Northampton Borough Council Scrutiny Panel
Core Questions

1. Please would you provide a brief description of the services you provide.

The Community Law Service (CLS) is the County’s only independent Specialist Advice Agency (as opposed to agencies such as the CAB’s who are largely generalist offering some specific specialist services). We deliver the Money Advice Service’s debt advice service provision in Northamptonshire, lead on the County Council Advice Services contract and are lead agency for the Big Lottery Fund Advice Services Development Project in Northampton. Employing 24 F/T Specialist Advisors including 2 solicitors CLS provides specialist advice, casework and Court/Tribunal representation in the social welfare areas of Welfare Benefits, Debt, Housing, Immigration, Employment Law. We also provide Energy Saving advice and administer the Emergency Fuel Payment Scheme. In addition we offer consultancy services and have an established Training Service offering a programme of courses for all levels of skill at our offices or in-house for organisations.

Whilst we promote supported self-help for people for whom this is appropriate most of our resources are focused on providing casework and representation for those who need more support and specialist help. One of our main aims is to support vulnerable client groups. We offer a one-stop holistic approach to dealing with clients’ situations and see all cases through to conclusion with the client having their own dedicated advisor throughout. All people seeking advice from our service either directly or through referral are assessed and advised by specialist advisors.

In Northampton our services include:
- Drop in sessions staffed by specialist advisors at our Advice Shop in St Giles Street
- Appointments at our advice centre in Hazelwood Road
- Outreach sessions at the Bangladeshi Gateway Centre, Northamptonshire
- Carers support groups, Blackthorn Good Neighbours and children’s centres at Ecton Brook. Vernon Terrace and Upton
- Home visits for housebound people
- Hospital Visits
- Telephone advice by specialist advisors
- Advice via email
- Consultancy, training for local agencies
- Awareness events and sessions for local groups and agencies

Q2. Please supply details of how you are responding proactively to the Welfare Reform Act

We are responding pro-actively to the changes by encouraging people to seek our advice at the earliest opportunity to address the issues that have arisen for them as a result. Our ongoing ‘Don’t Get Evicted – Get Advice’ campaign has become even
more important as the changes have resulted in a significant increase in rent arrears due to the Spare Room Subsidy and landlords are issuing possession notices and seeking eviction at a much earlier stage. We have made information resources on the changes available to staff in other agencies and to the general public and fact sheets can be downloaded from our website.

Through our newly established Training Service we have provided a number of courses to other agencies covering the Welfare Reform changes including courses on Universal Credit with further courses programmed. We have been very active in providing awareness sessions to key professionals in the County and have been raising awareness of the changes and how to access advice and support from our Service at a number of events in the community.

We have attended various meetings across the County to form good working partnerships to enable the best possible services to the residents of the County. We attend all possible public information events to increase awareness and knowledge. We have increased our drop in advice sessions and telephone advice provision to enable faster and increased access to advice and offer a daily call back service staff by specialist advisors.

2 Has mapping and information gathering been undertaken to assess the cumulative impact of the Welfare Reform Act. What actions have been put in place to support clients?

An analysis of our statistics shows 23% of people seeking advice from CLS are experiencing problems which included issues related to the Welfare Reform changes. In the area of Housing advice this figure is over 70% with problems relating to the Spare Room subsidy one of the main issues.

The types of cases we see are those where the individual or family have been effected by multiple welfare reform changes (paying rent due to ‘spare room’, contributing to council tax, harsh sanction regime etc). People already in rent arrears have become further in arrears and many people are in arrears for the first time. Repossession proceedings and eviction proceedings are escalating. The National Housing Federation have identified rising rent arrears as a consequence of the Social Welfare Reform changes as a national trend.

See above for our actions. - We are offering a comprehensive specialist service.

(N.B We have not done any mapping as such but we are in the process of undertaking mapping in conjunction with the CAB on the impact in Wellingborough and East Northamptonshire as part of the Advice Services Transition Fund project in that area.)

3 Is on-line resource information available to clients?
Our website has factsheets available to download including information on Universal Credit, the Spare Room Bedroom Subsidy, the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, Personal Independence Payments, the Benefit Cap and Benefit Sanctions. The website provides information about the help and services available from CLS and how to contact us. Good information resources are widely available to the public from agencies such as the National Debt Line, Child Poverty Action, Citizens Advice etc. CLS is primarily aimed at people who need specialist advice and representation and does not invest in information resources geared toward self-help seeing this covered effectively by other agencies.

(N.B it is noteworthy that over 60 % of people seeking advice from CLS about rent and mortgage arrears and are facing repossession do not have personal access to the internet. In the area of debt and welfare benefits advice 40 – 50% of our clients do not have personal access to the internet)

Q5. Has there been an increased demand for services? If so, please provide details.

Demand for Debt and Welfare Benefits has remained at a fairly consistent and high level for the past few years. The most significant increase in demand has been in the area of Housing Repossession and Eviction hearings. Although the number of hearings we have represented remained at a similar level to the previous year (867 people represented at Court in 2013/14) there has been a decline in mortgage repossessions and a rise in rent possession and eviction hearings. We have however seen a significant increase in hearings since October which are attributable to the Social Welfare Reform changes and the Spare Room Subsidy in particular and this rise is continuing since January 2014.

As a specialist service we have finite resources matched to specialist staff capacity. With the loss of Legal Aid resources and several specialist staff particularly in the area of Welfare Benefits to accommodate demand for our services we now offer immediate advice and assistance to people through our drop in sessions and through our call back system staffed by specialist advisors. Any urgent action is taken and then if a casework service is needed a follow-on appointment is then made. The drop in sessions for benefits advice are consistently over subscribed and we have to ask people to come to the next session or we offer a telephone call back from our advisors.

Our average waiting times for an appointment for benefits and debt cases has risen from 2.5 weeks to up to 4 weeks. We are able to offer immediate representation for all urgent housing cases.

Q6. Do you feel there is adequate co-ordination between Advice Agencies who are supporting affected clients? How could it be improved?
The Big Lottery Advice Services Transition Fund is currently funding a project in Northampton (and another in the East of the county) aimed at forming better co-ordination of independent advice services. Amongst other activities we are building a Directory of Services setting out clearly which organisations provide what level of advice, how to access those services, opening times etc. Information from partners is still being sought before the Directory can be finalised. The aim is to focus on sustainability of those services and work in a more joined up way ensuring effective referral pathways are in place.

As the main specialist independent advice provider in Northampton we would like to see an improvement in the numbers and the way are referrals made to us by other advice agencies. Our capacity in respect of specialist debt and housing advice is far greater than that in other agencies and people need to be able to access our services more effectively. It is of concern to us that many people despite having been to other agencies have not been told about our services or any proper referral made and find their way to us after their problem has escalated often only having been given general advice or self help information. We will be ensuring that agencies have up to date information about our services to make effective referrals and develop a greater awareness of services CLS offer.

There are also inherent conflicts of interest in respect of the NBC in-house provision where monies are owed to NBC such as rent arrears and council tax arrears and people should be given clear information about the availability of independent specialist advice.

Q7. Has the number of clients using short-term money lending businesses increased. If so are you able to share the data with the Scrutiny Panel?

Our statistics show that approximately 50% of our clients who seek Debt advice are experiencing difficulty with short term lenders including Pay Day Loans.

Q8 Has the number of clients presenting with arrears including rent or Council Tax increased since the introduction of the Welfare Reform Act (April 2013)? If so, what is the percentage of increase?

We have seen a significant increase in the numbers of people seeking advice in respect of rent repossession and eviction hearings and a decline in the numbers of people seeking advice in respect of mortgage arrears. The overall numbers of people represented in court have remained consistent as a result at 867 people represented in court in 2013/14. However we are now seeing an upward trend. Our Court Help Desk assisted 452 people at court who arrived without representation an indication that people are not seeking the advice that they need in advance of their hearings. We are seeing clients in arrears for the first time as a consequence of the Spare Room Subsidy and an escalation of arrears of those already in arrears. A more pro-active approach to rent arrears recovery is being taken by landlords and the numbers of court hearing has risen significantly since October 2013 a trend that is continuing.

Community Law Service
15/04/2014
We have seen a 56% increase in Council Tax debt over the past year in respect of the clients we have advised.

**What assistance and support is provided to clients in debt?**

CLS is the main provider of specialist debt and housing advice in the County and delivers the Money Advice Service (MAS) debt advice provision in the County. We have 10 full time Accredited Debt Advisors who are all Authorised Intermediaries for Debt Relief Orders, 6 of whom are funded by MAS. We also employ 3.5 Specialist Housing Advisors including a full time Housing Solicitor. Funding includes 5 contracts from the Legal Aid Agency to deliver Housing advice including a Housing Duty Possession Scheme at the County Court which provides representation for people arriving at the Court without representation. Most of our Housing funding is focused on assisting people who are faced with possession proceedings and eviction as a result of rent or mortgage arrears. Our comprehensive debt advice service covers specialist support in respect of:

- Rent and Mortgage arrears including representation at repossession and eviction hearings
- Council Tax Arrears
- Credit Debt
- Fuel Debt
- Water Debt
- Pay Day loans
- Bankruptcy applications and support at Court
- Administration of Debt Relief Orders
- Debt Management Plans
- County Court Judgements
- Time orders
- Income Maximisation – benefits and grants

Q 10 How secure is your service. Do you have any funding problems?

CLS were faced with a significant reduction in funding (over £500,000 per annum) following the cuts to Legal Aid from April 2013. This was a loss of 6F/T Specialist Benefit Advisors, 3F/T Debt Advisors, 2 F/T Immigration Advisors and a F/T Employment Advisor. CLS has been successful in securing other funding such as the Lottery Advice Services Transition Funding to help compensate for this to avoid significant redundancies but we are still without the necessary resources to meet demand as effectively as we did prior to the cuts and this is particularly so in the area of welfare benefits. The cuts to Legal Aid came at the same time as the introduction of Social Welfare Reform and has exacerbated the problem of supply not matching demand. We have seen a significant reduction in the important core funding we receive from Northampton Borough Council and this is of concern to us given the high proportion of advice we provide to Borough Council tenants and to people who are in arrears with their Council Tax. Our Housing advice service is highly respected by the NBC Housing officers and we are instrumental in tackling NBC rent arrears.
Since 2010 our core funding support from the Borough has been significantly reduced from £117,500 per annum to £60,000 (with the award for 2014-2015 still pending.) Our funding application for this year includes additional funding for a dedicated Advisor to help meet the demand for advice arising from the Social Welfare Reform changes.

We would like to see more funding support from the Borough Council for CLS specialist services given the greatest demand for advice is in Northampton and to see specific funding ring-fenced for advice rather than advice services having to compete for funding with other voluntary sector services. Investment in advice saves the Council money and effectively pays for itself as well as playing an important part in contributing to the health and wellbeing of local communities. CLS is now in a situation where more funding support is provided to us for work in East Northants and Wellingborough from the local authority and the housing providers there than in our County Town where we are based.

Q11. Do you have further information regarding the impact of the Welfare Reform Act about which you would like to inform the Scrutiny Panel?

We administer the Emergency Fuel Scheme (for NCC) and have seen a month on month increase of people presenting with no money for fuel (95 last month). A high proportion of these people are experiencing problems with benefit payments rather than debt.

Sarah Hayle
Advice Services Manager