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Tip of the Iceberg?

How far do Voluntary Sector Services meet the demand for advice in East Sussex?

Executive Summary

August 2010



Executive Summary

Introduction.

Nick Hopkins Consulting was commissioned by East Sussex Advice Plus in April 2010 to carry out a review of the current demand for advice in East Sussex, and of the extent to which the current provision of voluntary sector advice services has the capacity to meet that demand.

East Sussex residents may need advice services for a wide range of reasons including those connected with debt, benefits and tax credits, housing and employment. A range of specialist voluntary sector services, and other organisations within the statutory sector, try to meet their needs.

The focus of this report is on the work of specialist voluntary advice organisations in the four areas identified above, their four largest areas of work.

The report aims to guide funders and those working within the sector by:

- Comparing the need for services against the current level of capacity to provide services.
- Highlighting specific issues within the four key themes that might require more attention.
- Providing an analysis of the level of need and provision at a district as well as county wide level.

It sits alongside a companion report, also produced by Nick Hopkins Consulting for East Sussex Advice Plus; '*Financial Inclusion in East Sussex*'.

Given the limitations in the data available, much of the report's analysis relies on extrapolations from national figures. The assumptions involved have been explained at every juncture.

Further detail is available in the main body of the report relating to assumptions made in respect of:

- The comparative levels of need within different districts.
- The precise place of residence of service users.
- The complexity of cases dealt with by providers.
- The relationship between levels of provision and capacity.

Debt Issues.

Demand.

- Between 16,300 and 18,600 households in East Sussex may find themselves in problem debt.
- In the two years since the start of the recession people were put at risk of problem debt because of job loss on over 48,000 occasions.

Capacity to Meet Demand

- There is a striking under provision of debt advice in East Sussex.
 - On a conservative estimate of the number of households in East Sussex experiencing debt problems, only 58% of households in East Sussex receive the quality free of charge services delivered by the identified providers.
 - On a less conservative assumption, only 51% of households in East Sussex receive the quality free of charge services delivered by the identified providers.
- Hastings appears to be comfortably the best provided for area within the county.
- Rother appears to be the worst provided for area within the county, with provision only being sufficient to reach 19% of households in debt.
- The figures for districts can be no more than suggestive because:
 - Estimates for the levels of demand in Hastings might be low, based on the correlation between debt and low incomes.
 - Estimates for Wealden and Lewes might be high on the grounds of having higher income populations, those for Rother and Eastbourne on the grounds of having a more elderly population.
 - Hastings advice services are likely to be used by people from the surrounding district, Rother, where they are more easily accessible than provision through Rother CAB.

Welfare Rights Demand

- An estimated 130,000 benefit and tax credit entitlements are not claimed annually in East Sussex.
- 10,600 to 15,800 older people do not claim the Pension Credit that they are due, 9,300 to 11,500 do not claim the Attendance Allowance that they are due.
- Between 8 and 13,000 people of all ages do not claim their Housing Benefit entitlement.
- 8,600 low income households of working age do not claim the tax credits they are due

Capacity to Meet Demand

- Specialist advice voluntary organisations only have the capacity to deal with, at most, 1 in 5 of the benefit entitlements underclaimed by residents of East Sussex.
- There appear to be particular shortfalls of provision in Eastbourne and Rother.
- The lack of capacity in Eastbourne may be of concern given the age profile of its population, and the greater propensity of older people not to claim their benefit entitlement.

Housing Advice Demand

- 1,000 people apply each year as homeless to councils in East Sussex.
- An estimated 3,800 tenants in the private and social rented sectors find themselves in rent arrears at some point during the year.
- An estimated 1,640 households are in severe arrears with their mortgage.
- An estimated 27,000 people on low incomes live in the private sector, often facing problems with security of tenure, house conditions and disputes with landlords.

Capacity to Meet Demand

Homelessness

- There is a substantial shortfall in the capacity of voluntary sector advice agencies to meet the needs for advice of people affected/ threatened by homelessness in East Sussex, with the capacity to deal with only 60% of people in that situation.
- This shortfall appears to be particularly clear in Eastbourne, Hastings and Rother.

Rent arrears

- There is a substantial shortfall in the capacity of voluntary sector advice agencies to meet the needs for advice of people in rent arrears.
- This shortfall appears to be substantially lower in Wealden than other areas, and particularly high in Rother and Eastbourne.
- A proportion of those within the social rented sector will receive support from within their landlord to deal with arrears. However, this result might also indicate the need, and the opportunity, for local advice agencies to build better links with social landlords.

Mortgage arrears

- There is a shortfall in the capacity of the voluntary advice sector to meet the needs of people in serious mortgage arrears.
- This shortfall is particularly clear in Rother, Eastbourne and Lewes.
- However, the extent of the shortfall is noticeably higher for people in rent arrears in the social and private rented sectors.
 - In relation to social rented tenants, current advice provision might be underestimated due to the availability of alternative sources of help from staff of their landlord.
 - However, such help is not available to private rented sector tenants.
 - The result might also suggest that the advice agencies have better publicity engagement routes relating to owner occupiers.

Private sector property conditions

- There is a substantial shortfall in the capacity of advice agencies to meet the advice needs of private sector tenants experiencing property condition related problems in East Sussex.
- This shortfall is particularly clear in Hastings, Eastbourne and Rother.

Employment Advice.

Demand

- Extrapolating from national data, an estimated 1,100 people from East Sussex take a case to an Employment Tribunal every year.
- At the most conservative estimate based on a further extrapolation, 320 of those people see their chances at Tribunal reduced because they are not represented.

Capacity to Meet Demand

- East Sussex advice agencies are not currently able to meet the demand that exists from local residents for representation at Employment Tribunal.
- The lack of available support may inhibit many more people from seeking external advice on employment issues.

The Rural Dimension

- Although greater concentrations of poverty are to be found in urban rather than rural areas in East Sussex, and greater proportions of the urban population are affected by poverty, substantial numbers of disadvantaged people live in the county's rural areas.
- These people may have their isolation compounded by a lack of transport, inhibiting their access to advice services.
- Although outreach surgeries in rural areas are delivered by local advice services in East Sussex, there remains a desire to do more that is constrained by available resources.

Recommendations for Action

Responding to the Risk of Cuts

- ***Recommendation 1:*** The central conclusion of this report, that current voluntary sector advice services in East Sussex are not able to meet the level of demand that exists for them, should be taken into account in the processes determining future funding for the advice sector.
- ***Recommendation 2:*** It should be understood by funders that severe cuts to advice services would not only increase the pressures on advice services themselves, but also on other public services.

Improving the Sector's Offer.

- ***Recommendation 3:*** The East Sussex Advice Plus Strategy focuses on the key issues relating to efficiency identified above and in 'Financial Inclusion in East Sussex'.
- ***Recommendation 4:*** Funding partners give due recognition to the work of the advice sector in this regard.
- ***Recommendation 5:*** East Sussex Advice Plus partners further explore the potential for information and advice to support self help amongst those

currently non accessing services, and those accessing services more capable of resolving issues themselves.

Maintaining and Expanding Services.

- ***Recommendation 6:*** East Sussex Advice Plus partners should build on the relationships developed over the course of the process of developing the financial inclusion strategy, and extend their engagement efforts to stakeholders in other advice areas based on around an approach of delivering mutual objectives, efficiency, effectiveness and financial gains.
- ***Recommendation 7:*** East Sussex Advice Plus partners identify priority areas in which they might be able to develop focused bids for new services.
- ***Recommendation 8:*** East Sussex Advice Plus partners develop a proposal for the creation of a county wide telephone advice service, with a particular promotional effort for usage in rural areas.