

Self Help – Project Report

“I didn’t think I had any legal issues, but when you start to think about it, everybody has been through at least one of the issues on this website at some stage in their life.”

Advicenow website user

Many people try to resolve their legal problems themselves, often because advice is not available or inaccessible. Others are unaware that their problem has a legal solution, or that they can get advice or help. This lack of knowledge of the law and its processes is a major cause of people’s failure to resolve their problems successfully.

The low success rate for ‘self helpers’ was highlighted in research by Hazel Genn in her landmark study – Paths to Justice¹. Her report showed that 35% of the population attempt to

resolve legal problems themselves without help. However, the study showed that 21% of people gave up, without seeking help, because they believed nothing could be done about their problem.

The Advicenow self help project was developed in response to this research and to feedback from advice workers reporting the difficulty that many people have managing their legal problems, particularly in recording what they do to resolve them. It was designed to be a one year pilot project, developed and

managed by Advice Services Alliance’s Advicenow project in partnership with ASA members. It was funded by the Treasury’s Invest to Save Budget.

The project’s aim was to investigate whether the internet could be used to support a self-help approach to the resolution of legal problems. Its key objective was to develop an interactive case management system and supporting materials, and evaluate the usefulness of an online self help package.

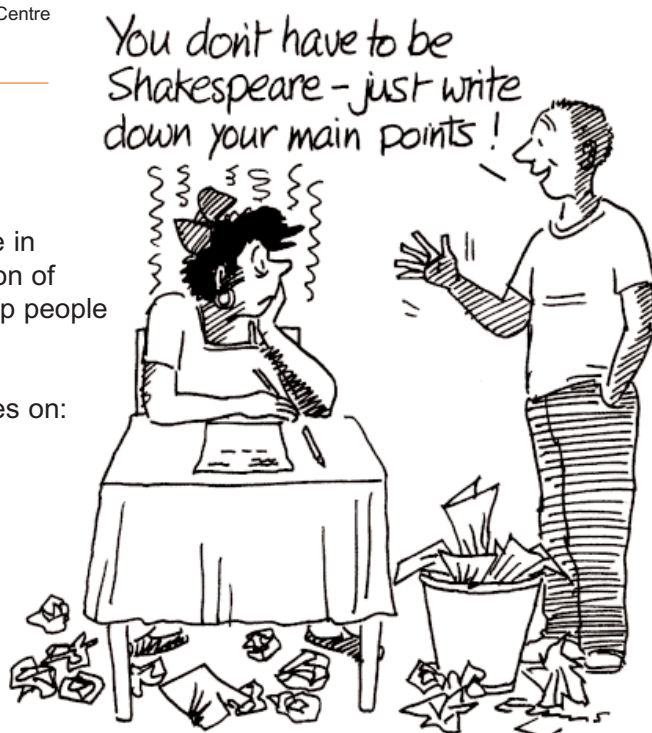
¹ Paths to Justice: what people do and think about going to law; Hazel Genn, with National Centre for Social Research

Self help online

The self help pages were launched on the Advicenow website in July 2004 with a range of self help materials, and a test version of the tracker tool – an interactive online system designed to help people track and record their legal problems.

Advicenow worked with partners to produce self help packages on:

- Dealing with debt – National Debtline
- Getting a deposit back – adviceUK
- Sorting out your tax credits – Walthamstow CAB
- How to solve your own problem – Norwich CAB
- Do it yourself. Managing your own case – adviceUK



Project evaluation

Evaluation was a key part of the project from the beginning, As well as feedback from the site, external evaluation was carried out by an independent evaluator, working with five focus groups with Pakistani, British Indian and British Muslim and white British respondents, as well as a community centre with Filipino domestic workers and their advice worker.

Evaluation focussed on whether the site was effective in promoting a self help approach to legal problems. The results are reported on in 'Lessons learned'.

A full copy of the evaluation report is available at www.advicenow.org.uk/selfhelpproject.

Tracker Tool

Advice agency staff describe how enquirers often arrive at an advice session with a Sainbury's bag full of papers; unable to remember exactly what they've done or who they've spoken to while trying to sort out their problem. The lack of recording skills makes it hard for people to resolve their problems and wastes adviser's time in sorting out the mess.

The aim of the Tracker Tool is to provide a practical aid, available for use by anyone wanting to record the actions they take to resolve a problem. It sets a framework for recording and helps users keep to deadlines. It is combined with explanatory material emphasising the importance of recording and give practical guidance on how to do it.

It is a simple interactive system available free on the internet at www.advicenow.org.uk/tracker. It is designed to encourage people to record the simple details of who, when, what: who you spoke to, when you talked to them, what did they say?

It can remind you to make a call, visit an adviser, or send a follow up letter.

The system was produced by our web developers,

theOTHERmedia. We worked with AdviceUK and Norwich CAB to produce accompanying material to help people identify their problem, consider the options, get advice, and take action.

A second revised version will be available in Summer 2005, complete with customisable email reminders of important time limits, deadlines, or meetings.

It could also be developed into a text messaging system – sending reminder texts directly to your mobile phone.

Tracker Tool feedback

"It's a really good idea, because often, when you are dealing with a legal problem, collecting evidence is the most important thing isn't it? if a case is going to be taken to court, if you could provide a diary of what steps you've taken to sort out your problem, that's going to support your case."

Interactive tools are an effective way of learning case management skills. The Tracker Tool is also particularly useful for vulnerable groups, as it provides a secure private space

to keep a diary, notes and details of appointment.

"If you take copies, they might get into your room and find your copies, if you have that in a computer it will be safer."

Live-in domestic worker

The benefits of a secure online system apply equally to vulnerable groups such as homeless people, and young people, who have no secure private space.

People liked the idea of being able to set up their own reminders of important deadlines, or appointments.

"My dentist does that, when I've got an appointment, I get a mobile message the night before."



GETTING ADVICE.

Lesson learned 1

Lack of knowledge and skills prevents self help actions.

“I wasn’t aware there were so many organisations that would be willing to listen.”

The project highlighted the existence of a knowledge and skills gap – many people don’t have the knowledge of how to go about dealing with a legal problem, and lack the basic skills needed to do so. They don’t know where to find information on rights, what organisation they need to deal with and where to find further help. There is a need for more material on how to go about dealing with problems, and more effort is needed to equip people with the skills like recording, managing correspondence, and negotiating.

Lesson learned 2

A mix of material works best in getting the message across. Interactive materials are especially good for learning skills.

“It’s up to date, real life, stuff that I’ve heard about. If I wasn’t comfortable with law, I’d feel more comfortable with that, dealing with real-life situations that I’ve heard about.”

The evaluation identified that people like a mix of material: basic information on the law; practical guides through specific processes; and broader skills material on how to achieve a good result.

Material worked best using case studies as examples, interactive learning materials, and simple guides.

Lesson learned 3

Intermediaries have a vital role to play in supporting clients and passing on skills.

“The objective for me is to encourage you to be more self-sufficient, to do things for yourself. I mean it’s great that you can come here and you can tell us your problems, and we can help solve them, but eventually, what we are trying to do is to encourage you to start doing things for yourself.”

Advice worker

People often turn to ‘intermediaries’ like community centre staff, youth workers or health service staff for help with legal and rights issues. These professionals and other community leaders need more support to help their clients deal with their problems and to signpost effectively to appropriate advice services

Legal problems faced by a community or client group may vary, but there is a common problem solving process that can be applied each time. Intermediaries are in a strong position to pass on these skills to their clients and/or group when working together through a particular problem. Such skills enable people to manage problems more effectively, preventing problems clustering or spiralling.

Lesson learned 4

Support for people attempting to resolve their own problems, an ‘assisted’ self help service, is a cost effective option for advice services.

“Self-help means you are going to be by yourself!”

Evaluation shows that people want to tackle their own problems, but there is a fear of being ‘left alone’ and isolated. Self help is often seen by legal and advice services as something separate from the usual client service, with users left to go-it-alone. A small input of support by phone or email when self helpers get stuck can make the difference between their success and failure. Supporting self help as a part of the work of advice services is cost effective and deserves further development.

Conclusions

The project showed there are benefits of a self help approach to resolving legal problems, and highlighted the effectiveness of delivering self help materials and tools via the internet.

It demonstrated that for people to resolve their own problems they need:

- Understanding of their rights
- Knowledge of how to tackle their problem
- The skills to carry it out.

Intermediaries and advisers can play a vital role in passing on these skills to their clients and supporting them through an assisted self help service, as part of the spectrum of legal help provided by their service.

We would like to see further work to develop the idea of assisted self help - one option would be to use the internet to support people who are dealing with their problems themselves.

The Tracker Tool and support materials are now an integral part of Advicenow's service. Advicenow plan to take ideas from the project forward as part of projects working with specific client groups and the intermediaries working with them – e.g. community groups, advisers, and youth workers.

For more information about the Self help project, please see www.advicenow.org.uk/selfhelpproject

Thank you

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During the course of the project, advicenow.org.uk won the Plain English Website Award for 2004.

advice services alliance

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Advice Services Alliance (ASA) is the coordinating body for UK advice services. ASA members include adviceUK, Age Concern England, Citizens Advice, DIAL UK, Law Centres Federation, Shelter and Youth Access.

ASA works with its membership and government to develop policy on the delivery of legal and advice services; champions the development of high quality information, advice and legal services; and provides supporting services to advice networks.

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