

Where next for *Independent Advice in Rotherham?*

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Introduction

This report discusses the findings of research that explored the future prospects for the provision of independent advice services in Rotherham. The research has been led by the Advice in Rotherham (AiR) partnership, and undertaken in partnership with researchers from the Centre for regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University and Rotherham Citizens Advice Bureau. It was funded through a grant from the Big Lottery Fund's (BIG) Supporting Change and Impact initiative, which aimed to give existing BIG projects in the last 18 months of their funding additional resources through which to review the way they work and explore ways of placing the project on a more sustainable footing for the future.

1.1. Aims and objectives

The research was undertaken between May and October 2012 and had the overall objective of providing the AiR partnership with intelligent information through which to shape and inform the development of local independent advice provision into the future. Underpinning the research were two main aims:

1. to understand existing demand for and uptake of independent advice services in Rotherham, through aggregation of statistics collected through the AiR partnership's 'common counting' system
2. to understand the future market for independent advice services in Rotherham, through research with two specific groups: those currently accessing advice services and those who have not accessed support.

In support of these aims the research addressed a number of key questions:

- what are the characteristics of people who access advice services in Rotherham and what types of support do they receive?
- how can advice services be developed to better suit the needs of individuals currently accessing support and individuals who have not accessed support but might require support now or in the future? In particular:
 - is there scope for the partnership to provide a more flexible range of support?
 - what prevents people from accessing advice services?

1.2. Methods

The research involved four main methods:

- analysis of secondary data on 8,041 advice recipients collected by AiR partners between July and October 2012
- a survey of 130 independent advice recipients
- a survey of 124 local people in Rotherham Town Centre
- a review of recent literature and policy material.

1.3. Report Structure

The remainder of the report is in three sections:

- the next section discusses the context for the research, including some background to the work of the AiR partnership since 2008 and the context in which they have been operating
- the following section considers the future demand for independent advice in Rotherham, through discussion of the policy, economic and welfare landscape, and analysis of data from our surveys of local people
- the final section is the conclusion, which brings together the research findings to consider the future for independent advice in Rotherham.

Where are we coming from?

2.1. Reflections on the early years of the AiR partnership

This section reflects on the first few years of the AiR partnership (2008-12). It considers the background to the project, how it enabled partners to respond to the economic downturn, the shifting policy and funding landscape affecting independent advice, and the findings of an independent evaluation.

2.2. An overview of Advice in Rotherham

AiR was established in December 2008 with a three year grant provided through the Big Lottery Fund's Advice Plus Programme. It is a partnership between a range of local third sector organisations¹ and representatives from the statutory sector that aims to support the development of the advice and information sector in Rotherham by enhancing independent advice provider's capacity and capability to tender for, manage, and deliver contracts for the provision of legal advice services in the borough.

Between 2008 and early 2012 the AiR project was delivered through a number of mechanisms:

- a small project team, hosted by Voluntary Action Rotherham, oversaw the administration and co-ordination of the project, including the provision of practical support and guidance to partner organisations
- partnership members were provided with funding for the on-going provision of advice services
- a new and improved approach to partnership working, particularly in relation to signposting, referrals, and engagement with the public sector.

Following the end of Advice Plus funding in early 2012 AiR has been able to sustain some activity, albeit at a lower intensity, through a short term grant from the Big Lottery Fund's Supporting Change and Impact programme. This funding will come to an end on 31st March 2013, after which the partnership hopes to secure funding from the Big Lottery Fund's Advice Services Transition Fund alongside a long term commitment from the Local Strategic Partnership to fund a level of support for the partnership.

¹ At various points the following third sector partners were: Voluntary Action Rotherham, Age Concern/Age UK Rotherham, Rotherham Citizens Advice Bureau, Kiveton Park Independent Advice Centre, Shelter-Ricochet, South Yorkshire Centre for Inclusive Living, Shelter, FACE, RDIS and Action for Blind People.

2.3. Responding to the economic downturn

The start of the AiR project coincided with the 'credit crunch' and the onset of economic recession in the UK. Neither could have been predicted while the proposal for the project was being developed. Advice providers typically see an upsurge in demand during recession due to rise of the number of people losing their jobs, and the subsequent increase in people requiring advice around issues such as debt and benefits.

Under the banner of the AiR project, advice providers in Rotherham were able to lobby for and gain access to additional funding for this increased caseload. This enabled some local advice providers to support a greater number of clients during this period. For example Rotherham CAB were able to support 67 per cent more clients in March 2009 compared to March 2008 while KPIAC used the additional funding to employ two further part time members of staff to meet the growing demand for the service.

The AiR project also provided advice providers with a mechanism through which to collect and collate 'intelligence' about the impact of the recession on local people. This was then fed into local statutory bodies to ensure that they had an up to date understanding about what was happening in local communities.

The AiR project therefore played significant role in helping the borough respond to the economic crisis. The additional 'credit crunch' activity was timely and very much needed. Furthermore, it is unlikely that this activity would have happened in such a co-ordinated, efficient or effective fashion had it not been for the work of the AiR project.

2.4. The shifting policy landscape

The policy environment surrounding the provision of advice services changed considerably during the three years of the AiR project. Although it was conceived as a way of building the capacity of local advice providers to tender for and deliver publicly funded legal advice, the way the Government funds this work, particularly work supported through Legal Aid and the Legal Services Commission, changed markedly as the project developed.

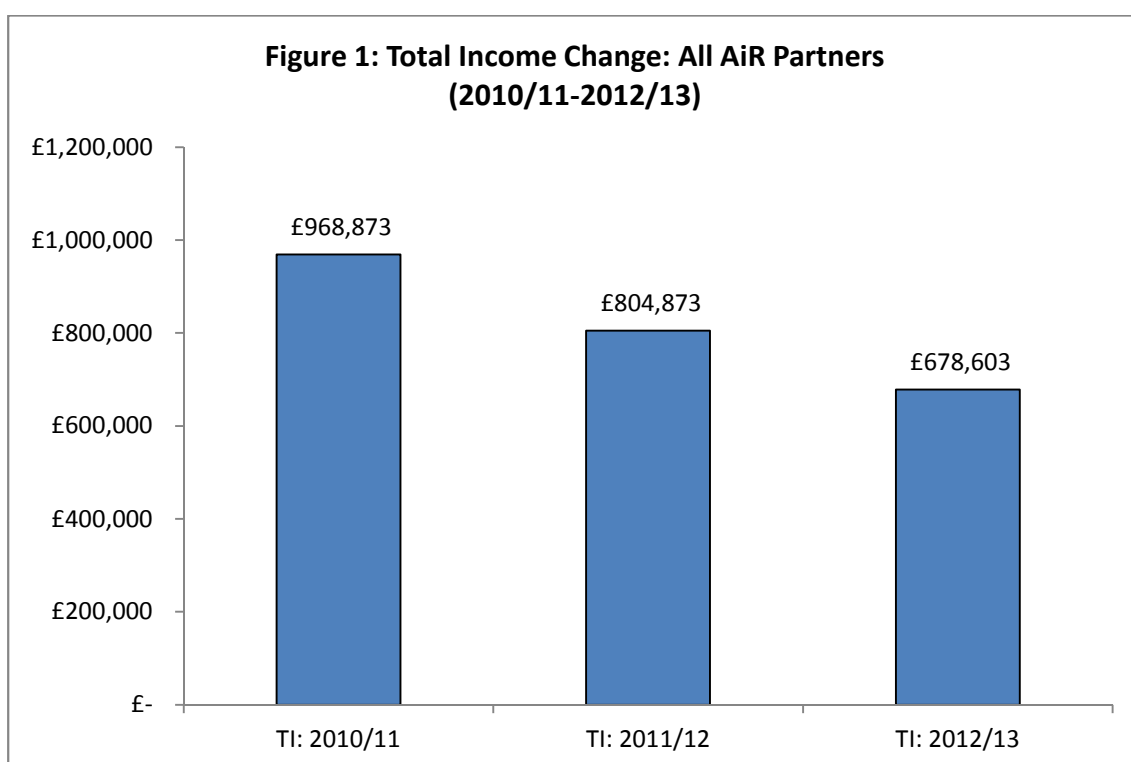
In 2010 the coalition Government announced that £350m would be cut from the Legal Aid budget and Civil Legal Aid will shoulder the majority of these cuts. Estimates suggest that more than 500,000 people will no longer be eligible for legal aid: support for welfare benefit issues, employment law and education law are now outside of the scope of Legal Aid. Of particular relevance to advice providers was the 68 per cent cut in Civil Legal Aid which meant that practically all debt advice and a large part of housing law - the type of initial help and advice typically provided by independent third sector advice agencies - was no longer eligible for government support.

In addition to the cuts in Civil Legal Aid, the Government also brought the Financial Inclusion Fund (FIF) to an end in March 2011. The FIF was established in 2004 and provided £45m to pay for face to face advice services in the not for profit advice sector to help people facing problems with debts. Around 100,000 people a year were assisted by the money advisors paid for by the fund.

These cuts in funding meant there were far fewer local resources available for not for profit advice services and fewer opportunities for AiR partners to put their newly developed capacity and capability for tendering and contracting into practice. More importantly, it meant that a number of AiR partners faced the immediate challenge of sustaining their services with far fewer resources.

Although the Advice Plus funding cushioned AiR members against the full impact of these cuts to some extent, the project as a whole progressed against a general backdrop of reduced resources and growing uncertainty for advice providers across the borough.

Figure 1 below shows aggregate statistics for the total income all AiR partners between 2010/11-2012/13². This demonstrates the extent to which total income across the partnership has fallen: between 2010/11-2011/12 there was a 17 per cent reduction in funding and between 2011/12-2012/13 a further reduction of 16 per cent has been projected. Over the three year period between 2010/11-2012/13 a total funding will have reduced by an estimated 30 per cent.



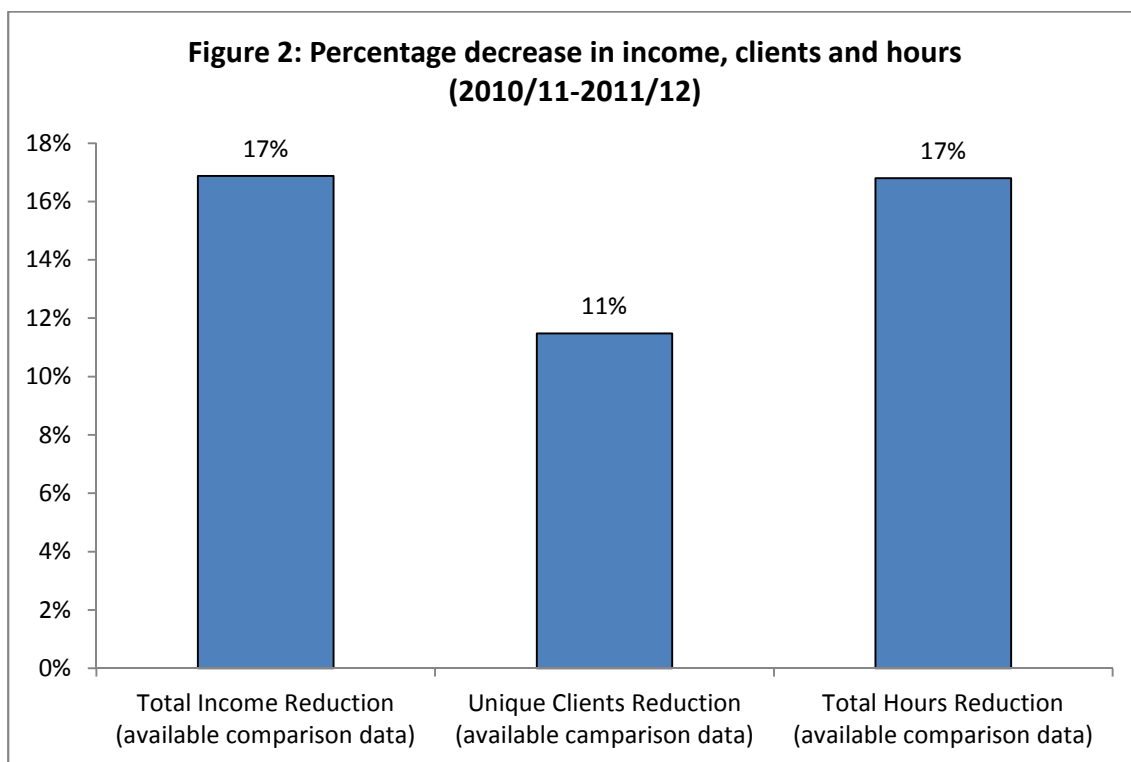
Source: AiR Partnership Data

This reduction in funding has impacted on staff hours. Figure 2 (overleaf) compares the percentage decrease in aggregate client numbers, total income and total hours for the 2010/11-2011/12 period. It highlights the relationship between 'demand' (client numbers) and 'supply' (total income and staff hours)³. It demonstrates the extent to which AiR partners have experienced difficulties sustaining their levels of service: there have been greater percentage reductions in 'total income' and 'total hours' (both 17 per cent) than for 'client numbers' (11 per cent). This suggests that

² The figures for 2012/13 may change with additional funding. These figures are accurate at the time of writing.

³ KPIAC and RMBC Advocacy and Appeals data are not included. At the time of writing some of the data was unavailable to make a direct comparison for some agencies. The % decreases in the data will be different in the other charts which do not make direct comparisons for these specific data.

providers are working harder to meet their client demand even though there has been an overall reduction in client numbers for the period. It is likely that the reduction in number of clients reflects of partners' reduced capacity to manage the demand for advice.



Source: AiR Partnership Data

2.5. Is AiR working? An overview of evaluation findings

An independent evaluation of AiR in 2012 was overwhelmingly positive. It found that the project had far exceeded the outcome targets specified in the original business plan and a number of notable successes were identified. Three areas in particular stood out:

- **ensuring the short-term sustainability of local advice provision** – the funding that the project provided for local advice services, both directly and indirectly, enabled the project partners to sustain their activity during an otherwise turbulent period for advice funding
- **improved partnership working between local advice providers** – the project enabled local advice providers to work together in a far more joined up way. This included in the delivery and co-ordination of services, and their engagement with the public sector
- **‘added value’ activities** – the project enabled a number of key activities to take place that have been identified as major successes. It was considered very unlikely that these would have been achieved if there had not been a project team in place to co-ordinate activities.

Despite these successes the evaluation identified two key challenges facing AiR partners going forward:

- **long-term financial sustainability** – the funding environment for independent advice services remained very uncertain and many providers would struggle to

maintain levels of service provision in future years. In the worst case scenario organisations without 'core funding' for their advice provision might not be able to provide any services at all in the future

- **maintaining the momentum of partnership** – it was noted that once the AiR funding period came to an end there would be far fewer resources available to support partnership working. The onus would be on the project partners, particularly the larger organisations and statutory bodies, to ensure the progress made since 2008 did not stutter or come to a halt during 2012 and beyond.

Where are we going?

3.1. The future of advice in Rotherham

The previous section has highlighted AiR's journey so far. It was established during a severe economic downturn that resulted in a significant rise in the demand for independent advice from local people adjusting to sudden changes in their circumstance. To complicate matters further this was followed by a large shift in the policy landscape surrounding independent advice, affecting in particular the way it will be funded going forward.

This section considers the implications of these changes for AiR members, alongside major cuts to welfare, in the context of what we know about local people who access advice and what they have told us about their expectations and needs for independent advice services over the next few years.

3.2. Cuts and consequences: reflections on the policy, economic and welfare landscape

Independent advice providers continue to operate within a complex and changing policy and economic landscape. Since 2010 the coalition government has proposed a range of changes to welfare benefits that are likely to result in further increases in the demand for advice. Headline changes include:

- the introduction of Universal Credit: a new single payment for people who are looking for work or on a low income. It will be launched in 2013 and will replace income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Child Tax Credits, Working Tax Credits and Housing Benefit
- the 'bedroom tax' which will cut the amount of benefit that people can get if they are deemed to have a spare bedroom in their council or housing association home
- the introduction of benefit caps will put a limit will be put on the total amount of benefit that most people aged 16 to 64 can get
- a general requirement to claim benefits online, moving away from paper-based forms.

It will be crucial for commissioners and providers to understand how these changes in benefit regulations will affect the demand for independent advice. Recent work to map Rotherham CAB's clients with debt and benefit issues suggests that the main unmet need in areas of high deprivation is for benefit advice work whilst analysis of their data suggests the proposed changes are already starting to have an impact: there was a 17 per cent increase in the number of new benefit issues reported in 2011/12 compared to 2010/11. This includes year-on-year increases in new issues associated with:

- Employment Support Allowance (141 per cent)
- Incapacity Benefit (65 per cent)
- Disability Living Allowance (mobility component) 42 per cent
- Community Care Grants (34 per cent)
- Disability Living Allowance (care component) by 29 per cent,
- Council Tax Benefit (14 per cent).

Smaller year-on-year increase were also recorded for issues associated with Income Support, Pension Credit and Social Fund Loans (budgeting). If this data is fully reflected across the AiR partnership it would suggest that benefit issues, particularly those associated disability and health, will impose greater demands on local advice provision over the next few years.

These increases have occurred despite low public awareness of the benefit changes that have been proposed. For example, a recent survey by Rotherham CAB showed there was little awareness of the Universal Credit:

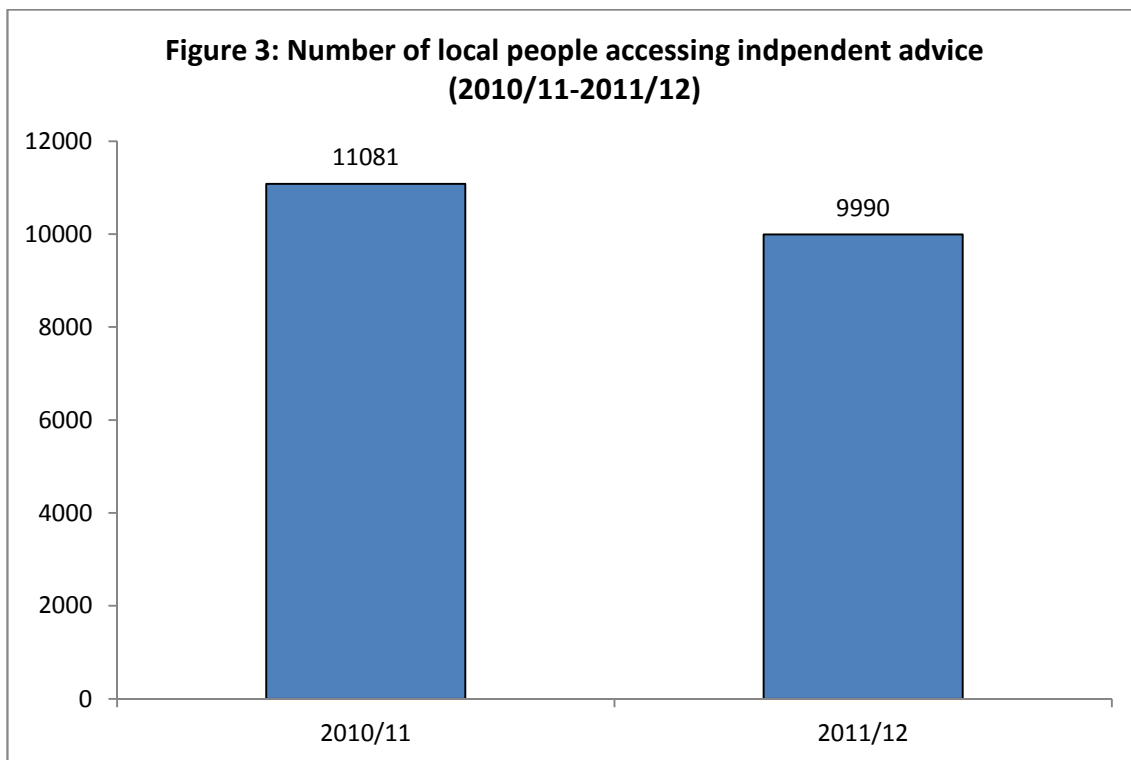
- approximately three quarters of all respondents had not heard of Universal Credit
- approximately three quarters respondents who claimed one of the affected benefits or tax credits had not heard of Universal Credit
- less than half of existing claimants thought the changes might affect them
- only about a fifth of respondents were aware that Universal Credit would take effect from October 2013. The rest of the responses were either unsure about the start date or gave a wrong date
- this low awareness of Universal Credit and its potential implications highlights the very real possibility that demand for benefits advice will increase yet further during 2013, particularly in the run-up to October when Universal Credit is introduced.

3.3. What do we know about the demand for independent advice in Rotherham?

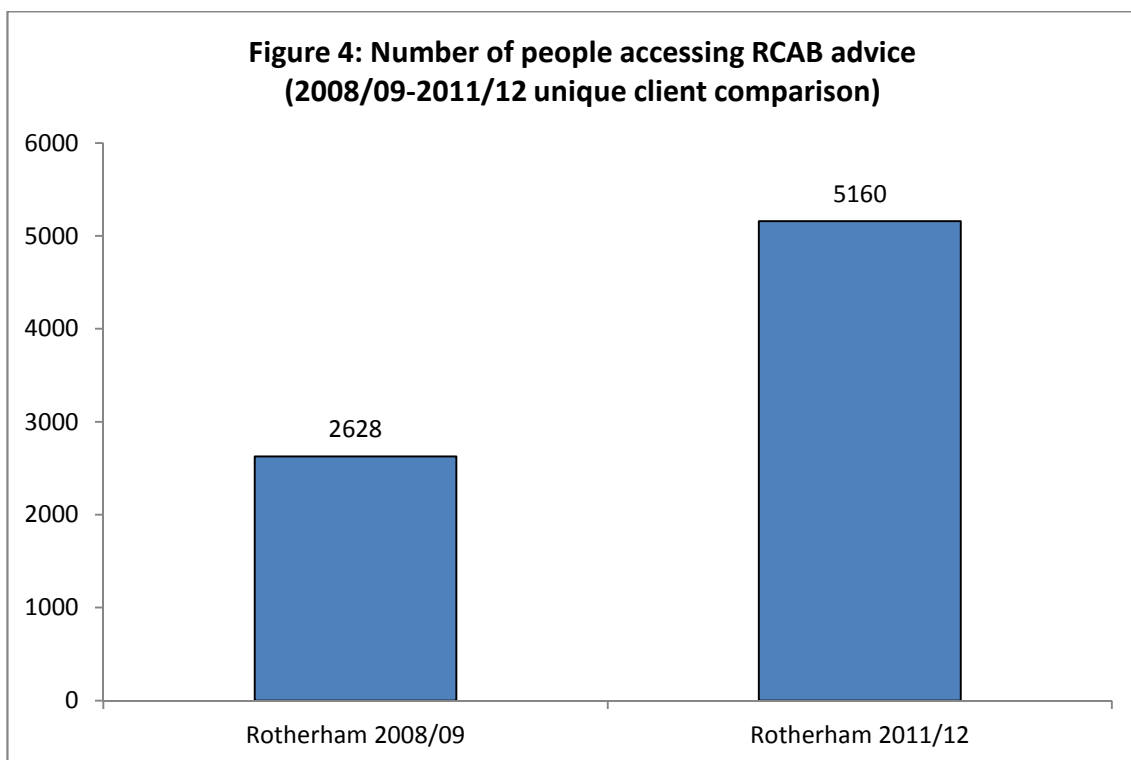
Data collected by AiR partners provides a valuable insight into demand for independent advice in Rotherham, including how it has changed since the onset of the economic downturn in 2008 and the extent to which there are areas within the borough where there might be demand that is going unmet. The following section highlights the main findings from analysis of this data

Figure 3 provides aggregate statistics from AiR partners. It indicates that around 10,000 local people each year access advice (2010/11 = 11,081; 2011/12 = 9,990). Although data on longer term trends is not available for the whole partnership, data provided by Rotherham CAB (figure 4 overleaf) indicates that that demand for their

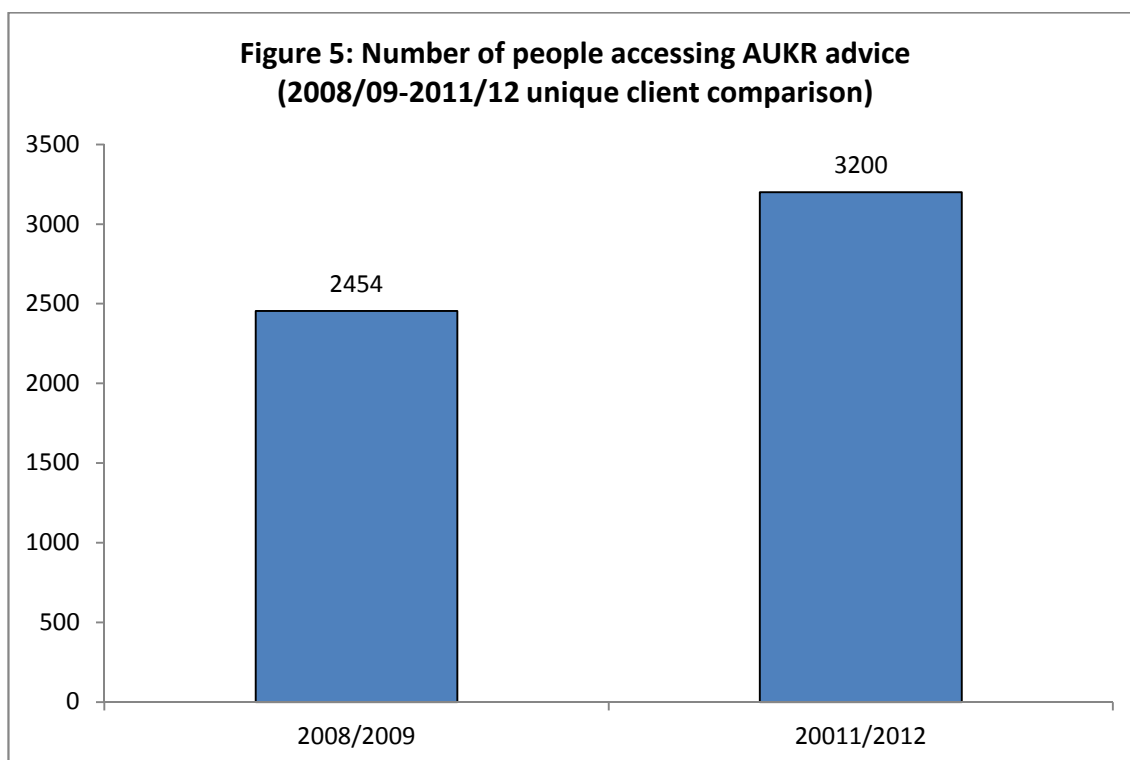
services has almost doubled since the onset of the economic crisis: they helped 5,160 unique clients in 2011/12 compared to 2,628 in 2008/09. This increase in demand is also reflected in data provided by Age UK Rotherham who helped 3,200 unique clients in 2011/12 compared to 2,454 in 2008/09 (figure 5).



Source: AiR Partnership Data



Source: Rotherham CAB



Source: Age UK Rotherham

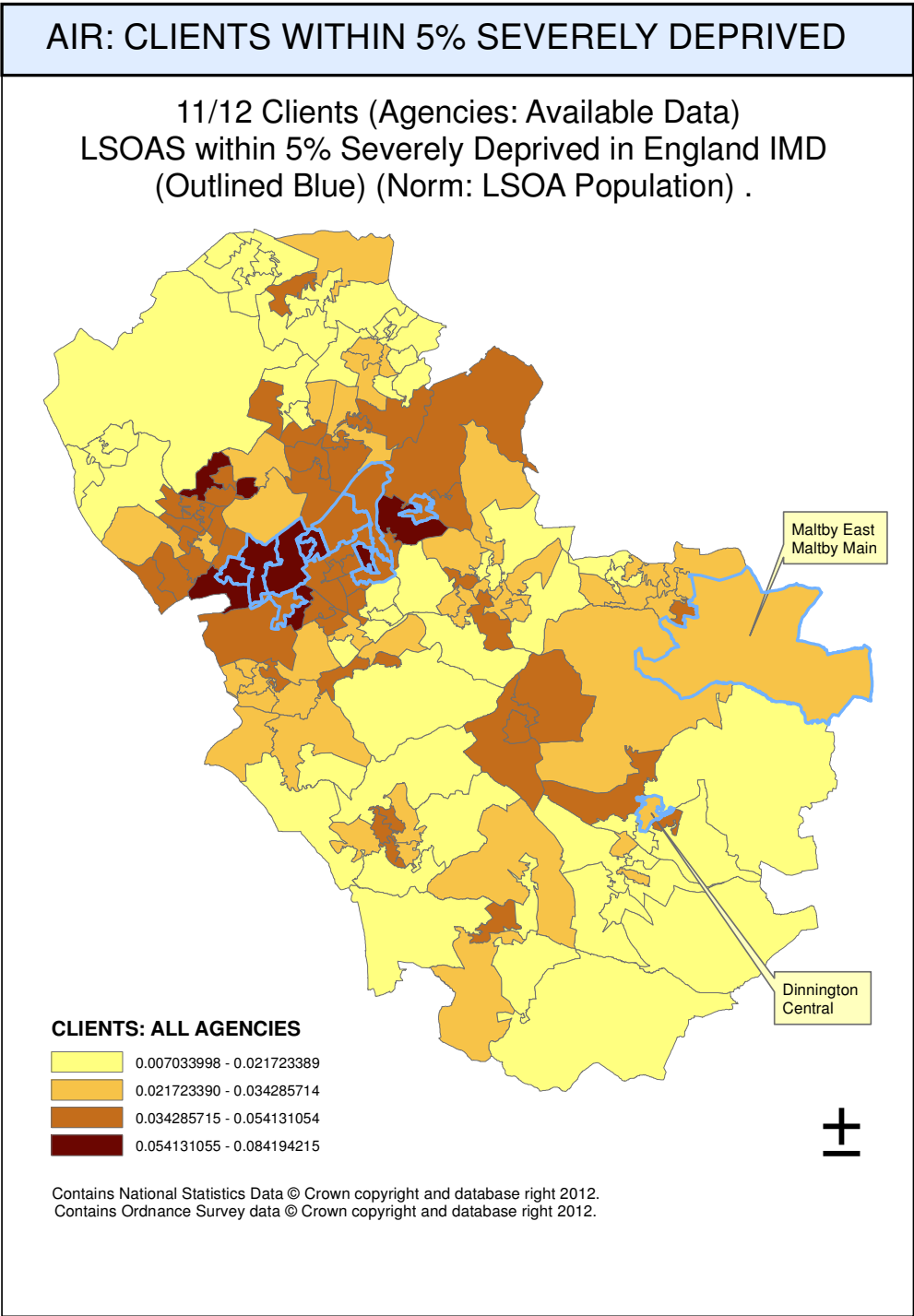
Further analysis of AiR partnership data indicates that despite this increase in demand for advice, there are a number of areas within Rotherham's most deprived communities where demand is not being met. The following maps (figures 6 and 7) show the number of advice clients from each of Rotherham's lower super output areas (LSOAs) as a proportion of the population estimates for these areas. The darker the colour on the maps, the higher the proportion of clients seen in those areas. The areas outlined in blue fall within the 5 per cent and 10 per cent most deprived LSOAS in England.

If it is assumed that the areas of highest deprivation are likely to contain the greatest number of people in need of advice several areas from these charts stand out:

- **Areas in the 5 per cent most deprived English LSOAs:** Maltby East/Maltby Main and Dinnington Central
- **Areas in the 10 per cent most deprived English LSOAs:** Maltby East/Maltby Main, Dinnington Central, Maltby East Town Centre and Swinton South.

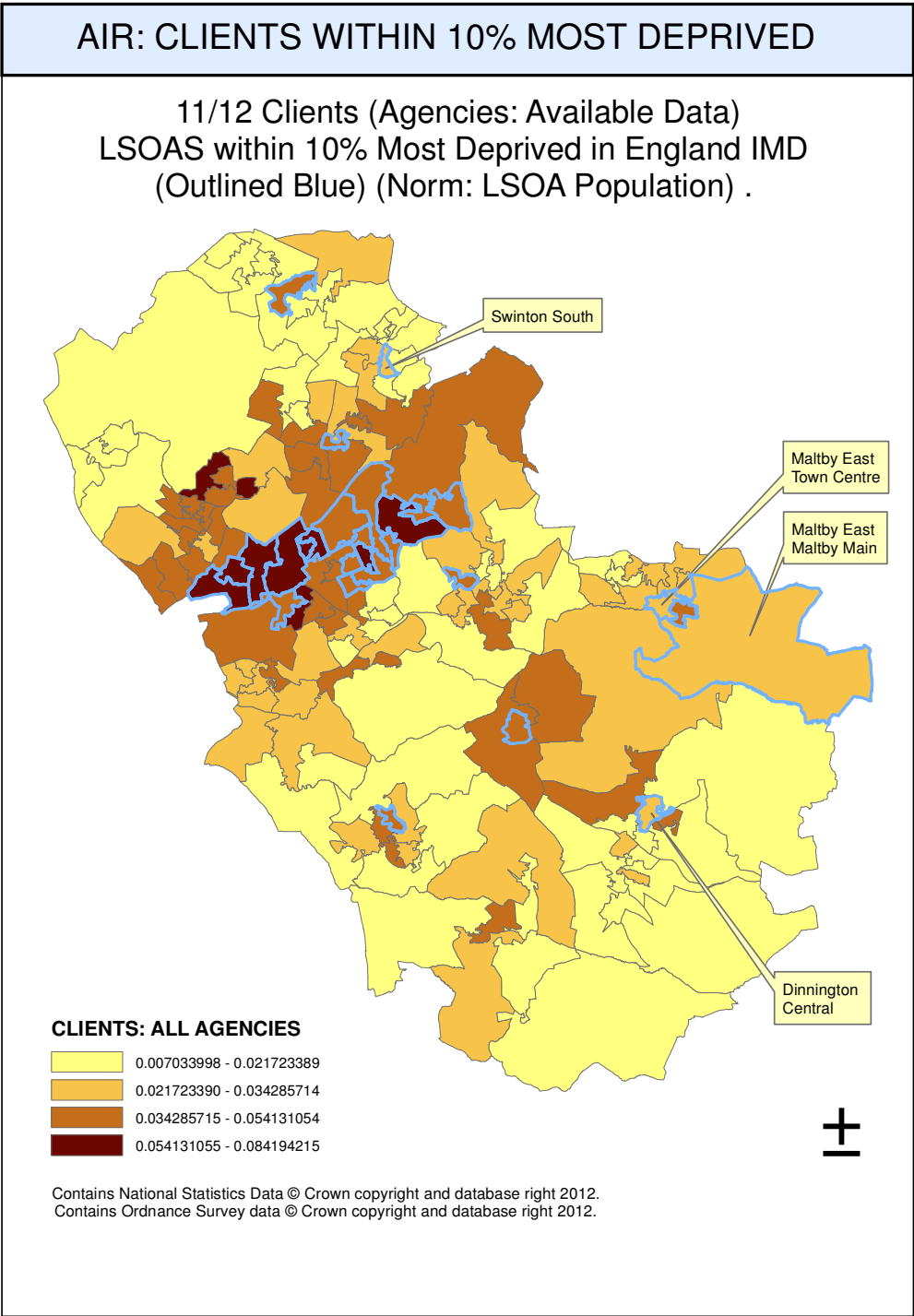
In each of these areas there are relatively low numbers of people accessing independent advice, particularly when compared to other deprived areas of the borough. Common to all of these areas is distance from Rotherham Town Centre and limited access to community based advice provision.

Figure 6: Proportion of AiR client from 5 per cent most deprived Rotherham LSOAs



Source: AiR Partnership Data

Figure 7: Proportion of AiR client from 10 per cent most deprived Rotherham LSOAs



Source: AiR Partnership Data

3.4. The views of local people: awareness of, access to, and demand for advice in Rotherham

Awareness and accessibility

Our survey found that awareness of the independent advice services available from AiR members varied considerably by organisation but overall appeared to be high. Perhaps unsurprisingly, of the *local people* interviewed were far more aware of national 'brands' such as CAB and Age UK than some of the local providers:

- 91 per cent had heard of Rotherham CAB
- 77 per cent had heard of Age UK Rotherham
- 50 per cent had heard of Howells
- 17 per cent had heard of Welfare Rights and Money Advice
- 12 per cent had heard of Rotherham Diversity Forum
- 11 per cent had heard of SYCIL and the Disability Information Services
- 7 per cent had heard of Kiveton Park Independent Advice Centre.

Of the *advice service users* interviewed the majority - 72 per cent - had found out the service was available through word of mouth with fewer finding out through another organisation (11 per cent), publicity/advertising (7 per cent), the internet (5 per cent) or a health/social worker (5 per cent).

Advice needs

Overall, the *advice service users* interviewed were largely positive about their experience of accessing the service:

- 90 per cent said they found it easy to get an appointment
- 100 per cent reported that the time allotted was convenient and only 7 per cent would have preferred an 'out of hours' appointment
- 95 per cent reported that the appointment was provided in convenient location and only 21 per cent would have preferred it to have been provided at a different location.

The majority of *advice service users* were also able to get their appointment relatively quickly: 38 per cent had to wait less than a day and 72 per cent waited no more than a week.

Of the *local people* interviewed in Rotherham town centre 49 per cent had actually received independent advice from an AiR member in the past three years. This included 22 per cent who had received advice from Age UK and 20 per cent who had received advice from Rotherham CAB.

Of those who had not accessed independent advice in the past three years 14 per cent had tried to get advice from an AiR member but been unable to. Of these respondents the majority said this was because they had been unable to get an appointment when they needed it.

The shape of future provision

The *local people* interviewed in Rotherham town centre who had not accessed independent advice in the past three years were asked if they ever needed an advice

appointment in the future what would be their preferred time. The majority (73 per cent) identified either morning (47 per cent) or afternoon (26 per cent) during normal working hours (i.e. 9am-5pm) but those who said they would prefer an 'out of hours' appointment the majority identified Saturdays (16 per cent) rather than weekdays (11 per cent) as their preferred option.

They were also asked to identify their preferred location for any advice appointment they needed in the future. The majority (62 per cent) identified a venue in the town centre as their preferred option followed by a community venue closer to their home (17 per cent) and their own home (13 per cent). Relatively few respondents said they would prefer advice to be provided via telephone (5 per cent) or email (2 per cent).

Conclusion

4.1. Where next for independent advice in Rotherham?

Through its Advice Plus funding from the Big Lottery Fund AiR has made remarkable progress for the borough's independent advice providers over the past four years. By joining-up provision in a more strategic way they have been able to support increasing numbers of local people despite dramatic cuts to the way their work is funded. The future, however, remains uncertain. AiR partners, similar to advice providers across the country are being squeezed from two sides. **Demand for support has increased** since the economic downturn in 2008 and there is strong evidence to suggest that this will only increase further in the face of cuts to the welfare bill and other public spending. The introduction of the Universal Credit in October 2013 may be a particular crunch point for demand. At the same time the level of **funding available for independent advice has reduced** considerably, with the exception of the Big Lottery Fund, there is little sign that new or alternative sources of income will become available in the near future. AiR partner's funding is projected to have reduced by almost a third between 2009/10 and 2012/13 and there have been year-on-year reductions in the number of hours provided and number of clients seen (2010/11-2011/12). This raises the very real question of whether local providers will be able to provide support to everyone who needs it: even though awareness of welfare reform is relatively low **there has been a marked increase in demand for benefits advice** over the past couple of years.

Two particular aspects of demand stand-out: the first is **an increase in demand associated with disability benefits**. Rotherham CAB recorded large year-on-year increases for advice about disability related benefits such as Employment Support Allowance and Disability Living Allowance. The second is apparent **unmet demand in several of Rotherham's most deprived areas**, something that particularly affects locations that are not within easy reach of the town centre, such as Maltby and Dinnington. Much of the AiR partners' provision is provided from town centre locations and it may be that uptake of advice from people in these areas would increase if they were able to access services more readily, perhaps through **better targeting of provision**. This conclusion is supported by the findings of our survey of local people not accessing advice, which found that a significant minority of local people would prefer to access advice from a **venue away from the town centre** and during **'out of hours'** periods.

It will also be important to draw on evidence from elsewhere when considering future configurations of advice provision in Rotherham. Research for Advice UK⁴ is particularly insightful in its categorising of three types of demand:

⁴ Johnson, S and Steed, S (2011). *Advice Service: What Next? Reflections from the BOLD project*. Advice UK/New Economics Foundation

- **value demand:** more people needing more advice due to the economic downturn and welfare reform
- **failure demand:** caused by complex benefit procedures and the inaccessibility of public services and public administration
- **revolving door demand:** where advice provision only addresses short term needs resulting in unsolved problems for which clients returning for more advice.

In response the Advice UK research calls for commissioning to address the drivers of demand rather than concentrating solely on sustaining or reforming supply. Although value demand is very much a product of the times we are living through it seems more could be done to address failure and revolving door demand. This might include enhanced collaborative support for individuals at the point at which their need to claim certain benefits is identified, and less pressure on advice providers to prioritise short term targets over better quality long term interventions. However, this would require an 'intelligent' approach to the commissioning of advice and wider public services that looks beyond simply plugging gaps in existing provision to a more holistic consideration of factors affecting advice demand. Hopefully this research and the work of AiR more generally, will provide a focus for developing a greater understanding of the demand for advice in Rotherham going forward.