

Voluntary and Community Action

INFORMATION, ADVICE AND GUIDANCE STRATEGY

Introduction

This strategy provides a framework for the design and development of Voluntary and Community Action's Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) services. These services relate to the provision of information, advice and/or guidance to inspire and support ...

- individuals in their choice of career, learning, work, volunteering and life goals;
- staff, volunteers and trustees of voluntary organisations, community groups, social enterprises and volunteer-involving organisations to achieve their learning, work and organisational development goals, such as good governance, sustainable funding and effective volunteer management; and
- residents in their choices for accessing local services, developing new social networks and participating in a range of social activities, community groups, forums and volunteering.

This strategy makes a significant contribution to delivering the organisation's priorities and, in particular, supports three of the organisation's Strategic Outcomes, namely:

- *People are inspired to volunteer, have the opportunity to do so and have an excellent volunteering experience*
- *People who are socially and economically disadvantaged are able to participate more fully in society*
- *Voluntary organisations and community groups have the skills, knowledge, structures and resources to fulfil their potential for responding to the needs of, and providing services to, their communities.*

Our Vision

Our vision is to provide information, advice and guidance that enables people to be socially and economically active citizens, able to make a fulfilling contribution to society.

We also recognise that this vision supports local Economic Strategies across Bedfordshire and the wider South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership (SEMLEP) to increase sustainable economic growth, improve skills, deliver high levels of employment and create socially inclusive communities.

We will achieve this vision by helping people make informed decisions about their life goals and options, in three key areas:

- for those wanting to access IAG services for careers, job opportunities, learning and volunteering, we will enable service users to actively look for work; find the right work; and get, stay and progress in work. Achieving this means both removing barriers to work, and improving people's ability to find and keep work. *Work* could be either voluntary work and/or paid work; voluntary work may also be an appropriate pathway to enhancing employability and/or to getting paid work;

- for staff, volunteers and trustees of voluntary organisations, community groups, social enterprises and volunteer-involving organisations, we will enable service users to gain the technical skills and knowledge needed to be better service providers and to meet the needs of their service users. This will include supporting them to achieve their learning, work and organisational development goals, such as good governance, sustainable funding and effective volunteer management;
- for residents affected by social isolation, we will help them to consider their options and make decisions about accessing local services, developing new social networks and participating in a range of social activities, community groups, forums and volunteering.

This vision reflects the importance of, and our aspirations for, lifelong learning and our wish to provide high quality services, including universal services for all and targeted services with more and better support for those who need it most; including people furthest from the labour market who are likely to struggle to get, stay and progress in work; and those who are affected by social isolation.

Delivering this vision demands effective leadership by Voluntary and Community Action and strong partnership working with other IAG, learning and employment support providers; employers; volunteer-involving organisations; and community groups.

Service Users

Access to high quality, impartial IAG services will help people to raise their aspirations and make informed decisions based on a better understanding of the changing world, the impact this will have on them, and the options that are open to them.

This strategy provides a framework for the future delivery of IAG services designed to meet the wide-ranging needs of its service users, including:

Employment Support

- those who are considering volunteering
- those who are unemployed and looking for work
- those who are economically inactive
- those with low skills levels
- those facing redundancy
- young people
- older people

Voluntary and Community Organisations

- staff
- volunteers
- trustees

Communities and Neighbourhoods

- new residents
- parents and young families
- older people
- children and young people
- men
- women
- those affected by mental ill-health
- those who are social isolated or lonely
- those who are considering volunteering
- those who want to share their time and skills with others
- community activists

In meeting these needs we will work with a range of partner agencies working in the wider advice and guidance community, including:

- employers
- other training providers
- other employment support providers
- Jobcentre Plus
- Bedfordshire Adult Skills and Community Learning
- National Careers Service providers
- voluntary organisations, community groups and social enterprises
- volunteer-involving organisations
- other VCS local infrastructure organisations
- funders.

Our IAG services will be impartial and objective. They will also seek to ensure that equality of opportunity and recognition of diversity are promoted through IAG, and that this reflects the perspectives and experiences of different groups within society, especially those in rural localities, socially excluded or vulnerable to discrimination. We will also seek to ensure there is no gender bias to IAG or career pathways, promote understanding of the needs of women and minority groups within society, and highlight issues relating to race, disability, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion/belief.

Our staff will also have consistently high expectations of what each service user can achieve, including the most able and the most disadvantaged, and use assessment information to plan appropriate IAG, teaching and learning strategies, including identifying learners who need additional support, enabling learners to make good progress and achieve well.

Principles

Our IAG services need to be:

- **Independent** – respecting the freedom of the choice and personal development of the service user;
- **High Quality** – up-to-date, accurate and consistent, enabling service users to make fully informed, confident choices;
- **Impartial** – in the best interests of the service user and is not influenced by provider, organisational or funding interests;
- **Informed** – should be based on a detailed knowledge of the changing environment, including labour markets, economic growth, learning opportunities and a developing civil society;
- **Confidential** – individual's right to privacy in terms of their personal information and to know with whom, and to what end, it will be shared will be balanced with the need to share information in appropriate circumstances;
- **Holistic** – individual needs and circumstances are taken into account in a way that supports and promotes equality, with IAG forming part of a wider package of support where appropriate;
- **Outcome Focussed** – where service users plan their own pathways with support through IAG, and where outcomes are a measure of the impact that the service has on service users, organisations and communities.

Service Delivery

We will seek to exploit the use of technology so that as many people who are able to can independently access online IAG resources in ways – and at times – that suit them best. This will enable intensive, face-to-face support to be more effectively targeted at those most in need.

Our *asset-based approach* to service delivery is important. Raising aspirations and improving people's capacities, skills, and knowledge are a potentially powerful means of improving health and well-being and, in turn, their life chances. Asset-based approaches mean supporting individuals to take control of, and manage, their own circumstances, not treating them as passive and dependent recipients of services doing things 'to' them.

We acknowledge this is not straightforward, nor a process subject to a quick fix. However, we believe that this is the right direction of travel for our IAG services. Whilst this approach is relevant to everyone, irrespective of age and qualifications, it will inevitably look and feel different for different people. It is, therefore, completely consistent with the move towards a more differentiated IAG service.

Employment Support IAG Service

Our Employment Support IAG service focuses on the importance of equipping people with the skills they need to manage their careers, and access information and other support as the basis for making informed decisions. IAG also has an important role in raising aspirations, helping people to understand and adapt to the changing jobs market, to acquire new skills, overcome barriers and fulfil their aspirations.

Raising aspirations is a key ingredient to tackling unemployment, poverty and inequality. We cannot over-estimate the capacity of good IAG to enthuse people about their future and to encourage them to aim high when considering and planning further learning and work.

It may sometimes be a challenge to encourage people to explore further learning, consider new or less familiar career options, and question stereotypes and pre-conceived ideas. Given the links between low educational attainment, health and socio-economic disadvantage, and unemployment, particular attention should be paid to those whose qualifications and circumstances mean they are likely to struggle to get – and stay in – work.

While some service users will have developed career management skills, many will be unaware of the changes taking place in the labour market, and will need help to understand what opportunities are available and what this means for them. For example, someone losing their job may need to acquire new skills or qualifications to help them find new employment. Others may want to change career direction and will need help to do so. For some, this may mean a short period of support; others may need help for longer.

Voluntary and Community Action is committed to ensuring targeted support for those who need it most – for example, those who are economically inactive, the long term unemployed and older adults. We want to strengthen support for those likely to struggle to find, stay and progress in learning and work. Some people may experience difficulties from time to time or face challenges that distract them on their journey; others may have more complex and long-term barriers. We will pay specific attention to the needs of these groups by enabling people to:

- identify opportunities to develop their learning goals and employability skills and understand how the labour market works – how to find a job, to appreciate how and why jobs are changing, and what sort of skills they need to progress;
- access the services they need, with partners working together to signpost them or, where appropriate, co-ordinate an integrated package of services; and
- be better able to take career decisions, to manage change and uncertainty and to make confident choices for themselves.

Our employment support IAG services will be delivered through:

- a network of Work Clubs across Central Bedfordshire;
- new Work Club provision in Bedford;
- *Prepare for Work* courses
- *Springboard for Women Returners* courses
- *Interview Skills* courses
- *Build your Confidence!* courses
- *Step into ...* courses for key employment sectors (i.e. health and social care, visitor economy, transport and logistics, construction and agri-food).

We will also develop additional provision, as and when resources become available, including:

- employment support for the over 50s
- IAG services for young people
- a network of Work Clubs across Luton
- a range of accredited courses
- teaching adults to read
- teaching basic ICT skills
- financial literacy and money management skills

While we have a good to excellent track record in delivering IAG services through employment support and achieving good outcomes for service users, we need to deliver better results in terms of people's job outcomes for those furthest from the labour market.

Voluntary and Community Organisations IAG Service

Voluntary and Community Action is committed to supporting the effectiveness of the voluntary and community sector by developing, enabling, promoting and supporting local voluntary and community action. It seeks to achieve this by providing information, advice and technical assistance to VCS organisations in Central Bedfordshire.

It is also committed to supporting the effectiveness of local volunteer-involving organisations by enabling them to develop and promote volunteering opportunities appropriate to the needs of organisation and volunteers, and good practice in volunteer recruitment, retention and management. It seeks to achieve this by providing information, advice and technical assistance to volunteer-involving organisations in Central Bedfordshire and Luton.

Our Voluntary and Community Organisations IAG services will be delivered through:

- Information Service
- Funding and Development Advice Service
- Volunteer Centre Central Bedfordshire
- Voluntaryworks Luton Volunteering Services
- the development of local timebanks across Central Bedfordshire.

Community Development IAG Service

Voluntary and Community Action is committed to supporting the development of sustainable communities across Central Bedfordshire. This involves advocating, creating, delivering and supporting new and existing social infrastructure to address the needs of residents in local communities. It seeks to achieve this by empowering residents to create, run and sustain the voluntary and community groups, volunteering opportunities and social networks required for existing and new communities.

As a result, people will be better informed about local social networks, volunteering opportunities, community activities and community groups in their area, and how to access them. They will also be able to make decisions about, and be able to, meet socially/informally with others through social activities or other services offered in the community; become actively involved in the community through their participation in community groups, forums, activities or volunteering and/or actively involved in leading, planning and/or organising community groups, forums and activities.

Ultimately, people will feel less isolated or lonely as a result of participating in social networks, volunteering, community activities and community groups etc.

Our Communities and Neighbourhoods IAG services will be delivered through:

- the Sandhills Community Action Project
- the development of local timebanks across Central Bedfordshire.
- the development of the Greenfields Café, Leighton Buzzard
- the development of a Pub Lunch project to address social isolation among older people
- the development of social prescribing approaches.

Strengthening Partnerships

Partnership working is key to the delivery of high-quality, impartial IAG services. For it to be effective and meet the needs of all users, provision must be a shared responsibility, delivered by a range of partners, each playing to their strengths and complementing each other. Voluntary and Community Action has considerable strengths in the area of IAG; it also has a leadership role within the sector, and as a provider, to work in partnership with others to build universal and targeted services.

Voluntary and Community Action has an important role in helping employers and volunteer-involving organisations to identify and articulate their skills needs and opportunities, and in helping them to find the right people for the right role. Employers/Organisations also have an important contribution to make in providing service users with insights into what it is like to work within particular sectors/careers/jobs/roles.

Improving outcomes, including up-skilling and getting people into work, is a large part of what we do, in partnership with others. Voluntary and Community Action will continue to advocate the needs of the sector and its service users, and to develop service delivery agreements with local authorities and other partners in order to support local priorities, promote partnership working and improve service delivery.

The community learning, further and higher education sector plays an important role in supporting individuals to further develop their skills and qualifications. Voluntary and community Action is working in partnership with other training providers, colleges and universities to identify appropriate pathways for service users and help people make better informed choices about their further and higher education options.

Jobcentre Plus supports people of working age from welfare into work, including the delivery of information, advice and guidance on job opportunities and payment of benefits. Voluntary and Community Action will continue to work with Jobcentre Plus to support customers who are experiencing difficulties in finding suitable work and to enhance their employability.

National Careers Service providers support people with careers advice, the development of a CV and information on a wide range of jobs, training courses, resources and funding. Providers are only funded to provide clients with up to two IAG sessions, so any longer term support has to be provided through other provision. Voluntary and Community Action will continue to work closely with National Careers Service providers, who attend all our Work Clubs and some of our employment support courses.

Schools are key deliverers of Career IAG for young people. Career-related learning and the development of career management skills offer a valuable context in which young people can develop their enterprise and employability skills, and help them plan for the future. Voluntary and Community Action has previously delivered a youth volunteering project where IAG services formed part of the service offer. This, along with careers IAG for young people, is an area of work that Voluntary and Community Action could develop further in the future, particularly if opportunities for growth in this area occur.

Continuous Improvement

Voluntary and Community Action is committed to, and already has systems and processes in place to, continuously improve the quality and consistency of its services.

Service users provide feedback on the quality and impact of our services through a range of mechanisms currently in place, including our Information, Funding and Development Advice Services User Survey, Volunteer-Involving Organisations Surveys and Volunteer Brokerage Surveys. Learner feedback is collated through Individual Learning Plans, Learner Satisfaction Surveys and other data. Residents are able to feedback through feedback forms and Residents Surveys.

We will continue to develop an approach that supports quality and improvement in IAG, through the Matrix standard; in the delivery of volunteering services, through the Volunteer Centre Quality Accreditation standard; and in the delivery of learning and employment support services, through the Ofsted Common Inspection Framework. We will seek to utilise robust self-evaluation whilst recognising that external scrutiny, where appropriate, can play an important part; for example quality standards accreditation, Observations of Teaching and Learning, and Social Return on Investment (SROI) studies.

We will seek to increase our capacity for self-evaluation and continuous improvement; in particular our ability to consistently track and evaluate the impact of our work and the outcomes and destinations of service users.

We recognise that information, advice and guidance is a distinct, defined and specialist profession that demands a unique set of core skills. We will ensure that all our IAG practitioners are professionally qualified, ideally with a Level 4 Advice and Guidance qualification (or above). Where this involves the delivery of learning and skills, staff would also be expected to have a Level 4 Award in Education and Training (or other teaching qualification). High quality, relevant, professional training and development is, therefore, critical to implementing this strategy effectively, building on the National Occupational Standards for the employability and the lifelong learning sector, and wider work on professional standards.

Voluntary and Community Action will provide appropriate workforce development for its staff and volunteers, including joint CPD with partners and opportunities for sharing good practice.

Ongoing training and development will need to take account of new service delivery models, which will see practitioners working differently with partners and clients, particularly to support those in greatest need. Moreover, delivery will increasingly involve a 'blend' of services in order to tackle deep-rooted barriers to employment and social inclusion.

We will therefore need to:

- continuously develop our knowledge and understanding of the local economy, including volunteering, learning and job opportunities;
- develop our coaching and facilitation skills for use with specific groups of service users;
- improve our knowledge and understanding of other partners and pathways to support individual clients with multiple complex needs; and
- improve our competence and confidence in the use of new technology.

Resourcing the Strategy

Voluntary and Community Action is committed to securing the resources needed to deliver this strategy effectively. Potential funding sources include a range of European Structural Investment Funds, local authorities, the Department for Work and Pensions, trusts and other grant-makers.