



STRATEGY

2016 – 2019

A strategy for bringing out the **BEST**
in information and advice services
in Central Bedfordshire



April 2016

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubting the **importance of information and advice** for people and their communities – especially during times of economic or social difficulty. There is a large bank of evidence that shows that effective advice can have beneficial effects on a wide range of personal issues such as income maximisation, financial management, legal rights, personal confidence and empowerment, health and general well-being. Further details on this, and links to various evidence, can be found on the Advice Strategy webpage on the Central Bedfordshire Together website: <http://www.centraltogether.org.uk/vision-priorities/advice-strategy/> (Details will be added to this webpage later)

This is the **second Advice Strategy** for Central Bedfordshire. Our first Advice Strategy was launched in 2011 and focussed solely on social welfare information and advice (ie advice on legal issues such as benefits, debt, housing rights etc). This new Strategy refreshes and extends the original Strategy, to provide a strategic approach to the planning and delivery of the wider range of information and advice services needed by the local community.



Central
Bedfordshire

In addition, having this Advice Strategy helps to meet some of the wider **community priorities in Central Bedfordshire** as outlined in Central Bedfordshire Council's Five Year Plan (2015–2020). Two of the proposed outcomes that link closely with information and advice services are:

- **Protecting the vulnerable** - Adults and children will be given the support and protection that they need
- **Community resilience** – Supporting people to help themselves and others

A key theme in this new Advice Strategy is the focus on **preventative information and advice**. The Strategy highlights the need to encourage people to seek advice at an early stage rather than waiting for them to get advice later, when often the issue has escalated into a much bigger problem or an urgent crisis.

Key drivers influencing this new Strategy include the impact of Welfare Reform, the launch of the Care Act 2014, and the increasing levels of poverty in our society.

This Advice Strategy will provide **added-value for the people of Central Bedfordshire** through its emphasis on collaborative working, preventative action and targeted support. The Strategy is specifically aimed at local information and advice providers, commissioners, funders, and policy decision makers.

This new Advice Strategy has been commissioned by the Central Bedfordshire Council's cross-departmental **Welfare Reform Board** and is being overseen by the multi-agency **Advice Planning Board**. The Strategy has been developed in partnership by **Bedfordshire Advice Forum** and **Central Bedfordshire Council**. It has been approved by Central Bedfordshire's Corporate Management Team and other local strategic bodies.

OVERVIEW OF THE ADVICE STRATEGY

BEST Vision

The **BEST Vision** for the Advice Strategy links closely with the overall vision for Central Bedfordshire in the **Council's Five Year Plan (2015 – 2020)**. We want to support residents in the local area by **bringing out the BEST** in information and advice services in Central Bedfordshire.

The overall quality of life of local residents will be enhanced by people being able to get the BEST quality information and advice that they want, when they want it, and how they want it.

BEST Principles

To work towards the **BEST Vision**, local information and advice services must be:

- **Built up and planned in a coordinated manner** – using collaborative, partnership working across the voluntary and community and public sectors
- **Embedded with a commitment to equalities** – with services available to the whole community, and supporting vulnerable, marginalised or disadvantaged people and communities
- **Supplied free at the point of delivery** - to avoid barriers in accessing advice and to promote social inclusion
- **Tailored to meet the diverse needs in the community** – using a multi-channel approach to provide services in different ways and at different levels

BEST Aims

To work towards the **BEST Vision**, we have set out four **BEST Aims** in this Advice Strategy to achieve:

- **Better access** to information and advice services
- **Excellent quality** of information and advice services
- **Stronger collaboration** in planning, funding and delivering information and advice services
- **Targeted prevention** of problems through increased use of early stage information and advice

Further details on the **BEST Aims** can be found on pages 8-11.

Information and advice in Central Bedfordshire

In Central Bedfordshire there is a wide range of information and advice **services and needs** (see pages 5-6). These will have a strong influence on the Advice Strategy.

Key drivers of the Advice Strategy

There are also some important national and local drivers that will influence the Advice Strategy. Major, current drivers are Welfare Reform, the Care Act 2014, increasing levels of poverty, and the growing personal choice agenda (see page 7).

BEST Delivery Plan

A **BEST Delivery Plan** will be developed to help implement the Advice Strategy (see page 13). This plan will link together the Advice Strategy's **BEST Vision** and **BEST Principles**, and will focus on turning the **BEST Aims** of the Strategy into **BEST Outcomes** across the full range of **information and advice needs in Central Bedfordshire**.

Structure of the Advice Strategy



INFORMATION AND ADVICE IN CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE

Information and advice - definitions

Information

Information is knowledge and facts about a particular issue. Information is generally provided without any personal context. This may be in the form of verbal communication but is often backed up by written information in leaflets, factsheets and websites.

Information providers are often an initial point of contact and can signpost or refer clients elsewhere for advice specific to the client's circumstances.

Advice

Advice helps a person to identify choices and options in relation to a particular issue, and can provide an opinion regarding a course of action.

A **basic advice** service involves:

- diagnosing the client's enquiry and the issues involved
- giving information and explaining options and choices
- identifying further action the client can take

Some advice providers also provide **casework support**. As well as providing advice they can also take action on behalf of the client to move the case forward eg contacting third parties to seek information, filling in forms, writing letters etc.

A few advice providers also provide **representation services** to clients. These agencies are able to deal with specialised casework requiring the presentation of arguments at tribunal and court hearings.

Information and advice – local services

Information and advice services are provided by a wide range of organisations in Central Bedfordshire based in both the voluntary/community sector and the public sector. The services provided differ from organisation to organisation.

- Many organisations simply provide information services whilst others also provide advice.
- Some organisations focus just on one subject area (eg welfare benefits) whereas others offer information and advice on a wider range of subjects.
- Some organisations specialise in supporting one specific group of clients (eg older people) whereas others provide services to the general public.
- Information and advice is provided in different sub-sectors covering **different types of advice** (see overleaf for details). Some agencies focus on one type of information or advice, whereas some others cover different types and themes.
- Some organisations only provide services in Central Bedfordshire whereas others also cover Bedford Borough or other areas.

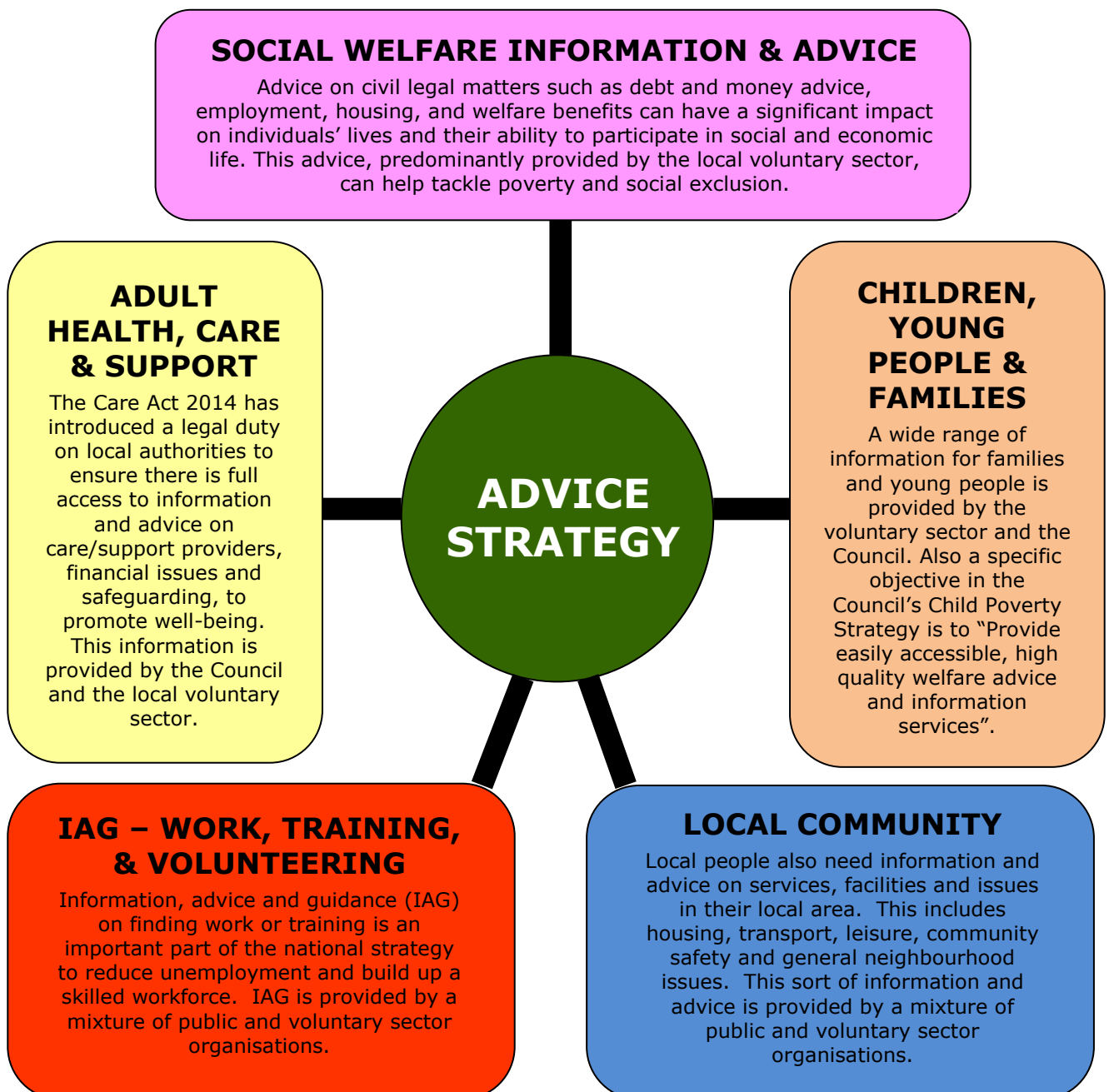
Links to get details about specific providers and their services in Central Bedfordshire can be found on the Advice Strategy webpage on the Central Bedfordshire Together website: <http://www.centraltogether.org.uk/vision-priorities/advice-strategy/> (Links and details will be added to this webpage later)

Information and advice – local needs

This Advice Strategy covers the wide range of **information and advice needs** in the community. We have broken down these needs into **five types or themes**.

These will be addressed in the **BEST Delivery Plan** for the Advice Strategy.

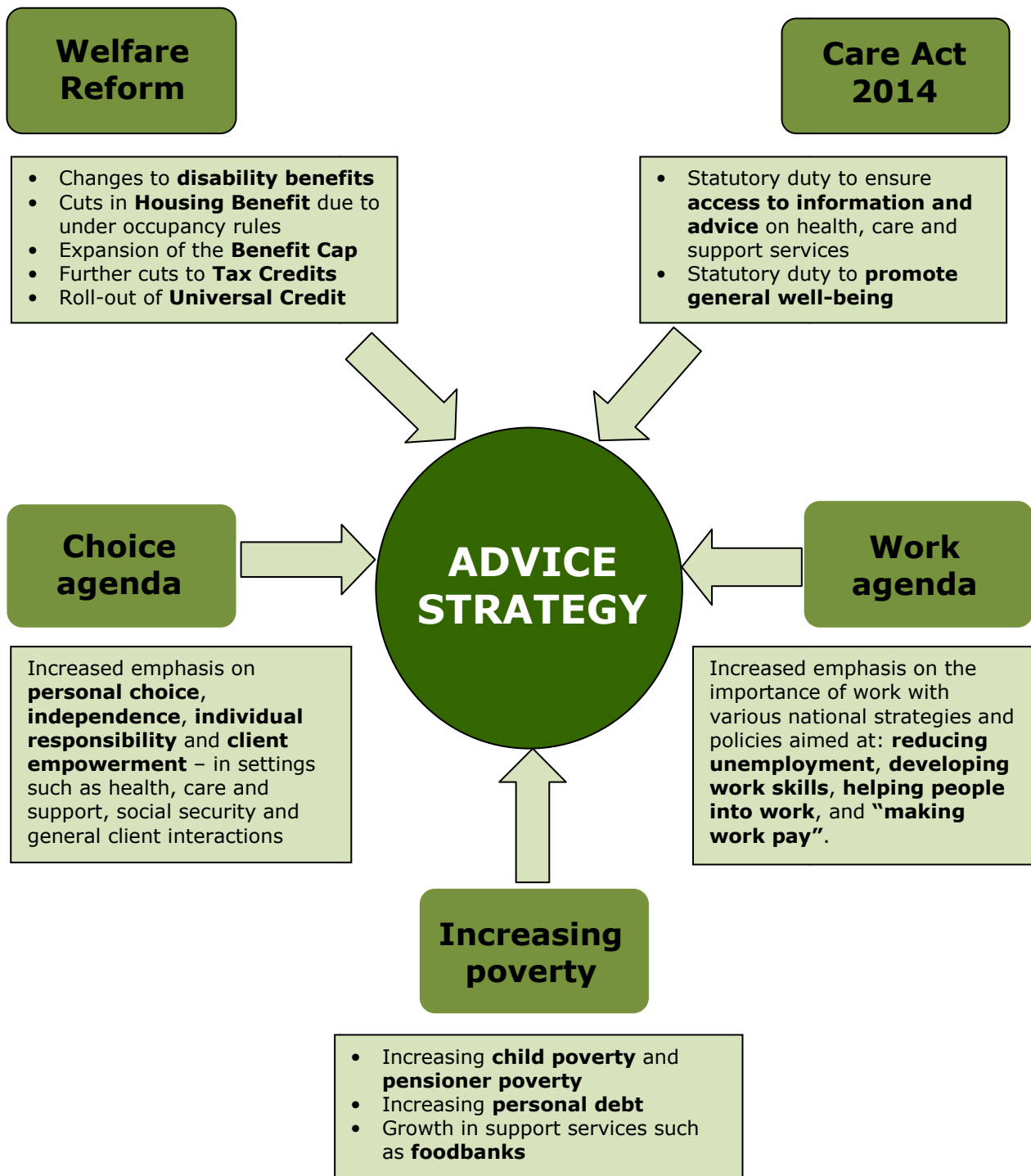
- **Social welfare** issues
- **Health, care and support** issues
- Issues relating to **children, young people and families**
- **Training, work and volunteering** (IAG – Information, Advice and Guidance)
- **Local community** issues



Direct links to individual advice providers in Central Bedfordshire, across the five advice themes, can be found on the Advice Strategy webpage on the Central Bedfordshire Together website: <http://www.centraltogether.org.uk/vision-priorities/advice-strategy/> (Links will be added later)

KEY DRIVERS OF THE ADVICE STRATEGY

There are some important national and local drivers that will influence the Advice Strategy and especially the **BEST Delivery Plan** that has been developed to accompany the Strategy.



Links to get further information, and base evidence, on these drivers can be found on the Advice Strategy webpage on the Central Bedfordshire Together website:
<http://www.centraltogether.org.uk/vision-priorities/advice-strategy/> (Links will be added later)

BEST AIMS

1 - Better access to information and advice services

Central Bedfordshire is predominantly a rural area and therefore ensuring good access to services, including information and advice, is a particular challenge.

This Strategy identifies the following **key requirements** to achieve better access:

- **Good publicity** – making sure people know where and how to get advice



It is important to have a mixed approach to publicity on information and advice services. We need to use a mix of web-based publicity, leaflets and printed material, and increased use of communication through social media, so that publicity is seen by people from all groups, from all backgrounds, and of all ages.

- **Flexible access** – making sure people are able to access information and advice services through a multi-channel approach

When looking for information, some people are able to self-serve using the internet, and it is therefore essential to have good web-based resources such as directories and information pages or weblinks.



However, many other people need different types of access for different reasons. For example, telephone or other remote access is often a necessity because some people are unable to travel due to illness, disability, frailty or caring responsibilities, and in rural areas because of lack of transport. Face-to-face interviews are also essential for dealing with more complex advice needs and supporting vulnerable people through the advice process.

- **Easy access points** – making sure people have alternative entry routes to information and advice services, if required



Having high profile, alternative, entry points can provide effective added value to established information and advice services. They reduce the danger of people falling through the net when thinking about seeking advice and ensure that people who are unaware of the usual access routes to advice have an alternative entry point. They can also help people move quickly towards the information and advice provider best suited to their needs. The new **AdviceCentral** service has recently introduced, for the first time, a single door approach to accessing advice in Central Bedfordshire.

The **key requirements** outlined above will be addressed in more detail in the **Delivery Plan** that will be developed to accompany this Strategy (see page 13). The key requirements will be specifically considered in terms of meeting the full range of information and advice needs in Central Bedfordshire.

2 - Excellent quality of information and advice services

Information and advice is given by a wide range of agencies in Central Bedfordshire – working at different levels and providing different types of services. It is essential that people receive excellent quality services, whatever agency they use.

This Strategy identifies the following **key requirements** to achieve excellent quality information and advice services:

- **Commitment to helping people – making sure people receive the excellent quality information and advice services that they need**



For agencies to provide excellent quality services they need to have a real customer focus embedded in their agency.

An essential part of this is to have an ongoing commitment to meeting client needs, and monitoring client satisfaction, to ensure that clients are happy with the service and that the information and advice they receive is clear and useful, and helps clients to achieve positive outcomes.

- **Meeting quality standards – making sure that all information and advice services are provided at a recognised quality standard**

All information and advice providers should be working to quality standards. This ensures that recognised, quality focused processes are used throughout the agency from recruiting, training and supervising staff and volunteers, through to planning, monitoring and evaluating the advice services provided.



Meeting quality standards gives advice providers extra credibility and enhances their reputation. Quality marks assist the public in deciding which advice service(s) to use, and also strengthen confidence for the public (and for funders) that quality services will be provided.

- **Quality support services – making sure that information and advice providers are given effective infrastructure support services**

For advisers to have the required knowledge and skills to be able to provide excellent quality services, information and advice providers need to be well supported in terms of training courses, networking opportunities, and general support. In Central Bedfordshire this support is provided through members of **Voluntaryworks** – the consortium of infrastructure organisations/networks such as Bedfordshire Advice Forum (for social welfare providers), VOCypf (for providers in the children's sector), and Bedfordshire and Luton Learning Partnership (for agencies in the IAG sector). CVS, VCA and BRCC also provide well established voluntary sector support services in Central Bedfordshire.



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The **key requirements** outlined above will be addressed in more detail in the **Delivery Plan** that will be developed to accompany this Strategy (see page 13). The key requirements will be specifically considered in terms of meeting the full range of information and advice needs in Central Bedfordshire.

3 - Stronger collaboration in planning, funding, and delivering information and advice services

Information and advice services are provided by a wide range of agencies across the voluntary and statutory sectors. It is important to have strong collaboration between different agencies and different sectors to ensure a holistic approach in providing information and advice in Central Bedfordshire.

This Strategy identifies the following **key requirements** to achieve stronger collaboration:

- **Commitment to advice** – making sure that all community frontline workers consider the wider advice needs of their clients

It is important for all frontline workers in Central Bedfordshire to be committed to making sure that their clients get relevant information or advice when needed – not only on the particular issue that the worker is dealing with but on other issues that are relevant to the person's situation. We therefore need to make sure that visits and contacts from people like community workers, midwives, health visitors, GPs, social workers, housing officers, youth offending officers, teachers etc. are used to identify wider information and advice needs, and to facilitate access to advice services. To encourage this wider commitment from frontline workers, it is essential to also have commitment from managers and agencies themselves. The concept of **"Everybody's got a role in advice"** needs to be promoted and understood.



- **Professional partnerships** – making sure that all information and advice providers, and other partners and stakeholders, work together effectively to provide a seamless service for users



It is essential that agencies and sectors consider the information and advice needs of the community as a whole. We need to develop new ways of working that build effective, respectful relationships between all agencies, sectors and partners to achieve the best solutions for customers. Better partnership working can also result in better planning of services, building better referral systems, and assisting clients more effectively. The concept of **"No wrong door"** for advice needs to be promoted.

- **Supportive funding** – making sure that decisions made by local funders and commissioners help to deliver the Advice Strategy

When making funding and commissioning decisions on advice services, in any of the different advice sectors, local funding managers and commissioners need to make sure that funding proposals support the **BEST Principles** and **BEST Aims** of the Advice Strategy.



The **key requirements** outlined above will be addressed in more detail in the **Delivery Plan** that will be developed to accompany this Strategy (see page 13). The key requirements will be specifically considered in terms of meeting the full range of information and advice needs in Central Bedfordshire.

4 - Targeted prevention of problems through increased use of early stage information and advice

Information and advice are often sought when somebody has an established problem or even a crisis. It sometimes requires intensive support and resources to resolve these problems and, if not resolved, the issue can lead to further support services and resources being needed. However, it is more effective, for the person affected (and often for the wider community and general public resources) if information and advice is provided at an earlier stage to prevent larger problems from arising and to help the person to make informed choices. This is especially true for issues affecting things like health, finances and children's futures.

This Strategy identifies the following **key requirements** to achieve targeted prevention.

- **Developing life skills – making sure that people have the skills and resilience to help them make informed life choices**



To prevent problems growing in the first place, it is important to put more emphasis on helping people to develop better understanding and skills on issues like financial literacy, and planning for family changes, retirement and future care and support needs. This can be done through closer work with schools, arranging targeted training programmes for adults, and organising information and awareness campaigns for the public. Helping people to gain life skills can also help individuals (and communities) to become more resilient.

- **Assisted early intervention – making sure that people get information and advice at an early stage**

If an issue or problem arises, it is essential for people to get information and advice at an early stage. Emphasis should be placed on promoting individual responsibility and encouraging clients to seek advice themselves. However, it is also important to provide practical assistance to help some clients to access advice services. A key part of this is to ensure that people are quickly and effectively referred to agencies that can meet their needs. It is essential to have simple, efficient referral systems in place, rather than just relying on signposting. These systems can be supported by incorporating innovative ways of using IT systems and mobile technology.



- **Preventative focus – making sure that adequate resources are provided to support preventative services**



Funders and commissioners need to ensure that sufficient resources are provided for preventative information and advice, and related activities and projects. We need to be more proactive by shifting the focus towards preventative services rather than simply relying on reactive advice services.

The **key requirements** outlined above will be addressed in more detail in the **Delivery Plan** that will be developed to accompany this Strategy (see page 13). The key requirements will be specifically considered in terms of meeting the full range of information and advice needs in Central Bedfordshire.

MANAGEMENT OF THE ADVICE STRATEGY

Implementing the Advice Strategy

The **Advice Planning Board** (APB) will oversee the implementation of the Advice Strategy on behalf of the **Welfare Reform Board**.

The **APB** currently consists of members from:

- **The local advice sector** - 3 representatives from agencies in Bedfordshire Advice Forum
- **Central Bedfordshire Council** - from: Children's Services; Equalities and Diversity; Partnership and Community Engagement; Public Health; and Social Care Health and Housing
- **Other key stakeholders** – AdviceCentral; Aragon Housing Association; Bedfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group; and Stronger Communities Thematic Partnership

The APB is liaising closely with lead partners across the five sectors / advice themes (see page 6), and will receive regular updates on the progress of the **BEST Delivery Plan** (see page 13).

The APB will also ensure that the **BEST Delivery Plan** meets the **BEST Principles** and **BEST Aims** of the Advice Strategy, and will specifically liaise with **Central Bedfordshire Equalities Forum** to ensure that the plan is **equality proofed and monitored**.

Updates on APB activities, including monitoring of the Advice Strategy, will be regularly added to the Central Bedfordshire Together website:

<http://www.centraltogether.org.uk/vision-priorities/advice-strategy/> (Details will be added later)



Developing the **BEST** Delivery Plan

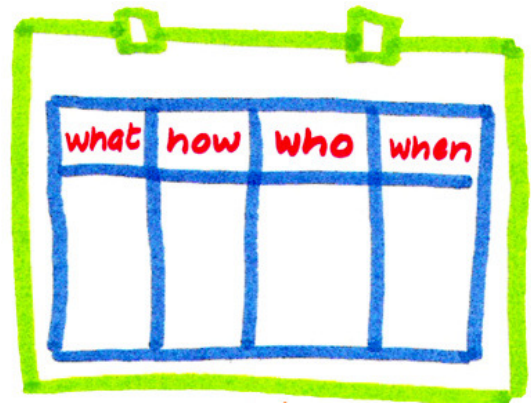
A **stakeholder workshop** will be organised in April 2016 to help develop the **BEST Delivery Plan**. Representatives from each of the five sectors/advice themes (see page 6) will be invited to this workshop.

The **BEST Delivery Plan** will link together the Advice Strategy's **BEST Vision**, **BEST Principles**, and **BEST Aims**, and will focus on the Strategy's **BEST Outcomes** across the full range of **information and advice needs in Central Bedfordshire** (see page 14).

A standardised template will be developed to record the **BEST Delivery Plan**.

The **BEST Delivery Plan** will identify specific prioritised and timetabled action to meet all of the **key requirements** relating to each of the four **BEST outcomes** in the Advice Strategy. The specific action in the **BEST Delivery Plan** will therefore fully cover:

- access to advice services
- quality advice services
- collaboration and partnership working
- targeted prevention



The **BEST Delivery Plan** will be regularly updated by the Advice Planning Board, and the updates will be uploaded onto the Central Bedfordshire Together website: <http://www.centraltogether.org.uk/vision-priorities/advice-strategy/> (Details will be added later)

Evaluating the Advice Strategy

The APB will evaluate the success of the **BEST Delivery Plan** at the end of each financial year and will produce an **Annual Report**, for the Welfare Reform Board, on the overall success of the Advice Strategy – and its links with Central Bedfordshire's Council's Five Year Plan.

Full evaluation of the Advice Strategy will be undertaken in 2019, with a view to refreshing the Strategy in 2020.



CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE ADVICE STRATEGY

