

**MILTON KEYNES COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICE PARTNERSHIP - ASSOCIATE
PIONEER PILOT PROJECT**

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1. Purpose

- 1.1 To endorse the Council's involvement in the Milton Keynes Community Legal Service Associate Pioneer Pilot Project and to advise on the current progress.

2. Summary

- 2.1 In the "Access to Justice Bill" the Government has included plans to introduce the "Community Legal Service".
- 2.2 Milton Keynes has been chosen as an Associate Pioneer for the Community Legal Service and is one of only seven local authorities in the South East to be chosen to pilot preparations for this service. An Action Plan for the first year until April 2000 has been drafted to develop and come up with some proposals.

3. Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- (a) the Council's involvement in the Community Legal Service Associate Pioneer Pilot project is endorsed;
- (b) that the progress to date on implementing the Associate Pioneer initiative be noted; and
- (c) that the next steps of the initiative, as set out in the Action Plan, be supported.

4. **Background**

- 4.1 In a series of major proposals for the way that ordinary people access legal advice, the Government has included in the "Access to Justice Bill" plans to introduce the "Community Legal Service".
- 4.2 The Government's vision is of networks of quality assured advisers providing comprehensive legal advice and assistance to communities across England and Wales and sees this improving of access to information, advice and legal services through the Community Legal Service as part of its agenda to address social exclusion.
- 4.3 In any one geographic area, the Community Legal Service will cover complementary legal and advice agencies. The ambition is to broaden the current narrow focus of the Legal Aid System on litigation to include information, advice and mediation services.
- 4.4 The Community Legal Service will embrace law firms, the Council, other public services and voluntary sector agencies and will be:
- (a) a network of quality providers of legal and advice services;
 - (b) supported by co-ordinated funding;
 - (c) delivering services to local communities; and
 - (d) in accordance with an effective assessment of local needs.
- 4.5 In order to establish and develop the details of the new Community Legal Service, the Government has asked a number of local authorities to spend a year testing the many different ways that a Community Legal Service could operate. These local authorities are known as Pioneers and Associate Pioneers.
- 4.6 Earlier this year, Milton Keynes Council was approached by the Lord Chancellor's Department and invited to take part. Milton Keynes was specifically identified as a Council with strong support for the voluntary advice sector and a good record of partnership working. The proposal was discussed informally with the Leader of the Council and the Chair of Policy and Resources Committee. A report on the Community Legal Service was presented to the Milton Keynes Anti-Poverty Forum on 10 March 1999, where the initiative was warmly welcomed. The Lord Chancellor's Department made a formal announcement of the Council's Associate Pioneer status on 12 March 1999.
- 4.7 Milton Keynes, as an Associate Pioneer is one of only seven in the South East to be chosen to pilot preparations for a Community Legal Service.
- 4.8 The Associate Pioneer phase will come to an end in April 2000 and the work achieved by all the pilots will be collated by the Lord Chancellor's department and will go towards planning a nationwide network of Community Legal Services. Milton Keynes will be able to build on and continue the work after April 2000.

5. **Issues and Choices**

5.1 Milton Keynes and the Legal Aid Board are working in partnership with providers of legal and advice agencies to establish a Community Legal Service Partnership. This will be a forum in which all funders, providers and users of the legal and advice services co-operate to plan those services.

5.2 The aim of the partnership will be to make sure the right services to meet the community's needs are provided. It is also vital that local people are aware of the services and how to access them.

5.3 A draft Action Plan for the first stages of this project has been prepared and is attached as **Annex A**. The following initiatives are covered:

5.4 **Phase One of the Draft Action Plan**

Consultation

The consultation exercise consists of two main strands. Firstly, consulting with the community and all the main funders, suppliers and providers of legal and advice agencies. Initially, the first priority was to promote and raise awareness of this new service and the proposals for Milton Keynes. A number of articles were placed in the local newspapers, the Council's own paper, the "Messenger", and an interview was held on the radio. In addition a monthly information bulletin has been developed and is sent out to all relevant legal, information, advice and voluntary services.

The next priority identified the need to consult with local people to find out what legal and advice services were needed. A sample of 1000 people were randomly selected and sent a confidential questionnaire in May. The results from this have been tested at a further Citizens Panel of 20 local people held at the end of June and the results from both of these will then be fed into other needs assessment surveys and reviewed at a Seminar planned for October.

The second strand of this consultation task is responding to a detailed consultation paper issued by the Lord Chancellor's Department on 25 May and **Annex B** is a summary of this paper. The progress made by the Milton Keynes pilot project was noted in the consultation document where they made reference to the intention to target excluded groups. Responses have been requested by the 30 July 1999 and an Information bulletin summarising the paper and asking organisations to respond has been sent out.

The Lord Chancellor's Department has also set up a "Quality Task Force" to develop a standard Community Legal Service Quality Mark which will cover quality of access, administration and quality of advice and which can be applied to all service providers in the Community Legal Service Partnerships. Milton Keynes has been invited to participate in a reference group that will be consulted at each stage of the development of this issue and has already responded to the first consultation stage sent out in May by this Task Force.

5.5 Mapping Local Provision of Services and Needs Assessment

This task consists of three main elements.

A database of all providers of legal and advice services needed to be set up in order that the project could begin to identify the extent of services available. The Council already had a database of business and local organisations and this was updated in conjunction with Legal Aid Board and the Library COIN system which holds a major directory of organisations providing advice to the community.

A Suppliers Questionnaire is being sent out to providers, whose main function is to provide legal and advice services. The questionnaire has been based on an annual survey carried out by the Legal Aid Board but has been adapted to take in to account the new access and provision proposals under the Community Legal Service. The results of the questionnaire should provide us with detailed data on the level of services provided and how these are provided and should help to identify where there are shortfalls that need to be addressed.

A needs assessment exercise to identify the needs for legal and advice services within Milton Keynes is to be commissioned. The Legal Aid Board are in the process of producing Assessment surveys for 99/00 on a number of issues. The first on Employment and Housing is expected at the end of June and the second on Debt and Welfare Benefits is expected at the end of August. It is planned to review these surveys and then identify any additional data to fill in the gaps. These will be commissioned locally and it is hoped to have some information for discussion at the October Seminar.

5.6 Targeting Excluded Groups

Initial discussions on this area of the Action Plan have highlighted a number of groups such as young single parents and socially excluded children. A confidential questionnaire is being developed that we hope to pilot during August and again the results of this survey will be available for discussion at the October Seminar.

5.7 Phase Two of the Draft Action Plan

Review

Phase two of the Pioneer Project will commence with a review of the work highlighted above, ensuring that the data collected provides a sturdy base from which to develop plans and strategies for implementing the Community Legal Service Partnership.

The findings of the review will be submitted to a seminar on Thursday 7 October 1999. All providers of legal, information and advice services will be invited and the seminar will be supported and attended by both local MP's with Dr Phyllis Starkey MP, chairing the seminar. Keith Vaz, MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Lord Chancellor's Department has accepted an invitation to attend and has expressed interest in what the Milton Keynes Pioneer Project is trying to achieve. The seminar will consider the findings of the review of all the mapping and survey data obtained and discuss steps forward to achieve concrete proposals for a Community Legal Service by March 2000 to submit to the Lord Chancellor's Department. This will include asking all the agencies at the seminar to sign up to and support the Milton Keynes Community Legal Service Partnership.

5.8 Phase Three of the Draft Action Plan

Implementation

This part of the Action Plan will be identified after the outcomes of the October seminar are known. However, it is hoped that the Milton Keynes Community Legal Service Partnership will continue to work together after April 2000 and build upon the work already achieved.

6. Implications

6.1 Environmental

The Community Legal Service is contributing towards one of the Council's strategic aims "To tackle disadvantage and promote equality" and is also contributing to quality of life objectives and therefore to a sustainable local community.

6.2 Equalities

One of the key ambitions of the Milton Keynes Pilot Project is to target excluded groups and to identify their needs and how these can be best provided and supported.

6.3 Financial

Direct costs to date for the Consultation survey and Citizens Panel are £1,880. Printing and postage costs for the Information bulletins have been shared with the Legal Aid Board and the Council's share of this cost is approximately £93 to date. The Supplier Questionnaire has been printed and posted by the Legal Aid Board.

6.4 Legal

Legislation to establish the Community Legal Service is expected to come into force in April 2000.

6.5 Staff and Accommodation

To date, staff in the Corporate Policy Unit have devoted approximately 10 days to the project and this is likely to rise to a total of 20 - 25 days by the end of March 2000. Staff in other directorates are also involved but to a much more limited extent.

7. Conclusions

- 7.1 The Community Legal Service is a very valuable part of the Authority's approach to social exclusion and equalities and our involvement as an Associate Pioneer should in the long term ensure better access to legal and advice services to all sections of the community, as part of the Council's Anti Poverty strategy.

Background Papers: Report to Anti Poverty Forum - 10 March 1999

Lord Chancellor's Consultation document "The Community Legal Service" - issued May 1999