

Briefing

Community Advice – a trailblazing signposting and support service

Providing independent, practical support and advice

Community Advice is an advice, information and support service based in Highbury Corner Magistrates' Court, one of the busiest courts in the United Kingdom. The service provides on-the-spot advice, direct support with practical problems and makes referrals into long-term support for anyone who needs it. It is a free service and it is independent of the court and any criminal justice proceedings.

Community Advice is able to engage with people who may not be reached by other services and with needs that may be unaddressed. It is prominently located inside the court building, providing a natural opportunity for people to access the service while they are waiting. As well as staff members and volunteers proactively engaging with individuals attending court, the service's location means that it often acts as an informal 'first point of call' for enquiries about the court and its processes, bringing more people into contact with the service. By working in the Magistrates' Court, Community Advice is able to support people who are at an early stage of their contact with their justice system, and help address some of the issues that can draw people further into the system. The additional strain placed on the justice system by COVID-19 makes this type of service more important than ever.

Community Advice was founded in 2014, based on the example of the Community Advice and Support Service in Plymouth.

Who does it support?

Community Advice is open to anyone appearing at court, from defendants, victims to witnesses, as well as those attending court in a supportive role, including friends, families and carers. The service is based in the London borough of Islington, though it supports people who live outside of Islington and makes referrals to services that operate outside of the borough.

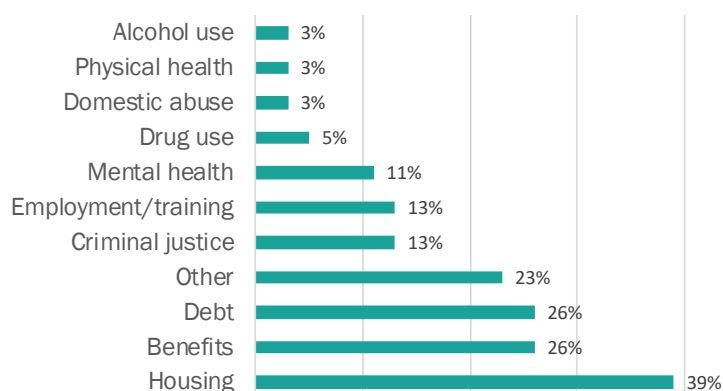
Demographics of service-users

- 66% identify as male
- 36% are Black and Black British, 29% are White British
- 28% are unable to work, 20% receive job seekers support, 16% are in full-time work
- 64% are single
- 40% live in social renting, 20% live with family, 17% are homeless
- 30% have caring responsibilities¹

What needs does Community Advice help with?

After conducting an initial assessment of people's needs, the service provides support on wide-ranging issues, from employment, to addiction, mental health and domestic violence. Housing, benefits and debt are consistently the most prevalent area of need.²

Service-user profile of needs



What difference does the service make?

While the types of issues that users of the service face are often complex and require long-term interventions, Community Advice offers a crucial first step that gives people the self-efficacy to begin the process of long-term change. What this step looks like differs from person to person. In some cases, an immediate resolution is found for one issue, completing a benefit application, for example, which creates the space and capacity to face the others. In other cases, a referral is made to a specialist service that can provide long-term support.

Community Advice Case Study

Martin³ attended court on a charge of possessing cannabis with intent to supply. He had been homeless for a year and was not in employment or training. He also suffers from a long-term health condition. With the help of Community Advice, Martin was able to take control of the issues he faced. He was advised on his benefits entitlements and his accommodation options. He was also connected with a specialist service that supports homeless young people, and referred into a programme that empowers young people to gain skills and employment.

As a result of the referral, Martin formed a strong relationship with the employment programme. He attends weekly 1-2-1 sessions, which is supporting him to achieve his goal of becoming a football coach.

Community Advice has supported 2,500 people since it opened in 2014.⁴ Satisfaction with its support and referrals is consistently high.⁵

Research has shown that this type of advice and support service can improve the compliance rate and effectiveness of magistrate's court orders.⁶ Community Advice is demonstrating on the ground the difference that can be made when the justice system supports vulnerable individuals to get the help that they need, instead of simply processing their case.

Endnotes

1. Community Advice dataset.
2. Community Advice dataset.
3. Please note that names have been altered to protect privacy.
4. Community Advice dataset.
5. Community Advice dataset. 91% of respondents with a debt-related need found the service helpful, along with 91% for benefits and 89% for housing respectively.
6. The Centre for Justice Innovation (2019) Better Courts Case-study: Plymouth Community Advice and Support Service. ([Link](#)). Accessed: 02/10/2020.