

## **COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES PARTNERSHIP**

### **1 SUMMARY**

- 1.1 This report advises Members on the Assessment of the legal advice needs identified by the Community Legal Services Partnership and seeks views on the finalised assessment document.

### **2 INTRODUCTION**

- 2.1 The Community Legal Service was established in April 2000 to replace the Legal Aid Board. A partnership was established covering the Castle Point and Rochford Districts with a role in mapping the legal advice needs of the area, identifying any gaps and drawing up a co-ordinated approach to funding.
- 2.2 As part of this process the advice needs were identified into three broad areas
1. Basic information including passive and active information
  2. Generalist advice such as CABs which cover a wide range of advice topics
  3. Specialist Advice such as that given by solicitors
- 2.3 Providers of advice can apply for a 'Quality Mark' via the Legal Services Commission to demonstrate their quality to the public.

### **3 THE COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICE PARTNERSHIP 'NEEDS ASSESSMENT'**

- 3.1 The assessment of the legal advice needs of the area is based on a nationally prescribed formula which reviews issues such as the levels of deprivation, education, health of the area. In addition, current demand for advice such as housing and homeless advice, advice given by a range of agencies such as CAB, solicitors and community groups is taken into account.
- 3.2 An assessment of the legal needs of the area has concluded that most legal advice needs are low in the Castle Point and Rochford areas except in matrimonial which is high throughout the country.
- 3.3 There are a number of areas where the partnership was concerned that local conditions were not reflected in the assessment. These are included in the Summary Strategic Plan 2002 at Appendix 1. These include the need for debt advice, possibly linked to the high price of housing in the area, welfare benefit advice for people in pockets of

deprivation, community care advice for the increasing elderly population, and housing advice.

- 3.4 The summary outlined - Appendix 1 is now subject to community consultation. An event will take place on the 28<sup>th</sup> November, inviting representatives of community groups and public sector agencies to review the needs and give their views.
- 3.5 As part of this consultation Members views are also requested on the document.
- 3.6 The agencies in the area which provide legal advice and have achieved 'Quality Mark' included CAB via SELAC, Alan Simpson & Co. and Pearl Baker. They cover legal advice at all levels and topics including family law, debt, welfare benefits, family mediation, employment, housing, community care, education, actions against the police and public law.
- 3.7 Rochford District Council advises on housing and may wish to consider seeking the quality mark for general or general and casework housing advice. However, this potentially involves substantial resources. The Housing Strategy review action plan currently requires an evaluation of the establishment of an independent housing advice service with Castle Point Borough Council, or others, by October 2003. This will need to be revisited as part of the new Homelessness Strategy which must be produced, and it will be important to decide whether to continue in-house housing advice services, or to use an independent organisation, before proceeding with the 'Quality Mark'.

#### **4 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 The production of the legal advice needs assessment and the consultation event has taken a considerable amount of Officer time. Officers from Housing, Health & Community Care, Legal and Corporate Policy departments have been involved in the Partnership. Estimates of time so far would be in the region of 6 weeks since the start of the Partnership. The development of the Strategic Plan (needs assessment) is essential to continue legal services commission funding of legal advice in the area.
- 4.2 A Member representative also attends the Partnership meetings on behalf of the Council.
- 4.3 Organising the consultation event with the community representatives is likely to take two days of officer time, including half-day attendance. The work undertaken will contribute to the research required for the Community Strategy.

- 4.4 The assessment of need is reviewed annually. The research required in updating the needs assessment is likely to be far less onerous in future, approximately one week of officer time per year plus partnership meetings would be required.

**5 RECOMMENDATION**

It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

To concur with the Community Legal Service Partnership assessment of the legal advice needs of Castle Point and Rochford, subject to comments.

Paul Warren

Chief Executive

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**Background Papers:**

A full copy of the Strategic Plan has been placed in the Members Lounge in the Civic Suite.

For further information please contact Helen Drye on:-

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**APPENDIX 1**



**Castle Point & Rochford Community Legal Service Partnership**

**STRATEGIC PLAN 2002: SUMMARY**

What it's all about

In early 2001, funders and providers of advice services came together to form the Castle Point & Rochford Community Legal Service Partnership. The common ground is a need to deliver existing services and develop new ones in order to address the needs of local people. By working in partnership, members believe this can be achieved.

The CLSP includes advice, information, advocacy and mediation on issues such as welfare benefits, debt, housing, employment, immigration, education and health and community care. Castle Point & Rochford CLSP includes Castle Point Borough Council, Rochford District Council, Citizens Advice Bureaux, solicitors, community groups and local voluntary and charitable organisations.

Their task is to ascertain what advice and information services are available locally and whether these meet the needs of local people. The Strategic Plan is a product of this research. If there are gaps in advice provision, the Partnership will work out how much to fund and deliver services to fill these gaps.

**The following summarises current concerns of partners about local advice provision. Do you agree with them?**

**Castle Point:**

**The population of Castle Point is approximately 84,800. Elderly people comprise 16% and the percentage of young people aged under 16 amounts to 18%. The Borough ranks higher in the deprivation indices than Rochford and is ranked 210**

**out of 354 districts. It has higher unemployment and Income Support rates than the Essex average but a low proportion of the population are from ethnic minority groups.**

The Borough is predominantly urban and there are four wards which rank in the top 20% for total need in Debt. Five wards appear in the top 20% for Health and Community Care. Three wards rank in the top 20% for Mental Health when predicting the number of persons expected to spend at least one day as a psychiatric in-patient within a 12 month period.

Regional statistics show that 25% of all 19 year olds currently do not meet the National Literacy Targets set in 1998. A total of 12% of adults aged between 16 and 60 have very low or low literacy in the Borough, which is lower than the national average of 15%.

The Partnership believes that young people in particular are a priority client group in the Borough. The need for advocacy services is apparent and there is a potential for high need for debt advice in light of the high rents and low wages which exist in Castle Point. Partners note that although the number of homelessness enquiries has reduced, requests for housing advice have increased.

Castle Point CAB offers face to face and telephone advice; they also provide home visits where necessary. Specialist advice is available in Castle Point in Debt, Employment, Housing, Family and Welfare Benefits. Advocacy services are limited to people with disabilities and women experiencing sexual violence.

**Rochford:**

The population in Rochford is approximately 79,220, of which 16% are aged over 65 and 18% under 16. Ethnic minority groups comprise less than 1% of the total population.

Approximately 90% of the District is rural and the problem of accessibility arises from the transport infrastructure. Although Rochford is amongst the least deprived districts in England, it has hidden pockets of deprivation. There is a relatively high proportion of young people and the increasing number of elderly people indicates the potential for Community Care advice and the need for advocacy services.

The high number of patients per GP practice is indicative of the need for services and three wards appear in the top 10% for need per thousand for Welfare Benefits (according to the Legal Services Commission's Predictive Needs Models).

Partners are concerned about the limited public sector housing opportunities available to homeless people. In addition to this, there is a perceived lack of

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affordable accommodation for the children of existing residents of the District. Both of these point to the need for Housing advice.

Debt advice accounts for 31% of the total workload for Rochford & Rayleigh CAB and the Frail Elderly Study Report highlights the growing need for Health and Community Care advice.

Outreach services are operated via the CAB. Both face to face and telephone advice are offered by the CAB, Day Centres and the District Council. A Welfare Benefits Take-up Campaign was set up in Rochford via Essex County Council which suggests the need for advice in this category. Specialist advice is available in Debt, Employment, Housing, Welfare Benefits and Family categories of law. Advocacy services are limited to people with disabilities and women experiencing sexual violence.

**How do you fit in?**

1. Your local knowledge is vital. You probably have an idea of the kind of advice needed, by whom and where. Please let us know. What do you think the partnership's priorities should be for improving access to advice?
2. There are opportunities for improving access to information and advice – at community centres, health centres, hospitals, GP surgeries for example. More work needs undertaking to raise awareness of how people can access help over the telephone, via the internet and in person. Can you help? Do you know someone who could?

There are three ways in which you can help:

1. By participating in the Consultation Event on 28 November.
2. By contacting us with information or ideas you have.
3. By joining the partnership.

For further information, please contact Sarah Plowman at the Legal Services Commission:

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