

ANNEX 7

Helplines and websites

At para 5.13 onwards in our report we discuss the role of telephone lines and websites in delivering information and advice. The Low Commission takes the view that the current diversity of access points is a good thing. We want individuals to be able to turn to the place where they already feel the most comfortable and supported in order to get information or advice about social welfare law. However, it is important to ensure that the information on these websites is accurate and helpful, and that the different telephone lines are structured to support referrals between different services when necessary.

We are also keen to explore the possibility of creating a safety net telephone helpline and website service. We know that not everybody receives support from particular organisations and we consider that there is merit in developing a go-to website and telephone helpline (see R35). We suggest that one approach might be for the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) to explore with Citizens Advice and others how best to do this (see R36).

What follows below is not a comprehensive list of websites and telephone lines that can provide information and advice about social welfare law problems, but it does outline those major services in England and Wales that we have come across over the course of our investigation.

Citizens Advice have a national **Adviceline** telephone service which is currently being rolled out on a phased basis through Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABx). Callers get through to a Gateway Triage service, which refers clients to their local bureau or to their local group of bureaux or one of four Physical Contact Centres. Depending on the availability of their bureau or group, clients may have to join a queue. The Physical Call Centre is the fall-back option. If the client's bureau is not in the scheme, they get recorded options, including referral to the Citizens Advice website, Adviceguide. About 30 per cent of clients who call need face-to-face advice, while the remaining 70 per cent get website information or signposting to other sources of help. This means that bureaux clients are getting better access than under previous arrangements. In order to join the service, bureaux need to commit to providing a core service of social welfare law advice of at least 25 hours per week.

Community Legal Advice (CLA) is a helpline run by **Legal Aid Agency** contractors and is funded by legal aid. When someone first contacts CLA, an operator will ask the caller to explain his or her problem and check the caller's financial eligibility for legal aid. Clients who are eligible for help from CLA will be put through to a specialist adviser immediately. If CLA can't help (because the individual is not eligible for legal aid), the caller will be given suggestions

for where else he or she might get help. For those eligible for legal aid, specialist advice is provided on housing and housing-related debt, discrimination, special educational needs and welfare rights cases above tribunals. The specialist advisers have agreements with a network of face-to-face advisers whom they can refer clients to as necessary.

The **Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS)** provides advice for both employers and employees on a variety of employment relations subjects. The service includes a free confidential telephone helpline; downloadable booklets, leaflets and handbooks; and an automated online Q&A service.

Shelter run a housing helpline, which receives 140,000 calls per year, of which 60,000 currently get answered. It also has 'Get advice' pages on its website, which in December 2012 were month visited by a quarter of a million visitors, an increase of 27 per cent on same month in 2011. Not only has there been an absolute surge in demand, but Shelter expects that there will be further increases. Shelter currently doesn't market its helpline and website to avoid being overwhelmed and bringing in users that it is unable to help.

As recorded in our main report (see para 5.15), both Shelter and Citizens Advice report significant capacity problems and are unable to handle all the calls they receive.

National Debtline was originally set up by the Birmingham Settlement (one of AdviceUK's members) and is funded by the Money Advice Trust, as well as getting some money from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and from a levy on creditors with whom it reaches agreements on payback plans. It covers England, Wales and Scotland. There is also a **Business Debtline**. **StepChange** (previously known as Consumer Credit Counselling Service (CCCS)) and **Payplan** are more specialised helplines, which offer debt management plans and individual voluntary arrangements to those who fit their criteria (eg those having a certain level of consumer debt), but don't provide more general advice. StepChange has an agreement with Citizens Advice regarding referrals, and Payplan has something similar with AdviceUK's members. The National Debtline will directly transfer eligible people to StepChange and Payplan and to their four approved providers. The Money Advice Trust reports that during 2012/13 it assisted 181,000 clients via the National Debtline, Business Debtline and My Money Steps website.

Money Advice Service (MAS), originally the Consumer Financial Education Body, provides financial capability support via online, telephone and face-to-face services, as well as running a debt advice fund. It is also responsible for the co-ordination of debt advice (work previously done under the auspices of the Financial Inclusion Fund, run by the BIS).

The **Royal National Institute for Blind People (RNIB)** runs an integrated Information and Advice Service comprising three core elements:

- Helpline providing information (c70,000 information enquiries pa);
- Advice Service offering generalist advice and casework at a similar level to a CAB. Main enquiry areas are welfare benefits, discrimination, social care and employment (c24,000 enquiries and 3,000 complex cases pa);
- Legal Rights Service offering specialist legal advice and representation in relation to welfare benefits, discrimination and social care (c1,000 enquiries and 500 complex cases pa).

The services work closely with separate specialist teams in emotional support, telephone-based peer support and eye health services. The central UK-wide service works with locally and regionally based services provided by RNIB or their associate charity Action for Blind People, where face-to-face provision is necessary. The Advice Service holds the Advice Standard Quality Mark, the Legal Rights Service holds the CLS Specialist Quality Mark.

Advice Services Alliance used to run the **Advicenow** website, but it has now transferred the service to **Law for Life**. The website covers all aspects of social welfare law, as well as many other legal topics. It includes a number of downloadable guides.

Independent Parental Special Education Advice (IPSEA) is a charity which provides legally based advice and support to families and children/young people who have special educational needs and/ or a disability as they navigate the education system. Its website contains over 400 downloadable guides and was visited 97,000 times in 2012, and it dealt with over 3,000 enquiries through its telephone line during the same period.

Disability Information and Advice Line (DIAL) services are run by and for disabled people. DIAL information and advice services are based throughout England and Wales. They provide information and advice to disabled people and others on all aspects of living with a disability. Every year, the network of DIALs help around half a million disabled people.

Turn2Us provides both web and telephone services. Its website brings together a benefits calculator and a grants search database, which gives access to over 3,000 charitable organisations. In 2011/12 there were 3.2m visits to the website and 1.3m completed benefit checks. Its helpline is intended to assist those who are financially excluded and the elderly who are unable to access information via the website. It dealt with 59,000 calls during 2011/12.

Other charities run specialist helplines or offer information services through their websites targeted at particular client groups. These include:

- Age UK
- Arthritis Care
- Asylum Aid
- Carers UK
- CLIC Sargent
- Different Strokes
- Disability Rights UK – Disabled Students Helpline
- Discrimination Advice Centre
- Equality Advisory Support Service
- First Stop Advice
- Friends, Families and Travellers
- Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants
- Macmillan Cancer Support
- MIND
- MS Society
- National Autistic Society
- Refugee Council
- Rethink Mental Illness
- Women’s Aid