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DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Area Advice Centre Location

Policy Statement

October 2010

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Ministerial Foreword

Advice services are a critical element of voluntary and community sector service provision which sits well within a community development framework. In recognition of this, 'Opening Doors', the Department for Social Development's Strategy for the Delivery of Voluntary Advice Services was published in September 2007.



The implementation of 'Opening Doors' is well underway, and following a recent stakeholder consultation exercise, I am pleased to publish this policy statement which provides guidance to councils on the optimum number and location for voluntary advice services in Northern Ireland. This is a key element of the 'Opening Doors' Strategy.

I would like to thank all those stakeholders who participated in workshops and provided written responses to inform my Department's work.

Adoption of the model was originally intended to take place in line with the Review of Public Administration new council areas however given the changes in the RPA implementation timetable and also the pressures on public expenditure my Department will work closely with councils and advice stakeholders to consider the appropriate timetable to establish the network of Area Advice Centres.

I am committed to working with councils, voluntary advice providers and across government to enable the full implementation of 'Opening Doors'.

Alex Attwood MLA
Minister for Social Development

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1. Introduction

1.1 This document constitutes the Department for Social Development's Policy Statement on the Number and Location of Area Advice Centres (hereafter referred to as "the statement"). It sets out the Department's approach to ensuring that voluntary advice services can be planned and delivered in a way which best matches available resources to need, with a particular focus on meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged in society. This identifies a methodology to assist in the development of an integrated network of voluntary services throughout Northern Ireland and also confirms the 34 locations identified using this methodology as currently suitable for the location of an Area Advice Centre. This will also provide councils with an evidence based research methodology for the resourcing of these services in the future.

2. Context

- 2.1 The statement has been produced against the following background. The Department for Social Development (DSD) has policy responsibility for helping to support voluntary information and advice services in Northern Ireland. Following public consultation in 2006 and a period of extensive consultation with all relevant stakeholders, 'Opening Doors' - The Strategy for the Delivery of Voluntary Advice Services to the Community was launched on 10th September 2007¹. 'Opening Doors' aims to put in place an integrated voluntary advice service across Northern Ireland and a framework to ensure that services are planned and delivered in a way which best matches available resources to need. The Strategy focuses on generalist voluntary advice provision.
- 2.2 The Strategy stopped short of mapping existing provision or commenting on the optimum location of services but indicated that the Department intended completing further research. The first phase of research, which was published in April 2008, mapped existing voluntary advice services and government advice and information provision services across Northern Ireland. The findings from this research are contained in the report 'Mapping of Advice, Information and Legal Services in Northern Ireland: Data Paper' and can be found at:
<http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/vcni-opening-doors-background-data-paper.pdf>.
- 2.3 The second phase of research on the optimum location for voluntary advice centres in Northern Ireland resulted in the production of a 'Consultation Document on the Number and Location of Area Advice Centres'. The proposed locations in the document derived from the work of independent researchers and DSD statisticians on the basis of population, deprivation indices and accessibility. The approach of the evidence based methodology along with details of how this was applied as part of the recent consultation process is attached at Annex A².

¹ The 'Opening Doors' document can be accessed at: <http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/voluntary-and-community/vc-publication/vc-strategy-for-voluntary-advice-services.htm>

² The consultation document, which can be found at: <http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/voluntary-and-community/vc-publication/vc-strategy-for-voluntary-advice-services.htm> provides further detail on applying the methodology

- 2.4 The stakeholder consultation ended on 27 November 2009 following a 12 week consultation period. During this period six stakeholder consultation events were held and the Department received a further 33 written responses on the document. The Department has taken account of all the representations in preparing this policy statement. A summary report of the consultation responses is available online at:
<http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/voluntary-and-community/vc-publication/vc-strategy-for-voluntary-advice-services.htm>.
- 2.5 At the time of publishing the consultation document adoption of the model was to take place on the implementation of the RPA new council areas in 2011 with implementation of the model occurring from 2011 through 2012. However this is no longer the case and at the time of producing this statement there is uncertainty as to the RPA timetable ahead. In addition this model is also being implemented in the context of increased demand and given pressures on public expenditure, will need to take place within available budgets. The Department undertakes to work closely with councils and advice stakeholders to consider the appropriate timetable to establish the network of Area Advice Centres.

3. Research findings for Area Advice Centre locations

3.1 The recent research on the optimum location for voluntary advice centres in Northern Ireland identified the following 34 locations as suitable for Area Advice Centres. Area Advice Centre's will be locally based and provide a broad range of advice services. A detailed description of these services can be found in Annex B. This is an indicative framework for the number and location of Area Advice Centres throughout Northern Ireland.

Antrim	Cookstown
Armagh	Craigavon
Banbridge	Derry (Cityside)
Ballycastle	Derry (Waterside)
Ballymena	Downpatrick
Ballymoney	Dungannon
Bangor	Enniskillen
Belfast City Centre	Larne
Belfast East (Newtownards Road)	Limavady
Belfast North (Antrim Road/Carlisle Circus)	Lisburn
Belfast South (Lisburn Road)	Magherafelt
Belfast West (Falls Road)	Newcastle
Belfast (Poleglass/Twinbrook)	Newry
Belfast (Shankill)	Newtownabbey
Belfast (Suffolk/Andersonstown)	Newtownards
Carrickfergus	Omagh
Coleraine	Strabane

- 3.2 The framework of Area Advice Centres proposed would provide a network of voluntary advice services in every main settlement in Northern Ireland. This will build on the services which already exist in these areas and complement advice services provided by Government such as the Social Security Agency, Trading Standards and the NI Housing Executive.
- 3.3 When a comparison is made between the current pattern of voluntary advice services and the research findings for Area Advice Centre locations there is a good geographical match.
- 3.4 The model for voluntary advice services (set out at Annex C) anticipates that advice will be provided via a range of outlets e.g. Area Advice Centres, specialist provision and appropriate outreach including telephone and on-line services. This statement deals only with Area Advice Centre provision, it does not include outreach which can be determined by councils. It is envisaged that there will be a fully integrated service across each council area with local providers sharing resources and working together.

4 Conclusion

- 4.1 The Department's policy objective on voluntary advice services is linked to the Department's wider Public Service Agreements objective on the promotion of a strong, vibrant and sustainable voluntary and community sector to enable better delivery of services. The Department is working towards the associated objective of delivering a sustainable network of voluntary advice centres that meets the needs of people through implementation of the Advice Services Strategy.

- 4.2 The Department fully respects the role of councils with the provision of voluntary advice services and would want to make sure that what we do assists them. The overall aim of the statement is therefore to provide clear guidance to councils on the optimum number and location of Area Advice Centres currently and set a clear framework and methodology that can be used in the future should circumstances change.

Approach for identifying Area Advice Centre locations

The identification of optimum Area Advice Centre locations has been part of an independent research project undertaken on behalf of DSD and the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission. The research has taken account of issues of accessibility, deprivation and population size.

Given the role of councils in funding and resourcing frontline advice services, the implementation of the new framework for voluntary advice services should take account of and fit with new council areas emerging from the RPA review.

The Advice Strategy highlights that population size; deprivation and accessibility are the criteria for locating voluntary advice services. A key principle of 'Opening Doors' is to ensure that there is an integrated network of voluntary advice services throughout Northern Ireland.

'Area Advice Centres' will form the foundation of this network of services at each new council level. This will provide councils with the opportunity to resource services in the most responsive and locally appropriate way. We believe that councils are best placed to determine the precise levels of service required at each location. It is anticipated that the new councils will have suitable arrangements for public engagement and both equality and rural proofing arrangements at the time of resourcing these services in their local area.

The method used to identify possible Area Advice Centre locations was based on two Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) classifications;

- Classification of Settlements based on population and
- Settlement Services Classification. This is based on services in a settlement such as shops, health services and education services. The settlement also serves a catchment area providing a range of shops and services for the people living there³. This was taken as a proxy for accessibility as it identifies service centres with a natural catchment area.

We identified all settlements⁴ with a classification of Band D or above (settlement population of 10,000 or above). We also identified four settlements, which although their settlement classification was Band E, they had a services classification of level 4 indicating that they were a sub regional service centre.

³ **Settlement Services Classification** – Settlements are classified according to the services they have such as shops, health services, education services and so on. Regional Centres (Belfast and Derry) have a classification of 5. Sub-Regional Centres such as Coleraine, Armagh for example, have a classification of 4. These classifications are as identified in the report on Settlement Service Classification in December 2006 by the NISRA Settlement Information and Classification Analysis Group (SICAG) http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/stats_and_research/statistics_and_research-sicag.htm. The locations of advice services proposed in this document means that area advice centre services are provided at all settlements classified Level 4 and above.

⁴ **Classification of settlements-** Settlements are classified in relation to population alone under this classification. There are 7 categories in total, together with a category for small villages, hamlets & open country. This framework was devised by the Inter-Departmental Urban-Rural Definition Group: Statistical Classification of Settlements. For the purposes of this consultation Bands A-D of the Settlement Classifications are referred to.

Band A - Belfast Metropolitan Urban Area

Band B - Derry Urban Area

Band C - Large Town (8 identified - Craigavon Urban Area, Ballymena, Newry, Coleraine, Newtownards, Omagh, Antrim and Larne)

Band D - Medium Town (8 Identified - Enniskillen, Armagh City, Banbridge, Cookstown, Dungannon, Downpatrick, Limavady and Strabane)

Band E - Small Town (15 Identified - Ballycastle, Ballyclare, Ballymoney, Ballynahinch, Coalisland, Comber, Donaghadee, Dromore (Banbridge LGD, Kilkeel, Magherafelt, Newcastle, Portrush, Portstewart, Randalstown and Warrenpoint)

Band F - Intermediate Settlement

Band G - Large Village

Band H - Small Village, Hamlet and Open Country

We then applied two further tests to all of these locations.

- a. **Population** - What percentage of the population lives within five miles of the Area Advice Centres? (The distance of five miles has been chosen to facilitate the assessment. The distance is not significant in itself, it has simply been used as a test in this circumstance)

- b. **Deprivation** - As set out in section 2.5.3 of the Advice Strategy, DSD has a particular responsibility to work for disadvantaged communities and will work to put in place appropriate arrangements to deliver high quality advice and information through the new advice framework that ensures effective provision to the most disadvantaged communities. DSD is particularly concerned to ensure the effective delivery of advice services in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas. Therefore the following tests have also been applied:
 - What proportion of the top 10 per cent and top 20 per cent of deprived census output areas⁵ are within five miles of the proposed Area Advice Centres. (The five miles reference is a tool for assessment and is not significant in itself);
 - A second test is whether or not a Neighbourhood Renewal Area can be readily linked to an Area Advice Centre.

The DSD research is based primarily on spatial geography; it does not take account of advice and information available by telephone, e-mail or internet. Nor does it take account of outreach which brings the service to various populations including individual households. It was determined that these local arrangements would be best placed with councils.

⁵ **Census Output Area** – a small area used for statistical and administrative purposes by the Census. It is smaller than a ward and smaller than a Super Output Area (also a unit of geography used for small area statistical analysis).

Annex B

Description of the Network of Area Advice Centres at each new council level

The Advice Strategy sets out an approach for frontline generalist advice providers described as a flexible and responsive model.

It is intended that there will be a fully integrated service across each of the new council areas with local providers sharing resources and working together.

The network of Area Advice Centres at each council level will provide a wide range of services, including advice, advocacy and support on a range of basic and complex general advice issues. It will also offer first line support to those who have very specific needs and will refer them to specialist agencies where dedicated specialist advice is needed.

The network will incorporate the following:-

- Advisors able to offer advice on each core area of general advice provision and provide basic advice on particular specialist needs;
- Dedicated debt counselling and the ability to carry out tribunal and high level advocacy work;
- One advisor will have a good level of knowledge in relation to disability issues;
- Where fixed premises are required to facilitate optimum service delivery these will be sited on main public transport routes, ideally close to where most people live but also open to those in more rural areas. They will be located in main settlements that the population would also visit to access other services;
- Similarly they also will meet the highest standards of disabled access;
- Within the network there will be access to advisors responsible for one or more specialist area, including disability, housing, the needs of ethnic minorities, older people, lone parents and children. Advisors will not necessarily be experts in these areas but will have sufficient understanding to recognise the particular needs of the client group and to understand how and when to refer clients to regional voluntary bodies;

- Links to a range of outreach service provision. It is envisaged that the network of Area Advice Centres will have good links with larger community organisations in the area so that suitable ways to refer clients can be set up. These will enable community based telephone and on-line access points; and
- Well established relationships with relevant regional voluntary bodies and support structures at a Northern Ireland level. These will ensure that the network of Area Advice Centres can maintain their quality, through suitable training, access to specialist information, regular updating of general information.

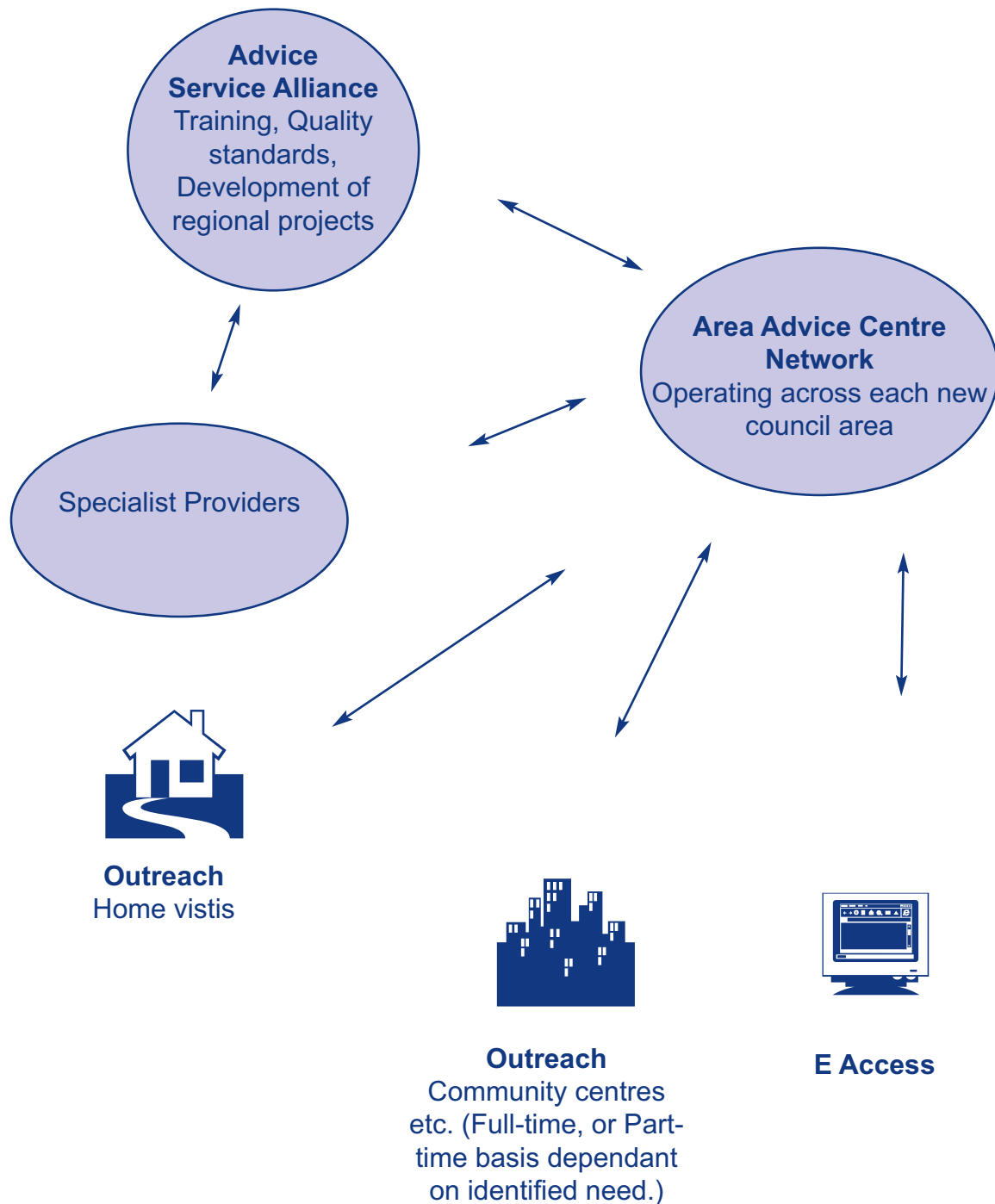
The network of Area Advice Centres will be expected to deliver advice/advocacy on a range of issues including:

- Benefits (including Disability Benefits, Income Support, Housing Benefit, Job Seekers Allowance, Tax Credits, Pension Credits);
- Appeal and Tribunal support and representation;
- Debt advice;
- Consumer issues;
- Basic Immigration (with more complex cases referred to specialist agencies);
- Administration of Justice;
- Human Rights;
- Employment;
- Housing;
- Education; and
- Health and Disability.

More complex enquiries relating to employment, housing, education, health and disability, immigration and social security will be referred to suitable specialist agencies.

Area Advice Centre Model

A key principle of 'Opening Doors' is to ensure that there is an integrated network of voluntary advice services throughout Northern Ireland. The framework for delivery of these services is as set out in the Advice Strategy below.





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