

## **Equality Impact Assessment**

### **Budget Proposal WPP9 – Advice and Information**

**Proposal:** *The proposal will examine the current mixed approach to in-house and external advisory services to ensure that resources are targeted in the most effective manner.*

#### **1 Assessor's details**

This assessment has been undertaken by Sheila McKandie, Policy and Development Manager, Finance Service.

#### **2 Available data and research**

The Council contracts the Citizens Advice Bureaux in Highland and also directly employs teams that are responsible to provide advice and information across the Highlands. This advice and information provision can be varied but cuts across four main themes, namely money advice, welfare advice, housing advice and employment advice. Equalities data is gathered by the Bureaux and the in-house teams.

From this data, it can be established that those accessing these services are within the equalities groups. In particular the following protected characteristics may be affected: gender, age, disability and pregnancy/maternity.

#### **3 Gaps in Evidence**

There are no identified gaps in evidence that make it difficult to judge if the budget proposal might affect different groups of people.

#### **4 Involvements, Engagement or Consultation**

The Highland Council has undertaken extensive budget consultation with stakeholders. This has included public meetings, focus groups and on-line consultation. This proposal, involving advice and information services, has been included as part of the Council's wider budget consultation process.

#### **5 Likely Impact of this budget proposal**

The nature of advice and information services means that the groups most likely affected by this budget proposal are gender, age, disability and pregnancy/maternity as these groups claim benefits and access money and housing advice. Some clients also access employment advice.

A comprehensive review of advice services, including the current provision, and the mix between CABx and in-house teams is planned. This review will consider the most effective service delivery model, ways of working, service provision, and future likely impacts arising from welfare reform and other legislative changes. The review will also consider other external funding streams that may be available to the advice sector and the growth in this sector in recent years. As part of this review there are opportunities to also examine opening times and access methods (for example, face to face; telephone; in writing; outreach; or via the web).

A straight budget cut is likely to have a negative impact on these groups as there will be reduced resources to provide advice and to undertake appeals on clients' behalf at a time when there is likely to be increasing demand for these services arising from welfare reform. However, to mitigate these adverse impacts, a review of existing advice and information arrangements will present opportunities to widen access to these groups and the wider population in Highland. The advice sector is also expanding with more organisations now operating in this field. Increased local provision from these other agencies will be factored into a review of advice and information services in Highland.

**6 Can adverse/negative impacts that will disadvantage any particular group(s) be justified without changing the policy?**

While a straight cut in budget may negatively impact particular groups, central to this policy change will be the undertaking of a comprehensive review of advice and information provision in Highland. This review will also take into account the growth in this sector by other organisations. Furthermore, this review will consider the types of advice and information that are deemed priorities for the Council in the context of the Council's Programme for the Highlands.

**7 Action taken to remove, mitigate or reduce adverse impact if the impact cannot be justified.**

A comprehensive review will be undertaken to mitigate the adverse impact of this policy.

**8 Arrangements to monitor and review the policy and any mitigating actions.**

Reporting to the Head of Revenues and Business Support, the Policy and Development Manager is responsible for monitoring the advice and information services procured by the Council and for managing two of the in-house teams, namely Money Advice and Customer Income Maximisation. This Manager is also responsible for undertaking quality of advice audits of each Citizens Advice Bureau that are contracted to provide advice and information services on behalf of the Council. In addition, monitoring reports are provided for elected member scrutiny, via the Resources Committee, twice per annum. Equalities data will be one component of these monitoring arrangements.

**9 Publishing this assessment**

This Assessment will be published in accordance with the Council's corporate policy.