

A Practical Guide to Peer Review

Advice Services Alliance

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Why read this guide?

- 1.1 This guide is written for advice agency managers.
- 1.2 If you want to improve the advice service you provide to clients, give effective support to your advice workers or demonstrate the quality of your work to funders, one of the best ways to do it is to employ an experienced, external adviser to review your advice work. This process is known as peer review and this guide has been written to help you devise a peer review process that ensures you get the best results for your agency.
- 1.3 The guide draws on peer review systems already in use across the sector to suggest different approaches and considers questions you should ask yourself when deciding which of those approaches are most appropriate for your agency.

The benefits of peer review

- 1.4 The adoption by the advice sector of quality standards such as the Quality Mark has resulted in improved management systems for many agencies. However, such standards, whilst supporting efficient practice, do not assess the actual quality of advice.
- 1.5 Unlike quality standards that are based on management procedures, peer review commonly involves the examination of case records and discussions between practitioners about casework. It is therefore capable of assessing the quality of advice that the agency is giving.

Background to this guide

- 1.6** In November 2003, ASA published a report (“the Report”) on peer review in the legal advice sector¹. The Report was a study of peer review systems in use across the sector. It looked at those used by Citizens Advice, Shelter and the Legal Services Commission amongst others.
- 1.7** The Report suggests that it is unlikely that individual agencies will be able to replicate such systems given the costs. However, it points out that one-off peer reviews commissioned by individual agencies are relatively cheap and simple to administer.
- 1.8** The aim of this guide is to help you carry out such a review in your agency.

1 Sargeant, J (2003) “Peer Review in Legal and Advice Services” (Advice Services Alliance) http://www.asauk.org.uk/fileLibrary/pdf/Peer_Review.pdf

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Reasons for using peer review

- 2.1** If you are considering carrying out peer review in your agency, you have to decide at the outset what you hope to achieve by it. Peer review is a very good tool for assessing advice quality but you must decide why you want to make this assessment.
- 2.2** It may be that you want to use the review to:
- improve the service that you offer to clients
 - develop and support your staff by identifying skills or knowledge gaps and areas where training is needed
 - demonstrate to clients that the work you do is of high quality
 - gather information that helps you to obtain or maintain funding

Some agencies may want to conduct a review for all the reasons above.

EXAMPLE 1

You work in a small Somali community group. Many of your clients are asylum seekers. You are not registered with the OISC to give immigration advice and you therefore refer all clients to local solicitors and the Law Centre. However, once they have been recognised as refugees, many clients come to you for support in finding work and housing. As a result of this, you have started giving welfare benefits advice to some clients.

You estimate that this is now taking up about 80% of your time. You have received some training in basic advice giving and the group has invested in the Child Poverty Action Group Welfare Benefits handbook upon which you rely heavily. You try very hard to give good quality advice and your clients are generally happy but you feel that input from someone that really knows the subject would be very helpful. You discuss this with your manager who agrees to hire a peer reviewer.

EXAMPLE 2

You are the manager of a long-established urban advice agency. You intend to make an application for funding for a new outreach caseworker. You have already collected information about the need for the new service but you want to include in your application evidence that your agency provides good quality advice. You therefore decide to hire a peer reviewer to assess the quality of the agency's work and to write a report, which, if favourable, can be submitted as part of the funding application.

2.3 Together with the nature of your work and client group, your reasons for carrying out peer review will affect choices you make about:

- who should conduct the review
- how it should be done
- the nature of feedback

These issues will be discussed in the chapters that follow.

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Choosing your peer reviewer

3.1 When recruiting a peer reviewer, there are a number of criteria that you should consider. The Report noted that existing peer review systems have identified six main elements that contribute to the profiles of peer reviewers:

- experience as an adviser
- experience of advice subjects
- experience of assessment, supervision, management and training
- working in a specific network or sector
- professional qualifications
- acknowledged expertise – a reputation

3.2 The list is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive. You should select the criteria that you think most appropriate and this selection should be made following consideration of the motivation for the review.

Generalist or specialist?

3.3 One major decision that you must make is whether to use a generalist or specialist peer reviewer.

3.4 The peer review systems already operating differ on this issue and there has been no conclusive research on whether one type of reviewer is more effective than the

other. Some take the view that where a generalist agency is being reviewed, the most appropriate reviewer is a generalist; they understand the work of generalist agencies in a way that specialists do not and specialists may demand too high a standard. Others take the view that in order to conduct a proper assessment of advice quality, the review has to be conducted by a subject specialist. Both methods have their advantages and it is for each agency to choose the most appropriate reviewer for them.

- 3.5** Having said that, your reasons for doing the review are likely to affect your choice. For example, one consideration is whether you want to review one subject area or all of the agency's work. If you have concerns about a particular subject, you may want to focus attention on that and therefore decide that a subject specialist is the most appropriate reviewer. If, however, you want to conduct a review of all of the agency's work, it may well be too expensive to get subject specialists in all areas and you may therefore select a reviewer with generalist experience who is able to review all or a large part of the agency's work. However, it is worth noting that the Report found that whilst specialist peer reviewers may charge more for their time, on the whole, they are quicker than generalist peer reviewers.

Other selection criteria

- 3.6** If the review is for support purposes ie to help advisers' development and identify possible training needs, trust in the reviewer by the advisers and by you is key.

Therefore it will be important for you to be confident that the reviewer understands the agency and the challenges the advisers face. So in this case, you might decide that an important criterion is experience in the same network or a similar advice agency.

- 3.7** It will also be important for the reviewer to provide effective feedback in a manner that is most likely to inspire confidence and facilitate improvement. Therefore you may want to insist the reviewer has some experience of assessment, supervision, management and training.
- 3.8** Where the purpose of the review is not solely developmental but is also to demonstrate quality externally, criteria that enable you to show that the review is objective and unbiased will be important. In these circumstances, you may prefer to recruit a reviewer who has not worked in the same network or similar agency and who in fact comes from a very different background. Furthermore, in order to demonstrate the legitimacy of the results, you may prefer a reviewer with professional qualifications and/or acknowledged and demonstrable expertise.
- 3.9** Having said that, all reviews will provide information that can be used for internal development. In order to get the most benefit from a review, you should always provide feedback to staff and use the information to improve the quality of your service. In order to do this, you may decide that a reviewer with supervision and management experience is crucial whatever the primary purpose of the review.

Ongoing experience

- 3.10** A further key issue for consideration is whether the peer reviewer is still a practising adviser. There are clear advantages to using a reviewer who is still practising: they are more likely to have up-to-date knowledge and the judgments they make will be embedded in their ongoing practical experience.
- 3.11** Most networks agree that the use of peer reviewers with ongoing experience is preferable. However, because they need them to carry out high numbers of reviews, many have not been able to employ practising advisers. This problem will not arise for an agency that is employing a peer reviewer to carry out a one-off review. We therefore recommend that a reviewer with ongoing experience be used wherever possible.

EXAMPLE 1 *continued*

You explain to your manager that you want the reviewer to examine your general approach to cases and make corrections and recommendations. You would like them to write a report and also to discuss this with you face to face. You would also like the reviewer to recommend a training programme. You are concerned, however, that the reviewer should understand the work of the group as a whole and the particular pressures that you face as an unqualified adviser working on your own. Your manager draws up a person specification containing the following requirements:

- *specialist knowledge and ongoing experience of welfare benefits advice*

- *experience of supervision and training*
- *awareness of the challenges facing small voluntary agencies*
- *awareness of the issues involved in working with refugees*

Recruitment process

- 3.12** Having chosen the selection criteria, you will need to consider where and how to advertise for your peer reviewer. This should be partly determined by your person specification. If you have decided that local knowledge or experience in your network are important criteria, it would be a good idea to advertise through your local network (if one exists), or your national network.
- 3.13** If you have decided to recruit a reviewer without local knowledge or experience of your network, it is probably best to advertise in a national newspaper or through other networks, although this is likely to be more expensive than advertising locally.
- 3.14** Alternatively, you may decide not to advertise at all and simply approach someone you know through a local connection. This will be an option if you want a reviewer with knowledge of the area and possibly of the agency. It will also mean lower recruitment costs.
- 3.15** However, if you follow this course, there may be a danger that the reviewer lacks or is perceived to lack objectivity; because the reviewer knows you and your agency, they may find it difficult to be critical, or

alternatively, they may regard you as a competitor and therefore be overly critical.

- 3.16** Once you have your pool of candidates, the next step in the recruitment process is to decide how to assess prospective reviewers against your selection criteria. Clearly, an applicant's CV will tell you if they have the experience you want, however, it will not enable you to assess other criteria such as knowledge, sensitivity to your agency's particular circumstances and needs and interpersonal skills. Interviewing the candidates is a good way to gauge these skills but you will probably also want to test the candidate by asking them to review and provide feedback on an anonymised or dummy file, that reflects the work of the agency.

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How to do it

- 4.1** By far the most common method of conducting peer review is by examination of written case records. It enables cases to be reviewed from start to finish and compared to other methods is generally faster and more straightforward.
- 4.2** However, as the Report points out, there are alternative methods in use in other sectors and to a certain extent in the legal advice sector. In particular, contemporaneous review of work being done as it takes place (eg observing an adviser interviewing a client) can be highly instructive. The benefits and drawbacks of contemporaneous review will be discussed below.
- 4.3** As most agencies are likely to use examination of case records as their method of review, it is worth looking more closely at how to go about it.

Case sampling

- 4.4** One issue to address is how you select the files to be reviewed.
- 4.5** The first thing to decide is how many cases should be reviewed. Peer reviewers generally agree that 15–20 cases are likely to provide an effective overview of an agency’s work. However, whether this sample is really representative will depend on how many cases the agency deals with and other factors such as whether all advice subjects and all advisers are included.

- 4.6** You know your agency best and have to decide how best to select a representative sample. However, you may choose to focus on certain subjects and certain advisers. If you do this, however, you will have to be prepared to defend the choices you have made to staff who feel the sample pool is unrepresentative.
- 4.7** Having chosen the pool, you should let the reviewer select files direct from the filing system or from a list of cases that you provide. This will ensure that there is a random element in the selection process.

Guidance criteria

- 4.8** Most peer review systems in use within the sector use criteria to guide the review process.
- 4.9** Guidance criteria help to ensure reviews are consistent, enable observers to understand how the reviewer has made his or her judgements and facilitate focused feedback.
- 4.10** You should therefore agree criteria with your peer reviewer before any files are reviewed. The contents of your framework will in part be determined by your priorities but existing peer review systems² look at criteria such as:
- diagnosis – how well the adviser identified the issues in the case

² See Appendix 1 of Seargeant, J (2003) "Peer Review in Legal and Advice Services" (Advice Services Alliance) for full details of existing systems

- appropriateness and accuracy of advice – the extent to which the advice was technically correct and tailored to the particular needs of the client (this could include referral to another advice source)
- communication – how well the adviser explained the issues to the client and kept them informed
- effectiveness – the extent to which the adviser made a positive difference to the client’s situation
- comprehensiveness – the extent to which the adviser identified and tackled all the client’s problems
- case recording – how well the adviser kept note of all activity on the case
- case closing – whether the adviser closed the file at an appropriate time and informed the client about the result of the case and its possible implications for the future

4.11 The criteria above are not intended to be a comprehensive package; they are suggestions for aspects of casework that you might want your reviewer to consider.

4.12 It is for you to decide the criteria you want the reviewer to focus on and the language you use to describe those criteria. The language should reflect that already in use in the agency to describe the advice process.

4.13 Whatever criteria you choose, it is essential that you and your reviewer agree what is good and bad practice. For example, if you ask your reviewer to consider case recording, you should agree some minimum

requirements for a good case record; if you ask your reviewer to consider accuracy and appropriateness of advice, you and your reviewer should agree on situations when it is appropriate for advisers to refer.

- 4.14** Not doing this may cause your reviewer to review against criteria that are unrealistically high or unacceptably low and may lead to disagreements over the results of the review.

Scoring

- 4.15** You should also discuss with your reviewer whether to score files. Whilst a score or a judgment of “pass” or “fail” provides a simple indication of whether a file is good enough, and is useful if the purpose of the review is validation of the agency’s work for external purposes, it is not helpful if the purpose of the review is to facilitate internal development. A score may distract attention from more detailed and constructive feedback. You might therefore decide to avoid scores and scales altogether.

Contemporaneous review

- 4.16** To date, contemporaneous review (ie the assessment of advice-giving as it is being done) has not been widely used and there are a number of reasons for this: the maintenance of client confidentiality is a common concern, the fact that the review is narrow in that it considers one interview and not the whole case and that it is relatively time-consuming, are all valid criticisms.

- 4.17** However, there are aspects of good quality advice provision other than the technical aspects of advice that cannot be assessed by looking at written records. For example, assessing how well and appropriately the client was treated and how appropriate the advice was to the client is difficult to do by examination of written records alone. When assessing these aspects of your agency's work, contemporaneous review could be a useful tool.
- 4.18** Therefore, it is important to decide at the outset what aspects of your agency's work you want to focus on. If you have concerns about interviewing or client care skills, it might be a good idea to consider contemporaneous review as an option as well as file review. This will give a more rounded picture of the quality of the agency's work.

EXAMPLE 3

You are the manager of an inner city organisation providing advice and counselling to homeless young people. You provide advice in housing, welfare benefits, employment and occasionally other areas of law. The agency has ongoing relationships with many clients but has only recently begun to keep case records. You decide that you want to carry out a review of all the agency's advice work and you hire a generalist adviser with long experience of advising and counselling young people. Because your case recording system is still developing and because you feel that interpersonal skills are particularly important when working with young people,

you decide that the reviewer should carry out a contemporaneous review of some advice sessions as well as an examination of case records. Before the review takes place, you agree the criteria with your reviewer. These include criteria relating to the technical quality of advice such as accuracy but they also include the following:

- *development of rapport*
- *demonstration of empathy*
- *sensitivity to needs*

You agree that your reviewer will assess these during observation of advice sessions.

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Consequences

Feedback

- 5.1 In order to get the most out of the peer review process, it is essential to have a good procedure for the provision of feedback.
- 5.2 You must ask your peer reviewer for written feedback on each of the files reviewed giving details of strengths and weaknesses and identifying areas for improvement. The reviewer should provide evidence for their judgements. This will help you and the adviser understand what constitutes good work as well as criticisms the reviewer might make. A summary of issues arising from the review as a whole is also indispensable.
- 5.3 You should consider who is responsible for giving feedback to whom. You may decide that it is better for the reviewer to give all feedback to the agency manager who then feeds back to caseworkers. This will mean that there is no chance for the caseworker to ask the reviewer any questions about the judgements made. Alternatively, you may prefer to give the caseworkers access to the reviewer so they can discuss the reviewer's findings and talk through alternative approaches and training needs.

Acting on the results

- 5.4 Where the skills of the reviewer allow it, you should work with them to devise an action plan identifying how the agency can improve its performance. This is likely to include an analysis of training needs and possibly suggestions for improving methods of supervision and even issues relating to management.
- 5.5 Together you should identify issues and decide what action is appropriate. This may include staff training, drafting new case recording guidelines or new procedures relating to supervision and management.
- 5.6 In order to ensure the changes take place, you should decide whose responsibility it is to implement them, set a realistic timescale and a date to review progress.

What if the results are bad?

- 5.7 On some occasions the reviewer may find serious problems with the quality of advice that cannot be rectified through training or the amendment of procedures.
- 5.8 When this is the case, you will need to investigate what lies behind the poor quality of advice. The cause may be systemic or down to the work of an individual and the action you take will depend on the cause. In this situation you will need to consider carefully what action to take. It may be a good idea to contact your network to see whether they can provide you with support and advice.

Disagreements

- 5.9** The situation may arise where you and/or your caseworkers are unhappy with the results of the review. By developing a rigorous selection process and by requiring that the reviewer use agreed guidance criteria, it may be possible to resolve differences of opinion through discussion. However you must consider what to do if this is not the case.
- 5.10** Some of the peer review systems in use in the sector use double marking of random selections of files to ensure the results of the reviews are sound. It is probably too much to expect an individual agency to have such a system in place, however, when disagreements do persist, the simplest way to resolve them is to seek a second opinion.
- 5.11** This will be difficult for a small agency with scarce resources. However, you have to be ready to deal with the consequences of a review, even if they are not all positive. It is therefore advisable to budget for the possibility of having to carry out a second review.

EXAMPLE 4

You are the manager of a generalist advice agency. You have arranged for an experienced generalist reviewer to conduct a review of a selection of files in all the legal areas that you cover. Before the review you arranged with your reviewer that she would give feedback direct to caseworkers. When giving feedback to one particular caseworker, she pointed out a number of recurrent problems on his

housing files. The caseworker did not accept the criticisms and this caused an argument between the two. You have tried to help them resolve the difference of opinion but both are adamant that they are right. Your caseworker says he will not accept the result of the review and asks to have a second review of the agency's housing files by a specialist housing solicitor. He says he is not prepared to accept the judgment of a generalist adviser. You do not have enough money to employ a reviewer to do a full review of the agency's housing cases but you do have enough to pay a specialist reviewer to review again the files that caused the dispute. The specialist reviewer writes a report that supports many of the criticisms found by the generalist reviewer and identifies a number of training needs. You discuss this report with the caseworker who accepts its findings and agrees with the training needs analysis.

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How much will it cost?

- 6.1** Cost is clearly an important consideration for all agencies when deciding whether or not to conduct a peer review. ASA's Report concludes that an agency should be able to carry out a one-off peer review for around £1000. This is based on a pay rate to the reviewer of £350 a day and the assumption that a review can be completed in 3 days.
- 6.2** This does not take into account advertising and recruitment costs. If you choose to advertise in the national press, this may double the overall cost.
- 6.3** Furthermore, the consequences of the review are likely to require you to spend both money and time implementing changes.
- 6.4** It may seem excessive to many agencies to spend large sums on peer review. However, given the importance of quality and the usefulness of peer review in identifying development needs and improving your service to clients, it should be seen as a good investment.

Obtaining funding

- 6.5** It may be possible to obtain funding specifically for a peer review. The Charities Aid Foundation funds small one-off pieces of consultancy work as does The Baring Foundation under its "Strengthening the Voluntary Sector" fund.

6.6 Alternatively, as the amount involved is relatively low compared to the overall cost of running an agency, it may be worth asking your regular funders to cover the cost and setting aside £1–2000 in the budget each year to cover a peer review.

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