

Measuring the outcomes of employment advice

Initial findings from the Islington Law Centre pilot



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Since November last year, ASA has been working with the Employment Unit at Islington Law Centre (ILC) on a pilot project to monitor the outcomes of advice.

Aims of the project

ASA had three aims for this project:

- to develop recommendations for best practice for advice agencies that want to measure their outcomes
- to devise questionnaires that can be used or adapted by other agencies that want to monitor their outcomes
- to find out what kind of resources an agency needs to do this work

Islington Law Centre

The Law Centre offers specialist casework in housing, immigration, employment education and consumer debt. It receives funding from the Legal Services Commission, local authority and Neighbourhood Renewal Fund.

The employment unit has 3 full-time caseworkers and has the help of up to 3 volunteers at different times.

The Law Centre wanted to learn about the effects of its advice work on its clients' lives and to know whether it was achieving its aims.

Practical matters

We agreed that the best way to monitor outcomes was through the use of a series of questionnaires. But before deciding on the detail of those questionnaires, we had to decide what resources were available for the project and what it was reasonable for the Law Centre to achieve. The Law Centre and its staff face considerable financial pressures and have to turn clients away as a matter of course because of a lack of resources. The pilot had to take this into account and we knew that we would have to compromise on some of the things we wanted to do because they were not practically possible.

How many clients to survey?

We wanted to survey a sufficient number of clients to be able to draw some conclusions from the results. However, we wanted to be realistic about the time staff had to do the questionnaires. Therefore, staff aimed to survey all clients whose cases the employment unit took on in a two-week period. They would then survey the same clients at the end of the case and at 3 and 6 months after the cases were closed. Staff thought this was practical as they would be able to ensure volunteer presence for the two-week period. They also felt that they would be able to carry out a similar project every year.

Who should ask the questions and when should they ask them?

We discussed whether it was better for the caseworker or a volunteer to ask the questions. The client was likely to feel more relaxed with the caseworker as they would have established a relationship during the case. However, particularly for the later questionnaires, we thought that the client may give a less objective response if it was the caseworker asking the questions.

There were also a number of practical issues to consider. At the end of an interview with a client, the caseworker may not have time to go through the questionnaires. It might also be the case that a volunteer was not available. Furthermore, it would not

always be possible to ensure that a confidential room was available. In these circumstances, a volunteer would have to call the client at a later date to go through the questionnaire with them.

We therefore decided that we had to be flexible and allow for different ways of interviewing. This would enable staff to work out what was most convenient during the course of the pilot.

What if the client does not speak sufficient English to answer the questions?

This was likely to be an issue for some clients. However, the Law Centre has no money to pay for interpreters for the questionnaires. Staff did not want to exclude these clients from the survey as they felt they might have particular issues that English-speaking clients don't have. However, there was no way round the problem and staff decided that all they could do was record it when clients had been left out of the survey for this reason.

Should we survey one-off advice?

At our first meeting we discussed whether or not to survey the outcomes of the one-off pieces of advice that the employment unit gives at its outreach sessions. We agreed that it would be useful to do and that, if successful, it would show the benefits of very short pieces of advice. However, because of the difficulties involved in carrying out the work and the resources required, we decided that we would concentrate on casework initially.

Work to look at the outcomes of one-off advice is something that could be done in the future. One way of doing it would be to have volunteers available at outreach sessions to ask the clients questions straight after receiving advice and, with the clients' agreement, to do a follow-up questionnaire by phone a few weeks later.

Designing the Questionnaires

Considering ILC's aims

At the start of the pilot, discussions with staff covered what they aimed to achieve for their employment clients.

Staff aimed to help clients with their employment problems. But as well as solving the immediate advice problem, staff recognised that those problems often had significant negative impacts on clients' lives and that they also aimed to alleviate those negative impacts.

Therefore, we decided to ask clients questions at the start of their cases about the impact of their employment problems on: their ability to carry on living normally, their stress levels, their self-confidence and their relationships with friends and family.

We would then ask the same questions at the end of clients' cases to see whether there had been any change.

Staff also felt that they aimed to have an effect on client attitudes and awareness. Therefore, at the start and end of the case we agreed to ask clients to rate: the extent to which they understood their employment rights, felt able to speak up for themselves, knew where to go for help and felt involved in their community.

Caseworker Questionnaire

We agreed that it was important to include information in the questionnaires about the subject matter of the case and the advice outcome. Therefore, we decided to

have a separate questionnaire for the caseworker so that they could make a note of this information. This would enable us to relate nature of the problem and what the caseworker achieved for the client to the effects of advice on clients' lives.

Barriers to accessing advice

Staff also wanted to use the questionnaire to get a better understanding of particular difficulties their clients face in accessing or acting on advice and of reasons why they might be particularly vulnerable.

They felt that many of their clients faced difficulties which were not necessarily recorded elsewhere. They had in mind things like insufficient English, drug or alcohol use or caring commitments.

They felt that this information would be useful in itself but also that such factors may affect the outcomes of a case.

We agreed that this should be a question for the caseworker. They could complete this using information that the client may have given themselves, for example as part of disability monitoring or based on their own observations.

We recognised that this was a difficult area as it was not based solely on client self-declaration, however, we thought it was important to try to capture difficulties that clients face that are not currently monitored.

Follow-up questionnaires

Staff were particularly keen to find out more about their clients' situations once some time had passed since their cases were closed. They wanted to know more about the long-term effects of their work and about clients' attitudes to their experience at the Law Centre once they had had time to reflect on it.

We therefore decided to include follow-up questionnaires at 3 and 6 months after case closure.

The questionnaires included questions about whether clients were still in the same employment they were in when the Law Centre advised them, and if not, what they were doing now. They also included more standard client feedback questions about how satisfied clients were with the service and whether they would recommend it to others.

What the questionnaires told us

At the date of this paper, 20 clients have been surveyed, of those, 9 cases have not gone beyond the 1st client questionnaire, 4 have completed up to the 2nd client questionnaire, 3 have gone as far as the 3 month follow-up questionnaire and 1 has completed the 6 month follow-up questionnaire. The remaining 2 did not get beyond the first caseworker questionnaire.

First client questionnaire

- Most respondents to the questionnaire found it hard to carry on living normally while experiencing their employment problem.
- Most people were suffering from high levels of stress as a result of their employment problem. However, there were a couple of people who were not affected in this way.

- People's self-confidence was generally quite high, despite their employment problems. However, one person commented that his self-confidence was high while he was at the Law Centre.
- Most people found it quite easy to maintain good relationships with friends and family despite their employment problems.
- Most people said they felt involved in their community, although a couple of people said they did not understand the question.
- Most people felt they understood their rights quite well, however, a couple commented that this was because the caseworker had explained them. One client commented "I used to think so".
- Clients also gave high scores for feeling they could speak up for themselves.
- Scores were also high for knowing where to go for help. 1 client said "the Law Centre".

Second client questionnaire

Of the 8 people whose cases had closed:

- 6 said it was easier to live normally after their case had come to an end. The ratings of 2 people remained unchanged.
- 7 people were less stressed. 1 person's rating remained unchanged.
- 4 people reported higher self-confidence. 3 people's ratings remained unchanged but they were high at the start of the case. 1 did not answer the question.
- 4 people reported that it was easier to maintain good relationships with friends and family, 1 was unchanged and 3 reported that it was harder.
- 4 people's ratings for involvement in the community stayed the same, 2 went down, 1 went up and 1 didn't understand the question.
- 4 people felt that their understanding of their rights had gone up, 3 stayed the same and 1 went down.
- 4 people's ratings for being able to speak up for themselves stayed the same, 3 went up and 1 went down.
- 5 people's ratings for knowing where to go for help stayed the same and 3 went up.

The impact of employment problems

It seems from the results that employment problems have a negative impact on people's ability to live normally and on their stress levels. On the other hand, even at the start of cases, people's self-confidence and relationships with friends and family do not appear to have suffered much. However, one of the volunteers conducting the questionnaires commented that people found it hard to understand what self-confidence meant.

It is also interesting that people's relationships with friends and family seem to be quite easy to maintain despite their employment problems. Indeed, a couple of people commented that their family/friends had been particularly supportive. In one case a client had moved back in with their family as a result of losing her job. One caseworker commented that she was surprised by this finding as she has had a number of clients saying that their employment problems had had a negative effect on their relationships with partners and children.

The scores for community involvement, knowledge of rights, being able to speak up for yourself and knowing where to go for help were all quite high. This may have

been because the initial surveys were carried out after the clients' first meetings with their caseworkers. Therefore they had already received advice and this could have affected the answers they gave particularly in relation to knowledge of their rights and knowing where to go for help. A few clients made comments to this effect.

The impact of advice

The most significant improvements occurred in clients' ability to live their lives normally and in their levels of stress. In all other areas there were improvements too but these were not as marked. As initial scores that clients gave for these areas were already high, significant improvements would not have been possible.

Some scores dropped in the areas of community involvement, knowledge of rights and ability to speak up for yourself. The clients concerned made no comments about this so we don't know why this was the case. If this trend continues as the Law Centre completes more questionnaires, we will have to devise ways of exploring with clients why this is so.

3 and 6 month questionnaires

At this stage only 4 clients have completed the 3 month questionnaire, one of which has also completed the 6 month questionnaire. Of those clients 1 was in the same job (having been re-instated at the end of the case), 1 was in a new job, 1 was unemployed and studying and 1 was unemployed and looking for work.

3 said they would use the service again, would recommend the service to friends and had got the outcome they wanted. 1 did not answer these questions. 2 gave the Law Centre service a rating of 4 out of 5 and 2 gave it 5 out of 5.

Barriers to accessing advice

The most common barrier, which was an issue for 5 clients, was lack of fluency in English. 1 client brought a friend to help with communication. Another commented that she had been worried that language would be a problem but that staff at the Law Centre had been friendly and helpful. This suggests that caseworkers spend extra time with clients who are not fluent in English to make sure they understand everything.

1 client had mental health problems and did not complete the questionnaires as a result. A volunteer tried to contact her on three occasions but the client was unable to talk because she was "in therapy".

2 clients were pregnant, one of whom had lost her accommodation when she lost her job. She was staying with a friend.

1 client had problems with alcohol abuse. He made reference to this in answer to some of the questions. For example, in the second questionnaire he said that his relationship with his family was not good but that this was due to his drinking.

There are always influences on clients' lives other than their employment problems. However, it is only in some cases that these become apparent.

Other comments

One of the most interesting things to emerge from the questionnaires was the strong desire for justice to be done and for employers to be held to account. As well as practical results such as getting compensation or being reinstated, clients wanted to prove that their employers had broken the law.

This was stated in the first questionnaire in answer to the question about what outcome the client wanted to achieve.

I want justice against my employer, when I worked for them I tried my best, when I needed help from them they didn't help me.

I would like them to admit that what they did to me was wrong.

Would like [my] employer to be brought to justice for the way he has behaved.

Similar views were also expressed in the second questionnaire in answer to the question "what was the main benefit of taking your employment case?"

Satisfaction that he learned a lesson so he doesn't do the same to someone else.

Justice.

Feel better as company have admitted wrongdoing.

I stopped her from doing it again.

The questionnaires – what could be improved

Asking the questions

As time at the first appointment was taken up with assessing eligibility for legal help and taking client instructions, the Law Centre settled for a system of contacting the clients afterwards by phone to go through the questionnaires. This did not seem to be a problem as long as the caseworker warned the client in advance that someone would be calling them to carry out the survey, and it is certainly the most efficient use of resources.

An interesting finding to emerge is that the person asking the questions seems to influence the types of answers clients give. Some questioners get basic answers whilst others get more lengthy and often more emotional responses. For example, one volunteer was much more likely than other questioners to get explanatory comments in relation to questions requiring a 1-5 rating answer. This is probably a reflection of the different personalities of the questioners and of whether they asked supplemental questions.

In order to avoid the differing responses, we could ensure that all questioners treat the questionnaire as a script and ask exactly the same questions. However, this would mean that the supplemental comments, many of which were very interesting, would be lost.

Furthermore, the survey is not intended to be for the purposes of quantitative research, and therefore it is not essential to ensure that all clients are asked exactly the same questions.

The questionnaire is a means of gathering information and we never intended that the information should be limited to specific answers to the questions. Therefore, if any action is taken on this point, it should probably be to encourage all questioners to explain the questions if the client appears not to understand and to ask supplemental questions and record the answers, if they feel the client has more to say.

Timing of first questionnaire

This was problematic. Staff felt it would be unfair to survey clients before they had seen a caseworker. Therefore they were all interviewed after they had received some advice. This meant that the first questionnaire might not have captured fully the impact of employment problems. There was some indication that this was the case when clients gave a high rating for knowing their employment rights and knowing where to go for help but then said that it was because their caseworker had explained their rights and that they would go to the Law Centre for help.

On reflection, staff felt it would be possible to ask clients the initial set of questions before seeing the caseworker. The Law Centre is introducing a new pre-appointment questionnaire for its employment casework that will cover personal data and also information about the client's employer and brief details about the case. They are considering adding questions from the initial client survey to this questionnaire so that they can get the information from clients before they have received any advice. It will be interesting to see whether clients are willing to answer these questions without having seen a caseworker and whether the answers are significantly different to answers given when the questions are asked after the first appointment.

Question wording

Revising the questionnaires is an important part of the process as there may be questions that don't work or words that are not clear. The volunteers asking the questions gave useful feedback about clients' understanding of how the questions were worded. In particular the question about clients' level of self-confidence was not easily understood, particularly by clients not fluent in English and volunteers had to take time to explain it. It would probably be better just to use the word confidence.

The volunteers also felt that the question about community involvement did not really work. We originally chose to ask this question because we thought there might be a link between feeling supported and knowing where to turn when you're in trouble and not feeling isolated. Demonstrating community involvement is also something that local authority funders are keen to see.

However, most clients rated their involvement quite highly both at the start and end of the case. Community involvement is a vague term and it is not clear what clients understood by it. The link between the wording of the statement and what we were trying to find out was too tenuous and we should consider how to improve the question in later versions of the questionnaire.

Scale ratings

For most questions we asked clients to answer using a scale rating of 1 to 5. This is something that could be reconsidered in future questionnaires. As one volunteer pointed out, it is hard to quantify a feeling and also each individual will interpret the scale in his or her own way. Unless you ask why a client has given the rating they've given, the answer to the question has little meaning. This makes comparison difficult. It would perhaps be more useful to put the ratings in words rather than numbers. So, for example, when asking whether a client is suffering from stress as a result of their employment problem, the choice of answers could be: *not stressed, quite stressed or very stressed*.

Language difficulties

Some clients could not be included in the survey because of their low level of English. This was frustrating for staff as they thought it was important to try to

capture any differences in perspectives and experiences that those clients might have. This is something that should be borne in mind in other outcomes projects and attempts should be made to secure funding for interpreting in some cases.

Resources used

Staff at the Law Centre have done a rough calculation of the time taken to work on the pilot. Devising the questionnaires and training volunteers to use them took about 25 hours of one caseworker's time and the Law Centre director's time. On top of this, I spent roughly another 15 hours attending meetings at the Law Centre and devising the questionnaires.

Completing the whole set of questionnaires with a client takes at least an hour of volunteer time and analysis of results is likely to take another 5-6 hours. There will also be an ongoing process of reviewing and improving the questionnaires which will take more time.

It is a very time-consuming process and it may be difficult for other agencies to find the time to do the work, especially if they don't have any external help.

During the course of the pilot, the Legal Services Commission introduced its fixed fee payment scheme. This had a significant impact on the Law Centre and as a result of the extra work, they were forced to stop the pilot. However, with the recruitment of new volunteers they have been able to start the project again.

How staff feel about project

Staff were very positive about the project and felt it was definitely worth doing. They felt that the information gathered helped them to understand more about their clients and the impact of the Law Centre's service, to identify barriers not covered by routine monitoring, spot gaps in service provision, feed into policy debates more effectively, and look for new partnership organisations through identifying the needs of clients.

They found that the amount of time needed to prepare, analyse and supervise the project was difficult, particularly when having to meet the very exacting LSC casework targets. This meant that they did not feel very confident about being able to expand the project into other areas of law, especially those that were LSC-funded.

They also felt concerned that the sample size was not large enough to allow the project to meet its aims.

This was true as the small sample did not allow us to examine the relationship between the nature of client problems and outcomes for the client. There are not enough instances of different types of problem to draw any conclusions about this.

Use of results

Staff felt that the information gathered in the survey could be used in a number of ways:

"First and foremost it will help us to understand the Law Centre's service in a new way, with data explaining the effects of independent advice that we do not believe is captured by anyone else in the borough. This will obviously be very useful for prospective funding applications, although more importantly it will help to influence commissioning bodies and agencies by helping them to understand the trends we have discovered. In particular, this may also show that keeping people aware of their rights is just as important as getting people into work."

Conclusions

The pilot has yielded some useful results and has given the Law Centre a greater understanding of its clients. However, carrying out the work was not straightforward for a number of reasons.

Designing a scheme for measuring outcomes is very time-consuming. It requires time input from management, caseworker staff and volunteers over a significant period. In this instance, I contributed time to help with design of questionnaires and analysis. Other agencies will have to do this without external help.

Once the scheme is developed, there will also have to be significant ongoing time input from all the staff mentioned above.

The project has been running for nearly a year and we anticipated having more results at this stage. This hasn't happened, mainly because of other pressures on the Law Centre. The introduction by the LSC of a whole new system of payment for Legal Aid work has meant that staff have had to spend time developing systems for coping with that.

A couple of volunteers also left the Law Centre in the past few months. This meant that employment unit staff were under more pressure and did not have the support to enable them to complete the questionnaires.

These are events that may affect other agencies and should therefore be taken into consideration by others planning to measure their outcomes.

Finally, employment cases can take a long time to complete. Combined with the factors above, this has meant that few clients have answered all questionnaires. Therefore, there isn't a complete set of results yet.

Further Work

ILC intends to continue with its project and ASA will continue to report on its progress. As well as this ASA intends to run other outcomes pilots in different types of agencies and covering other areas of law. We will try to ensure that clients who are not fluent in English are included in at least some of the surveys and that we cover one-off advice.

As part of the pilots it will be important to investigate whether work to monitor outcomes can be done in a way that requires less caseworker and volunteer time and is therefore less expensive. It may be the case that in areas where more clients are fluent in English, questionnaires can be sent in the post for clients to fill in by themselves. It will also be worth testing how an agency gets on if they use a questionnaire developed by another agency thereby saving on development costs.