

Advice Proofing

A framework for considering advice needs
in strategic plans, policies and procedures
in the East Midlands



Advice Needs

Benefits

Community care

Consumer rights

Debt and money advice

Discrimination rights

Employment

Family law

Housing

Immigration

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Disability Law Service



This advice proofing framework has been developed for AAEM by Len Simkins (Infotrain), based on a framework originally produced for **Advice Alliance East** by Loretta Hurley and Len Simkins.



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Contents



1. Context	2
1.1 Introduction	2
1.2 How will advice proofing help your organisation?	2
1.3 What is advice proofing?	3
1.4 Why consider advice services?	4
2. Advice proofing framework	5
2.1 What are the benefits of using this advice proofing framework?	5
2.2 Who should use this advice proofing framework?	5
3. Using the advice proofing framework	6
3.1 How to use the advice proofing framework	6
3.2 Forms to use in the advice proofing process	8
Advice Proofing Assessment and Report Form	9
Advice Proofing Evaluation Form	13
Advice Proofing Guidance Notes	15
Appendices	
1 The case for advice	17
2 Advice Alliance East Midlands	20

Context



1.1 Introduction

Independent advice services are a vital part of a democratic society, enabling people to exercise their rights and responsibilities through:

- Advice
- Information
- Support
- Representation

Research¹ has shown how the complexity of, and changes to public policy, strategy and administration can have a negative impact on individuals and communities – in particular those who are already struggling to manage. Navigating a complex maze of services and regulations makes access to independent advice essential.

This Advice Proofing Framework has been produced by Advice Alliance East Midlands to help public bodies ensure that the advice needs communities are taken into account as part of the impact assessment of strategic plans, policies and procedures.

Further information on the contribution of independent advice can be found in **Appendix 1 – The case for advice**. Further information on Advice Alliance East Midlands can be found in **Appendix 2**.

1.2 How will advice proofing help your organisation?

Advice and information services play a key role in the community, supporting citizens to understand their responsibilities and access their rights, promoting social justice and tackling poverty and social exclusion.

Advice services support the most disadvantaged and excluded individuals and communities. National and local changes, for example to social housing or welfare benefits, to revenue collection or local service provision may unintentionally increase the pressure on vulnerable people. When citizens are unable to access the advice and information they need to deal with these changes, evidence suggests a significant proportion will experience real difficulties, the result of which then impact on statutory services such as social care, rent and Council Tax collection, children's services or health.

¹ Radically Rethinking Advice Services in Nottingham, AdviceUK (2009)

Nationally, in recent years, there has been growing confirmation of the positive **benefits of independent advice services for the community**. Details on this can be found in a recent leaflet produced by Advice Alliance East Midlands², which is summarised in **Appendix 1 – The case for advice**.

There is also clear evidence that **advice services can help local authorities and other public bodies meet their own targets and the wider goals for the community**. Advice services can support effective policy review as they deal with the fall-out from problems in public service administration and changes in policy or practice. Recent research in the East Midlands by AdviceUK demonstrated that 31% of all the demand presenting at advice services was the direct result of failures in administration by public services at national and local level.

By using the framework as part of the impact assessment of a new strategy, policy or procedure, you will minimise the risk of unintended consequences impacting upon your community and driving unnecessary demand and cost into advice agencies and, ultimately to your own organisation's services.

1.3 What is advice proofing?

Advice proofing is a mechanism to help public bodies take account of advice needs in the community, when they are developing new plans, policies and procedures. The advice proofing process will help partners to assess the impact of the change on the advice and information needs of local people, and consider:

- How advice and information services could contribute to the design or implementation of the policy or procedure;
- Whether there are any failures in the system or design that are creating problems and how these can be resolved; and
- Whether the policy or procedure is likely to lead to an increased demand for advice or information services.

We welcome **feedback** on your experience of using this framework.

Please contact AAEM if you have any comments - see **inside front cover** for contact details.

² *Engaging the independent advice sector to unlock the potential in communities, Advice Alliance East Midlands, 2010*

Why consider advice services?



2. Advice Proofing Framework

2.1 What are the benefits of using this framework?

Using the framework supports the development of strategies, policies or procedures, and minimises the risk that the initiative will have an adverse impact on the advice and information needs of local communities, particularly excluded groups. The framework can be used on its own or as part of an equalities impact assessment. Using the framework will help you to:

- Ensure changes to your organisation's strategies, policies or procedures have a positive impact and support the development of strong, well-informed and engaged communities;
- Recognise potential extra demand on advice services that will result from the initiative, and work with advice services to identify productive ways to meet the increase in demand;
- Identify any systemic problems that could create or exacerbate problems for communities or advice providers;
- Contribute to equality in access to advice, rather than increasing inequalities either geographically or with regard to certain groups within the community;
- Foster collaboration and build open and trusting relationships between organisations.

2.2 Who should use the advice proofing framework?

This framework should be used by policy makers in the statutory and voluntary sectors in the East Midlands, including:

- Local authorities - County Councils, District Councils and Unitary Authorities;
- Local and regional partnerships, working at both strategic and operational levels;
- Health providers and partnerships;
- Third sector umbrella organisations, infrastructure consortia and networks;
- Advice providers developing their own strategies, plans, policies and procedures or proofing local plans and agreements.

3. Using the Advice Proofing Framework

3.1 How to use the advice proofing framework

Advice Alliance East Midlands recommends using a six-stage process when advice proofing a plan, policy or procedure:

A	Acknowledge
D	Decide
V	Verify
I	Inform
C	Confirm
E	Evaluate

1. **Acknowledge** that a strategy, policy or procedure needs advice proofing
2. **Decide** who should carry out the advice proofing
3. **Verify** the strategy or policy against the advice proofing framework
4. **Inform** the organisation developing the strategy, policy or procedure of the results of the advice proofing and make any recommendations for change
5. **Confirm** the issues in the strategy, policy or procedure that can be changed or addressed as a result of the recommendations
6. **Evaluate** the impact of advice proofing after implementation of the strategy, policy or procedure.

Notes

- Stages 1, 2, 5 and 6 should be carried out by the organisation which is developing the strategy or policy
- Stages 3 and 4 should be carried out by the organisation which is conducting the advice proofing.

1. **Acknowledge** that a strategy, plan, policy or procedure needs advice proofing

Whilst not all plans and policies will need to be advice proofed, those that have a direct effect on the local community will benefit from such an assessment. Consider whether or not the initiative needs to be advice proofed. Experience from piloting the framework suggests that good examples would be:

- Elements of Sustainable Community Strategies
- Community plans, including for community budgeting
- Social care charging policies
- Health improvement plans
- Procedures for enforcing debt collection.

Advice proofing can be a stand-alone process or integrated into a wider equality impact assessment.

2. **Decide** who should carry out the advice proofing on the strategy, plan, policy or procedure

The advice proofing should be undertaken by an organisation or individual that has a good knowledge of the advice sector and its work.

This could be an in-house team, such as a benefits advice unit in a local council, but preferably should be an independent organisation, such as a local Citizens Advice Bureau, law centre or community advice service.

Advice Alliance East Midlands can help you identify local advice organisations and may be able to conduct advice proofing, particularly for regional plans and policies.

3. **Verify** the strategy, plan, policy or procedure against the advice proofing framework

Use the **Assessment and Report Form** on **Page 9** to advice proof the strategy, policy or procedure. The document also acts as the record of your recommendations.

4. Inform the organisation developing the strategy, plan, policy or procedure of the results of the advice proofing and make any recommendations for change

Use the **Assessment and Report Form** to report back and make recommendations for change.

The report provides a starting point for discussions with the organisation that is developing the plan, policy or procedure, to address any advice or information issues identified in the assessment.

5. Confirm the issues in the strategy, plan, policy or procedure that can be changed or addressed as a result of the recommendations

The organisation developing the strategy, plan, policy or procedure will need to consider the recommendations arising from the advice proofing. This is an opportunity to liaise with local advice organisations to address any issues identified.

If any of the recommendations are not taken forward, a clear rationale should be given for their rejection and the impact should be assessed in Stage 6.

6. Evaluate the effects of advice proofing after implementation of the strategy, plan, policy or procedure

The evaluation should cover the impact of recommendations that were adopted as well as the impact of rejecting any of the recommendations in Stage 5. The evaluation should involve officers responsible for the strategy, plan, policy or procedure as well as external stakeholders, including the advice organisation or forum that carried out the advice proofing. The evaluation may be carried out as part of the wider impact assessment of the initiative.

Use the form on **Page 13** for the evaluation.

Guidance notes to help you use the advice proofing framework can be found on **Page 15**.

Advice Proofing Assessment and Report Form

Name of strategy, plan, policy or procedure assessed:		
Produced or owned by (organisation/department):		
Assessed by:	Person responsible for strategy or policy:	Date final version of document is to be published:
Date assessed:	Person responsible for review and monitoring:	Review due date:

Notes

1. Before printing this form you may wish to enlarge the boxes
2. This form should be completed with reference to the guidance notes on **Page 15**.
3. When completing the assessment you may also wish to consider other related tools for developing policies and plans eg Communities' Rural Proofing Toolkit; Local Authority Financial Inclusion Toolkit
4. Where a multi-stranded strategy or plan is being considered, or a multi-district approach is being used, you may wish to advice proof each strand and/or each district.
5. Advice proofing can be completed as a stand-alone assessment or as part of a wider equality impact assessment

Q1 What does the strategy/plan/policy/procedure aim to achieve?

Q2 How have advice or information needs been taken into account? Have advice organisations been involved?

Q3 What are the advice/legal issue implications for **communities** in introducing this strategy/plan/policy/procedure?
(Please see the guidance notes on **Page 15** for details of different legal issues and communities)

Communities	Advice/legal issue implications

Q4 What are the advice/legal issue implications for **advice providers** in introducing this strategy/plan/policy/procedure?
(Please see the guidance notes on **Page 15** for details of different legal issues and advice providers)

Advice providers	Advice/legal issue implications

Q5 What are the systems implications associated with this strategy/plan/policy/procedure?
(This might include the impact on other departments of the organisation, its strategies/plans/policies/procedures or ICT systems, its partners and partnerships and how they interact with local people and communities)

Q6 What advice implications are already addressed in the strategy/plan/policy/procedure?

Q7 What are the gaps or imbalances?

a) Advice implications for communities:

b) Implications for advice providers:

c) Implications for lead organisation:

Q8 As a result of this assessment how could the strategy/plan/policy/procedure be improved?

Q9 How has evidence informed our assessment?

Q10 What further evidence is required to assess the impact of the strategy/plan/policy/procedure on the advice or information needs of local people or communities?

Data / information required	Agency to provide	Lead person

Following our assessment, these are our **recommendations:**

This is how we suggest this assessment report could be used:

Signature of assessor:

Assessor organisation:

Advice Proofing Evaluation Form

This form is for use by the organisation that has produced the strategy/plan/policy/procedure, after it has been implemented.

The aim of this part of the process is to identify what has been learned from the advice proofing process and to prompt thinking about how advice proofing can be embedded into planning and policy processes for use in the future.

Name of plan, policy or procedure assessed:	
Produced by (organisation/department/officer):	
Q1 What was the impact of taking up the recommendations made in the advice proofing report?	
Recommendations taken up	Impact
Q2 What was the impact of rejecting any of the recommendations made?	
Recommendations rejected	Impact

Q3 What has been learned as a result of the advice proofing process?

Q4 What actions will be taken as a result of the advice proofing process?

Action	Lead officer

Q5 How will those actions be monitored?

Q6 Have we embedded advice proofing into our planning and policy processes for use in future rounds or refreshes?

Yes

No

Q7 If no, how will we ensure that future strategies/plans/policies/procedures are assessed for their impact on the legal issues faced by communities and on advice providers?

Name of officer carrying out the advice proofing evaluation

Date

Advice Proofing Guidance Notes

The **Assessment and Report Form** on **Page 9** should be used by an advice provider. The **10 questions** in the document provide a structure for the questions you will probably want to ask. The **final two sections** create a space for recommendations for future action and suggestions for how the advice proofing assessment report could be used.

In **Q3-Q7**;

When considering communities please consider **the range of diversity strands**:

- Older people
- Young people
- Faith groups
- Disabled people
- People in rural areas
- BME groups including refugees, migrants, and Gypsies and Travellers
- Women, men and transgender people
- Lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men
- Ex/offenders and their families

When considering the implications for **legal issues**, please consider the **range of legal issues**:

- Community care
- Debt issues
- Discrimination
- Education law
- Employment
- Family law
- Housing
- Immigration
- Mental health
- Welfare Benefits
- Criminal legal advice eg on hate crime, harassment etc.

When considering the implications for advice, please consider the **range of providers**:

- Community-based organisations that provide advice services, including those which are volunteer-led
- Not for profit providers of specialist advice, including Law Centres, Shelter or independent community-based organisations
- Citizens Advice Bureaux
- Race Equality Councils and providers of advice to BME or refugee groups
- Disability advice providers
- Rurally based providers
- Age UK, Youth Access and providers of information and advice for specific age groups
- Domestic abuse advice providers
- Solicitors' firms
- Local authority advice services.

We hope that members of our networks and public bodies in the East Midlands will adopt this framework to help avoid unintended problems for local people and communities, which might in turn lead to unnecessary additional demand for advice services.

Please contact Advice Alliance East Midlands if you are:

- An organisation wishing to adopt advice proofing, and would like assistance to identify local advice sector organisations to assist; or
- An advice provider planning to approach public sector partners with a request to proof one of their documents; or
- Involved in an advice network or forum that wishes to introduce advice proofing into your region or area;

Contact details for Advice Alliance East Midlands are on the **inside front cover**.

You are welcome to use this framework, but we would request that you acknowledge Advice Alliance East and Advice Alliance East Midlands in so doing.

We would like to learn from your experience of using the framework. Please forward your feedback to us – contact details are on the **inside front cover**.

Appendix 1 – The case for advice

Independent advice services are a vital part of a democratic society, enabling people to exercise their rights and responsibilities through:

- Advice
- Information
- Support
- Representation

Events such as redundancy, relationship breakdown, spiralling debt, homelessness or the need to navigate a complex maze of rights, responsibilities and public services make access to advice essential.

Independent advice services provide advice in one or more areas of social welfare law – welfare benefits, debt, housing, community care, employment, immigration and education law. Collectively, independent advice services provide advice at all levels from generalist advice and information, through to specialist legal advice, casework and representation.

Independent advice services often grow out of community action – local people finding solutions to local need. Their independence is crucial to their success, as people trust the services provided and value the support and advocacy they receive.

Advice services are built on the following qualities:

- **Quality of service** – accurate, quality-assured advice. A non-judgmental approach, taking time to listen and explain, and showing empathy all contribute to successful outcomes
- **Independence** – being seen as not ‘part of the system’, able to advocate assertively on behalf of clients and communities whose voice may not normally be heard
- **Prevention** – advice services influence changes in law, policy or practice and provide public legal education to raise awareness of common problems
- **Added value** – advice services have trusted community links and local networks, and support partnership working. They bring in additional funding and many involve volunteers
- **Local intelligence** – understanding client need and the issues facing local communities
- **Innovation** – taking risks and pioneering new approaches to meet emerging needs

The benefits of independent advice services for the community

Independent advice services contribute in a number of ways to meeting local need:

Prevention – the effects of people’s problems can be catastrophic. Problems with benefits and debt can end in homelessness, loss of essential services, or action by bailiffs to seize goods. These costs also impact on the public purse, increasing homelessness applications; reducing Council Tax collection; affecting health, especially mental health; and potentially resulting in intervention by care services. Timely advice can stop difficulties escalating to such a serious level, restoring stability to the household and reducing the demand on public services.

Weathering the recession – in the current economic climate, people are facing huge problems with employment and redundancy, benefits, debt and the threat of repossession. Citizens Advice Bureaux in the East Midlands saw a 35% increase in demand for advice in the year to September 2009, with problems with Jobseekers Allowance rising by 86.5%. Timely intervention can stop financial difficulties escalating into major crises.

Voice and engagement – the same issues limit the extent to which people can play an active part in their communities. There are increasing expectations on public services to engage local people in the design and planning of local services but if you are struggling to keep a roof over your head and put food on the table, such opportunities come low on the list of priorities. By helping people to stabilise their situations, independent advice organisations contribute to community resilience overall and provide the foundation from which people can engage in their neighbourhoods.

Social and financial inclusion – whilst no section of society is immune from the effects of economic problems, poorer communities are affected disproportionately. For those in work, employment is likely to be less secure and, when unemployment levels increase, those furthest from the labour market risk falling further behind. People in disadvantaged communities are also least likely to have access to services that most people take for granted, such as bank accounts and affordable credit; they are likely to pay more for fuel and to access public services less frequently.

Very often, these factors are compounded by complex problems involving debt, benefits, housing or care issues and sorting out these practical concerns enables people to address other areas of their lives. High quality advice and information gives people more options. Evidence shows that people from poorer neighbourhoods and from groups experiencing discrimination and disadvantage are more likely to access independent advice services. For example, 35% of Citizens Advice Bureau clients in the East Midlands class themselves as disabled.

Meeting wider community priorities – the contribution of advice to local communities is often seen only in narrow terms. But by helping to stabilise clients' problems, advice interventions enable people – often the most excluded and disadvantaged – to address other aspects of their lives. Advice makes a difference to mental and physical health, confidence and self-esteem, financial and social inclusion, and community cohesion. Having stabilised their position, people are able to move forward, returning to learning, securing or improving employment.

Evidence also demonstrates the extent to which advice puts money in people's pockets. This brings economic benefits as people on lower incomes spend a higher proportion of their incomes on local goods and services. Research by New Economics Foundation shows that each additional £1 of income generated by advice services has a value of £1.70, as it is 'recycled' through the local economy.

In 2009 AdviceUK published a toolkit to encourage advice organisations to engage with LAAs, which shows how advice contributes to 39 National Indicators, including supporting independent living, reducing repeat incidents of domestic violence, reducing child poverty, and satisfaction with the local area.

Appendix 2 – Advice Alliance East Midlands

Advice Alliance East Midlands represents the independent advice and information sector in the East Midlands. The members of the alliance are:

- Advice UK (Midlands Region)
- Age UK East Midlands
- Citizens Advice (Central England)
- Disability Law Service
- East Midlands Money Advice Partnership
- Law Centres Federation
- Refugee Action
- Shelter (Midlands and Eastern Region)

The **aim** of Advice Alliance East Midlands is to promote, and provide a voice for, the independent advice and information sector in the East Midlands.

AAEM's **strategic objectives** are to:

- Promote the principle that people should be able to access advice and information services regardless of lack of means, discrimination or other disadvantage
- Make the case for advice and ensure that advice is built into regional policy and funding initiatives
- Champion the development, provision and monitoring of high quality advice and information services
- Encourage co-operation within the advice and information sector to enable advice networks and organisations to adapt to change, respond to funding opportunities, and develop and deliver partnership projects
- Act as a conduit for the independent advice and information sector by providing a forum for advice networks to discuss common issues and concerns, and to share good practice
- Promote networking in the sector and encourage independent advice and information organisations to join and network
- Provide infrastructure to advice and information networks and organisations including access to advice related training and support for project development

In meeting its aim and objectives Advice Alliance East Midlands is committed to:

- Encouraging diversity within the independent advice and information sector
- Promoting access to advice and information services for all members of the community
- Respecting the independence and autonomy of advice networks, and their members, in the sector.

For further information about AAEM contact **Simon Johnson** at AdviceUK.

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