

No substitute: Local delivery vs telephone-only advice

Dr Marie Burton
Middlesex University

Overview

1. My research
2. Context: why telephone and face-to-face advice?
3. Findings
4. Final thoughts

1. My research

- *Calling for Justice: comparing face-to-face and telephone advice in social welfare legal aid*
(PhD funded by ESRC and LSE)
- Housing and homelessness cases
- National NFP housing provider

My research: methods

- Locations: 4 face-to-face local offices and CLA telephone service
- Interviews and observations:
 - 40 interviews:
 - 20 with advisers: 10 face-to-face and 10 telephone
 - 20 with clients: 13 face-to-face and 7 telephone
 - 22 observations of lawyer/adviser-client interviews
 - 11 face-to-face and 11 telephone

2. Context: why telephone and face-to-face advice?

- About me: Social welfare solicitor, former Law Centre worker
- Changes to legal aid – mandatory telephone advice
- Concerns about vulnerable clients
- ALSO - History of social welfare legal aid and law centres

History of law centres and social welfare legal aid

- Very little social welfare law legal aid in 1960s
 - Conventional lawyers were not based in deprived communities where SW advice was needed
- Legal activists set up 'neighbourhood Law Centres' in disadvantaged areas in 1970s to break down barriers to access to advice
- Success: Take up of social welfare law increased
 - 'The impact of law centres has been out of all proportion to their size' (Royal Commission on Legal Services Final Report, 1979)

Telephone delivery and social welfare law

- Telephone – immediate and convenient access (MOJ, 2010)
- BUT Law Centre success was related to reducing physical and social distance between clients and advice services to increase engagement – importance of physical proximity
- Telephone increases distance – what are the implications?

3. Findings

Comparing telephone and face-to-face advice

Main findings:

- **Place of delivery**
- Emotional engagement
- Advice process

Place of delivery

- Access
- Local knowledge
- Relationships and networks
- Impact: client outcomes

Access

- Telephone services
 - Instant response
 - BUT underused – lack of public awareness
- Face-to-face services
 - ‘Oversubscribed’
 - Capacity issues
 - BUT provide access to vulnerable clients

Local knowledge

Physical eg geographical, housing conditions

- ‘...[I]f you ask [clients] about mental health issues...they won’t understand what a [Community Mental Health Team] is...but you can just say to them...‘[D]o you ever got to [Dolphin] Road?’ and I know [Dolphin] Road is the local CMHT...’ (FL3)

Practices, policies and procedures

- ‘...[E]ach council has a different procedure, so we have to sort of look up each procedure or find out each procedure, so it just takes that bit longer for us as well.’ (TA6)

Relationships and networks

- Opponents
 - ‘...[T]here are certain people in the Council now who I know fairly well. I know how they’ll react to certain requests for information or requests for accommodation etc., etc. So, I know the ones that are pretty good and amenable to what we need.’ (FL1)
 - ‘I know the rent arrears team, the court team, because I used to do a duty scheme for years...it’s a bit of gold dust really.’ (FA2)

Relationships and networks

- Allies - provide clients with legal and non-legal support
 - ‘...[T]he legal problem is usually something that comes up when everything’s gone wrong and there’s an immediate thing that needs to be fixed. But, after that, trying to prevent that from happening again, you usually need other support services....’ (FA4)

Impact: Client outcomes

- Legal

- ‘I did one of the duty schemes at [local] County Court, and... [laughing] you just walk in and speak to the housing officer, and the matter’s resolved in about two minutes...[H]aving that local knowledge just gives you that edge, I think...’(TA8)
- ‘There is a lot of respect...between us... ...No matter how bad the arrears are, if I say “[We] are willing to take on this case and help this client”, they back off.’ (FA5)

Impact: Client outcomes

- Statistics
- Face-to-face vs telephone advice
 - Face-to-face: better outcomes in housing, education, debt and family law
(Balmer *et al*, 2012; Patel *et al*, 2014; Patel and Smith, 2013; Smith *et al*, 2013)
 - Face-to-face housing advice:
 - more 'tangible' outcomes - eg 'housed, re-housed or retaining home'
 - took **less** time when comparing like with like - ie stage reached, case type and client profile
(Balmer *et al*, 2012)

4. Final thoughts

- Access and intake arrangements
 - Can these be improved to be more responsive?

- Recognise the value of what Law Centres offer
 - The value of knowing 'your patch'
 - Do not take what you do for granted

Overview

1. My research
2. Context: why telephone and face-to-face advice?
3. Findings
4. Final thoughts

Contact: m.burton@mdx.ac.uk