

Key steps to effective signposting and referral

Introduction

Signposting and referral are seen by many as the cornerstone of an effective advice network where a client can move from one agency to another receiving the service that best meets their needs and with which the centre is best qualified to deal.

In practice, effective referrals and signposting create many challenges. The review of the Community Legal Service in 2004 recognised that most attempts to create referral networks had failed. Yet having an effective way of referring on clients is crucial to all centres providing advice and information whichever type or level of service they are providing. Without an effective signposting and referral system there is a danger that advice agencies will work beyond their competence and therefore be more likely to give incorrect advice.

This briefing will explore good practice when referring or signposting a client. It will cover:

1. The definitions of signposting and referrals
2. Reasons to refer a client
3. Making referrals easier

1. Defining signposting and referral

In order to signpost or refer a client you need to have identified that your centre cannot deal with the client's case. There are many different reasons for this which are unpacked in section 2 of this briefing.

Often you will be able to help a client with some of their problems but not all of them. For example, you may be able to help them to sign up with a GP but not with questions about their immigration case. In these situations you should signpost or refer the client in relation to the aspect of the case that you cannot address.

There has been much confusion about the differences between signposting and referral.

There is however a broad difference which can help to clarify the two activities. When signposting a client you are likely not to have undertaken any significant work on the specific query you are signposting, whereas with referral it is likely that you will have started to work with the client on the query but for some reason can no longer continue.

What is signposting?

Signposting takes place before a centre has started in depth work with a client about a query. It normally takes place when the client first visits a centre with a new problem.

It describes the process of giving a client the details of other organisations that will be able to help them.

Centres that provide telephone helplines are likely to undertake a lot of signposting. An information worker or receptionist who

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deals with initial queries from clients is also likely to undertake a lot of signposting. Advisers also undertake signposting and discuss alternative sources of help with clients when they have identified during an initial advice session that the centre cannot assist any further.

An advice centre may make suggestions about which agency to go to but it is normally left to the clients themselves to make arrangements for an appointment there.

However, in some cases clients are assisted to access the services of the alternative agency, particularly where the client has specific needs, for example, they do not speak English or they have a hearing impairment. Good practice suggests this be done when necessary rather than simply telling a client to “try the CAB”!

What is referral?

There are two key differences with referral: firstly, with referral an agency is more likely to have started work on a client’s case. Secondly, the agency will make contact with the referral agency directly on behalf of the client.

When signposting, the adviser has relatively little information about the case. If an adviser has seen the client for a second or third time about the same issue, but can no longer deal with the client’s queries, it is good practice to refer him or her as some work has begun with client.

Referral describes the process of contacting an alternative agency to work with the client when an adviser has reached the limit of their competence in a particular area of advice. A client is referred on to an advice provider that can take the case forward, for example, a solicitor or other specialist level advice service that can deal with an appeal tribunal.

With a referral it is good practice for the adviser to make contact with the alternative agency and make any necessary arrangements with them in order to ensure that the case is continued smoothly, this normally includes arranging an appointment.

As work has been undertaken with the client the agency has a greater responsibility to ensure that the client continues to get the advice they need. Within an advice context this is particularly important as there may be deadlines or other significant issues in the case that the new agency needs to know about. It is the responsibility of the adviser to ensure these are clear to the new agency over the telephone or by copying the case records and giving them to the new agency with the client’s consent.

As referral is a more detailed process than signposting it is good practice to complete a referral form (some examples of forms are included at Appendix 1). The form should include key details about your agency and the referral agency. A copy should be given to the client and one kept for your records.

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Usually centres will **signpost** some cases (e.g. where they do not handle that type of enquiry at any level), and **refer** others (e.g. where they have undertaken some initial work on the case but it is now time to pass it on to a more specialist organisation).

It is useful to have a simple procedure in place that explains how you signpost and refer a client, the forms you complete and the records that should be kept.

2. Reasons to refer

While a client will be signposted or referred on for many different reasons most of these fit within the categories listed below. It is important to be clear about these reasons so that you can clearly identify when you need to signpost or refer. Being clear also helps to ensure that you can clearly explain issues to the client and anyone else, such as a supervisor who may want to discuss the way a case has been dealt with. Many agencies prefer to signpost at the outset rather than take on a case and refer later.

Outside your subject area: No one can be expected to know everything. All advisers have the skills, training and resources to give advice in certain categories. Advice workers or solicitors providing specialist advice generally only work in one or two subject areas, for example welfare benefits or housing, because they need to know each area in depth. Generalist and community based providers may offer advice in a wider range of areas, but not to such a specialist level in each area of law.

It is important to be clear about which areas of advice you are competent in and to what level. If a client presents you with a query outside your subject areas, you will need to direct them to someone internally who has expertise in this area or signpost them to another organisation. It is illegal to give immigration advice even if you are competent to, unless your organisation is exempted by the Office for the Immigration Services Commissioner. In this situation you need to signpost to a recognised provider and explain the situation clearly to the client.

In your subject area but too complex: Sometimes a query is in one of your subject areas, but is too complex for you to deal with. A useful example to help think about this is a GP. We all expect our doctor to be able to deal with the initial stages of an illness. But we also know that if there is a problem or something unusual in our case we will be referred to a specialist or consultant. In fact if we were not referred on we would not be happy with the service and would certainly not want a doctor to undertake an operation that they were not qualified to perform! While this is a rather extreme example, it makes the point that whilst the implications of going beyond your competence as an adviser may be less dramatic, they could still be significant – a client could lose their house or not receive benefits they were entitled to and your centre could be sued for negligence.

It is therefore important to have a clear understanding of your individual level of competence. Once you go beyond this you can no longer advise a client well. If there is someone else in your organisation with

expertise in the particular area you may transfer the case to them. However if you identify that your centre can no longer advise a client competently you will need to refer them on. If it is clear when you first meet a client that you are not able to advise them signposting may be appropriate.

Work overload: Sometimes an organisation cannot adequately deal with a case because it simply does not have enough time to. Most advice providers are extremely busy, with demand for services sometimes greater than the organisation's capacity. Many advice agencies feel that they have to see everyone who comes through their door and feel guilty about turning clients away.

However, how can you meet deadlines, do follow-up work, keep up to date with rapid changes in law and provide good quality advice if you go beyond your capacity? Every advice worker needs to know when to say no in order that they can provide an effective service in the longer term. Signposting or referring some cases can help to manage workload better.

One of the concerns that centres have about referring on cases due to lack of capacity is that they will miss an urgent case. In order to ensure a good service is given to clients, a system to identify such cases (for example where there is an imminent court case) is useful. Urgent cases can either be prioritised within the centre or referred on. In such situations it would be good practice to contact the agency expected to take the referral to

ensure they have sufficient resources to take on the case.

The client falls outside your target group: Having a clear target group for your centre helps to define who you can best help. The key reason your centre was established was to help a particular community (for example, a particular ethnic group, a group of people with specific access needs or those in poverty in a certain geographical area).

If a client falls outside your target group it is important to assist them to access appropriate help, and this will often be by signposting them to another service. In some situations your centre may agree to take on a case even though the client is not in your target group. This is fine if there are exceptional circumstances, but there is sometimes a tendency for centres to try and help everybody. This can put centres in a position whereby they cannot cope, which results in a loss of their identity and in the quality of their advice, and a decline in their reputation.

It is important to ensure that you are serving the client group that you have been set up to serve – you have most expertise in dealing with these clients and understanding their specific needs. Your constitution or funding may also require you to serve a specific client group. You need to ensure you do not jeopardise your organisation's future by working outside of your stated remit. Furthermore, trying to do everything for everybody does not assist a centre when approaching funders. Funders do not want advice agencies to duplicate each other: funders generally

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want to be sure they are funding services that meet specific needs, are appropriate to particular clients and generally understand the need to signpost and refer clients when appropriate.

There is a breakdown in trust between the adviser and the client: A trusting relationship between adviser and client is central to providing advice. Unfortunately sometimes there is a breakdown in this relationship and the client needs to be referred on. This could be because the client clearly does not trust the adviser, and despite efforts to resolve this situation, it is decided that working together on an ongoing basis is untenable. It may also be that the adviser does not trust that the client is giving them accurate information about their situation with which to progress the case. Again this can be discussed, and if possible resolved, however, if this is not possible a referral may be appropriate.

If the adviser believes that the client is trying to seek advice with false information, which could lead to fraudulent activity (for example, asking for assistance with their Job Seekers Allowance when the client works), it is not necessary to refer the client on. The client should be informed that the centre cannot advise them and the reasons for this. If a client displays violent behaviour towards an adviser it is clearly inappropriate for the centre to deal with them. The action to be taken in such situations should be clearly documented.

It is likely that the client would be refused a service. Again in such situations it is not necessary to make a referral.

Conflict of interest: If there is a conflict of interest identified in the case a referral is often the best way to deal with this. Conflicts of interest can include when a centre is acting for both sides in a dispute (for example, husband and wife or dealing with a case in which a staff member or management committee member is involved). In these situations a centre cannot guarantee that they will always be able to work in the best interests of the client. A conflict of interest policy should help you to deal with this. If you refer a client on they should be informed of the reasons for this. In some situations this will mean breaching the confidentiality of the other client, this client will need to be informed why this is justified and necessary.

3. Making referrals easier

As discussed earlier in this briefing, signposting and referrals can sometimes cause problems.

Clients may not want to be referred; staff or management committee members may see referral as a failure. In this section we look at some key problems centres face and identify ways to resolve these and therefore improve referrals and signposting.

Defining your level of service clearly: Isn't making a referral just admitting failure? What will the clients and Management Committee say if we simply keep referring clients out all the time? We have explored the fact that advice agencies are often under pressure to take on more cases or continue cases beyond

where they should. There is also the fear that funders will see their service as non-essential. Centres providing a specific service to deal with a specific community's needs often come under particular pressure as clients are comfortable with the fact that the centre they originally approach is staffed by people who speak their language, come from the same community, and understand their problems more intimately.

All these things are right, but inaccurate and misleading advice is still misleading and inaccurate. A client who suffers as a result of poor advice is not going to remember the fact that it was in their own language. The risk is they will tell their friends or relatives that your service is not reliable.

A centre must try to combine the most accessible service they can with the best referral system they can. Think about the following:

- make your **publicity** reflect a commitment to guarantee the best possible service for clients even when this includes referral.
- **explain** to clients and Management Committee members why you make referrals. Tell them you face claims against the organisation if you give inaccurate advice, which is more likely if you work above your level of expertise.
- where there are particular problems such as language difficulties ensure that there is a **support system** in place for the client at the new agency. If the

referral is to a solicitor funding can be obtained from the Legal Services Commission to provide interpretation, though this is not usually applicable at the first interview stage as an interpreter can only be accessed once the solicitor has taken on the case. There may also be scope for you to work with the other agency to support the client. For example, attending the initial interview with the other agency can help the client to feel confident about the referral. Each case will be different and the degree of support needed by each client will differ.

There are specific difficulties for many small community organisations when making referrals - particularly the language barrier. It is important that this issue is understood at a policy level and by funders. For example, black and minority ethnic and refugee organisations, whose clients may speak little or no English, may need an interpreter to ensure the success of the referral. Funders should recognise the need to fund interpreting services and also recognise the value of community organisations supporting clients to access mainstream specialist level advice services.

Building relationships with other advice centres

"But most of the organisations we are expected to refer to have been guilty of letting our clients down in the past, so most of the clients we refer end up returning to us to find out about any progress the new agency has made"

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Bad experience of previous referrals is the biggest barrier to overcome. It is understandable that people are unwilling to send clients back to somewhere where others have been treated badly or where poor advice has been given. However, there are a number of things you can do about this:

Advice Forums: Forums are an ideal place to discuss difficulties with referrals between advice workers. Through such discussions and by building better relationships with other agencies referrals can be made more effective – see **The concept and role of local advice forums** for more information about advice forums.

Representatives from the forum can also raise these issues at Community Legal Service Partnerships and other policy meetings in order to identify where there are gaps in the referral system and to press for changes to occur to improve the overall co-ordination of referrals.

Check your information is correct and find out more about the agency you are referring to: It is a good idea to check that your information or feeling about another centre is correct before you let it affect the way that you refer a client. How long ago were the allegations of poor performance made? The centre may now have new caseworkers in place. Remember that it is easy in our sector to be influenced by gossip, which may be contradicted by a sample of feedback from your clients who have been successfully referred. In short make sure that you are making choices for your client based on accurate information.

Sharing centre information at advice forums breaks this down.

You can always contact the centre yourself to find out more about its services. It may be appropriate to discuss the particular client's case. If so be prepared for the fact that the agency may have a different perspective to the client as to why the referral did not work.

You might want to establish a more formal referral relationship with some agencies if you feel that this would make referrals more effective.

Check you did everything to make the referral successful from your end: It is also important to check that you have done everything you can to make referrals successful. Previous complaints about another agency may have related in some way to an ineffective referral system at your end. Check that you have followed your procedure correctly and that the client was supported effectively and had all the information they needed.

Make a complaint: Unfortunately sometimes the fact is that an agency has not provided your client with a good service after you have referred them. If you are convinced that this is the case you may decide to assist the client to make a complaint, following the agency's complaints procedure. It is also possible to raise issues of poor performance from other providers within the Community Legal Service (CLS) especially if the centre has been awarded the Quality Mark. Poor immigration advice can be reported to the Office for the Immigration Services

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Commissioner’s Complaints Department, they will investigate complaints as part of their regulation of immigration advice. Making a complaint is an important way of informing the agency that you are concerned about their services if you have been unable to do this using other means. If an agency is receptive to the complaint and acts on it services should improve in the future.

Making sure you have up to date information about other advice centres

“When all is said and done there is no one to refer to!”

This is sometimes the case, but in order to be sure that you cannot refer somebody to an appropriate centre you need to make sure you have up to date information about centres in your area.

- Most centres have their own referral and signposting lists. Make sure your list is up to date. Ask local centres and firms of solicitors for their service statements and publicity material Search the Community Legal Advice Directory online www.communitylegaladvice.org.uk/
- Consider again, your local advice forum (where one exists), as participation in these networks can help increase one’s awareness of other local advice providers and identify where else you might be able to refer clients. Generally an advice worker will feel more confident about referring a client to another agency where other advice workers are known to them. Forums

provide the chance for these kinds of relationships to be formed and sustained.

- If all else fails locally be aware of the specialist telephone helplines that may be able to assist you. In some situations they will be able to give you technical support so that you can keep the case within the centre, in others they can advise the client directly.

There are not enough advice centres to meet the demands of all clients. By recording cases when you could not find an appropriate agency to refer to and discussing this at advice forums, Community Legal Service Partnerships and other policy settings, gaps can be identified and this situation can begin to be changed.

Conclusion

Signposting and referring clients on effectively is central to any advice centre. The best way to ensure that you do this effectively is by agreeing with staff, volunteers and management committee members a simple procedure which meets the needs of your clients. Once agreed the procedure should be documented. It is important to make sure that, once in place, the procedure is understood and used by everybody involved in advice work in your centre.

Signposting and referrals are not only important for your clients, they are also important for your centre. By following up referrals you have made, you can gain important information about the outcomes of cases in which you were instrumental.

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Given the emphasis that funders now place on outcomes, and the difficulties that advice centres face when evidencing the outcomes that they have achieved, this is extremely significant.

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