

## **Background**

This framework was developed prior to the pandemic to ensure existing resources were used effectively to deliver good quality services across Aberdeenshire. Traditionally there had not been a consistent approach to the delivery of Information and Advice services therefore a co-ordinated approach was required to ensure equity of service across Aberdeenshire.

The framework was a result of the learnings from the pilot project led through Aberdeenshire Alcohol & Drug Partnership “ Health 4 Work Project ” and the outcomes from the European Social Funded (ESF) projects.

The Health 4 Work Project was funded through the Scottish Government and gave the partners an opportunity to deliver new ways of working to support those with long term health conditions. A welfare rights worker integrated in Peterhead Health Centre increased accessibility not only to advice and information services but the client focused approach ensured clients accessed all the services they required to ensure sustained outcomes.

The additional funding through ESF which the local Citizens Advice Bureau’s (CAB) has secured gave the opportunity to develop outreach services. One of the ESF projects developed a partnership through the Here 4 You Centre in Fraserburgh which CAB welfare rights workers were part of. The outcomes of these project highlighted that a partnership approach to delivering information & advice services was more effective than the traditional methods of appointment at an officer-based service.

Learning from these projects formed the basis for the Information & Advice Framework which has 2 elements to it. The first is a community-based services which compliments a specialist pathway service which relies on partnership working. It was also agreed that a quality assurance/training post would be created to ensure a consistent level of service would be developed across Aberdeenshire.

After consulting with Aberdeenshire Council 6 Area Committee’s the existing framework was agreed by Communities Committee on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June 2019.

## **Implementation of the Framework - 2020**

### Partnership approach to deliver Information & Advice Services

An existing structure within Aberdeenshire Support & Advice Team (ASAT) was identified to have capacity to manage an additional 7 staff that would be recruited within Primary Care settings. The existing 2 Money Advice Welfare Rights posts through the ASAT team became community focused with a wider remit of not only supporting Aberdeenshire Council Tenants but those who were at risk or present themselves as homeless. Through this development clients were able to access a range of Information & Advice Services from one point of contact. The Quality Assurance post was developed as part of this team to ensure the services being delivered meet the National Standards which includes community-based income maximisation and advice services.

Due to the pandemic the model changed where specialist pathways were developed with NHS, Foodbanks, Community Based groups, Schools and services over the past 5 years. The cost of the team has increased to meet demands with over 50% of the total costs being covered from external funding. The team was moved under Tackling Poverty & Inequalities on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2023

## Commissioned Community Based Services

Independent Information & Advice Services across Aberdeenshire gives people community access to the range of support and services which the third sector have traditionally delivered. The service that was commissioned covers - General Advice, Money, Debt, Housing and Welfare Rights.

The tender was split into 3 lots to cover North, Central and South Aberdeenshire. The contract outlined the expected service and levels, geographical area to be covered, accepted accreditation of staff, expected outcomes to be achieved, monitoring and reporting framework.

The contract for the community-based services was awarded to Kincardine & Mearns Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) who leads the Aberdeenshire CAB Consortium. The contract started on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2020 and after a review, was extended for a further 24 months with a further review after 12 months to ensure the improvement areas identified were addressed. The existing contract ends on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January 2025.

This contract has given security of funding for the 4 CABs operating in Aberdeenshire over a 5-year period at a cost of **£2,029,096**

The framework was agreed by Communities Committee on the 5<sup>th</sup> of September 2019.

## **Challenges**

### Pandemic

The Framework started as we entered into a pandemic which changed the way services were to be delivered. Over the first 18 months all staff and volunteers within the framework mainly worked remotely from home delivering services to clients online and phone support. During this time those that were vulnerable were still seen face to face however the meetings were on people's door steps rather than in an office or home setting. Developing an integrated approach through the framework was delayed due to the remote working environment.

Primary Health settings were not able to accommodate staff therefore developing a positive relationship within those teams was a challenge and the framework required to be changed to meet the demand through a different delivery model. The long-term impact on GP Practices was under estimated and a blended approach is still used to deliver these services.

### Staff recruitment

Recruitment of staff and volunteers to the sector was a challenge throughout the first 2 years of the framework. The impact of the pandemic resulted in financial challenges for households that were furloughed or made redundant therefore volunteers and staff had to secured employment to increase their household income. It takes 6 months to training an advisor therefore the high turn over of staff and volunteers resulting in a reduced capacity to deliver.

As a result of the rising cost of living, the cost of home working or travel has been more of a consideration to those applying for posts.

There has been 6 Consortium leads over the time of the framework which has had an impact on trying to develop an integrated approach.

### The rising cost of living

Over the last 2 years the rising cost of living has increased the need for the services delivered through the framework and the cost of delivery has also increased.

The sector has seen an increase in demand especially from those that are above the threshold for financial support. Income Maximisation has been increasingly difficult to

achieve for clients and it has resulted in an increase in clients displaying mental health issues.

The cases that are being presented are increasingly complicated resulting in waiting lists for both the Community based services and those within the Tackling Poverty & Inequalities team.

### **Outcomes**

Throughout the duration of the framework outcomes have been reported annually to a 6 Area Committees and the Communities Committee.

Through the framework 44,944 clients have been supported with a collective Client financial gain of £34,358,778 has been secured.

The framework has developed a range of tools, training and specialist pathways to ensure people get the right advice at the right time, reducing the risk of families and individuals into poverty.

### **Review Summary**

An Information & Advice Monitoring Board was established by Amanda Roe to ensure the framework was delivering the expected outcomes. This is a partnership Board who have engaged with the service users, providers and the wider partners to carry out a review of the framework. [Information Advice-Review-Final-Report-Jan-2024.pdf](https://ouraberdeenshire.org.uk/information-advice-review-final-report-jan-2024.pdf) ([ouraberdeenshire.org.uk](https://ouraberdeenshire.org.uk))

The main recommendations of the review were as follows –

1. The framework did give clients options which was positive. An increase in staff/resources to support advice services would improve access and help reduce waiting times.
2. An integrated triage system for more straight-forward cases or an opportunity to have paperwork prepared in advance of, for example, a CAB meeting could be developed, which would reduce waiting times for all.
3. Investment in a website that could be a resource for partners/services and service users over 24/7 period. With the use of technology to set up a chatbot function to allow for more self-support and increased access, again to help reduce waiting times.
4. An inconsistency in the level of satisfaction service users and services/partners have received from different CABs therefore, it would be essential that any contract awarded to an organisation for future service provision had to commit to consistently monitor and evaluate service levels and report not only on the number of service users supported and financial gain for them but also consider quarterly satisfaction surveys with their users to deliver continuous improvement.

## Future Options

<b>Option for service delivery</b>	<b>Positives</b>	<b>Challenges</b>
<p>A) Commission all aspects of Information and Advice service through a tender process.</p>	<p>The existing budget has been allocated to an existing contract.</p> <p>Local delivery agents are already in place with service delivery within targeted communities.</p> <p>Service delivery could be continuous if local delivery agents were awarded the contract. Progression routes for volunteers which will support the sector.</p> <p>Online and telephone services are already in place and could be developed to fit the needs of the sector.</p> <p>The contract could attract other delivery agents .</p>	<p>Capacity of the Third sector to deliver across a large rural area. Some areas have limited services such as rural communities in Marr and Fraserburgh.</p> <p>Feedback from services users and partner is there is not a consistent approach.</p> <p>The Third Sector have previously struggled to meet targets and outcomes in some areas within Aberdeenshire.</p> <p>A new provider within Aberdeenshire will require lead in time that may resulting in a loss of service.</p>
<p>B) Deliver Information &amp; Advice services through developing and building capacity within the Tackling Poverty &amp; Inequalities Money Advice Welfare Rights Team.</p>	<p>Already a team in place. Aberdeenshire Council has experience in delivering services across a large rural area. Apprenticeships could be developed to support progression routes into the sector.</p> <p>Services are delivered in a range of locations in partnership with NHS, GPs, Schools and community based groups. Services are delivered locally to increase accessibility to those who have a range of barriers. Online and telephone services are already in place and could be</p>	<p>Recruitment of experienced and skilled staff can be a challenge.</p> <p>Local people do not always want to engage with Council staff therefore an increase in partnership pathways will be required to widen the reach and increase engagement.</p> <p>A flexible service to meet the needs of all will be required to be developed resulting in an on line 24/7 service to reduce crisis.</p> <p>The existing team do not have a fully trained Debt worker in place therefore there may be a delay in service until that gap is addressed.</p>

	developed to fit the needs of the sector.	
c) Continue to deliver services using the framework approach which would result in a tender process for Community Based provision highlighting Welfare Rights, Debt and housing as the main areas and the continued development of the TP&I Welfare Team.	<p>The framework is in place and can deliver a confidential, accessible services delivered at a local level through a range of partnership settings.</p> <p>It supports the continued development of the sector through increasing professional development opportunities, including using a Cash First Approach.</p>	<p>The existing budget would not cover all aspects of the existing services and external funding will have to be secured.</p> <p>The framework would require to be developed ensuring an integrated services that meets the needs of clients across Aberdeenshire.</p> <p>Any contract should ensure a consistency across the shire with a focus on specialist services such as Debt.</p> <p>Increase in specialist pathways to ensure referrals are streamlined and more effective.</p>

## Budget

The existing budget for Information & Advice services is £549,000 per year.

The Health & Social Care Partnership has agreed to contribute annually an additional £100,000 towards the framework and the Housing Service contributes 21 hours of a member of staff (£22,247). These contributions beyond 2024/25 are to be confirmed.

Total annual budget available is - **£671,247**.

Total costs original framework (excluding the training post) is - £410,291 Commissioned, 7 Welfare Rights workers £266,966 = **£677,257**

External funding has been secured to build capacity within the Tackling Poverty & Inequalities Money Advice & Welfare Rights Team, which ends in 2025.

March 2024