



The voice of independent advice

Response to Modernising Commissioning

Introduction

AdviceUK is a membership organisation with 860 members, mostly community-based, and many volunteer-led. Our members work in some of the poorest parts of England, Scotland and Wales, helping people to solve social welfare problems, providing advice and legal support to over 2 million people a year.

Independent community advice services provide advice and representation in one or more areas of social welfare law – welfare benefits, debt, housing, community care, employment and immigration. Independent community advice services often grow out of community action – local people finding solutions to address local needs. As such, AdviceUK members are an integral part of the Big Society and are rich in social capital.

AdviceUK supports members to improve the quality and effectiveness of their services and provides a national voice.

The consultation period allowed insufficient time for consultation with member organisations regarding this response. We have based our response on our knowledge and understanding of the commissioning environment for advice organisations. Our response is not necessarily reflective of the views and experience of all member organisations.

The short consultation deadline also means that this response is restricted to key questions and issues we feel need to be taken into account.

Creating new opportunities and improving accessibility

We noted in our response to the Cabinet Office's other current consultation paper 'Supporting a Stronger Civil Society', that an increasingly competitive commissioning environment has mitigated against collaboration between organisations:

'We have witnessed this increasingly in recent years, with local authorities putting local advice provision out to competitive tender and replacing grant aid to a range of community organisations with one large single supplier/consortium contract. The climate of public spending cuts has only heightened this tendency. Current high profile examples include Birmingham and Sheffield. The Government must ensure that the funding and commissioning environment does not favour larger organisations over small and must also make it advantageous to larger organisations to share their resources with smaller ones.'

Unfortunately, the advice sector has seen numerous examples of poor commissioning in recent years. At local level, we have seen local authorities acting alone or in tandem

with the Legal services Commission, introducing new commissioning processes for local advice services. These have been characterised by lack of involvement of civil society in needs analysis and prioritisation, service specification design, monitoring and review. The procurement stage has also often excluded particular small and medium sized advice providers because of the onerous requirements of the specification, unworkable timescales, exclusion of consortia and failure to offer a price that permits full cost recovery.

At a national level too – most recently the civil bids round for legal aid – processes have been bureaucratic, highly resource intensive for bidders, very top-down and seem destined to result in little by way of service improvement and very often deterioration as the awarded contracts are not viable. They have been more about administrative convenience for commissioners and far less about securing more responsive services, focused on the needs of individuals and communities. Justice Ministers have indicated that in future they wish to introduce price competitive tendering for legal aid, which we feel will present a major obstacle for smaller organisations (assuming that legal aid funds any of the work they do in future).

The Green Paper cites the CSR commitment *'to increase the diversity of provision in public services by increasing competition and consumer choice.'* Our experience of working with advice organisations is that competitive procurement has narrowed choice and significantly damaged diversity of provision. Competitive procurement clearly has a role in securing value where commodities are being purchased or where the sole determinant of value is cost. However, our very different experiences of supporting advice organisations working through commissioning, for example in Manchester and Nottingham, suggests competition is inimical to creating value through co-operation, and collaboration is far more productive in creating value.

Whilst, therefore, we welcome the Government's acknowledgement of the need to modernise commissioning in order to achieve the desired 'power shift', we remain concerned about the emphasis on 'opening up markets'. This tends to mean frequent and protracted competitive bidding rounds. This can often prove very negative for local communities and civil society organisations if repeated in short-term cycles. The value of organisations that have a long-term commitment to a locality is often not recognised, particular in tender processes when larger bidders that can compete on costs will often win the tender round, and then struggle to establish a service because they don't have the local contacts and network (and it's not worth while them investing in developing this, certainly not over the long-term).

Communities are about cooperation and collaboration over the long term and not competition in the short term. The Government and commissioners need to find ways of encouraging and supporting that long-term collaboration in the ways that they commission services, particular in terms of contract specification. This should involve a mix of grants and contracts, and contractual measures to ensure bigger providers invest in collaborating with other local organisations and networks (for example, investing in local 'collaborative' infrastructure such as advice networks). Diversity of provision is crucial in circumstances where service-users lack confidence or language skills, or face challenges such as discrimination, as evidence and experience suggest they will not

access centrally-based, 'corporate' premises. Yet our experience is that this diversity of provision is damaged significantly by drives for efficiency that result on reduced numbers of larger contractors.

In addition, the service delivery contracts that have been imposed on the advice sector have mostly been heavy on output targets but light on outcomes focus. They have been obsessed with the unit costs of each output or transaction. As stated in Appendix one, data from AdviceUK's systems thinking work has demonstrated the potentially damaging nature of overly defined targets that deflect attention from meeting customer demand. We argue that commissioners and independent advice agencies should work collaboratively to agree an appropriate outcomes framework and indicator set that avoids unnecessary bureaucracy, can be integrated into service delivery and planning, and which is realistic and meaningful in the context of advice service provision.

We have made a number of additional suggestions about how advice services can be commissioned in a positive way. A series of recommendations appear in two appendices to this response. More information appears on our web site. We are actively engaged in work to improve commissioning processes at local level, some of which has been featured in *A Bridge Between Two Worlds*, completed by Reshenia for NAVCA¹, which thoroughly describes how commissioning should be done intelligently and how support organisations like AdviceUK could be involved.

Payment by Results

Both AdviceUK and our members have significant reservations about payment by results. Whilst we welcome the government's focus on commissioning for outcomes and achieving real value, as the Green Paper acknowledges, for voluntary and community organisations that do not have access to working capital, the impact could be catastrophic – and these are often the organisations that achieve the highest value, and which constitute the heart of the government's Big Society vision. We would urge government to fully evaluate the risks involved in this development, as well as the realistic contribution that can be made by vehicles such as Social Impact Bonds. A one-size-fits-all solution is unlikely to be appropriate. If payment by results creates an unreasonable transfer of risk onto providers it should be resisted: the continuation of grant funding, paid in advance of expenditure, is crucial to ensure voluntary and community groups – particularly smaller organisations – can continue to support communities.

In the context of advice provision – and many other community services – the relationship with service-users is relatively light-touch and short-term. Payment by results requires robust evidence gathering that is notoriously difficult in these circumstances. There are also the issues – yet to be fully resolved in SROI methodology – of attribution and deadweight.

Consortium delivery

As indicated above, our experience of competitive procurement in the advice services field has often precluded the creation of consortia to deliver services. We feel this

¹ A Bridge Between Two Worlds, NAVCA, December 2010

restricts the value that can be achieved by collaborative working, often essential to effectively meet a service-user's complex needs. Our experience of competitive procurement is also that the damage competition does to existing bonds between organisations make consortium building more, not less difficult.

We would also recommend that consortium structures are not predetermined. Organisations should be able to set up appropriate arrangements for internal accountability and governance between partners, and, when appropriate, there should be the flexibility for agencies to have a light-touch, short-term relationship to co-deliver with other partners, without having to go through the expense and time commitment of establishing formal structures.

Transformative change is not going to come about through cutting costs. Our points about unit cost specifications and freeing up providers to deliver outcomes over longer time periods are really important. Transformative change can happen over 5 year funding periods much more readily than 3 year funding periods – and tends not to happen at all over 1 year periods.

The Government should encourage a focus on prevention and early intervention in commissioning. It should also insist that a high value is placed on local knowledge, community links and long-term local commitment as part of all stages of process, including assessment of bids. This is where local community and user led organisations bring great value and reach to the table.

Value

We wholeheartedly agree that statement in the paper that *'Commissioners need to be enabled to think strategically and take a holistic approach to understanding needs and identifying appropriate outcomes and results. By not taking account of the whole system, decisions can have unintended consequences which cause perverse incentives and poor outcomes'*.

This echoes the findings of our systems thinking work². Our work in Oxford, Powys and Nottingham has clearly shown that demand for advice services – and the same is true of other public services delivered in the voluntary and community sector – is influenced to a significant degree by the administration of government services (over 30% of demand in Nottingham was generated by the failure of public services, in the main benefits administration, to get things right).

Advice services support individuals who have experienced the fall-out from public service system failures and, as such, can create significant value for communities and for the state by contributing this experience to the review and design of those services

AdviceUK has also worked with new economics foundation (nef) and Advice Services Coventry to analyse the ways in which advice makes a difference. Our research uses a Social Return on Investment (SROI) approach to show how independent advice creates value – for the people who use the services and for the state – and offsets this against

² *It's the System Stupid! Radically Rethinking Advice*, AdviceUK, 2008; *Radically Re-thinking Advice Services in Nottingham*, Interim Report of the Nottingham Systems Thinking Pilot, AdviceUK 2009

the costs that build up when public services fail to get things right for citizens. The report also maps the ways that Coventry advice services contribute to wider local priorities, such as homelessness prevention, health, community safety, employment and children's services.

The research report produced by nef noted:

'If advice agencies are assessed on the number of 'units' of advice, this tells us nothing about the quality of advice or whether the client permanently resolved his or her problem. Indeed AdviceUK has warned that funding advice on 'transactions' can cost more in the long term as there is no incentive for advice agencies to prevent future problems. This contributes to a 'revolving door' scenario where clients experience regular problems but agencies don't have the resources to respond to them in a proactive way. There are often wide-ranging outcomes from the advice which affect other areas of the client's life and also fit into local and national strategic priorities. These include improvements in health, worklessness, confidence and self esteem. Although these outcomes are sometimes recognised, they are often considered 'nice to have' or 'added value'. **nef** has argued elsewhere, however, that these should be considered in any commissioning process in order to identify the providers that will create most value for service users across the wider objectives of the commissioning authority.'

This study made a number of recommendations but identifies the challenges faced by advice organisations in gathering outcomes data, as the nature of the relationship with service-users is essentially light-touch and in many cases a relatively short-term one. We have included the report recommendations for advice agencies on preparing for outcomes as Appendix three.

Commissioning for outcomes is an area of considerable complexity, in which the quality and interpretation of evidence are key. This raises crucial questions of the capacity and training of commissioners to implement outcomes-based commissioning. Our experience of public service commissioners tends to be that they are risk-averse and are prone to follow the safest, most straightforward path, which can result in the true value of services for people with complex needs being overlooked or written out of specifications because they are perceived to be 'too difficult' to be valued accurately.

The advice sector has carried out extensive work in recent years, as part of the Working Together for Advice Project, to examine outcomes arising from its services.

Citizen and community involvement

Advice organisations have a significant contribution to make to the engagement of citizens and communities in service design and commissioning.

Firstly, successful community involvement is proactive in engaging people in excluded, marginalised and disadvantaged communities, both communities of geography and of interest. People in poverty or facing the challenges of discrimination may find it more difficult to engage because the burden of the practical problems they face can be overwhelming and have a detrimental impact on both physical and mental health. By

supporting individuals to address their debt, benefits housing or employment problems, advice interventions support community engagement. Many past users of advice services go on to volunteer, undertake further learning or become engaged in other ways in their communities.

Secondly, local advice organisations help people in their dealings with public services. They offer a means to access the voices of people who are let down by the system and by public services. As such, they are in a unique position to help commissioners to identify needs, design better service specifications and monitor and review services that are put in place, enabling citizen and community involvement.

Conclusion

AdviceUK encourages members to identify opportunities to work alongside providers of public services, to maximise their value. They also could play a key role in the commissioning of public and welfare services. With adequate funding, they could also add great value to commissioning processes – bringing their expert knowledge to the needs assessment, design and monitoring stages and helping to assess bids.

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Appendix One

Commissioning Advice Services Recommendations from AdviceUK's BOLD project

Introduction to BOLD project

BOLD is a joint project of AdviceUK, nef (new economics foundation) and Directory of Social Change (DSC). BOLD aims to strengthen the independence and effectiveness of advice organisations through the development and piloting of commissioning models that:

- Place the needs of service-users first;
- Focus on outcomes;
- Encourage co-operation and collaboration; and
- Contribute to public service improvement, by learning from evidence of what goes wrong.

Relationship-building

It is important from the outset to clarify roles of individuals / organisations. Inevitably, partners come to the table with a number of roles: the local authority may be an advice service provider, the principle funder of independent advice services, and it provides public services, with which independent advice organisations may often be in conflict on behalf of clients. Managers from the independent advice sector usually represent the interest of individual organisations (and by extension, their clients). In areas where there is a developed / developing Advice Network or Forum, organisations may also be engaging as a collective. These relationships need to be identified and explored from the outset, and it should be clear the capacity in which each individual is acting.

There may also be organisations who are not currently engaged, often due to lack of resources or capacity, historic reasons within the local area, or because there is no mechanism for them to do so. It is important that these organisations are not excluded from the process, indeed they will be a key part in assessing need and understanding provision.

As transparency is essential to build trust, it may be appropriate at the outset to discuss other potential conflicts of interest, such as council officers or members who are trustees of individual organisations, and establish how such issues will be managed. From a commissioner's point of view, it is essential that all engagement and consultation is open, transparent and fair, in order to meet the requirements of procurement rules.

When services are reviewed, re-designed and commissioned, it is more important than ever to understand the nature of the relationship; for everyone involved to be clear about status, objectives, and expectations; to acknowledge power relations and plan to mitigate their impact as appropriate; and to confirm the ways in which communications will be managed. Time spent understanding roles at this stage will encourage the ongoing development of a mature and open relationship to ensure that the planning, resourcing and delivery of advice services are built around local need.

The commissioning cycle

There is widespread misunderstanding in the application of procurement law in local commissioning, with the result that commissioners often feel they are unable to engage potential providers in the process. **This is incorrect** – all the recommendations in this document are based on central government guidance – see [Commissioning Advice Services - AdviceUK](#) for more information.

The BOLD approach to commissioning advice services follows the four-stage commissioning cycle:

- Understanding needs and determining objectives;
- Understanding provision and agreeing the strategy to achieve objectives;
- Resource planning;
- Monitoring and evaluation framework.

Understanding needs and determining objectives

There are a number of strands of intelligence that can be used to inform needs analysis:

- Socio-economic and demographic data on population and communities and likely needs for advice (see also LSRC Advice Need map - [LSRC Online Tools](#));
- Demand analysis and client feedback. AdviceUK recommends the use of a *Systems Thinking* approach to determine 'what matters' to clients and provide a robust evidence base of client demand;
- Provider experience of community need;
- Community involvement at neighbourhood level (in particular where this can access people who do not use advice services, to identify barriers to access).

Needs analysis should determine the objectives that a local authority intends to achieve through commissioning advice services. This process should include consideration of key local strategies and priorities, to determine what independent advice contributes and how:

- Sustainable Community Strategy – in particular, the contribution to, for example:
 - social and financial inclusion;
 - engagement with work – through stabilisation of individuals' circumstances; advice on employment-related issues, including better-off calculations, employment rights, anti-discrimination;
 - linking clients to learning/training/career options, for example through referral to IAG services;
 - neighbourhood transformation;
 - health, especially mental health and health inequalities.
- Mapping to LAA Indicators to identify, with reference to research, the contribution advice makes.

- Active engagement of advice organisations to discuss and determine the ways in which advice services contribute to meeting local needs and achieving strategic priorities and how these might be measured (see below).
- The potential contribution of advice to improving public service delivery.

Understanding provision and agreeing strategy

It is important to understand what advice is currently delivered where, by whom and how, and the extent to which this meets local need, so the local authority and the independent advice agencies can agree how services should develop to meet local needs. This process should begin with an assessment of existing provision, including:

- How do services respond to demand? What are the barriers to delivering against objectives and how can these be addressed?
- Areas of law delivered in the area and levels – generalist / specialist provision.
- How well are services currently co-ordinated to offer clients easy access and referral to the advice they need? If the local authority has an in-house advice service, how does this link to independent services?
- What is currently delivered and what outcomes are achieved / recorded?

It should then be possible to identify gaps, and we would recommend the local authority and independent advice organisations should work together to develop a strategy to fill the gaps and to support service redesign to meet client need and local objectives. Consideration could also be given to other organisations that might usefully be encouraged / supported to collaborate with advice organisations to meet need effectively, eg Credit Union, community groups, frontline health services, etc.

Resource Planning

Commissioners should decide how to resource advice services to achieve the required objectives as effectively as possible. Commissioning of services does **not** equate to competitive tendering. Government guidance (eg *Improving Financial Relationships with Third Sector Organisations – A Decision Support Tool* [NAO Search Results page](#)) confirms the importance of the role of grants as part of a mixed economy of funding. For local authorities, grants are recommended to invest in third sector organisations whose work contributes to the achievement of shared objectives as well as when a need is identified to invest in capacity. In March 2010, The National Audit Office published a useful toolkit for local commissioners, which clarifies, amongst other things, when to use grants and when to use competitive procurement – see [Successful Commissioning Toolkit Home](#)

AdviceUK would recommend that funding should support collaboration rather than setting up competition, and should be outcomes focused, enabling advice organisations to invest time in preventative activities including social policy work, to minimise problems arising in the first place. Our research suggests that competitive, target-driven and activity-based contracts are not the most effective means of achieving these objectives.

Any decision to move from grants to competitive procurement must be the result of a thorough impact assessment and risk analysis, including fully understanding the impact on access to advice from individuals from excluded communities if funds were withdrawn from small, community-based organisations. If a needs-based decision to move to competitive procurement is taken, steps should be put in place to ensure the involvement as far as possible of smaller organisations, which are important routes to access, in particular in excluded communities. This might include consortium arrangements, with requirements on consortium leads to ensure full participation of smaller organisations that might improve reach into excluded communities.

Evaluation framework

In line with Treasury guidance, evaluation should focus on outcomes and impact rather than on process and levels of activity. Analysis of data from AdviceUK's Systems Thinking pilot in Nottingham has demonstrated the potentially damaging nature of overly defined targets that deflect attention from meeting customer demand. Ideally, the local authority and independent advice agencies should work collaboratively to agree an appropriate outcomes framework and indicator set that avoids unnecessary bureaucracy, can be integrated into service delivery and planning, and which is realistic and meaningful in the context of advice service provision.

The sorts of areas which should be considered in establishing an outcomes framework would include, for example:

- Widening access to advice services
- Quality of delivery and client experience
- Outcomes for clients, including longer-term changes to which advice has contributed through stabilising circumstances (eg access to learning / education, proxy indicators of improved mental health, etc)
- Contribution to wider community objectives as included in the Sustainable Community Strategy, such as tackling worklessness, improving health, widening access to learning.

The BOLD project is working in Nottingham and Coventry to support the development and implementation of approaches to advice service commissioning that encapsulate these principles. We have also been approached by other local authorities, who recognise that competition and target-driven approaches do not work in the best interests of local people.

We will be disseminating the lessons from this work in autumn 2010. For more information about the implementation of BOLD's approach to commissioning, see [BOLD - AdviceUK](#)

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Appendix Two

Funding people-centred advice services

Independent advice services are a vital part of a democratic society, enabling people to exercise their civil rights and responsibilities through advice, information and representation. Advice organisations are rooted in their local community and committed to breaking the cycle of poverty and exclusion which are so costly to individuals, communities and society as a whole.

Smart advice services demonstrate the following qualities:

- **Local knowledge** – understanding and meeting community and client need.
- **Quality** – providing accurate and timely support that makes a difference. Taking the time to listen and explain, to show empathy and respect, are essential parts of a quality advice service. It's not just about treating people well – it achieves better results³.
- **Independence** – challenging assertively on behalf of individuals and communities whose voice is not heard.
- **Added value** – trusted community links; strong local networks and contributing to partnership working; and influencing change in law, policy or practice.
- **Prevention** – public education and campaigning, and intervening to avoid people's problems becoming a major crisis with huge cost to the individual and to the public purse.
- **Innovation** – taking risks and pioneering new approaches to meet emerging needs.

However, policy towards the funding and commissioning of advice services is hampering their effectiveness and locking in cost and waste to the process⁴. Recent years have seen a marked shift from grants to competitive contracts. Competition for contracts often brings about unintended and detrimental consequences,⁵ and can be particularly damaging to the effectiveness of advice services.

Independence: Advice organisations must not be, nor be perceived to be co-opted into the public services they need to challenge. Top-down contracts drafted without the involvement of advice organisations and local communities often fail to reflect the real issues and can shift the focus of advice services to chasing narrow activity-based targets instead of innovating to meet local need.

³ Time Well Spent, Council on Social Action, 2009

⁴ It's the System Stupid! Radically Rethinking Advice, AdviceUK, 2008; Radically Re-thinking Advice Services in Nottingham, Interim Report of the Nottingham Systems Thinking Pilot, AdviceUK 2009; Study of Legal Advice at Local Level, Ministry of Justice, 2009

⁵ <http://www.adviceuk.org.uk/uploads/documents/NEFreportUnintendedConsequences.pdf>

Co-operation: Competitive tendering drives a wedge between advice organisations and weakens co-operation, which is essential to meet a wide range of community needs effectively.

Access: Reducing the number of providers to achieve savings in funders' costs also reduces access to advice and choice, and there is some evidence⁶ that this may have a particular impact on the most excluded individuals and communities.

Effectiveness: The learning of advice organisations is not used to improve public service administration and the same mistakes damage people's lives again and again.

Waste: Targets and reporting requirements of funders, as well as poor public service administration cause huge waste in advice services – forcing them to do things that are of no value to the person they are advising.

Think Again

This is not a call for more funding for advice. It is a call for new thinking that enables the diverse range of services to flourish and to contribute to meeting social, economic, community and health outcomes and improving public services. **Smartly funded and designed advice services can play a huge role in helping central and local government reduce cost and waste and improve services.**

Think **Smart** about Advice Service Funding

- **Follow the Eight Principles of Good Commissioning**⁷ and commission services for their quality and impact, not on the lowest price;
- Recognise and resource **the role of advice as part of the democratic process** and the fabric of communities. Independent advice services often grow out of community action, through which people take responsibility for finding solutions to local need – ensure that commissioning encourages this diversity in the independent advice sector;
- Explicitly recognise and resource **the contribution independent advice makes to the achievement of national and local priorities**, as articulated in Local Area Agreements. Independent advice helps build stronger communities, creating local jobs, reducing reliance on health services⁸, and involving and training volunteers;
- **Recognise and respect the value of grants**, to support a diversity of provision, choice and access. Grants are the most appropriate funding vehicle to invest in services that meet local priorities; to encourage innovation and risk-taking; and for smaller organisations that provide trusted services in excluded communities. Decisions to replace grants with contracts should be based on a full assessment of

⁶ <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/access-justice-minority-groups-ii.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/6617745>

⁸ <http://www.adviceuk.org.uk/uploads/documents/1LAAToolkit.pdf>

the impact. Avoid language that stigmatises the use of grants – terms such as 'grant dependency';

- **Reduce the emphasis on narrow activity-based target setting** and ensure that commissioning enables advice organisations to work with public services to identify and address the system failures that cause problems in the first place;
- **Design collaboration and partnership working into the service** you are commissioning, to minimise unhelpful competition and enable organisations to meet need effectively by building on mutual strengths, for example through consortia;
- **Follow Compact principles** in all commissioning exercises – ensure there are sufficient resources to fund Full Cost Recovery, and that monitoring and evaluation are proportionate to the service being commissioned. Involve independent advice providers and local people to develop frameworks that put outcomes and impact at the heart of evaluation, not activity-based targets.

Smart funding is possible: AdviceUK's BOLD project is working with independent advice organisations and partners in Nottingham and Coventry to develop and implement smart approaches to advice service funding. For more information, see [BOLD - AdviceUK](#).

Appendix Three

Outcomes in Advice – recommendations for advice agencies

The following is an extract from the report **Outcomes in Advice** jointly published by AdviceUK and nef and based on primary research in Coventry. The full report is available at [Making Advice a Local Priority - AdviceUK](#)

There are advantages to collecting outcomes data

There are several reasons for collecting outcomes data. Firstly, only outcomes can capture the extent to which a service delivers value for money and it can be important for providers to be able to prove their impact to funders. Secondly it can help to check with clients that their matters are resolved and whether any follow-up work is required.⁹ Finally outcomes data can also provide feedback to staff and advisors. This can be good for morale and also for improving the way services are delivered. Recently there has been investment in developing outcomes tools for advice services and in general where pilot sites have trialled these tools advice agencies have found them useful.¹⁰

Advisors frequently express concern that increasing monitoring returns can detract from time spent with clients. This is a real issue and it is important for outcomes monitoring to be integrated in service delivery, evaluation and planning, to minimise additional bureaucracy. The role of funders is crucial and it needs to be recognised that some resources are needed to shift towards a focus on outcomes. After an initial investment, however, outcomes data can be collected in a way that supports effective service delivery, rather than detracting from it. Funders should also engage with advice organisations to agree the outcomes that best demonstrate value and the means through which data will be collected, to ensure the process is relevant and achievable.

Outcome measures need to reflect what matters

Outcome measures need to reflect what matters to the people who use advice services. The majority of the people that we spoke to who had accessed advice had clear ideas about the outcomes they wanted to achieve – a stable family life, better relationships with their family, and improved well-being for their children. However these outcomes aren't always reflected in the way that advice agencies are funded and at worst they can conflict if agencies have to focus on the volume of individual advice transactions rather than the broader concerns of clients. An example of this is with Eleanor, one of our case

⁹ Widdowson *et al.* (2010) *Youth Outcomes Pilot: Youth Access* (London: Evaluation Trust).

¹⁰ For example Youth Access has piloted a Youth Advice Outcomes Toolkit which has been very well received by agencies who took part in the pilot. Agencies found this filled gaps in current monitoring and all but one of the agencies involved in the pilot will continue to use this in the future. Widdowson *et al.* (2010) *op. cit.*

studies. She wanted support to end her debt problems, and to have a stable family background for her children. Applying for bankruptcy is one step on the way to achieving the outcome, but is not enough in itself. In reality it was all the other things the advisor did, like building up a trusted relationship, arranging an account at the credit union, and empowering Eleanor to take control of her finances and budget, which were key to her not getting into debt again.

It's also important to recognise the complexity of people's problems. Different people have different starting points and are on different pathways to achieving them. Advice should be tailored to individual circumstances. In Eleanor's case, she came to the advice problem with a number of different background issues and needed a lot of support to overcome these and be able to manage her finances on her own. For a different client, perhaps a different approach would have been required.

Think long-term

In the more complex cases with the most vulnerable clients it can take many years for outcomes to be achieved. If the 'distance travelled' towards their outcomes is not measured, there is a danger that only those agencies working with the most straightforward cases will appear effective.

There are several options for assessing outcomes over the long term. The first is collecting outcomes data at intervals during and after the case. A good way to do this is to integrate outcomes measurement within the follow-up with clients.

Where it may not be feasible to maintain long-term relationships with clients, agencies can collect data on distance travelled towards an outcome or indicators that an outcome has been achieved. In Eleanor's case, she reports feeling in better control of her finances, and has maintained her repayment plan over a year; these are good indicators that she is better able to manage her money over the longer term and has resilience against future debt issues. Although collecting indicators can be a good way of capturing outcomes, they should not be treated as outcomes or endpoints in themselves.

Quality is key

Although measuring processes or quality is very different to measuring outcomes, in practice high-quality providers are also those who are likely to be delivering the best outcomes. There are several elements to good quality advice work.¹¹ One of the most important is strengthening the one-to-one relationship between advisors and clients as there is overwhelming evidence that this is linked to improved outcomes for clients.¹²

¹¹ ICAR (2010) *op. cit.* has a well developed discussion of quality issues in legal aid work.

¹² Council on Social Action (2009) *Time well-spent: The importance of the one-to-one relationship between advice workers and their clients* (London: Community Links). For example The Solihull pilot found more investment in advice at the initial stage would shorten the time taken for decision-making in asylum cases and lead to greater justice and lower costs. ICAR (2010) *Review of Quality Issues in Legal Advice: Measuring and Costing Quality in Asylum Work* (London: Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees).

In general, quality measures for advice services are in a state of flux with some expressing concern that quality measure for the unified contract for LSC outcomes has been set too low and recent changes to the General Help Quality Mark.^{13,14}

Community outcomes count

Advice services contribute to a range of strategic priorities for Coventry City Council. These outcomes are often viewed as added value but in reality they are central to the priorities of the local authority and should be viewed as part of the way advice should be delivered. It is good practice to enable providers to meet multiple outcomes at the same time. For example, where advice agencies involve volunteers in the delivery of services, this not only meets the national indicator around increasing levels of volunteering, but brings a range of new languages and skills into delivery of the service, as well as creating sustainable outcomes for service users who go on to volunteer. If advice agencies are encouraged to focus on community outcomes, this can create a virtuous circle and ensure that every £1 spent creates maximum value for both individual clients and the wider community.

Prevention and policy change are crucial

Although individual case work is important in its own right, it must be viewed within the bigger picture of what advice agencies do. Policy work is crucial to complete the advice services loop and can create substantial savings by 'switching off' at source large elements of the demand that is presented and creating significant savings in the long term. It is more challenging to capture the value created from preventing negative outcomes occurring but these are a crucial part of the service and cannot be omitted.

¹³ ICAR (2010) *Review of quality issues in legal advice: Measuring and costing quality in asylum work* (London: Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees).

¹⁴ Advice UK (2009) *The General Help Quality Mark: Guidance for AdviceUK members* (London: Advice UK)