

Measuring the outcomes of housing advice

Findings from the Southwark Law Centre pilot

**advice
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alliance**

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As part of the Working Together for Advice project, ASA and its members are carrying out work to develop ways for advice agencies to measure their outcomes. In order to inform that work, ASA has carried out two pilots. Last year we reported on the pilot which was carried out in the employment department of Islington Law Centre. The current report is on the second pilot which was carried out with Southwark Law Centre's housing department. It should be read in conjunction with the earlier report.

Aims of the project

ASA's aims for the pilots were:

- 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

Southwark Law Centre

The Law Centre offers specialist casework in housing, immigration, employment and welfare rights. It receives funding from the Legal Services Commission, local authority, Equality and Human Rights Commission and London Councils.

The housing department has 3 full-time solicitors.

The Law Centre wanted to learn about the effects of its advice work on its clients' lives. It also wanted to collect information to meet the needs of particular funders, for example, London Councils required outcomes information about prevention of homelessness for young people.

Practical matters

Resources

Like Islington Law Centre, Southwark had no extra funding to put into its outcomes project. This had a significant impact on its decisions about how to gather information on the outcomes of its work.

For example, the Law Centre advises many clients who are not fluent in English. Ideally they would have ensured that these clients were represented in any group they surveyed and that interpreters were provided. However, as they had no money to pay for interpreters they were unable to do this.

Staff considered attempting to measure change in their clients over time by asking them questions before and after advice as Islington Law Centre had done. They decided, however, that whilst this might be a more rigorous approach, they did not have the time to interview clients more than once. They therefore decided to do a one-off survey after the clients' cases had closed.

Who should ask the questions?

The staff felt that, whilst clients might be more relaxed talking to caseworkers they already knew, they were likely to be more objective if they were talking to someone they had never met. They also felt it would be better to do it face-to-face and by appointment with the client as they were likely to get a better response rate.

Fortunately the Law Centre was able to get the help of a volunteer for 2 days conduct the interviews with clients. The caseworkers were concerned, however, that if the volunteer contacted them unexpectedly they may not participate. Therefore, the solicitor with conduct of the case called the client first and asked them to come into the Law Centre at a particular time to meet the volunteer and answer the questionnaire.

How many clients to survey?

Because of the time limitations, the Law Centre decided to attempt to survey all housing clients whose cases had closed in the last 3 months. They did not include clients who had ceased to give instructions. This gave a total of 16 clients. As an incentive they offered clients a £5 Argos voucher and this was paid for out of reserves.

Designing the Questionnaire

Like Islington Law Centre, staff at Southwark wanted to know about the impact of housing problems and of their advice on clients' health, stress levels and their relationships with friends and family. They also wanted to know how clients' housing problems affected their children as they suspected this impact was significant.

The Law Centre wanted to understand the effect their housing advice had on the aspects of their clients' lives that they would normally know little or nothing about, in particular their ability to participate in activities such as education, sport, music and religious activities.

Staff also wanted to know whether clients felt better able to manage their relationship with the local authority as a result of having had their cases handled by the Law Centre. They hoped that as a result clients would address any future problems more quickly and would come to understand the system a bit better.

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. We hoped that 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.

Results

16 clients were asked to attend the Law Centre to answer the survey. 15 attended to answer the survey and one missed her appointment but called in later to answer the questions. Below are the results collated by the volunteer.

Question	Answer
Number of clients that take part in social activities:	<p style="text-align: center;">10</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English classes at Southwark College. • English classes at Kingsway College. • Church. • Studies IT with learn direct. • Mosque. • Sports. • Gym.
Number of clients that were able to participate in these activities while their legal problems were ongoing:	<p style="text-align: center;">6</p>
Number of clients whose ability to participate has improved now that their case has finished:	<p style="text-align: center;">8</p>
Number of clients that were affected by stress as a result of their legal problems:	<p style="text-align: center;">16</p>
Number of clients that are less stressed now that their case has finished:	<p style="text-align: center;">14</p>
Number of clients that feel that their health was affected by their legal problems: And how?	<p style="text-align: center;">14</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress. • High blood pressure. • Skin problems. • Suicidal. • Symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia became much worse. • Asthma. • Sleeping problems. • Arthritis. • Problems with pregnancy. • Anxiety. • Severe nosebleed/had to hospitalized whilst his wife developed a heart problem. • Heart attack. • Loss of appetite/weight loss .

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crying. • Chest pain. • Headaches.
Number of clients that feel that their health has improved now that their case has finished:	13
Number of clients that feel that their relationships with their partner, family and partner were affected by their legal problems:	9
Number of clients that feel that their relationship with their friends and family have improved now that their case is closed.	10
Number of clients that feel that their children were affected by their legal problems: And how?	<p>9</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children were sad. • Children did not laugh or did not play as much. • Children were anxious. • Children did not sleep properly. • Mice made floors unclean for small child to play on. • Cramped conditions caused problems such as rows, stress, and nowhere to play. • Close-knit family and so children and grandchildren were upset and worried for us. • Short-tempered with the kids and they suffered because of this. • Lack of sleep made me less patient with my child. • Children had to change Schools three times. This was very disruptive to their education and social lives.
Number of clients that feel that the situation for their children has improved now that their case has finished:	9
Number of clients that feel that their legal problem got in the way of their work, education or training:	10
Number of clients that feel that their ability to work, study or train has improved now that their case has finished:	11
	8

<p>Number of clients that feel that their understanding of the council's role has improved now that their case has finished:</p>	
<p>Number of clients that feel that following their case, it will be easier to manage their relationship with the council:</p>	<p>8</p>
<p>What the clients feel has been the biggest changes for our clients as a result of our advice?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solicitor helped get client out of the hostel he was staying in. • Client is now in temporary accommodation waiting to be re-housed, but is now on their way. • Client is very happy; is now in secure accommodation. • Solicitor stopped client from getting evicted. • Client now understands the processes of the council and now knows how to access the services. • Solicitor helped client with their problems with their rent, which made a big impact on the client's peace of mind. • The solicitor quickly re-housed the client. • Client's blood pressure dropped from 200 to normal! Southwark Law Centre made the council back off. They were brilliant. Eva is my heroine! • Southwark Law Centre put me on the right path. Wrote letters for me. If it wasn't for them I would have lost my flat. • Made client realise that I should work harder to keep my house. Without Southwark Law Centre I would have lost my house. • The comfort of knowing someone was on my side. • Julia helped me by writing letters for me. She helped me to stay and helped me bid for a property. • I have not lost my house. I would have been homeless if it was not for the Southwark Law Centre. • I was shown a lot of compassion by Julia, and I was very moved when she spoke on my behalf in court.

<p>What did the clients particularly like or dislike about our service?</p>	<p>All clients gave positive feedback:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff: helpful , quick, welcoming, professional, friendly, sincere, very kind, supportive, informative, well-trained, gave excellent advice, listened and treated client with respect, took time to explain what was going on at every stage due to English being their second language, do everything they can for you, reception is lovely-always a smile, caring, warm people, expert help was given to me, they kept me up to date. • Clients really trusted their solicitors. • Julia was very good. Kept me informed and excellent aftercare. Very happy with the service at the Law Centre. • Advice was free. • I liked the service because they helped me a lot. The council made lots of mistakes and the law centre was very good in helping me sort them out. • It has given me the courage to keep going. Julia has been to court with me, this helped me a lot. Julia is helping me by writing and letting me know what is happening. <p>No clients gave negative feedback.</p>
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Reflections on the questionnaires

The volunteer who administered the questionnaire commented that before asking the questions she needed to give more explanation about its content. Without doing this the clients did not understand why they were being asked questions about their personal lives and the process felt intrusive. Therefore, the volunteer explained that the Law Centre wanted to find out about the impact of legal problems and of its casework on clients' whole lives. Clients seemed to understand this and find it acceptable.

Clients did not generally understand the question about managing their relationship with the council. However, when the volunteer broke the question down by asking "how do you get on with your housing officer?" and "if you had a problem with your housing officer, would you know what to do?" clients were generally able to answer the question.

A number of the clients did not speak fluent English. By spending time explaining the questions to these clients, the volunteer felt that clients were able to understand and

answer the questions. However, whilst successful in this context, this method is not ideal and it is ASA's view that agencies with significant numbers of clients who are not fluent in English should make arrangements for interpreters to be involved in the project.

We do not have results from the caseworker questionnaire as the caseworkers forgot to complete them. This is probably an indication of how difficult it is to introduce a new procedure into an already paperwork heavy area of work.

Had we had the results of the caseworker questionnaire, it is unlikely that cross-referencing them with the client questionnaire would have revealed anything about the possible relationship between problem type, work done and effect on client. This is because there was not enough variation between the survey results and the numbers surveyed were too low to be able to draw any conclusions. This is something that it would be interesting to do but it is probably beyond the ability of a single agency as they would need large numbers of surveys answered in order to be able to see any patterns.

The fact that all the clients who were asked to participate in the survey did so is impressive and it seems that the offer of the voucher was not a key factor. One of the caseworkers did not tell her clients about the voucher when she called them as it had not been finally agreed. Furthermore, the volunteer who conducted the surveys commented that it was clear to her that the "clients would have walked barefoot to tell her how important the Law Centre was to them."

Cost and Use of results

The director of the Law Centre felt that the process was worthwhile as she will be able to use the results to provide feedback to funders and raise further funds.

They would like to carry out a similar project in the future, probably in another area of law. However, she estimated that staff, including the volunteer, spent about 50 hours on developing and running the project. As the Law Centre's funding is tight she would have to consider very carefully whether they could afford to invest this much staff time into another project.

Conclusions

The approach of using a single volunteer to interview a small group of clients, on one occasion, after their cases had closed, seems to have been appropriate in this case and yielded useful results.

Given the amount of time spent by staff on the project and the fact that they had external help from ASA, it is difficult to see how it is possible for an agency to do anything more complex or to carry out outcomes work on an ongoing basis without significant extra resources.

However, we hope that one product of the Working Together for Advice pilot work will be a bank of questions that have been tested by a number of agencies working in different areas of law and with different client groups. In future, agencies will be able to draw on this when designing their own outcomes measurement schemes thereby reducing the time they have to spend on developing them.