

Medway Consumer Support Network Network Development Plan

1. Summary of Network Area

- 1.1. Medway, located in North Kent, is just 30 miles from London and 40 miles from the cross channel services. The M2, M20 and M25 motorways are close at hand and the Medway Towns are well served by Rail services from London, as well as regular coach services to and from London, Victoria.
- 1.2. Medway's population stands at 249,488¹ and is centred on the five main towns of Chatham, Rainham, Gillingham, Strood and Rochester. There is a large rural area on the Isle of Grain peninsula comprising the wards of Thames Side, Hoo St. Werburgh, All Saints, parts of Frindsbury Extra and Chattenden, and a further rural area of Cuxton and Halling. The contrast of urban and rural areas results in about 12% of the population of Medway living in a rural area geographically covering 70 % of Medway. The population is relatively young, 64% are aged 44 or under. 13% were aged 15-24. 17% of the population was over 60yrs old.
- 1.3. There are a number of wards within Medway that suffer from multiple deprivation factors. Five Medway wards are among the 20 most deprived in the whole of Kent. Many of the problems are deep seated and inter-related - poor economic prospects because of poor educational attainment. However, 11 wards are among the top 100 wards in Kent in terms of prosperity, including Hempstead and Wigmore, which is North Kent area's most prosperous. In these wards unemployment is lower than average and home ownership higher. These wards are on the outer fringe of Medway in the main and tend to be concentrated to the south east in Gillingham.
- 1.4. The Black & Ethnic Minority population has risen slightly since the 1991 Census from 4.2% to 4.4%, still below the national average. The majority of the ethnic communities originate from the Indian sub-continent. Many of the wards with the highest proportion of residents with Indian origins within the ethnic minority population also figure highly on the IMD 2000 indices of deprivation, most especially Holcombe, Town, Luton and Brompton.
- 1.5. Medway's economy has suffered a great change within the space of a generation. A large heavy industrial base has expired and been replaced by service based industries with a focus upon the tourism industry. Medway's service sector now accounts for nearly three-quarters (72.4 %) of all jobs. This has resulted in minimum wage labour and consequential social and economic stress characterised by high debts and unemployment levels.
- 1.6. Medway has a lower proportion of professional and skilled workers compared to both the Kent and national figures and a higher proportion of low skilled workers. 2.7% of the population is unemployed compared to 2.3% for the South East Region and 3.1% nationally (June 2001). The government's Annual Business Inquiry for 1999 shows 25.3% of jobs in

¹ 2001 Census

distribution, hotels and restaurants, and 24.2% in public administration, education and health. Average earnings per hour (based on 1998 figures) show that Medway has lower average earnings of £9.36 compared to £10.09 for the South East and £9.54 for the UK.²

2. Members of the Network **(See Form C)**

- 2.1. The management team of the CSN comprises representatives drawn from the organizations who initially agreed to participate in the project.
- 2.2. These representatives assisted by other staff from their organisations, will manage the resources available to the CSN to endeavour to meet the objectives set out in the Terms of Reference and Network Development Plans.
- 2.3. The Main Providers of Consumer Information & Advice in Medway are Trading Standards and Local CABx (located in Chatham, Chatham Maritime and Gillingham). The Library & Information Service, spread out across all of the Medway Towns (including rural locations and a mobile library) provides Information by way of leaflets, CD ROMs and the Internet. All the main providers of Consumer Information and Advice are members of Medway CLSP.
- 2.4. Gateway Members are important avenues for dissemination of information and consumer education especially targeted at priority groups.
- 2.5. Age Concern and Neighbourhood Watch are members of Kent CSN and disseminate information received via the Ringmaster System to members of the community on problem traders, including lottery scams, rogue builders and doorstep traders, data protection agencies and many more.
- 2.6. Project Sunlight is a healthy living centre; its premises are used by various community groups. The Youth Service facilitates a Youth Parliament whose views are sought on matters affecting younger people in the community.

3. Needs Assessment

- 3.1. Medway CLSP has conducted research into the current provision of services to provide a complete picture of the services available within the Partnership area³. The CLSP has also identified and conducted research into the priority groups of young people, people in the rural community, the ethnic minority community and their need for the future provision of services.
- 3.2. CSN research in Medway shows:
 - 3.2.1. That there are gaps in access to the provision of consumer advice to young people, older people, large sections of the ethnic minority population and the Rural community.

² Medway Community Legal Service Partnership (Outline Strategic Plan), November 2001

³ Medway Community Legal Service Partnership: (Outline Strategic Plan), November 2001

- 3.2.2. Trading Standards and the Citizens Advice Bureaux are the main providers of consumer advice.
- 3.2.3. Key consumer needs were readily identified, including debt & credit issues, second-hand cars, home maintenance & repairs, doorstep selling (including cancellation rights) and TV/Audio products.
- 3.2.4. Medway Council Trading Standards, CABx and the Library Service have access to Medway Councils Translation Service for which they are charged.
- 3.2.5. Partners operate mostly during office hours
- 3.2.6. There is a need for partners to enhance the sharing of information
- 3.2.7. Home and work visits are available in specific, limited circumstances
- 3.2.8. Customers residing elsewhere, shopping in Medway, can access CSN services.
- 3.2.9. All Medway CSN advice and information providers hold the relevant CLS Quality Mark
- 3.2.10. Both primary advice partners have undertaken user profiles and satisfaction surveys, the CABx entailing NACAB report/returns, exit questionnaires and user surveys and Trading Standards analysing their OFT complaint returns, DTI statutory reports and user satisfaction surveys(postal and by telephone).
- 3.2.11. A MORI poll was conducted using the standard DTI core CSN benchmarking questions, with the following principal results:-
 - 9% felt very well informed about their rights;
 - 37% fairly well informed;
 - 36% not very well informed;
 - 15% not at all well informed;
 - 3% did not know.
 - 6% felt access to advice was very easy;
 - 37% fairly easy
 - 17% neither easy or difficult
 - 20% fairly difficult
 - 8% very difficult
 - 12% did not know.
- 3.2.12. Consumer debt and related credit issues such as cancellation rights, present significant consumer concerns, particularly to CABx.
- 3.2.13. Provision of consumer education work is currently very limited
- 3.2.14. Consumer complaint levels have been stable over the last 3 years

3.2.15. There is a need for consumers to have access to details of competent, reliable and reputable trades-people.

3.2.16. Consumers expect action to be taken against rogue and problem businesses to prevent further abuses being committed.

4. Gap analysis

4.1. From the research conducted, an initial evaluation leads to the aims below:

4.1.1. To enhance/improve awareness amongst Medway residents of their consumer rights.

4.1.2. To enhance access to CSN services to all by partnership working, particularly the young, old, ethnic minority and rural communities.

4.1.3. To maintain the high quality of CSN advice.

4.1.4. To promote the CSN itself

4.1.5. To establish the libraries as the first stop for consumer information

4.1.6. To develop a holistic approach to CSN services by an effective referral and information sharing processes (including training) for CSN members

4.1.7. To disseminate good practice and intelligence on rogue traders

4.1.8. To develop a scheme to inform consumers of reputable trades-people

4.1.9. To conduct further demographic and geographic research in relation to requests for advice

The first four aims are integral to the CSN itself and would be given equal priority. The remaining aims have been listed in order of priority.

5. How the Network Operates

5.1. Medway' s CSN members met and decided with the data collated from community surveys, user surveys, the needs analysis and self-analysis questionnaires that the best route forward, with the limited resources and diverse needs identified, would be for the CSN to:

5.1.1. Operate as a sub-division of Medway Community Legal Service Partnership.

5.1.2. Educate and inform consumers so they do not suffer as a result of ignorance about their rights and duties.

5.2. The Plan provides a comprehensive schedule of activity, which aims to deliver Medway with a leading CSN capable of delivering the aims and objectives.

5.3. Medway CSN sees the evaluation of the programme as an ongoing process and will follow protocol to monitor the progress and effectiveness of the CSN.

5.4. The network partners will work together to:

5.4.1. Provide for the consumer advice and information needs of the community, avoiding duplication and addressing existing gaps in provision –

- ◆ Medway CSN plan to make greater use of the Libraries and other information providers as information outlets. These organisations would be utilised to deliver information by way of leaflets, general information packs and signpost the residents of Medway to specific consumer advice providers.
- ◆ Improving Access - Establish Library Service & other Gateway Members as a first stop for initial consumer information. Train staff to be more effective at active sign-posting. Provision of leaflets / information packs with contact details of CSN Members. Utilising Mobile Advice Unit to service Rural Areas and hold advice surgeries in premises of Network partners.
- ◆ Telephone help lines are useful for people not able to access services for various reasons and the CSN will work with available help lines to provide better consumer information and advice in Medway.
- ◆ Further research is needed into the geographic and demographic origins of requests for advice.

5.4.2. Improve the quality of services – By responding to gaps identified in service provision. The primary providers of consumer information and advice, Trading Standards, CABx, and the Library Service, have the CLS quality mark and plan to maintain that.

5.4.3. Maintain effective cross-referral mechanisms - Medway CLSP has introduced and implemented a comprehensive Referral Network between local providers of information, advice and legal services. This referral network is fully CLS quality mark compliant. CSN members will work together to ensure that the referral protocol is followed and that staff are trained to use it. This will provide a “joined up” CSN service and enhance quality.

5.4.4. Ensure that the community is aware of, and has ready access to, the services provided - Raising consumer awareness of the services provided by the individual agencies and of the CSN as a whole is seen as the priority issue to be addressed by the network members. This may require different means for different target groups. Some examples which highlight the need for this project are:

- ◆ Client Feedback generated over a twelve month period showed that 45% consumers questioned knew Trading Standards were

there to provide Consumer Information and Advice. 3% were referred by a CAB office.

- ◆ A recent MORI research finds that most people are ignorant or misinformed about their rights as consumers. There are significant differences in overall awareness of rights between age groups and social classes and according to educational qualification, with young adults aged 15-24, older people aged 55+, less affluent social classes, and those without formal qualifications having much lower awareness.⁴

5.4.5. **Promote inter-agency working** - The CABx and Trading Standards have long enjoyed a good working relationship with regular interaction between the services; this benefit has been extended through partnership to all network members giving the opportunity for more inter-agency working. CABx will continue to invite staff of Trading Standards to speak at staff meetings on consumer issues and will extend these meetings to network partners when appropriate.

5.4.6. **Share information about local consumer concerns** – Representatives of Network Members will meet regularly to share information and will establish protocol for the sharing of information between meetings. Network Members have agreed to report social policy issues to CABx.

5.4.7. **Support each others' training and information needs** - Utilising the expertise and resources within Trading Standards and CABx to assist in the training and development of our partners within the CSN.

5.4.8. **Consumer Information and Education** – Members will ensure the enhanced distribution of information leaflets. Trading Standards will continue to provide lectures to community groups, students and interested parties supported by consumer fact sheets. A CSN factsheet will be introduced.

5.4.9. **Link with other relevant initiatives** - Trading Standards provides advice to local businesses, informing them of their legal obligations and is planning an approved trader scheme.

Further research needs to be done into the possibility of joint working with the Kent CSN. Also, information is needed to identify and evaluate the use of all consumer information and advice help lines available in Medway

5.4.10. **Establish the CSN firmly within the Medway public and business community by:**

- ◆ Publishing Research;
- ◆ Launch Event;
- ◆ Articles in the Local Media;

⁴ Public Awareness of Consumer, Employment and Other Rights – MORI Social Research, August 2001

- ◆ Advertising and promotion of the CSN logo;
- ◆ Introduce a CSN page to the Medway Trading Standards website, and provide links to and from CSN partner websites
- ◆ Establish links with local businesses, main shopping centres and Chamber of Commerce.

6. *Planned Service Development*

6.1. The specific action plan which corresponds with this development plan can be found attached. (Please see action plan - Form F).

7. *Review and Monitoring Process*

7.1. Existing local community surveys, client feedback surveys and local business surveys will provide some data for the review and monitoring process. Feedback from identified target groups will also need analysis. A timetable will be established to cover the review process.

7.2. MORI has recently conducted a poll on behalf of Medway Council surveying the wider community. Questions asked include awareness of rights and where to go for help. The poll is to be carried out annually and results will inform network members of local targets and performance indicators.

7.3. Main providers of consumer advice regularly carry out user satisfaction surveys. The results of this are published and are available to network members.

8. *The Project Plan*

8.1. The specific project plan which corresponds with this development plan can be found attached. (Please see action plan - Form G)

9. *Equal Opportunities*

9.1. Medway Consumer Support Network has incorporated an Equal Opportunities Statement in its Terms of Reference.

9.2. All individual partner organisations have equal opportunity policies which can be produced upon request.