

Advising in Austerity: How Citizens Advice can adapt to uncertain times

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About the research

Reductions in legal aid, fee charging for court applications and other reforms to the courts and tribunal service have created barriers to accessing justice for many people in the UK. In this context, the free-to-access advice sector provides crucial support for people to understand and engage with the legal frameworks that impact upon their lives.

Advice services face an increasingly complex workload as 'austerity' policies intensify social need and restrict access to rights. However, the advice sector itself is at risk; Citizens Advice Bristol is representative of other advice services in facing a combination of funding reductions and rising demand as other services are cut.

A four-year programme of research examined the role of the advice sector in developing public understanding of law and legality. Researchers carried out interviews, focus groups and participant observation at seven local Citizens Advice Bureaux in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and three homelessness organisations in England. The resulting book includes advisor and service user perspectives that demonstrate the value of effective advice work and the critical challenges to service provision. A collaborative project will develop a model for formalising partnerships between advice services and University Law Schools, opening up a mutually beneficial sharing of expertise and resources.

The advice sector is key to supporting people to access their legal rights, but it is under threat from austerity. Innovative solutions are needed to ensure the sustainability of service provision.

Policy implications

- Sustainable sources of funding and resources are needed to maintain both face-to-face and telephone advice services.
- Innovative solutions are needed to ensure sustainability within the advice sector as funding streams become increasingly precarious. Partnership working between advice services and university law schools can be part of this.
- Formal models for the placement of students in advice and law centres are needed. These should be based on existing best practice and take account of law students' educational needs and the needs and capacities of advice agencies.
- Practical experience within the advice sector could become a recognised element of a law degree, supported by methods of assessment which support learning by enabling students to build on advice experience.
- A quality assurance framework would support these models to ensure the value of placements and quality of work undertaken.

**citizens
advice**

Key findings

- Well targeted advice can prevent people ending up in crisis, saving local authorities' money in the long run. Time and resources in other services, such as Tribunals, can be saved as claimants are better assisted to make a claim.
- The encounter between adviser and client is a critical point at which everyday problems come to be understood as a matter for legal action. Problems are often complex and interlinked, requiring personal interaction between advisor and client to unravel issues, create clarity and find solutions.
- Face-to-face advice services enable a 'holistic' approach to people's problems; often underlying issues are identified beyond the initial problem presented by a client.
- The 'emotional labour' of advice work is key to the provision of effective advice. It facilitates understanding, creating clarity and ownership, which empowers people to take control of their problems.
- Understandings of 'citizenship' expressed by CA staff and volunteers were distinct from the current political discourse, which equates citizenship with nationality. These understandings reflected key service principles of an independent, free advice service available to all.
- The advice sector is threatened by 'austerity' policies. Despite the commitment of large numbers of volunteers, service provision is destabilised by reductions in 'core' funding from local authorities. Funding reductions are being made at a time of intensifying social need.



Further information

Advising in Austerity: Reflections on challenging times for advice agencies, ed. by Samuel Kirwan, published by Policy Press (<http://policypress.co.uk/>)

The University of Bristol, in collaboration with local Citizens Advice, is launching a new project. 'Advising in Austerity: How Citizens Advice can adapt to uncertain times' aims to examine innovative strategies to create sustainability in the sector.

Other research outputs can be found on the 'New Sites of Legal Consciousness' home page. <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/law/research/centres-themes/aanslc/>

Citizen's Advice Bristol: <https://www.bristolcab.org.uk/>

University of Bristol Law Clinic: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/law/law-clinic/>

Contact the researchers

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