



**Finding better problems  
for better solutions:**

**Digital insights for  
Hackney Advice Sector**

**A report prepared by Social Spider CIC June 2016**



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# I Introduction

The following report represents the findings of a number of sessions Social Spider carried out with voluntary sector advice providers and advice seekers in the London Borough of Hackney in Summer/Autumn 2015. The sessions sought to answer the question:

*What, if anything, could digital tools and devices contribute to better accessibility and provision of advice services in Hackney?*

The initial aim was to try to find problems that people actually have, and feel they have. From there the aim was to better understand those problems and how they feel before going on to develop some tentative ideas for ways in which those problems might be solved.

To do this we spoke to people to derive a set of detailed insights into what it feels like to provide and receive advice services in Hackney.

This report details the context of the work, draws out emerging themes and insights, and finishes with some of the ideas that we suggested.

The appendix provides a more detailed commentary on what was said at each session.

This report deliberately offers reader the chance to 'see under the bonnet' of our discovery process with the intention of increasing awareness both of this specific project and of the potential value of using similar approaches to develop digital services working with voluntary sector organisations.

It is a quick turnaround report documenting a work in progress and, as such, may be rough around the edges in places.

Voluntary sector advice providers in the London Borough of Hackney face the dual challenge of decreasing levels of public sector funding, and rising demand for services from local people.

Organisations must work to ensure their own continued existence while meeting clients' needs in an uncertain funding climate. Hackney has a large and diverse not-for-profit advice sector ranging from relatively large general advice providers to small volunteer-led organisations working with specific communities who provide advice as part of a range of activities.

In 'Working Together Better'<sup>1</sup> a report for the local consortium Sustainable Advice in Hackney Partnership (SAH), completed and published by Social Spider in September 2015, raised a number of issues faced by Hackney-based voluntary sector advice providers including:

### Demand for services appears to be rising – but is hard to monitor consistently

Big Lottery Fund's Advice Services Transition Fund (ASTF)<sup>2</sup> – the scheme that funded SAH - was launched in October 2012 and awarded a total of £68million to 228 partnerships across England, with half of the funding provide by The Cabinet Office. The fund stipulated that local partnerships should show that they have plans in place to improve efficiency, adaptability and quality of service over the long term.

Alongside the launch of the fund, the Cabinet Office published 'Not-for-Profit Advice Services in England'<sup>3</sup>, which it described as 'a review of the not-for-profit social welfare advice sector'.

This review noted that: 'quantifying the total level of demand for advice or need for advice services is challenging as data is not collected in a consistent way. However, there seems to be a pattern of rising demand during difficult economic circumstances.'

A 2013 report by Hackney Advice Forum using data from 20 local organisations showed a significant increase in local use of advice services between 2011–12 and 2012–13, with further increases predicted in 2013–14. Phone Contacts increased 13% from 71,140 in 2011–12 to 80,652 in 2012–13 while Face to Face Contacts increased 17% from 21,884 in 2011–12 to 25,672 in 2012–13.<sup>4</sup>

Being able to show the demand for advice services would allow Hackney advice providers to seek funding with more evidence and campaign for less cuts to the services, depending on the organisations' mission.

### Evidencing outcomes

Working Together Better noted that London Borough of Hackney (LBH) had not been impressed with the standard of bids for the most recent round of consortium grants awarded to local voluntary sector advice providers. In particular, officers were keen to see better evidence of the outcomes produced by advice services.

The Working Together Better report advises SAH to explore funding opportunities to develop models for measuring outcomes generated by local advice services.

<sup>1</sup> <https://t.co/8Q6xmFalOs>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/astf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/not-for-profit-advice-services-in-england>

<sup>4</sup> Data from 'Clients Needs and the Independent Advice Sector' – Hackney Advice Forum

### Early intervention and reducing face-to-face advice provision

Working Together Better reported enthusiasm amongst LBH officers for more early intervention and services provided via remote channels in order to reduce the demand for one-to-one services.

The report advises SAH to consider developing projects that:

- Provide specialist early intervention services that tackle specific local needs
- Give local people the information they need to help themselves without or prior to accessing advice services

The report noted that for advice providers, funders and advice-seekers, both providing and accessing face-to-face services are resource intensive and time-consuming activities. Whilst often this service is vital, in other cases it is not the optimal service from the provider or the advice-seeker's perspective.

### Referring advice seekers effectively

Working Together Better highlighted that many voluntary sector advice providers interviewed for the report expressed a desire to better understand the work of other advice organisations operating in the borough.

While it was recognised that the SAH website – [hackneyadvice.org.uk](http://hackneyadvice.org.uk) – is helping to clarify the situation – and some specific links that were working well – generally there is widespread confusion about what

other agencies do and the basis for referring clients elsewhere.

The report advised that beyond the work it is already doing in collating information about services online at – SAH should consider coordinating referrals via a single point of access.

### The sector working together

Working Together Better outlined a number of both historical and ongoing differences of understanding amongst local organisations about the role of voluntary sector advice providers working in Hackney.

Many members of local providers' forum, Hackney Advice Forum – often smaller organisations either volunteer-run or fewer than two members of staff – believe organisations should focus more on campaigning while larger organisations, including those within SAH, are more focused on quality assured service delivery.

The report recommended that SAH should look to initiate a new Alliance or Working Group to focus on practical collaboration. This would not resolve either of the underlying issues but it would create an opt-in route for those organisations interested in taking it.

Possible focuses for collaboration – potentially of practical use to both larger and smaller – include:

- Sharing information and resources between partners for specific purposes – such as volunteer recruitment
- Developing shared administration systems

# 3 Methodology

Working with SAH, Social Spider carried out five workshops with service providers<sup>5</sup> and service users of advice services in Hackney to explore in detail the possibility of developing digital services, products or interventions to address some of the issues outlined in the Working Together Better report and additional related problems identified by participants.

The objective was to find out what the problems with advice provision in the borough are from the perspective of advice providers and from the perspective of members of the community in Hackney - with the intention of surfacing particular, detailed problems for which we could then begin to develop solutions.

## Who?

### Advice Providers

A variety of representatives, staff members and volunteers working in the provision of advice in the London borough of Hackney.

### Advice Seekers

Hackney residents who either have or have not accessed advice services within the borough.

## Why we talked to them

Understand organisational and sector challenges. Understand both organisations and the ways in which organisations interact. Understand existing offerings in borough. Understand the problems of advice provision from the perspective of advice providers including different challenges faced by organisations with different sizes and roles. Understand the service journey of advice seeking and advice provision from provider perspective. Understand challenges of advice provision from provider perspective. Understand organisational tolerance in sector for digital products, services or interventions in advice giving.

Understand user preference, user need, emotional journey of advice seeking and use of advice services. Understand how advice services look for the outside. Understand problems users actually have when accessing advice services.

## What the sessions involved

Discovery workshops of roughly two hours comprised of a pair of discussions around set questions and group discussions based on sticky note feedback from each partnered discussion.

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<sup>4</sup> Including voluntary sector advice providers and staff from housing associations and public sector agencies

The aim was to capture granular insights where possible: specifics rather than generalities. We wanted to make sure that we understood the problems as well as possible before accepting any assumptions about the nature or order of possible digital solutions.

Our starting point was that there are four main factors in a successful advice interaction:

- the advice service
- the advice provided
- the advice seeker and
- the broader landscape and conditions both operate within

It was important for us to explore all four of these domains in order to create ideas for digital services that would meet the needs of real people in real situations in a real landscape.

In each session we facilitated a conversation designed to draw out details about ways in which people and organisations and their staff understood the process of seeking and accessing advice and the particular emotional and practical issues this involved.

We went into this process forearmed by our previous work with providers in the borough and with our previous experience of exploring the possibilities and challenges of developing digital interventions into an existing service and organisational landscape.

We already knew that there were some assumptions to be tested and that by making explicit our intention to interrogate them we could actually begin to build a picture with enough detail to allow us to then develop and test a number of potential service ideas.

We captured the richness of each discussion through a combination of taking notes as discussions took place and collecting sticky notes generated from the discussions. Throughout sessions we fed back what we had noted to the group, giving further opportunity to modify or add to the record.

A full commentary on the sessions is included as an Appendix on page 19.

## Summary of Emerging Themes

Across our discussions there were several areas of crossover between service providers and members of the public but also some issues where interpretations differed.

The tables below pull out some of the key emerging themes – the full commentary in the Appendix provides more detail.

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### Advice Providers

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The problems that people seek advice to resolve are 'ticking clocks' in that they often tend to escalate over time leading to a point of crisis. Many advice seekers seek advice at the point of crisis rather than in anticipation of it.

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Advice is not just information: it's information that is actionable.

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People seeking advice are not uniform and do not have uniform motives for seeking advice.

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For the advice seeker the goal is to reduce or remove the problem they are experiencing. Their understanding of how the advice provider may support them in this may differ from the advice providers' understanding.

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People arrive at advice services at points of intense emotional turbulence; carrying with them expectations, hopes, fears and wished-for outcomes.

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Advice providers like to feel that they do a valuable and useful job but are aware that the right 'advice' does not always feel right to the advice seeker. If there is not a simple answer to a problem or if the advice does little to mitigate the current emotional and practical turmoil, the individual advice seeker will not necessarily rate the service as useful.

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### Advice Seekers

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Advice seeking may have downsides as well as upsides and these will change from person to person and community to community.

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Accepting the need for advice is also accepting the reality of a situation. This, in itself, can be unpleasant. The practicalities of advice seeking (where the advice provider premises are, who else you anticipate being there) can also compound that sense of personal discomfort.

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Sometimes needing advice involves a challenge to who you think you are.

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Advice providers are often the last port of call for people with problems; not the first. Primary sources of advice may be friends, family members or other trusted community figures. If the people you know don't know more than you about what you should do, then you are unlikely to move forward in the resolution of your problem.

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People may be seeking support rather than advice.

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Information, like advice, has to be possible to put into action for it to resolve a problem. Information seems to be picked up in trusted places or from trusted people. Advice providers may, initially be neither of these things.

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## Advice Providers

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The advice provider joins the journey of the advice seeker's problem only after the advice seeker has lived with this problem for a period of time: they often meet the advice seeker when the problem is most acutely felt.

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Successful advice is a combination of the right knowledge, the right action that follows from it at the right time.

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It was clear that even with SAH project to map and collate all of the information about available advice providers; even providers were not sure of available provision in the borough. This creates a particular problem for signposting and referral. The answer to this is often suggested as being a necessity to simplify the advice provision landscape or for the advice provision landscape to formally coordinate provision. This has been a point of discussion in the past. Similarly, triage had been suggested via one point of contact initially as a remedy to the same challenge.

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Information decays, and still does not do the job of helping someone to fit themselves to the provider that best suits their needs. If providers of advice find this difficult, members of the public find this far more challenging.

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The problem of being unable to utilise volunteers as a resource is also a significant challenge with advice services tied to particular places and times unless peripatetic, which some providers of advice are. These providers tend to be embedded in other services, with advice forming a small part of their overall service.

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## Advice Seekers

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It's questionable whether advice providers are actually 'part of the community' for people who would not automatically think of accessing an advice provider: they may not feel like 'natural' choices or easy ones. Advice seeking by proxy is a common theme, as is the reluctance of some people to 'make the jump' to seeking advice. The path to a provider may be rockier than it appears to the advice provider.

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People who are often asked for advice want to do a good job of providing it; the wish to refer others on with certainty is a strong driver for action.

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Received wisdom about who does and doesn't use digital devices is always worth questioning. As is the assumption that it is only the person with the problem who can be enabled by digital, rather than the broader community around that person.

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If accepting the need for advice is challenging and status challenging; the digital device as a private space to explore first is potentially important. We often google physical symptoms before seeking medical help; especially when the symptom is embarrassing or difficult to admit to experiencing.

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Signposting is only as good as the information the signposter has and how effectively they can relate that information to the person and their problem. If this is ineffective, the person will need to visit an advice provider to receive advice about what advice provider to visit.

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## Advice Providers

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There is potential for a digital service to increase the utilisation of volunteers by aggregating and distributing digital work such as emails, queries or another mechanism for delivering asynchronous advice.

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Similarly, there is potential to supply information to advice providers in a way that reduces their need to 'know' everything about the local landscape by making it easier for them to arrive at useful answers through decision tools and similar.

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Advice providers seemed keen in this session on the possibility of digital tools that would address the problems that they actually face. Moving beyond the idea that digital is just communication of information (websites as analogues of printed materials) and looking at the potential for digital to be a tool seemed more popular than the idea of digital as a replacement of a face to face service.

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Digital may reach people not reached currently by advice services, facilitating their advice usage rather than replacing it.

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As in all of these sessions, digital exclusion was identified as a problem but it was one without a strong basis in evidence for the borough. As such, it's an area where assumption is currently trumping actual data.

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Existing online information sources do not quite 'hit the spot' and that even this knowledge may not usefully contribute to either efficiencies or expansion of advice provision in the borough.

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## Advice Seekers

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The division of advice seeking into 'before, during, after' is very useful, as advice provision models are only focused on 'during'. The idea of extending the influence or operation of advice providers beyond the 'face-to-face' represented by 'during' represents one way of influencing outcomes. Advice providers do not currently have the resources infinitely increase their face to face capacity.

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Ongoing conditions of austerity are leading to increasing levels of personal, family and community instability. Most people do not make it to an advice provide. It is in everyone's interest that those who make the emotional investment to seek advice arrive at the most appropriate service as quickly as possible and that they leave that service with the greatest possibility of carrying out actions beneficial to their situation.

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People seek advice when no one around them knows the answer or when no one around them has the power to enact a solution to a problem. People ask for advice from the people most immediate to them they find trustworthy; people they already see and know. Sometimes people don't know they need advice until someone else points it out. All of these points suggest that the network around someone is as important in help seeking as the individual.

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People are looking for advice about the ways that things really work; something different from broad but shallow information about the way things are intended to work. This illustrates why 'people don't just google it': they want something more than just information.

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## Advice Providers

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Similarly, the need to be aware of what other advice providers are providing was considered to a problem not yet solved. Many of the providers in this session had never met each other, despite all working in the advice providing sector in the borough.

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There is a sense that the dream of more involved and regimented referral and triage is a particular approach to solving the gap between organisations themselves and the gap between those organisations and the people who seek to use their services. There may be potential for a digital project to approach these real problems from a different direction.

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There are strong human motivations to put off and avoid seeking advice. Advice providers require clients to 'take ownership' of their problem, but this sometimes requires emotional resources over and above those available to the client at that point.

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An advice seeker is putting a significant amount of trust in an advice provider with little way at present to work out prior to visiting that advice provider whether that trust is warranted.

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The contrast between actual advice provider client behaviour and 'ideal' client behaviour is strong. People who are in difficult situations are sometimes understandably difficult to help.

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Both formal and informal referral can create expectations that cannot be fulfilled, especially when the advice seeker does not have a strong idea of the limits of the advice available.

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## Advice Seekers

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To be in need of advice is to feel vulnerable. To seek advice greatly increases this sense of vulnerability. Any solution must take this experience of vulnerability into account.

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Knowing exactly what a service can and can't do guards against disappointment. People turn to others they know before they turn to advice services. Word of mouth is a strong driver and might be recognised as a kind of informal signposting.

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It is an unpleasant and embarrassing experience being turned away from an advice service because they cannot help; one that impacts upon future advice seeking.

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It takes courage to seek advice.

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While opinions differ about whether lots of small advice providers are needed or larger ones, it was clear that people don't feel they get to what they need quickly and simply enough.

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All mediums work for some people and not others. Digital is no different.

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## Advice Providers

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Word of mouth referral is often stronger than self directed help seeking. While self agency is vital to resolving problems, the advice seeking situation often seems to foster its opposite. Crisis is when the individual feels they have run to the end of their ability to either resolve or ignore the situation, and has run to the end of the resources they have available.

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Advice seekers who are prepared for their consultation and who have a clear idea of what information is relevant and required for good advice to be provided make the job of advice provision easier. Again, crisis is the least amenable state to the kind of complex decision making and contract setting required to turn advice into action.

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If it is true that only 50% of advice is put into action, this has strong implications for the model of advice provision.

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Taking ownership of the advice and seeing it as a guide to your own action seems to be key in that advice being put into action. Emotionally volatile times are not the best for making complex decisions and negotiating complicated courses of future action.

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Advice provision is about what the advice seeker takes away. In many cases, it is the advice seeker that will have to take the actions rather than the advice provider. The advice provider may help that process along, but cannot take ownership of it.

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A collaboration tool with a portable record of decisions made seems to be valued by advice providers.

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Exploring further with advice providers the discomforts of their profession uncovered a frustration at not being able to help and not being confident that their help made a difference. The gap between the ideal client and the actual client suggested strongly that there is grounds for some kind of intervention, which perhaps may be a digital tool, that would increase the effectiveness of advice given. This would perhaps be something that would enable clients to both prepare for a consultation and also create a record for both advice provider and advice seeker of what was discussed and what was agreed during the consultation.

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Often it is people who did not make it to the advice provider that might actually be most in need of advice and that finding a way to incentivise earlier advice seeking would be beneficial.

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Following the workshops we developed a rough slate of five ideas addressing some of the challenges outlined both by Advice providers and potential Advice seekers.

It was important to develop ideas that were both possible to enact and which addressed not just a service provider need but also took as their starting point the insights we had captured into the emotional experience of advice seeking.

### i. Questions answered by email

This was a simple idea: develop a mechanism for receiving advice questions via email or another form of electronic message medium and developing a way of managing the workflow involved in processing the questions.

Part of this would be developing mechanisms for distributing the work of answering such queries in a way that could be audited.

We looked at this as a potential way of leveraging volunteer time as a resource in Hackney. Currently, while there may be people willing to volunteer their time to assist in delivering advice services in the borough, their ability to contribute their time is limited by a mismatch between the times they are available and the times that advice services providers are available to enable them. Typically, volunteers are available outside of traditional working hours and advice services are available within them.

## ii. **Something to take away from advice sessions**

This idea was for an app or online service that helped those receiving advice services to note the advice that they were being given, help construct to-do lists and agendas. It would include links to other sources of information and would provide a record for the client of the next steps leading on from their appointment.

The principle here was creating a way of collecting together all of the information conveyed and agreed into an electronic setting that would be capable of generating reminders, which could be added to and which, as importantly would exist in a form that was difficult to lose or misplace.

Advice seeking rarely leads to a direct resolution of the issue presented by the individual and often requires a lot of agency on the part of the person seeking the advice for a resolution to be reached. In advice seeking sessions, often the person attending is in a state of mind opposite to the state of mind most useful for taking in complex information and planning a set of future actions.

This app idea would provide a helping hand and would be something that would be collaborative between the advice seeker and advice provider, something like an interactive electronic health record.

**iii. Advice Kit – an advice app in your pocket for you or those around you in future**

This idea was for an app which would solve the problem that very often people seek help and advice from people they trust who may not have any more knowledge or experience of their problem than they have. Traditionally public sector agencies have hoped that signposting would be an effective way of matching people to services that might help them; but signposting requires enough individuals spread evenly enough with enough up to date knowledge to effectively direct others to the most fitting source of help.

Instead of this, we proposed an app that would sit on the device of an individual, which would be available when called up to provide a way of working out which advice service would be best for someone else. Important to this idea was the concept of it being like a first aid kit: something you store away ready to help someone else when they are in need.

So, this would be an app for people who wanted to be able to give others the best advice about where to seek help. Being an app it would be possible to 'push' updates so that the information remained current and so that the app would be ready any time that someone wanted to help someone else seek help.

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#### iv. **Digital triage - matching problem to service**

Potentially using some kind of semantic analysis or similar method, this app or website would seek to provide an interface where people could enter their problem and receive back in response a judgement as to the most appropriate advice provider for their needs along with other information.

The objective would be enable advice seekers who were unable to find the 'right' terminology for their problem to go through a simple and intuitive process to establish what domain of problem their problem belongs to and who in the borough was most likely to be able to help them.

#### v. **What do I need to bring to my appointment? Pre appointment prep and possibly communication prior to appointment**

This application or service would provide help and guidance about what documentation needs to be brought to an appointment. It could present a variety of ways of recording the problem which the individual needs to discuss and could, perhaps, convey that information prior to an appointment.

This could be used to prompt the individual to consider the factors present in the problem they were seeking help for before attending an appointment, helping to get to the 'advice; part of the consultation as quickly as possible.

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## 6

# Conclusions and next steps

We feel there is a strong basis to continue the development of these ideas and to carry out further work with people in Hackney (and potentially elsewhere) to dig deeper into the question of the ways in which digital products might support people with advice needs and the organisations that attempt to help them.

Since the completion of this initial research we have tested the five ideas with a group of advice providers which has provided further insights in developing next steps.

- i. The next steps currently envisaged for the project:
- ii. Consider making a small investment in prototyping ideas at the pre-funding stage
- iii. Work with partners to seek grant funding to develop prototype ideas
- iv. Engage with local commissioners who may be able to provide either financial or in-kind support for further project development
- v. Approach national organisations who may be interested in working in partnership to further develop the initial ideas and/or buy into the process
- vi. Develop an outline business plan with a view to approaching either investors or grant funders for investment in/funding for the suite of products as a social venture/enterprise

This report was primarily written by Mark Brown with contributions from David Floyd and Amy Croome.

If you'd like to talk to us, about either the digital advice in Hackney project or the general approach outlined in the report, please contact us at:

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# 8 Appendix

## What did we find out by talking to people?

### Session one: advice providers Thursday 30th August

#### Question: When do people seek advice?

From the perspective of advice providers, people often chose to seek advice when it is too late. One attendee described advice provision as the constructed process of 'turning desperation into action'.

Various, the moment of choosing to seek advice was described as:

- "when they're at the end of their tether;
- after they have "buried their heads in the sand";
- usually at crisis point;
- at the last moment when 'the bailiffs are knocking at the door';
- when somebody feels they can't cope;
- when they feel isolated or need to talk something through;
- when an unexpected event occurs.

The consensus was that most advice seeking was reactive. Some advice seeking was proactive, especially around well trailed changes to social security benefit entitlements.

Specific events might include redundancy, debt problems, benefits issues, legal issues or rights based issues.

In a literal sense people seek advice once they've been referred by others for advice; when they find out that advice is available provided by a particular organisation; on the advice of friends or family or when a formal notification of credit card debt action or rent arrears contains the suggestion that they contact a local CAB - "The letter from Barclays Bank said go to Citizens Advice"

Advice is not just about knowledge; it's about information that is actionable. People seek advice sometimes when they have the information but do not know how to put it into practice.

Some may seek advice services due to being unable to read correspondence or to carry out their own research. In some situations people may be hoping for an arbitrator or a trusted person to help them weigh up the costs and benefits of a particular course of action. They may also be hoping for an outside agency that can move a situation along that they have not been able to progress under their own efforts.

At least one group member suggested that people sought advice from advice providers once they knew that this service was available or when the service has been recommended by someone they trust.

It was suggested that people seek advice when they perceive that there is a positive possible outcome in doing so and do not do so when they have a fatalism about the outcome of their particular problem.

#### Commentary and themes:

*The problems that people seek advice to resolve are 'ticking clocks' in that they often tend to escalate over time leading to a point of crisis. Many advice seekers seek advice at the point of crisis rather than in anticipation of it.*

*Advice is not just information: it's information that is actionable.*

*People seeking advice are not uniform and do not have uniform motives for seeking advice.*

*For the advice seeker the goal is to reduce or remove the problem they are experiencing. Their understanding of how the advice provider may support them in this may differ from the advice providers understanding.*

**Question: How do people feel when they're seeking advice?**

Perceptions of how it felt to be 'on the other side of the desk' differed. Some group members suggested that advice seeker came in in one state (scared, frightened, vulnerable, embarrassed, unhappy, sad, frustrated, angry, worried, overwhelmed, anxious, nervous, frightened) and left in another (Grateful, empowered, reassured, relieved, understood, feeling they've been listened to, relaxed, enabled). Others suggested after initially suggesting visitors to advice services might feel 'relieved and happy' that instead advice seekers might also feel:

- Angry,
- Cynical,
- Suspicious,
- Humiliated,
- May feel authority challenged,
- Feeling let down that other services, haven't helped them,
- Don't feel they've got what they wanted,
- People don't like the answer, so shop around looking for a different answer so are looking for answer that is not available,
- Disappointed,
- Frustrated,
- Vulnerable,
- Embarrassed,
- Unhappy,
- Sad.

Some group members talked about the gap between expectation and actual possibility. They spoke about the challenge of situations where there is no immediate, easy or acceptable to the advice seeker answer that will resolve the situation. It was suggested it is a challenge to explain this in a way that helped the advice seeker to accept the advice rather than going to another service with the same question to try to get another, 'better' answer.

When we asked what got in the way of talking; at least one group member raised the issue of engagement and concentration: "there's no way around the fact that the advice seeker must be able to concentrate sufficiently on the conversation to comprehend the points being made."

**Commentary and themes:**

*People arrive at advice services at points of intense emotional turbulence; carrying with them expectations, hopes, fears and wished-for outcomes.*

*Advice providers like to feel that they do a valuable and useful job but are aware that the right 'advice' does not always feel right to the advice seeker. If there is not a simple answer to a problem or if the advice does little to mitigate the current emotional and practical turmoil, the individual advice seeker will not necessarily rate the service as useful.*

*The advice provider joins the journey of the advice seeker's problem only after the advice seeker has lived with this problem for a period of time: they often meet the advice seeker when the problem is most acutely felt.*

*Successful advice is a combination of the right knowledge, the right action that follows from it at the right time.*

**Question: What are the current problems around advice seeking in Hackney?**

It was acknowledged that in comparison to other local authorities, Hackney is relatively generous in its supply of funds for the provision of advice services but even then there may be too few advisors or holes in provision.

One of the most interesting insights raised by a member of the group was that for the big advice providers of the borough there are always more people seeking advice than the capacity that they have to provide it. This, they suggested, meant that they had never had to revise or clearly set out their 'offer to the consumer meaning that an element of what they did was trying to work out why someone had come to them.

Other issues raised were that what each advice providing organisation does in the borough keeps changing. The reasons for this included the fact that advice was often provided as part of a limited length project.

The group also suggested that this created a constantly changing landscape of available advice provision which made it difficult to 'keep on top of everything' that was currently available; someone expressing this as 'you never know who is doing what'. They also suggested that the policy arena was particularly volatile in the current period, with law, available services and council services and provision constantly changing. This, some of the group suggested, meant that it was difficult with confidence to know where to refer people, lacking a knowledge of each provider's competencies and specialism.

The fact that information websites were *always* out of date was suggested as both a cause and a result of problems. One corollary of this was that perception of an organisation influenced the amount of faith that the advice seeker places in that organisation's ability to help and to the authority of the advice seeker assigns to that advice.

Some group members said that often clients do not know what they actually want or expect from the advice provider.

Another group member suggested that there was too much duplication of advice provision, though other countered that may have been due to differing needs and situations of advice seekers. It was acknowledged there was often a gap in capacity at providing advice accessible to particular groups within the community, with accessibility and language often causing challenges.

A further issue was raised around opening hours of advice services. Advice workers tend to work office hours. This creates a situation where the window of opportunity for advice seeking falls at points in the day that may not be appropriate for all members of the community. It also creates a situation where it is difficult to make use of volunteers, as volunteers currently active working in sectors useful to advice providers will also often be working similar office hours.

Some members of the group were aware that advice seeking often came after the failure of another organisation to execute their duties or obligations toward an individual. They flagged this as being the in-practice gap between policy rhetoric and actual practice, something that they spoke about as being a feature of both national and local government operations.

Members of the group also raised the prevention paradox where organisations with the advice sector may lose out if advice is accessed before an individual's issue escalates, reducing the demand on advice services. This suggested that intense demand on advice services can sometimes result from failure demand; with much workload coming from imperfect resolution of issues earlier on in their progression.

#### Commentary and themes:

*It was clear that even with the Sustainable Advice f or Hackney Partnership project to map and collate all of the information about available advice providers; even providers were not sure of available provision in the borough. This creates a particular problem for signposting and referral. The answer to this is often suggested as being a necessity to simplify the advice provision landscape or for the advice provision landscape to formally coordinate provision. This has been a point of discussion in the past. Similarly, triage had been suggested via one point of contact initially as a remedy to the same challenge.*

*Information decays, and still does not do the job of helping someone to fit themselves to the provider that best suits their needs.*

*If providers of advice find this difficult, members of the public find this far more challenging.*

*The problem of being unable to utilise volunteers as a resource is also a significant challenge with advice services tied to particular places and times unless peripatetic, which some providers of advice are. These providers tend to be embedded in other services, with advice forming a small part of their overall service.*

*There is potential for a digital service to increase the utilisation of volunteers by aggregating and distributing digital work such as emails, queries or another mechanism for delivering asynchronous advice.*

*Similarly, there is potential to supply information to advice providers in a way that reduces their need to 'know' everything about the local landscape by making it easier for them to arrive at useful answers through decision tools and similar.*

#### Question: What technology do you like?

The group were comfortable with a range of technologies, although some organisations were more likely to be tied to desktop PCs than others.

Social media presented more organisational problems, with some remarking that their organisation didn't feel comfortable. Other spoke about the sense they had that the people that they saw and worked with often used social media, but also that some had very low digital literacy.

There was some discussion of the level of smartphone ownership in the borough and amongst those seeking advice and whether there was a wide enough availability of wifi hotspots in the borough.

It was raised that there is advice online already aimed at advice seekers and that there is specialist advice available for the use of advice providers. This specialist advice is sometimes behind paywalls. Also raised was the existence of digital advice information distributed via physical media and licensed to a particular organisation.

Amongst the group members there was an acceptance that digital might provide solutions to problems that otherwise may be difficult to solve.

**Commentary and themes:** 

*Advice providers seemed keen in this session on the possibility of digital tools that would address the problems that they actually face. Moving beyond the idea that digital is just communication of information (websites as analogues of printed materials) and looking at the potential for digital to be a tool seemed more popular than the idea of digital as a replacement of a face to face service.*

*Digital may reach people not reached currently by advice services, facilitating their advice usage rather than replacing it.*

*As in all of these sessions, digital exclusion was identified as a problem but it was one without a strong basis in evidence for the borough. As such, it's an area where assumption is currently trumping actual data.*

**Question: What things don't work so well about advice services in Hackney?**

Discussing the question of what doesn't work so well in the provision of advice services in Hackney the group discussed that one hand there wasn't enough information available and on the other hand there was too much. Some members felt there was advice and knowledge available online to advice seekers but that either advice seekers didn't know it was there or that the advice was contradictory, out of date, confusing or wrong.

The group spoke about the ways in which it could be hard for organisations to be aware of each other's work without competition or 'personalities' intruding.

There was still feeling that it was difficult to reach marginalised potential clients and that the existing funds available did not always match the needs presenting.

**Commentary and themes:** 

*Existing online information sources do not quite 'hit the spot' and that even this knowledge may not usefully contribute to either efficiencies or expansion of advice provision in the borough.*

*Similarly, the need to be aware of what other advice providers are providing was considered to a problem not yet solved. Many of the providers in this session had never met each other, despite all working in the advice providing sector in the borough.*

*There is a sense that the dream of more involved and regimented referral and triage is a particular approach to solving the gap between organisations themselves and the gap between those organisations and the people who seek to use their services. There may be potential for a digital project to approach these real problems from a different direction.*

## Session two: Public session Tuesday 28th August

In this session we spoke to one person with experience of managing voluntary community activities about their own life experience and the experience of those older people they supported in the Caribbean community. They suggested for that particular group shame and keeping up appearances were strong motivators for avoiding seeking advice until too late. They felt it was important to develop ways of seeking advice and support that did not carry with them a perceived risk of loss of status in the eyes of others.

In their experience, elderly Caribbean people don't like to talk about their affairs with others, placing a high premium upon respectability within the community/standing within the family. To seek advice would involve losing face, as it makes concrete the crisis at hand. In their experience; people often got into trouble and required advice when they were overwhelmed with complexity; when the problem at hand did not have a simple, tangible remedy.

They were keen to stress that cultural awareness was important in the provision of advice; but that this did not mean that advice had to be provided by 'members of the community'. In fact, the sense of losing face within your own community could be a disincentive to seeking advice.

Commentary and themes: 

*Advice seeking may have downsides as well as upsides and these will change from person to person and community to community.*

*Accepting the need for advice is also accepting the reality of a situation. This, in itself, can be unpleasant. The practicalities of advice seeking (where the advice provider premises are, who else you anticipate being there) can also compound that sense of personal discomfort.*

*Sometimes needing advice involves a challenge to who you think you are.*

**Question: How do people seek advice?**

People seek advice from those they know and trust; church, mosque, best friend. Only after that do they seek help from advice providers. Most advice is given by people who aren't advice providers and they may not give very good advice. Some people assume that all advice services are part of 'the Council' and thus have decision making powers rather than advisory ones. This can lead them to bring complaints to advice providers only to have advice providers advise them to direct their complaint to the relevant organisation. A minority of people seek advice before the point of crisis is reached. Even then, people are not always looking for advice, they may be looking for an answer to their problem; something that may not exist or may not be within the gift of advice services to provide.

Commentary and themes: 

*Advice providers are often the last port of call for people with problems; not the first. Primary sources of advice may be friends, family members or other trusted community figures. If the people you know don't know more than you about what you should do, then you are unlikely to move forward in the resolution of your problem.*

*People may be seeking support rather than advice.*

**Question: What information is there about advice that's available?**

The information available is varied and disparate and often picked up via doctor's surgeries and churches. It was felt that communication about the purpose of advice services is not very good and that the assumption is that one message will reach all people equally.

Commentary and themes: 

*Information, like advice, has to be possible to put into action for it to resolve a problem. Information seems to be picked up in trusted places or from trusted people. Advice providers may, initially be neither of these things.*

*It's questionable whether advice providers are actually 'part of the community' for people who would not automatically think of accessing an advice provider: they may not feel like 'natural' choices or easy ones.*

**Question: What are the current problems around advice seeking?**

It was expressed that there is a difficulty in knowing which advice provider provides what and that this made it harder for people to decide which provider might be best for them. There was a perception that funding models meant that providers were likely to wish to grab a client rather than referring them on to a more appropriate service.

The participant felt that advice providers often did not grasp the psychology and motivations of advice seekers. It was also raised that when people are approached to offer advice, it is a betrayal of trust to involve someone else without their permission. This often puts trusted friends in a difficult situation as it is difficult to get the individual with the problem to the right service without knowledge. This often meant sending someone off to an advice provider in an act of bad faith; promising that the provider would be able to help without any strong conviction that they would be able to do so. This risked the trust built up between people and potentially made it harder to offer support in future if the experience had not delivered as expected.

Commentary and themes: 

*Advice seeking by proxy is a common theme, as is the reluctance of some people to 'make the jump' to seeking advice. The path to a provider may be rockier than it appears to the advice provider.*

*People who are often asked for advice want to do a good job of providing it; the wish to refer others on with certainty is a strong driver for action.*

**Question: what technology do you and others like?**

Elderly people often less keen on technology; often see it as the enemy. In many cases, they're refusing it rather than not understanding. Older people often happy to use i-pads. They get into it but generally they see it as young people's technology and don't like to go and ask young people: "Status issue. Preserve your dignity."

The idea came up that technology might provide a private, non-stigmatising space for people to develop their understanding of their problems and what advice might be relevant. Tablets and smartphones being essentially private devices, facing the user and no one else.

**Commentary and themes:** 

*Received wisdom about who does and doesn't use digital devices is always worth questioning. As is the assumption that it is only the person with the problem who can be enabled by digital, rather than the broader community around that person.*

*If accepting the need for advice is challenging and status challenging; the digital device as a private space to explore first is potentially important. We often google physical symptoms before seeking medical help; especially when the symptom is embarrassing or difficult to admit to experiencing.*

**Question: What things don't work so well around advice provision in Hackney?**

There was a sense that existing advice provider activities don't connect with the realities of people's situations, desires and circumstances.

Some people require reassurance. Some people need to have their problems validated by others listening. It was expressed that the sector as a whole did not seem to fit together well enough, and that this translated into confusion for those in the position to signpost advice seekers to advice sources.

It was expressed that solutions in advice provision needed to work for people who had problems rather than for people who had made it to advice providers, and that a part of that would be about enabling the not the problem to signpost themselves to available and appropriate services but the targeting the people who have their trust to carry out this function.

**Commentary and themes:** 

*Signposting is only as good as the information the signposter has and how effectively they can relate that information to the person and their problem. If this is ineffective, the person will need to visit an advice provider to receive advice about what advice provider to visit.*

## Session three: Advice providers session 2 Tuesday August 4th 2015

**In our second session with advice providers we tested some of the themes that emerged in the previous two sessions.**

**Question: What does 'too late' mean in the context of seeking help?**

Even if someone arrives at advice services 'too late', they still have the problem that they were seeking advice for regardless of whether the service can give them any useful help.

Attendees pointed out that 'too late' can be a form of hopelessness, a feeling that the situation had gone too far for help to be useful, believing that things couldn't get any worse. They also suggested that in some situations people can actively choose to cut their losses in help seeking giving the example of people with debt problems believing that as they had no money to make any repayments.

Providers agreed that while they may consider themselves to white knights at the service of their clients, customers may feel differently. The wrong advice can make a situation worse, and even the right advice can confirm someone's worse fears causing them to lose hope for a solution.

The group talked about the way that people are scared of bad news and the ways in which people put off opening a letter or returning a call. They also talked about the ways in which people's individual situations and capabilities, including knowledge of 'the system' often obscured the point at which advice would be advantageous. Though, as one participant said 'it's just human nature to avoid doing things when we're meant to do them.'

The group discussed ways in which people might actively avoid seeking advice, citing the example of upcoming changes to benefits entitlements that seem too draconian to be true - 'It won't happen to me'. While this may look like burying your head in the sand, it is a way of putting off the situation becoming real. Some members of the group spoke about the ways in which people might only seek advice once the bailiffs have already been or when they have already been evicted or after a court hearing.

The group also discussed 'advice seeking by proxy', where a friend or family member took on the management of advice seeking for another. Sometimes this is at the invitation of the person with a problem but at other times it is the result of the friend or family member feeling that the individual with the problem is not doing what they might or cannot do what would be useful. This advice seeking by proxy was difficult for providers as it made it difficult to hear 'from the horse's mouth' the situation but also added a layer of complexity around confidentiality and other issues.

We asked whether people behaved in different ways depending on what kind of advice they are seeking. The CAB claimed that the majority of their enquiries were money-related.

**Commentary and themes:** 

*There are strong human motivations to put off and avoid seeking advice. Advice providers require clients to 'take ownership' of their problem, but this sometimes requires emotional resources over and above those available to the client at that point.*

*An advice seeker is putting a significant amount of trust in an advice provider with little way at present to work out prior to visiting that advice provider whether that trust is warranted.*

**Question. How do people get to advice services and what state do they turn up in?**

Group members talked about the emotional charge involved in seeking advice. People are often desperate and afraid of the consequences both of inaction and of taking action.

Some advice seekers are proactively seeking advice about how to execute a particular course of action and are looking for specific information or guidance. Others are in the more frustrating situation of attempting to rectify their problem but finding that organisations or agencies involved in the problem (DWP, housing provider or council department for example) are reluctant or incapable of dealing with them and their attempt to sort things out. An example of this was given in the way in which sometimes organisations will only accept a debt plan from a person if it has been done in collaboration with an adviser, even though this is not a requirement. Sometimes the individual advice seeking is seeking legitimacy for their complaint or need 'backing up' from advice service. This was considered to be a tension, as advice services attempt to foster individual agency but also have to acknowledge that sometimes the world does not conform to this vision, especially where real and endemic power imbalances exist.

Group members discussed that people often arrive at the door of advice services after a recommendation from a trusted source which might be a friend or family member or might be an organisation that an individual has links to in their community. This word of mouth effect was considered important, though it was suggested that informal or formal referral or signposting is only as good as the understanding of the problem and available services that the referrer

or signposter has. If their understanding or knowledge is lacking, people often end up at the wrong service for their needs.

The group also discussed more challenging clients. These included the well informed 'shopper'; who moved from one advice service to another looking for a specific outcome; those who were less able to take agency and were hopeful that someone else would solve their problem; and clients who were less aware of the limits of what advice service can and cannot do and who were pushy or uncooperative.

It was discussed that in some cases the most well informed customers may be the most most challenging; especially where their problem does not lead to a simple solution or if their expectations are unrealistic. It was suggested that there were cultural difference in people's behaviour in advice seeking situations.

The group discussed the ways in which people are often in the least useful state when they arrive at advice services to actually discuss problems and difficulties and the life changing implications of future courses of action. Members of the group discussed angry clients, clients who had bad experiences with organisations, clients who were hysterical or threatening and clients who were inebriated. They spoke about the way that for the clients they saw, problems were all consuming and that while as an advice service it was possible to operate a hierarchy of need; individuals were having real and upsetting disruption to their lives which had a strong emotional charge regardless of whether objectively others had more complex or pressing problems.

The group was in broad agreement that being a crisis was the worse time to sort out a crisis.

**Commentary and themes:** 

*The contrast between actual advice provider client behaviour and 'ideal' client behaviour is strong. People who are in difficult situations are sometimes understandably difficult to help.*

*Both formal and informal referral can create expectations which cannot be fulfilled, especially when the advice seeker does not have a strong idea of the limits of the advice available.*

*Word of mouth referral is often stronger than self directed help seeking. While self agency is vital to resolving problems, the advice seeking situation often seems to foster its opposite. Crisis is when the individual feels they have run to the end of their ability to either resolve or ignore the situation, and has run to the end of the resources they have available.*

**Question: What would the ideal state for someone to turn up in be?**

We asked the group to imagine the perfect client: someone who would enable them to do their job with the utmost efficiency.

The group suggested that this person would seek advice early; possibly at the first sign of a crisis. They would be calm; receptive to taking advice and putting it into action; would be organised, having brought all of the paper work required with them to the first consultation; they would be able to articulate their problem well and able to comprehend and retain advice; and would be realistic about the limits of the role of the advice provider in resolving their problem.

One group member realised that their dream client would be a member of the public who acted like the PA to the CEO of a bank; who would be able to provide on request a ring binder of colour coded and tabulated correspondence and who would be able to action plan for the resolution the issue. This perfect client would not turn up with a carrier bag full of unsorted and possibly irrelevant letters They'd be able to concisely

summarise their story into five minutes with relevant information in chronological order.

The dream client would be patient and would have time to spare; making it possible to make phone calls on their behalf or to carry out internet based research while they were present. One group member expressed the idea that the dream client would be able to leave their child or children outside of the consulting room so that they could give their undivided attention to the discussion in hand.

The advice provider would be sure that the perfect client was going to carry out any required actions within the timeframe required for the positive progression of their case or issue.

**Commentary and themes:** 

*Advice seekers who are prepared for their consultation and who have a clear idea of what information is relevant and required for good advice to be provided make the job of advice provision easier. Again, crisis is the least amenable state to the kind of complex decision making and contract setting required to turn advice into action.*

**Question: How do you know that someone is going to put advice into action?**

The group estimated that they felt that advice was taken and acted upon, or that actions were carried out between advice sessions by only about 50% of the clients that they saw.

When we asked them what reassured them that a client or customer would 'keep their side of the bargain', the group suggested a number of factors. Writing down or otherwise noting the actions discussed was seen as a big indicator; as was agreeing a timescale for actions and the individual choosing from a set of options with the adviser.

The group thought that 'ownership' of actions was more likely when the client and the adviser selected from a set of possible actions together.

### Commentary and themes:

*If it is true that only 50% of advice is put into action, this has strong implications for the model of advice provision.*

*Taking ownership of the advice and seeing it as a guide to your own action seems to be key in that advice being put into action. Emotionally volatile times are not the best for making complex decisions and negotiating complicated courses of future action.*

*Advice provision is about what the advice seeker takes away. In many cases, it is the advice seeker that will have to take the actions rather than the advice provider. The advice provider may help that process along, but cannot take ownership of it.*

*A collaboration tool with a portable record of decisions made seems to be valued by advice providers.*

### Question: What frustrates you most about providing advice?

We asked group members to write down the things that frustrated them most about providing advice.

Across the group the following themes emerged:

- Clients unwillingness to carry out action
- Lack of communication from clients
- Being dumped on by other agencies
- Not being able to help
- Slow IT system
- Funding doesn't cover you to help
- Not being able to reach a satisfactory outcome
- Needing more digitalised resource
- Lack of conversation about priority issues
- Advice agencies not wanting to engage with new approaches
- No admin help

### Other thoughts

In the course of the discussion other themes and ideas emerged. Group members suggest that there may be some people who would prefer not to meet face-to-face and that there are a number of attendees of their services that aren't necessarily best served by being seen face-to-face. They wondered whether time constraints would influence this decision: if someone was told that they could access email advice in 24 hours and face-to-face in a fortnight; how many might opt for the email advice?

Attendees wondered about digital exclusion and whether smartphone ownership was prevalent amongst potential client groups.

Also discussed was the idea of repositioning advice services not as a last resort in the face of insurmountable crisis but as a first resort in prevent the escalation of crisis and how this might be communicated.

### Commentary and themes:

*Exploring further with advice providers the discomforts of their profession uncovered a frustration at not being able to help and not being confident that their help made a difference. The gap between the ideal client and the actual client suggested strongly that there is grounds for some kind of intervention, which perhaps may be a digital tool, that would increase the effectiveness of advice given. This would perhaps be something that would enable clients to both prepare for a consultation and also create a record for both advice provider and advice seeker of what was discussed and what was agreed during the consultation.*

*Often it is people who did not make it to the advice provider that might actually be most in need of advice and that finding a way to incentivise earlier advice seeking would be beneficial.*

## Session four: Public Session 2 Tuesday August 2nd

**Due to a small attendance of this session the discussion was less structured. Broad themes emerged, with much discussion of why people don't take up the offer of advice. Group members spoke about complexity and the way in which any advice represented making a change in the situation.**

The group talked about there being three stages where a digital intervention might be useful:

- before someone gets to an advice service
- While they are using the advice service (either in consultation or while they are engaged in an ongoing relationship)
- As a way of tracking or owning what happens afterwards (this was everything from making sure they didn't forget anything to finding a way of keeping on top of their problem.

The group recognised that no one likes to waste their time, and that done correctly self-triage would be a more effective way of directing people to appropriate help, as this stage would happen before the person had potentially made the effort to visit a service that wasn't appropriate for their needs.

The group made the distinction between information and advice. Information alone being important in some circumstances but being no guide to the potential outcomes of actions or decisions. People are looking for guidance and reassurance as well as being presented with all of the options.

People also talked about the power imbalance in advice seeking and the ways in which it can be possible not to feel ownership over an agreed course of

action, especially if its benefit is long term while the problem that leads you to seek help has effects in the current term.

Smartphones seemed to be a good avenue for the provision of apps, as did tablets; although the issue of digital exclusion was raised again.

The group also discussed a kind of survivorship bias in existing thinking about advice provision: our ideas about what people need are based upon the people that advice services get to see. These people are unrepresentative of the wider population as they are people who have made it as far as the door of the advice service.

### Commentary and themes:

*The division of advice seeking into 'before, during, after' is very useful, as advice provision models are only focused on 'during'. The idea of extending the influence or operation of advice providers beyond the 'face-to-face' represented by 'during' represents one way of influencing outcomes. Advice providers do not currently have the resources infinitely increase their face to face capacity.*

*Ongoing conditions of austerity are leading to increasing levels of personal, family and community instability. Most people do not make it to an advice provide. It is in everyone's interest that those who make the emotional investment to seek advice arrive at the most appropriate service as quickly as possible and that they leave that service with the greatest possibility of carrying out actions beneficial to their situation.*

## Session five: Public Session 3 9th September 2015

**To further test the emerging themes and insights we organised an additional session to speak to more members of the public who were not connected to advice providers.**

**Question: When do people seek advice?**

The group discussed why and when people seek advice. They suggested that people seek advice when they have reached the end of their own resources to solve a problem. Sometimes this is because they recognise the need for specialist knowledge or expert advice, other times when no one around them knows the answer to the problem or challenge they are facing. This was described as being when you “hit a dead end” and can think of nowhere else to turn. Other people see the services of advice providers because they lack the support of someone close to them or feel isolated and without anyone to turn to. The emotional reality of both of these situations is different.

The group talked about the ways in which government websites give only shallow information and direct you toward advice services, and the way in which advice services can or could provide advice based on how things really work rather than the way that they are set out in ‘official’ advice.

The group thought that people sought advice sometimes as a kind of redress; seeking advice when statutory services have let them down. In this situation people often wish to avoid directly complaining to the service in question if they are unsupported in doing so.

The suggested that people often go to the most trustworthy person, or the service to which they feel closest when seeking advice. This might be a GP or a voluntary agency, but often the trusted person doesn’t know where they might go for better help. One attendee said that as an educated person they wouldn’t know where to start looking for advice as they’ve never had to do it before.

The group spoke about the way in which it was required to tell your story over and over again on the path to finding the correct help and that this can feel both intrusive and stigmatising. Some people may have very good reason to be suspicious of giving too much away about their circumstances or situation. Another person raised the experience that help to deal with a crisis is only forthcoming when someone else, often a service, recognises that you are in crisis. The group said that people seek advice where they know that advice is available, and may not seek advice until they know that there is a possibility of help being offered.

The group spoke about the way in which seeking advice is often a very public admission of something and that it involves giving up some privacy, even at the level of having to stand in a queue or enter a know advice providing building. Some members of the group expressed the idea that digital devices might provide an initial private space for conducting some of the advice seeking.

On a practical level it was suggested that people seek advice about financial matters, benefits matters, changes in living situation or family situation; things which have an impact upon their quality of life. Many of the situations for which people seek help and advice can be embarrassing or leave the individual open to the judgement of others, another factor that prevents early advice seeking.

**Commentary and themes:** 

*People seek advice when no one around them knows the answer or when no one around them has the power to enact a solution to a problem. People ask for advice from the people most immediate to them they find trustworthy; people they already see and know. Sometimes people don’t know they need advice until someone else points it out. All of these points suggest that the network around someone is as important in help seeking as the individual.*

*People are looking for advice about the ways that things really work; something different from broad but shallow information about the way things are intended to work. This illustrates why 'people don't just google it': they want something more than just information.*

**Question: How does it feel to seek advice?**

The group outlined a number of negative feelings and implications about advice seeking:

- Sad
- Useless
- Loss of control
- Overwhelmed
- Stigma
- Depression
- Fearful of being talked about
- People are scared of asking for help because they think having gone once, they're being talked about
- Distrust – it doesn't matter how reassurance you get – 'what do they talk about when we've all gone home'
- People knowing your business
- Humiliated and embarrassed
- Vulnerable
- Even if circumstances change later on, it's still there
- Might feel reassured if you've been to that service before and you know they're in safe hands
- "You go and you can't get the advice you need, and you give up"

Overall, there was a strong sense that while getting the right advice was vital, even this did not come without vulnerabilities and worry. The advice seeking journey means that the point at which people first arrive to discuss their problem is the point at which they have lived with it for longest and are most troubled by it. Admitting that you cannot sort a problem by yourself is not an easily accepted position, especially when the problem itself has been caused by a service or organisation and advice seeking requires putting yourself in the hands of another one.

**Commentary and themes:**

*To be in need of advice is to feel vulnerable. To seek advice greatly increases this sense of vulnerability. Any solution must take this experience of vulnerability into account.*

**Question 3: How do people seek advice and who do they seek it from?**

The group listed a number of places and people from which you might seek advice:

People hear about advice services from services they already access; from other people around them who have accessed these services and from TV, radio and newspapers in the case of larger organisations and helplines.

At a more personal level people hear about advice services from places, services and communities that overlap their own like places of worship, GPs, government agencies, advice workers, support groups: 'People you'd be seeing anyway; people you'd go to discuss advice but it's not their job.'

The group suggested that people would ask people around them where to go, but that this would only work if friends and/or family have experience of seeking advice previously and even then wouldn't mean that someone got to the 'right' service. An example of a negative effect of this might be of an advice provider that is highly rated by a particular community; but does not actually advise on the issue the problem is facing.

An individual in this situation might become disillusioned at the perceived difference in service they received to that of the person who made the recommendation.

The group perceived that services not accessible, with a bottleneck to access them. Some members thought that services are not clearly explained and that people then felt shoved off when they sought help from a service that was not appropriate to their needs. The group agreed with the importance of services clearly labelling 'this is what we can help people with' with one person expressing the view that 'It's best to know before you go somewhere what they can and can't help you with'.

Some members of the group found it difficult not to be cynical about the industry of advice giving, suggesting that people worried about giving feedback about their experience with a service in case it prejudiced future

advice and pointed out the failure demand issue: an advice service will always be busy if it doesn't manage to resolve to a satisfactory conclusion the problems those using it present.

Other traditional forms of publicity were mentioned and the group maintained that younger people would look for information on the internet while 'the older generation' would not.



#### Commentary and themes:

*Knowing exactly what a service can and can't do guards against disappointment. People turn to others they know before they turn to advice services. Word of mouth is a strong driver and might be recognised as a kind of informal signposting.*

*It is an unpleasant and embarrassing experience being turned away from an advice service because they cannot help; one that impacts upon future advice seeking.*

*It takes courage to seek advice.*

#### Question: What are the current problems with advice provision in Hackney?

The group was in strong agreement that queuing at the CAB was a problem and that there were few advice

services in the borough, expressing incredulity of the actual amount and the level of current funding. Some members of the group suggested that lots of small groups providing advice meant that organisations were difficult to keep track of; dropping in and out of existence. They suggested that lack of continuity made it difficult to build the trust and profile required to support people. Some suggested that a single point of contact might be useful but others disagreed. There was tension between wishing for one large service, reducing confusion and creating a single point of contact and the need to provide choice, responsiveness and to satisfy preference by having a range of organisations.

There was some feeling that advice providers were not responsive to the needs of those who need advice.

There was a suggestion that an online space that brought together information about providers and which would signpost visitors to the best service to meet their needs would be extremely useful.

Some group members suggested that one of the problems with advice provision was the solution offered by the advice provider might be beyond the capabilities of the advice seeker to put into action. Various things might contribute to this including language, disability, mental ill-health and other stuff of life.

#### Commentary and themes:

*While opinions differ about whether lots of small advice providers are needed or larger ones, it was clear that people don't feel they get to what they need quickly and simply enough.*

#### **Question: What kinds of technology do you use?**

The group said that they were comfortable with using a range of internet enabled devices. Some expressed a preference for web apps over download and install apps. Others expressed an appeal not to forget the older, simpler forms of communication like phone, email and text.

#### Commentary and themes:

*All mediums work for some people and not others. Digital is no different.*

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