

# **Advice Agencies, Advisors and their Clients: Perceptions of Quality**

by Jenny Johnstone & James Marson, University of Sheffield

## **Executive Summary**

This research report describes perceptions of the quality of the legal advice services provided by non-legally qualified advisors – both in terms of the clients' perceptions of the quality of service received and the providers' views on the service they offer.

The findings are based on in-depth interviews with advisors working in the advice centre network in Sheffield, Leeds and Manchester – and the clients of these advisors. Forty-six advisors and fifty-eight clients were interviewed. The advisors interviewed worked in a variety of agencies providing legal advice - mainly in areas such as welfare benefits, housing, debt and immigration matters. The advisors included a good mix of those working in the independent advice centres as well as those affiliated with the larger organisations. CABx and law centres were included, as were other centres that had contracts with the Legal Services Commission to provide publicly funded advice and/or one of the Community Legal Service (CLS) quality marks for providing information or specialist or general advice.

### ***The advisors***

Advisors identified a number of common themes:

- While some were quite positive about the need for quality standards in general and to some extent the CLS quality marks, there were some problems associated with achieving these. Advisors thought quality marks were important but the majority of clients were not aware whether the advice centre they were using had any quality marks or followed any quality standards.
- Contracting with the LSC to provide specialist advice and a generalist service brought with it an additional set of pressures in meeting the contract requirements.
- For some advisors, meeting the SQM criteria meant moving away from providing the kind of holistic service to their clients which they felt had previously set them apart from their solicitor colleagues. Also, applying for quality mark recognition was felt to be a burden mainly by the smaller advice centres, although they had a strong incentive to seek these marks, as they were important when seeking further funding.

- There was some confusion on the part of advisors about whether they ‘referred’ clients to other sources of information and advice or whether they merely ‘signposted’ the way to other services. The words were at times used interchangeably, although there is a clear distinction. Many advisors explained that they operated a system of ‘directed signposting’ by which they meant that they would not make a proper referral but would tell the client who they ought to see.
- There was a lack of awareness about the CLS’s purpose and its full range of services on the part of both advisors and clients. This is a problem for both since it is a central function of the CLS to enable advice centres to direct clients to the best source of advice. This can only happen where advisors have good knowledge of and access to information about other advice centres and providers in their area.
- The majority of advisors felt that the advice sector network could be improved, especially by increasing accessibility and outreach work – including court based services – in order to meet unmet legal need.

### ***The clients***

- The group of clients interviewed was quite varied, but nevertheless there was some uniformity in what the clients considered to be a good quality service. This differed little between clients who were publicly funded and those who were not, or between those advised by advisors working in advice centres with quality marks and those without.
- The key qualities needed by advisors in order to provide a good quality service were identified by clients (and also by the advisors) as being the ability to communicate, together with knowledge of the law and legal procedures.
- Clients also valued qualities such as empathy, honesty in advice, interest in their problems and effectiveness in helping to resolve the problems.
- When clients had used an advisor whom they did not like they showed an ability to shop around to find one more suitable.
- Overwhelmingly, clients were very satisfied with the advice they received and felt that the assistance had been ‘very helpful’. The majority said that they would use the advice centre again and would recommend the centre and the advisor to others.
- Negative experiences tended to focus on the organisational aspects of service: waiting for advice, advisors spending too long with other clients and restrictive opening hours.