

Models of Advice Forum

This short briefing provides an insight into the many models and styles of forums. It uses brief examples of seven existing London based forums to demonstrate how some have adopted one or more of the models listed below when delivering on their local, regional and/or national objectives. The briefing can be useful for those planning to start a new forum or for those seeking to reinvigorate an existing network.

This resource does not seek to pigeonhole any forum into a particular way of working but simply emphasises the diversity of forum operations which can change over time. Among the most common models are:

1. Information sharing
2. Policy & practice
3. Service delivery
4. Theme based
5. Training
6. Independence
7. Combined

Below are examples of how some forums have emphasised one element or model of advice forum.

1. Information sharing: In Havering the forum wanted to respond to the inadequate links between information and advice providers. The forum meets bi monthly and initial meetings took quite some time, sharing information about each centre's work. For a borough where links were quite weak, the forum's emphasis on agency updates was relevant. So far, providers are quite happy to focus on establishing and maintaining links rather than solely focusing on taking forward strategic policy issues.

2. Policy & practice: Lambeth Advice Forum hit the ground running when it launched its forum in November 2007. Straight away it adopted a strong policy stance by challenging its Local Authority and local councilors to justify funding cuts to the voluntary sector that would have a significant impact on advice providers. A face-to-face meeting was arranged with the

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Chief Executive and other local authority officers and a report produced detailing the impact that the cuts would likely have on the sector.

3. Service Delivery Tower Hamlets Community Advice Network's (THCAN) successful bid to Big Lottery's Advice Plus programme in the first round has enabled it to formally link 12 advice agencies into a cohesive Advice Network, offering more advice across the borough where it is most needed. Advice partners will share common administration and monitoring systems. Central to the success of advice delivery will be the creation of an online referral mechanism. THCAN has adopted a 'bottom up approach' to establishing a CLAN style network, developing an integrated advice service that is focused primarily on frontline advice practitioners and meeting access requirements of hard to reach clients is paramount. The THCAN model more closely resembles a CLAN model where a partnership of agencies across the borough provide the full range of advice services and are linked via common monitoring and referrals systems. However, THCAN is investigating a formally constituted partnership body that would be able to contract centrally with key funders. It has not been directly influenced by the LSC, but has received considerable support from the Local Authority, which has written the Network into its commissioning plans for the next three years.

4. Theme based: In a theme based model, a forum is likely to adopt a particular issue that it sees is a priority concern for its members. In doing so, it needs to ensure that this is what its members want and that the themes are relevant to forum members needs. If not, members will simply begin to vote with their feet. An evaluation of the forum is useful in gathering feedback from members as to what its current priorities are and whether these have changed over time or indeed needs to!

The theme of housing has remained on the agenda of BASA (Brent Advice Services Alliance) for many years. With a borough that has some of the largest amounts of rented housing stock across London it is probably no surprise that a recurring issue discussed at forum meetings is the theme of housing provision.

5. Training: Haringey Advice Forum has been funded by Lloyds TSB to deliver a range of advice good practice and capacity building training for smaller, information and

advice providers locally. The training included referrals, confidentiality and supervision & file review and brought together a range of providers keen to up skill and review their current practice and share and exchange ideas with others. A key concern cited by many of organisations was that, for many smaller providers the cost of arranging training for staff was often unaffordable. Co-ordinating training via a forum provides a much more cost effective way of up skilling the sector across a borough and contributes to a better quality of advice provision locally.

6. Independent: Some forums remain committed to being independent from the influence of the statutory authority at advice forum meetings. This may have some advantages in that providers may feel freer to discuss issues that concern them, including how the local authority's (LA) policies and practices in administering Housing Benefits affects their clients. Some might argue that it may have a detrimental effect on the integrity and sustainability of a forum in that it loses out on the LA's potential support, whether in kind or financial and any plans that the LA has which might affect the future of the advice sector.

However, in the case of Hackney Advice Forum, they maintain a clear stance of independence from the LA with some surprising results. The advice forum recently drew up an alternative advice strategy to the LAs version of commissioning. This resulted in the local authority effectively abandoning its intended move to commissioning, delaying it for a year, and agreeing to retain a substantial grants budget.

7. Combined: This model combines elements of all the previous ones and has no particular emphasis on one legal area, topic or theme. An example is the forum in Barnet. It has emphasized a number of elements that it is likely to focus on over the coming months 1) An advice strategy, detailing the gaps and priorities in services, 2) Training priorities – which are the priority topics for providers? 3) Setting up a website with an online referral function attached to it.

Barnet isn't tying itself to one emphasis, but combines elements of most of the above, thus offering its members a diversity of issues that it will address.

No one model will fit all. Diversity is the key and being responsive to what your forum members want will produce the best results. All advice forums ought to consider which model of forum is most relevant and appropriate for its needs? What is the forum trying to achieve and which model or style will help it reach its goals? Answering these questions ought to help your network decide which model of forum it's best to adopt.

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