also in dealing with many clients who have been referred to our service from generalist advice agencies.

Whilst this consultation does not address the needs of specialist advice agencies we feel that any future changes to the work, organisation and administration of the generalist advice sector has the potential to impact on the day-to-day work of specialist agencies such as HRS. Over 70% of our clients are already referred to us by another agency. Any change in their resources will also have a correlative effect on the demand for HRS. Therefore, we feel strongly that it is important for government to give careful consideration to any feedback from the specialist sector; especially in light of government's aim for better co-ordination between agencies in using available resources more effectively.

This consultation paper has been released against the backdrop of an evaluation of the previous advice services' strategy 'Opening Doors', the reform of local government and the looming introduction of welfare reform. It is also set in the context of increased usage of technology both in the home and at work.

2. Summary

- Generalist advice agencies do not work alone. The voice of the specialist advice sector is crucial to the development and delivery of any new strategy.
- Any increased emphasis on digital and telephony services should not result in a reduction of resources for providing traditional methods of advice giving; which are still the preference of many users.
- Increased usage of digital and telephony services has not led to a comparative reduction in the demand for traditional advice giving methods.
- Any strategy must be supported with sufficient resources and training of advice staff with appropriate skills and knowledge.
- Appropriate referral arrangements between generalist and specialist advice agencies are key to the successful delivery of the strategy.
- Generalist advisers must be trained to recognise when a customer needs other services and be able to make appropriate referrals for specialist advice.

3. Vision and values for a new strategy

As an organisation which sets great store on its own vision and values, HRS welcomes the formation of a vision and set of values for the proposed strategy.

We believe that a vision should be inspirational. In light of that, we would propose the following amendment to the suggested vision:

*'To **ensure** accessible, quality generalist advice services **are available** for all the people of Northern Ireland.'*

In terms of the list of values, we agree with all of the proposed values but would recommend that an additional value of 'Quality' be added. We believe that in order to provide an effective generalist or specialist advice service it must be of a consistent standard. It would be beneficial if agreed quality standards for different levels of advice giving were implemented across the sector to ensure that all end users are confident in receiving the same quality advice regardless of where they live in NI or the method of contact.

4. Strategic objectives

4.1 Strategic objective 1: To empower and enable people to help themselves

HRS agrees in the empowerment of people. However, all people must be treated as individuals with their own specific needs and requirements. In terms of advice provision,

this can mean accessing advice and assistance through digital and telephony platforms, through personal face-to-face contact with an adviser or a combination of these channels.

Whilst there has undoubtedly been a rise in the use of digital and telephony services these should not necessarily be regarded as the only means of providing advice in the future. We do not believe that a ‘one size fits all’ model of advice giving is necessarily the best option.

HRS has experience of providing online advice services. We currently provide:

- A public advice website www.housingadviceNI.org
- A virtual adviser service to allow people who are experiencing housing debt to contact one of the specialist advisers on our Mortgage Debt Advice Team
- An email advice service which is manned by our advice team.

Our own statistics (Table 1) show that whilst there continues to be increased usage of our online advice services, this has not negated the need for people to have individual contact with an adviser by phone or in person:

Table 1 – Methods of contact for housing advice to HRS

| | 2010/2011 | 2011/2012 | 2012/2013 | 2013/2014 |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Number of clients assisted – traditional methods i.e. phone or in person | 5,625 | 6,952 | 7,770 | 9,371 |
| Number of visits to www.housingadviceNI.org | 240,828 | 519,500 | 699,000 | 657,000 |

We strongly believe that digital and telephony advice services should not be developed in isolation but should be complementary to more traditional advice services which are proven to be effective. There are many people who are unable to use or access digital advice resources who may have no alternative when seeking advice except to approach crisis support services. If these in turn are not available then those people in a crisis will have no means of accessing advice.

Therefore, whilst we agree that new innovative ways of providing advice should continue to be developed, traditional methods of advice giving should be retained and strengthened to provide the relevant support to those clients who either have no option but to use conventional methods or have a preference for that type of service.

Our experience of providing information online shows that many people do feel empowered by the information they find online and feel better able to deal with their problems as a

result. However, we have also found that many of the people using our services are vulnerable. Fortunately, HRS has mechanisms in place to identify such people and ensure that they do not slip through the cracks. For example, when an email or comment from an online user indicates that there may be a risk or vulnerability, we ensure that they are then contacted by an experienced adviser who can provide advice tailored to that person's needs, (see Appendix 1).

4.2 Strategic objective 2: To have an aligned and complementary approach to the delivery of advice services

HRS supports the delivery of advice services in a joined-up collaborative manner. Working in a co-ordinated approach with other agencies can:

- free up much needed resources for all,
- ensure that resources are put to best use, and
- reduce the duplication of work done.

Generalist advice agencies cannot work in isolation. To provide the best outcome for clients, generalist and specialist agencies need to work closely and in tandem with each other. In order for a more collaborative working environment to be successful for the end user, we believe that there needs to be formalised agreements put in place between all parties. This could, for example, be in the form of a service level agreement which would set out agreed standards as to the delivery and quality of the advice giving and also a referral process to ensure that clients have speedy access to specialist advice when required. We also believe that government needs to work with specialist agencies to agree what referral practices can be put in place and what expectations there are on the specialist sector.

One practical example of where collaborative working has already been effective is CHAP. CHAP was launched in 2004 and was jointly developed by:

- Housing Rights Service;
- Citizens Advice; and
- Advice NI.

It is managed by HRS and is currently funded by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

The aim of CHAP is to increase the capacity of information and advice providers throughout Northern Ireland to provide quality housing advice services for people in their local communities who are threatened by homelessness or experiencing housing need. In particular, the partnership focuses on:

- Preventing homelessness by enabling people to sustain existing accommodation and dealing with issues threatening their security of tenure;
- Assisting people to access suitable accommodation by exploring the full range of options available including social housing, low cost home ownership and the private rented sector;
- Providing advice on issues associated with affordability; and
- Assisting clients to challenge adverse housing decisions.

Partnership arrangements have been set up with 24 frontline agencies operating throughout Northern Ireland and Service Level Agreements have been put in place (See Appendix 2 and 3.) The Service Level Agreements are an important tool for formalising the working relationship between CHAP and each of the 24 frontline partner agencies. They set out what exactly is expected of each of the parties and are renewed on an annual basis to take account of any changing circumstances in the project or the agencies.

There are also procedures in place for referring clients to the specialist advice service of HRS and for complaints, should any difficulties or disputes arise.

In the 10 years since it has been operating, CHAP has successfully delivered a high quality service. The satisfaction ratings of the partner agencies as regards to the services provided have scored consistently at around 95% positive rating each year. Furthermore, although there is an avenue for complaints built into the Service Level Agreements, this has never been activated. We believe that CHAP should be regarded as a prime example of how specialist advice agencies can provide valuable support to generalist advice agencies; provided that resources and proper working arrangements are put in place.

4.3 Strategic Objective 3: To have a sustainable Advice Sector which maximises the impact of resources

HRS agrees that best use should be made of existing resources. However, when it comes to IT recording systems for casework we do not necessarily believe that a uniform IT system is needed.

From our own point of view, we believe that it is more important that whatever IT system is implemented it is capable of producing relevant, accurate statistics and is adaptable enough to meet the changing demands of our advice needs.

Many of the AdviceNI aligned agencies, including HRS, use Advice Pro as their case recording system, but this does not necessarily mean that all agencies are recording the same type or level of information on their clients and the advice given. Therefore, we believe that it is more important to have greater consistency regarding the type of data that is collected by way of any IT system. (See 4.6)

In our experience, important resources can be used up in having to respond to changing demands from funders for data. We would recommend that funders are clear and in agreement as to:

- what statistics they require from advice agencies at the outset; and
- what the purpose of the data collecting is; having regard to statutory requirements under data protection.

We believe that having these requirements agreed in advance would free up valuable staff time currently used in amending the recording and reporting systems to meet changing funder demands.

4.4 Strategic Objective 4: To maximise accessibility to quality generalist advice services

HRS agrees that advice services should be available to everyone who needs such help and that it should be convenient to the end user. To that end, HRS has embarked on a number of projects over the years to facilitate greater accessibility to our services e.g. CHAP, www.housingadviceNI.org and the Housing Possession Court Duty Scheme (HPCDS) which works to provide representation to clients at risk of losing their home.

Whilst the half a million visitors to the information pages on the Advice NI and CAB websites, referred to in the consultation (paragraph 50), is impressive, figures (in Table 1) also show that 94% of all client contact was still made by traditional methods i.e. telephone, face-to-face, home visit, type talk.

The fact that so many people visited the relevant websites for help with their queries did not eradicate their need for personal contact with an adviser. We believe that government should not lose sight of traditional methods of advice giving. Digital and telephony advice services should continue to be developed and should be offered as an option to those who prefer this style of advice giving, but only in addition to local based traditional methods and not as a replacement.

Furthermore, we believe that government should carry out investigations into how effective these sites are in relation to providing a positive outcome for the end user. Efforts should be made to undertake an impact assessment to ascertain whether users accessing information on such sites actually had their problem solved.

In our experience of providing advice through www.housingadviceNI.org we believe that it is not enough to merely provide online information without the back-up of individual contact from an adviser. Through the housingadviceNI website, users are signposted to contact an adviser if their problem is particularly complex. Users can:

- phone the HRS advice line;

- email their query and receive a personalised response within 3 days;
- chat live with a Mortgage Debt Adviser during service hours; or
- join in scheduled “live advice clinics” on particular themes.

While many of the site users are able to find the information they require on the site, it is important that those users who have not found the answer to their query can get advice tailored to their particular situation. There is 100% satisfaction among users of HRS’email advice service. In their feedback, users comment on the personalised aspect of the service and value this over a “boilerplate” response. (See Appendix 3 for sample feedback on our email advice service.)

In terms of quality of service, HRS has a strong commitment to quality; it is one of our own organisational values. We believe that quality should be at the heart of any advice service and have suggested earlier that it should also be a value attached to any strategy that results from this consultation.

HRS currently meets the following quality standards:

- Lexcel – Practice Management Standard of the Law Society of Northern Ireland.
- EFQM – European Foundation in Quality Management.
- Investors in People (IIP) – Gold standard.

HRS is aware that the Northern Ireland Advice Services Coalition (NIASC) intends to introduce an agreed quality standard for generalist advice providers. We welcome this in terms of setting out how an advice service should be operated and governed. But we feel that there is also a strong need for a quality standard to be developed which would oversee the level of skills and knowledge of advisers.

HRS is in the process of planning a new housing advice quality standard. This would be a knowledge-based standard for all frontline staff offering housing advice in NI. We hope to work further with NIASC, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the DSD and the advice sector in drawing up this standard.

4.5 Strategic Objective 5: To encourage the role of the Advice Sector in contributing to the policy development cycle

HRS agrees that the advice sector has an important contribution to make in developing a wider policy agenda. Specialist advice agencies have a particularly important role to play in identifying and flagging up specific trends and issues within their own areas of work. As such, we believe that input from the specialist advice sector should complement any system put in place for generalist agencies to develop important policy initiatives.

4.6 Strategic Objective 6: To support the delivery of the strategy

As mentioned earlier (4.4), we agree that devising and implementing a quality standard for the provision of generalist advice would be a welcome development, but believe that this should go beyond the confines of administration and governance of advice agencies.

In terms of IT, we recognise the importance of having competent IT systems in place in order to properly record client demand on services. However, we do not believe that there necessarily needs to be a standardised IT system across the advice sector. Instead, we believe that government and the advice sector needs to reach agreement on what data should be collected from clients, so that there is consistency, regardless of the organisation. For example, agreement should be reached on:

- What is defined as an individual 'client';
- What is defined as a 'case';
- What is defined as an 'issue'.

If all generalist and specialist advice agencies were to capture the same data then this would instil greater confidence in the quality of the data and would make it a much more powerful tool. More accurate comparisons could be made across the sector and trends/causes for concern would be more easily identifiable. This would be regardless of what actual IT system was being employed for the job.

The training of advice staff with the relevant skills and knowledge is a crucial element in delivering the strategy. We believe that all advice staff should be able to attain a set level of knowledge in their given subject. This will also ensure that quality advice is delivered. In order to achieve this, sufficient resources must be made available. At present, there is no regulation or scrutiny into levels of training which means that there is no consistent approach across the sector. There must be a commitment to provide training to staff which, for example, meets the National Occupation Standards to carry out their work role or an organisational pledge to continuous improvement of staff knowledge and skills through the adoption of CPD points (Continuous Professional Development).

Particular attention should also be paid to the different skills and knowledge that is required for an adviser to be able to provide advice by online methods. Such an adviser not only needs to know their subject matter but must also have the technological skills to provide online advice. This will require further specialist training of such staff, which must be sufficiently resourced to provide a quality end product to the user.

4.7 Strategic Objective 7: To deliver the strategy

We believe that it is crucial to have an action plan put in place to deliver the strategy. However, the action plan has to be achievable, measurable and realistic. Measuring the progress of its implementation will be core to its successful delivery.

The involvement of the specialist advice sector is at the heart of delivering this strategy. Any impact on the generalist advice sector will also have consequences for the day-to-day delivery of specialist services. For example, if a formalised referral system was to be set up for referring clients to specialist agencies, then specialist agencies, such as HRS, should be involved in drawing up such procedures.

Therefore, we would call on any Steering Group to include representation from the specialist advice sector. Anything which could potentially impact on the demand for or running of specialist services should involve those agencies at an early stage of discussion.

5.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, we very much welcome this consultation for a new strategy for the delivery of generalist advice services in NI. However, we would reiterate that specialist agencies have a crucial role to play in the future of the advice sector and would welcome a greater say into any developments. Any future strategy cannot work without the input of the specialist sector as the implementation of any new strategy will have an impact on the demand for the specialist sector.

Involving the specialist sector in any discussions would address some of the points raised in the consultation, such as making best use of resources, reducing duplication of work and, ultimately, to provide the best advice services to people in NI regardless of how they wish or are able to access such services.

We will be pleased to provide additional information in support of this response. For further information contact:

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Appendix 1

Sample feedback from vulnerable clients

Users of the HRS email advice service are regularly surveyed to obtain their feedback on how we can improve our service. Below is a sample of some of the actual responses we have received from website users which indicate how very vulnerable some of the people who contact us are.

In these cases, an automated or 'boilerplate' response to their query will not provide any effective assistance to them. It is essential that there is an adviser available to take the time to listen to these people, talk with them and provide them with the support they need:

- *"my husband died and i have been homeless for 2 yrs trying to do part time jobs no money"*
- *"I was in a relationship and very recently that relationship broke down... I live in my vehicle still... No money food etc. I don't know how long I will last.. I don't know the systems at all. Never been unemployed before. Or homeless. Any help would be greatly received. I am 43 yrs old. And if I'm honest scared . But I wouldn't normally admit that."*
- *"My father trow me out. Now i dont a clue of where to go and live. I am starting a job with concentrix in august but until than i dont know what to do."*
- *"I have recently been made homeless by my parents. I am 16 weeks pregnant. Tonight i have managed to spend the night on a friends sofa but tomorrow i dont know where i will stay."*

Appendix 2

Community Housing Advice Partnership Partner Agencies

Current members of CHAP are:

- Age NI
- Antrim District CAB
- Citizens Advice Community Initiatives (formerly Ballymena CAB)
- Banbridge CAB
- Carrickfergus CAB
- Causeway CAB]
- Craigavon District CAB
- Disability Action
- Down District CAB
- Dungannon and Cookstown District CAB
- East Belfast Independent Advice Centre
- Fermanagh CAB
- First Housing Aid and Support Services
- Gingerbread
- Larne CAB
- Ligoniel Improvement Association
- Limavady Community Development Initiative
- Magherafelt District Advice Services
- Mindwise
- Neighbourhood Assist
- NIACRO
- North Down CAB
- Omagh Independent Advice Services
- Strabane and District CAB

Appendix 3

CHAP Agency Locations 2015



Appendix 4

Sample Feedback from Email Advice User Surveys

The following responses illustrate that providing online information on its own is not a sufficient way to provide advice, and that online information services must be supported by a personalised advice service, staffed by experienced advisers who have adequate skills, knowledge and resources at hand to properly deal with queries from members of the public:

- *“excellent service - was expecting an automated response - a really useful and caring reply, thank you”*
- *“Really excellent, thoughtful advice. Commendable service, very fast response (same day) - thanks very much for your help.”*
- *“So far it has proved to be an exceptional service.”*
- *“I was extremely impressed by the thorough response, the short wait time, that the advisor had sought the opinion of a solicitor and the option to follow up with the service again if my landlord was difficult. Really appreciated this help exceeded my expectations”*
- *“I was very pleased with the service you offered. Your email reply was informative and friendly. I appreciate the time taken and detail that went into the reply.”*