



The importance of being connected

why, how and when referrals are made by
community groups

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1 Purpose and methodology

- 1.1 This study explores why, how and when community groups refer their users to other advice agencies, solicitors and organisations for support. Good referrals are important as they can help to ensure that people receive an appropriate, good quality service.
- 1.2 We interviewed staff members in 11 community groups in London:
 - three older people's organisations (OP1, OP2, OP3)
 - three ethnic minority/immigrant support groups (EM1, EM2, EM3)
 - two disabled people's organisations (DP1, DP2)
 - two women's groups (W1, W2)
 - one young people's group (YP1)
- 1.3 A copy of the interview questions can be found as an appendix to this report. Some interviews were with front line advice workers, whereas others were with service managers. The interviews were conducted by three members of ASA's policy team. Each group was offered a payment of £50, as a contribution to their running costs.
- 1.4 We agreed with interviewees that we would not disclose information that identified individuals or organisations without their permission.

2 Conclusions and recommendations

- 2.1 The nature and small size of the study means that any conclusions must be very tentative.
- 2.2 We found that the community groups in the study had differing approaches to referring users to external agencies. Some, most notably the ethnic minority/immigrant support groups, were very pro-active in ensuring that their users had access to appropriate external expertise and considered this to be a core role.
- 2.3 Others appeared to be much more internally focused, with some regarding their organisation as *the* one-stop-shop which could provide for all (or most) of their users' needs. In a few cases, we found a worryingly low level of awareness about what external advice agencies might offer users.
- 2.4 It seems likely that, in part, these differences reflected reality. For example, the older persons' organisations in the study tended to be relatively large organisations, able to offer a range of funded services to meet a variety of advice and non-advice needs. On the other hand other organisations were small, sometimes with only one paid staff member, with little option but to look for external support for their users.
- 2.5 A number of factors appeared to influence when and how users were referred to external advice providers. In particular, it was clear that knowing individuals in external organisations made a significant difference as to whether and how external referrals were made. Other factors were also identified and these are explored below in Section 7.
- 2.6 As a result of this study, we recommend the following:
 - Initiatives to encourage referrals between advice organisations should take account of the importance of personal relationships.

- Agencies need to feel confident that, provided they have objective justification, they can recommend specific external providers. Several interviewees were uncertain about whether they are “allowed” to recommend particular specialists, “I don't think we or anyone else are actually supposed to recommend a solicitor” (DP2). This appeared to lead some to lose confidence in making referrals at all.
- Specialist advice agencies need to review how they communicate their capacity to take on new work. We found that several interviewees were reluctant to refer to certain agencies (for example CABx and Law Centres) because they assumed that they would be “too busy”. Of course, in some cases, this perception might reflect reality.
- Advice sector quality marks should continue to ensure that organisations are clear about the parameters of their service. Most interviewees were aware of their own and their organisation's limitations and this appeared to be linked to a greater awareness of and use of external specialists. However, others were not clear about the parameters of their service and this appeared to lead to fewer referrals.
- There is a need to develop understanding and expertise in community care law. We found that a significant proportion of the interviewees were uncertain and unconfident about this important area of law.

2.7 The evidence for the above conclusions and recommendations are set out below.

3 Definitions

3.1 The diversity of the advice sector means that definitions can be problematic and we struggled to settle on clear terminology.

3.2 For the purpose of this research, we have used the term “community groups” to describe organisations which provide support and services to a specific community, defined in terms of geography or shared interests. These groups often provide advice to their users and, in some cases, have several paid advice workers. However, they do not see themselves primarily as advice providers.

3.3 We use the term “generic advice provider” to describe organisations whose main role is the provision of advice to the general public. This could include CABx, other generalist advice agencies, Law Centres, national voluntary organisations and private practice solicitors. Of course, such organisations do sometimes offer some services targeted at specific communities.

3.4 Generic advice providers can work at both a generalist and specialist level. Many of the community groups in the study had the General Help Quality Mark and several interviewees considered that their services were at least equivalent to those provided by agencies such as CABx.

4 What they do

4.1 Our interviewees demonstrated enthusiasm, commitment and warmth towards their users. We observed that most of the organisations in this study were very friendly and welcoming to people as they arrived in their premises.

4.2 The community organisations in the study provided advice in a wide range of subjects, clustered according to the needs of their users. Typically

- older persons' organisations provided advice in benefits and housing

- women's organisations provided advice in domestic violence, relationship breakdown/divorce, benefits, children (including abduction), and housing
- ethnic minority organisations offered advice in immigration, housing, benefits
- disability organisations focused on disability benefits, health, housing
- the young person's organisation offered advice in housing and benefits.

Nearly all mentioned debt as a growing area of work, and a surprising number mentioned driving offences and parking tickets.

- 4.3 Most could give examples of users asking for help in other areas of law and this will be dealt with later in this report.
- 4.4 Significantly, although several interviewees mentioned problems with the provision of social care for their users, only two referred to community care as an area of law without prompting. Again, this will be dealt with in more detail later in this report.
- 4.5 In addition to their legal advice service, most of these organisations provided their users with other services. These included:
- Day centres for older people
 - Small repairs or handyman service
 - Counselling
 - Support e.g. helping to complete applications for driving licenses, finding a GP, "just helping them to manage relationships" (DP1),
 - Social/befriending
 - Advocacy
 - Scrutiny role in relation to local authority progress on disability equality
 - Interpreting

Some organisations, notably those for ethnic minority users, provided services which went beyond the normal boundaries. For example, a woman fleeing domestic violence (but not entitled to claim benefits) was found a home, job and psychiatric support through community members (EM3).

5 Distinctive role

- 5.1 It was clear that interviewees felt considerable commitment and passion towards helping their user groups. Examples were given of staff members visiting vulnerable users at home at 8pm (OP1) and users having 24 hour access to personal mobile numbers (EM2). There was also evidence that at least some of these groups were very precariously funded. On the date of the interviews, the salaries of two interviewees were being paid out of reserves.

Accessibility of the organisation

- 5.2 Our interviewees felt that their users appreciated the accessibility of their organisations and that, in contrast with generic advice providers, they were able to focus on the specific needs of their user groups and tailor their services accordingly. For example,
- older people's organisations provided advice services at day centres
 - disabled people's organisations offered more flexibility in how their users contacted them

- an ethnic minority organisation felt that they were more accommodating of their users' culture and tendency to poor timekeeping "we try to be flexible . . . Other agencies . . . work in a very cold, calculated, nine-to-five way" (EM2).

Many commented that their users (for differing reasons) found it difficult to cope with the queuing and appointment systems used by some generic advice agencies.

A continuing relationship

- 5.3 Nearly all of the interviewees described a continuing relationship with their users. They could offer sufficient time to develop "relationships of trust" with their users [OP1]. One interviewee gave an example of a user who had not been able to bid for a council flat. After some time, the user had disclosed that she couldn't read, something that she was too embarrassed to reveal to anyone else (OP3).
- 5.4 Another felt that "the model of giving advice and people go away - doesn't really work in the disability sector . . . regular customers . . . come to you because they feel that you support them" (DP1).
- 5.5 An organisation working with ethnic minority users described providing support with the stages that new immigrants go through - first their immigration problems and then benefit applications. Then, later, "I realise . . . that very soon they are approaching to sixty, and I would advise that . . . they should come to see me in order to apply for pension credit" (EM1).
- 5.6 Another tried "to provide services from birth to the grave, you know, even . . . when they die . . . we have advice as to how to arrange funerals" (EM2).
- 5.7 An interviewee working with older people told us about "one client with dementia who comes here and . . . well, he remembers where the post office is, and where our office is, so . . . if he, you know, feels completely lost, he knows that he can come to our office . . . the only place he feels safe" (OP3).

Their doggedness

- 5.8 Several interviewees referred to the fact that they don't give up - "my reputation precedes me, for being tenacious, shall we say" (W1).

6 Relationships with generic advice providers

- 6.1 We asked questions about the relationship between our interviewees and generic advice providers. Reassuringly, all of the interviewees were able to give examples of users that they had referred to other agencies. However, there were differences between them.
- 6.2 Some interviewees, notably those working with ethnic minority clients, were able to provide a long list of generic specialist advice providers that they referred to. They clearly felt that it was an important part of their role to ensure that their users got the right help from the right organisations. For example, one promptly named several large not-for-profit organisations in her area and private practice solicitors "that we have" that dealt with a significant number of her user group (EM3).
- 6.3 More commonly, interviewees had relationships with a few favoured generic providers on certain areas of law. For example,
- Most interviewees talked about referring users to their local CAB, although many mentioned problems with accessing these services.

- One interviewee described how he referred homeless users to a “brilliant” local Law Centre (DP1). However, he had yet to find a “good immigration solicitor”.
 - Another agency reported referring users needing specialist housing advice to an organisation nearly four miles away (OP3).
- 6.4 As indicated above, there was evidence that referral can mean something different for community groups. In the generic advice sector, referral is often seen as sending the client elsewhere. However, for many of these community groups the user continued to be ‘one of theirs’ at the same time as receiving advice from another organisation.
- 6.5 Some interviewees complained about the lack of feedback from generic providers about what was happening. For example, one interviewee pleaded for better communication with them “because they cannot communicate with the client - the woman doesn't speak a word of English. So the woman is speaking through us to them, and she is crying out for information” (EM2).
- 6.6 There was some evidence of a reluctance to refer users “because a lot of our people . . . there are mobility problems – they can only really deal with one person . . . they trust us, they build up a relationship, and they get fed up with going to different places, and they just can't manage all the different relationships” (DP1).
- 6.7 Finally, there was evidence that generic advice providers made inappropriate referrals to community groups. A disabled people's organisation complained that a disabled person wanting help with an Irish passport application had been sent to them (DP1). Similarly, a women's organisation complained that a woman had been sent to them simply because she had been crying (W1).

7 What made the difference?

- 7.1 During the interviews we attempted to explore the reasons behind decisions about when and how to refer to other advice providers.

Knowing people

- 7.2 It was very clear that personal relationships had a significant impact on referrals. Several interviewees expressed a reluctance to refer users to people they don't know. As one said “I won't send them on to people that I don't know . . . or. . . if I do have to send them onto somebody, I might come along with them for the initial visit” (DP1). In the absence of a personal relationship with a suitable agency, some interviewees reported relying on their colleagues' contacts.
- 7.3 These relationships were developed through:

Previous workplaces

- 7.4 A few interviewees had previously worked for generic advice providers. They referred users to their former workplace, or to organisations that they had come across in their old jobs. For example, one interviewee with several years' experience of working in a CAB said that she would “phone up and ask to speak to [a well-known and respected community care solicitor] but that's because I've referred dozens and dozens of cases to her and so I just shortcut everyone else, because . . . I haven't got the time” (DP2). Another talked about “this particular solicitor, I've known, because I worked with her when I worked with Women's Aid, and so I got to know her very well” (W1).

Previous good experience

- 7.5 Not surprisingly, several interviewees mentioned referring users to organisations where they or their users had previous good experience. One referred to a solicitor who had "got very close relation with our community" (EM1). Another knew their local solicitors well, and offered clients the choice of "my little rottweiler" or solicitors "who will spend more time with the person" (W1).
- 7.6 The opposite was also true, with several interviewees reporting bad experiences and a consequent reluctance to refer to them again or to refer at all. "We tend not to refer a great deal, because a lot of our clients have already been x amount of places before us" (W2). Another described a reluctance to refer to the CAB because they had the impression that "they are uncomfortable dealing with disabled people and . . . basically there's nothing CAB can offer that we can't offer . . . and . . . in terms of funding, we get told that we have to meet a certain target" (DP1).
- 7.7 Interviewees avoided referring to some solicitors. One complained about "cavalier" immigration solicitors that are "unscrupulous, and just giving hope . . . [saying] come on, give me £700, and . . . I will apply for you" (EM1), and another about family "solicitors who'd represent the cat if the dog barked too loudly" (W1).

Joint working or advice forums

- 7.8 Some interviewees were aware of generic generalist and specialist providers through various forms of joint working. One interviewee talked about using "pro bono solicitors, [where] we end up having a very good relationship. And there's one particular firm that, if I call, I don't have to pay for advice" (W1). Another was on the management committee of a local Law Centre. A couple mentioned contacts made through hosting Financial Inclusion Fund projects providing debt advice in their premises.
- 7.9 Three interviewees mentioned local advice forums as a source of information about referrals. However, one wasn't happy with the bureaucracy of the referral process that their forum had developed and felt that it was still difficult for their users to make appointments. A couple of others felt that the lack of such forums in their area made it more difficult to keep up to date with developments in their neighbouring advice services.
- 7.10 However, one interviewee recognised that such forums can be problematic because "you're not really going to have proper cooperation between all the advice agencies – because they don't really want you stealing their clients" (W1). Another agency described the fragile state of their local advice sector following a funding round: "the bridges have been broken . . . you both apply for the same pot of money - one had got it, the other hasn't got it. And then suddenly you're expected to refer people . . ." (EM2).
- 7.11 Some interviewees mentioned other forums e.g. domestic violence, Disability Forums which provided them with useful contacts.

Marketing by generic agencies

- 7.12 There was some evidence that agencies responded to promotion activities by generic agencies - in particular face-to-face contact. One agency referred users to a housing provider over four miles away after being visited by the manager of that agency (OP3). This was in spite of the fact that another specialist housing provider is situated across the road to them.

- 7.13 At least one agency said that they would welcome more information about the services that generic agencies provided "it would be fantastic if they promoted themselves to us" (DP2).

Effort by the community group

- 7.14 Some interviewees talked about the effort that they had put into developing relationships with specialists. One had "built a good relationship with the solicitor [at the Law Centre] who deals with homelessness" (YP1). Another complained that it had been difficult to "manufacture a relationship [with immigration solicitors] like we have with our family law solicitors" (W1).

Lack of capacity

- 7.15 Some interviewees mentioned a reluctance to refer because they doubted that other agencies would have the capacity to help. As one interviewee said "Citizens Advice Bureau, I'm assuming are so overwhelmed – we get lots of people saying . . . [that] the Citizens Advice Bureau have told me it'll be two months before I get an appointment for that issue" (W1). Similarly, another mentioned that their local advice agency's "waiting list is astronomical – they've got people going round the block when they open their doors . . ." (OP1).

Relationship with local authority

- 7.16 Several interviewees felt that they could often resolve problems without the need to refer because they had a good relationship with their local authority. It was acknowledged that the efficiency, or otherwise, of the local authority department concerned made a difference to how easy it was to resolve problems on behalf of users.
- 7.17 Even here, the importance of personal relationships was emphasised. One interviewee found problems with social services "easier when you know the person . . . who is responsible for the area" (OP3). Several interviewees, particularly in older persons' organisations, complained that contact centres were making it more difficult to resolve problems because it wasn't easy to get through to the right person at the local authority.
- 7.18 In contrast, one interviewee referred to specialist providers in order to protect their relationship with their local authority "there's another dynamic to this – you need to be mindful, because you're arguing with [local authority], but you're also funded by [local authority]" (DP1).

Type of problem

- 7.19 Most interviewees recognised that some areas of law were too serious for them to deal with and that certain problems such as immigration, asylum support, domestic violence and child abduction problems should be referred to specialists. Similarly, if their organisation didn't deal with benefits, then such problems were best referred to the local CAB (W1).
- 7.20 We were concerned to note that, although several interviewees mentioned their users' problems with social care, most appeared very hazy in their understanding of the community care legal framework. One interviewee said "it's just a question of arguing the case, and you spend all your time arguing the case . . . it's not a legal thing" (DP1). Although others felt that the support given to some of their users was inadequate, with one notable exception, there was little talk of challenging social services assessments.

- 7.21 Of course, these approaches might reflect a realistic understanding of the position for most users - that a legal challenge is not possible. However, it does seem that community groups, in common with many specialist agencies, need training and support materials in this important area of law.

Knowing limitation

- 7.22 There was evidence that some interviewees were more aware than others of the limits of their knowledge. Regulation by the Office of the Immigration Service Commissioner seems to have heightened this awareness in relation to immigration (EM1).
- 7.23 As one manager said “[being] a nice service, a friendly service to the public . . . doesn’t necessarily mean that they get good advice” and that better referrals would come from “being clear about what the parameters of the service is” (DP2).

Being easy to contact/approachable

- 7.24 It was very clear that the ease of contacting mainstream providers made a difference to what community groups did. Providers who answered the phone were spoken about with approval, and there were feelings of frustration about those who don’t.
- 7.25 Interviewees also commented about some generic providers being particularly approachable to their client group “they’re [a Law Centre] quite supportive of disabled people. Some solicitors that I’ve communicated with before . . . you mention the word disability they have kind of, like an apoplexy” (DP1). Similarly, an organisation working with young people felt that referral to organisations which did not specialise in this user group took up more of their time because young people were “stepping into . . . adult-land” (YP1).

The CLS

- 7.26 Some interviewees, mostly without enthusiasm, referred to using the CLS Directory in order to find specialists for their users. At least one complained that it was out of date. The Directory appeared to be useful when people were trying to find providers outside their normal geographical boundaries or when trying to find solicitors to deal with unusual problems such as equity release or transfer of property to relatives. At least one interviewee appeared to be under the impression that it was a requirement of the General Help Quality Mark to use the directory.
- 7.27 There was little awareness of the Community Legal Advice helpline with one interviewee saying that she had no “experience of them, it’s probably not somewhere I’d go” (OP2) and another “they might have wonderful titles, but they don’t understand a lot of the most vulnerable people in the society” (DP1).

8 Problems with referrals

- 8.1 Whilst some interviewees couldn't think of any problems with making referrals, others could.
- 8.2 For the most part, these problems related to finding a *good* solicitor, particularly in immigration. A women's organisation had found it difficult to find a good solicitor for women wanting to apply for indefinite leave to remain under the domestic violence concession and had experience of "bizarre" advice being given to such users. An ethnic minority people's organisation was unhappy with an immigration provider "we were actually directing them how to do their job, they were all over the place" (EM2).

- 8.3 Another women's organisation complained about [housing] solicitors in their area not getting on with cases saying that they don't "necesssarily have a problem getting a solicitor - what the problem is is how good that solicitor is, and are they actually going to do the work, and are they going to take it seriously" (W2). However, another agency had struggled to find housing solicitors able to take on cases in Southwark.
- 8.4 Examples were given of mainstream providers who were not aware of how to take account of impairments – with one interviewee reporting that a provider had phoned to ask how they should get hold of a BSL interpreter (DP2).
- 8.5 One interviewee complained about problems their users had experienced in getting past the reception of the largest legal aid provider in their area. This problem had finally been resolved by complaining publicly which had led to the legal aid provider appointing a specific liaison person for them.
- 8.6 However, one interviewee felt that their advisers had a responsibility to make clear referrals " . . . if we try and refer in a haphazard way, and don't get to the bottom of what the issues are before we refer, then we're likely not to receive a favourable response" (DP2).

9 Recent changes

- 9.1 We asked interviewees whether they had noticed any recent changes in the needs of their users or the availability of specialist advice. Not all were able to answer this question, mainly because they were relatively new to the role.
- 9.2 As already indicated, and not surprisingly, almost all reported an increase in the number of people needing debt advice – although, in most cases, meeting this need didn't appear to be a problem.
- 9.3 Positively, one interviewee reported that it was easier to find a housing solicitor in Hackney than it had been two years previously.
- 9.4 A disability organisation felt that they were getting an increasing number of users whose needs were linked to problems with immigration status and others referred to a growing problem of finding good immigration solicitors for their clients.
- 9.5 A women's group felt that they were getting more complex benefit problems than previously.
- 9.6 Some felt that legal aid reforms had led to problems. A women's organisation felt that users were increasingly complaining that they had been "fobbed off" by solicitors and speculated about whether this was due to legal aid changes. Apparently, divorce proceedings were taking longer, and the interviewee speculated that this was linked to a new payment scheme. They also felt that "things [were] more difficult for some clients – especially the ones . . . , that . . . maybe have mental health issues, or . . . who need more time" (W1).
- 9.7 Another agency felt that legal aid agencies tended to dump cases back on them if they had a low chance of being successful. "They are happy to deal with the easy cases . . . if it is more complicated, the hard cases, they return again to us" (EM2).
- 9.8 Finally, in one area, the closure of a large generic advice agency had made a significant difference to the workload of one of the community groups.

10 Looking for support

- 10.1 We asked interviewees what they would do if faced with a complex or unusual problem.
- 10.2 In many cases, the interviewees talked about using the web to do their own research. For example, one agency had found an organisation which specialised in child abduction and had referred a user to them. Another used the web to find information about challenging a parking ticket.
- 10.3 Whilst some interviewees said that they would ask their more experienced manager for help, several others said that they would phone one of the organisations that they routinely referred to. For example, one interviewee said, "I might ring somebody up and say, I've got this issue . . . I might ring up the Law Centre, or . . . yesterday, for example, I rang up Shelter, and I had to ask them a question about a person's situation" (DP1). Another said "we'd talk that over with a solicitor, or the Law Centre . . ." (DP2).

11 Conclusions and recommendations

- 11.1 The conclusions and recommendations of this report are set out in section 2 above.

Appendix: the interview questions

1. Introduction

Many vulnerable and disadvantaged people are referred to advice agencies by community groups. This research will explore the relationship between community groups and advice agencies.

We define community groups as organisations which provide support and services to a specific community - defined in terms of geography or shared interests e.g. older people, asylum seekers, mental health service users. Some community groups provide advice to their users but most do not see themselves primarily as advice providers.

We want to meet with a staff member from each of 12 community organisations, with each interview lasting about 45 minutes. For reasons of cost, the community groups will be based in London. A report will be prepared which outlines our findings. The report will respect the confidentiality of those involved - we will not disclose information that identifies individuals and organisations without their permission.

In acknowledgement of the time involved, we will make a contribution of £50 to the organisation's running costs.

2. Research purpose

To explore why, how and when community groups refer their users to specialist advice agencies and to other organisations for support. Further, from the perspective of the community group, to consider what factors make such referrals more, or less, likely and successful.

3. Questions

We will ask the following questions:

Your organisation

- what services does your organisation provide?
- what advice services, if any, do you provide? Roughly how many people (or problems) does your organisation advise every year?
- what types of problems do your users have? Have you noticed any changes over the past year or two?

Making referrals

- are there circumstances where you are unable to provide all the help that your users need? Can you give some indication of how often this happens?
- in this situation, who do you turn to and why? Can you give examples?
- what makes it easier for you to refer users to others?
- what would you do if one of your users had an uncommon problem - one that you are unsure about? Can you give a recent example?
- are you experiencing any problems getting external help for your users?
- are there types of problems or users where you find it more difficult to get help?
- do you get feedback from users that you have referred elsewhere? What are your users telling you?



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