



Stronger together

Strategic Plan 2018-2023



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Introduction

Over the next five years we anticipate that the social and economic landscape in which we work, will get worse. This strategic plan aims to identify the current and future needs of the advice sector and set out how ACFA can best support advice agencies, so that they are better able to respond to this challenging environment.

Funding is reducing

Significant cuts to funding streams will lead to reduced central and local government investment in advice provision, cutting grant and contract income. There will be increased competition to secure funds from other sources such as charitable trusts and foundations. This will be reflected in reduced agency budgets, reduced service provision and even jeopardising the very existence of some agencies.

Demand for advice is increasing

The government's austerity programme continues to have a direct impact on the clients and service users of advice agencies. Its deficit reduction programme consisting of sustained reductions in public spending, intended to reduce the government budget deficit, is disproportionately affecting the lives of those who are disadvantaged and survive on low incomes.

Continued changes to law and policy have left more disadvantaged households in ever increasing levels of poverty and insecurity. The Welfare reform programme is reducing household incomes in real terms and this is compounded by other issues such as: insufficient affordable housing, the rising costs

of private rents, increasing homelessness, the growth of zero hour contracts and low paid work, and restrictions on immigration.

Challenge brings opportunity

Despite the challenges presented by increasing demand and reducing resources, the not-for-profit sector has a rich history of responding creatively and managing to survive against the odds. There is an opportunity here to underpin our strengths and adopt different ways of working.

For many years advice agencies have worked jointly, openly and supportively. This is a quality that needs strengthening, with ACFA playing a lead role in pulling agencies together so that we can build resilience during the difficult times ahead. Collaboration needs to increase because when charities with a common aim work together, they are able to learn and share new skills, improve outcomes for their beneficiaries, and improve their long-term sustainability.

However, advice agencies must also work towards developing new structures and working methods. This includes more formal partnerships based around project funding, sharing resources or developing diverse services based on contractual agreements, service level agreements or merging agencies.

This is the future environment in which advice services will be working. Now more than ever there is a need for the sector to take a strategic view of how we can work together more effectively, more efficiently and more innovatively.

About ACFA: The Advice Network

ACFA is not just for organisations that provide advice on social welfare law issues; it is for all voluntary sector and community organisations that provide advice, information and/or support. We are keen to ensure that organisations work together effectively to ensure people get the help they need, when they need it.

ACFA was set up in the early 1980s. One of its main aims was to lobby the then Avon County Council on behalf of independent advice centres and to assist the Council in setting up a Welfare Rights Take-Up Campaign.

Originally an abbreviation of Advice Centres For Avon, over the years the network has become known merely by its acronym: ACFA. To reflect this and the demise of the county of Avon, the acronym was formally removed in 2014 and the name ACFA: The Advice Network adopted.

ACFA representatives worked in partnership with the local authority to determine how best to develop a county-wide network of advice centres. ACFA was instrumental in securing better resources for advice centres and was influential in developing an Avon-wide advice service.

As a long-established umbrella organisation, ACFA has become an influential body trying to improve the provision and quality of advice services across the four unitary authorities of Bristol, North Somerset, Bath and North East Somerset and South Gloucestershire.

Our mission is to work in partnership to combat poverty and promote social justice by improving the quality & provision of free, independent advice.

ACFA supports advice agencies based in and around Bristol who provide free, independent and confidential advice services.

Individually and collectively, ACFA members will be more effective and efficient in order to provide great advice services.

Included in its social policy work, collectively ACFA will lobby local and national government on any issue of concern related to its work; and will propose new ideas and innovations.

Our aims

Provide
a forum for
information
exchanges

Aid
development of
comprehensive
advice provision
throughout the
region

Lobby
for adequately
funded and
resourced advice
services

Represent
the interest
of advice
agencies

Publicise
the work
of advice
agencies

Organise
& support
campaigns
covering a range
of advice related
& policy issues

Facilitate
improvement of
policy and best
practice

Arrange
relevant and
affordable
training

Strategic Priorities 2018-2023

In 2016 we began a process of developing a strategic plan for ACFA. We achieved this by gathering member views about the functionality they expected from a network, the priorities we should set, and the improvements we could make.

We consulted members through online questionnaires and by holding a consultation event entitled ACFA: Stronger Together. As a result, a steering group was created to take these findings forward and produce a draft strategic plan which was, again, circulated to the membership for feedback.

This strategic plan is the final result of this consultative approach and will form the basis of the benefits offered to member organisations over the next five years.

Each of our five strategic priorities are defined by a set of key organisational functions. These feed into our annual planning process.

We've developed a range of outcomes for each priority, which we aspire to achieve by 2023. We will measure and monitor ourselves against the delivery of these outcomes.



One: voice

We will represent and express the collective views and opinions of the advice sector on matters that are important to them and promote the advice sector to a wide audience.

Key Priorities

- Promote the views and opinions of advice agencies through the ACFA Brand
- Influence decision makers in both voluntary and statutory sectors
- Showcase social policy issues through relevant media including an Advice Squad column in the Bristol Post
- Lobby for change to law, policy or practice based on evidence collated from members
- Promote advice services by utilising media and marketing
- Articulate the impact quality advice services have on service users and the community
- Raise issues or complaints on behalf of members

- Represent members at key events / meetings such as BCC's Joint planning Board or Bristol Homes Board
- Promote advice services through a reviewed ACFA website
- Communications sub-group

Primary Outcome

- The profile of the advice sector has been raised

Secondary Outcomes

- Decision-making has changed or has been influenced as a result of ACFA involvement
- Increased understanding of our collective service provision and impact
- Representation of our views, opinions and issues has been maintained and improved
- Better represent the views of members outside Bristol
- ACFA website structure improved



Two: Sustainability

We will work towards ensuring that the advice sector and ACFA enjoy a sustainable future.

Key Priorities

- Maintain existing and attract new ACFA members
- Assist in securing future funding for advice agencies
- Work towards securing funding for ACFA in order to increase capacity
- Apply for legal status for ACFA
- Employ key staff for ACFA
- Fundraising sub-group
- Develop and promote ACFA member services responsive to member needs
- ACFA members contribute to the running of their Network

Primary Outcome

- Advice services and ACFA are adequately funded and resourced

Secondary Outcomes

- ACFA membership maintained or increased
- Advice sector funding has been maintained or increased
- Improved or retained advice services
- Funding for ACFA secured
- Legal status for ACFA established
- Recruitment of key staff for ACFA
- ACFA services are improved and more efficient
- Increased involvement of ACFA members in delivering ACFA functions
- Membership and training booking system improved

Three: Partnership

We will encourage and facilitate a collaborative and strategic approach to the funding and delivery of advice services and provide a platform for sharing best practice, exchanging information, knowledge and experience.

Key Priorities

- Enable communication between member agencies and between ACFA and other networks
- Facilitate partnership agreements and joint funding bids
- Facilitate sharing of best practice, expertise and resources
- Provide opportunity for collaborative working ranging from informal group work to joint project delivery
- Establish and deliver a range of ACFA sub-groups to encourage joint working and information sharing
- Deliver regular ACFA meetings to facilitate information exchange, development of sector wide strategies and sharing of best practice, knowledge or experience.

- Enable a strategic and collaborative approach to planning and delivery of advice services
- Implement changes to membership and training booking systems

Primary Outcome

- Opportunities for members to collaborate are maintained or increased

Secondary Outcomes

- Improved sharing of best practice and expertise
- Opportunities for members to improve communication are maintained or increased
- Improved sharing of resources
- Avoid duplication of services to clients
- Improved communication between agencies
- Improved communication with other networks

Four: Evidence

We will facilitate the collating of evidence which illustrates the impact advice has on the communities we serve and the social policy issues the sector has identified through its work.

Key Priorities

- Enable collaboration to identify social policy issues
- Collect and collate case studies, data and other evidence to support our social policy work
- Collect and collate data and other evidence to illustrate the impact of legal advice
- Social policy sub-group
- Develop impact assessment protocol

Primary Outcome

- Improved ability to demonstrate the need for change in law, policy and practice

Secondary Outcomes

- Improved identification of joint social policy issues
- Joint collation of case examples or data is increased
- Law, policy or practice has changed or improved
- Increased ability to demonstrate our collective impact

Five: Support

We will provide resources and services that help member agencies deliver high quality advice services, and enable sector wide support for common goals.

Key Priorities

- Offer support for the development of quality advice services and attaining relevant quality marks
- Support advice services where funding is jeopardised
- Maintain a resource library of relevant policies and procedures
- Deliver good quality, relevant and affordable training
- Deliver regular and relevant news items to members
- Encourage peer support and opportunities for members to give and receive trusted mutual support whether this be operational, organisational, managerial or legal issue based
- Enable casework support through encouraging joint casework, consultancy and signposting and referral.
- Establish a referral protocol
- Provide member support through a reviewed ACFA website

Primary Outcome

- Delivery of high quality advice services throughout the network

Secondary Outcomes

- Members offering support to others is increased
- Advice agencies and their staff, feel supported
- Advice agencies are better informed and updated, through regular newsletters
- Agency staff have gained improved insight and knowledge through training
- Improved referrals between member agencies
- Caseworkers establish improved cross agency links
- Member area of ACFA website improved

Action List

Our ambitious action list identifies key tasks that we plan to begin working on during the first year of our plan in order to achieve our strategic objectives.

Action	Tasks	Timescale	Outcome
Legal status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify possible status Application process 	Dec 2018	New legal status established
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review current sub groups Implement changes to sub-groups 	Sept-Dec 2018	Sub groups more effective
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Re-launch relevant sub-groups Consider new sub-groups Investigate potential referral system 	Dec 2018	Referral system proposed
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify purpose of funding / project Identify potential funding sources Review income generation: membership and training fees 	Sept 2019	ACFA Fundraising strategy complete
ACFA staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify staff roles Prioritise relevant posts Recruitment Plan 	Sept 2019	Recruitment Plan completed
Membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement membership renewal system 	April 2018	Membership system in place
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve member information on website 	June 2018	Improved functionality
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement member vacancies on website 	Mar 2019	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review criteria for membership 	Sept 2019	Clearer criteria
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruiting / inviting new members & follow up dormant members 		Increase number of members
Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review ACFA website 	Sept 2018	Improved information exchange
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review meeting structure 	Mar 2019	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review emails and investigate potential newsletter 	Mar 2019	
Training	Develop training plan for 18-19	Sept 2018	Training Plan complete
	Implement event booking system	July 2018	Event booking system in place

Current membership

Here is a list of current members, as per August 2018.

1625ip
Age UK Bristol
Age UK South Gloucestershire
Avon (University Settlement)
Community Association
Avon and Bristol Law Centre
Bristol and Avon Chinese Women's
Group
Bristol City Council Welfare Rights
and Money Advice Service
Bristol Poverty Action Group
Bristol Refugee Rights
Bristol Somali Resource Centre
Care Forum
Centre for Sustainable Energy
CHAS Bristol
Citizens Advice BANES
Citizens Advice Bristol
Citizens Advice North Somerset
Citizens Advice South Gloucestershire
Nailsea Disability Initiative
Missing Link / Next Link
North Bristol Advice Centre
Shelter
South Bristol Advice Services
St Pauls Advice Centre
Talking Money
The Brigstowe Project
The Matthew Tree Project
The Personal Support Unit
University of Bristol
UWE Bristol
We Care and Repair
WECIL
Wessex Water

Member benefits

Together we are stronger

Here we set out the benefits members receive when they join ACFA. We believe these will support local advice services to be more effective and efficient. They have been developed over time by members, for members and with the aim of encouraging a partnership approach.

Information sharing

ACFA members benefit from a long established tradition of encouraging open sharing of information. This might include the interpretation of specific areas of law, funding or social policy issues.

Strong brand history

ACFA was established in the early 1980s and has worked to significantly raise the profile of the advice sector. Examples include:

ACFA led a successful consortium legal aid bid and made a joint stand against its abolition. Our open, sharing and partnership approach is the envy of many advice agencies in other areas.

Showcasing social policy issues in the media such as the Sunday Politics Show and Points West and establishing a regular column in the Bristol Post.

ACFA led a successful partnership bid for Advice Services Transition Fund which led to more joined up services and reporting on our impact.

Jointly hosted a Welfare Reform Conference to gain a better cross sector understanding of the impact of welfare reform on Bristol citizens.

ACFA training

Good quality and relevant training provided at an affordable price and delivered locally.

Joint working and collaboration

Encouraging a partnership approach is an important principle for ACFA, enabling an open and sharing relationship between members.

Collaborative working can range from informal group work through to joint delivery of projects. The ACFA network can provide the opportunity for the development of such collaborations.

ACFA meetings

A useful monthly forum for information exchange and to discuss issues relevant for advisers and managers alike. There is also an opportunity for speakers, external or internal, to address members.

Voice and influence

As a long-established umbrella organisation, ACFA has become an influential body in trying to improve the provision and quality of advice services. ACFA lobbies for adequately funded and resourced advice services and defends members when threatened with funding cuts. ACFA is a collective voice for advice agencies which can raise issues or complaints on behalf of members and represents them on Bristol City Council's Joint Planning Board and Bristol Homes Board.

Resource library

Members have exclusive access to a range of regularly updated policies and procedures that aim to facilitate the development of best practice and help member agencies become quality mark compliant. Resources available include casework and employment related policies, as well as organisational policies such as data protection or business continuity.

Social policy

An opportunity to raise and identify key social policy issues affecting our clients and service users. The social policy sub group can co-ordinate a joint response. There are many transferable skills within ACFA members that can provide a united front against the policies of austerity.

Peer support

An opportunity for members to give and receive trusted mutual support whether this be operational, organisational, managerial or legal issue based. Having someone to call or meet to discuss common problems and issues saves time, avoids duplication and reduces stress.

ACFA sub-groups

An open invitation to attend a number of sub groups where you can work with other members on specific issues:

Communications: An informal forum to discuss marketing strategies and opportunity to increase your visibility by contributing to our regular Advice Squad column in the Bristol Post.

Fundraising: The sub group establishes a strategic approach to fundraising, avoiding duplication, discouraging competition and identifying opportunities for partnership.

Social policy: The sub group provides an opportunity for all members to contribute to larger debates and campaigns, which, as individual organisations, they might not have the time or resources to do so.

News

Focused and relevant news delivered through regular emails to all members and through ACFA meetings and sub groups.

ACFA website

A central place where details of all ACFA member services can be found as well as member only resources such as our unique resource library.

Marketing

An opportunity to increase awareness and publicity for your own services, both to other members and externally. This is achieved through attending ACFA meetings, disseminating information through ACFA emails or through the ACFA website.

Casework Support

ACFA can help advisers to work more effectively with their clients. We can do this by:

Joint casework: Bringing together advice skills and experience from different agencies helps to bring about a more effective case outcomes for the client.

Consultancy: Caseworkers can access specialist skills and knowledge in different fields of law.

Signposting and referral: Shared understanding of services provided by members enables advisers to make more effective signposts and referrals for their clients.

New developments: ACFA members are always working on new initiatives and opportunities. Future developments include an impact assessment protocol and online referral system.



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