



Final evaluation of the Ask Us project

Ask Us was a Help Through Crisis project funded by
The National Lottery.

Sept 2021



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Executive summary

Ask Us was a Help Through Crisis project that ran from 2016 to 2021 with funding from the National Lottery's Help Through Crisis programme. It brought together the expertise of Bristol Law Centre, Citizens Advice Bristol and 1625 Independent People. This report shows that Ask Us made highly significant and substantial contributions to the Help Through Crisis programme's four outcomes.

The Ask Us project achieved far more than could be measured by its KPIs or even the Help Through Crisis (HTC) outcomes - it was always more than the sum of its parts and partners. The evaluator was particularly struck by the quality of observation, reflection and deep thinking that enabled the project to learn about young people's needs and barriers in relation to social welfare advice - and turn that into four main outputs in line with the funding programme's four outcomes. These outputs were:

-  a responsive service to enable young people to overcome hardship crisis
-  practical support and coaching to build the life skills needed to avoid future crises
-  training for the partner agencies and local services to become more accessible and responsive to young people, leading to the project's legacy of an online Toolkit.
-  opportunities for young people to engage in shaping local services in Bristol and to contribute to the Ask Us Toolkit.

Many young people have chaotic lives - often caused by the trauma of childhoods spent in poverty, experiencing or witnessing abuse, leading to an inability to engage with education. They seldom seek advice when in hardship crisis because they don't know they have a legal problem that can be resolved. When they are given advice, they often lack the capacity and life skills to act on it. Enabling them to follow and act on the advice is not the role of mainstream advice agencies, so good partnerships with local support agencies are crucial if people are to overcome hardship crisis and prevent future ones. The Ask Us project demonstrated how to bring advice and support workers together to wrap their services around a young person for the maximum benefit in overcoming their hardship crisis.

Without being aware of the concepts or any prior research on the subject, the Ask Us team succeeded in assisting young people to develop clusters of social and emotional skills, along with legal capability. This report draws on two separate pieces of academic research that provide the conceptual framework for the team's achievements. However, these research reports did not cover the 'other side of the coin' - namely that for young people to receive advice, the agencies providing it must be able to understand and communicate with them. The Ask Us team worked closely with young people to identify common failings and how to rectify them, before turning this into a robust training programme and online Toolkit.

Of all the many Help Through Crisis projects the evaluator worked with since 2016 when the funding began, Ask Us is the most outstanding in the depth and breadth of its work and legacy. She is delighted to have worked with BLC, CAB, 1625 and the team of Ask Us project workers over the last five years. She will promote the Toolkits as examples of good practice to encourage charities and public services to develop similar approaches to advising and supporting not just vulnerable and disadvantaged people of all ages to overcome hardship crises.



Introduction

The HTC programme outcomes - a reminder

The Help Through Crisis (HTC) programme was set up in 2015 by the National Lottery Community Fund as an innovative approach to helping individuals and families tackle the problems of repeated hardship crisis by blending advice with support. Most of the 59 recipients of these grants were partnerships of advice and support agencies. One of the requirements of the HTC programme is for grant-holders to extract as much learning as possible from their projects. Five year funding was offered from 2016 - 2021 to partnerships that would work together to achieve the programme's four outcomes in their localities. These outcomes were:

1. People who have experienced hardship crisis are better able to improve their circumstances.
2. People who are at high risk of experiencing hardship crisis are better able to plan for the future.
3. Organisations are better able to support people to effectively tackle hardship through sharing learning and evidence.
4. Those experiencing (or who are at high risk of experiencing) hardship crisis, have a stronger, more collective voice to better shape a response to their issues.

What was the Ask Us project?

The Ask Us project in Bristol was designed to provide advice and support to vulnerable young people (YP) aged 16-25. The three organisations which made up the core delivery partnership were:

- 🌀 Bristol Law Centre (BLC) - lead body
- 🌀 Citizens Advice Bristol (CAB)
- 🌀 1625 Independent People (1625).

Methodology

This final evaluation builds on three preceding pieces of work: the evaluator's review of the first six months of the project in 2016 and her evaluations of the work and outcomes in 2018 and 2019 (Years 1-3). It was designed not to go back over that ground nor re-present previous data, but to answer the following questions:

- 🌀 What was learned about blending advice and support through this HTC project?
- 🌀 How do the findings of Ask Us relate to other research about young people?
- 🌀 What will be the legacy of Ask Us?

Who carried out this evaluation?

The author of this report is an experienced freelance consultant and evaluator. Rachel Hankins' knowledge of advice services began as a Citizens Advice Bureau volunteer in the 1980s after graduation, followed by setting up new independent advice agency in areas of highest deprivation in Edinburgh, then a decade managing charities (including a Citizens Advice Bureau) and social enterprises. Subsequently, she served six years in local government in charge of grants and voluntary sector relations before becoming freelance in 2007. Over the last 8 years, Rachel has specialised in carrying out evaluations for advice agencies, bringing a fresh approach informed by her other clients who operate in diverse fields including criminal justice, social care, domestic abuse, drugs and alcohol, mental health and community building. She worked with a number of HTC projects from 2016-21 as their independent evaluator and helped them develop their own evaluation skills.



Section 1: Blending advice and support through HTC

Words from the consultant about HTC in general and Ask Us in particular

As an independent consultant specialising in working with advice agencies, Rachel Hankins was keen to support the HTC programme since its inception in 2015. She firmly believes that blending advice and support is more likely to help vulnerable people of all ages out of repeated hardship crisis than advice alone - which they are often unable to act on. Thanks to the Lottery's emphasis and resourcing of external evaluation, she worked with several projects to develop their evaluation skills and capacity in order to evidence the outcomes of their work, as well as carrying out the required independent evaluations.

All the evaluations were local and small-scale, so did not include control groups or any statistical modelling - therefore the level of 'hard' evidence was low and relied on client-reported correlations between the advice/support received and their own personal outcomes, rather than on proven causation. Most HTC partnerships engaged seriously with their simple local evaluations, some for the first time. This will stand them in good stead for the future, both in terms of having evidence of achieving the four HTC outcomes and from building the skills and capacity in their workforces to actively engage in the evaluation process.

The team and managers of Ask Us were keen to engage with the process of external evaluation, which began with a review of the partnership half way through Year 1 and continued through two further evaluations before this final one. They worked well with the evaluator and always produced good quality data. Because the Ask Us Board focused closely on KPIs, the project's manager at 1625 was equipped and ready to provide up-to-date reports on progress against the targets for each of the three independent evaluations.

The consultant hopes that the unique blend of advice and support funded by HTC will continue to be provided by voluntary sector partnerships and further funded by grant-makers for many years to come, building on the services developed over the last five years. Having worked with several HTC projects as their evaluator, and met many more at the annual HTC conferences, she was struck by the different ways that advice agencies developed their services and approaches, usually informed by their non-advice partners, and took their advice work a lot 'deeper' as a result. In most advice services operating under standard advice grants or contracts, clients would have been given one-off advice and/or casework to solve more complex social welfare problems - but without much regard to their ability to understand or act on it. This kind of advice can be characterised as '*dealing with the problem, not the person*' - a phrase coined by the Ask Us project worker who wrote the research document 'Advice Needs of Young People in Bristol'¹.

The more person-centred approach was very much encouraged by the HTC programme, particularly in response to Outcome 2 - building resilience against future hardship crises. This can only be done by helping a client tackle underlying issues - ie putting the person before the problem, because tackling the financial/housing/hardship problems alone does not change enough for and within the person to develop the necessary confidence, skills or resilience. The Ask Us project excelled at this because of the two advice agencies' active partnership with 1625. As a young people's service, 1625 colleagues were accustomed to operating in a psychologically informed environment (PIE), using reflective practice and being trauma-aware. These practices were shared with CAB and BLC, who in turn shared skills in information-giving and good practice in advice with colleagues at 1625.

The HTC programme was perhaps overly ambitious in expecting partnerships to work on four outcomes, and many did not manage to achieve as much as they planned in Outcomes 3 & 4.

¹ Reproduced in full in Appendix 2.

All the HTC projects known to the evaluator, not least Ask Us, made every effort to cover all four. It was challenging for most HTC projects to engage people living in or emerging out of hardship crisis with coproduction and user voice activities, but Ask Us enabled young people to engage in these: several opportunities were found to support individuals or small groups to fully participate in consultations by national charities on whether and how to set up services for young people in Bristol. They also involved young people in assessing the accessibility of local advice and support services, and in developing the Toolkit. Without Ask Us, those individuals would never have taken part in such activities.

If the evaluator were to limit herself to one single factor to highlight about Ask Us, it was **the quality of their thinking**. This rather abstract factor is a quick way to summarise a whole host of practical outcomes that arose directly from this mindset, as well as the team's conceptualisation of the needs and barriers experienced by young people - which directly map onto the findings of two pieces of academic research quoted later in this report.



It would have been so much easier for Ask Us to spend five years being a niche advice project serving young people - receiving referrals of every young person in need of social welfare advice in the Bristol area. From the start, Ask Us was determined not to do this because:

- ∞ The service would have ceased at the end of the funding, leaving a big gap in Bristol with no more direct access for young people to advice nor anywhere for other agencies to refer young clients if they felt unable to meet their needs themselves.
- ∞ Ask Us had the foresight to see that skilling up other agencies, rather than becoming a (temporary) niche provider, would be more productive and better for young people in the long term.
- ∞ The Help Through Crisis programme did not require high target numbers of clients to receive advice (Outcomes 1 and 2) but encouraged grantees to skill up other local agencies to better support people in hardship crisis (Outcome 3).

Ask Us workers therefore took every opportunity in the first three years of giving advice to observe their own practices and note how these differed from mainstream advice-giving. Through coproduction with project beneficiaries, they developed an in-depth understanding of the specific needs of young people and how best to address them. In Year 2 the team supported young people to carry out a 'mystery shopping' exercise to rate the delivery of advice and support by various agencies in Bristol. The young people then shared their good and bad experiences with the team to build a picture of the best ways to meet their needs - along with tips for advice-givers on what to avoid doing or saying.

Ask Us built on the learning gained direct from young people to train and resource other charities and public sector services in Bristol to give good quality information on social welfare issues to their clients and/or prepare them to become clients of the mainstream Law Centre and CAB advice services. BLC and CAB learned how best to advise young people and draw on their support workers' input, and received training on topics including trauma-awareness and communicating with young people. This resulted in changes to the Law Centre's initial assessment process (triage) and the idea of case reflection meetings for paid staff and volunteers was promoted at the CAB. Advantage was taken of the increasingly widespread use of online video platforms during lockdown to provide the training in a more easily accessible and streamlined manner.

All this led directly to the creation of the project's **major legacy** - the online toolkit.



Words from Ipsos Mori's 'Legacy and Learning' report for HTC

Ipsos Mori's report for the National Lottery contains many observations which the evaluator agrees with and considers to be highly relevant to Ask Us. She has therefore included several quotations from the report to illustrate points that she would otherwise have put in her own words. (Bold has been added to certain words in the quotes below for emphasis.)

Over the five years of the HTC programme, partnerships have supported many people experiencing crisis in their local areas. Partnerships described how, through HTC, they were able to **reach types of people often not reached by mainstream services**. Providing crisis support almost always involved meeting people's basic needs, but partnerships also sought to **tackle the underlying causes of crisis**. This often included addressing beneficiaries' physical and mental health needs.

This is particularly true of Ask Us with its focus on young people - a group that is not traditionally seen in waiting rooms seeking advice from mainstream agencies such as Citizens Advice and Law Centres. As noted above, the focus group of young people and their mystery shopping survey revealed the shortcomings of many local advice and support agencies. This enabled Ask Us to address these through bespoke training and the Toolkit.

Furthermore, Ask Us encouraged young people to obtain the support they needed to address underlying causes (eg trauma, anxiety, family relationship issues etc) from appropriate services whilst working with them to develop skills to tackle their current hardship crises and prevent future social welfare-related problems from escalating into crises.

Staff wellbeing

In recent years, charities have been paying more (but still very overdue) attention to the mental and emotional wellbeing of their staff and volunteers - particularly during the Covid lockdowns. It was very clear that, long before the pandemic, 1625 was further advanced than many charities in this regard. Staff wellbeing was highlighted in Ipsos Mori's report as essential for HTC project teams due to the intense and stressful nature of their work with people in hardship crisis:

An important part of supporting staff and volunteers is **promoting their wellbeing**. The LSE team's literature scan on 'Staff Wellbeing in Crisis Support' highlights how wellbeing is crucial in the context of crisis support. Frontline workers are at a potentially high risk of developing **burnout** and **experiencing vicarious trauma**. HTC partnerships found that supporting their staff and volunteers with their mental health and wellbeing had become more important over the course of the HTC programme, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Partnerships described the focus on the mental health of staff and volunteers as an important part of the legacy of the HTC programme that they plan to continue to apply in their work.

1625's focus on reflective practice and staff wellbeing was experienced and appreciated by the Ask Us project workers in CAB and BLC. They took back these ideas to encourage take-up by their own organisations - but it was quite difficult for relatively junior staff to influence long-standing cultures and practices, so their attempts were less successful than they had hoped. However, by the end of the project, CAB reported it was actively planning to instigate case reflection meetings for staff: this is likely to be implemented after their Ask Us project worker takes up her new post as the CAB's HR & Admin Manager in Sept 2021.

Future funding

Ipsos Mori recognised that ongoing funding would be hard to find to continue the work of the HTC projects after the five year Lottery grants ceased in 2021. Although the Ask Us partners chose not to seek funding to continue this project, managers at both BLC and CAB said they would like to have a young people's 'lead' in their advice agencies - which would require specific funding. The Ipsos Mori report stated:

HTC partnerships reported that there are few funders that recognise the value of long-term crisis support in a similar way to the HTC programme. There are challenges around identifying funding for services that provide specialist support to a small number of people.

However, on a more positive note:

Partnerships described using the learning and evidence from the HTC programme:

- Bidding for further funding jointly with HTC partners. HTC partners applying for funding together said they were able to **demonstrate a 'tried and tested' approach** to crisis support, with existing referral mechanisms and established ways of working. This was seen as important because funders often prefer or require joint bids highlighting the role of different partners.
- Strengthening funding applications by **demonstrating what they have achieved** through their HTC project. This includes using evidence from evaluation activities to support grant applications, as well as having more informal discussions around funding opportunities (e.g. with their local authority). Some HTC partnerships were also using evidence, including case studies of impact on individual beneficiaries, to raise their project's profile in a proactive way in the local area to help attract grant funding.

Whether the Ask Us partners work together again on a joint project or apply for funding individually, they have a strong story to tell potential funders - backed up by robust evidence of the project's outcomes and three independent evaluation reports.

HTC Legacies

Ipsos Mori's report observed:

Partnerships have worked to develop staff and volunteer teams throughout HTC. They often described the **experience and capabilities of their teams as one of the main legacies** of HTC. Partnerships noted that the skills and knowledge gained through delivering their HTC project would help them and their colleagues deliver effective crisis support in future. This was identified as a key way that the HTC programme would continue to **benefit the organisations involved, as well as the wider sector**.

The Ask Us training to 1625, BLC and CAB's staff have created just such tangible legacies that will benefit those organisations and their young clients for years to come. Staff and volunteers will doubtless take their new skills and approaches with them into new jobs in future too. The online toolkit will be available to the wider advice sector and will ideally be promoted by the two national membership bodies, Law Centres Network and Citizens Advice. It is equally relevant to charities providing support services. The evaluator considers that most of the insights and learning about how best to work with young people also apply to working with disadvantaged adults with chaotic lives who are experiencing hardship or other kinds of crisis. Whether or not future funding is obtained by BLC, CAB or 1625, these legacies will continue to directly and indirectly benefit those in hardship crisis.



Section 2: Achievement of KPIs over the five years

As stated above, the Ask Us Board was diligent in overseeing the project in terms of achieving its Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and kept a constant eye on target numbers. The table below shows the achievement of these for each year of the project.

	HTC Outcome	Ask Us 2016 - 2021	Y1 Total	Y2 Total	Y3 Total	Y4 Total	Y5 Total	total %	total no's	Revised EoP targets
		Total YP worked with directly	81	140	113	82	64	105%	480	456
		Total YP reached through training/capacity building *	-	-	-	-	-	0%	0	0
1	1	YP develop their own action plans	17	38	45	22	22	67%	144	216
2		YP increased confidence to access advice/support services	20	82	65	53	44	110%	264	239
3		YP more able deal with problems as they arise	19	78	56	33	39	103%	225	218
4	2	YP more able to plan for future	18	74	48	37	39	97%	216	222
5		YP more confident to plan for future	18	74	48	37	39	97%	216	222
6		YP improved ability to future plan	18	74	48	37	39	97%	216	222
7	3	Staff/volunteers trained in specific areas of expertise	-	-	48	26	23	81%	97	120
8		Partner agencies' improved understanding/knowledge to support YP to tackle hardship	0	0	0	0	6	100%	6	6
9	4	YP engage in activities to influence social change	-	47	10	1	7	130%	65	50
10		YP feel their collective voice having impact on social change	-	-	15	3	7	83%	25	30
11		YP indicate improved ability to influence issues affect them.	23	67	37	13	3	72%	143	198

The figures speak for themselves - Ask Us over-achieved against five targets and fully or very nearly achieved a further four. The three indicators registering 72-83% were very competently addressed: the training of more agencies' staff was only hindered by the focus on Covid in Years 4 and 5. The two KPIs for Outcome 4 were complex and, with hindsight, difficult to achieve because young people would not have seen any immediate change in the social policies or public sector procedures that caused/contributed to their hardship. The 72-83% achievement of these is therefore to be applauded.

The second lowest figure, 67% of young people developing their own action plans, reflected the fact that in many cases, the Ask Us advice workers were not the ones to work in-depth with their young clients on action plans - this was more the domain of their support workers. However, action planning was still undertaken with over two third of clients. The

Ask Us Toolkit provides an excellent template² for this, based on the work done face-to-face with young people by the project workers:



Template 3- action planning

Using the information in the table, make a list of the steps you need to take. It's important to think about:

- Are there any deadlines for these actions? If so, make sure you keep on track to meet them
- Are there any consequences for not acting or acting too late?
- What does the client have a right to in this situation?
- What is the client responsible for?

Client action plan

What will I do?	How do I do it?	Why do I need to do this?	When do I need to do it?	What might stop me from doing this?	Who can help me do it?

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Finally, the KPI registering 0 targets and 0% was changed, by agreement with the Lottery, soon after it was recognised that such numbers could only be achieved by the project workers going into a lot of schools and colleges to train young people in life skills to avoid hardship crises. This would not only have significantly detracted from achieving all the other outcomes, but would not have been amenable to evidencing as contact could not be kept up with 2000 young people after the training sessions to find out if they sustained the benefits of the project’s input.



Equalities and Diversity Data

The equalities profile of the project’s young clients remained similar across the five years, with some minor variations. The data from Years 1 & 2 were taken from the previous two evaluation reports and do not show the numbers, only percentages. The categories were expanded over time so some do not appear in the results for the earlier years.

² <https://askustoolkit.co.uk/good-practice-in-advice-work-with-young-people/understanding-young-peoples-needs>

E & D category	Year 5		Year 4		Year 3		Year 2	Year 1
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	%	%
Age								
16-17	5	8%	4	5%	8	7%	47%	46%
18-21	38	59%	55	64%	64	56%	53%	40%
22-25	21	33%	26	30%	43	37%	0%	15%
Not known*		0%	1	1%			0%	0%
Gender								
Male	24	38%	35	41%	52	45%	46%	47%
Female	34	53%	44	51%	63	55%	40%	53%
Not known*	0	0%	7	8%	-	-	-	-
Gender Identity								
Cisgender	53	83%	70	81%	95	83%	86%	79%
Transgender	0	0%	2	2%	3	3%	0%	0%
Not disclosed	1	2%	1	1%	5	4%	Not asked	
Not known*	10	16%	13	15%	12	10%	14%	21%
Sexual Orientation								
Asexual		0%	0	0%	1	1%		
Gay/ Lesbian	2	3%	3	3%	1	1%	1%	9%
Heterosexual	49	77%	63	73%	91	79%	58%	60%
Bisexual	4	6%	3	3%	6	5%	5%	4%
Unsure	1	2%	1	1%		0%	0%	1%
Not disclosed	1	2%	4	5%	5	4%	7%	1%
Other	-	0%	1	1%	Not asked			
Queer	1	2%			Not asked			
Not known*	6	9%	11	13%	10	9%	28%	19%
Ethnic Origin								
Arab	1	2%	1	1%	1	1%	2%	3%
Asian/Asian British: Other	1	2%	0	0%	1	1%	2%	3%
Asian/Asian British: Bangladeshi	-	0%	2	2%	0	0%	Not asked	
Asian/Asian British: Indian	1	2%	Not asked					
Asian/Asian British: Chinese	1	2%	Not asked					
Black/Black British - Somali	-	0%	2	2%	2	2%	1%	5%
Black/Black British: African	4	6%	5	6%	11	10%	9%	4%
Black/Black British: Caribbean	2	3%	5	6%	6	5%	2%	1%
Black/Black British: Other	-	0%	0	0%	3	3%	1%	0%
Eastern European	-	0%	4	5%	2	2%	Not asked	
Gypsy/Irish Traveller	-	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0%	1%
Iranian	1	2%	Not asked					
Mixed: Other	2	3%	2	2%	0	0%	Not asked	
Mixed: White & Asian	2	3%	1	1%	0	0%	Not asked	
Mixed: White & Black African		0%	2	2%	2	2%	Not asked	

E & D category	Year 5		Year 4		Year 3		Year 2	Year 1
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	%	%
Mixed: White & Black Caribbean	1	2%	2	2%	4	3%	Not asked	
Other Ethnic Group	3	5%	2	2%	6	5%	Not asked	
White: British	34	53%	41	48%	57	50%	41%	43%
White: Other	4	6%	6	7%	5	4%	1%	5%
White: Irish	1	2%	1	1%	2	2%	1%	0%
Not known*	6	9%	10	12%	12	10%	34%	26%
Not disclosed	-	0%	0	0%	1	1%	-	-
Religion								
Agnostic	-	0%	3	3%	1	1%	36%	34%
Atheist	4	6%	5	6%	7	6%	1%	3%
Buddhist	-	0%	2	2%	1	1%	1%	0%
Christian (all denominations)	8	13%	13	15%	19	17%	1%	0%
Not disclosed	2	3%	2	2%	7	6%	5%	4%
Muslim	8	13%	9	10%	12	10%	12%	13%
No religion	34	53%	37	43%	52	45%	4%	3%
Any other religion		0%	2	2%	1	1%	4%	6%
Jewish	1	2%	-	-	-	-	1%	0%
Not known	7	11%	13	15%	15	13%	1%	0%
Care Leaver status								
Yes	12	19%	14	16%	14	12%	not asked	
No	52	81%	63	73%	80	70%	not asked	
Not disclosed	-	0%	5	6%	16	14%	not asked	
Not Known*	-	0%		0%	5	4%	not asked	
Disability								
Yes	16	25%	25	29%	23	20%	25%	29%
No	22	34%	26	30%	47	41%	30%	46%
Not known*	26	41%	35	41%	44	38%	0%	7%
Did not wish to disclose	-	-	4	5%	1	1%	44%	18%

**Where E&D are Not Known, these were clients who were never seen again after the initial referral OR advice was given by phone/email and E&D information was not taken.*

Compared to many advice services, Ask Us did a thorough job on obtaining a high proportion of E&D data from its clients, including during the periods of lockdown when face-to-face interviews were not carried out.

In her previous two reports, the evaluator strongly recommended Ask Us team to compare their E&D data with the profiles of young people across Bristol, to see whether there were any obvious gaps to be addressed eg through targeted outreach. However, this was not done. This lack was not in line with the practice of 1625 and the other partners, who normally carry out such analyses across their services as a whole and for many other individual projects.



Section 3: Reflections on achieving the Outcomes

As well as offering comment from her independent perspective, the evaluator's approach is always to 'hold up a mirror' so her client organisations can reflect evaluatively on their work and identify learning for themselves. The team often felt that the Board seemed to focus more on the challenges and perceived weaknesses of the project than noticing its strengths and achievements. The evaluator noticed this too. Because of this tendency, she asked everyone to state one thing they were most proud of about Ask Us. Those still in post by the end of the project responded:

Good things to be proud of

"It was hard work, but we did it! We got there in the end despite all the changes of personnel."

"Working so closely with partners, and all partners committing to learning over a longer term project to deliver advice better - something so needed by young people in the city. This has been a new way of doing things for the Law Centre – focusing a service on a group of people, rather than type of legal need."

"Helping colleagues to think about what THEY can do to help young people engage."

"Writing the training that accompanies the toolkits."

"Enabling the change in culture in Citizens Advice."

"Using the change in CAB culture to work better with young people - and actually seeing this happen not only with my clients but with other workers' clients too."

"The casework, knowing that with an extra understanding of the systems we worked with (that I got with the help of my BLC and CAB team mates) and the assurance that I could make a difference by diving into researching rights and responsibilities of young people in crisis, big differences were made in young people's lives!"



This section sets out the reflections and observations of the managers and project workers, along with the evaluator's comments, under the headings of the four HTC Outcomes.

Outcomes 1 & 2

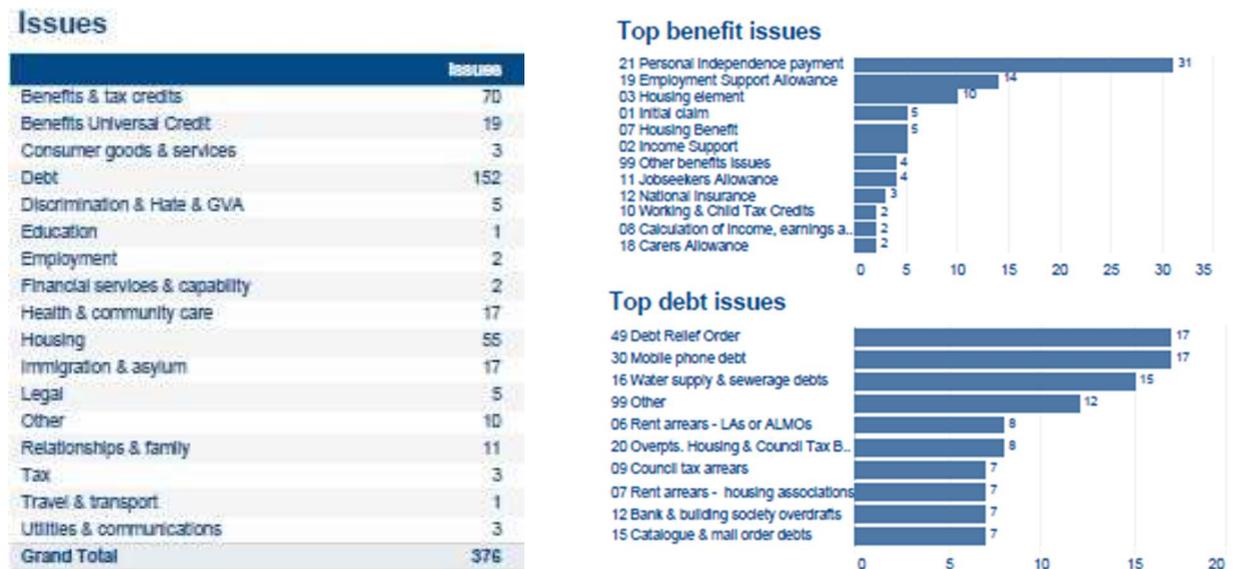
- People who have experienced hardship crisis are better able to improve their circumstances.
- People who are at high risk of experiencing hardship crisis are better able to plan for the future.

The Board identified one of the main challenges that ran throughout the life of the project was the difficulty of obtaining feedback from clients about their own outcomes at the end of their cases - and through follow-up some months later to find out if any outcomes had been sustained. The Board explained this was challenging because, with a light support structure operated by 1625 and no ongoing support available from the advice agencies (because they are not designed to give support), longer term relationships with young people were not part of the Ask Us service. This made it harder to phone, text or email a client 'out of the blue' to ask for outcome feedback - especially as most wanted to move on from their difficulties and not be reminded of them later.

The evaluator fully understands and appreciates this challenge and believes the team addressed it as well as they could. Advice agencies commonly state that clients of all ages don't want any further contact after their urgent legal issues have been resolved, so they

stop answering calls or emails. This explains the difficulty in obtaining feedback on outcomes - as well as engagement in coproduction, which is considered later in this section under Outcome 4.

This challenge was common to many HTC projects, and to many advice services outside the HTC programme which are required by funders to obtain reliable feedback on their outcomes or to involve clients. The Ask Us Board stressed that every effort was made - and the evaluator witnessed this over the five years. She considers the achievements of Ask Us under Outcomes 1 & 2 more than outweigh this difficulty. Outcome 1's 'improved circumstances' can easily be evidenced by advice agencies' records of advice given, debts written off, benefits gained etc. Citizens Advice Bristol recorded the following stats for advice given to young people:



The CAB project worker explained that this is only a small proportion of the numbers of young people advised and a snapshot of the areas of law their problems entailed, because other clients' records were held on 1625's and BLC's databases. The stats above relate only to young people who became 'full clients' of the CAB project worker or her CAB colleagues and therefore had full case records on the database, Casebook. Further data from the earlier years is now inaccessible on CAB's previous database which is no longer in use.

Data from the advice drop-in operated at 1625's homelessness service point was recorded by all three project workers as they were given access to 1625's INform database. However, INform was not set up to record the nature of the enquiries or the type of advice given, so only client numbers and detailed reports on their Equality & Diversity data were provided to the evaluator.

As BLC had not provided annual data on clients of the Ask Us service advised by their solicitors and caseworkers during the project, the evaluator asked for a summary report to be run from their client records database to show the number of young people (under 26) and areas of law they were advised on over the full five year period. This resulted in some very impressive stats - the first table below shows the steady increase in numbers of young clients year on year. The point of presenting these stats is not to claim that Ask Us funded all this work, but to show the enormous amount of work and time spent by BLC advising young people, which the other partners were not aware of before these stats came to light.

BLC had a project funded by Comic Relief to provide immigration advice and representation to young unaccompanied asylum seekers, which accounts for the higher levels of this area of law after 2016. Legal Aid may have been claimed for the 'certificated' work in the 2nd table.

Case Open Year	Bristol Law Centre clients Areas of Law	Number of Cases	Number of Clients
2016	Community Care	1	1
	Employment	1	1
	Housing	3	3
	Immigration - Asylum	3	3
	Mental Health	2	2
	Supported advice	4	4
	Welfare Benefits	2	2
Sub-Total for 2016		16	16
2017	consultancy	1	1
	Discrimination - Disability	2	2
	Discrimination - Pregnancy	2	2
	Discrimination - Race	2	2
	Employment	6	6
	Housing	15	12
	Immigration - Asylum	19	16
	Mental Health	12	9
	Public Law	4	3
	Supported advice	4	4
	Welfare Benefits	10	9
Sub-Total for 2017		77	66
2018	Discrimination - Disability	2	2
	Discrimination - Pregnancy	2	2
	Discrimination - Race	3	3
	Discrimination - Religion	2	2
	Discrimination - unspecified	1	1
	Employment	13	13
	Family	5	5
	Housing	6	6
	Immigration - Asylum	33	28
	Mental Health	13	11
	Public Law	5	5
	Supported advice	1	1
	Welfare Benefits	17	13
Sub-Total for 2018		103	92
2019	Civil Litigation	1	1
	consultancy	1	1
	Debt	2	2
	Discrimination	1	1
	Discrimination - Disability	1	1
	Discrimination - Religion	1	1
	Discrimination - Sex	1	1
	Employment	5	5
	Family	6	6

Case Open Year	Area of Law	Number of Cases	Number of Clients
2019 (cont)	Housing	12	9
	Immigration - Asylum	33	32
	Immigration - Citizenship	2	2
	Immigration - Other	2	2
	Immigration -EUSS	15	15
	Mental Health	6	6
	Personal Injury	1	1
	Public Law	5	5
	Supported advice	1	1
Welfare Benefits	28	24	
Sub-Total for 2019		124	116
2020	Discrimination	3	3
	Discrimination - Disability	2	2
	Discrimination - Sex	2	2
	Employment	18	18
	Housing	12	9
	Immigration - Asylum	17	15
	Immigration - Citizenship	3	3
	Immigration - Deportation	2	2
	Immigration - Other	3	3
	Immigration - Settlement	3	3
	Immigration -EUSS	8	8
	Mental Health	6	6
	Public Law	2	1
Welfare Benefits	17	13	
Sub-Total for 2020		98	88
2021	Discrimination	1	1
	Discrimination - Disability	3	3
	Employment	8	7
	Housing	9	7
	Immigration - Asylum	12	11
	Immigration - Other	1	1
	Immigration - Settlement	1	1
	Mental Health	6	5
Welfare Benefits	10	9	
Sub-Total for 2021		51	45

The next table shows the kinds of work carried out and the amount of time spent by the whole of BLC - not just by the Ask Us project worker at the Law Centre. The average time spent per client was 10.4 hours, and the total number of clients over 5 years was 393.

Year	Case Type	No. of cases	No. of clients	Aver. hrs/client
2016	Casework	30	25	9.7
	Certificated	2	2	17.5
	Email Advice	1	1	0.0
	One Off Advice	1	1	0.0
	Telephone Advice	1	1	0.8
Sub-Total for 2016		35	30	9.3
2017	Basic Info	3	2	2.8
	Casework	58	52	8.8
	One Off Advice	5	5	0.2
	Specialist	1	1	0.0
	Support Work	6	6	3.9
	Telephone Advice	2	2	1.2
Sub-Total for 2017		75	68	7.3
2018	Casework	60	50	9.7
	Certificated	3	3	78.0
	One Off Advice	11	11	0.1
	Specialist	5	5	11.9
	Telephone Advice	9	9	0.9
Sub-Total for 2018		88	78	10.1
2019	Casework	44	41	12.7
	Certificated	3	3	3.5
	One Off Advice	15	13	1.6
	Specialist	3	2	10.1
	Telephone Advice	8	8	2.0
Sub-Total for 2019		73	67	8.8
2020	Advice	2	2	0.0
	Basic Info	1	1	0.9
	Casework	44	39	8.1
	One Off Advice	3	3	0.6
	Specialist	3	3	7.2
	Support Work	1	1	2.0
	Telephone Advice	19	18	1.2
Sub-Total for 2020		73	67	5.6
2021	[Not Specified]	1	1	0.0
	Advice	4	4	4.2
	Basic Info	2	1	1.1
	Casework	83	68	12.6
	One Off Advice	1	1	3.0
	Specialist	1	1	13.3
	Telephone Advice	8	7	6.0
Sub-Total for 2021		100	83	11.3



The team's own key skills in advice-giving

Pertinent to the evaluation of Outcomes 1 & 2 is the way in which the Ask Us team imparted advice to young people. They enabled their young clients not only to overcome their immediate hardship crises but also to gain life skills that would stand them in good stead to manage any future problems themselves, or access advice services if needed.

In a session with the evaluator in Nov 2019 (Year 3), the team identified the seven key skills that enabled them to maximise their own effectiveness in giving advice to young people. These were considered in depth in the previous evaluation report and are summarised briefly below:

The Ask Us team's own key skills for advising young people, from triage onwards:

- 1) Using story-telling to encourage and enable the young person to explain the 'who, what, when and where' of what happened that led to the hardship crisis.
- 2) Quickly understanding how the young person processes information.
- 3) Using the knowledge of how the young person processes information to map out the options and talk through the implications of each one.
- 4) Plugging the young person in to others (eg support workers) who can reinforce the advice given and support them to follow the best path/option.
- 5) Recognising when the young person is not understanding or taking in what the adviser is saying.
- 6) Recognising that many young person have resistance to the client identity.
- 7) Recognising when a young person's life is too chaotic to respond to advice at the moment.

The evaluator is more than satisfied that Ask Us did not just deliver advice but ensured that their young clients were able to understand and act on it. The team used those key skills to blend advice with the appropriate degree of initial support and coaching to bridge the gap that many advice agencies don't recognise - that giving advice is of little use if the client is unable to act on it by themselves.

It was very interesting to see how the Ask Us team used the learning from their self-reflection to inform the development of the project and take it so much further than becoming a niche advice service for young people. It led directly to the development of the training for others to learn those skills and leaving the lasting legacy of the online Toolkit.

Ask Us findings bear out those of previous research

Outcome 2 was about enabling young people to become more resilient against future crises by being able to access and benefit from advice services as well as develop the necessary life skills to avert future hardship crises. The Ask Us team thought deeply about the difficulties they noticed vulnerable young people experiencing in accessing advice services. They noted the lack of life skills, knowledge and attitudes - which was not only due to their age and stage of development/maturity, but the disadvantages of multiple deprivation, no role models in their families and little or no teaching of life skills in schools and colleges.

Without being aware of it, the Ask Us team came to the same conclusions as the **Public Legal Education Network (PLENET) and Independent Academic Research Studies (IARS)**. PLENET set out to measure young people's legal capability in 2008³ and worked with IARS,

³ <https://www.advicenow.org.uk/lawforlife/research-and-theory/measuring-young-peoples-legal-capability>

which is a youth-led social policy think-tank set up to empower and give voice to young people so they can influence policy and democratically engage in society as equal citizens. When the evaluator recently read that piece of research, she was struck by how much of it sounded familiar from things she had heard the project workers say over the years as they got further into analysing the barriers to young people seeking, receiving and acting on advice on social welfare issues. Extended quotations from that report are included here because of this direct read-across.

Legal capability

Although the term 'legal capability' is not in our everyday vocabulary, and this is especially true for young people, it refers to the basic ingredients that make an active citizen who is able to fully participate in everyday life. Being legally capable simply means to be able to perform our role as equal members of society while being aware of our basic rights and responsibilities. It is not about complex legal concepts; it is about empowerment and proper education. However, there is a balance that needs to be struck when expecting individuals, especially the most vulnerable, to maximise their democratic role.

Through a qualitative methodology consisting of focus groups complemented by face-to-face interviews with young people aged 16-25 from particularly disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds, we found:

Knowledge

- The participants had little or no knowledge of most basic rights and entitlements; in particular they seemed unaware of any system of civil law to which they had recourse.
- The young people's lack of knowledge of their rights/entitlements, legal processes or where to go for help impeded their ability to recognise that they were dealing with an issue with legal elements. This in turn would affect their ability to plan how to resolve the issues.
- If the participants did seek information and/or help, it was either in the form of information available at the point of sale in shops, or by speaking to their family members or friends. There was also little knowledge of existing structures for advice.

Skills

Many of the participants lacked sound verbal communication skills, which would greatly affect their ability to resolve law-related problems. For example, many of the young people had difficulty verbalising their thoughts and arguments, or used aggressive body language. Further, many of the young people would act in an aggressive manner to resolve law-related issues.

Attitudes

- The young people's chosen source of help and advice was affected by their attitudes, in particular, a negative attitude towards professionals (such as the police) and advice professionals. Their choice of family members and friends was in part due to familiarity and trust, but also convenience.
- The young people's impetus to resolve an issue and persist was affected by what was at stake. For example, those problems they felt as being less serious might not be acted upon at all.
- The young people had difficulty in managing the emotional effects and stress that law-related issues had on their lives. In particular the most marginalised young people reported feeling lost and helpless.

Quotes in the report from young people included:

- ❖ “I know what I mean in my head, I just don’t know how to say it.”
- ❖ “I would start shouting and ask for the manager.”
- ❖ “I didn’t know anything about my rights. I only spoke to my mum... and she didn’t know what to do either.”

To remedy this lack and develop the behavioural aspects of legal capability, the research identified that several competencies must be developed by young people (and, the evaluator would add, by people of any age who lack this capability). These included:

- ✓ knowledge of rights and entitlements
- ✓ understanding processes (eg applying for benefits)
- ✓ knowing that the problem is a legal one
- ✓ knowing where to go for (free) information and advice
- ✓ skills to use online resources effectively
- ✓ communication skills to explain the problem
- ✓ collecting paperwork, keeping appointments with advisers etc
- ✓ managing emotions, not being aggressive through fear/stress.

The evaluator has seen strong evidence over the years that the Ask Us project worked with young people to develop all of these. This recent observation from the 1625 project worker sums up the development of life skills and legal capability:

“I saw young people develop lasting independence and skills. They would come in with notes all in a folder, using their diaries and knowing what they wanted help with – amazing changes from where they started out! One told me she’d moved and knew what her Council Tax would be, and had been to CAB on her own already.”

The development of social and emotional capabilities in young people

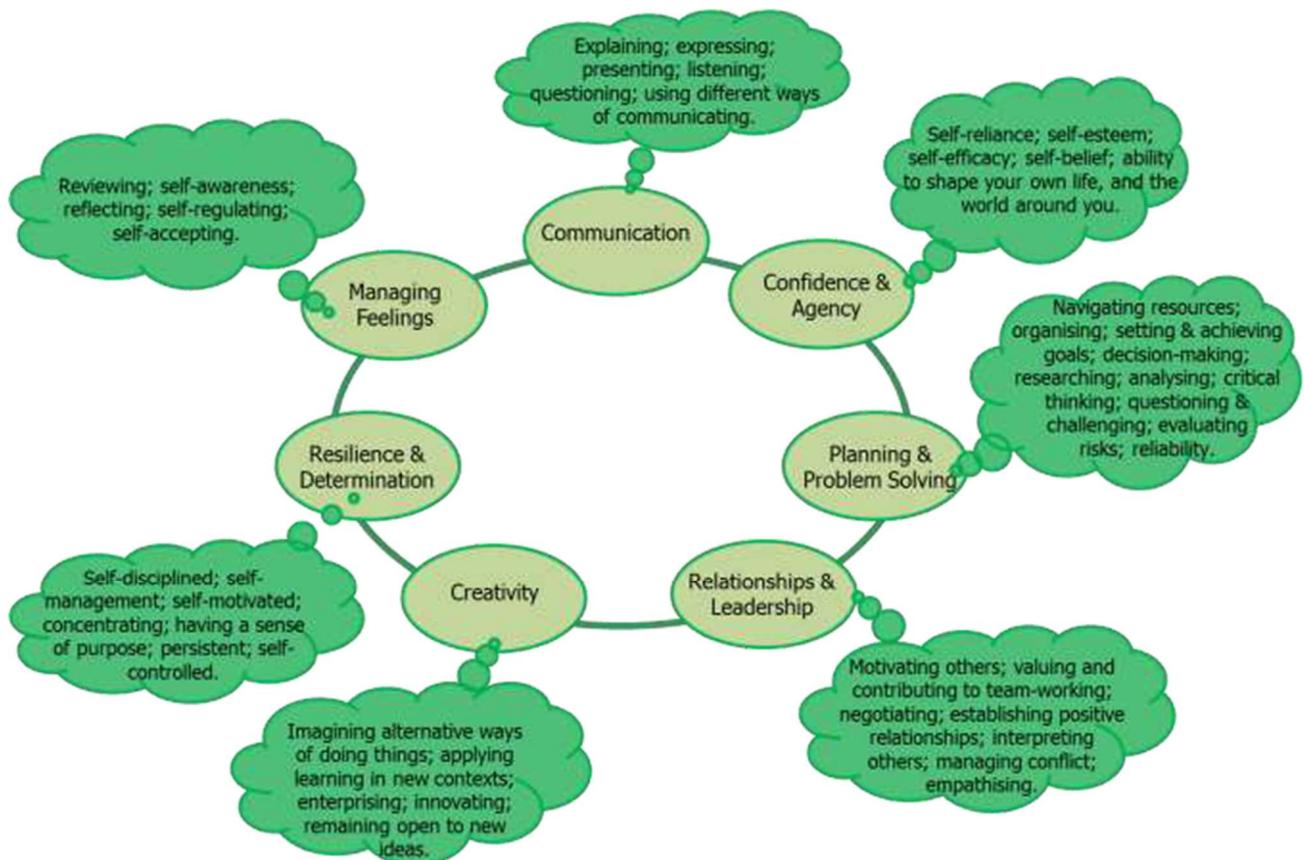
The evaluator identified a further piece of research that neatly sums up the development of these skills in young people. Although not considering legal capability specifically, it focused on the necessary skills and capabilities that young people need for a successful transition to adulthood. It relates directly to Ask Us and Outcome 2.

In 2012, [The Young Foundation](https://www.youngfoundation.org/publications/framework-of-outcomes-for-young-people/) researched and published its findings on the development of social and emotional capabilities in young people.⁴ The extended quotations and useful diagram set out below neatly summarise the lengthy piece of research:

Evidence shows that all young people need to develop both cognitive skills (such as maths, problem solving and language skills) and social and emotional capabilities to help them achieve the outcomes that they, and others, value both in their lives right now, and for their future. We have identified a consistent core set of social and emotional capabilities that are of value to young people. These capabilities can be grouped into seven interlinked clusters, each of which is supported by an evidence base that demonstrates its importance and links to success in extrinsic outcomes: these capabilities can act as a bridge between personal and positional change [in their circumstances].

The diagram on the next page shows the clusters of capabilities:

⁴ <https://www.youngfoundation.org/publications/framework-of-outcomes-for-young-people/>



The evidence base underpinning the clusters is compelling and illuminating. It makes the case for why social and emotional capabilities matter, and explores how they are connected to a range of outcomes for young people:

- **communication** – good communication is essential for a successful transition to work or training, for independence and to access a range of life opportunities. The role of communication is key to forming positive relationships.
- **confidence and agency** – enabling young people to recognise they can make a difference to their own lives, and that effort has a purpose, is important to key outcomes such as career success. There is a link between positive outcomes and self-confidence.
- **planning and problem solving** – problem solving, alongside resilience, provides young people with a ‘positive protective armour’ against negative outcomes associated with risky life events. Problem solving has also been shown to be associated with the ability to cope with stresses in life.
- **relationships and leadership** – a strong relationship between emotional intelligence, positive school transitions and academic success.
- **creativity** – displaying creativity and imagination may be related to resilience and wellbeing. Creativity can have an impact on both self-esteem and overall achievement.
- **resilience and determination** – important effects from discipline, patience and motivation on early psychological wellbeing and the role of ‘mental toughness’.
- **managing feelings** – ‘mood management’ is a critical to emotional intelligence and ‘interpersonal intelligence’. Regulating emotional behaviour is correlated with higher wages.

The capabilities in all of the clusters are critical in enabling all young people to fulfil their potential, and make a positive transition to adulthood and independence. This is not a targeted model that only applies to certain groups of young people - some will need more support to develop the capabilities: they may not receive the right development opportunities through formal learning and may not have the necessary support from their family, peers and wider communities. Therefore services for young people have a critical role to play both by *directly developing* the clusters of capabilities in young people and by *designing and increasing access to opportunities* that enable the development of the capabilities.

In conclusion on Outcomes 1 & 2, the last five years have shown that Ask Us directly contributed to many young people developing in most of those domains of competency. The evaluator is particularly impressed that the Ask Us team achieved this without knowledge of these pieces of research and without any training in coaching or personal development. Their natural curiosity, ability to relate to and understand young people, along with the use to which they put their insightful observations, meant that the project achieved much more than anyone could have imagined would be delivered to meet the first two HTC outcomes.



Outcome 3 - organisations are better able to support people to effectively tackle hardship through sharing learning and evidence.

The Ask Us Board always planned that the project would focus more on Outcome 3 after the first couple of years. This proved to be a wise decision as by then, the team had learned an immense amount about young people's needs for advice and barriers to accessing it - as demonstrated already in this report. They were then ready to put this learning to good use in training the three core partners' paid workers and volunteers before extending this offer to local organisations including Bristol Refugee Rights, Off the Record (a young people's counselling service) and Bristol City Council's Welfare Rights and Money Advice Service.

The 1625 manager and CAB project worker met with each organisation to establish what their goals were in relation to working better with young people. The focus for non advice agencies was on giving good quality information and preparing young clients to obtain and carry out advice. Advice services at CAB, BLC and the City Council focused on understanding how to communicate with young people, becoming trauma-informed, making their services more accessible and how best to work with a young client's support worker. For the three Ask Us partner organisations, this training built on the work they had begun by setting goals for their own development back in Year 1 of the project.

Just a few examples of the benefits from this training and joint working are provided below:

"A young person in difficulties will always turn to the people they've got established relationships with, like a support worker, before going to a stranger in a new organisation. So the advice-givers need to understand that and work with it. Thanks to our work in Ask Us, it's good that there's now more BLC solicitors and CAB advice workers contacting young people's support workers. The support worker can help with gathering the evidence for a legal case, and remind the young person of their appointments, so the whole case runs smoother for the client and the solicitor."

"We at 1625 gained skills and good practice in information-giving, including better use of publicly available websites. It's still the case that we have no capacity to undertake more thorough supervised casework - but this was never the intention of our involvement in the partnership or the training."

"There's been a real cultural shift at CAB as the traditional adviser base didn't see young people as viable clients. Now they're eating out of our project worker's hand and see her as an absolute guru! They used to say "Oh here's a young person, let's give it to L." Now they say "I've got a young client, I can use what L taught me!"

"We've now all had the trauma-informed and PIE training, but they're not included in the CAB basic training. They should be."

"BLC's new Assessment & Support Team on reception were trained by L at Ask Us. They find out if a client has a support worker. If so, that's a great benefit to the client and our solicitors to have someone doing the running around and hand-holding, being sympathetic and

supportive to the client. Without that, young and older people may disengage from the process of legal advice and representation.”

Commenting on the make-up of the Ask Us partnership, the 1625 worker explained how she benefited from working with her colleagues in the two advice agencies:

“There was a benefit from mixing advice and non advice agencies - I learned loads about options, the process of evidence and how to build a case. It was invaluable to draw on the other project workers’ expertise. I know so much more about legislation, asking the right questions and dealing with evidence-based stuff.”

She also had a unique perspective on her own 1625 colleagues before they received the training:

“1625 workers were often no different from the clients – they referred young people to us expecting a quick fix, so we explained that wasn’t possible as helping those workers and their clients to weigh up the options is part of the process for effective advice. Anything else is disempowering, like if we just do it all for the young person without their worker being involved to support them, as the workers seemed to want.”

The CAB’s project worker actively promoted the training through the national CA network:

“We’ve had good feedback on the training we’ve given internally, locally and to other CAs. CAs are being sent to us since I presented on it to the national CA Comms Group.”

The CAB project worker led on the development and delivery of the training to partners and other local organisations. She wrote a comprehensive report entitled ‘Capacity Building Narrative’ which appears in full at Appendix One. It is reproduced in full in order for this valuable record not to be lost after the project finishes.

The Ask Us project’s own research

A further contribution to Outcome 3 was made in the form of a piece of original research - this appears in full in Appendix Two. After the BLC project worker left for a new job in Year 4, the post was redesigned to provide the maximum input to Outcome 3 in the remaining period - rather than be trained to take on casework. The new post-holder was tasked with researching and writing a paper on the barriers for young people in accessing advice, and the enablers/best practice to overcoming them. It addressed the following four research questions:

- 1) What are the advice needs of young people in Bristol?
- 2) What are the barriers to advice for young people in Bristol?
- 3) What enables young people to seek advice?
- 4) What does good practice in advice and support work for young people look like?

The evaluator chose to include this document as an appendix to ensure that the readers of this report at the Lottery would see it, if it hadn’t reached them by other means. It can also be found online as one of the resources of the Ask Us Toolkits. She hopes that BLC will publicise the research paper through the Law Centres Network and AdviceUK, and that CAB will do the same through its national network.

The Ask Us Toolkits

The greatest and longest-lasting legacy of the Ask Us project is, without doubt, its online Toolkits. In summary, this highly professional website provides in-depth guidance on:

-  good practice in giving information
-  good practice in advice work with young people.

These two toolkits will be launched to support organisations and advice agencies in Bristol at the end of September 2021. They will be available online for similar organisations anywhere in the world - arguably, the contents are relevant to services working with vulnerable people of all ages who need advice and support on social welfare issues because the underlying principles are not only relevant in the UK. The evaluator hopes the Lottery will help promote the Toolkits to all of the other 58 HTC projects.

The team worked tirelessly throughout Years 4 and 5 to produce these. This evaluation report cannot do justice to the finished article other than to recommend readers to view it for themselves at <https://askustoolkit.co.uk/>. Many of the key points map directly onto the findings of the two pieces of research quoted in this report.

This evaluation was concluded before the public launch of the Toolkits on 28 Sept 2021.

In conclusion, Outcome 3 was clearly nothing less than an outstanding set of achievements of which the three partner organisations should be extremely proud.



Outcome 4 - those experiencing hardship crisis have a stronger, more collective voice to better shape a response to their issues.

The Ask Us Board identified that the project’s main challenge here was the gap between the aspirations and reality of involving young people in the project, other than as clients needing urgent advice and support with their hardship crises.

The evaluator disagrees that Outcome 4 was “not met as well as it should have been” (a view expressed by some on the Board on many occasions). The KPI data shows that two of the three KPIs were strongly attempted - achieving 83% success with 25 young people and 72% success with an impressive 143 young people: nearly three quarters of that large group reported an improved ability to influence issues affecting them. Even more impressive was the over-achievement of numbers engaged in activities to influence social change. The relevant part of the table from an earlier section is reproduced here for emphasis:

Outcome 4 KPI wording	Y1 Total	Y2 Total	Y3 Total	Y4 Total	Y5 Total	total %	total no's
YP engage in activities to influence social change	-	47	10	1	7	130%	65
YP feel their collective voice having impact on social change	-	-	15	3	7	83%	25
YP indicate improved ability to influence issues affect them.	23	67	37	13	3	72%	143

Involving young people en masse in ‘client voice’ activities in support of HTC Outcome 4 was very challenging for many HTC projects. The only one known to the evaluator which excelled in this area was led by a large support charity in Merseyside, where the numbers of clients were kept very low in order to provide them with the maximum support to overcome their hardship crises and take part in the life skills development group and peer support. In this partnership, the advice agency was very much the secondary partner - adding advice into the support, rather than the other way around.

Trying to involve young or adult clients in coproduction, service planning, peer support or commenting on social policy issues whilst they are in the middle of their hardship crisis is

not only inappropriate but highly unlikely to result in engagement. CAB quoted the example of adult debt clients who wouldn't engage in money management or consider switching utility suppliers to save money (still less engage in coproduction of charities' projects) as all they can focus on is getting their immediate crisis sorted out.

It is therefore testament to the project's success, in particular that of the 1625 project worker, that these KPIs were achieved so well. The previous evaluation report contained more than six pages of evidence of young people's involvement in a diverse range of 'voice' activities. These influenced service provision in Bristol, built the individuals' confidence and supported them to take up opportunities they would never have had without the project worker having found and matched them up with them. 1625's project worker said:

"So many things that young people wanted to change through 'user voice' were systemic eg the DWP or Home Office procedures. But I was one worker in 1625 which is not a campaigning organisation, so I couldn't even help young people set up a petition. However, it was great that several individuals got to participate in consultations on local services, and one even got paid for to go to London. That boosted her confidence and skills amazingly. Young people are not ready-made activists – some organisations have 12 week training for them on how to do it. We should have considered our scope to do social action properly with young people before signing up to deliver on it through user voice and involvement. And then of course the pandemic changed everything and stopped so many things going ahead."

The reason why 1625 was included in the partnership was because of its Youth Board and reputation for involving young people - something that the CEO of BLC (as author of the original HTC bid) saw as essential in complementing the advice services of BLC and CAB to achieve all the HTC outcomes. The 1625 project worker was unclear why she was not placed in 1625's Participation Team, where she would have had access to the Youth Board (as originally envisaged for the project), training in participation skills and supervision/support from a manager experienced in the subject:

"It felt like Ask Us was a side project for all three partners. I should have been based in 1625's participation team and had a manager who was a participation or outreach specialist. Because it wasn't promoted from on high, the Ask Us project wasn't something that the Participation team bothered to engage with, which was a real shame. When I met with the Youth Board, they let me do a five minute presentation then said it would take away from what they were doing, rather than seeing we could work together within the same organisation for the same aims. They had a peer education project in schools – Ask Us could have had input on what to do in a hardship crisis, how to seek advice and support. That could have prevented a lot of hardship and anxiety for young people and ensured they got advice before a crisis blew up."

Another factor that hindered the 1625 project worker's ability to focus on engagement was having two very different types of work in her part-time role:

"If this were done again, I wouldn't put casework responsibilities in the same part-time job as participation and engagement. The latter always lost out to having to deal with clients' urgent crises."

1625's first project worker was an aspiring solicitor and so focused much of her time on the casework aspects of her job, which was where her skills and interests lay. This was beneficial to the project in its early days when it focused (rightly) on advising young people and learning from them about their needs and barriers. Despite that focus, all three project workers worked together to engage young people, resulting in the highest number engaging in 'voice' activities - with 67 reporting a positive outcome for the third indicator in Year 2.

As an Ask Us Board member, 1625's senior manager thought the problem she perceived of the team not achieving higher numbers for Outcome 4 targets was caused by with the advice agency partners and the young people themselves:

“Young people are involved in setting and determining the agendas in 1625, but there's not the same culture with the other two partners. Advice services are not relationship-based so it's not surprising that young people or adult clients don't want to be involved with them once their crisis has been resolved. Our project worker tried in so many ways but young people just weren't interested.”

In conclusion, the evaluator considers that Ask Us made significant contributions to HTC's Outcome 4. Perhaps more could have been done had the 1625 project worker been employed elsewhere within that organisation's structures - which would have been more in keeping with the original vision of 1625's role. Better recognition of what was achieved would have been made possible if the indicators for Outcome 4 had been changed earlier in the project, as recommended by the evaluator. Measuring a project by KPIs is better done when its indicators are relevant and achievable. The Lottery allowed for flexibility based on learning throughout the programme so this could have been done sooner, rather than treating the indicators as if they were set in stone. Nonetheless, the results of Outcome 4's indicators show a high level of success in engaging and enabling young people to have a stronger, more collective voice to better shape a response to their issues.



Section 4: Other matters of interest

This evaluation has now considered the Ask Us contributions to the four outcomes of Help Through Crisis, and demonstrated that the project's benefits went further, wider and deeper with and for young people - and with and for other charities in Bristol. The report now turns to various other themes and issues raised by the partners as part of the conversations with the evaluator in the last few months of the project.

The benefits and downside of five year funding

The partners stated unequivocally that they found it helpful to have had secure funding for five years, particularly because establishing a common culture between three such different organisations took time. The downside was that all had to be committed to subsidising the project for five years. This was because the original bid did not include a funded structure for the operational management of the three project workers or the project itself, including the time-consuming task of collecting and collating data from the three partners and reporting to the Ask Us Board. BLC received a top-slice for acting as the lead body and reporting to the Lottery, but was not able to provide consistent leadership because of the turnover of Directors. BLC did not have a project/middle manager to take charge of overseeing the project. 1625 therefore provided this function unpaid until in Year 5 when they received some additional money from the Ask Us grant to recognise the time and input of their middle manager.

Although five year funding was welcome, another factor was at play too: their various sources of core funding were effectively eroded over time due to the lack of inflationary uplifts, so each partner had less money with which to subsidise Ask Us year after year. One CEO said: “There are only so many projects a charity can subsidise out of core funding or other grants. Five years ago, we knew it was low money and high expectations – but went for it anyway. Next time, we'd think twice about going for a grant which requires so much for so little – and where the money has to be shared across a partnership.”

Perspectives from Bristol Law Centre

BLC saw four different Directors during the five year project, which was particularly unsettling for everyone in Ask Us as they were the lead body. Nearly half the workforce left

and (sensibly) were only replaced if funding allowed. In May 2021, the temporary cover CEO was interviewed by the evaluator. She provided her own insights into several challenges BLC experienced in being part of Ask Us, which she had observed from being on the BLC staff team at various points over the five years:

"1625 are a provider of services which our solicitors will take action against – ie homelessness assessments. On top of that, Law Centres don't have a good track record of working with agencies outside the advice sector. One problem is that partners can't understand we have to judge the legal merit of a case before we take it on – whereas they take a victim-centred approach and expect us to take on cases even where we cannot find the legal evidence to do so.

Young people won't come to us of their own volition – there needs to be a more supportive lead-in as the case will be complex by the time it needs a solicitor. It's better when we provide legal consultancy eg if a young person goes to a charity dealing with trafficking or mental health and they remain with that service, with us feeding in the legal information until it becomes a case for us to take over and act on. They would still be supported by the referring charity and we'd do our legal bit. After Ask Us is over, we will have to negotiate relationships in this way if we are to continue to advise and represent young people."

It's not just a matter of making our offices more attractive to young people because for them it's just another office, which is scary especially if they're not with their mates. What BLC needs to do in future is funding to develop relationships with youth groups in South Bristol so we can do legal consultancy because young people are more likely to relate to youth workers and local organisations who do outreach in the skateparks. However, youth outreach funding has long been cut so we'd have to seek partnership funding to make it happen."

The current (permanent) Director of BLC was interviewed for the evaluation in July 2021. She explained the many positive ways in which BLC has been building on the foundations developed over the last five years:

"The Ask Us project has opened up many new partnership opportunities. We are talking to Bristol Refugee Rights about joint work where they'd continue to provide the holistic support and we'd provide specialist legal advice to their clients. And we're in early discussions with MIND around Personal Independence Payment benefits appeals. We want to use our legal expertise to prevent deepening and widening inequality, so we're thinking about key life events and are going to talk to the Trussell Trust foodbank providers locally, for a start. In South Gloucestershire, the Council and voluntary sector providers have been very interested to hear about Ask Us. It's possible we will start similar work there. We're also thinking about other areas of law including education exclusions from a discrimination point of view.

With young people, we know it's vital to go to where they are, not expect them to come to us. We're building a database of community groups, youth centres and other place-based hubs in the area where young people hang out and feel comfortable."

Furthermore, the recent restructure of BLC was also influenced by the way of working adopted during Ask Us:

"Our reception function has now been replaced by an Assessment and Support Team who offer a more expert level of triage and an ongoing support function. They're being trained by the CAB's Ask Us project worker. It's the natural expansion of the initial assessment model we had for years. We've seen the benefits in the Ask Us model of having extra support from someone who's not a skilled advice worker but is sympathetic to young people. That model clearly applies to other vulnerable people as well as younger ones."

"We're improving our referral process. It's not the responsibility of the referrer to do it perfectly, but the toolkit will help them get their clients ready and we will be better able to receive them and quickly link them to a solicitor with our new A-Team doing the assessment and triage."

The evaluator asked BLC's second project worker for a contribution to the evaluation. This was given with the benefit of considerable hindsight as he left Ask Us in May 2019 to take up a new job at the Law Centres Network. He wrote at length:

"My name is Nathan FitzPatrick and I was a Project Worker for Ask Us between May 2018 and May 2019, based at the Bristol Law Centre. I am not a solicitor, but had been volunteering and working in Law Centres for around four years before joining the Ask Us team, meaning that I have experience of working with lawyers in a rights-based social welfare setting.

In my view, a hugely important learning point from Ask Us was that, as a meeting point between three different styles of advice-giving/support, it allowed for some fairly radical challenges to each organisation's standard way of operating.

What the Law Centre taught the other two partners:

A rights-based approach to working with young people. However, I'm unsure of whether this was ever really embedded, but it seemed to me that too often support-based organisations would start with an intention to reach a compromise, which ran the risk of alienating clients who would then not see them as "on side". I think that the advocacy based lawyer/client relationship that the Law Centre and CAB modelled was a valuable challenge to this

What the Law Centre learned:

- A better understanding of the way other support engages with people in crisis.
- A better understanding of why clients act in different ways / prioritise certain parts of their situation over what the lawyer may be trying to deal with.
- Reflective Practice, including more awareness of psychologically informed practice, began to make its way into Law Centre consciousness. I believe this was a good deal due to Ask Us.

I think that the project helped to progress BLC's internal discussion about working holistically and across teams with the same clients, and the complexities, benefits and limits of this.

There were opportunities for strategic responses to situations that the Law Centre missed, because not much space was made internally for learning from Ask Us to be brought into the Law Centre. It was possibly seen as a resource, rather than an agent of change, and perhaps this should have been challenged more by me. [Evaluator comment - this should have been led from the top, not left to a junior member of staff to try to implement.]

I think incorporating this sort of project within Law Centres has huge amounts of potential, and in particular in using partnerships to bridge the gaps between LCs and organisations such as CAB.

Looking back, I think the fact that ability to provide pretty much any young person with at least an advanced triage was beneficial, and questioned BLC on what it could and couldn't help with, and who it could and couldn't advise. Being able to be useful, at least in a limited way, to a young advice-seeker before working out whether or not the advice was covered by other Law Centre funding allowed BLC to learn more about people in crisis in Bristol – what had gone wrong for them and why."

Organisational cultures

The next three comments continue the theme of the different organisational cultures and potential for conflict of interest.

"Many of the difficulties were due to miscommunication, not cultural conflicts. We were open to challenge and welcomed difficult conversations with our two partners. We would work with either of them again in the future. The funding didn't resource an equal partnership between all three parties, however."

"I would caution against being in direct partnership with a housing provider again, as a number of difficult situations arose and much energy had to be spent in dealing with these. However the relationship between BLC and CAB was, I believe, very much strengthened as a result of the presence each organisation had in the other, and the shared values / understanding of advice principles were a particularly useful point of connection."

"A key message for each partner would be to know their own strengths as organisations and share them, and recognise where they can learn from the others. It's not a matter of admitting weaknesses as such – just knowing what their own challenges are and where they can improve, being able to admit they can learn."

The evaluator was asked to carry out an early review with the partners after the first six months of delivery. This helped address some of the already-apparent differences and difficulties, and found a way to resolve some of them by altering the role of BLC's worker.

Governance by the Board of Ask Us

Comments on the approach of the Board came from three different perspectives - two senior managers and a project worker:

"Some of the Board seemed obsessed with KPIs – there's more to a project than targets."

"KPIs are useful to see weaknesses and spot what's not working. They show us what's not on track so we can bring it into a conversation at the Board about what we can do in the real world to rectify it. They're a useful anchor, it's not box-ticking."

"It was weird that the managers met separately from the three workers. We were not included in decisions or necessarily even told."

Benefits to CAB from its involvement in Ask Us

Some final comments on the influence of the project on the CAB came from the Advice Services Manager, CEO and project worker:

"We can be the best we can be through the reflective approach. We need to make sure our staff and volunteers are psychologically well – it is very stressful endlessly dealing with poverty, debt, clients talking about ending it all. The new volunteers under 40 we have coming along now are more up for skills-sharing and supporting each other, locally or through the nationally-provided real-time system from Citizens Advice."

"Ask Us has been a real revolution, transformative! We thought we'd be giving advice to young people in a separate project, but it was far better than that and the legacy is going to be long-lasting. Over the five years, there's been heaps of learning for us."

"We can't do intense support one-to-one. We do involve support workers now but sometimes it's not clear who owns the case: Shelter, us, support worker, whoever. If one of those goes on holiday for a week, it can all unravel. It needs a case manager role."

The end of the project

The end of the project was well managed. Even before the end of Year 4, it was clear there was a well-thought out exit strategy being planned to manage the final year of the project to transition neatly from casework to focusing on the legacy of the Toolkits. The evaluator has seen many projects with time-limited funding which did not have anything like this smooth an ending for all concerned: she wishes to congratulate the Ask Us team and its managers for this exemplary transition, close down and legacy.



Summary

This report has shown that the Ask Us project achieved the Help Through Crisis outcomes for 600+ young people in hardship in Bristol, influenced the culture and skills within the three project partners' organisations and left an impressive legacy of the online toolkits. The success of this project was due to at least the following factors:

- ∞ A creative grants programme from the Lottery that encouraged innovation in service delivery and put a high premium on learning through evaluation.
- ∞ The determination of the young clients to overcome their immediate and underlying issues with the advice and support of Ask Us.
- ∞ The dedication, knowledge, skills and ingenuity of all the project workers and the project manager at 1625.
- ∞ The Board's oversight of performance and accountability.
- ∞ The three organisations' persistence in making the partnership work, despite very different cultures.

It is clear that Ask Us made very significant contributions to the Help Through Crisis programme's four outcomes. The evaluator considers herself fortunate to have worked with the team and its managers over the last five years. The impressive toolkit created by Ask Us will endure long after the funding ends and will reach beyond the City of Bristol to anyone who searches online for resources on how best to advise and support young people in and through hardship crisis.



Rachel Hankins
RZ Hankins Consultancy
Sept 2021.

Appendix 1 - results of the training by Ask Us

Capacity Building Narrative - a report by Lyndy Bailey, Ask Us project worker at CAB.

One of the key things we wanted to implement as part of the Ask Us project was the ability for staff and volunteers from support and advice agencies to feel confident and upskilled in delivering the information or advice in a more young person accessible way. We knew the changes in learning had to also come from other changes within the organisations to support the training we had previously delivered. This training directly complemented both of the toolkits.

We ran a short series of workshops with the three partner organisations and other key organisations in Bristol to look at building capacity within their organisations and what support they could offer for young vulnerable clients. These organisations were both advice and support agencies.

The first workshop looked at exercises around the following questions:

- What are the barriers to young people using advice centres?
- What stops support agencies from giving consistent and accurate info?
- What would a young people's friendly advice agency look like?
- What would a support agency which gave good info look like?
- What ideas do we have for overcoming barriers to building capacity?

These were the basis for the organisations developing their own actions plans.

The action plans were designed around a Now, Next and Later template with time frames. Now, Next and Later was designed to see what can be implemented now, or what is happening now within organisations to make their services more effective and accessible for young people. These 'now' changes were defined by occasionally happening but could be implemented in everyday practice. The 'next' were changes that agencies wanted to make but would require internal/external training, creating objectives and partnership building. These were objectives that were achievable within a realistic timeframe.

The 'later' objectives were those which would need both of the 'now' and 'next' to happen but also recognised the significant amount of time, effort, potential funding restraints that could impact these objectives. These were long term aims for the organisation that would embed the 'now' and 'next' that would help inform the long term planning of the 'later'

We've followed the agency's action plans since the first workshop in 2020 and have seen some of their initial objectives move from a recognition of need within their organisation to an implemented action and decisive change.

Bristol Law Centre identified that they wanted to look at how to analyse clients who have disengaged from advice - how many return, how many are signposted? How many outcomes are unknown and how to identify the best way to communicate with young people using technology. They have since developed a triage team who will oversee the frontline needs of the community accessing the Law Centre in Bristol. They have also undertaken the training delivered by Ask Us, Best practice in working with Young People, which gives an overview of a whole person approach and trauma aware practice in an advice capacity. This triage team as part of the reception team are already working with the existing law centre networks to identify and improve their technology approach with young people and the benefit of texting before calling and not using withheld numbers. They plan to have the team fully operational by the end of 2021.

There are also a number of system changes that have been identified and they plan to implement these changes by the end of 2021. They want to break down the lawyer image for young people accessing the law centre, deliver training on language used in the wider community, share the Ask Us toolkits both internally and externally and gather feedback from

other agencies on how Bristol Law Centre is received in the wider community.

With these changes embedded into their practice they are hopeful that the longer term plans they have made will be achievable. These were:

- Reviewing areas of the law they cover, do they meet the young person's needs?
- Embed Ask Us toolkit 2 training
- Use of Toolkit 2 training material on a regular basis with BLC staff
- Deliver training to young person focused organisations
- Develop Outreach to marginalized communities
- Co-locate services and/or work in partnership with organisations that work with marginalised communities.

Feedback from a team meeting in Aug 2021 also reflected their Now, Next, Later planning:

- *“Consider how we incorporate the learning from this project into our services going forward.”*
- *“Push to embed learning, best practice and use of Toolkit in wider team's ways of working.”*

Bristol Refugee Rights

BRR identified that for their organisation to become more accessible to young people they wanted to “Initially work with a small group of young people. Co-design how we work with them going forward. Focused on broader advocacy services with YP’s voices. Access to advice may or may not come up.” This was achieved in July 2021 as they have now created a partnership with Bristol’s Creative Youth Network, a youth organisation that delivers youth clubs and creative activities. Bristol Refugee Rights are delivering fortnightly sessions with a small group of young leaders. By Autumn, this group will be consulting with a wider group of young people to pick priorities to work on based on their own experience and conversations.

They also identified that working collaboratively with partner organisations would be beneficial to young people and a way to build capacity for them and partner organisations. They have also created factsheets and lists of resources to share with other agencies., along with offering training to external organisations and inviting them to the Forum to collaborate on issues.

BRR delivered training for both Creative Youth Network and 1625 on immigration. They facilitated a discussion on support for undocumented young people at the Young People’s Forum which led to a follow up meeting and actions with other organisations there are plans to follow that up with future meetings. They are also planning to embed the use of the Ask Us toolkit and share the Toolkit externally.

Welfare Rights and Money Advice Support Services (WRAMAS)

WRAMAS offer casework and advice to support workers across Bristol. In their action plan they had already identified through consultation and guidance with young people that have advice needs that they needed to remodel their existing service. This was a good opportunity for WRAMAS to discuss and plan what suggestions they might develop and where these priorities could be trialled.

WRAMAS determined that a plan to meet with the Mediation, Assessment, Prevention and Support (MAPS) team at 1625 would be a good place to start. MAPS works to prevent youth homelessness through early intervention with young people. This often can lead to conversations around debt, benefits and housing related issues. WRAMAS have provisionally agreed that they will:

- Attend a team meeting (virtual or otherwise) to set out what WRAMAS does/can do and how Bristol Youth MAPS can refer to their service.
- Learn from Youth MAPS workers about best practice for engaging with young people,

impart advice and take on casework. Some of this would be called 'assisted casework' i.e. sitting alongside the young person and their support worker/s to provide benefits and debt advice.

- Developing drop-in sessions at the Bristol Youth MAPS office and/or 1625 Independent People head office. This would be a pre-booked appointment service with the flexibility for emergencies.
- We aim to deliver services to young people via two of our workgroups: Take Up and Outreach and Welfare Rights / Money Advice support services.

1625 Independent People

1625 deliver a wealth of youth provision services across Bristol, Bath & North East Somerset, South Glos and North Somerset. The main focus in their Now, Next later plan was the role of support workers within the youth support accommodation service they provide. Through previous training the youth support accommodation workers and floating support workers have received they were able to identify where there were gaps in their knowledge with providing information to young people and the benefits this can have on supporting a young person during the transition from supported to independent living.

Those attending the workshop session identified that by March 2022 they wanted to embed the triage "key issues" skills from the toolkit as part of the regular induction and training process for new members of staff and deliver this for existing staff. By supporting young people in supported housing and hostels with opening letters this was more actively engaging young people and not just passively this would then enable them to support young people to process the information contained in the letters. Staff would have this practice as standard and as part of their one-to-one with young people in supported accommodation. Support workers to establish an agreement between young people and the adviser they may be working with to enable cohesive working relationships and allow them to be updated with any tasks the adviser had set the young person.

Use of the online toolkit resources for one-to-one working with young people. Encouraging note taking, recording of resources used and having this being monitored and audited by managers

1625 Independent People have already started to plan some significant changes to their approach when working with young people in the triage of information issues and they anticipate that this will continue and only improve with the rollout of the online toolkit resource in September 2021.

Off The Record

OTR is a mental health charity based in Bristol that provides one-to-one therapy for 11-18 year olds and group therapy service for under 25s. They offer support with creative therapies, book clubs and drop-in sessions. The service is delivered by trained therapists, holistic support staff and trained peer navigator volunteers. They are interested in embedding the Ask Us approach to their delivery and training in best practice, as they are aware that information and support often overlaps. Due to the Covid pandemic all face to face services were suspended and OTR planned for these to resume in September 2021, they are on track to re-open to a small number of young people as planned.

They identified that the training from Ask Us would be useful for their peer navigators in supporting them in their roles. This was initially scheduled for July 2021 but is now being delivered to their new volunteers in September 2021. OTR's long term plan is for the use of the online Toolkit 1 to be used and embedded throughout the organisation once it has been released in September 2021.

Citizens Advice Bristol

CAB identified that there were administrative changes that could take place by April 2021 to enable young people to access and or better engage with the advice service. They were

predominantly associated with taking calls and managing appointments. By April 2021 they wanted to achieve the following:

- Text reminders to be sent 1 week before the appointment and on the day of the appointment for young people.
- Text reminders to include the information that the call would be from a withheld/private number.

This became standard in April 2021 when young clients accessing citizens advice and the advisers can make a note on the casefile to highlight these communication needs. They identified that, by June 2021, training would be delivered around best practice in delivering advice to young people - this was completed in July 2021.

As a result of the Ask Us Toolkit 2 training, the admin team now routinely asks whether someone is a young person, and they are more aware of the barriers that young people have when accessing advice and are confident in escalating their case internally or signposting them to the appropriate local services.

There is still a plan for ongoing training around trauma aware practices and wellbeing support, case reflection meetings for staff but having been introduced to an overview of trauma aware practice and the benefits for clients, volunteers, and staff.

They have longer term objectives looking at local marketing, connecting with communities and providing more outreach but some of this will need to take place once there are clear definitions around the method of service delivery re: Covid.

Citizens Advice has an internal case review model where specific categories are checked by senior advisers. They have identified that, post-Ask Us, a young person category could be beneficial to continue monitoring the consistency of advice and issues related to that demographic. This is dependent on the capacity of duty managers and funding.

The wider network of Citizens Advice has also benefited from the Ask Us project as there are other local CAs are starting to think about working with young people. This has sparked conversations with the Ask Us project from the national Citizens Advice body sharing learning from the project with their members and delivering the Toolkit 2 training with this workshop incorporated into it.

Of the training Chief Officer of Wiltshire Citizens Advice said:

“The most useful part for us was identifying what we are already doing well, and what the barriers are. And also the crucial link between what we are doing in other areas and client groups and how transferable this might be. Finally we will definitely use the Now, Next and Later matrix to formulate a plan.”

The combined approach of the questions we asked in the workshop to advisers and support workers to develop their approach with working with young people led to Wiltshire CA creating their own planning documents so they can monitor their own progress.



Appendix Two - results of the research by Ask Us

This is a copy of the research document authored by the Bristol Law Centre project worker for Ask Us.

Ask Us - Understanding the Advice Needs of Young People in Bristol

July 2021

Dr Laura Colebrooke, Bristol Law Centre.



Introduction

The Ask Us project was a 5 year partnership between Bristol Law Centre, Bristol Citizen's Advice Bureau and 1625 independent people. Funded by the National Lottery Help Through Crisis fund, the project supported young people aged 16-25 in Bristol to access support and advice.

As part of this project, we have researched the advice needs of young people to better understand their advice needs and how best to help them. This document presents the findings of the research for advice agencies and others who are interested in how to help young people in crisis to access the support and advice they need.

Through the project, toolkits were also produced for advice workers and support workers to help them work with young people.

The findings presented here are based on:

- Interviews with practitioners on the project and other relevant organisations working with young people
- Policy documents and reports on young people's advice needs and access to advice
- Young people's feedback and voice - a range of engagement activities that were held throughout the length of the project
- Interviews with young people who had received support through the project
- Analysis of details of young people helped through the project ie demographics.

The findings relate to 4 research questions:

1. What are the advice needs of young people in Bristol?
2. What are the barriers to advice for young people in Bristol?
3. What enables young people to seek advice?
4. What does good practice in advice and support work for young people look like?

What are the advice needs of young people in Bristol?

1. The context for young people

Young people in Bristol and throughout the UK face a range of challenges. Some of these, such as issues around welfare benefits, are faced by people of all ages, but young people's experiences of these issues may differ. It is important to recognise young people as a distinct cohort with specific features but it is also important to remember that young people are not a homogenous group and an intersectional approach is also relevant when understanding young people's needs.

Additionally, a young person's journey to adulthood is often not a linear one. A young person may appear 'grown up' or manage responsibilities we see as 'adult' (such as caring responsibilities) but need support in other areas of their life. As a result, it's always important to start with the person in front of you, seeing their age as one aspect of a complex picture that shapes their needs, ability to seek and use advice and the opportunities available to them.

Especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting impact on wellbeing and the economy, young people may have different outlook to those held by those delivering support due to socio-economic change. As one researcher put it: "Traditional linear notions of an individual biographical transition to adulthood depend on a set of economic possibilities that may no longer be in place," (Boddy et al p 291)

Young people often came to case workers with complex situations, and a key skill for support and advice workers was identifying the key issues that required support and advice from a complex picture. It was important that advice workers were able to build

understanding with the young person and work with them in order to prioritise and take action on the key issues they were facing. This can be summarised by the approach ‘start with the person, not the law.’

2. Debt

Debt is an increasing problem in the UK, however young people face specific issues:

- Young people sometimes seek support for debts but on investigation, reveal further issues that mean they are struggling financially
- Psychologically, people under 25 are likely to prioritise short term needs over longer-term issues meaning that the short term gains of credit outweigh the longer term consequences of paying back debts.
- Young people may not have been taught about the consequences of loans and debt. There are many myths surrounding debt payment and so it is important to work with young people to help them to understand their rights and responsibilities around debts that they owe- even when these debts were taken out with another person or when the situation seems unfair.

3. Welfare benefits and poverty

Changes to Welfare Benefits over recent years including the introduction of Universal Credit have increased reliance on support and advice across the country (Trussell Trust, JRF) and the bureaucracy of applying for, appealing and managing benefits claims has also placed an increased burden on individuals and, in turn, support and advice organisations. Young people in particular face challenges in making ends meet:

- In Bristol 16-24 year olds are twice as likely to be affected by food insecurity compared to those aged 50 and above.⁵
- Additionally, 13.8% of people aged 16-24 find it difficult to manage financially - nearly three times the level for people of over 50 (5.5%).⁶
- Young people were the sector most forced out of employment due to the Covid-19 crisis, starting a ‘youth employment crisis’.⁷ In Bristol, the proportion of young people classed as NEET 15% (2019/20 figures) which is about twice the national average. This is double the figure for Bristol in the previous year (2018/19 - 7.7%) according to Bristol’s Joint Strategic Needs Assessment figures.⁸
- The benefits available to young people have been reduced as they “ receive a reduced level of Universal Credit, are only entitled to the lowest rate of Local Housing Allowance (shared accommodation rate), and are at greater risk of benefit sanctions.”⁹
- For young people who turn 18, changes to the support that’s available to them can be difficult to understand and leave them to seek help alone.
- Young people may not have applied for benefits before and need support to understand and navigate the system.

4. Insecure housing, homelessness and eviction

Homelessness and rough sleeping are hard to measure however, many of the young people we worked with were facing problems with their housing including notices for eviction, disputes with landlords and other issues were often tied up with complex life situations which made their housing insecure:

⁵ [Quality of Life 2020-21\(equalities\) – Open Data Bristol](#)

⁶ [Quality of Life 2020-21\(equalities\) – Open Data Bristol](#)

⁷ [How Covid-19 has sparked a youth unemployment crisis \(newstatesman.com\)](#)

⁸ [JSNA Data Profiles - bristol.gov.uk](#)

⁹ [Young and Homeless 2020.pdf](#)

- Young people may not be aware of their rights and responsibilities around housing and eviction and need support to navigate disputes or evictions.
- For young people in Bristol aged 16-24, the rate of homelessness is 0.81 per 1000, a great deal higher than the rate for the rest of England which is 0.52 per 1000. 10
- 30% of young people in Bristol have below average mental wellbeing.¹¹
- According to Centrepoint in 2020, 1318 young people approached the local authority in Bristol as homeless/at risk of homeless, 797 (60%) were not supported into housing.¹²

5. Immigration

Cuts to provision and the ‘hostile environment’ mean that there are many challenges facing anyone who needs support with immigration. From Ask Us, we saw that young people were particularly in need of help when they were estranged from family. This meant they were unable to access documents or evidence their status easily. There is research from across the UK that shows that the asylum system is part of “ a broader legal system that fails to see and treat children as children, and routinely violates the rights of children and young people. Consistently the young people ask that immigration judges should be better trained to deal appropriately with the children and young people they encounter.”¹²

- Support for immigration has dramatically decreased across the UK in recent years due to changes in policy around Legal Aid. These cuts have reduced “access to justice and the hollowing out of the not-for-profit sector, [and] have had a considerable deleterious impact on those experiencing insecure status.” (O’Nions 2020, p331).¹³
- The Children’s Society has shown that the European Union Settlement Scheme (EUSS) many children and young people, “particularly those who are vulnerable - may now unknowingly find themselves living in the UK unlawfully, having failed to apply or to have an application made on their behalf to the EUSS”.¹⁴

In addition to these issues there were two cross-cutting themes that affected young people and which shape their need to access support: their mental health and wellbeing and their relationships with others or issues around isolation and estrangement.

6. Mental health and wellbeing

To help support young people, it is important to understand their needs in a psychologically-informed way. Young people may face a range of challenges related to their mental health, for example finding it hard to cope with debt repayments or rent. For young people specifically, mental health has particular impact on advice needs as 75% of long-lasting mental illnesses are first felt before the age of 18¹⁵. This means that young people are often learning about their mental health for the first time at this age.

7. Estrangement isolation and relationships

Social isolation and family or relationship breakdown were often intertwined with young people’s need for support and advice. Young people are made vulnerable when relationships with family breakdown, or when those caring for them are unwell.

- ‘Family breakdown’ is a primary cause of homelessness in England, accounting for 59% of the calls to Centrepoint in 2020¹⁶ and relationship breakdown, domestic abuse, harassment or threat of violence, death of a family member or carer were

¹⁰ [JSNA 2020.21 - Emotional Health & Wellbeing of Children and Young People \(bristol.gov.uk\)](https://www.bristol.gov.uk/jсна-2020-21-emotional-health-wellbeing-children-young-people)

¹¹ [Quality of Life 2020-21\(equalities\) – Open Data Bristol](https://www.equalities.open-data-bridges.com/quality-of-life-2020-21)

¹² [Breaking-the-Chains-Evaluation-Report-September-2020-Final.pdf \(miclu.org\)](https://www.miclu.org/breaking-the-chains-evaluation-report-september-2020-final.pdf)

¹³ [‘Fat cat’ lawyers and ‘illegal’ migrants: the impact of intersecting hostilities and toxic narratives on access to justice: Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law: Vol 42, No 3 \(tandfonline.com\)](https://www.tandfonline.com/journal-of-social-welfare-and-family-law/vol42-no3)

¹⁴ [LAC & EU Settlement Scheme | The Children’s Society \(childrenssociety.org.uk\)](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/lac-eu-settlement-scheme)

¹⁵ [Chapter 2a - Mortality, morbidity and wellbeing \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/90481/chapter-2a-mortality-morbidity-and-wellbeing.pdf)

¹⁶ [a-year-like-no-other.pdf \(centrepoint.org.uk\)](https://www.centrepoint.org.uk/a-year-like-no-other.pdf)

also highly ranked indicated that young people's basic needs such as housing are often met through family and friends, making them precarious in result of relationship breakdowns.

- Young people often turn to those around them for a whole range of support needs so those who don't have strong relationships with friends or family, or for whom friends and family are unable to provide meaningful support, are likely to have a harder time dealing with challenges around the issues identified above. Recent research showed that "those who lead isolated lives and are not linked into local networks may be at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to signposting to, and support throughout, an advice-seeking journey." (Buck & Smith p 185).

What are the barriers to advice for young people (in Bristol)?

The barriers to advice that young people face are not straightforward and relate to wider problems within advice agencies in terms of being accessible to all communities that need their support. From the experience of Ask Us, there were specific barriers that young people and practitioners identified for young people seeking advice. There is start inequality across the city and although Ask Us was able to help people from across the areas, it is likely that many young people were unaware of our service and/or were unable to access it. The barriers to access are multifaceted but we identified six key themes.

Experience & Trust - knowing where to turn or how to ask for help.

Young people may not have experience of advice seeking, be experiencing an issue for the first time and be unsure about where to turn to help or how to frame their issue. From speaking to young people and practitioners on the project, knowing how to ask for help created several barriers to advice:

- Having negative experiences had a huge impact on YP making them reluctant to seek help in the future.
- Being able to trust an adviser or support worker was key. If the advice worker doesn't build trust then it was harder for them to work together.
- Young people often turn to those they trust for advice. If they don't have family or if their family isn't in a position to offer advice, they often turn to friends who may not offer good advice.
- Young people may not know what their rights and responsibilities are.
- Understanding how systems and organisations work and what support might be available.

Material and physical barriers

Physically getting to advice -either in person or online/over the phone was also a barrier. This could be due to geography, lack of funds or resources, or the need to prioritise other issues first. While increased uptake of virtual or telephone support can go some way to help this, research in 2008 showed that even with telephone access, "[t]hose [of all ages] furthest away from an adviser and without transport not only fail to obtain advice more, but also 'do nothing' to resolve their problems (rather than handling alone), at a higher rate" (Patel et al 2008, p2093). On Ask Us, the barriers that we're mentioned included:

- Travel and geography
- Cost of transport
- Not having credit or access to reliable internet
- Timing and accessibility- being able to get to services and use them
- Not having a printer/laptop with Adobe - digital exclusion.

Wellbeing, accessibility and skills

There are a range of accessibility needs that are important for a young person to feel safe and to be able to participate and engage with your services. As mentioned above, young people we supported faced a wide range of mental health challenges. As a result, young people may not always behave in the ways we expect from a 'good' client for example, missing appointments, being late, not responding to emails or calls. This could be for a

number of reasons and it's important to be able to help them to learn how they can meet the norms you expect rather than exclude them.

Disengaging or 'hitting a wall'

Young people often hit 'walls' in their support due to no fault of their own, but simply because of the way services are designed. While many persisted and were able to seek help, it is impossible to know how many gave up after hitting these walls. Complex pathways for support, the need to rely on project-based funding and attending eligibility criteria as well as waiting times and stress on services meant that young people often had hit many 'walls' before coming to Ask Us. Some of these included:

- Having complex needs that exclude a person from services that could help them
- Turning 18 and no longer being eligible for support
- Not fitting eligibility criteria for certain projects i.e. living in a 'wrong' postcode
- Issue falling outside of criteria for Legal Aid.

These issues can be particularly challenging for young people who are living in unstable situations and face complex challenges.

Lack of provision

On a related note, advice services are under pressure, facing huge increases in demand and squeezed funding. Resulting 'advice deserts' mean that services can be hard to reach, involve long waiting times and resilience and resources to persist in seeking support.

How do young people access advice and what are the enabling factors?

Although there are barriers to accessing advice, young people are able to get support from a range of sources. We sought to understand how young people seek help when they need it. This is a question that would benefit from further research however, our project indicated that young people seek advice primarily through local informal routes, often looking to individuals they trust:

- **Place based** young people are not likely to travel but much more likely to drop-in to familiar places that they already visit for other reasons.
- **Friends & family** young people will turn to those they trust for advice. Having links and a profile within a community is helpful. For those who are isolated it becomes important to find 'problem noticers' in other contexts (i.e. youth work, health). Important also to advise young people in context- working with support network where possible and aware of limitations or issues if friends and family are not supportive or are abusive.
- **Tailored and friendly** Having a service that's clearly for young people can be helpful as young people may not be certain about how to ask for help. Being clear that you support young people is important to help them feel confident in reaching out.

What helps young people to access advice?

- A range of access points - online, in person and on the phone
- Flexibility around timings and appointment types
- Trust and openness around your role, availability and how you can help them.

What does good practice in advice and support for young people look like?

The barriers and challenges facing young people may be multiple and complex but there are many opportunities to provide and advice to those aged 16-25 as well as marginalised groups more broadly. Again, we return to the principle: “start with the person, not with the law”, emphasising the importance of focusing on the whole person, not just an issue in isolation. From our experience, there are several opportunities and recommendations that can help improve services for young people:

- Partnership working: young people benefit from having extra support alongside an advice worker. Working with other organisations who provide support workers, or using internal staff/volunteers to facilitate actions and support the young person enables the person to be supported holistically and recognises the complexities and real-life challenges faced by young people.
 - Training staff in principles of Psychologically Informed Environments and/or trauma aware approach. Meeting young people on their own terms and having a strong understanding of techniques to do this is important to help young people. See: www.askustoolkit.co.uk
 - Monitoring how many young people are referred to your service and regularly reviewing the outcomes and service they receive as part of evaluation and reflexive practice.
 - A staff member who can be considered a ‘young person’s champion’. Having someone that other organisations can speak to directly about a potential referral.
 - Co-production and young people’s involvement in service design can be time consuming and challenging, especially if the young people you support have been living in crisis and may not want to engage further than getting advice. However there are benefits to having someone who can advocate for young-person friendly practices and policies when relevant decisions are being made.
 - Clear up-to-date communication with other organisations about what support you are able to give and what you cannot help with.
 - Triage and case monitoring that is YP sensitive - ask from the start whether the young person has a support worker- identify opportunities for extra support that they might need and signpost if you can’t provide it.
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