

An evaluation of Advicenow's internet-based information guides

1. Executive Summary

1.1 Pilots and other evaluation

In the summer and autumn of 2005 Advicenow set up three evaluation pilot projects to test the effectiveness of its downloadable internet guides. Two of these pilots were based on a partnership between Law Centres, Connexions advisers and youth workers, and a third was operated by a number of regional mediation networks.

The two Law Centres in the pilots had been involved in developing Advicenow's guide to homelessness for young people (*Homeless? - Get your foot in the door*), and both were keen to assess how well it was working. The regional mediation networks piloted the Advicenow guide to divorce - *Divorce – a Survival Toolkit*. Two other Advicenow guides - *Bailiffs & debt collection* and *Young Workers* – although not included in pilots, were evaluated through general discussions with advisers and users.

The three pilots involved use of the guides for a period of around eight weeks with service users, in the main by informal advisers¹, supported by advice workers.

The evaluation sought to address a broad spectrum of issues about the usefulness of the guides for all of the different users - advice workers, informal advisers, and advice service clients².

Over a period of two months individual qualitative interviews and topic-guided group discussions took place with all three groups in the pilots. Evaluation of the other two guides sought to glean impressions of the value of the guides through topic-guided discussions.

¹Informal advisers are professionals who are providing a service to the public, but who are not trained advice workers. In this report this includes Connexions advisers, youth workers, and family mediators, but it could well include many other types of professional, including, for example health workers and housing agency staff. Informal advisers often share the same service users with advice agencies, and have links with those agencies. Informal advisers are also described as 'intermediaries' and sometimes as 'problem noticers' in other contexts. In this report the term 'informal advisers' has been chosen because it best conveys the relatively limited but very valuable advice role they have with their service users.

² In the evaluation there were three kinds of users of the guides, and to make it clear which is under discussion, where necessary the report describes the type of user more carefully. The rather awkward term 'end user' has been chosen to show when the user is what might be called the 'client' of a 'service', or 'the public', in other contexts.

1.2 Findings

The general findings were very positive. The evaluation showed that the success of the guides depended on a combination of three elements: the high quality well-focused content; the range of information techniques used, and the range of design techniques used.

Guides worked best when they provided an overview of a specific user 'situation'. The most successful guides offered a clear focus on an identified 'life situation' of relevance to a clearly specified user. A successful overview consisted of information that combined legal rights and guidance, personal issues and guidance, decision-making and steps to take across a range of aspects of the situation, and mythologies to be debunked. *Divorce - a survival toolkit* was described as the best exemplar of this overall approach. *Young Workers* was seen as at least in part as structured around the law and rights, and so less clear both as to audience and purpose.

The use of a very wide range of presentation techniques was a further key to success - grabbing and keeping the reader's attention was shown to be a key requirement of an effective guide. Such techniques included the use of illustrative and realistic case studies, question and answer explorations of issues, checklists and prompts about key factors and key decisions, quotes from real-life experiences, glossaries and other explanations of jargon, board-game style presentations of the sequence of events and presentation of the decisions that needed to be made. Presenting information in such a variety of ways also accommodated the different learning styles of different users.

The range of design techniques also contributed to the success of the guides. By leading with images of people, and illustrating points with cartoons, diagrams, varied uses of colour etc., the reader's attention could be held with greater certainty, opening up the text and making the guide much more interesting.³ Some end-users wanted the design of guides to fit better with the expectations of their age group, and the report takes this point on when it suggests relating design more closely to target group from the outset.

The guides were especially helpful for the informal advisers in the pilots in helping them to understand problems. For the end-users, guides achieved their maximum impact when used in the interactions between informal advisers and end-users, and the report concludes that informal advisers have a key role to play as an important channel for the dissemination of rights and legal information, notably enabling early intervention.

Perhaps unsurprisingly Law Centre workers did not see the guides as of direct help in their own work with clients, but for Law Centre clients there was a desire to have information of the type provided in the guides to take away from an interview. The report concludes that guidance for advisers and informal advisers on how to use the information with users would help to improve its impact.

Some advisers took the view that some problems or issues, such as homelessness or divorce, were too complex to be addressed by end-users without professional support. However, the evaluation did not succeed in testing whether the end-users agreed with this. Whilst it is clear that where users had met advisers the interpretative role of the

³ A set of 'quality standards' are proposed in the Conclusions that describe these components of quality in more detail.

adviser had been of value, this did not necessarily indicate that the users could access information unaided.

Most respondents thought that access to information was a key difficulty. Some respondents saw use of the internet as more routine for some groups than others, and described the value of a printed guide as limited by the chances of a user picking the right one up at the right time for them. Whilst these thoughts were in the main speculative, there was a clear sense from respondents that better, more obvious links between the www.advicenow.org.uk internet guides and the paper copies used in the pilots was desirable.

The evaluation pilots enabled some of the professionals involved to gain insight both into the role of the guides for their own services, and the value of the guides to their clients. These gains in understanding have helped to motivate advisers to stay involved in the future development and evaluation of guides aimed at their service users.

The different types of advisers involved in the pilots were helped in the pilots and in the evaluation to develop new understandings of how their various services were benefiting their users, encouraging their sense of the value of a partnership approach both to services and to information development.

1.3 Recommendations

Advicenow's guides would be improved by the further development and use of a set of quality standards that are closely linked to careful identification of target users and their life situations by engaging with advisers and with end-users as intensively as is possible.

Advicenow's successful use of design, information presentation techniques and high quality information content should be sharpened up to ensure first, that these techniques do not become too complicated, and second, that design is related more carefully to specific audiences. The report suggests that Advicenow unify its partnership approach to guide development with pre-planned pilot evaluations.

To make the best use of the guides, Advicenow should develop support materials for the guides that address explicitly the ways in which both advisers and informal advisers can use the guides in their own practices with their own users.

To consolidate the quality of guide development, the report also recommends that Advicenow consider an induction process for its writers in order to pass on lessons learned, and to improve access to its website through an approach to Google, as part of its ongoing marketing efforts.

May 2006

ASA Advicenow
Bramah House
65- 71 Bermondsey Street
London
SE1 3XF

www.advicenow.org.uk/evaluation