Citation for published version:

Publication date:
2014

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication

University of Bath

Alternative formats
If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact: openaccess@bath.ac.uk

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
Citizens Advice Bureaux provide a universal advice service to all clients who approach them. Typically, the problems for which they seek advice are debt, welfare and housing as well as employment, consumer and legal issues. Clients of a Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) tend to be vulnerable, and demand for advice services has increased in times of austerity and public spending cuts. At the same time, advice services can be dependent on public funding and are facing cuts to their budgets. It is therefore more than ever necessary for advice services, like other voluntary and community sector organisations, to measure the impact of their interventions, calculate the return on investment by funders, and consider ways of improving service delivery in order to ensure value for money.

A study, conducted by a team of researchers at the University of Bath (Nick Abercrombie, Peter Cressey, Michelle Farr, Beth Jaynes, Susan Milner) working in partnership with the Bath and North-East Somerset Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB-BANES), analysed the long term impact of advice. Some twenty volunteers from the Bureau also participated as interviewers and analysts. This was one of five linked projects, all looking at the economic and social value of social purpose organisations, coordinated by South West Forum and funded by the Big Lottery.

The study provides the fullest account of the long-term impact of CAB advice based on the largest range of outcomes to date. The study found a Social Return on Investment ratio (SROI) of 1:50 over a 5 year period for the 80 clients who participated in the research. That is, for every pound spent on CAB-BANES services, a value of £50 was generated. This finding reflects the importance of CAB advice for vulnerable clients for whom it makes a big difference and who have few or no other sources of help and advice. Whilst the sample was broadly representative of the CAB-BANES client population profile, caution must be applied before generalising these results further.
Research findings in context

CAB-BANES clients often said that the advice they received made a big difference, because without it they would not have known how to act, or would have felt less confident in negotiating outcomes by themselves. CAB is a ‘last resort’ for many vulnerable clients who report not knowing where to source other advice. As a result, clients tended to attribute outcomes to a very high degree to CAB intervention. After accounting for interventions where others were involved, the study calculated the value of CAB-BANES advice as reflecting a cost to social and economic value ratio of 1:50.

This ratio is higher than previous SROI studies (e.g. New Economics Foundation Consulting 2008; Steed and Johnson 2010). The differences in the approach include the use of clients’ actual financial values rather than proxy values wherever possible, and a far larger sample of clients. It is possible that there may be some over attribution of value to CAB-BANES advice services in this ratio. However, even when the ratio is recalculated to take account of the most cautious attributions of impact possible, it is still high at 1:33.

Different types of value created from advice client sample

Key findings

- The CAB is seen as a reliable, trusted brand and this is related to its universal, open access. Most clients were satisfied with the advice they had received and said they would recommend CAB to friends or family.

- 80% of clients sampled showed that CAB advice led to positive outcomes. The research found a range of different outcomes were attributable to the CAB, including the alleviation of poverty through income gain, debts managed and rescheduled, in-patient psychiatric care avoided, suicide prevented, depression and mental health issues alleviated, homelessness prevented and social services savings made.

- Within CAB-BANES, 60% of clients have incomes below the poverty line and 36% have disabilities or long-term health issues. A significant number of clients had physical or mental health problems, which were exacerbated by the issue for which they had sought advice.

- Clients reported improved health and well-being as a result of CAB advice, and the study was able to confirm the link between advice and improved health and well-being through surveys that used the short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (Stewart-Brown et al. 2009).

- CAB-BANES advice provides a significant social return on investment, reflecting a cost to economic and social value ratio of 1:50. A sensitivity analysis was conducted to take account of possible over-attribution within this calculation. Even when recalculated to take account of the most cautious attributions of impact possible, the ratio is still high at 1:33.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial gain</th>
<th>Financial gain</th>
<th>Financial gain</th>
<th>Financial gain</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Prevention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Debts written off) 22%</td>
<td>(Income gained) 41%</td>
<td>(Income gain following repayments rescheduled) 8%</td>
<td>(Debts wrongly charged) 0.004%</td>
<td>(Improved relationship, housing, sleep, employment or volunteering gained) 6%</td>
<td>(Of depression, homelessness, bailiffs, utilities disconnected, hospitalisation) 8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One of the reasons this study finds such a high return on investment of funding in CAB services is because clients’ income had often been substantially improved, or large debts had been managed. As well as straightforward gains to clients, outcomes include benefits to wider stakeholders (e.g. the state and local authorities), such as the avoidance of legal proceedings, the avoidance of homelessness, and reduced pressures on and costs to health services. Indeed, closer examination of the SROI ratio shows that of the £50 value that is created per pound invested, £4 is value to the state in preventing homelessness and reducing further usage of health services.

In the context of austerity, reducing funding and coverage of advice services to save money runs the risk of higher costs to the public purse, as advice plays a vital preventative role. If the coverage of advice is reduced, it is likely to limit the ability of individuals to access services until it is too late to prevent greater and more expensive problems. At the same time, the study found demand among some of the most vulnerable clients for more systematic and intensive follow-up of their cases by the CAB, indicating the usefulness of a more tailored approach to clients’ needs.

Policy implications

• CAB-BANES advice services produce a significant social return on investment and are an essential cost-effective service for people at times of vulnerability. The CAB acts as an important advocate and helps to prevent harm.

• The CAB mitigates the adverse effects of welfare reform where vulnerable clients are on the wrong end of inaccurate decisions about entitlement to welfare benefits. 20% of the client sample sought advice to appeal decisions about Employment Support Allowance (ESA) and Disability Living Allowance (DLA). At least 75% of these ESA appeals and 67% of DLA appeals were successful, alleviating the pressures of poverty for people in times of ill-health or disability.

• The findings of this study suggest that any significant reduction in the CAB’s capacity to give advice to clients is likely to result in worse outcomes for vulnerable populations, including increased risk of poverty, homelessness, accumulation of debt, and deterioration of physical and mental health. It is likely that the cost of these greater problems will have to be picked up in other public service systems.

Methodology

This mixed method longitudinal study demonstrates how impact measurement can be applied to individual case-based work, and illustrates the potential for co-production of research by means of partnerships between universities and social purpose organisations. CAB-BANES volunteers played a major role in the study and helped realise an important objective – the creation of a trained research team within the Bureau. Interviews were carried out through 2012 and 2013, with a sample of 80 clients that broadly reflected the local CAB-BANES core population, and follow-up interviews were carried out at intervals with nearly half of the sample (38). Backed up by substantial financial and reporting data from the CAB, the interview findings were analysed and translated into financial outcomes using Social Return on Investment (SROI) techniques (Nicholls et al. 2009). The study also used a survey of well-being using the short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (Stewart-Brown et al. 2009), which asks respondents a series of questions about their state of mind, ability to cope and feelings. This survey was completed by a wider sample of clients (170) as well as those who were interviewed at the initial and follow-up stage.
Contact the researchers:

For general enquiries, please contact:

Mr Peter Cressey
Department of Social and Policy Sciences
University of Bath
Email: P.Cressey@bath.ac.uk
www.bath.ac.uk/sps/staff/peter-cressey

Dr Susan Milner
Department of Politics, Languages and International Studies
University of Bath
Email: S.E.Milner@bath.ac.uk
www.bath.ac.uk/polis/staff/susan-milner

For SROI enquiries, please contact:

Dr Michelle Farr
Department of Social and Policy Sciences
University of Bath
Email: m.farr@bath.ac.uk
www.bath.ac.uk/sps/staff/michelle-farr

For policy implications, please contact:

Professor Nick Abercrombie
Email: nick.abercrombie@btinternet.com

For further information on how these research tools are being developed, please contact:

Beth Jaynes
Email: Beth.Jaynes@cab-banes.org

Date of release:
April 2014

More on this research:


For further information on the Proving our Value five linked projects, please contact the South West Forum (Charlotte@southwestforum.org.uk).

South West Forum supports voluntary groups to be better at doing what they want to do. They also work with local authorities, health agencies, universities and other public bodies as well as businesses to help them build strong relationships and partnerships with voluntary and community groups.

References:


