

A better deal for everyone: A new approach to

debt advice from the Money Advice Service



Who we are

The Money Advice Service is independent, unbiased and available to everyone.

Our vision is to enhance people's lives because they take control of their money as a matter of course.

We were set up by government and are funded by a levy on the financial services industry.

We are here to help everyone manage their money better. We do this by giving clear, unbiased money advice to help people make informed choices.

We believe that the right money advice can make a difference to people's lives. And when people take steps to manage their money better, they can live better too.

Because we're not selling anything ourselves, or for anyone else, you can trust our advice.

What we do

We offer advice and information online, over the phone and face-to-face.

We provide tailored money advice to help people make choices throughout their life, whatever their circumstances.

Foreword

Debt, almost always, is more complicated than owing money you can't readily repay. It doesn't usually lend itself to simple solutions. We can though, simplify the complicated and confusing arrangements currently facing people seeking help. The research summarised in this document is a significant first step towards that goal.

We are clearer now than before on the numbers of people in need of debt advice – numbers that will inevitably increase as a consequence of the tough current economic situation. We are clearer about people's motivations for seeking help, and the ways in which they want to speak with advisers and communicate with advice services. And we have found consensus around the need for greater coordination, evaluation and leadership – and the role that the Money Advice Service can take in bringing that about.

Our role is not as regulator for the sector but as an independent enabler of high quality debt advice services. That independence is central to our ability to bring about the changes identified by our research that will result in the increased availability of high quality advice, and in the quality of advice overall; in the enhanced consistency of delivery; and in the adoption of an effective triage system that directs people swiftly to the most appropriate source of advice for their needs – whether that is a face-to-face consultation, a telephone call or an online link.

We have been able to reach this point thanks to the support of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), which funded this research and development work. On behalf of the debt advice project team at the Money Advice Service I would also like to thank all of the creditors, debt advisers, and members of the public, who have given their time and cooperation so generously.

Our coordinating role is being funded by a new allocation from the levy collected by the FSA. In 2012/13, this funding will ensure continuation of the 16 free face-to-face debt advice providers across England and Wales previously funded by BIS. By 31 March 2013 we expect a 50% increase (to 150,000) in the number of people using these face-to-face services, achieved through the introduction of efficiencies and improvements in coordination. The 2012/13 budget will also provide for proportionate funding for free debt advice in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and for development work towards a better system – a system that is strong, clear, funded on a fair and sustainable basis – one where people in financial difficulties know where, how, and are able to access free, effective multi-channel debt advice services that deliver consistent and fair outcomes for them and their creditors.

We recognise the increased contributions of the financial services sector to fund debt advice in the future, and it is vital we ensure that this new system provides value for money, and we will ensure future funding is appropriate and sustainable.

My vision, ultimately, is of aligning crisis debt advice with the Money Advice Service in a simple, seamless way that helps people get out of debt, stay out of debt, and plan for the future.



Gerard Lemos ChairmanMoney Advice Service

Introduction

From April 2012 the Money Advice Service will be responsible for the coordination of free debt advice provision across the UK. We see our role in this area as two-fold:

- developing a model of debt advice delivery that is as efficient and effective as possible, putting customer needs and outcomes at the heart of the service and meeting the demand of customers in crisis as well as encouraging customers to act earlier before their issues become severe
- ensuring that the long term funding of debt advice is placed on a sustainable footing (and we recognise fully the importance of continuing to engage with the creditor industry in the development and introduction of any future funding model to ensure this).

In order to enhance our understanding of the debt advice sector and to inform development of a new model for the delivery of debt advice, we have:

- consulted widely, and continue to do so, on a one to one basis with many stakeholders from across the UK, including banks and creditor organisations, regulators, Government departments, Local Authorities and advice delivery agencies
- commissioned a programme of formal market research with stakeholders and 'over-indebted' people across the UK.

Our research suggests that there are:

- 6.6 million 'over-indebted' households in the UK that perceive debt as a heavy burden or have had arrears of three months or more; of which:
 - 2.1 million will actively seek debt advice
 - 2.2 million would benefit from debt advice
 - 1.0 million could benefit from broader money advice, and
 - 1.3 million are unlikely to ever seek debt advice.

Throughout this process we have been struck by the qualities of the debt advice sector that are valued by over-indebted people and creditors. Debt advice increases individual well-being, improves collection rates for creditors and boosts the health of communities.

"It changed everything. It just changed the way I dealt with it. Getting rid of the shame. I am only sorry that it took me so long."

Previous debt advice customer, 35-49, Female

The final scope of our coordination role will emerge from the detailed development work we are engaged in, underpinned by this research and our programme of stakeholder engagement and it will, as planned, form the basis of our detailed business plans for 2013 and beyond. A number of key principles have already emerged that we believe are critical to the future delivery of debt advice, and these are set out on page 3.

Our proposed approach to debt advice co-ordination

Creditors (from both within and beyond the financial services industry), advice providers and funders have told us consistently that facilitating a shift from a debt advice sector that is driven by the needs of funders to one that is structured more around the needs of customers is the single most important step we could take.

Over-indebted people have told us how the debt advice process needs to feel and the outcomes it needs to achieve and we will focus relentlessly on creating a debt advice sector that reflects this.

Our approach will be developed to meet four **key principles**:

- **Reach and accessibility** we will increase availability in a cost-effective way to ensure over-indebted people have access to high quality debt advice when they need it.
- **Simplicity** we will make it easy for people to get the right advice at the right time, which addresses both their immediate money problems and helps them build long-term financial resilience.
- **Self-help** we will encourage people to help themselves whenever practical.
- Addressing gaps in delivery the services we commission will focus on addressing any delivery gaps in the sector as identified by our ongoing research. It is not our intention to displace current funding arrangements.

To deliver against these key principles, we have identified seven key areas as being critical to a debt advice sector that meets the needs of over-indebted people and delivers fair outcomes for them and their creditors.

We will work with regulators, creditors, advice agencies and Government departments to ensure that each of these areas is in place and funded in an appropriate and sustainable fashion.

1 Creditor Referrals

We will develop an enhanced new approach to customers accessing debt advice services by changing the current default position of referrals from 'self-referral' (customer) to much wider creditor referral. We will achieve this by working directly with creditors and the regulatory and self-regulatory bodies and encouraging industry-wide protocols for the triggering and referral of consumers with debt issues to an appropriate triage mechanism.

2 Triage

We will introduce a new approach to triage by developing and procuring triage systems to ensure that over-indebted people reach the best source of advice, through the most appropriate channel, as quickly as possible. Our priority will be to ensure that this process can be readily accessed and it is our view that most people using this triage function will be referred by their creditors at a consistent point in the arrears process.

We do not envisage developing a new brand for this system, but will harness as appropriate the potential of those brands already in the sector for both preventative and crisis debt advice.

3 Face-to-face advice

It is clear that for a proportion of over-indebted people, face-to-face debt advice is the most effective option. The triage systems we will develop will perform an important channel management function to ensure that those who *need* rather than simply *prefer* face-to-face advice are able to access it in a timely fashion.

We will commission face-to-face debt advice services in response to this need as part of our aim to meet the demand for advice across the UK, and we will want to ensure that we can maximise the value of this channel by adopting the most efficient and effective working practices (and at the same time maintaining quality of service).

4 Fair-share arrangements

The 'fair-share' arrangement between some creditors and a number of free-to-client advice providers is an effective method for matching demand and supply over the telephone and online.

We see clear benefits to customers of having access to the single payment solutions provided at no cost to them through 'fair-share' funded advice services. The single payment is straightforward to administer for the customer and provides peace of mind. We also acknowledge the strong support for this model across the creditor sector.

We will encourage greater participation in this system while maintaining the important principles of proportionate creditor contribution and a free service for customers. We will work with the 'fair-share' funded organisations and creditors to encourage more comprehensive participation by creditors, including priority creditors, to complement work already in train.

We will not seek to duplicate 'fair-share' funded services. We expect that the triage systems we will develop will lead to an increase in demand for 'fair-share' funded services.

5 Other advice models

We will also seek to ensure that services continue to be available online and over the telephone to meet the need for advice that is specifically focussed on enabling people to take forward self-help and assisted self-help solutions with their creditors. If it is necessary, in due course, we will commission these services directly.

There is an important role to be played by organisations that promote and support self-help and assisted self-help responses to over-indebtedness. A significant proportion of over-indebted people in our research exhibited a strong desire to address their problems themselves and we believe they should continue to be able to access the tools to do so.

6 Standards

Given the importance of debt advice interventions in people's lives, it is crucial that the advice is of the highest quality. We have encountered various quality measures through this programme of research and believe that the quality of the individual adviser and the quality of advice organisations should be subject to a regular, transparent quality assurance process. Individuals and organisations that have been subject to assurance processes and who meet agreed standards should be able to publicise this as a way of demonstrating their worth.

We will develop and embed best practice quality assurance processes in services we fund and seek to expand their use across the sector, building on existing examples of good practice.

7 Consistency and integration of data and evaluation framework

We will introduce standardisation of data, which is currently lacking across the sector, which will facilitate better measurement of impact, improve learning, enable more accurate targeting of resources and will help creditors with their approach to identifying and supporting customers who are at risk of becoming over-indebted. It will also bring greater consistency to creditor treatment of over-indebted customers. We will also look to provision an integrated data system, promoting referrals, stopping duplication and enhancing the customer experience.

We will also develop and disseminate an evaluation framework based on desired and agreed customer outcomes which will enable us to measure the impact of particular interventions, and will provide an important reference for future commissioning of services.

We envisage using the data that we will collect and the outcomes we will measure to help us influence policy makers and creditors in order to ensure that the system remains robust and relevant over time.

In conclusion

We will work with stakeholders to transform the sector to one that places customer needs and outcomes at its very heart. The major changes that we will introduce are:

- default referral of consumers by creditors to an effective debt advice triage process (enabling customers to quickly access the best advice that meets their needs, including self-help)
- improved availability of a face-to-face service for those customers that really need it
- increased participation of creditors in fair-share arrangements, and
- standardisation of service delivery, data collection, measurement of service delivery effectiveness and greater consistency of creditor treatment of over-indebted customers; leading to improved quality and consistency of customer outcomes.

Next Steps

We are conscious of not disturbing the current good work of debt advice providers and the value provided by the industry. We will continue to work collaboratively with all interested stakeholders throughout 2012/13 to help test, evaluate and develop our plans, which we will incorporate in our 2013/14 business plan, on which we will consult.

Summary of research programme

A grant to fund this research programme was provided by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).

The programme of research consisted of:

1 Landscape Research – conducted by London Economics

A comprehensive review of existing literature and research materials available publicly was conducted. This was supplemented by consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. This study describes the current debt landscape in the UK and highlights information gaps for further exploration.

Debt Advice in the UK is available at the Money Advice Service website: www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/about/corporateinformation/research.aspx

2 Individuals and Stakeholder Research – conducted by IFF Research

Primary qualitative and quantitative research conducted amongst the UK population and debt advice stakeholders has supported the definition of key outcomes desired from the future delivery of debt advice:

Individuals - qualitative research

■ Interviews conducted face-to-face, lasting one hour, with 40 individuals across the UK. Individuals were both customers and potential customers of debt advice services.

Individuals - quantitative research (mixed online and telephone methodology used)

- Screening exercise 7,251 sessions completed, identifying over-indebted people.
- Online survey completed by 2,506 over-indebted people.
- Telephone survey 201 interviews were conducted by telephone with over-indebted people aged over 65 without internet access, supplementing the online study.

Stakeholders - qualitative research

- 40 in depth interviews with a broad range of stakeholders across the UK including: advice providers (free to client and fee charging), creditors (housing associations, utility companies, banks and other finance providers), Government and Local Authorities.
- A multi stakeholder focus group.
- A half-day stakeholder workshop.

User Needs from Debt Advice: Individual and Stakeholder Views is available at the Money Advice Service website:

www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/about/corporateinformation/research.aspx

3 Funding debt advice in the UK – A proposed model – conducted by London Economics

An exploration of the way to attribute the costs of debt advice services through a levy on the financial services industry, administered through the Financial Services Authority.

This report presents a discussion of potential funding options that might be considered and suggests a potential funding allocation approach.

This research, not discussed in this document, is available at the Money Advice Service website: www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/about/corporateinformation/research.aspx

Summary of research findings

Debt advice landscape

This report sets out the landscape of debt advice drawing together a wealth of information from across the sector. As a literature review, few of the findings will be new to the sector. However, some highlights are worth restating here:

The **major causes** of crisis debt are recognised to be:

- negative financial shocks/loss of income due to job loss, illness, relationship breakdown or other circumstances
- persistent low income
- increased or unexpected expenses
- over-commitment/poor money management.

Customers of the traditional or formal debt advice agencies span a wide range of socio-economic criteria, however, the literature suggests that customers may be broadly characterised, as:

- typically aged 35-49
- both male and female, with a slight over-representation of females
- have very low incomes, mostly less than half the UK national average
- often single parents
- mostly not in employment
- likely to be renting their home.

The **benefits of receiving debt advice** to customers can include the following, many of which also have substantial societal benefits:

- reduction and eradication of debt
- improved emotional well-being
- improved mental health
- preventing homelessness
- maintaining jobs/wages
- increased income
- avoiding criminality
- avoiding court costs.

People with debt problems consult a wide range of advice sources including:

- friends and family
- financial services providers
- housing associations
- free-to-client advice providers (e.g. National Debtline, Citizens Advice Bureaux, Consumer Credit Counselling Service, Payplan, Christians Against Poverty)
- fee charging debt management companies.

Advice providers deliver services in a combination of the following forms and delivery channels:

- self-help typically provided online
- assisted self-help typically provided by telephone
- full assistance typically provided face-to-face.

Whilst much of the information above reinforces current understanding of sectorial issues, it also highlights the extent to which the sector has **important information gaps** which, once filled, would lead to a more authoritative understanding of the sector and a framework to monitor the impact of debt advice on both people in crisis debt and their creditors. The most notable information gaps identified are:

- Effectiveness whilst implicitly, the delivery of debt advice is seen as a 'good thing', e.g. reducing people's stress levels and dealing with their situations, reducing debt levels, etc., there is little evidence on the long term effectiveness of debt advice on its customers. Further, there are no standard mechanisms in place to measure effectiveness, not least because a common evaluation framework or statement of desired outcomes does not exist. Whilst customer satisfaction, after receiving debt advice, is high across the sector, it is probable that this satisfaction relates more to the immediate session than the long term 'success', or otherwise, of any action plans decided upon. This is why, as part of our future activity, we will establish a common evaluation framework against which to measure the effectiveness of service delivery (referred to under *Consistency and integration of data and evaluation framework* on page 5).
- Sector wide data there is no central repository for sector wide data. Consolidating sector wide data is complicated in many ways, for example, there is little consensus on how to count the number of debt advice sessions delivered each year. Definition of what constitutes debt advice differs by agency, e.g. sessions/clients/casework, making data collation difficult. We will want to address this point by working with all relevant parties in the sector to establish consistent approaches to data collection (referred to under Consistency and integration of data and evaluation framework on page 5).

Individuals and Stakeholder Research

Individuals Research

In depth exploratory conversations with people who are currently 'over-indebted' (a mixture of those currently using and those not using debt advice services) clearly identified a range of core 'needs' that people have from the provision of debt advice services. These are summarised in the chart below and are a combination of practical and emotional needs:

Individuals' desired outcomes from debt advice:

Resolution of debt



All are looking for a finite solution. Few are interested in the detail about how it is achieved. Type of resolution varies by individual but all want to be able to see an end in sight.

Implementation of a realistic solution



The solution needs to be personally appropriate. Repayments need to be affordable and manageable on an ongoing basis.

Improvement in confidence, knowledge and control of finances



Want to be able to:

- effectively deal with creditors and debt; know how to prioritise bills
- understand options available including any cost or other implications
- be confident in their own ability to make decisions and act
- be able to make ends meet; avoid future problems.

Improved emotional well-being



Reduce overall anxiety and especially fear and worries about money. Acknowledged that this may also lead to a general improvement in health and personal relationships.

Ongoing support



Progress updates and regular checks on the individual's financial and personal situation are welcome. Consistent, known point of contact is highly desirable.

The extent to which people require each of these outcomes depends on, not surprisingly, a range of factors, amongst others, including:

- complexity of debt issues
- individual's financial capability
- individual's well-being
- how long an individual has been coping with debt issues.

Recognising the complexity of people's differing personal circumstances and financial ability and their ability and confidence to cope, reinforces the need to ensure **a multi-channel approach** to the co-ordination of debt advice services, so that the most appropriate support tools can be made available as quickly as possible.

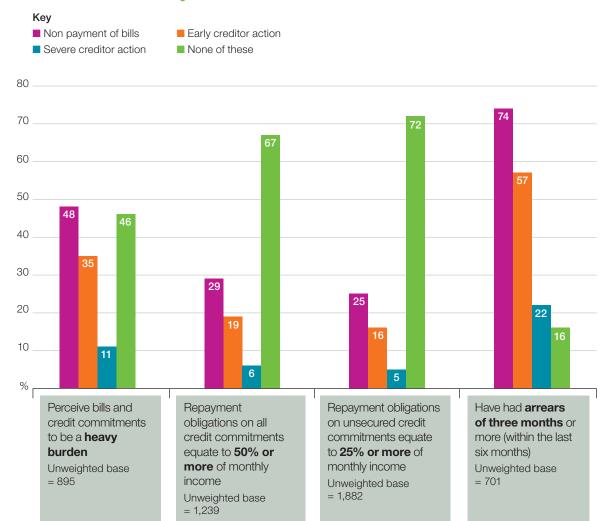
Given that there is no common definition for identifying those in need or potentially in need of debt advice a number of previously used 'over-indebtedness' indicators were used to attempt to define the scale of the task at hand – i.e. the number of people who need or are likely to need debt advice. The quantitative survey suggests that there could be as many as 18.6 million people in the UK who could technically be described as 'over-committed'. This is based on any one of four indicators². However, many of these, of course, will be fortunate enough never to experience debt issues despite their apparently risky status.

Of those identified as 'over-committed' just over half (54%), approximately ten million people, identify themselves as actually 'being in debt'. This proportion varies across the indicators with eight in ten of those with 'arrears of three months or more' or perceiving 'commitments to be a heavy burden' claiming to be 'in debt'. As the chart on page 12 illustrates, the self-assessment of 'being in debt' is typically associated by individuals with non-payment of bills and/or the onset of creditor action.

¹ MAS/IFF definition of 'unsecured credit commitments' is wider than used in other research studies as it includes bills and other commitments.

² 'perceive bills and credit commitments to be a heavy burden'; 'repayment obligations on secured and unsecured credit commitments equate to 50% or more of monthly income'; 'repayment obligations on unsecured credit commitments equate to 25% or more of monthly income'; and 'have had arrears of three months or more (within the last six months)'.

Creditor action by indicator met



Base: all individuals qualifying as over-indebted/over-committed (2,707)

Analysis of the data, looking at how individuals are dealing with their bills and commitments and also if they are experiencing creditor action suggests that the following indicators best reflect those who are likely to use/need debt advice:

- perceive debt as a 'heavy burden', and
- have had arrears of three months or more (within the last six months).

These two indicators represent 8.8 million individuals or approximately **6.6 million households** with debt advice needs (making an allowance for the proportion of couples that take advice together). The table on page 13 sets out, in grid form, the relationship between creditor action and 'how they are dealing with bills and credit commitments', for the 6.6 million households referred to above.

Creditor action by 'how dealing with bills and commitments'

Creditor action/pressure on household	None of below	0.05m 1%	0.02m 0%	1.49m 23%	0.86m 13%	0.20m 3%
	Missing some payments	0.01m 0%	0.18m 3%	0.65m 10%	0.53m 8%	0.02m 0%
	Minor creditor pressure	0.18m 3%	0.59m 9%	0.60m 9%	0.34m 5%	0.03m 0%
	Severe creditor pressure	0.21m 3%	0.28m 4%	0.20m 3%	0.17m 2%	0.05m 1%
	6.6m	Under heavy financial pressure	Falling behind/ missing some payments	Keeping up but constant struggle	Keeping up but sometimes a struggle	Keeping up without difficulty

Individual's view of how well they cope with bills and credit commitments

Base: those households identified as 'over-indebted' using the following indicators: 'commitments...heavy burden' and '...arrears of three months or more...'

Categorising situations as follows, allows us to quantify both active and latent demand:

- Very severe: sees themselves as under heavy financial pressure and likely to be under pressure from creditors.
- Severe: sees themselves as falling behind/missing payments or a constant struggle to keep up with payments and under pressure from creditors.
- At risk: Keeping up but sometimes a struggle and under creditor pressure or missing some payments as indicted above.
- Other: Keeping up without difficulties and under no pressure as indicated above.

As illustrated above, applying this categorisation to those who 'perceive commitments as a heavy burden' and 'those in arrears of three months or more' results in the identification of more than two million households with debt situations that are either very severe or severe in nature.

We also asked if consulting an external advice organisation about their money situation is something households could imagine doing. More than a quarter (28%) of all over-indebted people said this is not something they can envisage doing ever.

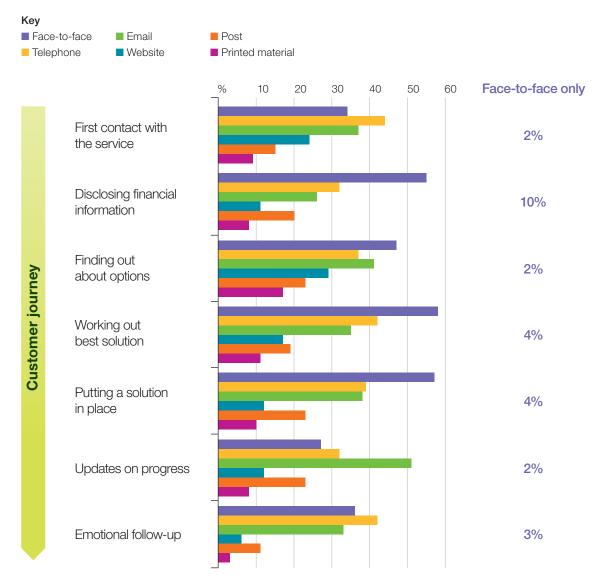
Of those in the two indicators being considered on page 13, one in five (19%) claim that they **would never consider using debt advice**. Applying intention to use debt advice to the figure on page 13 provides us with the table below:

Total number of debt problems in a year	6.6m	100%
Less those who would not seek advice	1.3m	19%
	5.3m	81%
Those with very severe problems and would seek advice	0.4m	6%
Those with severe problems and would seek advice	1.5m	23%
Others who would seek advice but probably don't need it	0.2m	3%
Active demand in a year	2.1m	32%
At risk and would seek advice if situation worsens	0.8m	12%
At risk and could be stimulated to seek advice	1.4m	22%
Latent demand in a year	2.2m	34%
Active plus latent demand in a year	4.3m	66%
Others for whom debt prevention advice might be suitable	1.0m	15%

This suggests an **estimated scale of demand for debt advice of approximately 4.3 million households**, made up of active demand of 2.1 million households and latent demand of 2.2 million households. A further one million households could potentially benefit from debt prevention advice.

People's preferences in how they wished to engage with debt advice were also explored; recognising the increasing use of digital tools and the potential cost. People **do not display strong channel preferences** with regards to receiving debt advice, with many choosing a multitude of channel options. Although initially respondents default to a face-to-face preference, when face-to-face is withdrawn as an option, people are, in the main, willing to adapt to use other channels. Even for 'disclosing financial information' only 10% of the over-indebted population insist that face-to-face is their only acceptable route.

Channel preferences: all considered



Base: all individuals qualifying as over-indebted/overcommitted: 2,707

Stakeholder research

Research amongst **debt sector stakeholders** covered a wide range of participants (Government, Local Authorities, funders, creditors and advice delivery agencies). Whilst each organisation had its own views about the current issues facing the sector, there was a high degree of **consensus on how the sector might be improved** to benefit customers in the future.

Stakeholders expressed an array of desired outcomes from the provision of debt advice including:

- people being able emotionally and practically to deal with their debt situation
- people being able to access and implement appropriate and sustainable debt solutions
- creditors being able to retain their customers
- repayment of debts
- creditors acting responsibly towards customers, reassured that referral to debt advice will deliver appropriate and consistent outcomes for both themselves and the customer.

One outcome in particular that all agreed on for customers was:

• improving customers' financial capability is a core requirement in achieving these outcomes.

Despite the variation of input from across the sector, common issues were identified relating to:

- The sector being **stakeholder centric**, rather than customer centric.
- The **funding** of the sector e.g. short term funding arrangements limit delivery agency ability to invest in long term advice delivery programmes.
- Advice capacity advice capacity is limited and is largely stakeholder (funding) driven. Further, conditions of funding often restricts the way advice can be given, e.g. by channel, and the populations that might be served with that specific funding.
- Inconsistent approaches the **lack of a standardised approach** to the provision of debt advice means that customers may get different advice depending on the channel or advisor chosen. Further, inconsistent data capture and data sharing constraints often leads to duplication of work across agencies and frustration for customers.
- Lack of effective regulation of advice and solution providers means that customers cannot be assured of receiving high quality advice, irrespective of the delivery agency, and allows rogue providers to provide poor service which may be detrimental to the customer and brings the sector into disrepute.
- Low awareness amongst people of where to go to seek advice limits choice of customers when considering where to go for advice and often results in people taking advice from the first organisation they come into contact with. This can also lead to some not taking advice at all.

Following collation of the individual stakeholder interviews, a number of stakeholders from across the sector, came together in a workshop session to discuss collectively the issues facing the sector and also to consider the customers' outcomes from debt advice that our research had identified. In general **stakeholders welcome the Money Advice Service co-ordination role** in relation to debt advice. The workshop session resulted with **stakeholders agreeing to a potential way forward** with a co-ordination role delivering:

- a single recognisable first point of contact
- a **triage** function signposting to appropriate advice/solutions
- consistent referral to accredited advisers
- improving the **consistency and efficiency** of the sector
- mechanisms for greater collaboration and information sharing
- a sustainable funding stream.

Perceived role of co-ordination:

Drive awareness of credible advice providers

- Single, recognisable, first point of contact
- Provide a triage function
- Consistent referral to accredited advisers

Improve consistency and efficiency across the sector

- Set minimum standards for provision, including kite-marking
- Set the bar for quality
- Develop mechanisms for greater collaboration and information sharing

Provide mechanism for sustainable funding

Unbiased money advice to help everyone manage their money better.

moneyadviceservice.org.uk

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