
LEGAL ADVICE NETWORK DARLINGTON (LAND)

**Responsible Cabinet Member – Councillor Andy Scott,
Communities and Engagement Portfolio**

Responsible Director – Chris Sivers, Assistant Chief Executive

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To seek cabinet approval to proceed with the lottery funded Legal Advice Network Darlington (LAND) partnership project. The aim is to improve access to free legal advice at a generalist level in relation to debt and housing but also increasing capacity for employment advice at a specialist level.

Summary

2. Now that the LAND Partnership, of which the Council is a member, has been successful in its lottery funding application, it meets the financial threshold to become a ‘significant partnership’ under the Council’s definition. As such, it requires cabinet approval to proceed to implementation. This is in accordance with the Council’s Partnership Toolkit, which was adopted by Cabinet in March 2007.

Recommendation

3. It is recommended that Cabinet is asked to support the work of LAND as a significant partnership and to receive annual reports as part of the partnership toolkit procedure.

Reasons

4. The recommendation is supported to facilitate compliance with the Partnership Toolkit and the Council’s risk management strategy.

**Chris Sivers
Assistant Chief Executive**

Background Papers

Cabinet Report March 2007

Mary Hall : Extension 2676

S17 Crime and Disorder	This project will have no negative impact on Crime and Disorder
Health and Well Being	This project will improve the health and well-being of the residents of Darlington by reducing anxiety and providing support for legal advice in a timely way.
Sustainability	No sustainability implications are noted at this time.
Diversity	This project will improve access to services for vulnerable and at risk groups
Wards Affected	All the wards in Darlington
Groups Affected	These include people who are at risk of or are experiencing need for advice on issues of debt, family breakdown, homelessness and employment related problems.
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not recommend a change to the Council's budget or policy framework.
Key Decision	Yes
Urgent Decision	No
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	This project will contribute strongly towards delivering One Darlington by helping people to access free legal advice.
Efficiency	This project will improve efficiency by improving referral processes.

MAIN REPORT

Background

5. The Big Lottery have introduced Advice Plus funding to provide resources to partnerships in local areas to improve the linkages between different types of advice services available within a locality. There have been two rounds of such funding, and Darlington's partnership (LAND) was successful in its bid to the second round (Advice Plus 2).
6. Partners in the development of Darlington's proposal were:
 - (a) Darlington Borough Council (Welfare Rights Team)
 - (b) Age Concern Darlington
 - (c) Darlington Citizens Advice Bureau
7. A business plan and partnership agreement was developed as part of the process that set out the aims and objectives of the project and the governance arrangements for the partnership.
8. The project is aimed at increasing access to free legal advice with particular focus on vulnerable individuals including those on income-related benefits, older people, lone parents, people with mental or physical health problems. Other priority social inclusion groups may be identified as further research is developed.

Partnership Agreement

9. The partnership agreement was developed with significant involvement from Darlington Borough Council's Legal Team as the Council was not the lead partner. This role falls to Darlington Citizen Advice Bureau.
10. The agreement:
 - (a) Formalises the partnership and describes the partnering role of the three organisations;
 - (b) Establishes the LAND Partnership to cover the administrative area of Darlington;
 - (c) Improves the quality of service for free face-to-face legal advice targeted at the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and individuals;
 - (d) Establishes effective referral processes.

Business Plan

11. A detailed business plan was also agreed, which set out:
 - (a) project delivery arrangements;
 - (b) resources;
 - (c) costs;
 - (d) financial appraisal;
 - (e) marketing and communications strategy;
 - (f) monitoring and evaluation;

(g) risk analysis.

12. As part of the business plan it has been agreed to use the Council's risk management processes and as such the LAND partnership was put through the Council's Partnership Toolkit process in March 2009. Before funding was received the partnership was not deemed to be a 'significant partnership' according to the threshold criteria. Since receiving the funding in April it has now become a 'significant partnership' according to the partnership toolkit.

Involvement of Council Representatives

13. As part of the governance arrangements there is an operational group that consists of representatives of each organisation including the Acting Head of Connecting with Communities and Voluntary and Community Sector Liaison Manager.
14. In addition, on the Steering Group which is responsible for performance management and risk assessment, there is representation from Darlington Borough Council through the Communities and Engagement portfolio holder, Councillor A Scott.
15. The LAND Partnership continues to follow agreed risk management processes. It will also need to comply with the performance and governance arrangements within the Big Lottery grant conditions. It is for this reason that risk has been agreed as a standing item on the LAND steering group agenda.

Conclusion

16. The work undertaken by LAND has already provided a forum for joint referral protocols to be developed, although it must be acknowledged that this will not be a quick or easy process. The benefits to both quality and capacity of service delivery will however be very beneficial for the residents of Darlington at the current time.
17. The Citizens Advice Bureau is the lead partner and staff are all employed by them although two of the staff are based within the Council's Welfare Rights Team. These two officers are paid for through the Big Lottery grant and will have the key role of developing the partnership working and increasing take-up of benefits. Both of these activities fit well within the strategic priorities of the Council and will deliver service improvements and efficiencies in the longer term.