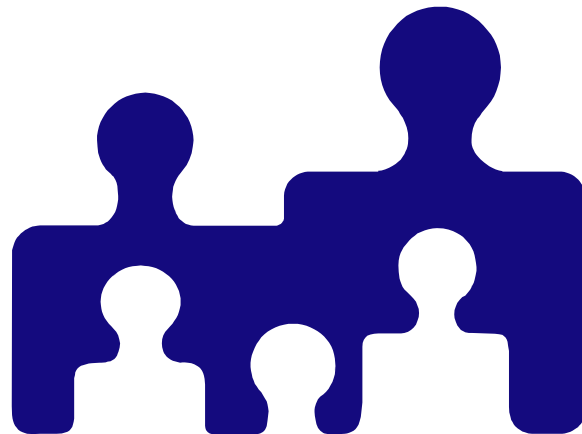


Parents Advice Centre Helpline Services



Freephone Client Survey Report

November 2005

INTRODUCTION

This survey was developed to assess the impact of PAC's support services on clients accessing support via the freephone helpline. The survey was undertaken in order to meet monitoring commitments to the Big Lottery, as a major funder of the Freephone service, but also to inform PAC's own internal quality assurance and service development.

Given the anonymous and confidential nature of PAC's support services, gaining information on client outcomes is inherently problematic – especially for the majority of our clients who choose to access support via the telephone. Monitoring has therefore tended to focus on outputs (number of calls taken) rather than on outcomes (benefits to the client). As other service providers in statutory and voluntary sectors have increasingly discovered, focusing solely on quantitative measures of success to the exclusion of qualitative measures can not only give an incomplete picture, but can in fact be very misleading and even counter-productive. It was therefore seen as an important step for the service to undertake this work to assess the impact of the service on its users.

The survey was designed as a telephone questionnaire, conducted during September 2005 with a sample of approximately 40 Helpline telephone clients who had used the service in the previous 6-8 weeks. This report, as well as being presented to the funder, will also be made available within the organisation and may be used to inform the development of the helpline procedures, staff and/or volunteer training

METHODOLOGY

This is the first time in recent years that PAC has made a structured attempt to gain information on client outcomes directly from the clients concerned. Client feedback sheets have been given to clients attending appointments in person, but this excludes the majority of clients who choose to contact us by telephone. Furthermore, the return rate for these sheets is so low that they are rarely collated and the information requested has not been reviewed in some time.

It was recognised that the conduct of the current survey was, therefore, likely to present a number of problems, including:

1. Gaining clients' consent to take part in the survey and indeed conducting the survey without disrupting or compromising the delivery of the service itself.
2. Gaining the co-operation of volunteer Helpline workers in accessing clients to take part in the survey. (There has been an historical reluctance on the part of many volunteers to 'intrude' on callers by asking for feedback.)
3. The relatively time-consuming nature of gathering and interpreting qualitative data.
4. The poor response rate for client-completed questionnaires

The questionnaire (attached) was, therefore, designed to be

- Anonymous – to maximise the validity of the responses
- Short and focussed – a maximum of ten questions, seeking basic information on the accessibility and efficacy of the service provided. For each question, respondents were provided with a range of possible responses to select from, as well as the option of adding their own comments
- Retrospective – to minimise disruption to the delivery of the support service.
- Small-scale – aimed at gaining a 'taste' of how the service was perceived by sample of users, rather than a comprehensive description of the service provided to all users.
- Telephone-based - using the clients' medium of choice and giving more control over when and how the data was collected

During July, Volunteers in all four branches of PAC were provided with an explanation of why and how the survey would be conducted, and asked to seek the permission of telephone clients to contact them in the following 6-8 weeks for the purposes of completing a short, anonymous client satisfaction questionnaire. (Clients were also given the option of receiving the survey by post, although none did so.) It was left to the volunteers' discretion as to which clients they asked, for example if they felt it would be inappropriate to ask a client who was very upset or distressed. It must be acknowledged that, with the best of intentions, the sample was unlikely to be completely random, with some degree of selection probably being exercised in who was asked, as well as in who consented, to take part.

In September, Supervisors were given the list of clients who had contacted different branch and a 'script' containing instructions for conducting the survey (attached). This emphasised the anonymity of the survey to ensure clients felt able to give honest feedback, although again the well-documented tendency of respondents to fulfil the researchers perceived expectations is well noted. The target was to survey a sample of about 40 clients, representing about 1% of the total telephone calls taken by the Helpline in a year. 57 clients consented to take part in the survey, of which 39 were successfully contacted and 37 completed the questionnaire.

RESULTS

Client outcomes

| <i>Types of support the client...</i> | <i>wanted</i> | <i>received</i> |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| A listening ear | 16 | 33 |
| Emotional support/reassurance | 16 | 28 |
| Factual information | 13 | 21 |
| Help/guidance to identify options | 24 | 25 |
| Advice/suggestions on what to do | 22 | 29 |
| Other | 1 | 1 |

| <i>Following the call the clients...</i> | <i>agree</i> | <i>disagree</i> |
|--|--------------|-----------------|
| felt better, calmer or reassured | 36 | 0 |
| could see the issue/problem(s) more clearly | 26 | 2 |
| had gained some helpful factual information about the issue(s) | 33 | 2 |
| got some useful ideas on dealing with the problem(s) | 36 | 0 |
| were able to put some of the ideas discussed into practice | 30 | 5 |
| felt the problem I had called about improved as a result of the call." | 24 | 8 |
| felt nothing changed as a result of the call | 5 | 30 |
| the problem got worse as a result of the call | 0 | 35 |

| <i>Further contacts with PAC</i> | <i>No.</i> |
|----------------------------------|------------|
| None | 15 |
| PAC initiated follow-up call | 5 |
| Client initiated follow-up call | 8 |
| Appointment | 8 |
| Contact with another PAC service | 2 |

| <i>Degree of satisfaction with service received</i> | <i>No.</i> |
|---|------------|
| Very satisfied – I would call again or recommend the service to a friend | 33 |
| Quite satisfied – I might call again if I needed support | 4 |
| Not satisfied – I don't feel that it helped | 0 |
| Very dissatisfied – I feel it made things worse or that I was treated badly | 0 |

Accessibility

| <i>Any previous contacts?</i> | <i>No.</i> |
|-------------------------------|------------|
| No | 26 |
| By phone | 9 |
| Appointment | 2 |

| <i>No. of attempts</i> | <i>No.</i> |
|------------------------|------------|
| 1 | 26 |
| 2 | 9 |
| 3+ | 0 |

| <i>Use of Freephone No.?</i> | <i>No.</i> |
|------------------------------|------------|
| Yes | 11 |
| No | 23 |
| Don't know | 3 |

| <i>Call answered in...</i> | <i>No.</i> |
|----------------------------|------------|
| Local branch | 12 |
| Another branch | 20 |
| Don't know | 5 |

| <i>Reason for accessing support by freephone</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Don't know</i> |
|---|--------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| find it easier to talk about problems on the 'phone | 19 | 18 | 0 |
| wanted to remain anonymous | 5 | 32 | 0 |
| it was more convenient | 34 | 3 | 0 |
| was not aware of another option | 15 | 21 | 1 |

Other comments

| <i>Comments</i> | <i>No.</i> |
|---|------------|
| Excellent / Very good/ Could not be improved / Very happy | 25 |
| Friendly/ Helpful / Discrete / Respectful / Reassuring / Impartial | 16 |
| Service should receive more publicity &/or funding | 5 |
| Would recommend this service | 4 |
| Would like additional services (home visits, longer opening hours) | 2 |
| Freephone number / call back appreciated | 2 |
| Child-focussed | 1 |
| Helpline good - but client unable to access statutory services required | 1 |

COMMENTARY

Client outcomes

The most outstanding figure from the results – and most commented on by those conducting the questionnaires – was the very high level of client satisfaction (almost 90% ‘very satisfied’ and the remaining 10 % ‘satisfied’). Even given the weaknesses of the chosen method (noted in the Methodology section above) this is a remarkable result, and is validated by other data, not least that nearly half of respondents chose to use the Helpline or another PAC service again. The additional comments quoted in the final table reflect the positive nature of the feedback to some extent - no criticism or suggestions were offered, other than to extend or expand the service – but does not capture the enthusiasm and gratitude clients expressed. One Supervisor commented, *‘Although I wasn’t really that keen to carry out this survey, the response from clients has made me feel proud and privileged to be working with these volunteers in this organisation’*.

The reasons for the high level of satisfaction seem evident in the feedback given on both the type of service received and the outcomes identified by clients. While less than half (43%) the respondents were seeking a listening ear &/or emotional support, 75% - 90% felt they did receive one or both. All the indications are that this was perceived very positively by the clients concerned, with all but one *feeling* better as a result of the call. This sort of outcome is often given little value, especially by larger funders who are understandably focussed on their own macro-level social indicators, but PAC’s experience has shown that this is often sufficient to help parents to negotiate minor crises successfully, improving strained relationships and averting more serious problems.

Looking at the more ‘concrete’ forms of support, 1/3 clients were seeking information, but significantly more clients wanted more proactive support in the form of advice/suggestions or help/guidance (60% - 65%) and this was provided on 67% - 78% calls respectively. Almost all callers (89 - 97%) felt that they had received relevant information or useful ideas on how to deal with the problems presented, and an impressive four out of five were able to carry this through into action. With almost two thirds of clients attributing a positive change in their situation to the support provided by the Helpline, this data represents a very impressive case in support of the efficacy of the Helpline service.

Accessibility

Statistics provided by the freephone service provider, Call Handling, has until now been our only source of information on the accessibility of the service. These ‘bare numbers’ leave significant gaps in our understanding of access issues and can be hard to analyse due to the technology in use. For instance, a call diversion system allows calls not picked up in the first branch contacted to be automatically diverted to another branch. Calls so diverted are registered as ‘answered calls’ in both branches, giving an inaccurate impression of the pick-up rate.

For instance, based on Call Handling reports, the total number of calls via the freephone, would account for 87% of all Helpline calls in the last quarter (Aug –Oct) - yet only about 30% of respondents to the survey said they used the freephone number. However, if we remove all calls under 5 minutes duration from the calculation (on the assumption that a large proportion of these are, in fact, diverted calls) this disparity disappears. Freephone calls then account for 28% of all Helpline calls. Working on this as a more accurate

figure, we must therefore ask the question: Why, after 18 months in which only the freephone number has been promoted, the proportion of freephone calls is still so low?

One possible issue in relation to the use of the 'old' local numbers in preference to the freephone may lie in the fact the calls coming into the freephone system can be routed to the local branch only when the caller is using a BT line. Customers of other services (i.e. NTL) and mobile telephones are not recognised as originating from a particular area and are therefore routed to a 'default' receiver – in our case the smaller and less busy branches in Ballymena and Dungannon. This has been reflected in a significant rise in the total call numbers for these branches, evening out the distribution of calls and hopefully making better use of the our volunteer resources.

However, this in itself has brought some problems when clients from outside the local area wish to have a follow-up contact with the same volunteer – especially for face-to-face appointments. In some areas (in particular the northwest) NTL have a large proportion of subscribers, so the only a minority of callers are automatically routed to their local branch. Over half of the respondents stated that their calls were taken in a branch other than their local branch. This is not always a problem – for instance, for the 'one-off' caller - but it confirms the experience of Helpline staff that, since the advent of the freephone, many more messages are having to be passed between branches to ensure that continuity of service for ongoing clients.

One instance where the survey has contradicted service provider statistics is in the proportion of missed calls i.e. calls that ring off before they are answered. Over 70% of of clients surveyed said their calls were taken on their first attempt, and the remainder on the second. This would suggest a missed call rate of 23% - almost twice the rate of 12% indicated in call provider statistics, although not far off the 'industry standard' of an 80% pick-up rate. While the fact that all respondents were able to access the helpline in no more than two attempts could also be interpreted quite positively, it also raises the possibility that callers who do not get through after two attempts are unlikely to try again.

The clear preference of this particular sample of clients to access support by telephone was hardly surprising, but their reasons for doing so highlight the importance of the telephone option. Over 90% cited the convenience as an important consideration, and we know from anecdotal evidence that this is the only realistic option for many people living in rural areas, or with limited access to transport and/or young children. However, the anonymity of the telephone is still a vital consideration when people decide *whether* to access help. It is probably not surprising that only 1/7 of our respondents said they wanted anonymity since they had, after all agreed to give a telephone number and be contacted again for the purpose of the survey. It is more telling that over half the respondents agreed that they felt more comfortable sharing problems on the telephone. For PAC as a whole, the fact that well over half of respondents were not aware that the service also offered face-to-face support provides a clear challenge for how the service is currently promoted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- To continue to train new volunteers in listening and support skills, as well as parenting and child development knowledge; and to maintain a balance between skills and knowledge development in in-service training.
- To review the usage of the freephone number at branch level and target promotion accordingly.
- To investigate further the number of calls routed to the 'wrong' branch (based on helpline daybooks) and consult with Helpline staff and volunteers on the impact or misdirected calls
- To consult with Call Handling regarding technical options for the routing of calls within the system.
- To monitor 'missed call' rates within branches and consult with Call Handling on possible explanation for the discrepancy in statistics provided.
- To review the promotion of Helpline services, including alternative ways to access support.
- To conduct a client survey on at least an annual basis. While the present survey has provided very valuable information, the current methodology could certainly be improved and it would seem preferable to sacrifice the year-on-year comparability gained by keeping the same survey content, in favour of maximising the relevance of the process by reviewing the questions asked each year.

Survey Questionnaire

Appendix I

Q1: Which of the following best describes the types of support you were expecting when you contacted the Helpline, and which best describes the support you actually received? (*Read through each list in turn and tick **all** boxes that apply*)

1a Did you expect...

- A listening ear
- Emotional support/reassurance
- Factual information
- Help/guidance to identify options
- Advice/suggestions on what to do
- Other (specify) _____

1b Did you receive

- A listening ear
- Emotional support/reassurance
- Factual information
- Help/guidance to identify options
- Advice/suggestions on what to do
- Other (specify) _____

Q2: I am going to read out some statements that might describe your situation after the call. For each one, please tell me whether you agree, disagree or don't know (*Read each statement, then pause and ask the client if they agree, disagree or don't know. Tick **one** box for **each** statement*)

- | agree | disagree | don't know | "After the call ..." |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | .. I felt better, calmer or reassured" |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | .. I could see the issue/problem(s) more clearly." |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | .. I had gained some helpful factual information about the issue(s)." |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | .. I got some useful ideas on dealing with the problem(s)." |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | .. I was able to put some of the ideas discussed into practice." |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | .. the issue/problem I had called about improved as a result of the call." |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | .. nothing changed as a result of the call." |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | .. the problem got worse as a result of the call." |

Q3: Have you had any further contact with PAC? (tick **one** box only)

- no, just this survey
- yes, someone called me back
- yes, I phoned again
- yes, I came in for an appt
- yes, I got in touch about another PAC service/project

Q4: Overall how satisfied were you with the support you received? (tick **one** box only)

- Very satisfied – I would call again or recommend the service to a friend
- Quite satisfied – I might call again if I needed support
- Not satisfied – I don't feel that it helped
- Very dissatisfied – I feel it made things worse or that I was treated badly*

* Inform the client that PAC operates a complaints procedure and offer to send out details if desired.

Q5: Was this your first contact with PAC's support service? (*Read all options and then tick **one** box only*)

- Yes
- No – I had phoned previously[#]
- No – I had previously had a face-to-face appointment[#]

[#] no. of contacts (if applicable) _____

Q6: Did you use the freephone telephone number (0808 8010 722)? (*Tick **one** box only*)

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Q7: How many times did you call the number before your call was answered? (*Tick **one** box only*)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5+

Q8: Was your call answered... (*Tick **one** box only*)

- In your local branch
- In another branch
- Don't know

Q9: I'm going to read some statements that might describe why you chose to contact us by phone. For each one, please tell me whether you agree, disagree or don't know (*Read each statement, then pause and ask the client if they agree, disagree or don't know. Tick **one** box for **each** statement*)

agree disagree don't know "I chose to contact PAC by phone because..."

- .. I find it easier to talk about problems over the phone
- .. I wanted to remain anonymous
- .. it was more convenient
- .. I was not aware of another option

Other (specify) _____

Q10: Finally, is there anything else you would like to say about the service you received or how it could be improved?

Signed _____ (Supervisor) Date _____

Supervisors will be supplied with the list of first names, contact numbers and call times from another branch. Each Supervisor should select names and contact numbers from the list to match the requested contact days & times.

In carrying out the survey, the Supervisor should take a copy of the 'script' below and a blank questionnaire and ensure that they will not be disturbed for 15 minutes. Treat the call as you would if returning a helpline call – speak only to the client, do not tell anyone else answering the telephone where you are calling from or why and do not leave any messages.

When the client answers the telephone, the Supervisor should read the following introduction before commencing the survey:

“Hello (client's name). This is (Supervisor's) name from Parents Advice Centre. Thank you for agreeing to take part in our customer survey – is now a convenient time for you to answer a few questions? “ *(If not, try to arrange a convenient time to call again).*

“Before we start, I'll just explain a little bit about this survey.”

“We are carrying out this survey to help us evaluate our telephone helpline service and identify improvements we can make to better meet the needs of our callers.”

“The survey should take about 10 to 15 minutes and it is completely anonymous – that means the answers you give will not be linked to anything that could identify you, the volunteer you spoke to or any other details from your previous calls. Any information you give today will also be treated in accordance with our confidentiality policy.”

“I will not ask you anything about the content of your previous call to the helpline – just about your experience of using our helpline services. Questions 1- 4 are about the nature and quality of the service you received when you called; questions 5-10 ask are about how easy it was for you to access our service.

“For each question, I will read out the question and then read out a number of possible answers for you to choose from. You can tell me which option or options most accurately match your situation or suggest something else if you wish.”

“Is there anything you want to ask before we start?”

Then read through the questions and record the answers on a separate sheet for each client.

Remember to thank the client when you have finished and encourage them to contact the helpline again if they think we can be of any help in the future.

When the survey has been completed with a client, the Supervisor should strike the name off the Contact List and initial beside it to indicate that this client has been successfully contacted