Signposting, Referral and Referral Networks - Discussion Document

This document is not a definitive briefing on signposting and referral networks. It is rather a discussion document for further exploration of some of the issues involved, and aims to help provide a framework in which to develop practice around referral networks.

Sections 1-8 offer an overview of some of the main issues.

Section 9 explores in greater details some of the practical challenges to establishing and running a successful referral network.

Sections

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1. Access to advice and the role of referral networks

The vision of a “seamless service” of advice provision was a founding principle of the Access to Justice Act, 1999, which gave rise to the Community Legal Service (CLS): anyone seeking advice on a social welfare law problem should be able to gain access to the entire spectrum of advice services. A referral network formalises this vision at a local level.

In practice, definitions of service levels such as “general help” or “specialist help” may mean little to people needing advice and clients will often approach a service – whether an advice

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1 welfare benefits, debt, housing, employment, immigration and asylum, education, community care
agency or a community-focused organisation – with which they are already familiar. Research shows that acute access problems are experienced by certain “hard to reach” groups. There is convincing evidence, for example, that young people don’t make clear distinctions between what may be deemed legal problems and other types of personal or social problems and may prefer to seek advice from organisations which cater specifically for their needs rather than from traditional advice services. For this reason, a referral network should aim either to include a wide range of community-based and “problem-noticing” organisations (such as GPs or social workers) or at least to incorporate a procedure by which these types of organisations can make direct referrals to advice services.

A referral network serves several purposes, both for the client and the member organisations, as outlined in this discussion document. Not least of these is that, in creating a genuinely seamless service, it may be the best defence against inappropriate top-down solutions being imposed on services.

2. **Signposting and Referral defined**

Signposting and referral are crucial to an effective network, ensuring that the client gets the fullest and best possible service towards a resolution of their enquiry. But, in practice, there is some confusion between the two activities, and it’s important for organisations to be clear about the differences.

**Signposting** is about the client taking (or being given) responsibility for contacting other organisations to help them resolve their problem.

Organisations providing telephone helplines may undertake a lot of signposting. An information worker or receptionist who deals with initial queries from clients may also signpost extensively. Advisers undertake signposting and discuss alternative sources of help with clients when they have identified that the organisation cannot assist any further.

This may take place before an organisation has started in-depth work with a client. In many organisations, though, advisers will see a particular client many times and on some occasions will signpost them.

**Referral** is about the adviser taking at least partial responsibility for contacting other organisations when, for whatever reason, they are no longer able to assist the client. A referral usually involves the adviser making contact with the organisation to arrange an appointment and make any other necessary arrangements to ensure that the case continues smoothly.

This may take place after the adviser has begun the case and seen the client for the second or third time about the same issue. Sometimes, however, it will be necessary to do a referral on the first visit, eg if the client is vulnerable.

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2 See “Young People’s Access to Advice-The Evidence”, James Kenrick, Youth Access, 2009
Reasons to signpost or refer
While a client will be signposted or referred on for many different reasons, most of these will fall into the following categories:

• The problem falls outside the adviser’s (and organisation’s) subject area/level of expertise
• The client falls outside the organisation’s target group – e.g. BME groups, those with specific access needs, older people, homelessness etc
• There is a breakdown of trust between the client and adviser
• There is a conflict of interest
• Capacity issues generally

3. What is a referral network?
A referral network is a group of organisations that has focused on how clients can be referred both within and outside the network, often thinking about relationships between frontline advisers or structures for ensuring that referrals take place effectively. Referral networks are established to enable advice organisations to concentrate on their own areas of expertise and refer to another agency where necessary, thereby maximising the combined capacity of the network.

4. What makes an effective referral network?
In order for a referral network to exist, a number of underlying conditions need to be in place:

Trust: A prerequisite for the successful operation of a referral network is trust between the member organisations, in terms of the quality of service they provide, their ability and willingness to accept and deal with referred clients in a timely fashion and to provide feedback to the referring agency on the progress in the case. A shared quality assurance system may help ensure that all services in a referral network are providing services to a minimum level of quality.

Clarity on services provided: Crucial to the effectiveness of a referral network is absolute clarity amongst members of the services each other provide and to what level. Without this, there is a risk of inappropriate referrals, poor service for clients and a potential breakdown in trust between network members.

Management and coordination: To ensure that a referral network functions effectively and efficiently, it is essential that the operation of the network is carefully managed and coordinated and its policies and procedures are reviewed regularly. Referral works best where there is an agreed protocol between referral network members and some means of servicing the network (such as the paid time of an employee of a participating organisation). It is crucial that problems or difficulties in the operation of the network are identified and resolved at the earliest possible opportunity. Failure to do so can have serious consequences for trust between member agencies. The use of standardised referral forms or an online electronic
booking system is common practice to ensure that the necessary information is shared between the agencies making and receiving the referral (see Electronic referral systems).

**Acknowledgement of extent of competency:** If appropriate referrals are to be made, it is important that organisations are clear when they have reached the upper limits of their level of competence and refer clients to an organisation with the appropriate competency to deal with the case – for example referring a client to a specialist agency/solicitor. This is also relevant to making referrals external to the network where the appropriate expertise does not exist within the network.

**Systems for handling inward referrals from external organisations and problem noticers:** As well as having clear systems on how referrals are made between referral network members, it is important that clear systems are in place to deal with referrals from external organisations and problem noticers, such as social workers, schools, health workers. Clear information on these types of services and levels of expertise of the different organisations is essential if appropriate referrals are to be made.

**Capacity:** It is important to recognise that the success of any referral network is predicated on the capacity within the network as a whole to deal with the client that presents seeking advice. Insufficient capacity cannot be overcome though referral networks, but a network can be a mechanism for collecting data on unmet need, thereby making a persuasive case to funders for additional advice services.

5. **Organisational challenges and barriers to referral**

The operation of a good referral system is part of a comprehensive and good quality service. Unfortunately, when a referral needs to be made there may be barriers for an organisation to getting the client access to an appropriate advice service.

**Lack of clarity about the remit of the service provided**
Advice organisations may feel under pressure to take on more clients or continue with cases that go beyond their service specification and therefore their expertise. A challenge for small under-resourced organisations is to ensure that all staff are trained sufficiently to provide accurate information.

**The client may not want to be referred**
Organisations providing a service to deal with a specific target group, e.g., women, disabled people, a particular ethnic minority etc, may come under particular pressure from clients who approach them repeatedly. This is because they may have built up trust and confidence in the organisation’s ability to meet their needs.

**Culture and language**
A specific difficulty for many small community organisations when making referrals is the language barrier. Black and minority ethnic and refugee organisations, whose clients may speak little or no English, may need an interpreter to ensure the success of a referral.
Staff or management committee resistance
Staff or management committee members may see referral as a failure. Clarity about when referrals must be made and the reasons for doing so in a particular case can help in convincing reluctant staff and trustees.

Finding a suitable referral agency with capacity
In the current climate of scarce funding and competition between advice organisations, this can be seen to be one of the biggest barriers to making successful and timely referrals. There can also be concerns about an organisation that should be able to handle the referral, but where the adviser and/or client has had negative experiences of that organisation’s work.

6. Overcoming organisational barriers

There are a number of actions that an organisation can take to try and overcome some of the barriers to referral mentioned above.

Good diagnostic skills: It is good practice to have a person with good diagnostic skills on the reception desk of your organisation, or to ensure that all the advisers dealing with clients are able to quickly work out what the client needs and whether the organisation can provide it. It is better to signpost a client to the best service for them as quickly as possible.

Good training in advice skills: All workers need to have the skills to diagnose a problem and provide options to the client. The ability to do this consistently will minimise time wasted for a client who may need a different service.

Supervision and back-up support during advice sessions: This can ensure a quicker turnover of clients and the necessary support for an adviser when a client needs to be referred on.

Provide the fullest service possible before signposting or referring on: It is important for organisations to check that they have done everything they can to make referrals successful. This includes checking that the adviser has followed the organisation’s procedure correctly and that the client was supported effectively and had all the information they needed.

Clear referral procedure: If the client needs to be referred on, the process needs to be clear and consistent. Ideally it should be a written procedure that all advisers use consistently.

What if the client is unwilling to be referred? Advisers may need to discuss other options, including how much continued support it is possible for them to give the client. The boundaries of any ongoing support must be agreed so that the client's expectations of the service are not raised beyond the remit or expertise of the adviser or the organisation.

Providing a supported referral service: Clients may need support to enable them to access the service they are referred to. There may be scope for working with referral organisations to support the client. Such support could include accompanying the client to the
initial interview with the new agency, helping the client to get there physically (eg finding the place and help with travel) and providing an interpreter.

**Building up-to-date knowledge of suitable providers:** It’s important to make contact with and find out about other local services, and to regularly update lists for signposting and referral.

**Build relationships with other providers:** Participation in an advice forum, or becoming part of a network of providers can help increase an organisation’s awareness of other local advice providers and identify complementary services. Forums provide the opportunity for relationships between advice services to be formed and sustained, as well as for identifying gaps in local provision.

### 7. Electronic referral systems

It is good practice, and a requirement of the CLS Quality Mark, to keep a central record of referrals. This allows for tracking the progress of and monitoring of referrals, including demand for service, effectiveness of referrals and where it has been impossible to identify a referral organisation. This information can then be fed into any review of the advice service. The central record can be paper based, for example placing referral forms in a file, or electronic, for example recording information from referral forms in spreadsheets.

**Web based diaries and online referral systems**

An alternative to paper based referral systems are web based referral systems. A number of different systems have been designed, and some examples are provided at the end of this section. The essential features of these systems are that they allow referring agencies to book appointments online at referral organisations, and some allow referring organisations to track the progress of the referred case. Web based referral systems should also record the key information used for paper based referral systems as mentioned above.

**Potential advantages of electronic referral systems**

Electronic referral systems can support and improve the ability of advice organisations and the wider advice sector to refer clients to appropriate advice providers.

Some of the potential advantages of having electronic or web-based referral systems include the following. They:

- may be easy to keep up to date and allow for timely responses
- may facilitate the production of statistics indicating the number of clients referred to other organisations and of clients received from other agencies to inform funding applications
- may help reduce manual work, wasted telephone calls and duplication of work
- may complement and enhance existing referral networks
- may improve partnership working amongst advisers and the advice community
- may enhance cement and improve the efficiency of the referrals.
Potential disadvantages of electronic referral systems
Some of the potential disadvantages of using electronic referral systems include concerns:

- about the security of information held online and corresponding concerns about client confidentiality
- about the implications of setting up referral protocols and legally binding agreements between organisations
- that ongoing training and IT support is required to encourage use of the system. This may involve additional costs for agencies or networks
- that without a discussion between advisers at the referring and receiving organisations beforehand, inappropriate referrals may be made. It’s important to note that they cannot replace relationships between organisations.

Examples of online referral systems

A number of online and web-based systems exist, and some incur a cost. Some examples are provided below.

**Nellbooker**
Developed by solicitors Hopkin Murray Beskine in partnership with AdviceUK, the system provides an online inter-agency referral system and diary where participating agencies can show time available for other agencies to book appointments. The system is designed to meet the needs of legal advice services and allows for tracking, monitoring and reporting on referrals. It is currently being used by several networks. For more information visit www.nellbooker.net

**Refernet**
This is an interactive web application developed by Viccari Wheele Ltd to facilitate referrals between organisations and networks. Like Nellbooker, the system provides details of the organisation where the referral is being made and an electronic form is used to send details of the referrals. The system allows an administrator to view statistics on the numbers of referrals being made by each agency. For more information visit www.refernet.co.uk

**Appointment Plus**
Appointment Plus has been developed by Storm Source Software based to schedule appointments online. For more information visit www.appointment-plus.com.

**FORT**
Developed by Alienation Digital, FORT allows organisations to refer clients to the appropriate organisation within a network, track the referral through to its resolution or closure and monitor referrals across the network. The system provides a directory of organisations referrers can choose from.

The receiving organisation examines the case and accepts or rejects the referral. For more information visit www.alienationdigital.co.uk
8. Case study: Advice Services Coventry

Advice Services Coventry (ASC) is a consortium of independent advice services. Within this group there is a mix of organisations whose only business is advice, and some who also have a range of other functions. The network has 12 members and one network co-ordinator.

With funding from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund the network was able to commission a web-based directory of local advice services, with details of what’s on offer and how to access it (www.adviceservicescoventry.org.uk). When members log on they can access the latest network information, and a page where they can upload minutes, reports, etc.

The network has done a lot to promote a joint working between its members, especially through its online referral form, which is based on a paper form and was developed with the co-ordinator with the help of a web designer. The web referral form is very simple to fill in, and every partner is using it. When the referral is sent the referring organisation receives a confirmation email and can see if it has been picked up. They then have two weeks to deliver an outcome, whether a successful or a failed referral.

A paper protocol defines how the partners are meant to use the referral system. A key to its success is in training the partners in the use of the online form and referral system. The Co-ordinator monitors how the referrals are going, and provides more training if there are failed referrals.

For further information contact Caroline Murray at caroline.asc@btinternet.com.
9. Key questions to consider

These questions and the suggested possible solutions were discussed at meetings of the National Advice Sector Development Forum in March & April 2010. The events were attended by staff from a wide range of advice agencies from across the country.

Q. How to avoid inappropriate referrals and maintain up to date information?

There must be clearly defined service provision between organisations, including the subject area and type of clients an organisation works with, level of service (generalist/specialist).

It’s also important that members of the network understand the difference between signposting and referral.

The development of a referral flowchart to guide referring organisations/staff through the referral process can help. As part of the process organisations should state why the referral is being made.

**Training** can play an important part in avoiding inappropriate referrals. Ensuring people are trained on eligibility can also reduce inappropriate referrals. In cases of inappropriate referrals these should be explored and training should be organised.

Maintaining up to date information

There are several ways of maintaining and updating information, including:

- Networking events
- Common online system
- E-bulletin newsletter
- Each organisation must take responsibility for keeping key contact information updated and current capacity information on service provision.

A **moderator** can play a important role in overseeing the referral system and reducing inappropriate referrals. The moderator needs to have an identified contact within each organisation who will cascade information oversee information maintenance.

Q. As a referral network is widened, how can it be ensured that confidentiality is protected?

Drawing up protocols and monitoring them are key to ensuring confidentiality. There should be a common understanding of client consent across the network and there should be communication between members on an ongoing basis.
For electronic systems passwords and filters can be used with client authorisation and the client must be confident in the system. Information should only be available after acceptance of the referral.

Data protection/control issues and standards and different contractual obligations (retention and destruction of records etc), in compliance with the Data Protection Act must also be borne in mind.

It’s important to recognise that if the statutory sector is involved, especially the police, social workers and any council/PCT services there can be complications in relation to confidentiality.

**Q. How to improve the client’s journey through multiple advice queries?**

Citizens Advice are implementing a ‘Gateway’ system, in which a Gateway coordinator acts as a single point of contact for the client. The Gateway host can bring all advisers together relevant to the client. The use of video conferencing/telephone can be helpful.

It is important that advisers need to be able to diagnose major issues and to explore presenting and underlying issues, and investing in the first point of contact through training is vital.

It’s also important to share client information and monitor feedback and to involve service users in the governance of the organisation/network.

**Q. Do triage systems such as the Gateway system help or hinder access?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Help</th>
<th>Hinder</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• They can help clients see the right person</td>
<td>• If the client has already gone through and it is determined they don’t require further support how can we be sure that clients can actually ‘self-help’?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Before advice can be given the process is client-driven, eligibility criteria is to be established.</td>
<td>• Can exclude clients – i.e. demand management rather than inclusive access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There is a fast track option if triage has already been done</td>
<td>• Are no shows monitored as well as support needs like language, literacy and mental health?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Need for assisted information – initial contact should be positive and encourage clients to return</td>
<td>• ‘Hard to reach’ groups (eg young people) may to be deterred.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Frees up time for other methods of access (eg email/telephone), and allows organisations to see more people</td>
<td>• Not suitable for home visits. It also hinders flexible client-focused solutions.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Q. **What can be put in place to ensure a common referral (including electronic) system is effective and sustainable in the long term?**

- Ensure relationships are in place and trust has been established. This can be achieved through agreement on key messages, clear information and breaking down barriers.
- Establish how you will fund the system. Put the cost of electronic systems and partnerships into funding bids. The only sustainable solution may be that the network pays a fee for it. Evidence the need by introducing measures around speed of referral and accuracy of referral.
- Ongoing management steering group with terms of reference can play a key role in ensuring the system is effective and sustainable.
- Ensure buy-in from advisers. Prove the concept and make it a success for participants.
- Solve any data protection issues. Permission needs to be written into the agreement, as well as procedures for data cleansing and updating information.
- Build flexibility into the system to accommodate change in the future.
- Standardise the training and keep it simple.

Q. **How can effective referral networks be developed with limited resources?**

- Re-prioritise funding – sustainability – allow full cost recovery
- Share resources
- Build relationships
- Culture supported through training/resolve/share problems
- Build on what you are already doing
- Accept ownership
- Have regular meetings
- Need co-ordinator/function to be funded

Q. **How can all organisations, especially smaller organisations, be identified, incorporated, engaged in networks?**

Communication and engagement are key to incorporate all relevant organisations into a network. The following are some of the steps that can be taken:

- Selling the benefits to agencies and clients – eg electronic referrals. This can be done through presentation at staff meetings and training
- Invite prospective members of the network meetings of a steering committee with varied agendas to accommodate diverse interests and services
- Newsletters, both in hard copy and email can help promote the benefits also
- Collect information informally about referral needs
- Partnership website
- Themed meetings linking similar agencies
Q. **How do we pick an electronic system that suits everyone?**

- Defining needs – User group to input and test, researching existing systems in other areas
- All network members have technology/resources to use system
- Core list of essentials members have to have to be part of referral network
- Paper/phone back-up for organisations without essentials
- Assess resources available to develop and maintain system, eg advice and project
- Number and type of agencies involved/targeted.
- Training needs to use system and on making referrals
- Costs and how they are calculated, e.g. per user
- Maintenance needs of system
- Sustainability of system

**Some ways to help ensure that staff use the electronic system**

- User group to ensure buy-in
- Emphasising the purpose of the network – meeting client needs
- Simple to use
- Feedback on referrals to see the value/measure outcomes
- Training
- Positive leadership
- Monitoring

Q. **How to ensure an effective referral system by initial assessment, especially where large numbers of organisations are involved?**

- Referral agreements within organisations
- Reception staff need to be trained
- There should be minimum standards/time limits/and clear guidance
- Where organisations don’t have triage systems, educate front line staff
- Problem noticers and other non-advice organisations need to be engaged
- Flowcharts of the referral process within and between organisations
- Training and awareness events (although difficulties of people, time and resources)
- Newsletters and case studies can help keep organisations up to date
- Support for organisations that can’t adhere to protocols due to capacity or other issues.
- Ongoing monitoring is crucial
- Quality – requiring all organisations to hold a common quality standard, eg new General Help Quality Mark
Q. How can the network ensure that knowledge of capacity/capability of local advice organisations is up to date?

Capacity
• An online appointment system maintained daily by each organisation, managed by a dedicated person overall and at each organisation – interpersonal contact also needed.
• A Service Level Agreement sets minimum requirements to decide on acceptance/rejection of referral, eg within five days let the client know what to expect.
• Monitor no show rates for appointments and analyse reasons.
• Limited period book in advance – 2/3 weeks
• Identify client’s options beyond the network (incl telephone helplines, self help)
• Consent from client to share information with other organisations.

Capability
• Have clear and strict criteria for membership of the network
• Inter-agency training/meetings – it is important for agencies to understand each other’s capability beyond formal Quality Mark information/other quality standards and share knowledge/skills/contacts.
• Other criteria – clarity re client groups served by members agencies
• The network could consider only allowing agencies with a particular quality assurance standard to join.

Q. How to ensure appropriate referral among advice providers?
• Clear referral protocols, including clients’ eligibility for the referral.
• An up to date directory of local services is crucial
• Careful consideration of which organisation is best placed to deal with the enquiry
• Training to ensure that organisations and individuals within organisations aware of the full range of services locally.

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