

This report may be of interest to: All Members
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COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICE PARTNERSHIP

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1. Purpose

- 1.1 To update the Council on the development of the Community Legal Service (CLS) in Milton Keynes and report on the next phase of the project.

2. Summary

- 2.1 In 1999 the Access to Justice Bill became law and includes the requirement that all local authorities must set up a Community Legal Service Partnership in their area.
- 2.2 In the year prior to the legislation being enacted, the Lord Chancellors Department chose local authorities to be Pioneers and Associate Pioneers to develop best practice guidance for future CLS Partnerships. Milton Keynes was chosen as an Associate Pioneer, one of only seven in the South East. An Action Plan shows the work completed in the first year to April 2000 and the work proposed for the second year of the Milton Keynes CLS Partnership.
- 2.3 All CLS Partnerships are expected to agree a Concordat statement, indicating all members of the Partnership agree to support and develop this initiative. The Lord Chancellors Department has requested that signed Concordats be submitted by the end of March.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 It is recommended that the Committee:
- (a) agrees the signing of the "Statement of Commitment (Concordat)"; and
 - (b) notes progress on:
 - (i) implementing the Associate Pioneer; and
 - (ii) contents of the Action Plan and planned next steps.

4. **Background**

- 4.1 The Access to Justice Act 1999, established the Community Legal Service which will be nationally launched on 3 April 2000. The Government's vision of a Community Legal Service is of networks of quality assured advisers, supported by co-ordinated funding, which will meet the identified needs of communities and be provided within a new national quality standard that will apply to all providers of advice services.
- 4.2 Earlier last 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 Lord Chancellor's Department made a formal announcement of our Associate Pioneer status and inclusion in the first phase on 12 March 1999.
- 4.3 Milton Keynes, as an Associate Pioneer is one of only seven council areas in the South East to be chosen to pilot preparations for the Community Legal Service. In the last year we have been quoted in a number of the Pioneer progress reports and invited to seminars to present the good practice we have been recognised for in raising awareness and carrying out consultation.

5. **Issues and Choices**

- 5.1 As an Associate Pioneer, Milton Keynes Council, the Legal Aid Board and a number of local providers of legal and advice agencies have set up a Community Legal Service Partnership in Milton Keynes. The aim of the Partnership is to make sure the right services are provided to meet the community's needs.
- 5.2 The Partnership is made up of an executive group, steering group and a larger forum. Attached as **Annex A** is a list of the membership of these groups.
- 5.3 Details of progress of the Milton Keynes Associate Pioneer Project are featured in the Action Plan attached as **Annex B** to this report. Key achievements to date have included:
- (a) Establishing a database of 450 agencies involved in the provision and accessibility of legal and advice information in Milton Keynes.
 - (b) Regular Information Bulletins to all local legal and advice agencies and interested parties.
 - (c) Survey of local needs for information and advice - carried out by surveying a random sample of 1000 residents.
 - (d) Focus group discussion on needs - reviewed outcomes from above survey and came up with ideas for the Partnership to consider.

- (e) Mapping needs assessment of the area - developing a model to assess needs on a regular basis. Some mapping has been completed but further work is required.
- (f) Mapping provision of legal advice - builds upon the above and will now form the basis for developing a local directory.
- (g) 7 October 1999 Seminar to launch Partnership. This was well attended by local legal and advice agencies and was supported by both local MP's. Keith Vaz MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Lord Chancellor's Department attended and praised Milton Keynes for being in the fore front of this initiative.
- (h) Establishment of steering group to take on local ownership of the CLS Partnership. At its first meeting on 15 December 1999, "Terms of Reference" were agreed. The next phase of the project, building upon the consultation and seminar results is now being progressed (see phase 3 of the Action Plan in **Annex B**).
- (i) Partnership "Statement of Commitment Concordat" agreed for signing. The Lord Chancellor's Department set a minimum task for all Pioneers to have their Partnerships fully signed up to supporting this initiative by the end of the first year. This was to be achieved through a Concordat that was not legally binding. Attached as **Annex C** is a copy of the Concordat and the Committee is requested to agree that the Council sign this.
- (j) Regional seminars are being held around the country as part of the run up to the national launch of the Community Legal Service on 3 April 2000. The seminar for our region is on 23 March 2000 in Reading. These are being targeted specifically at local authorities to raise the profile of the CLS at the highest level and increase levels of participation in the initiative. The seminar involves David Locke (Minister from the Lord Chancellor's Department) and speakers from the LGA and LAB. Milton Keynes is to present its experiences of establishing a CLS Partnership to the seminar.

5.4 Future priorities in the next year for the CLS Partnership are:

- (a) A local Directory to advance the objective of making legal and advice information more accessible to the community. It will list contact and service provision details and be available from a wide range of information points all over Milton Keynes. It will be produced in paper and web site format.
- (b) A Partnership Wide Referral Scheme is another major cornerstone of the CLS. The development of a referral scheme will ensure there is a consistent approach throughout the Partnership to referrals and ensure that the client receives appropriate advice from a suitably experienced organisation.

- (c) Local Champion. The Lord Chancellor's Department has pooled together a number of prominent supporters, including celebrities to help promote the CLS nationally. Milton Keynes is the first Associate Pioneer to have its own "Local Champion" in Judge Tetlow.

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

Resources are required to take this project forward, notably in publishing the local Directory and implementing a Partnership wide Referral Scheme. A Budget for this has yet to be identified and at present the Council and Legal Aid Board are sharing the modest costs incurred to date. However, the financing of this project will need to be reviewed as the role of the Partnership develops and expands.

6.4 Legal

The Access to Justice Act 1999 established the Community Legal Service and this Government initiative will be nationally launched on 3 April 2000. Milton Keynes Council was part of the first phase of local authorities asked to pioneer this project to identify best practice guidance for future Partnerships. As a result of this legislation and the work carried out by the Pioneers, all local authorities must have a working Partnership in place by October 2001. The Government is hoping that two thirds of Partnerships will be established by April 2001.

6.5 Staff and Accommodation

None.

7. **Conclusions**

- 7.1 The Community Legal Service is a very valuable part of the Authority's approach to social exclusion and equalities. The commencement of the Partnership and the work of the steering group 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 and 21 October 1999

Report to Policy and Resources - July 1999

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

Lord Chancellor's Consultation document "The Community Legal Service Quality Mark" - issued August 1999