

Bestwood Advice Centre Development – January 2011

This document outlines the changes made in one community based advice centre to increase capacity and improve adviser productivity. There is still some work to do but the centre has successfully increased its ability to meet the needs of double the number of clients in five years.

Year ending	Paid adviser hours	Cases opened	Cases closed
October 2006	80	296	130
October 2009	65	471	220
October 2010	80	601	283

The level of productivity in 2006 was partly due to sickness problems but also reflects other factors in how the centre operated:

- Limited opening hours due to part-time staffing and lone-working provisions;
- Two hour initial appointment slots;
- Extended waiting lists and waiting times, contributing to
- High numbers of clients failing to attend appointments.

Improvements were made by reducing the length of initial appointments and reminding clients of forthcoming appointments on the day before but, by the end of 2006, funding for one adviser had been lost. Following a temporary closure in 2007 the centre re-opened early in 2008 with a very experienced full-time senior adviser and a trainee adviser, who was also office administrator. The senior adviser had previous experience of working with and developing volunteers, so was able to implement the centre's plan to increase productivity and efficiency by using volunteers to support advice and administration functions.

Funding was obtained for volunteer expenses and to purchase training in basic welfare rights and debt advice, volunteers were recruited and attended a 6-day introductory welfare benefits training programme, followed by in-house training in all aspects of reception and administration duties. The trainee adviser/office administrator had also undertaken training as a volunteer coordinator, and supported volunteer learning.

The volunteers covered un-filled reception hours and numerous different administration and adviser support duties, allowing the senior adviser to concentrate on clients and supporting the trainee. The advice centre was now fully accessible to callers on the phone and in person.

Client Intake

Changes were also made to client intake, to address the issue of waiting lists and low attendance rates.

- Drop-in access to the service was introduced for all new clients two days per week at the centre;
- A pilot outreach service at Sure-Start was integrated in the mainstream service;
- Triage was introduced, involving a 10 minute assessment from which clients were allocated appointments according to area of advice, urgency and complexity.

Monitoring of individual performance through targets was stopped once drop-in was introduced. However, with fewer adviser hours, productivity improved by October 2009 by some 60%.

November 2009 brought an opportunity to expand the services in the short-term to meet the needs created by the recession. A half-time post was created for an advice support worker to work

alongside a half post adviser. Together they set up and developed outreach services in three new venues and ran a 'twilight' session at the centre for people in employment who could not otherwise access face-to-face advice. Further funding also allowed us to work in a second local Sure-Start.

Outreach posts were later shared so that all staff worked in at least one drop-in session at the centre. This ensures advisers are exposed to a variety of case types and allows for closer support, supervision and knowledge exchange, as well as maintaining a sense of belonging to the advice centre. At drop-in sessions the two interview rooms are allocated on a rota basis to cater for the three, or now four, advisers per session, supported by the triage system.

Having piloted the advice support worker role, Future Jobs Fund funding was also secured to maintain the role for 25 hours per week, supporting the three part-time advisers based at the centre. The advice centre now supports six different outreach venues, two weekly drop-in sessions, an out-of-hours advice session and home visiting appointments. An increase in demand is already apparent with over 2,000 recorded telephone or enquiries in person in the last year. Figures suggest the advice centre took on an additional 50 clients in the last six months over previous rates, which coincides with and appears to be the direct result of the 25-hour advice support worker post.

With the help of a *Volunteer Advice Sector Training* scheme run within Advice Nottingham the advice centre was able to continue recruiting and training volunteers and anticipate having an average of 4-5 at any one time, deployed in a variety of roles depending on their skills and experience. Ongoing in-house training is provided in administration and advice skills with the aspiration to recruit from within this home-grown resource when vacancies occur.

In order to meet the anticipated increase in future demand various options are being examined, including:

- Better promotion of some of the outreach venues and sessions, encouraging more clients to use them rather than the main advice centre;
- Extending the working hours of the two weekly drop-in sessions to offer same-day advice slots in the afternoon.
- Training volunteers in specific areas, such as doing benefit checks and financial statements, to enable them to specialise in working with certain groups of clients, as delegated by the senior adviser.
- The possibility of three of the volunteers developing as trainee advisers, with their own small caseloads, equating to the work of an additional half-post adviser.

Additional funding has allowed the centre to introduce benefit checks for older people and to increase the number of *Money Matters* workshops (see below), to prevent groups of potential clients getting into difficulties in the difficult economic times.

All of the above developments increase capacity, but in the end there is an absolute logistical limit to the client numbers the centre will be able to meet, taking account of supervision, time and space needs.

Definitions

An **advice support worker** is rather like an adviser's personal assistant and is deployed slightly differently by each adviser. Basically they leave an adviser free to use their advice, negotiation, etc. skills and abilities to see more clients, rather than having to do their own administration. For example, they enter initial client information and undertake supplementary work at the end of the interview, recording case notes and data, writing letters to clients, creditors and statutory bodies

etc. Advice support workers keep clients updated, make follow-up appointments and administer case monitoring, calling for outcomes and feedback information.

Depending on the outreach venue, advice support workers may attend the interview to take case-notes, or operate a reception, ensuring the smooth running of the session and client confidentiality. Pairing of adviser and support worker also ensures that staff safety is not compromised, both at outreach venues and conducting home visits.

Volunteers still perform the same range of routine advice support and administration roles, gaining work experience, but some are now taking on more complex work, and we anticipate three volunteers developing, through guided experience and further training, to take on their own small caseload. Volunteers also cover administration and reception during sickness/annual leave absence.

Money Matters financial literacy programme has been developed by Bestwood Advice Centre to address financial capability amongst clients who frequently return, and who exist from one crisis to another. The programme is currently being accredited and is used in local Children's Centres. The workshops are also designed to support early intervention, preventing the difficulties brought about by limited financial experience or capability.

As well as promoting client learning and improved confidence, Bestwood Advice Centre applies the same ethos to staff development and opportunity. The centre has signed up to the Skills Pledge and the planned progression of staff and volunteers within the service is evidence of its commitment.

None of what is done at Bestwood Advice Centre could happen successfully without co-operation and understanding by all and the willingness of the senior staff to develop and support other staff and volunteers.

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