

**Better Courts Case-study:  
Plymouth Community Advice  
and Support Service.**

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# Executive Summary

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## At-court advice and support services

Many of the people who come through our magistrates' courts commit low-level offences like drunk and disorderly conduct— and go on to commit them again and again. The offences themselves may seem minor but they end up absorbing a good deal of the criminal justice system's resources. Typically, the seriousness of the offences means that they receive fines or conditional discharges. But very often the people who receive these sentences end up returning to court— latest figures show that over 40% of fines imposed are outstanding 18 months after they are made and 33.5% of those receiving a conditional discharge re-offend within a year.

Operating from offices in the public area of criminal courts, there are a handful of at-court advice and support services which work to break this cycle. At-court advice and support services are one of a number of models of 'problem-solving' court practice, which aim to ensure that the justice system addresses the problems of those who come into contact with it, rather than simply process their case. Many of the people caught in the cycle of low-level offending struggle with debts, housing, unemployment, mental health and alcohol problems. At-court advice and support services offer a wide range of services for their clients: practical support with issues like fines or benefits, information on the working of the criminal justice system or help to access support services to address the issues which bring people to court. They work with the courts, police and probation service to ensure that court orders are obeyed in order to reduce reoffending and create long-term savings for the justice system.

In this case study, we look at one example of an at-court advice and support service, the Community Advice and Support Service (CASS) in Plymouth Magistrates' Court, a court which serves a city with a disproportionate number of high-crime communities. This report describes the work of CASS and provides emerging evidence of its efficacy.

## The work of CASS

From its office in the Plymouth Magistrates Court, CASS provides on the spot advice, direct support with practical problems and referral into long-term support to anyone who needs it: defendants, victims and their families. CASS is open in Plymouth five days per week and is delivered by two paid staff members and a team of around ten volunteers who receive training and support in identifying and responding to a range of issues that clients are facing, including mental illness and dual diagnosis.

## The clients

Each year, CASS provides a comprehensive service to around 500 clients. Typically, those who accessed the service were either defendants or had been sentenced for low level offences. 10% of defendants who accessed the service were in court due to failure to obey a previous court order, like a fine or conditional discharge. The majority of those at CASS had prior convictions— 24% had between two and five prior convictions, and 30% had six or more prior convictions.

We conducted a needs profile of the client cohort, which shows that:

- 40% of CASS clients were on disability benefit or long term sick and a further 28% of CASS clients were identified as out of work;
- 25% identified as having housing problems;
- 22% identified as having debt problems.

## Activity

In 2014, CASS worked with 469 clients. 70% of the support CASS provides comes in the form of direct intervention with clients or emotional support, advice and information, while 30% consists of referrals to more specialist support. Where cases were referred out, 41% of CASS clients attended their first appointment, compared to 29% in similar projects (the court service's pilots in 2010/11).

## Interim outcomes

CASS's overarching aims are to improve compliance with and the effectiveness of court orders, and thereby reduce reoffending and reduce the costs incurred by those returning to court. To support this work, we have been working with CASS to look at how far CASS is delivering on a range of interim outcomes that, based on the evidence of what works, should be influencing their overarching goals. Based on our analysis, it is clear that CASS has a number of strengths:

- The feedback from stakeholders clearly indicated that CASS is seen as an invaluable resource for the courts and those professionals working within the court;
- The feedback from stakeholders clearly indicated that CASS has played a role in connecting community services to the court and those who come to court and vice versa;
- Based on our analysis of the cohort data, it is clear that CASS is addressing the significant unmet need of people who are coming to court (and who are likely to return if their needs are not addressed), especially the low level persistent offenders who it has a specific focus on;
- There is clear evidence that CASS has adopted practice which is strongly suggestive that it is making an impact on its overarching goals of improving compliance with and the effectiveness of court orders, and thereby helping to reduce reoffending and reduce the costs incurred by those returning to court;
- There is promising evidence that CASS helps clients feel like they are being treated more fairly.

However, there remain important questions that still require further work:

- The evidence base for CASS needs to be added to, specifically on its impact on its overarching outcomes and on its value for money;
- The service isn't yet embedded in such a way that guarantees its sustainability.

CASS's promising model is valuable in informing the development of other at-court support projects and in demonstrating the benefits of court taking a more problem-solving approach.

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## **Better Courts Case-study: Plymouth Community Advice and Support Service.**

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## 1. ABOUT THIS PAPER

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This paper is intended to offer information which may be useful to practitioners developing or commissioning at-court advice and support services which aim to improve compliance with and the effectiveness of court orders, and thereby reduce reoffending and reduce the costs incurred by those returning to court.

The paper describes the concept of at-court advice and support services, using a case study approach on the Community Advice and Support Service (CASS), a volunteer-led service located within Plymouth Magistrate's Court. This is an updated version of our previous publication on CASS in 2014.

Operating open-door policies from inside court buildings, at-court advice and support services work with vulnerable individuals and with criminal justice agencies to improve outcomes and reduce the number of people who have to come back to court again. This paper:

- Describes the key elements of at-court advice and support services delivered at CASS;
- Describes the relationship between CASS and the Plymouth Community Court;
- Analyses the caseload of CASS in 2014;
- Presents an analysis of how far CASS is delivering on a range of interim outcomes, indicative of its ability to meet its overarching goals to improve compliance with and the effectiveness of court orders, aiming to reduce the number and costs of people returning to court.

This paper is part of Better Courts, a programme of work run by the Centre for Justice Innovation, which argues that by embracing procedural justice and problem-solving justice our courts can contribute to reduced reoffending. The programme is built around a vision of courts which are seen to be fair, which act with authority, which focus on individuals as well as cases and which process cases swiftly.

For more about Better Courts, visit [www.justiceinnovation.org](http://www.justiceinnovation.org)

## 2. AN OVERVIEW OF AT-COURT ADVICE AND SUPPORT SERVICES

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### At court support and advice services

The Plymouth Community Advice and Support Service (CASS) is an example of an at-court advice and support service. At-court advice and support is one of a number of models of 'problem-solving' practice, which aims to ensure that the justice system addresses and resolves the problems of those who come into contact with it, rather than simply process their cases, to improve outcomes and reduce the number of people who have to come back to court again. At-court advice and support services often have the following features:

- **Open-door policies in a court setting:** At-court advice and support services often have a permanent physical presence in court and, unlike services that have eligibility criteria, at-court advice and support services tend to offer services to anyone coming through court. This is especially important in relation to clients with multiple needs: research suggests that people with multiple needs face a range of barriers which prevent them from accessing services.<sup>1</sup> By adopting open door policies, bureaucratic barriers to entry are minimised – clients are not required to complete forms, pre-book appointments or present documents.
- **Assistance in understanding the court process:** Many who attend court find it a confusing place to be and the court process hard to navigate. At-court advice and support services seek to help people understand what has just happened to them in the court process and what will happen next. It is clear that, where this is done effectively, it can help people understand the court process and there is substantial evidence that greater understanding in turn leads to greater compliance with court orders (a concept known as procedural fairness).<sup>2</sup>
- **Responsivity to need:** There is substantial research which suggests that a series of individual or social factors are associated with an increased risk of reoffending, such as alcohol misuse.<sup>3</sup> There is also an extensive evidence base that shows that services based in the criminal justice system can work with clients to mitigate these factors through proper assessment and providing services that respond to identified needs and risks (known as risk-need responsivity).<sup>4</sup>

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1. Anderson, Sarah, 2011, *Complex Responses: Understanding poor frontline responses to adults with multiple needs: A review of the literature and analysis of contributing factors* (London: Revolving Doors Agency); Rosengard, Ann et al (2007) *A Literature Review on Multiple and Complex Needs* (Edinburgh: Scottish Executive)

2. Bowen and Gold La Gratta (2014), 'To be Fair: Procedural fairness in courts', Criminal Justice Alliance: available online at <http://www.justiceinnovation.org/better-courts/publications/be-fair-procedural-fairness-courts>; Frazer, S., 'The Impact of the Community Court Model on Defendant Perceptions of Fairness', Center for Court Innovation, 2006 available online at [http://www.courtinnovation.org/sites/default/files/Procedural\\_Fairness.pdf](http://www.courtinnovation.org/sites/default/files/Procedural_Fairness.pdf), Center for Court Innovation, 'Documenting Results: Research on Problem-Solving Justice', 2009; Paternoster, R., et al., 'Do Fair Procedures Matter? The Effect of Procedural Fairness on Spouse Assault,' *Law & Society Review*, 31: 163-204; 2000; Sherman, L., 'Trust and Confidence in Criminal Justice', Philadelphia, PA; Tyler, T. R. and Huo, Y. J., 'Trust in the law: Encouraging public cooperation with the police and courts. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002; Tyler, T. R., 'Procedural Fairness, legitimacy, and the effective rule of law', 2003.

3. Ministry of Justice Analytical Series (2013), 'Transforming Rehabilitation: a summary of evidence on reducing reoffending'. Available online at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/243718/evidence-reduce-reoffending.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/243718/evidence-reduce-reoffending.pdf)

4. Bonta & Andrews (2007) 'Risk-Need-Responsivity Model for Offender Assessment and Rehabilitation'. Public Safety Canada 2007-06: Available online at <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/res/cor/rep/fl/RiskNeed2007-06e.pdf>; Bowen & Whitehead, (2013) 'Better Courts: Cutting Crime Through Court Innovation', Centre for Justice Innovation; Burnett & McNeill (2005) 'The place of the officer-offender relationship in assisting offenders to desist from crime', *Probation Journal*, 52.3, 221-242; Shapland, Bottoms, Farrall, McNeill, Priede, & Robinson (2012b) 'The quality of probation supervision – a literature review: summary of key messages. Research Summary 2/12, London, Ministry of Justice; Turley, Ludford, Callanan, & Barnard (2011) 'Delivering the NOMS Offender Management Model, Ministry of Justice Research Series 7/11: available online at <http://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/publications/research-and-analysis/moj-research/delivering-noms-offender-management-model.pdf>.

At-court advice and support services seek to put this evidence into practice by identifying, assessing and responding to the unmet needs of those who come through their doors by giving useful, practical information to clients; offering immediate emotional support and; providing assistance in accessing sources of support available outside of the court building, such as alcohol treatment, community mental health services or supported housing.<sup>5</sup>

- **A focus on early intervention and unmet need:** At-court advice and support services are open to all but they have a particular focus on the 76% of people sentenced last year who received either a fine or a conditional discharge.<sup>6</sup> Some of this population do not need support or advice— they receive a fine and pay it, they get a conditional discharge and don't get into trouble again. However, there are a significant number of people in this cohort who fail to comply with their court orders: over 40% of fines imposed are outstanding 18 months after they are made<sup>7</sup> and 33.5% of those receiving a conditional discharge re-offend within a year.<sup>8</sup> At-court advice and support services seek to use attendance at court as an opportunity to provide a package of advice and support which will make it less likely that people receiving low level sentences will return to court in the future.
- **Volunteer-based service model:** At-court advice and support services tend to use volunteers to carry out the majority of the direct service provision. This is both useful for distinguishing the services from court professionals but also places an emphasis on wider community engagement.
- **Independent of but complementary to the court:** At-court advice and support services tend to look and feel independent of the court, providing neutral, helpful advice. However, they should also complement the work of the court, fitting within and alongside the day to day court operations.

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5. It is important to note that at-court advice and support services seek to provide time limited offers of support which clients can choose to take or choose not to. This is partly based on the limited resources they can give each client but also on the evidence that over treating low risk individuals can make matters worse. See Bonta, J., Wallace-Capretta, S. & Rooney, R. (2000a). A quasi-experimental evaluation of an intensive rehabilitation supervision program. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 27, 312-329.

6. Of these, 10% were found guilty at court for an indictable offence and 40% for a summary non-motoring offence. This means, as these defendants are below the threshold for community sentences, they are unlikely to receive any assistance with the circumstances that brought them to court in the first place.

7. Ministry of Justice, 'Court statistics (quarterly): April to June 2014', (2014), accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/court-statistics-quarterly-april-to-june-2014>

8. Ministry of Justice, 'Proven reoffending statistics: April 2012 to March 2013', (2015), accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/proven-reoffending-statistic>

### 3. THE WORK OF CASS IN PLYMOUTH

#### Local context

Plymouth is a city of 256,000 people<sup>9</sup> located in the south-west of Devon on the border with Cornwall. The town is relatively ethnically homogenous, with 92.9% of inhabitants describing themselves as white British,<sup>10</sup> compared to 80.5% for the whole of England and Wales. The town experiences notable geographical inequalities with around half of families in the Stonehouse, North Prospect and Barne Barton neighbourhoods dependent on welfare benefits, compared to one in five families across the city as a whole.<sup>11</sup> The city has a disproportionate number of high crime areas - more than 15% of Plymouth's areas are in the worst 10% of the country in terms of crime levels.<sup>12</sup>

Plymouth has a significant problem with alcohol abuse. Hospital admission for alcohol related conditions are 20.3% higher than the national average. Alcohol use is a significant contributor to violent crime and is a factor in 40% of all recorded domestic abuse incidents.<sup>13</sup> The city also has an above average number of adults in receipt of incapacity welfare benefits for mental illness.<sup>14</sup>

Numbers of problem drug users – around 0.7% of the population - are typical but present a major problem in terms of crime, anti-social behaviour and health problems. Most identified priority offenders, for example, are illicit drug users.<sup>15</sup>

The city has an active network of voluntary support agencies providing services including alcohol and drug treatment, community mental health support, women-specific support, emergency housing and food banks.

#### CASS team

Currently, the service has two paid staff members; a full time service lead who splits her time between Plymouth and two sites in Cornwall, and a support worker dedicated to the Plymouth site working full time in Plymouth. The service has a team of around ten volunteers who receive training and support in identifying and responding to a range of needs. Volunteer turnover is relatively low, enabling the team to develop and retain experience. Volunteers work with clients in pairs and a paid staff member is always on call to deal with problematic issues. Volunteers also handle much of the administration and co-ordination work.

#### The CASS service

CASS provides advice, direct support with practical problems and referral into long-term support in Plymouth Magistrates Court. Figure 1 presents an overview of the CASS model in the form of an impact map. The impact map describes the inputs which make the work of the service possible, the activities that it undertakes and the outcomes which it achieves. CASS's inputs are broadly

9. From Plymouth Population 2011, Part of the Plymouth's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. Available online at <http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/jsnaplymouthpopluationdraft.pdf>

10. From Plymouth Population 2011, Part of the Plymouth's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. Available online at <http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/jsnaplymouthpopluationdraft.pdf>

11. Plymouth Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2009, available online at <http://www.plymouthpct.nhs.uk/CorporateInformation/reportsandinquiries/Documents/JSNA%202009%20inc%20photos.pdf>

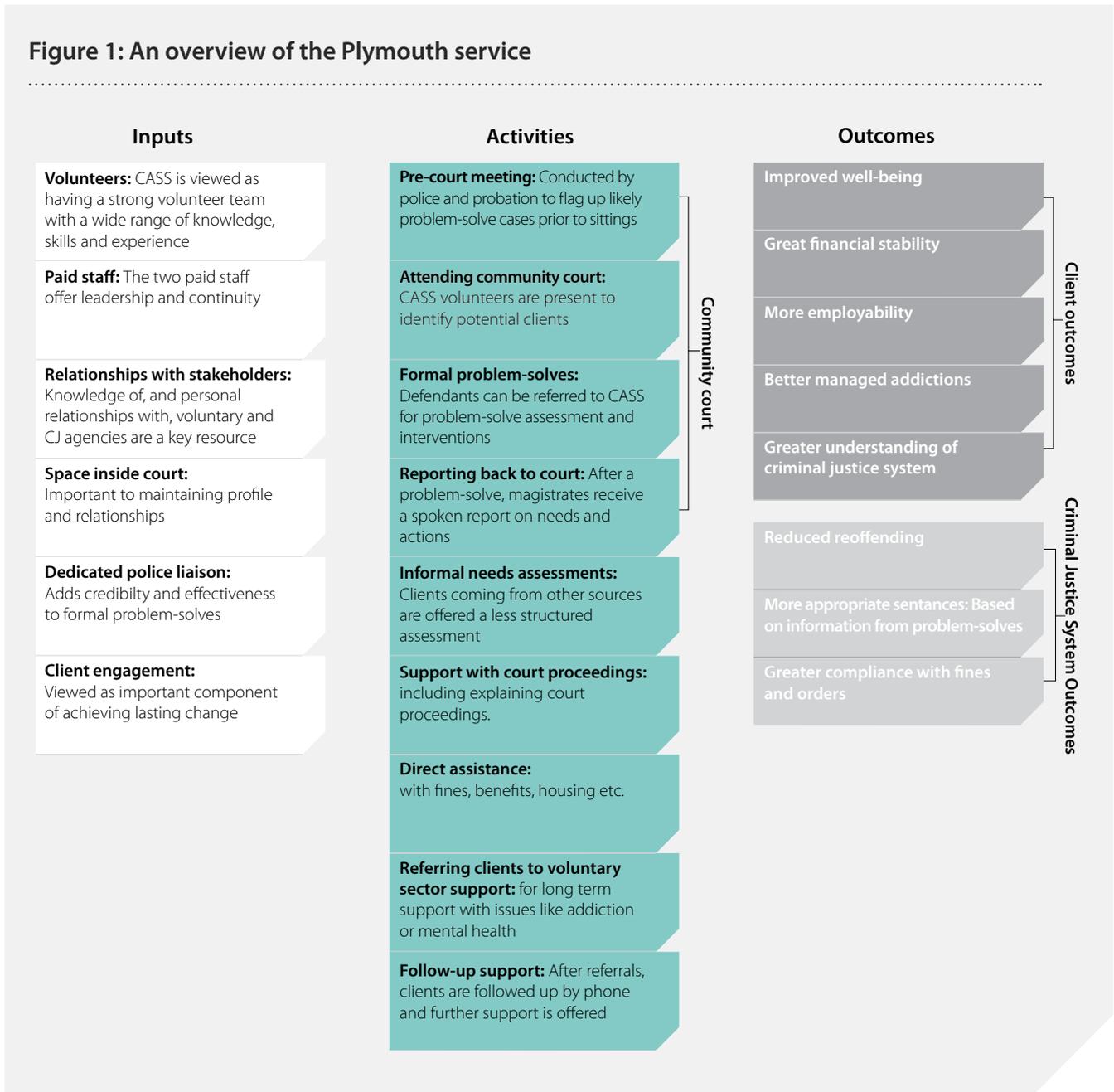
12. South West Observatory (2011) *Indices of Deprivation 2010 – Plymouth Summary* Available online at <http://www.swo.org.uk/EasysiteWeb/getresource.axd?AssetID=48870&type=full&servicetype=Inline>

13. From *Plymouth Alcohol Needs Assessment 2011*, produced as part of the JSNA. Available online at <http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/jsnaalcoholneedsassessment.pdf>

14. Plymouth Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2009

15. Plymouth Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2009

**Figure 1: An overview of the Plymouth service**



split into three groups – the human resources of the service such as paid staff, volunteers, support acquired via relationships with partners such as court space, police support and organisational backing, and the engagement of clients. The activities of the service are split into two strands. Firstly, it provides support to clients via a broad range of approaches. Secondly, CASS supports the work of the Plymouth’s Community Court (described in more detail in section 4). CASS offers three main forms of support: support with court proceedings, direct assistance for practical problems and supported referrals to long-term support.

**Support with court proceedings**

CASS workers describe that many defendants with mental health issues or other vulnerabilities find the experience of attending court to be very difficult. They can be intimidated by the formal trappings of the court or unsure about what is required of them. Where appropriate, CASS seeks to support these people to minimise their distress and to ensure that it does not lead to potentially harmful outcomes such as non-attendance.

Many agencies in Plymouth are aware of CASS and refer vulnerable clients there when they have a pending court date. Other clients come into contact with CASS either because they are visibly distressed in the court building or because they request help from a member of court staff and are referred.

CASS supports people in court in a variety of ways including explaining court procedures, offering a supportive presence in court in the way that a family member might, explaining particular needs to court staff where they have been overlooked and on rare occasions assisting unrepresented clients in presenting their experience to the court.

### Case Study – Support with court proceedings

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Mr A was referred to CASS by his Community Mental Health Team a month before he was due to appear in court. He had been diagnosed with anxiety and depression which had been exacerbated by the court case, the nature of which had led to him moving out of his family home.

On arriving at court to meet with CASS, Mr A was extremely anxious and had difficulty entering the court building. CASS workers took Mr A into an empty court room to explain who would be present and how proceedings would occur. They helped him consider things he needed to discuss with his solicitor and agreed that the same CASS worker would accompany him to the hearing as a supporter.

### Direct assistance

CASS staff also work directly to resolve issues which clients might be facing outside of the court. Many CASS clients have vulnerabilities such as illiteracy, anxiety, poor communication skills, learning difficulties or mental health issues which make it difficult for them to overcome bureaucratic hurdles. CASS workers will work directly with clients through simple interventions such as making phone calls, filling out forms, and sometimes visiting benefits or housing offices and other agencies. The most common areas for direct support include unpaid fines, benefits, housing and access to healthcare. However, the range of issues is hugely diverse and CASS takes a pragmatic approach to issues as varied as researching access to employment grants for a young person with a job offer conditional on him taking driving lessons, to helping an unexpectedly remanded client pass his car keys to a relative so that his minicab – his main source of income – was not towed away.

While the scale of these problems can sometimes seem small, both workers and clients take the view that CASS workers' willingness to respond flexibly to clients' priorities is a key part of their ability to form a rapport with clients and encourage them to access long-term support.

### Case Study – Direct practical support

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Mr J was a Bristol resident referred to CASS by probation. He had been in Plymouth a week waiting for his case to progress and in that time had missed a job centre appointment which led to the cancellation of his benefits. CASS helped him arrange a crisis loan and also access a food bank to receive a food parcel to support him over the further week he had to remain in Plymouth. CASS followed up with Mr J after his return to Bristol and found that due to on-going benefits issues he had missed his first probation appointment and did not have mobile phone credit to contact his probation officer. CASS contacted the probation officer on his behalf who rearranged the appointment, potentially avoiding early breach proceedings.

## Supported referral to long-term services

Referring individuals to long-term support is a third aspect of CASS's work. **Many of the needs which clients present with, such as mental health problems and drug or alcohol misuse, require a long-term programme of support to begin to resolve.** CASS workers, and especially the Service Lead, hold strong relationships with staff in a wide range of services in the city, including drug and alcohol treatment, community mental health, supported housing and food banks. CASS also has formal information sharing agreements with a number of other agencies. They are able to use these relationships to facilitate the process of referral, arranging rapid inductions, sharing information on particular client needs and directing clients to named individuals.

Where accessing a service is difficult – for example alcohol support services which often have long waiting lists – CASS can also refer to an interim source of support – such as Alcoholics Anonymous – to support the client until the service becomes available.

### Case Study - Supported Referral to long-term services

Mr L, was a 19 year old Plymouth resident who was directed to Plymouth CASS after engaging with the service at Bodmin Court while appearing on an assault charge. He had been brought up in care and faced a range of issues including alcohol abuse, unemployment and a benefit suspension. He had been referred to a local alcohol treatment agency by police but had not engaged. CASS workers talked him through the potential benefits of accessing alcohol treatment and also of registering with a GP, and explained how to do so. They also resolved outstanding paperwork issues with his benefits claim and arranged for a hot meal to be provided by a local food bank. Mr L visited CASS again three weeks later and reported that he had registered with a GP, begun alcohol treatment and secured a part-time job. He asked the CASS worker to contact the Senior Attendance Centre to ensure that his work would not interfere with his attendance, and for more information about apprenticeships and training, which was provided.

## Following up with clients

Although the work of CASS is focussed on immediate intervention, follow-up support via telephone is an important part of CASS's offer. The schedule of follow-up calls is tailored to each client, but at a minimum each client receives one follow-up call around 1-2 weeks after their initial interview. Follow up calls offer clients an opportunity to highlight further support needs – which can be particularly relevant if the initial intervention was aimed at resolving an immediate crisis.

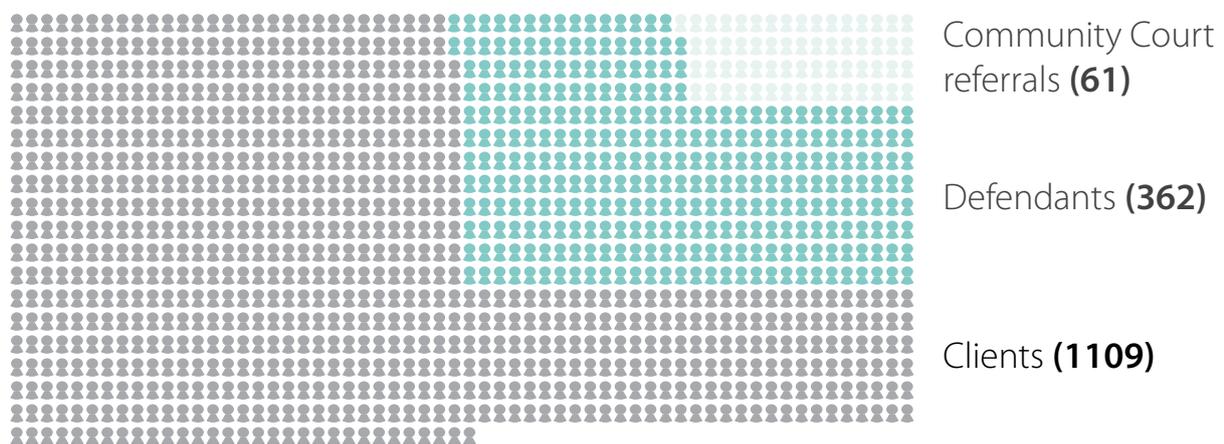
A follow up call will often be scheduled for shortly after a referral appointment. If a client has not successfully engaged with a referral – either because they failed to attend an induction appointment or if the service did not meet their expectation - the follow up call allows this to be picked up

## 4. CASS AND THE COMMUNITY COURT

Today, CASS and the community court are key features of the magistrates' court in Plymouth. The community court sits weekly and covers guilty-pleading low-level offenders from the whole of Plymouth.

The community court provides a sixth of CASS's clients. The community courts sits for one day per week in the magistrates' court and is overseen by a specific bench of magistrates. The court follows the Criminal Justice: Simple, Speedy, Summary (CJSS) model, focussing on cases where a guilty plea is expected. Community Court magistrates are encouraged to engage directly with clients to both uncover more about the background to offences and to help defendants understand the court proceedings. Devon and Cornwall police have assigned an officer to attend the community court sittings and she works closely with CASS in supporting the court.

**Figure 2: Make up of CASS client group**



CASS volunteers attend all community court sittings. At the commencement of each case, magistrates point out the volunteer to the defendant and highlight the option of requesting CASS support. During community court hearings, magistrates have the option of adjourning a case and requesting that CASS offer the defendant a problem-solving intervention or 'problem-solve'.

Problem-solves are conducted in the CASS office or court interview rooms. The defendant meets with a CASS worker to discuss the background to their offending. The CASS worker conducts a structured needs assessment and creates a voluntary action plan which may involve providing direct interventions or referring the client to statutory or third-sector support. After a problem solve, the CASS worker reports back to the court, describing the needs identified and any actions to be taken by CASS or the defendant.

## Case Study: Community Court Problem Solving

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Ms C was a defendant in a community court who was referred by magistrates for a problem-solve. She was interviewed by CASS and with police liaison, together with a probation officer. In the interview she described a wide range of issues include debt, depression, alcohol abuse and a history of domestic violence. CASS created an action plan for her, referring her to the Citizens Advice Bureau and an alcohol support service and helping her register for a GP. Based on the report of the problem-solve, magistrates sentenced her to a community order which included a Specified Activity Requirement to attend Promise – a local service which specialises in supporting vulnerable women offenders and could offer specific support with dealing with the repercussions of domestic violence.

Magistrates say that having the option of problem-solves enables them to better understand the background of offenders – particularly in cases where the offence does not warrant a probation report. The action plans created also enable them to make a more informed assessment of the resources available for the individual in the community which can support more appropriate sentencing.

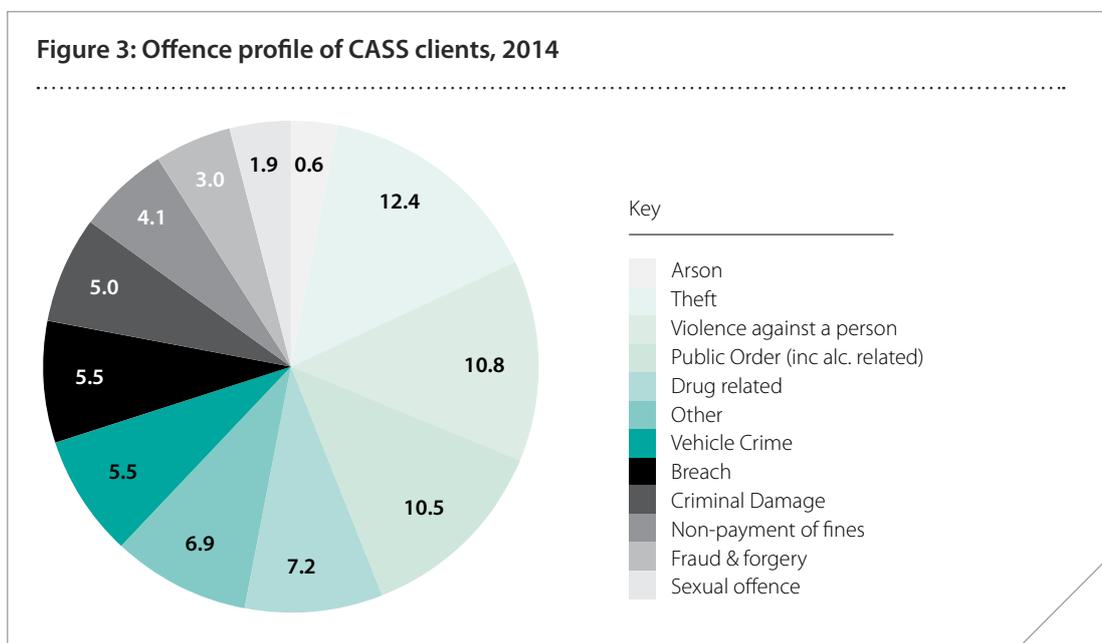
Although the community court is crucial to CASS's relationship with the court in Plymouth, it's worth emphasising that the service also operates in two sites – Bodmin and Truro – which do not have a community court. Some stakeholders suggested that in those sites, CASS may operate in a wider range of sittings and with a broader set of magistrates than in Plymouth where the service is particularly associated with the Community Court. However, even in Plymouth CASS volunteers attend a range of non-community court sessions.

## 5. CASELOAD OF CASS

### Caseload profile

In 2014, CASS worked with 469 clients. CASS saw around 24 repeat clients and saw 9 new clients each month. In terms of demographics, two thirds of clients were men, and a third women. The overwhelming majority of clients were White British. 32% of clients were defendants, while the remainder were attending courts as victims, witnesses or supporters of participants or they had come to the court to specifically use the CASS service.

Of the defendants, 12% were in court charged with theft offences, 11% for violent offences and 11% for public order offences. 10% in court for failure to comply with a court order, either through the breach of a community sentence or non-payment of a fine. The majority of those at CASS who were in court as defendants had been a defendant previously. 8% had one prior conviction, 24% had between two and five prior convictions, and 30% had six or more prior convictions.



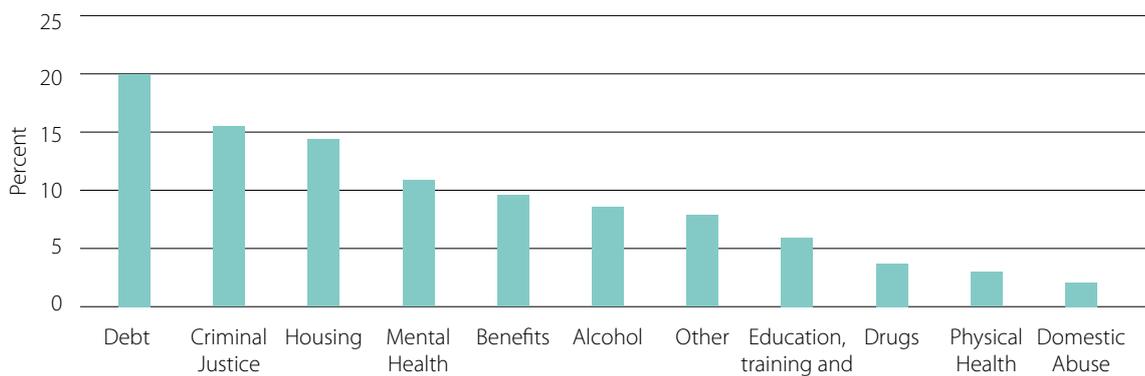
### Identified needs in the CASS caseload

As part of their work, CASS performs assessments on clients to identify and respond to their needs.

The needs profile of CASS clients in 2014 shows that debt, housing and mental health were the biggest identified needs for clients, and 15% went to CASS to get a better understanding of the criminal justice process.

Though the service is available to all, CASS has a special focus on working with low-level persistent offenders, who cycle through the criminal justice system, to prevent their future return to court. These offenders tend to commit low level offences like public order offences (like disorderly conduct in public), offences that on their own may seem minor but which end up absorbing a good deal of the criminal justice system's resources. Because their offending itself tends to be relatively low level and therefore unlikely to warrant a formal community sentence, this client group cycle through courts regularly, receiving low level dispositions like conditional discharges and fines.

**Figure 4: Needs profile of CASS clients, 2014**



This population often have criminogenic needs which lead to their offending. The goal of CASS is to therefore give them assistance to identify and address needs which would otherwise lead to escalating offending. Therefore, we looked at whether CASS was targeting clients with dynamic criminogenic needs:

- Lack of employment and income: 28% of CASS clients were identified as out of work. 22% identified as having debt problems. 12% identified as having problems with their current benefits. There is a complex interplay between employment, debt, offending and reoffending. Evidence points towards employment status and income affecting and being influenced by offending.
- Lack of suitable accommodation: 25% of CASS clients were identified as lacking suitable, stable accommodation or were homeless. Offenders with accommodation problems have been found to be more likely to reoffend.
- Mental health: 12% of CASS clients were identified as having poor emotional well-being. Mental ill health can be a factor in poor emotional well-being and there is strong evidence that desistance from crime rests on improving a person's emotional well-being.
- Drug misuse: 5% of CASS clients were identified as having drug misuse issues. There are well-established links between drug misuse and offending.
- Alcohol misuse: 11% of CASS clients were identified as having alcohol misuse issues. Problematic alcohol consumption is associated with crime, particularly heavy or binge drinking and violent crime. However, the links between alcohol, crime and reoffending are complex.

Next, we looked at the extent to which clients had multiple needs. 30% of cases that came to CASS in 2014 were identified as involving people with more than one need. 10% of those involved people with 3 or more needs. The most common multiple needs were benefits and housing, debt and criminal justice issues, housing and mental health and debt and benefits.

It is clear from our look at the CASS caseload that there are many people who come through our courts who have needs that, if unaddressed, are likely to increase their propensity to offend.

## 6. ACTIVITY AND INTERIM OUTCOMES OF CASS

CASS's overarching aims are to improve compliance with and the effectiveness of court orders, and thereby reduce reoffending and reduce the costs incurred by those returning to court. To support this work, we have been working with CASS to look at how far CASS is delivering on a range of interim outcomes that, based on the evidence of what works, should be influencing their overarching aims.

Firstly, we look at what work CASS did in 2014 (its activity). Secondly, we look at the extent to which CASS's activities are geared toward delivering a response to identified, unmet need, using the theory that if CASS can do this, in line with the risk-need responsivity evidence base, it will be delivering a service likely to reduce re-offending (responsivity to need). Thirdly, we look at client well-being and perceptions of procedural fairness following contact with CASS, seeking to capture the extent to which CASS has been helpful and the extent to which it has helped clients understand the court process, key elements of procedural fairness practice which has been shown to reduce re-offending and improve perceptions of the justice system. Lastly, we look at stakeholder perceptions of the CASS service to see what value key agencies and partners think CASS is delivering.

### CASS activity

In 2014, CASS worked with 469 clients, delivering 1109 assessments and taking 1614 separate actions to support and assist them. Figure 4 shows that almost 70% of CASS's actions were direct intervention with clients or providing them with emotional support, advice and information.

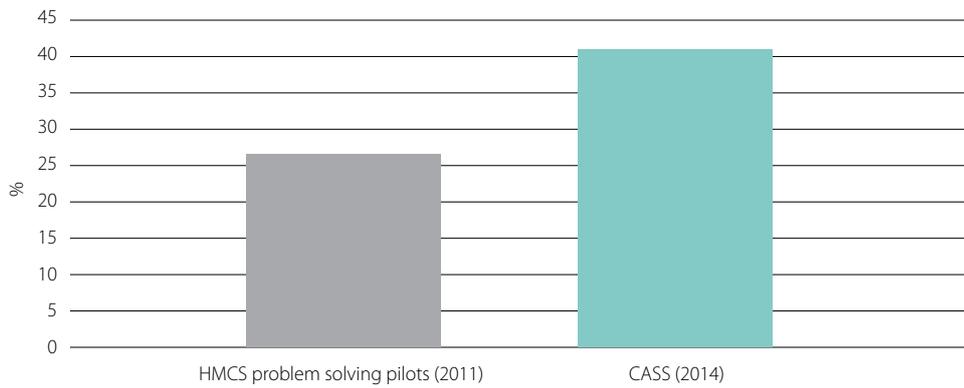
**Figure 5: Types of activity**

Support with court proceedings	Direct assistance for practical problems	Referral to direct support
22.4%	47.2%	30.3%

CASS makes a referral to an outside agency in the rest of the cases. Of this activity, benefits, housing and debt take up 43% of the individual case actions CASS took in 2014, helping clients navigate the criminal justice system a further 15% and mental health advice 11%. There was significant attrition between the CASS referral and the first appointment: 41% of the clients attended the first appointment. This is to be expected. When compared to the HMCS problem solving pilot projects in 2010/11, CASS's attrition rate compares very favourably. 41% of CASS clients who were referred to a service attended at least one appointment, compared to 29% in the problem solving pilots.

Of those who did access services following referral, 58% were intending to continue accessing the service they were referred to. Overall, this meant that close to a third of CASS clients who were referred engaged with and intended to continue to engage with an outside provider who was addressing their needs.

**Figure 6: Take up of voluntary referrals: CASS vs HMCS problem solving pilots**



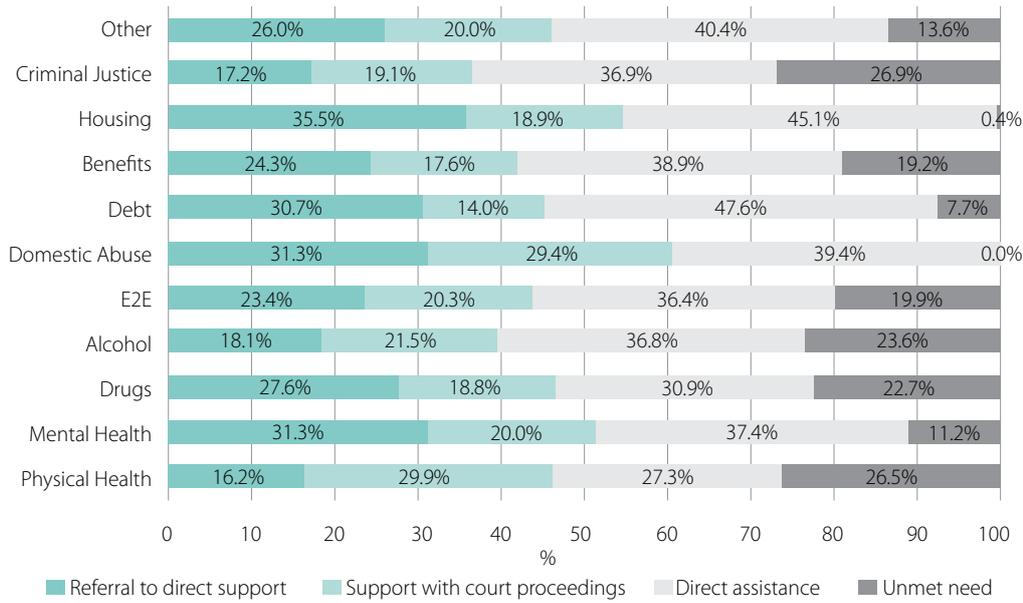
### CASS responsivity to need

However, as outlined in section 2, activity on its own is not enough. The CASS model rests on identifying needs and responding to them, either through direct intervention or emotional support, advice and information in the CASS office, or through referral. Therefore, it is important to see if CASS is responding to the needs identified. Figure 6 shows the service response following identification of need. It is important to be clear that this does not mean that the response was necessarily effective, only that CASS was able to provide a response. Therefore, what the chart does show is that in only 15% of cases where a need was identified did CASS not match that with a response targeted at it. In general, our analysis suggests in the overwhelming majority of cases, CASS responded to needs when identified. In only a small number of areas has CASS failed to find a response to an identified need.<sup>16</sup>

In follow up interviews with clients, this responsivity to need had directly led to self-reported improvements in the ability of clients to address the needs underlying their cases. 12% of clients interviewed reported that CASS intervention had directly led to improvements improving their debt issues and in helping them access benefits to which they were entitled. A further 7% said that, through CASS, they had been able to make new arrangements for paying off fines. Of those receiving referrals out of CASS, 10% said the services they had engaged helped their mental well-being. This qualitative work suggests that CASS is not only responding to identified need but that clients are finding the response helpful in addressing underlying problems they face.

16. It is possible that this unmet need was a function of prioritising addressing particular unmet needs of a client over others, given the limited amount of time CASS has to work with its cohort.

**Figure 7: Responsivity of CASS to need**



### Client well-being and perceptions of procedural fairness

Research evidence suggests that improving public perceptions of “procedural fairness” – the fairness, neutrality and supportiveness of criminal justice procedures - can enhance the legitimacy of the justice system, increase compliance with court orders and reduce crime. Helpfulness and understanding are key elements of procedural fairness. From the follow up interviews, it seems that CASS delivers wider benefit to Plymouth Magistrates’ Court by enhancing the procedural fairness experienced by its court users who access CASS. Firstly, when asked about the impact of CASS interventions, the most valued impact ascribed to CASS was the emotional support and advice they had delivered, with the second most valued impact being the benefits clients felt they had from the direct assistance provided. Secondly, there was also clear evidence from the interviews that CASS had helped clients understand the court process better and that it had helped improve perceptions of the court’s legitimacy. A number of interviewees described how CASS had improved the court experience, increased their motivation to access support and that they valued the helpfulness of the service.

Taking these elements together, it appears CASS is delivering a service that exemplifies practice which we know have a strong prospect of reducing re-offending and return to court. In delivering these interim outcomes, it makes it likely CASS is delivering its overarching aims.

## Stakeholder perceptions

In 2013, we interviewed a range of stakeholders including clients, volunteers, magistrates and police about their perceptions of the project's impact. Stakeholders described the outcomes of the service from two perspectives. For clients, they pointed to long-term life changes triggered by engagement with CASS and with the services which CASS referred on to. These were (i) improvements in well-being, both in the short term where a supportive engagement with CASS can offer feelings of being valued and optimism about the future, and in the longer term, as accessing support for chronic needs can lead to life changes; (ii) greater financial stability for CASS clients as CASS resolves issues around benefits and fines and refers on to services which can support with debt; (iii) greater employability as CASS helps clients identify and access training and volunteering opportunities; (iv) better managed addictions, potentially leading to abstinence as a result of accessing alcohol or drug treatment; (v) a greater understanding of and trust in the criminal justice system.

Criminal Justice system stakeholders also pointed to a number of ways in which CASS enabled them to perform their roles better. Most prominently, there was a widely shared belief that CASS was producing a long-term reduction in reoffending rates by engaging people with services that would provide long-term support with factors underlying offending such as addictions, mental illness and homelessness.

Magistrates also pointed to the information which CASS provide the community court as enabling them to make more appropriate sentences. For example, CASS assessments identified mitigating factors or support options which could be incorporated into a community order. Clients also stated that the help that CASS offered in understanding sentences improved their ability to comply with fines and orders.

These findings are consistent with findings from similar initiatives. The 2011 post implementation study on problem solving pilots identified that stakeholders found the services "worthwhile" and that it helped outside service providers and court agencies understand each other better.

## 7. CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS FOR CASS

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From the interviews, stakeholders identified a range of factors which they believe underpin CASS's success:

- **Strong leadership is in place to build networks within the court and in the community:** CASS shows the importance of the role of the Service Lead in building relationships with other agencies and supporting volunteers was stressed by all stakeholders;
- **The open door policy promotes an inclusive, can-do culture:** The fact that CASS welcomes all clients regardless of need profile, offending status or other qualifier was seen as important to reducing barriers to entry, facilitating open relationships with clients, ensuring that all clients had their needs met and building the culture of the service to be inclusive and flexible;
- **CASS's active case work and support model supports more effective referrals:** CASS workers take responsibility for ensuring that referrals are successful, supporting clients through the referral process and following up to verify that the referred service is meeting clients' needs. Stakeholders cited numerous examples where significant support was required to help a client engage with a service and are sceptical as to whether a more streamlined 'sign-posting' service could achieve the same success;
- **CASS is valued because it combines strong links with the local voluntary sector with an entrenched position within the justice system:** CASS represents an innovative partnership between the court service and the voluntary sector, made possible by a fortunate coincidence of local leadership, charitable funding and a central government pilot. CASS's ability to make effective referrals is dependent on its knowledge of and relationships with other agencies. But CASS also maintains strong links with key criminal justice system practitioners including in-court probation officers, police, sentencers and courts staff. This enables CASS to access potential clients and resolve issues on their behalf. These relationships are strengthened by CASS's involvement in the community court.
- **A visible in-court location matters:** CASS is based in a visible office in the public area of the courts, which enables clients to self-refer to the service and promotes transparency.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

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The Centre has now been actively working with CASS for two years, as we see it as one of a number of models of 'problem-solving' practice, aiming to ensure that the justice system addresses and resolves the problems of those who come into contact with it, rather than simply process their cases. CASS shows that this approach can be valuable in strengthening the criminal justice system— we have found CASS has a number of strengths:

- The **feedback from stakeholders clearly indicates that CASS is seen as a valuable local resource for the courts** and those professionals working within the court;
- The feedback from stakeholders clearly indicates that **CASS has played an important role in connecting community services to the court and those who come to court and vice versa**. The strength of having CASS physically located within the court clearly allows it to help its clients and other providers navigate the court process and the courts as an institution. For the courts, it gives court staff, magistrates and judges access to services that exist in the community but which they may not be aware of;
- Based on our analysis of the cohort data, it is clear that **CASS is addressing the significant unmet need of people who are coming to court** (and who are likely to return if their needs are not addressed), especially the low level persistent offenders who it has a specific focus on. In 2014, CASS worked with 469 clients, delivering 1109 assessments and taking 1614 separate actions to support and assist them. Without CASS, these needs many have gone unmet.
- There is clear evidence that **CASS has adopted practice which is strongly suggestive that it is making an impact on its overarching aims to improve compliance with and the effectiveness of court orders, and thereby reduce reoffending and reduce the costs incurred by those returning to court**. Based on our analysis, it is clear that CASS is delivering a service in line with the evidence base on what works to reduce re-offending and to improve the well-being of people who come through court.
- There is promising evidence that CASS helps clients feel like they are being treated more fairly.

However, there remain important questions that still require further work:

- **The evidence base for CASS needs to be added to, specifically on its impact on its overarching outcomes and on its value for money**. There is good evidence that CASS is delivering services that are likely to be making the impact it seeks to deliver. However, there remains no evidence gathered that compares CASS on a range of its outcomes to a counterfactual, whether that be a matched group or a control group. Specifically, it would be useful to assess the impact of CASS on its clients compared to a matched control group that receives no similar treatment. If such a study was possible, it would be important to focus not just on re-offending outcomes but also wider wellbeing measures. Moreover, further work is needed to assess CASS's value for money on the outputs and outcomes it achieves;
- **The service isn't yet embedded in such a way that guarantees its sustainability**. CASS's financial future is not secure. At court advice and support services, while valuable, find that the breadth of their client group makes it difficult to raise funding. Although, situated in the criminal justice system, their clients are predominantly not in contact with probation, the main source of rehabilitative services. They present with a range of low-level needs which do not fit neatly into any single commissioning scheme. For these reasons, a joint commissioning approach, taking in crime reduction, public health and adult social care streams may be appropriate.

CASS's promising model is valuable in informing the development of other at-court support projects and in demonstrating the benefits of court taking a more problem-solving approach. Find out more about CASS



## Find out more about CASS

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As part the Better Courts programme, the Centre is working with CASS to help the service measure its impact and develop its model. If you'd like to know more about the work that CASS does, please contact Stephen Whitehead in at: [swhitehead@justiceinnovation.org](mailto:swhitehead@justiceinnovation.org)

# Better Courts Case-study: Plymouth Community Advice and Support Service.

*By Stephen Whitehead*

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THE HADLEY TRUST



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