

Ten Steps to a Quality Advice Service

A briefing for managers of youth advice services



- ✓ Be clear about your advice service offer
- ✓ Keep accurate and up-to-date records of the advice provided
- ✓ Review your case file management systems
- ✓ Keep your information resources and reference materials up-to-date and relevant
- ✓ Ensure advice workers are given access to appropriate training on key rights-based subjects
- ✓ Provide advice workers with technical support & supervision
- ✓ Have systems in place to regularly check the accuracy of the advice given
- ✓ Strengthen relationships with mainstream advice agencies
- ✓ Collect good data on the enquiries you receive and the outcomes you achieve
- ✓ Check your insurance cover

Introduction

Purpose

This briefing is intended as a resource for the managers of youth advice services. It is concerned with the provision of advice to meet young people's social welfare needs, i.e. advice services to tackle rights-based issues, such as housing, homelessness, benefits and debt. A key function of rights-based advice is to use the law to the young person's advantage and, where appropriate, to challenge decisions rather than comply with them.

Background

Between 2008 and September 2010 Youth Access was involved in a quality project as part of the Big Lottery-funded Working Together for Advice project. The work involved the development of a new quality standard for the advice sector. Several youth information, advice and counselling services (YIACS) were involved in testing not only the new standards, but also a range of delivery methods for Quality of Advice Assessments, such as client interviews, mystery shopping and taped interviews. We also delivered a number of training courses and learning sets on quality of advice-related issues as part of the project. These recent quality initiatives have resulted in the development of the following Ten Steps.

Service characteristics linked to good quality advice

The following characteristics have been identified by Youth Access as being closely associated with the delivery of high quality services achieving good outcomes for young people:

- Providing an advice service that is free, independent, impartial and confidential
- Building good quality relationships between adviser and young person based on trust and respect
- Advisers using the law to ensure accurate, effective, timely and appropriate advice
- Providing flexible access routes, offering both fixed and drop in appointments at times that suit young people's needs
- Delivering holistic wrap-around support through a range of interventions that meet young people's needs
- Young person-centred and welcoming the involvement of young people where appropriate

Step One

Be clear about your advice service offer

The issue

Rights-based advice is typically delivered in YIACS alongside personal advice and a range of other inter-linked support services. We have identified that agencies often don't adequately define the type and level of advice they are able to offer. It is also common for there to be unrecognised or unresolved issues regarding restrictions to the independence of services, which may be compromised by statutory or corporate objectives of the local authority or other third parties.

Why is it important to be clear about your advice offer?

- To enable young people to know what they can expect from the service
- To ensure partners and stakeholders know what to expect when referring clients
- To enable the agency to recognise the limits of its expertise and keep its advice work focussed
- To ensure advice workers are clear about their areas of responsibility and are given access to appropriate resources, training, support and supervision to fulfill their role competently
- To enable the agency to recognise potential conflicts of interest and be transparent about any limitations on its ability to always act in the best interests of the young person

Resources to help with this:

[Service Planning - CLS Support 2002](#)

Common Definitions Guidance for the Advice Quality Mark – Working Together For Advice 2010

[Conflict of Interest- CLS Support 2002](#)

[What is a Conflict of Interest? - Youth Access 2006](#)

Step Two

Keep accurate and up-to-date records of the advice provided

The Issue

Youth advice agencies are generally over-stretched and under-resourced. This can result in workers not allowing enough time between interviews to write up accurate and concise notes. Agencies steeped in youth work values sometimes keep inadequate formal notes on the misguided pretext of respecting the young person's right to confidentiality.

Why is it important to keep accurate and up-to-date records?

- To ensure that the young person does not have to repeat information already given
- To enable issues to be dealt with systematically and not to be overlooked
- To identify responsibility, time limits and deadlines for any further action that may need to be taken
- To ensure continuity if the client comes back and is seen by a different adviser
- To provide evidence that an adviser acted properly, in the event that a young person brings a claim for wrong advice, and to allow complaints to be properly investigated
- To be used as evidence for checks on the quality of advice given

Resources to help with this:

Guidance on Case Recording – Youth Access 2010

[The Principles of Case Recording in Advice Work – Youth Access 2001](#)

[Case Management and Client Care – CLS Support 2003](#)

Step Three

Review your case file management systems

The Issue

Young people with chaotic lives tend to dip in and out of services, often presenting with very complex issues which may need a range of interventions. Agencies sometimes have just one large case file containing all of the notes from these different interventions and tend to keep the file “open” for lengthy periods, making it difficult for workers to quickly assess the status of different issues.

Why are good case file management policies and systems important?

- To set out how the advice service opens, organises, stores and closes client files
- To clearly show when issues have been resolved
- To ensure information is organised consistently
- To help locate information quickly and easily and ensure any supporting information is not missed
- To ensure client information is stored in line with confidentiality and data protection procedures
- To ensure the archiving and disposal of case notes once the file is closed or issue is resolved complies with legal and good practice guidelines

Resources to help with this:

[Case Management and Client Care – CLS Support 2003](#)

[File Management Guidance - IQP/Youth Access 2003](#)

Step Four

Keep your information resources and reference materials up-to-date and relevant

The issue

The use by advisers of accurate sources of information is a vital part of providing good quality advice. Resources used – books, manuals, journals, magazines, websites – should be carefully selected for their quality and appropriateness and fit the level of advice provided. We have found that a lack of structure provided to advice workers from management sometimes means they are left to their own devices and have little awareness of appropriate resources; lack the knowledge and support to use resources effectively; use out-of-date materials because managers either do not recognise the importance of renewing them or do not budget for this; or search out poor quality information for themselves (e.g. from unreliable websites). Key resources (e.g. CPAG handbooks) must be renewed annually or when there has been a change in the law.

Why is it important to have good information and reference materials?

- To ensure the advice given to young people is always accurate
- To avoid putting the young person's rights, entitlements or opportunities in jeopardy through the provision of bad advice
- To ensure advice workers' skills and knowledge are kept up-to-date

Resources to help with this:

Recommended Information Resources for Youth Advice Agencies – Youth Access2011

Step Five

Ensure advice workers are given access to appropriate training on key rights-based subjects

The issue

Advice workers need to be skilled in unpicking and prioritising the different and often complex issues with which young people invariably present. Many advisers offer information or personal support solutions to the issues identified and do not always have the skills or knowledge to use the law to provide good advice. Consequently, effective legal remedies to problems can be missed. Advice workers' important training and development needs in this area are often overlooked.

Why is training and workforce development important?

- To ensure that young people receive accurate and effective advice on their rights
- To develop advisers' knowledge of the law and how it affects young people in areas such as housing and welfare benefits
- To enable advisers to become better skilled in using the law to get the best possible outcomes for young people
- To give the advice worker the confidence to challenge decisions

Resources to help with this:

[Youth Access Events and Training pages](#)

[The Youth Advice Workforce: Now and in the Future – Youth Access 2008](#)

[Youth Advice Worker – NCVYS Information Sheet 2010](#)

[A Manager's Toolkit: How to Develop Your Workforce – Working Together For Advice 2010](#)

Step Six

Provide advice workers with technical support & supervision

The issue

Our experience has shown that youth advice workers tend to be provided with managerial supervision, which monitors their overall performance, sets targets and monitors their progress against workplans. However, they do not necessarily have access to the appropriate technical supervision to check the accuracy of the advice they give and provide casework support in their day-to-day advice-giving role.

Why is technical support and supervision important?

- To prevent feelings of isolation on the part of the adviser
- To help monitor the adviser's case-load and any referrals made to the organisation
- To check the accuracy of the advice given
- To provide the adviser with an opportunity to discuss difficult cases
- To identify the adviser's training and support needs
- To check that advice workers are operating within the limits of their competences
- To support the worker's career development
- To confirm that organisational procedures are followed

Resources to help with this

Models of Technical Supervision – Youth Access 2010

[People Management Sample Procedures – CLS Support 2002](#)

Step Seven

Have systems in place to regularly check the accuracy of the advice given

The issue

Our experience has shown that youth advice agencies rarely carry out checks on the accuracy of the advice given. Where checks are made, this is often to check compliance against organisational procedures, e.g. to ensure clients' personal data has been completed, rather than a 'quality of advice check' which actually looks at whether the advice given was accurate, complete and appropriate. Quality of advice checks can be conducted (e.g. internally by a casework supervisor or by an experienced external adviser from another local advice agency) using a variety of different methods, including case file assessments or observed interviews.

Why is regular checking of advice important?

- To confirm that the advice being given is accurate, complete, timely and tailored to young people's needs
- To ensure mistakes in the advice given are identified promptly and rectified
- To provide a second opinion on the advice given
- To help identify advisers' training and support needs
- To provide the agency with feedback on both the quality of advice and the quality of service

Resources to help with this

[Independent File Review – CLS Support 2002](#)

Quality of Advice Assessments – Youth Access 2008

Mystery Shopping Evaluation Report – Youth Access/Age UK 2010

Step Eight

Strengthen relationships with mainstream advice agencies

The issue

YIACS are often marginalised from local advice sector structures and processes causing a general feeling of mistrust amongst some YIACS towards agencies such as Citizens Advice Bureaux. The perception is often that mainstream advice services are not geared up to working with young people. This results in some youth advice services being reluctant to make referrals in order to move a case on and failing to pursue joint-working opportunities that might benefit their clients.

Why is it important to have good relationships with mainstream advice agencies?

- To facilitate referrals between agencies that ensure young people get the best possible advice
- To enable youth advice workers to utilise and learn from the expertise of mainstream advice agencies
- To enable mainstream advice agencies to utilise the expertise of YIACS
- To enable services to be delivered in a joined-up way
- To provide all partners with operational benefits in terms of pooling resources
- To facilitate a wider range of funding opportunities via joint bids

Resources to help with this:

[Opening Your Doors to Young People: practical guidelines for making advice services young person-friendly – Youth Access 2010](#)

[Rights within Reach: developing effective legal advice outreach services for young people – Youth Access/Law Centres Federation 2009](#)

Step Nine

Collect good data on the enquiries you receive and the outcomes you achieve

The issue

Youth advice agencies often collect a wide range of statistical information on their service users and the interventions provided. However, they often lack the quality of data needed to demonstrate to funders and commissioners the types of enquires they're receiving and, most importantly, the impact of their interventions.

Why is collecting good data on enquiries and outcomes important?

- To provide evidence for current funders as well as supporting future funding applications
- To evidence the advice service's effectiveness
- To confirm progress toward overall strategic objectives
- To confirm the agencies' contribution to local and regional priorities
- To help with service development and planning
- To inform the local authority's needs assessments and priority-setting

Resources to help with this

[Youth Advice Outcomes Toolkit – Youth Access 2010](#)

[YouthStat: statistical monitoring for youth information, advice and counselling services – Youth Access 2002](#)

Also see Youth Access' web-based Good Practice Resources on:

[Monitoring your Outcomes and Impact](#)

[Statistical Monitoring and Evaluation](#)

Step Ten

Check your insurance cover

The issue

We have found that some YIACS don't have insurance covering them against being sued for wrong advice. Quite often agencies confuse Public Liability Insurance with Professional Indemnity (PI) Insurance. Many have the former and are running a major risk in not also having PI insurance. The recommended minimum level of PI cover is £250,000.

Why is PI insurance important?

- To protect individuals and organisations against risk, i.e. from being sued by clients for providing wrong or incomplete advice
- To ensure that any claims for compensation made against the agency don't put the organisation's resources and the personal assets of the management committee at risk.

There are many insurance companies offering professional indemnity insurance policies. Details can be found online. We would recommend that you obtain at least three quotes for comparison. Some PI insurance policies say that they cover the organisation against loss from counselling activities, but this may only relate to debt counselling rather than therapeutic counselling services. Therefore, separate insurance cover may need to be arranged to cover your counselling activities.

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