TRIAGING ADVICE: THE CITIZENS ADVICE GATEWAY SYSTEM

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A report on collaborative research carried out by the University of Bristol Law School and Bristol Citizens Advice Bureau.

KEY FINDINGS

1. The most striking findings from the survey are those showing the high levels of satisfaction with the service provided by the Bristol CAB. Overall 90% of respondents said that it was easy or very easy to understand the advice given at an advice appointment, 92% stated that they had received some or all of the help they had wanted, and 86% said they were clear or very clear about what to do next. Where participants did not follow the advice given, this was predominantly due to not having the time and energy to pursue it rather than not trusting the advice.

2. Regarding the difference between the Gateway Assessment process and a full advice appointment, the survey findings show that while clients do not receive all the help they want at the Gateway stage, the help and advice they receive there is nonetheless clear.

3. Responses to questions concerning how participants experience their problems display the considerable levels of anxiety and stress with which individuals are living. The survey shows further that these are disproportionately felt by women.

4. The majority of respondents, irrespective of problem type and advice process, would return to the CAB rather than seek to solve problems themselves.
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**SECTION A**

**BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

How do people in need of advice experience the Citizens Advice service? What are the differences between those who only get a triage appointment at the Bristol Advice Point, and those who receive the full advice service? What happens to people who are referred elsewhere?

This is a report of a survey carried out by the University of Bristol in collaboration with Bristol Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) to explore these questions. The survey was put in place after Bristol CAB introduced the Gateway Assessment (GA) system as a way of increasing the numbers of clients that can be seen by bureaux and reducing waiting times. Gateway is essentially a triage process that assesses the client’s issues and sets the advice pathway for their interaction with the service, thereby deciding what type of advice they need to resolve their enquiry and who is best placed to deliver the advice.

There are three possible outcomes from a GA:

1. Provision and where appropriate explanation of information
2. Direction to another agency
3. Provision of further advice from a CAB generalist or specialist adviser

In the first year of the Gateway service the bureau was able to increase the number of people seen.

Little is known about what clients do about their problems before contacting the bureau, or about what happens to those who receive only the GA session.

This survey therefore asked:

- What do clients do about their advice problems before going to Bristol CAB?
- How do clients experience the service offered by the CAB?
- What are the outcomes of clients’ contact with the service?
- Are there differences in the experiences and outcomes of the service between clients who receive a full advice appointment and those who do not?

**THE RESEARCH PROJECT: AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

The research began with the objective of comparing the advice and problem solving experiences of three groups of clients: i) those that were turned away before they received a GA at Quay Street (group 1); ii) those that only received a GA (group 2); and iii) those that were referred for a full advice appointment at Broad Street (group 3). However, practically and ethically it was not possible to survey group 1. The survey was therefore designed to compare group 2 and 3.

A key aim was to gain an understanding from a large number of CAB clients. Self-completion surveys of CAB clients have produced low response rates. We believed that a telephone survey carried out by CAB advisers could produce a much higher response rate. This method used the experience of CAB volunteers in using the telephone to elicit information.

The survey data provides a broad understanding of CAB clients’ experiences of these two varying advice trajectories (though the sample is skewed as we had a higher response rate from those who had a full advice appointment than those who only had a Gateway appointment).

Whilst many of the results may not be a surprise to advice workers, there is considerable value in this data inasmuch as it reflects what clients think, rather than what the advisers believe their clients think. As such, we believe that the data collected is unique in both its breadth (having over 1200 responses) and in its ability to examine the impact of the triaging system of advice operated by CAB.
Structure of this report:

This report is divided into four sections. The first addresses the behaviour and experience of clients before they arrive at the bureau. The second section addresses clients’ experience of the advice appointment. This section focuses on comparing the experience two groups of clients; those who were not given a full advice appointment and those who were.

Section three addresses what clients did after the interview and how their problem developed over the intervening period.

The structure of the report mirrors the structure of the survey. Following initial questions regarding their actions before visiting the CAB, participants were then divided into two survey streams. Those who were given a full advice interview were asked about this experience, whilst those who were not were asked about the GA; to allow for comparative analysis, similar questions were posed to each stream. Those who were given a full advice appointment were not asked about their GA, as it was assumed that people would recall most clearly the most recent events. Participants were then asked questions regarding their experience following the appointment. Details of the research methodology are set out in the Appendix.
SECTION B
SURVEY RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

1: SURVEY RESPONSES: OVERVIEW

| A: Number who started survey. | 1216 (1155 telephone, 61 email) |
| B: Total Responses after omitting those answered NO to the question ‘are you happy to take part’ or provided no further responses. | 1155 (1122 telephone, 33 email) |
| C: Total Responses after omitting those who did not answer whether their appointment was Broad Street or Quay street or did not confirm if their Broad Street appointment had taken place. | 1055 (556 Broad Street, 499 Quay Street only) |

Clients whom we term ‘Broad St’ will have received both a full advice and a Gateway Assessment (GA) appointment at Quay Street (BAP). However, we assumed that most people would recall the most recent event, and therefore we have taken their responses to refer to their experiences at Broad Street. Throughout the report we will refer to the ‘advice appointment’ to refer to this most recent event. For the sections of analysis concerning comparisons between Quay Street and Broad Street, it was only the responses in category C (n=1055) that were used in the analysis. For more general questions we used all responses under B (n=1155).
2: WHAT TYPE OF PROBLEMS DO PEOPLE HAVE?

Respondents were asked what their problem was about. In their responses they were able to choose more than one problem type. As displayed in Figure 1 the most common types of problems related to **benefits**, then **debt**, **housing** and **employment**. Regarding gender, there were differences in the types of problems with which clients present to the bureau. Women were more likely than men to present with problems related to Housing, (22% to 14%) Tax (9% to 5%) and Benefits (23% to 20%) problems. Men were more likely to present with Debt problems (16% to 13%).

![What was your problem about?](image)

**FIGURE 1 (N=1,050)**

3: WHAT DO PEOPLE DO BEFORE GOING TO CAB?

The first series of questions examined whether and where people sought help before they approached the CAB, providing several important insights. There are several reasons why it is important to ask these questions. First, it is clear from other research we have carried out that advisers place great importance on **where** individuals have sought information before presenting at the CAB. Such sources can influence the established understandings and assumptions clients hold regarding their problem, with several advisers raising the potential for family and friends in particular to give incorrect or misleading advice.

Second, these responses shed light on people’s connections with other services; in a climate where services are seeking to provide joined-up approaches to advice, it is important that referrals are made in an appropriate manner. Third, there has been a turn within the service to internet-based advice as Citizens Advice has sought to widen the range of methods it uses to deliver advice. As such a greater emphasis has been placed upon methods that connect and interact with ‘Advice Guide’ (the public-facing online information system), including the rolling out of a pop-up chat-box that appears when one accesses this service.
3.1 Did people seek help before they came to Bristol CAB?

As illustrated in Figure 2, the most likely source of help before visiting a CAB was friends and family (43% of respondents). This response included those who had sought help in this way and been told to visit the CAB.

Overall 37% responded that they had not asked for help from ‘anyone else’, showing that for a large number of people, CAB is the first point of call. 35% had sought help from the internet, though this response encompassed a large number who stated to the researchers that they had not found anything of relevance to their situation.

Only 9% of respondents had previously sought help from another agency (this response included those who had sought help but not received it). Of the 145 respondents who specified an ‘other’ from whom they had sought help before their Quay Street interview, as the table shows, 21 had seen a solicitor, 19 had seen a representative at Bristol City Council and 10 had been to the job centre.

Fig. 2 shows the variation by age group as to whether respondents sought help from the internet or did not ask anyone for help.

The youngest age group were the most likely to have sought some help from the internet prior to coming to the CAB. However, it is interesting to note that despite the frequently held assumption that older age groups are less likely to use online resources, a higher proportion of people aged over 60 than those in the 41 to 60 age group sought advice from the internet.
3.2 How had the problem been affecting people prior to their visit?

As Fig. 3 shows, the majority of participants – 70% overall – had been experiencing their problem for less than six months, highlighting the relatively short-lived nature of the problems clients face. 12% had been experiencing the problem for between six months and a year while 18% said that the problem had endured for over a year. Responses to this question differed depending upon the types of problems individuals faced; 34% of those with debt problems stated that the problem had lasted for over a year, compared to 11% of those with Benefits queries and 8% of those with Employment queries.

As shown in Fig. 4, the extent to which problems affect the lives of clients was highlighted by 39% of participants who stated that they were spending all of their time worrying about their problem, while 38% stated they spent most of their time in this way. This highlights the significant levels of anxiety and stress caused by the problems faced by CAB clients. Female respondents were more likely to report being worried about the problem all the time, highlighting, as noted above, the gendered distribution of household problems and as such of anxiety and stress.
4: DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF QUAY STREET AND BROAD STREET

4.1 DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF THE ADVICE INTERVIEW

As described above, the two offices at Quay Street and Broad Street represent different stages in the advice process; the former providing minimal information whilst focusing upon the best next steps for the client, while the latter seeks to deal more comprehensively and holistically.

In response to the question of whether the participant received none, some or all of the help that they wanted, those who had visited Broad Street for a full advice appointment were significantly more likely to give the latter response.

There are many reasons for which those clients who visited Quay Street only would express dissatisfaction with the process; in particular due to the difficulty for advisers of managing expectations given that many clients arrive expecting a full advice interview. Nonetheless, overall 92% of participants stated that they had received some or all of the help they had wanted.

As shown in Figure 7, overall 74% of respondents said that it was very easy to understand the advice given at an appointment.\textsuperscript{xii} Comparing the results between Quay St and Broad St there is little difference in this respect: whilst 76% of Broad Street clients reported it was very easy to understand the advice, 72% of Quay St clients gave the same response. In comparison with the significantly different responses to whether participants received none, some or all of the help they were seeking, the similarity in these responses suggests that, even where clients feel they did not receive all of the help they wanted, the GA is nonetheless successful in providing the client with clarity.

Clients with immigration problems were more likely to say that they found the information difficult to understand.\textsuperscript{xi} However, this might not just be a function of the complexity of the problem type, but also related to the expertise of advisers.\textsuperscript{xi}

\textsuperscript{xii} The difference was significant at the 0.01 level (Chi-Square = 13.22, df = 2, p = 0.001).
Regarding how clear people were about what actions to take following their engagement with the CAB, overall most people said they were clear about what to do next - 86% gave a score of 4 or 5 (very clear). We can see that people who have a full advice appointment at Broad Street are more likely to be very clear about what to do next than those who have been through the Gateway process at Quay Street only. Nevertheless, 83% of people came away from a GA giving a score of 4 or 5 to this question, a strong indication that the Assessment is also effective in terms of helping people to understand what they need to do to progress their problem.

With regard to what the client remembers happening in the advice interview, compared to the ‘Quay Street’ (Gateway Assessment) group a significantly higher proportion of Broad Street clients reported that the adviser solved the problem (40% to 29%), a figure reflecting the fact that the Gateway Assessment process is only designed to solve the problem where this can be done in the short space of time available, but rather to accurately assess, sort and direct clients, with scope for a limited amount of advice.
4.2 Differences between Quay Street and Broad Street following the Advice interview

Participants were asked whether, following their advice appointment, they followed all, none or some of the advice given.

Of those who had an appointment at Quay Street significantly fewer (69%) reported following all of the advice given compared to those who had a full advice appointment at Broad Street (83%).

While a quarter of Quay St. clients reported following ‘some’ of the advice, only 15% of those at Broad St. gave the same response. Very few clients, just over 4%, reported following none of the advice.

For those who did not follow the advice given, the most frequent reason given was that they ‘did not have the time/energy to follow it up’ (40%). 26% stated that they had tried to follow it up but it led nowhere, while 22% stated that they did not understand the advice, with twice as many Broad St. as Quay St. clients giving this response. Overall, just 12% stated that they did not agree with the advice.

Regarding the extent to which clients felt that their problems had been ‘sorted out’, the most common response was that it was still in the process of being sorted out (46% of respondents). 29% of respondents stated that their problem was completely sorted out. There was little difference between the Quay and Broad Street clients in this respect. It is important to note in this respect that calls were made at least three weeks after the interview, the responses providing an indication of how long it often takes to resolve the kinds of problem that clients present with.
Participants were then asked to what extent CAB had helped in sorting their problem out. In total, 55% stated that Citizens Advice had helped “a great deal” in sorting out their problem. The key figure in this respect however is the number of respondents - just under three quarters (74%) – who gave a response of either “4” or “5” on the 5-point scale. Those visiting Broad Street were more likely to give the most positive response: 65% of this group gave “5” in comparison to 45% with a Quay Street appointment only.

Those who reported as having a disability were less likely to say that the CAB helped. It should be noted in this respect that 37% of these clients were pursuing a benefits query (compared with 27% of the general sample), and that these responses may be due to frustrations particular to changes in the benefits system.
Clients who had an advice appointment at Broad Street were more likely than Quay Street clients to say that they would return to the CAB if they had a similar problem in the future (86% to 80%) and less likely to say that they would solve the problem on their own (25% to 35%). Given the above finding that Broad Street clients were more likely to say that the adviser ‘solved the problem for them’, this research suggests that those clients who had an full advice appointment felt confident that the CAB would help them again if they had a similar problem, but the appointment did not lead them to be confident in solving the problem on their own in the future. This raises issues around the specialism of the knowledge required to solve the problem, the guidance and support which the client might feel they need from the CAB if they encounter a similar problem in the future, and the confidence clients require to tackle the problem themselves. Relatedly, it raises the question of whether the advice appointment imparts the necessary knowledge, skills and confidence to enable clients to think they can solve the problem themselves in the future. As such, fundamental themes are brought to fore around clients’ reliance upon institutional advice and support as well as the difficulty of empowering clients to become self-reliant. If it is not straightforward for clients to learn how to solve problems for themselves through the advice appointment and if it remains likely they will return to the CAB, this puts greater pressure upon the resources of CAB advice services.
5. **What happens to clients referred elsewhere?**

Clients were then asked whether they had been told to contact another agency. Of those who had an appointment at Quay Street, 38% were told to contact another agency compared to 24% of those who had an appointment at Broad Street. Of those referred to another agency, 23% said they did not try to contact the agency. Of the 214 respondents who said they tried to contact the other agency, 93% said they were able to speak to someone.

Clients who were able to speak to someone at the agency to which they were referred, were then asked to what extent the agency were able to help them. Overall, Fig. 14 shows the responses also for the three most frequent problem types reported by the respondents. Of these, employment queries have the highest degree of satisfaction, with 21 of the 36 respondents saying that the agency had “helped a great deal”. Housing and homelessness enquiries had the lowest percentage of the most positive responses, with only 19 of the 60 referred on to another agency stating that they helped ‘a great deal’.

![ Did the other agency help? ](image-url)

**FIGURE 15 (N=234)**
APPENDIX

SURVEY DESIGN, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Survey design: the survey was developed by the University researchers through an iterative process with the CAB staff and volunteers who agreed to become ‘telephone researchers’. Version 1 was drawn up after consultation with the CAB Director and then discussed at the first training session with the telephone researchers who were able to propose ways of phrasing questions that would accord with the everyday experience and understanding of clients. This session also produced additional lines of enquiry and deletion of questions that would not make sense to clients.

Version 2 of the survey was created using SurveyMonkey and was tested in the second training session by the telephone researchers through role-play, leading to further refinements.

Training of adviser/researchers: training sessions were both a mechanism for co-design of the survey and for establishing protocols and standards for conducting the research. The first session covered principles of research and ethical codes; the second involved the academics and the CAB Director overseeing and providing feedback to the paired mock phone surveys. A third session was added when new telephone researchers were brought in.

Respondents: CAB clients were recruited for the survey at the Bristol Advice Point (BAP). The BAP receptionist explained the survey and handed clients a leaflet and consent form to read and complete whilst waiting for their GA. The consent form requested a telephone number on which the researcher could call. Subsequently, we tested out a self-completion version of the survey which was emailed to consenting CAB clients.

Matching data: Based on data that could be matched to attribute data routinely collected by the Bureau, participants in the phone survey were able to be grouped in terms of personal characteristics, namely gender, age group and the presence of a disability. In total it was possible to match 428 cases.

Analysis: of the survey data was carried out by researchers at the University of Bristol. Bristol CAB was able to match some of the participants with socio-demographic data from the CASE and PETRA information systems. Through this matching process 428 survey responses were matched providing age, gender, ethnic group and disability data. This allowed for an assessment as to whether responses differed depending on personal characteristics. Statistical analysis of the data follows the established practice within quantitative research in using the 5% level to determine significance.

Ethical issues: telephone researchers were briefed on the ethical guidelines of the Socio-Legal Studies Association. These guidelines require researchers to do all possible to ensure that research participants are not harmed by their involvement in the research. Primarily this means ensuring absolute confidentiality. Phone surveys were conducted from the CAB offices, with the bureau’s Director exceptionally approving circumstances for conducting surveys from the researcher’s home. A particular ethical concern arose concerning who answered the phone when the researcher called, as some CAB clients may not wish others in their household to be aware they had consulted the CAB. Researchers were instructed to first ask for the person named on the consent form; only when the respondent confirmed that they were that person would the telephone researcher introduce themselves as working with Bristol CAB and University of Bristol to conduct a survey.
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All images: Citizens Advice

NOTES

1 They either gave ‘4’ or ‘5 – very easy’ on a scale from ‘1 – very difficult’ to ‘5 – very easy’.
2 As above, they either gave ‘4’ or ‘5’ on a scale from ‘1 – not clear at all’ to ‘5 – very clear’
3 Note that these differences were not significant at the 5% level on a two-tailed test.
4 This observation is based on the ‘matched data’ – see appendix.
5 Advisers interviewed as part of the ‘Ideas of Legality and Citizenship’ project have raised concerns regarding clients being given incorrect or misleading information. More on this research project can be found at http://www.bristol.ac.uk/law/research/centres-themes/aanslc/iolac/
6 Further information on this service can be found at the Citizens Advice website www.adviceguide.org.uk/england/about_this_site/web_chat_service.htm
7 This was reported by one of the three phone researchers.
8 These tables draw on the ‘matched data’ – see appendix.
10 As this was a scalar response it was necessary to run a linear probability model to test significance. The oprobit value with Gender (Female) as the Independent Dummy Variable is 1.323.
11 As above, respondents were provided with a scale ranging from ‘1 – very difficult’ to ‘5 – very easy’.
12 As this was a scalar response it was necessary to run a linear probability model to test significance. The oprobit value with Problem Type (Immigration) as the Independent Variable is -0.479.
13 See note above housing, benefits, debt and employment are all areas in which the CAB have trained specialists which could also result in an ability to convey information to clients more clearly. In contrast, with regard to immigration problems, the Bristol CAB is only qualified to work at Office of the Immigration Service Commissioner (OISC) level 1 (general advice) which by default limits the complexity of work handled in this category.
14 A researcher on the project noted that in practice it was difficult to separate these responses.
15 Note the low numbers of participants who responded to this question.