

# Working Together for Advice Draft Quality Mark

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Evaluation of the Quality Mark Pilot

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## Executive summary

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In the first initiative of its kind a consortium of national advice networks led by the Advice Service Alliance has developed a new quality mark standard for advice agencies providing services at the current Community Legal Service General Help and General Help with casework level (CLS GHQM). The Quality work stream is part of the larger, multi-agency *Working Together for Advice* project funded by the Big Lottery.

This independent evaluation sought to:

- Review the operation of the pilot programme
- Review and evaluate the service standards and the experience of advice agencies and auditors against the stated objectives of the pilot, with a view to identifying any issues that have arisen
- Review and evaluate the various quality of advice methodologies in the light of the experience of the advice agencies and the auditors and identify any issues that have arisen
- Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the service standards and the quality of advice methodologies and make recommendations for the future.

The evaluation found that the work stream has achieved its aim by devising standards and processes for assessing the standards that have been endorsed as comprehensive, understandable and relevant and useful.

There is strong support to indicate that the Service Standards and the Quality of Advice Assessment achieve a relevant and appropriate quality standard for advice work. There have been complimentary views that confirm that the methodology provides a robust measure of the quality of advice.

The pilot has identified the essential ingredients of the “quality of advice” element of the new Quality Mark and has confirmed the value of external examination of advice work. The pilot has identified a number of revisions to the service standards and quality of advice assessment which will further enhance the relevance and applicability to a wide range of advice providers.

The pilot has tested other Quality of Advice methodologies such as mystery shopping and observed interviews which have proved to be useful mechanisms for monitoring client care. These methodologies have been adopted by some pilot agencies as internal quality control measures and will provide a mechanism for ongoing quality assurance in between audits.

Overall the views from all involved in the pilot presents a strong and positive response to the Quality Standard. In particular:

- A recognition and appreciation that the Quality Standard meets a huge gap in accreditation or validation of quality of advice delivery
- A sense that this project was a very successful ‘first go’ at arriving at an agreed quality standard.

# Introduction

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## Aims & objectives

The Quality work stream of the *Working Together for Advice* project commissioned ADP Consultancy to evaluate the pilot programme for the Quality Standard that was delivered from April to December 2009.

The evaluation sought to:

- Review the operation of the pilot programme
- Review and evaluate the service standards and the experience of advice agencies and auditors against the stated objectives of the pilot, with a view to identifying any issues that have arisen
- Review and evaluate the various quality of advice methodologies in the light of the experience of the advice agencies and the auditors and identify any issues that have arisen
- Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the service standards and the quality of advice methodologies and make recommendations for the future.

This report details the viewpoints arising regarding the delivery of the pilot programme and provides a review of the Quality of Advice Assessments and auditing of the service standards. It also sets out a 'route map' for both the further piloting of the Quality Standard and auditing process and suggested revisions to the standard and processes.

## Background to the Quality standard for advice

In the first initiative of its kind a consortium of national advice networks led by the Advice Services Alliance (ASA), managed by Citizens Advice and involving AdviceUK, Age Concern and Help the Aged, Law Centres Federation and Youth Access has developed a new quality mark for advice. The Quality work stream has developed a new Quality Standard for advice agencies providing services at the current Community Legal Service General Help and General Help with casework level (CLS GHQM). The project is part of the larger, multi-agency *Working Together for Advice* project funded by the Big Lottery.

The new quality mark aims to replace the CLS GHQM. Owned by the sector, it seeks to provide a flexible and user friendly standard, which will be relevant to all advice providers. Significantly, the new standard measures the quality of advice given by providers as well as organisational standards. The first version of the quality mark is made up of a Quality of Advice standard (QAA) and six service standards that cover:

1. Case and Enquiry Management
2. Access, Client Care and Community relationships
3. Governance
4. Planning
5. Financial Management
6. People Management.

Between February and April 2009 the project consulted with advice providers and other relevant stakeholders, gathering feedback on the range and content of these Quality of Advice and service standards and potential assessment methods. One hundred and thirty eight individuals and organisations responded to some or all of the consultation questions.

## The Pilot Programme

In order to test the suitability of the draft service standards and quality of advice methodologies a total of twenty advice agencies from participating networks were selected to take part in the pilot programme. The advice agencies are a stratified sample representative of the different geographical bases (rural, urban and metropolitan) and the kind of advice work undertaken (generalist open door services, target group specific, e.g. young people, older people, refugee groups and people with disabilities).

The Quality work stream Management Board identified that the pilot should test:

- The new standards and the processes for assessing the standards:
  - Are they comprehensive?
  - Are they understandable?
  - Are they relevant and useful?
  - How much time does it take to undertake the process?
  - Are they cost effective?
  - Are they meaningful - what added value do they bring?
  - Do they accurately measure quality of advice?
  - Has it improved the quality of advice given?
  - Assess the pros and cons of internal audit; external audit, mystery shopper; peer review and direct observation
  - How peer review works within a youth agency.
- What are the essential ingredients of the “quality of advice” element of the Quality Mark?
- What is the minimum level of organisational competence essential to the delivery of good quality advice?
- How flexible can the auditing be with the elements of the Quality Mark which don’t directly relate to the “quality of advice” assessment?
- What adjustments, if any, can be incorporated within the Quality Mark to take account of differences of practice between organisations with regard to:
  - Access (e.g. tailored to the needs of the client group)
  - Client care (e.g. methods of communication with a client for whom a case is being conducted could be left to the discretion of the agency).

The Quality work stream staff devised feedback forms to collect viewpoints on the issues listed above from auditors, assessors and pilot agencies. This evaluation drew on this feedback and built on the viewpoints expressed.

## Methodology

This evaluation took place throughout January 2010 and consists of:

- A review of the documentation relating to the service standards and quality of advice methodologies
- Desk top analysis of consultation data and published report on its findings and background analysis
- A review of audit infrastructure documentation including support manuals, audit reports, auditor feedback data, agency feedback data
- In person and phone interviews with work stream staff, auditors, assessors and work stream management board members
- Focus groups and phone interviews with staff from pilot agencies.

The findings in this report draw on all the above, and where appropriate this report makes recommendations either based on consensus views or occasionally the balanced view of the evaluator.

This report sets out:

- A review of the pilot process drawing out issues and challenges raised by pilot agencies and network representatives
- A review of the Quality of Advice methodology from the viewpoints of both pilot agencies and assessors
- A review of the Service Standards and the audit process used in the pilot
- A summary of what worked and what needs further examination
- The route map arising from the findings of the evaluation.

A list of the organisations and individuals whose viewpoints contributed to this evaluation is at Annex I.

# 1. Review of the pilot

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This section details what the pilot set out to achieve and viewpoints on the impact of the overall pilot.

## Overview of the pilot

In setting up the pilot, the Quality work stream Management Board was required under its funding conditions to deliver the pilots in a time limited period. It was agreed that the pilot should test the viability of the standards and assessment processes. Pilot agencies were made aware that their participation in the pilot was a review of the quality standards and not a judgement of the agency's quality of advice.

Some of the features of the pilot were put in place specifically for the pilot and will not necessarily be replicated in a full scheme. These include:

- The sample size for the Quality of Advice Assessment
- The assessment being conducted at one specified site rather than all the sites where an organisation provides advice
- Assessors and auditors being drawn from a pool of freelance consultants and staff.

It should also be noted that a considerable number of findings raised in this evaluation relate to pilot agencies from networks other than Citizens Advice. Citizens Advice has operated a quality system for some years and the individual Citizens Advice Bureau in this pilot have experience of having undergone similar assessment and audit processes.

## Pilot set up

The agencies that were to take part in the pilot were selected by the advice networks and achieved a range and diversity of agencies.

This sample ensured a representative group for both the pilot and the evaluation and enabled a wide set of viewpoints to be collected. Should there be a further pilot of the quality standard an assessor suggested that there should be additional smaller organisations e.g. mainly staffed by volunteers included in the sample.

The selection process for auditors and assessors was thought to be fair and effective.

The work stream provided initial training and support to assessors and auditors which were rated by participants as very useful. Assessors reported that in any future scheme they would want:

- More opportunities to consult with peers and share practice. As the auditors and assessors were freelancers they preferred group meetings planned in advance rather than adhoc phone calls that had to be fitted around their other commitments

- More focus on understanding the differential between advice and advice with casework. Assessors reported needing more detail on the distinguishing features of advice and advice with casework. This point was also raised by pilot agencies and is explored in more detail in section 2
- More focus on how to achieve and ensure ongoing consistency in both QAAs and audits. This is also explored in section 2.

There is consensus that the pilot set-up was effective and promoted collaboration amongst the participating networks.

Consultation with Management Board members confirmed that viewpoints were sought and the majority of points taken on board.

The viewpoint that remains an issue for debate is how information services fit within the quality standard. Under the funding conditions of the project the Management Board were required to develop a quality standard aimed at advice and casework levels only. However, some networks are of the view that information and advice delivery is a spectrum and the advice delivered by agencies can fall just below advice and be assisted information. This point was also raised by pilot agencies and is explored in section 2.

## The pilot process

Pilot organisations were offered initial training from the workstream. Training participants reported finding this training useful.

Pilot organisations reported that they primarily benefited from support from their network representatives and identified this as a key support in understanding the quality standard and preparing for audits. Network representative's roles included providing training and supporting the pilot organisation to identify relevant sections of the guidance.

It was evident that a number of pilot organisations viewed the pilot as a developmental process. The pilot not being based on a 'pass or fail' judgement enabled a greater emphasis on using the pilot process to improve practice. This was reinforced by the support available from network representatives. This developmental focus will not necessarily be replicated in the final scheme as this will need to be based on pass or fail. There may be value in conducting a further assessment and audit process with agencies in a 'colder' pass or fail environment and/or without access to support.

Considerable guidance was produced for the pilot. Some of these documents were well received and the Draft Quality Mark Standards (Pilot document 2.1) and the Quality of Advice Assessment Manual (Pilot document 2.3) were valued. These two examples provide support for the view that work stream documents should be short and concise. There was comment that the more detailed documentation such as guidance should be indexed and easy to reference. For example, there was little evidence that pilot agencies referred to the written guidance during the pilot. The majority had relied on their network representatives to guide them through the materials and had only referred to the occasional reference.

It was felt that the guidance in particular was unclear and felt like a 'dumping ground of viewpoints' and could move to a concise summary then specific guidance along the lines of:

What you need to meet	How you can meet this/what auditors will be looking for	How other agencies have complied
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There is a sense that overall revisions to the standard should result in a clear and concise summary of the standard and accompanying guidance and that generally there should be a reduction of written guidance and a move to visual flow-chart summaries.

### Pilot agencies feedback on their participation

A number of agencies, primarily from non CABx reported that they initially found the quality standard auditing processes daunting. In particular, receiving feedback about their service delivery was described as '*not comfortable*' with one manager describing the process as '*shake, rattle and roll*' and another reflecting that reading the audit report was '*like a car crash*'. One manager reported feeling demoralised by the QAA results and did not want to convey the full results of the assessment to the staff team.

It should be recognised that for network members other than CABx this was often the agencies first experience of a quality of advice assessment. Also, that by the time the consultation took place all agencies reported that they were pleased that they had subjected themselves to the assessment with one manager commenting that '*a positive experience is not always a comfortable one but it was worth doing*'.

By the time the evaluation took place the pilot agencies contributed very positive feedback of their experience and these comments are outlined in section 3 of this report.

## 2. The Quality of Advice Assessment

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The new Quality Standard introduced a new dimension to the audit of advice work by specifically examining the quality of advice via a Quality of Advice Assessment (QAA).

The purpose of the QAA is to check the quality of advice provided by the advice service against the criteria set out in the Quality of Advice standard and to provide recommendations for improvement where this is required. The assessment also identifies any evidence about the extent to which other related elements of the service standards are met.

The Quality of Advice Standard Criteria covers:

1. Diagnosis
2. Research
3. Advice options, consequences and limitations
4. Action or support
5. Signposting and referral
6. Advice records
7. Case progression

### External assessment

The pilot tested two methods of case file assessment:

- External Assessment conducted by an assessor from outside the organisation.
- Self Assessment by a member of staff with External Verification.

The pilot aimed to test the effectiveness of the QAA and the number of case files assessed in the pilots was intended to provide baseline information for the Workstream to decide on the final criteria to be used in the quality mark. The pilots aimed for:

- Pilot organisations delivering advice only to have 10 cases assessed.
- Pilot organisations delivering advice and casework to have 15 cases assessed.

Cases assessed were targeted at those cases that were either formally closed by the advice agency or where an assessor considered that sufficient time had passed for the issue to be considered closed.

In devising the pilot, the Quality work stream Management Board recognised that further work is required to arrive at an appropriate sample sizes for the future scheme. The sample sizes used in this pilot were for pilot purposes only.

## **Pilot agency and network feedback**

Feedback in relation to QAA highlighted several factors:

### ***Familiarity with QAA***

In focus groups the response to QAA initially presented a contrast between the response from Citizens Advice Bureau pilot agencies and AdviceUK, Age Concern and Youth Access pilot agencies.

The QAA assessment has been a feature of the Citizens Advice scheme for some years but was not employed within the Community Legal Service Quality Mark. This means that for many of the pilot agencies, QAA was a new experience.

CABx were more confident in undertaking both external assessment and self assessment. It is anticipated that other organisation's confidence and awareness of QAA will grow once the Quality Standard is adopted as the main quality standard for advice. Already, by the time the pilot agencies attended focus groups for the evaluation they reported that they were using the QAA forms.

### ***Advice delivery style and methods***

Significantly, the impression of a large number of the pilot agencies was that the QAA criteria is based on an advice process that better reflects that undertaken by CABx.

*A youth advice agency explained 'We let the young person lead the session by letting them talk rather than use a series of questions. The advice worker uses a combination of advice and counselling skills which helps them unpack the information the young person is disclosing and read between the lines.'*

Other pilot agencies, e.g. Age Concern's reported that they have regular ongoing contact with clients and be able to segment the delivery of advice e.g. deal with entitlement to attendance allowance in one session and then cover other benefits in another session to ensure that the advice was delivered at the appropriate pace for the client.

There was a particular concern that the QAA does not recognise or measure the outcomes achieved for clients. Youth Access members and Age Concern's in particular were more likely to focus on what their advice achieved as they have a longer term relationship with their service users. It should be noted that this issue was raised via the consultation and it was agreed that outcomes should not be included at this stage.

The QAA criteria were thought not to be sufficiently flexible to capture different styles and processes.

This evaluation and the work stream's own review of the QAA explored which elements of the QAA were considered to be essential. Focus groups and interviews confirmed that the QAA criteria capture the features of advice that are commonly recognised as being important. These are:

- Diagnosis
- Advice options, consequences and limitations
- Action or support
- Advice records
- Case progression.

In addition, one pilot agency primarily delivered advice in client's homes and felt that the QAA assessment did not accommodate this e.g. lack of access to photocopying on home visits may mean benefit forms are not copied and attached to the case sheet.

### *Awareness of how the organisation worked*

In addition to advice delivery styles, pilot agencies drew attention to assessors and auditors needing to have a good awareness of how the organisation worked. In relation to assessment issues raised included:

- Agencies reported wanting an assessor that was familiar with their own area of work - one agency reported that 'Whilst professional, appropriate and approachable our assessor didn't necessarily understand how we worked.'
- The QAA process missing local practices and knowledge through their lack of knowledge of how the organisation worked and the environment they worked in.

This indicates a need for the application process to address how background information is collated and used to ensure the assessor is aware of the operating environment of the agency.

It also raises an issue about who assesses organisations. Pilot agencies expressed a preference for an assessor to be familiar with the areas of advice they were delivering and the client group they were working with.

One youth advice agency suggested '*A mutual peer review system with a comparable neighbourhood agency may be an effective and cheaper alternative to external assessment and more rigorous than self assessment.*'

### *Level of advice*

A number of agencies reported being unclear about whether their work fitted the advice and casework definition. Generally agencies reported that there was a lack of clarity within their own organisations about what level of advice they were operating at.

This lack of clarity impacted on the QAA with a number of pilot agencies not being able to identify sufficient cases for QAA and agencies thinking they could submit non-advice queries.

This point needs to be addressed as the level of advice is a key component of the initial application and will dictate the level of QAA required. Feedback from assessors outlined below also supports this view.

The Quality work stream Management Board have recognised the importance of providing clear definitions and have a Definitions Sub Group that meet periodically and initially provided definitions of advice, casework and information and have subsequently considered how to best support applicant agencies to identify whether they fit into the advice or advice with casework categories.

### ***Consistency of approach***

Feedback from pilot agencies drew out a number of issues about how assessors applied the QAA. These concerns were about the consistency of approach adopted by an assessor within an assessment of one agency. A number of agencies reported these concerns.

The concerns expressed regarding consistency included:

- The assessor's approach to QAA varied so that in one case data recorded on the front sheet (e.g. confirming the client's receipt of job seekers allowance) was allowed in one instance and not in another
- Assessors were inconsistent in their treatment of forms and documents and sometimes insisted on the need for a full copy of a benefit application form to be attached to the case record and on other occasions not
- The tendency for assessors to focus on their own areas of expertise e.g. housing and miss, or not recognise, other areas of advice.

### **Support for the external assessment**

Whilst having a number of concerns about the process, pilot agencies were resoundingly of the view that the QAA was a welcomed new development and that independent external assessment, whilst difficult, was a vital tool.

It was noticeable that each of the three focus groups concluded that the external assessment was the most valuable feature of the overall Quality Standard and provided organisations with a significant independent viewpoint on one of the most essential elements of their advice work. Comments included:

*'This exercise provided us with invaluable feedback on how we were recording cases'*

*'We are starting to explore ways of separating legal and non legal issues and we are going to introduce training for advice volunteers.'*

*'It made me realise how my own assessments were not as impartial as it could be and we needed this input'.*

External assessment was recognised to be a significant tool by pilot agencies and their experience of a QAA promoted action, particularly in relation to improving case recording and conducting more frequent internal quality controls.

It was also noticeable in consultation with assessors and pilot agencies that any improvements put forward for the QAA were considered to be 'tweaks' to a significant new feature of a quality standard for advice.

## Auditor and assessor feedback on external assessment

The external assessment process was also valued by auditors. Auditors reported that the QAAs findings provided an indication of the areas that needed to be explored further within an audit e.g. client care or key dates. Auditors also reported that QAA indicators proved to be accurate.

Assessors reported that the QAA materials were easy to use. The main challenge that arose with QAA was identifying the relevant level of advice for an agency and the background information questionnaire was not considered sufficient. An assessor reported:

*'Clarification of the difference between general enquiries and case work is often an area of confusion amongst agencies, particularly amongst very small agencies with few advisers.'*

The QAA forms and guidance was clear for both the assessors and the agencies. This is supported by the number of pilot organisations that reported they are now using the QAA forms in their own internal quality checking.

The sample size was generally considered low and it was appreciated that this would change in a real assessment. Both advice agencies and assessors had an expectation that the sample size would be sufficiently large to establish a true picture of the advice work undertaken by the agency. A sample of 15 - 20 was suggested.

The scoring for external assessment was less welcome. Some agencies felt the 'totally met' approach led to assessors seeking the perfect case record. There is some support for moving to a % scoring system, along the lines of that currently operated by Citizens Advice

Assessors and auditors indicated a number of suggestions in relation to revisions to the Quality of Advice Standard. These revisions mainly focus on:

- Introducing exploration and analysis prior to diagnosis to recognise the approach taken by organisations working with specific client groups or longer term with clients
- Research being more flexible to accommodate other approaches to achieving accurate and complete advice drawing on regular practice, peer knowledge and training.

Assessors provided supporting evidence for these revisions particularly the case for the research criteria to be more flexible:

- *'Some advisers giving general help may be knowledgeable about the subject and don't need to look something up on a particular query. It would be an unnecessary burden if they had to then look up a resource and note it down simply to be able to record the resource to meet this benchmark.'*

- *'Advisers in Age Concerns, universities, youth centres, and refugee organisations may be full time workers and build up a good level of knowledge about their main enquiry areas such as attendance allowance for an Age Concern, and can give good advice within looking it up.'*
- *'In one case the work was done very well by a specialist and the advice was clear and pertinent. However, no specific research was listed but it did seem that there was no real need for this worker to note down what they probably deal with all the time.'*

Pilot agencies appreciated the approach of auditors and assessors and the work that they put in.

External assessment received a positive response from all involved in the pilot. In particular, it was recognised that QAA addresses a gap that existed within the CLS Quality Mark. It was overwhelmingly viewed as the most appropriate method for reviewing quality of advice by pilot agencies and reinforced by assessors.

## Self assessment

The pilot agencies that undertook self assessment varied in their responses. A CABx found the process worked well. This was supported by an auditor, who was able to use verified cases and commented

*'I felt that it gave me a lot of credibility in discussing the arising problems with staff. We used several of the cases that had been verified to explore case management issues - I got them to demonstrate their case checking, key dates and conflict of interest cases on cases with which I was familiar.'*

Others felt self assessment had been stressful due to them not being confident about how to apply consistently or fairly. This applied to pilot agencies and assessors, with an assessor commenting:

*'I found the verification method much harder and more time consuming than the external QAA method. I found it challenging to compare and critically evaluate the work of the internal assessor against my own. I had to revisit assessment findings over and over again to satisfy myself that my comments were fair and justified'*

Self assessment was viewed as having some limitations, particularly in relation to the small sample of cases that were verified. Whilst this was limited to five cases solely for the purpose of the pilot, agencies reported that this number was insufficient to make a judgement on the quality of advice provided by the service.

Focus group participants questioned who should be able to self- assess and suggested self-assessment should only count towards an audit if an organisation operated consistently at a sufficiently high level.

Throughout the consultation there was a noticeable distinction between agencies who had previous experience of internal assessments and others that didn't. It is recommended that self assessment with external verification remains within the QAA process but is only available after the first assessment. It should only apply to subsequent assessments where the internal assessor meets specified criteria and the organisation has met a required score in their previous assessments.

## Other QAA methodology

The pilot explored a range of other QAA methodology. Generally, all of these were found to be useful by pilot agencies and there was evidence that each of the methodologies, other than client interviews in its current format would be adopted internally by agencies in the pilot.

However, there was consistent and strong consensus that these methodologies are more appropriately applied to the current point 7 of the Case and Enquiry Management service standard '*Operate an internal quality of advice assessment procedure and act on the findings*'.

This was due to a number of factors raised by pilot agencies:

- The cost of ensuring a sufficient comparable quantity of assessments
- The indication that the methods were more appropriate for internal quality assurance methods due to the focus on client care and approach to clients
- The methodologies not adding much to the whole assessment
- The time and resources being seen as disproportionate to the benefits provided as there was negligible additional information.

Pilot agencies reported that they have started using these methods as they view them as beneficial but that they would not want these methods to be used for external examination purposes.

## Mystery shopping

Mystery shopping involves an external company taking on the persona of a client and approaching the advice service with a specific problem.

Two scenarios were developed for older people and two for young people. A questionnaire was designed for both phone and face-to-face interviews. An external company undertook the mystery shopping visits.

Pilot agencies reported that mystery shopping reports were useful and primarily provided feedback on client care as well as in a small number of instances, indicating gaps in the advice given.

Mystery shopping was felt to have added to or validated viewpoints put forward by the assessor or auditor. However, agencies felt the practicalities and cost might be prohibitive.

As the sample of agencies experiencing mystery shopping was small it was felt that further pilots would be necessary to explore its use in internal quality of advice processes.

## Video/Taped interviews

This method uses either a video recorder to record a face-to-face advice session for assessment or a tape recorder to record telephone advice. The Assessor first carries out a case file assessment on the observed case by looking at the written case file notes and then looks at/listens to the tape and carries out the case file assessment

again to allow a comparison to see what, if any, additional information is picked up by observing/listening to the advice session.

Video interviews were valuable in a small number of instances and an assessor reported finding that the video evidence revealed aspects of the interview not covered in the case recording.

However, pilot agencies also reported practical difficulties organising the video. Others experienced difficulty gaining client consent to use the videos. One agency reported that the video sessions were quite artificial.

*One assessor commented 'Videoed interviews may be a useful tool for adviser training as it is possible to observe the skills and attitudes of the adviser, and whether they are actively listening to the client, whether the room layout is user friendly and health and safety is being complied with. However, difficulties encountered and very limited further information that could be gleaned from these interviews does not add much value to the assessment of written records.'*

Another assessor reported that going through audio tapes took considerable time (4.5 hours) even though the tapes weren't very long. The assessor commented, *'I think that tapes can give some additional insight into how the interview was conducted, the client care skills and interviewing skills of an adviser. This augments written information, but can't replace the need for it'*.

## Observed interviews

Observed interviews were where agencies provided one of their own members of staff to sit in and observe an advice session and the observer completed a case file assessment form whilst they are observing the session based on what they have observed. This was then compared to the case file assessment form which will be completed at a later date based on the written case file notes of the session.

Observed interviews were considered to be very useful for staff development and learning about peer approaches

Again, observed interviews proved very useful in identifying client care issues and one agency reported that they had now adopted observed interviews within their own internal quality assessment procedures.

*An assessor commented that 'This is a reasonably effective method. The forms did provide a little additional information and I found the observers record of the client's attitude at the start and end of the interview to be useful. It was however, subjective information.'*

## Client interviews

Client interviews where the client was asked to take part in a 5-10 minute interview immediately after their advice interview with a member of staff asking a standard set of questions were felt not to have worked in the current format. One agency reported that the client interview useful and would be adopting the template and using it.

Client interviews were viewed primarily as a client feedback process rather than an internal quality of advice procedure. One manager raised the limitations of client interviews:

*'I am not sure how much this adds to the assessment process as clearly clients don't know what advice they should be getting and if feel vulnerable they may not put anything negative in case this effects the service that they may receive.'*

## Conclusion on QAA methodology

The overwhelming consensus was that the external QAA was the most useful process and a considerable number of the pilot agencies have adopted the QAA template for their own work. Significantly, the vast majority of agencies had implemented processes to improve their case recording. There is strong support for adopting external assessment as a compulsory element of the first audit.

Self assessment with external verification should in the first instance be considered as a tool to be employed on the second and subsequent audits once an agency has reached a specified score for external assessment.

There was support from both agencies and assessors of adopting other QAA methodologies such as observed interviews, mystery shopping and taped interviews as internal quality mechanisms rather than adding them to the external QAA.

### 3. Service standards and the audit

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This section considers the service standards and the audit process. The service standards were generally less daunting for pilot agencies as the majority of agencies had had experience of an organisational standard audit.

The standards were generally reported to be clear and understandable and pilot organisations were happy with the audit process.

#### The service standards

There was a consistent view presented by all respondees that the most relevant service standards are:

- Case and enquiry management
- Access, client care and community relationships
- People management

Planning is also identified as relevant. The rationale for identifying these standards is that they specifically address the processes and policies required for advice work and are not replicated in other organisational standards. These service standards have also been identified by the work stream as being the most relevant.

There were inconsistent views about the value of the governance and finance standards: Some organisations, for whom advice was one function of many, expressed concerns about the governance and finance management of the wider organisation being scrutinised. An auditor shared this view. Others, especially a small advice specific organisation felt that the governance and finance service standards had raised the awareness of the organisation's management committee. It is proposed that these two standards are merged into one organisational management standards.

Pilot agencies also raised the need for the Quality Standard to ensure the right to passport compliance with other quality standards against Quality Standard criteria.

The content of the service standards was felt to be very relevant. Focus groups raised one specific issue, where several organisations reported that they found the language of some standards too legalistic. On further examination, this primarily relates to Standard 1 and revisions are suggested in annex II of this report.

#### The audit process

The pilot agencies were generally complimentary about the audit process and the auditors and reported that auditors were professional, polite and friendly.

Where auditing worked, the auditor was described as '*very good and thorough, shows an understanding of how the service operates and really useful to have a fresh pair of eyes on the service*'.

Several issues were consistently raised:

- The need for more communication during the audit process, e.g. *'It would have been nice to have half an hour at the end of the visit to go through the initial findings'*<sup>1</sup>.
- There was a strong feeling that the QAA and audit should be brought closer together. Where the auditor also conducted the QAA this was felt to be beneficial but there was generally a recognition that there was value in having two separate opinions to draw on when assessing the quality of advice
- More time should be taken to understand the context of the organisation
- Factual errors being present in the QAA and audit reports. Both pilot agencies and auditors felt that there should be a right to reply to correct these errors.

The audit report was viewed as too lengthy and both agencies and auditors suggested a template format whilst not losing the free-flow. One auditor commented:

*'I grew more used to the free flow nature of the audit report format. I think this format lends itself to writing a more personalised report describing current practice in the organisation rather than there being a series of tick boxes. Initially found free-flow difficult but increasingly saw it as valuable.'*

Comments on the audit report included:

- *'Well written, clear and helpful'*
- *'Could the report list each of the criteria and then state the evidence given, findings and recommendations so we find it easier to follow'.*

## Pilot agency feedback

When asked to assess how they had used the quality standards and findings from the audit process agencies confirmed that action plans had been extremely useful and were being implemented. In particular, the attendees at the focus groups all confirmed that they had found the process to be developmental. Respondents reflected:

- *Taking part in the pilot was really positive as advice work is a small aspect of our work and brought out what we should do*
- *We gained a lot, made us look at procedures - though we had to be thick skinned*
- *We are feeling our way*
- *We have used the findings to refocus - getting back on track.*

When asked to identify what had changed since the audit, organisations identified:

- *The Quality Standard provided prompts to make us think about what kind of service we offer*
- *The audit provided a benchmark for the quality of advice when we merged with another organisation*

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<sup>1</sup> This would occur in a 'real-life' audit.

- *We have an increased awareness of clarifying what subjects we can advise on and identifying what advice or assistance a client could expect to receive*
- *We have knowledge from the audit on what systems need improving and are clear about what to do.*

Overall views from all involved in the pilot presents a strong and positive response to the Quality Standard. In particular:

- A recognition and appreciation that the Quality Standard meets a huge gap in accreditation or validation of quality of advice delivery
- Respect and compliments for all involved in the project - Project leader, auditors and assessors are reported to have been extremely helpful and accommodating
- Appreciation for the collaborative nature of the project
- A sense that this project was a very successful 'first go' at arriving at an agreed quality standard - respondents rated this first go as '70-80% right'
- Recognition that the project built in effective and useful feedback mechanisms and is willing to listen to views.

## 4. Conclusion

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This section summarises the findings of what has worked and what needs further consideration.

### What has worked?

The new standards and the processes for assessing the standards have been confirmed to be:

- Comprehensive
- Understandable
- Relevant and useful.

In addition, they:

- Bring added value as they specifically address advice
- Provide a robust measure of quality of advice.

In the context of this pilot the standard has improved the quality of advice given through pilot agencies addressing case recording.

There is strong support to indicate that the Service Standards and the QAA achieve a relevant and appropriate quality standard for advice work. There have been complimentary views that confirm that the proposed methodology best meets the need for organisations to be able to demonstrate quality of advice provision. This is further supported by thirty AdvicePlus Partnerships requesting copies of the quality standards materials for consideration and use.

The content and scope of the service standards have been easily understood by agencies and auditors. The one exception is Standard 1 which requires revision in order to clarify the differential between advice and advice with casework.

Standard 1 should also highlight the role of internal quality as several of the QAA methodologies used in this pilot could have a valuable role in internal quality. Organisations need to have clear directions about how the use of mystery shopping, videoed interviews etc can be recognised within the audit process.

External QAA is strongly supported as a valid and recognised independent measure of the quality of advice. The criteria require some revision to provide clear direction on the baseline definition of advice whilst accommodating different styles and approaches to advice work.

The QAA reporting works well.

The auditing process was well received and action plans have proved to be very effective.

## What needs further consideration?

How organisations identify if the Quality Standard is relevant for their agency needs to be addressed. If moving to an open scheme consideration needs to be given to how best to navigate organisations through the application process. The pilot agencies demonstrated that there is also a need to take into account the spectrum of advice as some agencies range between information and advice. Any revisions to the QAA process and accompanying definitions of advice should ensure that they are not out of kilter with any developments relating to information and specialist legal advice.

Who assesses and audits the Quality Standard is key. Whilst the assessment and auditing worked well in the pilot there is a need to ensure that quality standard staff are familiar with the workings of applicant organisations and further consideration needs to be made of how to best match assessors to organisations. The consistency achieved by assessors needs further work.

QAA criteria requires revision to recognise the exploratory and scoping activities undertaken by many organisations and address the more varied routes by which an organisation ensures accurate and complete advice.

The other QAA methodologies need to be reviewed in more depth to identify how they can be used for internal quality assessment and what evidence can be recognised by the audit process.

The revised assessment and audit processes need to be tested with organisations that do not have access to support as well as those that do.

The governance and finance service standards need to be merged and pass porting arrangements defined. This should include consideration of different criteria for specific organisational structures e.g. public bodies

The audit record format needs to be reviewed to simplify and condense the record.

The appetite for the Quality Standard needs to be explored. Cost is a key factor for applicants and needs to be clarified. The response of local authorities and other funders to the availability of a Quality Standard for advice needs to be examined.

## 5. Route map

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The revisions outlined in this route map are drawn from the findings of this evaluation.

### Organisational structure

There is support for the Advice Services Alliance owning the standard.

### Infrastructure

This evaluation recommends that a structure is put in place to provide for a paid team that co-ordinate the application process. This could include full time auditors and assessors.

### Recruitment of auditors and assessors

The findings of the evaluation indicate that auditors and assessors need to be supported to bring relevant expertise and an awareness of how the applicant organisation operates. There was a strong feeling expressed by pilot agencies that assessors in particular needed to bring knowledge and awareness of the agency's own approach.

The training and support available to auditors and assessors should focus on achieving a greater consistency when assessors are conducting assessments. This should address the issues identified in this report: eliminating individual approaches and the potential dominance of the assessor's own area of expertise.

Further discussion is needed to agree whether to employ paid or freelance practitioners and the need to maximise consistency should be a factor.

### Application process

Introduce a free-of-charge application process that clarifies the level of advice delivered by the applicant organisation and enables the applicant to identify if the quality standard is relevant for the organisation. This process should also draw out the individual service delivery methods and specific features of the client group served by the applicant organisation. This will help address the issue identified in the pilot that individual organisations are not always aware of the level of advice they are providing.

This application process could consist of:

- The applicant organisation submitting a checklist of relevant policies and procedures
- The applicant organisation submitting a specified number of self-assessments using the QAA form

- The Quality Standard co-ordinator holding a follow-up phone call to review the findings of this initial assessment and agree the most appropriate timeframe and format of the Quality Assessment.

It is recognised that this proposal has implications for the overall costs of auditing and assessing agencies as it requires a 'free' front ended application process which requires resourcing.

## Support to applicant agencies

There is consistent support for guidance materials to be concise and clear. It has been suggested that material could include

- A flow diagram of process and content
- Plain English, indexed guidance to clarify points on assessment - drawing on the current Citizens Advice material
- Initial application workshops to be provided regionally and continued availability to be subject to review.

There is strong support for the continued involvement of network staff as their support was viewed to be invaluable but would fall outside of the development of a quality standard and be met by capacity building support. Consideration also needs to be given of how organisations might meet the standard in the absence of support and this should be tested.

## External assessment

There is strong support for external assessment to be adopted as the mandatory QAA method.

External assessment requires further revision. Revisions should include:

- Compulsory external assessment of enquiry or case records within a set sample range e.g. 15 - 20
- Add in exploration stage prior to diagnosis in the QAA standard
- Review inclusion of research in its current form in the QAA standard
- Introduction of % scoring.

This revised application of QAA should be piloted with existing pilot agencies and new agencies who have not received support from their networks.

Self assessment should only apply once an agency has successfully passed one audit round.

## Other QAA methodologies

All other QAA methodologies such as mystery shopping, observed interviews, videoed and taped interviews should be promoted as internal quality measures.

This will require consideration of:

- Whether some methodologies, e.g. mystery shopping require further piloting before guidance is issued
- How organisations can submit evidence of internal quality measures as part of the audit process.

## Service standards

There should be revisions to the content of the overall Quality Standard. The standard currently consists of a Quality of Advice standard and six service standards.

The following existing services standards should be retained:

1. Case & Enquiry Management
2. Access, Client Care and Community Relationships
3. Planning
4. People Management

The rationale for this revision is all the four standards refer specifically to an advice service.

The following revisions should be made to these service standards.

### Service standard 1 Case and Enquiry Management

This should be renamed Enquiry and Case Management and a number of revisions are detailed at annex I.

Consideration should also be given to giving a higher profile to the criteria *'operate an internal quality of advice assessment procedure and act on the findings'* as organisations will be using the other QAA methodology to demonstrate ongoing compliance with this requirement.

### Service standard 3 Planning

This should incorporate specific reference to have processes to ensure the financial sustainability of the advice service.

### Service standard 4 People management

This should incorporate specific reference to inducting and maintaining support to trustees in relation to advice policies and principles e.g. conflict of interest and confidentiality.

### Combining the remaining two service standards: Governance and finance

The remaining two service standards, governance and finance management should be combined to make a single *'Managing the organisation effectively'* standard. There may need to be several versions of this standard to accommodate other organisations e.g. public or private delivering free and independent advice. This should be the standard against which other organisational standards e.g. PQASSO,

Quality Counts can be passported as it relates to generic management rather than advice specific policies.

## **Auditing**

There is support for keep the auditing separate from the QAA but bringing the two processes closer e.g. taking place within a two week period of each other.

The audit report could be revised to a shorter template version but still allow for free-flow entries to provide further explanation on specific items.

## Annex I Contributors

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Thanks are due to the following individuals and organisations that took part in both the pilot and the evaluation.

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Advice Services Alliance

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### Pilot agencies

#### *AdviceUK members*

De Montfort University Students Welfare Service  
Dunstable Disabilities Resource Centre  
Mosaic Shaping Disabilities  
Staffs University Students Welfare Service  
Willenhall Advice Centre  
Wood End Advice & Information Centre

#### *Age Concern*

Age Concern Birmingham  
Age Concern Coventry  
Age Concern Hounslow  
Age Concern Leeds  
Age Concern Shropshire

#### *Citizens Advice*

Blackpool CAB  
Chapel Town CAB  
Mexborough CAB  
Ripon CAB  
South East Staffs CAB

## *Youth Access*

Cambourne Share  
Mancroft Advice Project (MAP)  
The Bridge

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# Annex II Revised Service Standard I

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## 1: ENQUIRY AND CASE MANAGEMENT

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**The Standard:** A quality marked advice service has appropriate processes and documents in place to support advice enquiries in place in order to ensure consistently good quality advice and service is delivered to clients. Where an advice service undertakes casework it also has additional processes including case management to ensure good quality casework is provided for clients.

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### **(a) For advice enquiries:**

#### **A quality marked advice service should have:**

##### ***Processes to:***

1. Operate a filing and records management system.
2. Signpost and refer to caseworkers or other appropriate local service providers.
3. Provide advisers with access to technical advice guidance and support including resources.
4. Operate a key dates and action items diary, where appropriate.
5. Effectively monitor advice given, correcting or amending incomplete or incorrect advice provided.
6. Operate an internal quality of advice assessment procedure and act on the findings.
7. Create and securely store advice records for the time required.
8. Ensure secure disposal of advice records.

##### ***Documents:***

1. Up to date policies, procedures and relevant codes of practice for the operation of the advice service, which are available to all staff.
2. Written and up to date advice records which meet the Quality of Advice Standard.
3. Records of internal assessment of quality of advice.
4. Policy dealing with conflict of interest in acting for a client.

**(b) Where an advice service undertakes casework it should have *in addition* to 1(a) above:**

**Processes to:**

1. Allocate casework to advisers according to their level of competence and experience.
2. Update legal, procedural and other information.
3. Progress casework using a case management procedure.
4. Provide technical advice and support for advisers undertaking casework.
5. Provide a supervised case checking system for casework which includes a system for taking any corrective action identified.
6. Operate a key dates and action items diary, and evidence of its effective operation.
7. Annually review case checking system.

**Documents:**

1. An explanation of the advice service's system for case allocation.
2. A document to describe the case management system.
3. A document to describe the supervision and case checking system for casework.