

Advice work and local action – together we can

The future will only be bright if we can act in the interests of and with local people. If local voluntary and community action is undermined then we are lost. And this applies especially to independent rights and advice groups, whose main job is to assert and enforce individual and community rights against the powerful.

Local advice groups and NCIA have begun working together in Leicester, Cardiff, Gloucester and Hackney, to fight against the effect on local people of oppressive bureaucratic, legislative and political practices; and to assert their own autonomy in acting for local people.

In Hackney, the Hackney Advice Forum (HAF) has mounted a campaign to promote their view of what is needed in the borough. The campaign challenges the presumption that funding for social welfare advice through joint commissioning by Local Authority and Legal Services Commission (LSC) of one or two large organisations – otherwise known as Community Legal Advice Centres (CLACs) or Networks (CLANs) – will improve access, referrals and quality of advice.

The Forum is opposed to this development because it damages local independent provision, reducing funding and support to local groups. Hackney Council has now indicated it will not be going ahead with a CLAC because the model has not worked when introduced elsewhere. The Forum is watching carefully to make sure that the Council keeps to their word.

The Forum's approach to local advice services is based on principles of independence, inclusion and diversity and will address questions of access, referrals and quality.

The Campaign aims are to:

- develop their own model for advice services in Hackney
- influence LSC spending in Hackney – where possible with the local authority
- oppose the development of a CLAC in Hackney.

The Forum has the beginnings of a plan for local advice which it has already used as a basis for negotiating with the Council and developing its own initiatives ([HAF Advice Strategy](#)); has begun a project to support bi-lingual advisers and has reported on the pressures for local groups in protecting their independence ([Independent Advice Provision in Hackney](#)). But it's not all been plain sailing and there are lessons to watch out for (put in link for PDF download [Advice Forums Independence](#)). To get more information contact Cathy Murphy, HAF Co-ordinator through indyaction@yahoo.co.uk.

In Cardiff and surrounding areas, advice agencies are looking at how to hold their own, faced by LSC plans for contracts beyond 2010, having already been successful at stopping the LSC in its attempt to set up CLAC/CLANs in Wales. The groups, with the help of national advice networks, have managed to get the Welsh Assembly to look at alternatives to the LSC model and this work will report sometime in autumn (see www.dglegal.co.uk for consultation document). In the meantime a small group of advice agencies are exploring how they can join together under a LSC contract which will be to the benefit of local people; and some Cardiff agencies are hoping to draw up their own plan for City advice services, as a basis for developments and negotiations with the Council; and to be well placed to respond to suggestions that may be made through the Welsh Assembly. To get more information, [contact Penny Waterhouse](#).

In Gloucestershire and Gloucester, the LSC has again failed to persuade local authorities that CLANs are a good idea. In fact, when the Councils did their figures they found that it would cost them more not less, and some even rejected the CLAN because they realised it would undermine the precious diversity of their advice services. Good news: but this failed process has soaked up resources – what John Seddon calls “failure demand” ie. bad ideas waste money. Download his report called “It’s the System Stupid” to explain why your work is so hard and how it could be made easier (they’ve started work in Nottingham to do exactly this).

<http://www.adviceuk.org.uk/projects-and-resources/projects/radical/ITSS>

As an antidote to bad ideas, a small – but expanding – group of advice services are discussing their own plans for the Gloucester area. In particular, to focus on the value of multi-purpose neighbourhood services which combine rights work with other community action eg. for families and children. To get more information, contact Frances Sullivan through indyaction@yahoo.co.uk.

And in Leicester advice services have come together as Action Advice Leicester to tackle local pressures. Demand for advice – especially for casework to tackle multiple and complex problems – is rocketing. Waiting times for advice are increasing. There is inadequate provision of both generalist and specialist advice and especially poor provision for black and ethnic minority populations which make up 40% of the City. Funding for independent advice, particularly community-based smaller services, has been cut back and the little money available has been taken by the Leicester CLAC, run by the infamous A4E. Action Advice Leicester has seized the initiative and will be checking what sort of service local people are actually getting from this particular model for advice, through a CLAC Watch survey. And as in other areas, the group will be drawing up their own plans for the City and will use the 2010 local elections to push for these. To get more information, [contact Penny Waterhouse](#).

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