Highbury Community Advice

Five years of community advice

The work of the community advice service at Highbury Corner Magistrates' Court

2015-2020

Summary

The Highbury Corner Community Advice service supports people attending Highbury Corner Magistrates' Court. Operating from a help-desk in the court's main concourse, it acts as a signposting and referral service, putting people in touch with organisations and agencies that can provide them with long-term support, as well as offering immediate practical and emotional support to people who are experiencing challenge or adversity.

This report provides an overview of the work of the service from 2015 to 2020. In this time, the service has worked with roughly 2500 clients, of whom 91% were using the service for the first time. Data for this report is taken from the service's client records.

Demographics

Community advice clients were typically young adult men: 47% of clients were aged 18-34 and 72% were male. The most common ethnic identity was White British (28%) but Black and Mixed Heritage individuals were over-represented compared to the general population of London.

Offending

71% of clients were attending court as a defendant and nearly half of those (44%) were doing so for the first time. The most common offence types were violence against the person (21% of offences) theft offences (13%) and drug offences (12%).

Support needs

Community Advice takes a client-led approach to support, encouraging clients to identify the areas of need where support would be most beneficial. The most common needs that clients sought help with were socioeconomic: housing (47% of clients), benefits (30%) and debt (21%). In contrast, fewer clients sought support with health needs such as mental health issues (16%) and drug use (10%).

Referrals

The service made 3039 referrals into support services over this period, an average of roughly 1.2 per client.

Progress

After 6 months, clients reported that 38% of the issues which they sought help with had been resolved and a further 32% had improved. 91% reported that Community Advice support had helped address their issues.

Background

Community Advice is an advice, information and support service based in Highbury Corner Magistrates' Court. It is free to use and completely independent of the judicial process. It acts as a signposting and referral service, working to connect people with the relevant support services and organisations as well as providing immediate practical support.

The service is run by the Centre for Justice Innovation, a charity which seeks to build a fairer and more effective justice system by promoting evidence-based, innovative justice policy reforms.

Community Advice was founded in 2014, based on the model of the Community Advice and Support Service (CASS+) in Devon and Cornwall. The service operates from a counter in the main waiting area and its prominent location means that it often acts as an informal 'first point of call' for enquiries about the court and its processes, which subsequently provides more opportunities for people to access support. By reaching individuals in the early stages of their contact with the justice system, Community Advice can act as an early intervention by helping to address some of the issues which can draw people further into the system.

After conducting an initial assessment of people's needs, the service provides advice and signposting support on wide-ranging issues, including housing, substance misuse, mental health and domestic abuse. The service does not provide legal advice but is able to direct service users to the relevant organisations.

Community Advice is open to anyone appearing at court, including defendants, victims and witnesses, as well as those attending court in a supportive role such as friends, families and carers.

Highbury Corner Magistrates' Court is located in the London borough of Islington, and serves four London boroughs: Islington, Haringey, Camden and Enfield. The service supports people from across this catchment area as well as further afield. Community Advice works collaboratively with partners operating in the courts including solicitors, the Witness Service, National Probation Service, Court Clerks and Serco Custodial Service, as well as with community-based support agencies.

Data Collection and Monitoring

The service collects a range of data including demographic variables for monitoring and outcome purposes. For this report, we have collated service user data over a 68 month period (January 2015 to August 2020) to identify key trends and inform service development.

Case study

Katie*

Housing, Drug use, Mental Health and Debt

Katie is a 29-year-old single woman with two children living in a 2 bedroom privately rented accommodation. Katie was in court on charges of driving under the influence of cannabis and was referred by the probation service, due to not meeting their criteria for support. She was given conditional discharge for 2 years and a 12-month ban with a £22 victim surcharge. Katie asked for some advice in the following areas:

Area

Housing
Katie was living in temporary accommodation before being placed in privately rented accommodation. Katie stated the property was in a state of disrepair and had an issue with rodents. She would like to move area and required more information on what her housing benefit would cover in terms of renting in a different area.

Drug use
Katie reported she had been using cannabis on a daily basis for the past 12 years and felt this was contributing to her current difficulties. She requested a referral to local drug services.

Mental Health
Katie suffered with anxiety and depression and has attempted to do CBT in the past. Katie had another session of CBT lined up but would like to know her options for other talking therapies as well.

Debt
Katie reported she had rent arrears and also owed payments on her credit card.

Actions

Housing
Community Advice provided Katie with details of her local Law Centre to assist with the disrepair issues. She was also provided with details on the Local Housing Allowance for another area she was interested in moving to.

Drug use
A referral was made to a relevant substance support service for one to one support.

Mental health
Katie was provided with information on Talking Therapies through the NHS.

Debt
Contact was made with the local council to follow up on a previous Discretionary Housing Payment application. Katie was also provided with National Debt line details for assistance with managing her credit card debt.

Outcome

Katie reported that the council had attended the property to fix some of the disrepair jobs. She has not yet contacted the Law Centre as she was keen to see if the council would repair all the issues before taking this further. Katie said she has not heard back about her Discretionary Housing Payment application and Community Advice will follow this up. Katie is working with a support service to address her cannabis use and is also attending CBT therapy which she reported she is enjoying. Katie is yet to contact national Debt line but still has their details.

* The name of the client has been changed to protect their privacy.

Our clients

Referral and assessment

Anyone who approaches Community Advice for support is first offered a detailed assessment where they can discuss their support needs. Clients can request support with multiple issues if necessary, including: debt, benefits, housing, employment, education and training, domestic abuse, drugs and alcohol and health.

The Community Advice service assessed a total of 2498 clients between 2015 and 2020, an average of approximately 441 clients per year. 91% (2269) of these clients were using the service for the first time.

Clients can be referred to the service by a range of practitioners including probation officers, magistrates and judges and solicitors. However, a large majority of clients (65%) came into the service via self-referral (often coming to know about it through the service's active outreach to people using the court's public space). A further 9% came into the service via self-referral while in the courts' cells, another area targeted by service outreach. Apart from self-referral, the other major source of referrals was through solicitors, which accounted for 10% of clients.

Clients

TOTAL 2015 - 2020

2,498

441

AVERAGE PER YEAR

91% used the service for the first time

Referrals

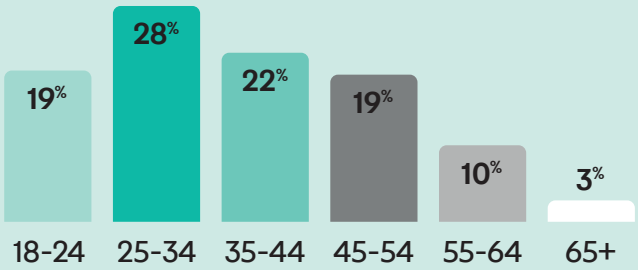
Self-referral (not from custody)	65%
Self-referral (from custody)	9%
Solicitors	10%

Client demographics

The demographic data collected provides a useful profile of those coming into contact with the service. Over the period the majority of clients (72%) were male. The average age of clients was 36 and nearly half (47%) were aged 34 or below. These age and gender demographics may reflect wider general patterns in offending behaviour.

The most common ethnicity for clients was White British (28%). However, Black and Mixed Heritage service users were overrepresented compared to the general London population. This overrepresentation reflects the wider issue of ethnic disproportionality in the criminal justice system.

Client Age

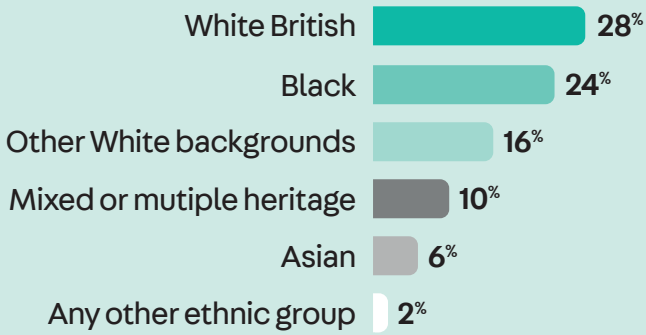


Client Gender

FEMALE **28%**

MALE **72%**

Client ethnicity



Offending information

A majority (71%) of clients using the service reported that they were attending court as a defendant. Of those who appearing as a defendant, nearly half (44%) were doing so for the first time.

The most common offence types were violence against the person (21%), theft offences (13%) and drug offences (12%).

Defendant status?

71% Attending court as a defendant

44% Were doing so for the first time

Offence types

Violence against the person	21%
Theft offences	13%
Drug offences	12%
Motoring offences	11%
Public order offences	9%
Criminal damage & arson	6%
Antisocial behaviour	5%
Possession of weapons	3%
Robbery	2%
Fraud offences	2%
Council tax liability	2%
Other	14%

Support needs

Community Advice takes a client-led approach to support, encouraging clients to identify the areas of need where support would be most beneficial. The most common needs that clients sought help with were socioeconomic: housing (47% of clients), benefits (30%) and debt (21%). In contrast, fewer clients sought support with health needs such as mental health issues (16%) and drug use (10%).

Between 2015 and 2020, Community Advice completed a total of 3039 referrals to support organisations on behalf of their clients, roughly 1.2 referrals per client.

Areas of need

Housing	47%
Benefits	30%
Debt	21%
Mental health	16%
Employment, training and education	13%
Drug use	10%
Criminal Justice	9%
Alcohol use	7%
Domestic abuse	3%
Physical health	2%
Other	17%

3039 referrals...

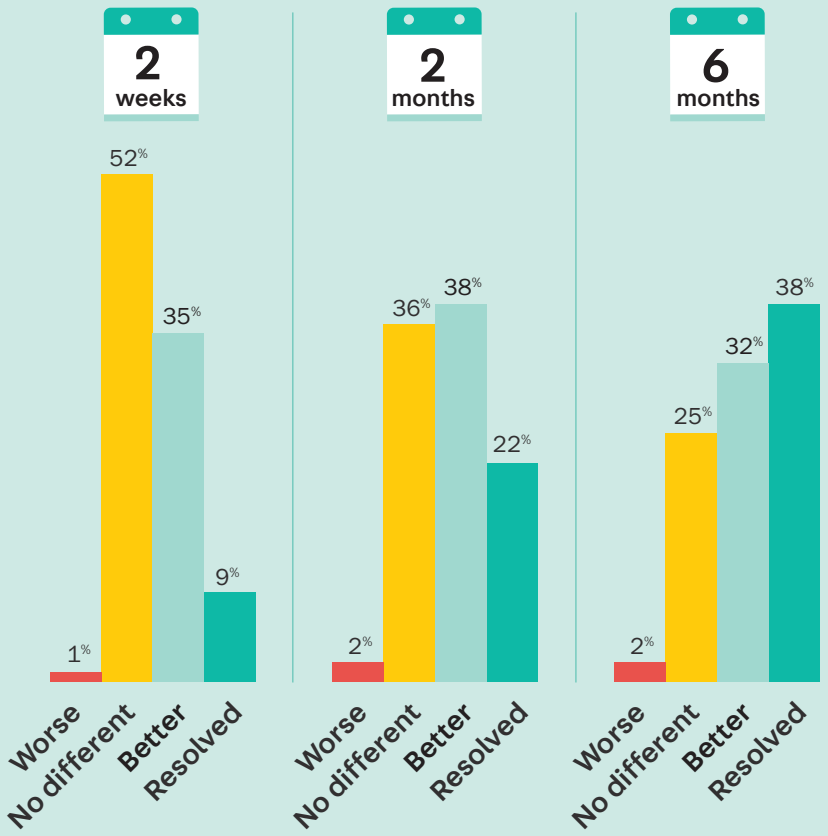
...to support organisations on behalf of clients, **roughly 1.2 referrals per client.**

Outcomes

Where possible, the service re-contacts clients at three points after their initial assessment to offer further support and check on progress made. Clients are contacted at two weeks, two months and six months, and the service collects data on changes in clients reported difficulties over time. Data across these three time periods show significant progress being made in addressing and resolving client issues. 9% of issues are reported as resolved after two weeks but this rises to 38% of issues over six months.

While it is difficult to directly attribute the progress made to the work of Community Advice it is worth noting that a large majority (91%) of clients contacted after six months reported that Community Advice had helped with the issues they sought help with.

Changes in clients' difficulties over time



Did Community Advice help with your issue?

YES
91%

UNSURE
3%

NO
1%

Samantha*

Housing

Samantha is a 33-year-old single woman who attended court as a witness in a case against her ex-partner due to experiencing domestic abuse. She was supported by HCMC Witness service and referred to Community Advice due to her housing situation. Samantha had been placed in a refuge with her two children aged two and five years old. She was previously offered accommodation by her local council but the application was withdrawn due to the location being near where her ex-partner resided. Samantha said the refuge she is currently living in was uninhabitable due to being extremely dirty and rodent infested.

Actions

Community Advice contacted Samantha's case worker from the council to discuss her situation and a plan to move forward.

Outcome

Samantha was contacted as part of a 2 week follow up. Her case worker had managed to move her to a different refuge which she reported she was very pleased with. Samantha informed us that the key worker at the new refuge was very helpful and that she was able to stay at the current refuge until more permanent accommodation was found. Samantha thanked Community Advice workers for their support. She was informed she would be contacted again for her 2 month follow up call but to contact the service in the meantime, if needed.

* The name of the client has been changed to protect their privacy.

Thank you

We would like to thank Deb Tudhope, Linda Logan, Alison Lamb, Jeanette Daly Matthias, Jo Crellen, Ross Reis, Michelle McGuire, Phillippa Heath Philpotts, Carole Edwards, Greg Foxsmith, the Hadley Trust and all our amazing volunteers for everything they have contributed to the project over the years.

This report was written by Aisha Ofori

Get in touch

If you are interested in or want more information about our services please contact our office.

Community Advice
Highbury Corner Magistrates' Court
51 Holloway Road
London
N7 8JA
07766 693 138
07941 510 242
justiceinnovation.org/highbury

Highbury Community Advice

Office Hours: 9.00AM to 4:30PM
Closed for Lunch between 1PM and 2PM