

The case for advice

People need advice services for many different reasons. Unexpected events, such as relationship breakdown, redundancy and illness, can throw lives off course. Some people lack the basic skills¹ to cope with form filling and others need help to understand complex regulations and legislation. Some are worn down by bureaucratic inefficiencies or intransigence and end up feeling that everything is stacked against them.



The problems that people face have a significant cost. The Department for Constitutional Affairs has recently estimated that “over the past three and a half-year period ... the cost [of problems] to individuals, health and other public services was at least £13 billion”².

Advice services provide information, advice, support and representation to people concerning their civil rights and responsibilities. This includes advising people who are in debt, representing those who have suffered discrimination and defending those threatened with homelessness.



The advice sector is diverse, reflecting the diversity in our society. The sector includes national organisations, such as Shelter, and local centres such as Citizens Advice Bureaux and Law Centres. Most advice agencies are rooted in their communities. Some focus on particular disadvantaged groups such as young people, older people, disabled people and BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) communities.

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The contribution that

People working in advice services have always known that they make an important contribution to the well-being of individuals and of society. However, there is now a growing body of research evidence to support this.

Advice has an important positive impact on at least four aspects of our lives:

- **fairness and community cohesion**
- **health**
- **economic benefits and social inclusion**
- **improving public services.**



Fairness and community cohesion

In a democracy, the law protects our civil liberties and our human rights. Disadvantaged people, in particular, need to be able to assert their rights as, more than most, they rely on the law to protect their personal safety, homes and incomes.

In a diverse society, it is particularly important that the law is seen to be fair and that everyone, regardless of their means and personal characteristics, is confident of having equal access to justice.

Advice agencies and Law Centres provide important access points to legal advice for the most disadvantaged people. A recent analysis³ found that advice agencies help a disproportionate number of disabled people and people from a minority ethnic background. The Social Exclusion Unit⁴ found that, among focus group participants, the “perception that the voluntary and community sector (VCS) provides information more effectively is widespread among ethnic minorities and disabled people”.

Advice services can help to break down people’s feelings of isolation. In 2004, health professionals were asked⁵ to assess the impact on patients of placing advice services in health centres. These professionals stated that advice had helped patients to “feel that someone cares” (84 per cent) and reduced “feelings of hopelessness” (84 per cent).

Case example

Ruby is a 17 year old who was thrown out of her family home due to her very difficult relationship with her stepfather. She was unemployed, penniless and sleeping on friends’ sofas when she sought help.

She went to Streetwise Law Centre, where an advice worker helped her to apply for emergency accommodation, a crisis loan and Job Seekers Allowance. The advice worker also referred Ruby to a Connexions personal advisor to discuss her future.

As a result of the advice, Ruby was provided with suitable stable accommodation and was able to return to full time education.

Case example

Ms B complained to her employer, a sports club, about sexual harassment by a male colleague. The harassment included inappropriate touching and sexual remarks. Her employer failed to take Ms B’s complaints seriously.

Ms B couldn’t cope with the situation any longer and went to her local legal advice centre. She was advised to take a claim to the Employment Tribunal.

The legal advice centre represented Ms B at a Tribunal hearing. The seriousness of the harassment and failure of the sports club to deal with it led the Tribunal to make a substantial award of £57,000 in compensation.

1 16% of people in England do not have the literacy skills expected of 11 year olds. See *Skills for Life national needs and impact survey*, DfES, 2003

2 Pascoe Pleasence *et al*, 2006, *Causes of Action: Civil Law and Social Justice*, 2nd ed, page i, TSO

3 Based on analysis by the Advice Services Alliance of information provided by the Legal Services Commission for the year 2004–5. Nearly 21.9% of clients were from a non-White British background (compared to 7.9% of general population), and 31% were disabled (compared with 16.6% in general population).

4 *Improving Services, Improving Lives* October 2005 (page 43), see www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk/downloaddoc.asp?id=75

5 *Better Advice, Better Health, Final Evaluation Report*, Citizens Advice, page 19, March 2004

advice makes



Health

Research⁶ published in 2006 has demonstrated the strong link between civil law problems and ill health. There can now be no doubt that problems lead to ill health and to increased burdens on health services.

This research⁷ found that over a third of civil justice problems led to adverse physical and mental health consequences. The research also found that 40% of civil justice problems were so serious that people spent “all or most of their time” worrying about them and that 27 per cent of problems led to stress-related illness. Nearly a quarter of the people affected only by stress sought medical treatment, with an average of 9 visits each to a general practitioner.

Advice services can have a positive impact on health. In 1999, a study⁸ found that “the forty-eight subjects who received an increase in income after using the [advice] service believed that the increase had improved their health-related quality of life, and showed statistically significant improvements in three aspects of health...”.

The advice sector has become increasingly aware of the links between advice and health and agencies have been developing new services in conjunction with health services. Examples include outreach services in GP surgeries and mental health units.

Economic benefits and social inclusion

Research conducted by MORI⁹ on behalf of Citizens Advice, found that bureaux put money into the pockets of over one third of their clients. This is mostly achieved by helping people to claim the benefits that they are entitled to and also by advising people about their debts.

The Bristol Debt Advice Centre¹⁰ has done some pioneering work in assessing the impact of their work. Clients were asked how advice had benefited them and 55% said that, on average, they had an extra £33.90 a week to spend on



Case example

A taxi company referred Mrs Evans to her local Age Concern. Mrs Evans has poor mobility and is going blind. She was mistrustful of people and wouldn't let anyone into her home.

Age Concern's Information Officer invited Mrs Evans to her office and found that she had several problems. Mrs Evans had recently suffered from pneumonia, but wouldn't use her heating because she was in arrears with her fuel bills. Also, Mrs Evans' home was in a poor condition, particularly the bathroom.

Over time, Age Concern's Information Officer gained Mrs Evans' trust and was able to support her in applying for a Winter Fuel Payment and Attendance Allowance thus enabling Mrs Evans to pay her fuel bill. Age Concern arranged for their handyperson service to repair the bathroom. Eventually, Mrs Evans agreed that Social Services could carry out a care assessment, and this led to the provision of bathing and laundry facilities.

Case example

Following an accident at work, Marcos was unemployed and had accumulated debts of £16,000. Within weeks of visiting his local Citizens Advice Bureau, his creditors had been contacted and had helped Marcos to prepare a budget.

“It was a great relief. I couldn't have done it myself and I'm now paying my debts in manageable instalments.”

The CAB adviser also checked that Marcos was receiving the correct benefits and referred him to a solicitor specialising in employment and personal injury law.

6 *Causes of Action: Civil Law and Social Justice* (2nd edition) 2006, page 60, TSO

7 *Ibid*, page 60

8 Abbot S, Hobby L, 1999, *An Evaluation of the Health and Advice Project: its impact on the health of those using the service*, page 1, The Health and Community Care Research Unit

9 Citizens Advice/MORI, 2004/5

10 Bristol Debt Advice Centre, Annual Review 2002–2003

essentials and that the three most common items of expenditure were food, household repairs and “on their children”.

This additional money has an effect beyond the individual. The New Economics Foundation, working with local authorities, found that “encouraging welfare benefit take-up contributes to the local economy” as the additional income was spent on “additional necessities, most of which were brought in the local area at local stores.”¹¹

Improving public services

Finally, it has been increasingly recognised by government that the advice sector has an important role in feeding back to government the results, intended and unintended, of changes in legislation.

Advice agencies have been involved in lobbying for improvements in the law on behalf of their clients. A recent



example is the joint campaign by Shelter and Citizens Advice which resulted in the establishment of a Tenancy Deposit Scheme which will ensure that tenants are able to recover rental deposits without having to take their case to Court. ●

11 Sacks, Justin, 2002, *The Money Trail*, New Economics Foundation

Case example

Mr Reed suffered from multiple sclerosis (MS) and was finding it difficult to manage on his own. In particular, he found it difficult to use his toilet.

He went to his local DIAL (Disability Information and Advice Line) where a volunteer helped him to complete a Disability Living Allowance form and advised him to claim council tax benefit.

The volunteer also arranged for an Occupational Therapy assessment to provide Mr Davies with aids to enable him to be more independent and gave him contact details for a local MS support group.



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The following organisations are full members of the Advice Services Alliance:

advice^{UK} • **Age Concern England** • **Citizens Advice** • **DIAL UK (Disability Information and Advice Line)**
Law Centres Federation • **Shelter** • **Shelter Cymru** • **Youth Access**

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