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**Tower Hamlets Advice Support Project**

**Advice Skills**

**Information for Volunteers**

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# Disclaimer

Every effort has been made to ensure that the information contained within the notes accompanying this course is accurate at the time of writing. However, law can rapidly change and case law can alter the interpretation of the law. As such these notes should be taken as a general guide to social welfare law and how it operates and should not be interpreted as an authoritative statement of the law.

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AdviceUK

Advice Service Transition Fund Volunteer Induction Check List

Induction

Volunteers will be supplied with, required to read and shown where to locate the following information within the first 4 weeks of starting their voluntary placement. This information will be discussed and explained fully at a formal induction session.

* Office layout, information manual
* Equal opportunities
* Confidentiality and data protection
* Health and Safety
* Personal Safety and office security
* Complaints Procedure
* Volunteer Task Description and Policy
* Case recording procedures
* Computer system including accessing shared files and general letters
* Expenses claims

Supervision

You will have a named supervisor who will be responsible for ensuring induction is carried out, all work is supervised and your supervisor will also carry out formal supervision meetings monthly

Your supervisors name is:....................................................................

Days and times of attendance

What day/s and times will you attend to volunteer......................................

Details of who and how to notify of absences.............................................

....................................................................................................................

Dates of monthly supervision meetings.....................................................

I confirm that I have read and understand all the above policies, I have also read the advice skills information

Signature (volunteer)…………………………….........Date……........…......

I confirm that I am the above persons named supervisor and have carried out induction as above requirements

Signature (supervisor)……………………………........Date………………...

**The following is general information on Advice principles, skills, policies and procedures to be read prior to you starting to see clients**

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| **Fundamental Principles of Advice Work** |

**Independence**

**Confidentiality**

**Accessibility**

**Accountability**

**Equal opportunities**

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| 1. Independence |

Clients must be confident that:

* the advice they will be given will be unbiased, non-judgmental and will focus solely on what is in the client’s best interests
* the adviser does not represent any organisation with whom the client might have a dispute e.g. the local authority or the Department of Work and Pensions.

**Conflict of interests**

A conflict of interests occurs when an advice centre cannot be seen to be acting independently or if it is involved in a case that goes against its values and ethics.

Advice centres should also have a policy on conflict of interest.

Examples of a conflict of interest could be:

* knowingly helping someone make a fraudulent claim for welfare benefits
* advising two parties in a case when they are in disagreement with each other, for example, a husband and wife who are separating.

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| 1. Confidentiality |

**Confidentiality** is an essential feature of any advice service. Clients need reassurance that they will not be judged, and that anything they tell you will not be shared with others without their knowledge and authority. By reassuring clients about confidentiality, you may help a client trust the organisation to disclose a problem that they may not have been happy to discuss with anyone else. It is good practice to explain your organisational policy on confidentiality to each client.

For confidentiality to work, both all staff need to be committed to it, fully understand what it means, and implement the policy.

**Breaching confidentiality**

Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in all circumstances. Your organisation should be clear about what the limits to confidentiality are, perhaps covering: threat of harm to self or others, and threat or commission of a serious criminal offence.

* Any justification for breaking confidentiality should be in your policy.
* You should make clients aware of any situations when you may have to breach confidentiality *before you need to.*
* Do not breach confidentiality without agreement of your line manager.

If you breach confidentiality without sufficient justification, there may be serious consequences for yourself, your client and your organisation.

# Relevant legislation

Data Protection Act 1998. Covers data held about people on computer and on paper-based records. You need to ensure that anyone you hold information about knows that you hold it, what you use it for and to whom you may pass it on to.

*The Social Security Administration (Fraud) Act 1997.* Advisers must not knowingly assist in a fraudulent claim – there is no duty to disclose discussions with aclient.

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| 1. Accessibility |

As the advice sector often provides services to hard to reach groups, it is vital that the target population for your service knows what you do and the methods by which you can be accessed. Your service should be as accessible as possible to everyone who needs it. Agencies often target certain groups: disabled, women, age related (youth or over 50’s), BME groups.

Accessibility might involve consideration of:

* Physical premises – the law requires that reasonable adjustments are made to facilitate disabled access
* Resources – can your resources be made available in your local community languages? Are your resources available free of charge? What can you do to enable people with specific disabilities to access your services?
* Policies and procedures – equal opportunities etc

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| 1. Accountability |

Independent advice centres are accountable to their funders and to clients. They must demonstrate that their service is well managed and is responsive to the community's needs. Responsible funders will ask centres for evidence that their money is being well spent and services are being delivered. Often this evidence is in the form of targets and outcome monitoring. Management Committees/ Boards of Trustees are there to ensure that the organisation meets the needs of the clients.

Professional indemnity insurance will ensure that where mistakes have been made the client can seek redress.

**Complaints procedures**

Every centre should have a complaints procedure that is accessible and publicised widely to clients and other stakeholders. Complaints should be encouraged as they can provide useful feedback that may enable the organisation to improve its service delivery. Being responsive to information gained through the complaints process is key if you wish to deliver a quality service and maintain a good reputation.

**User feedback & user involvement**

Many funders require organisations to find out what clients think about the service. This may be achieved by: Interviewing clients, Asking clients to complete a user feedback survey, Recording compliments as well as complaints about the service, Having a comments box in reception

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| 1. Equal Opportunities & Diversity |

Equal Opportunities means that everyone has a right to be treated fairly, regardless of their background, gender, beliefs or health problems.

If we treat clients differently because of who they are, we are making judgments about the help that they should get, for reasons that have nothing to do with the merits of their case. By doing so, we can help perpetuate discrimination in society.

As an advice centre you will come across many examples of people being treated unfairly, either by organisations or individuals. Organisations should ensure that they challenge such treatment.

Discrimination is where a person is treated worse than other people because of who they are. It is illegal to discriminate against others on the basis of the following protected characteristics: Age, Disability, Gender Reassignment, Marriage & Civil partnership, Pregnancy & Maternity, Race, Religion or belief, Gender or sexual Orientation. A written policy gives day-to-day guidance.

**Relevant legislation**

The Equality Act 2010, which merged all of the existing equal opportunities laws into one and introduces some new rights for specific groups.

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| **Health and Safety** |

This is a cross-cutting theme that is relevant to any organisation – not just those in the advice sector. It is important that an organisation is active in its management of health and safety. It needs to provide training to all staff; carry out regular reviews of the health and safety policy and procedure; and regularly carry out an audit of the premises and the work of the organisation.

A risk assessment will help you to identify possible areas of danger to staff, volunteers and users. The assessment should look at: The building and equipment, Users, Management, Other visitors, Risks in the area surrounding the offices.

The organisation should make it clear that it expects all employees, volunteers, visitors and users to exercise a reasonable standard of care at all times.

Advice centres should also ensure the safety of advisers at all times.

* Do you spend too long looking at a computer screen?
* How do you manage stress?
* Is there access to a panic button when dealing with clients?
* How do you ensure safety for home visits or outreach sessions?
* Do others in the office know where staff are if they are not in the office?

Advisers should consider their own safety when working with clients. In a closed advice room, advisers should sit nearest the door and inform others of their whereabouts.

The Health and Safety at Work Act and organisational Health and Safety Policies should be checked regularly to ensure compliance.

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| **Case Recording** |

There are many reasons why you need to make sure that all client contact is recorded on your organisational systems (paper and/or electronic):

* Supervision and file reviews
* Statistics
* Funding requirements
* Monitor and demonstrate client progress
* Colleagues can take over your clients in your absence
* Useful in case of a complaint
* Can be used as evidence if there is a tribunal or court case
* Client case studies can be helpful in writing funding bids
* Evidence that you have carried out the requirements of your job role
* Inform social policy work

**Best practice in case recording**

* Always date your case note entries
* Make sure case notes are kept in date order
* Record the appropriate level of detail about client interactions
* Ensure that case notes are legible and clear so that others can take over in your absence
* Under the Data Protection Act, clients can request a copy of their case notes. Do not write down your opinions of the client
* When completing a claim- always write down the reason why you think person is eligible and attach a copy of the claim
* Where you check benefits using benefits calculator attach a copy
* Copies of emails/letters sent and received should be included in the case file
* Agencies will have their own procedures for keeping case files
* Case files should be orderly, usually there will be a ‘case record sheet’ at the front of the case and documentation relating to the case kept in date order attached to this

**The Initial Interview**

**Possible Contents of an Initial Interview:**

* Welcoming your client
* Finding out the whole situation
* Dealing with emergencies
* Planning to deal with other issues
* Ensuring your client has the necessary support to take action
* Working out next steps & closing

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| Welcoming the Client |

1. You should start any interview by welcoming your client and allowing them time to settle.
2. Introduce yourself: tell your client your name and what your role is.
3. A useful starting point is **How can I help you?**
4. At an initial interview, explain that anything they tell you is confidential within your organisation: it will make clients more willing to explain their problem.
5. When you’ve found out what the problem is, you can then identify whether it’s appropriate for your service to deal with this client, or whether they should see someone else.
6. If you can deal with them, you can explain (when it’s relevant!) how you will work with them.
7. Try not to bombard your client with information. All advice will be confirmed in writing.

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| Dealing with Emergencies |

**Common emergencies will include:**

* Imminent eviction
* Homelessness
* Threats or actual violence, including abuse
* Not enough money to live on from day to day
* Risk of imprisonment or detention
* Risk of disconnection (fuel companies) or loss of other essential services.

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**Communication Skills**

Although advisers must have adequate knowledge and information on the subject areas they advise in, advisers also need good communication skills. Communication skills are a **tool** for advice. They are not an end in themselves, but merely help an adviser work with a client. There are five main elements to effective communication:

* Actively being with a client – body language is important
* Listening to your client
* Empathy with your client
* Questioning your client
* Giving informationto your client.

## Actively being with a client S-O-L-E-R micro skills: Body language for advice

Advisers should seek to encourage clients to express and recognise their requirements.

**S = Sitting** Sitting squarely, facing your client, or at an angle, and on the same level as the client helps both clients and advisers relate as equals. Your presence helps demonstrate your commitment to your client (sitting at right angles is a comfortable compromise between the formality of sitting behind desks, and being too close to a client by sitting alongside them).

**O = Open posture** Avoid crossing arms and legs as this creates a barrier between you and the client. Use an open posture.

**L = Lean** At times you may want to lean towards the client. This is often best done as a slight inclination indicating the client is the centre of your interest.

**E = Eye contact** Direct eye contact is not the same as staring. Maintain steady contact with the client. You may want to look away occasionally but if this becomes frequent the client may feel you have lost interest in them.

**R = Relaxed** Avoid fidgeting and distracting facial expressions. Try to be naturally relaxed, as this will be more comforting for the client and for you.

**Combined verbal and non-verbal behaviour**

Your client will get messages from you, not just from your words but also from your actions or your behaviour. ‘I’m listening’, said by someone who appears bored, or is sitting leaning back with their arms folded, could be interpreted as ‘I’m not interested in what you have to say’. What you say and what you do needs to be consistent. You need to be aware of how you may appear to your client without being preoccupied with it.

**Body language makes up 55% of the communication message**

You should try to be aware of cultural differences, for instance to do with eye contact or shaking hands in greeting. What may seem like good manners in one culture may be offensive in another.

**Tone and volume (vocal)**

**Tone** – how a person’s voice actually sounds, the pitch and modulation of their voice, whether it is high or low. When you get angry your voice will often get higher and you will often speak quickly. Speaking in a monotone can give the impression that you do not care about the client/customer, subject matter or your job.

**Volume -** how loud (or quiet!) you speak. Try to ensure the client can hear you, without being too loud.

**Listening to the client**

Not listening to clients often leads to wrong advice.

*‘Active Listening’* involves both verbal and non-verbal messages. It means checking your understanding of what you have heard the client say, but without interrupting. Your body language should also show that you are listening!

Do not make assumptions about what someone is telling you - it is easy to decide what you think is the most important thing, whereas your client may think differently.

Check your listening skills by spending some time thinking about what you are doing when you ‘switch off’, and why you do it.

**Paraphrasing - reflection of content**

**Aim:** To communicate as briefly as possible your understanding of the key message To build trust, minimise distortions, communicate respect.

**Example:** “so what you’re saying is...” Intervene reasonably frequently - it helps the anxiety of a hesitant person and manages the outpourings of someone who is jumbled and confused.

**Empathy** You need to be able to see the situation from your client’s perspective, and understand how your client feels about the situation.

This doesn’t mean that you have to agree with it or follow it – other perspectives may also be important – but unless you can understand your client, you will not be able to advise them effectively.

**Perceptiveness - *having a perception of your client’s position***

You need to have a degree of perception of your client’s position in order to make sense of their issues and requirements and respond accordingly. It is important to develop an awareness of poverty, discrimination and prejudice

**Listening** You are NOT listening to me when

* you have an answer for my problem before I've finished speaking
* you look frightened by, or disapproving of, what I am telling you
* you finish my sentence for me
* you find me boring
* you feel critical of my vocabulary, grammar or accent
* you are dying to tell me something
* you tell me about your experience, making mine seem unimportant
* you are communicating to someone else in the room

**Questioning clients**

* Think about the purpose of each question before you ask

1. Try to keep your questions to a minimum - a barrage of questions can be off-putting to your client.
2. If precise information is needed you should use **closed questions**, for example, ‘are you receiving Income support?’

* To explore an issue, use **open questions**, for example, ‘could you tell me more about the other bills you are having difficulty paying?’
* Sometimes you will need to be direct. For instance, if you are trying to stop someone getting evicted for rent arrears, you *will* need to ask personal uestions like why or how they got into debt in the first place. If you need to ask personal questions, explain why to your client.
* Remember to keep the emphasis on the client.
* Let your client respond in their own time. If your client hasn’t understood you, you may need to rephrase your question, but don’t be too quick to speak. Your client may need the time to express themselves.
* If information you have been give doesn’t make sense, is contradictory or unclear state this and ask further questions to obtain clarification

**Giving Information**

**Communicate clearly**

give people straight messages, avoid euphemisms, abbreviations, acronyms. Don’t assume that your clients/customers know jargon or technical terms.

**Avoid mixed messages**

If you mean “no”, say no: don’t try to hide behind warm words or your customers will interpret your message as “yes”

**Stick to the point**

Don’t use twenty words where ten will do. Be precise in what you say and mean.

Use the **KISS** principle: **K**eep **I**t  **S**hort &  **S**imple

**Set deadlines** Give a definite deadline for when you intend to return with an answer, and then stick to it.

**Shut up** Remarkably often a communication goes wrong by virtue of its length, so say your piece then stop

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| **Information and options:**   1. You need to be aware of your own knowledge and competence as an advice worker, and also that of your advice service. 2. Know where to find and how to use information. 3. Ensure that options explored are in accordance with organisational policy. 4. Assess any risks or needs of the client. 5. You will need to be aware of the client’s circumstances in order to help to assess the options, e.g. the client’s time, resources, disabilities, finances, beliefs etc. 6. Remember to empower your client - help *them to decide* the appropriate course of action. You will need to check their understanding of each option and its consequences.  * Help your client to explore both short and long-term options. * Try to avoid overloading your client with too much information at once – or too many options. You should be able to help your client by outlining suitable options based on the facts you have gathered. If your options are unacceptable to the client it will then be necessary to find out why and identify other alternatives. * Encourage your clients to use their own information gathering skills. This will help them to understand the process, and to feel involved. It will also help them to be able to solve future problems. * Help your clients to recognise any unrealistic goals they may have, and discuss how these goals may be modified so that they become more realistic. * Explore with your client any advantages and disadvantages of each option, so that they are fully prepared to make informed choices, and are aware of the implications of their decision. Also encourage them to consider alternatives if necessary. |

**Assisting Clients to Plan a Course of Action**

**You will need to consider the following when planning a course of action:**

1. Time
2. Processes involved
3. Client’s previous experiences
4. Client’s circumstances
5. Cost
6. Practicality

* Likelihood of success
* Possible problems and ways to overcome them
* Responsibilities

All volunteers advising for the Advice Service Transition Fund will be required to give all clients they see a written Action Plan. The plan should include goals and targets, relevant information, possible barriers, stages of implementation, and what actions you expect the client to carry out (and by when), deadlines, what actions the advisor will be taking (and when). If you are going to continue to assist the client in future you should specify how and when the plan is to be reviewed.

Using written action plans helps reduce client or adviser misunderstanding or the missing of deadlines, and helps make the advice process easier. The action plan is not rigid, and may be altered over time. Both the advisor and the client should keep a copy of the action plan. You should advise your client to bring the copy of their action plan with them if they have to return for advice on the same issue in the future. Your action plan should **always** be checked and signed by your supervisor before giving a copy to the client.

**Letters**

When writing letters you should consider the reason and purpose of the letter and ensure the tone of the letter is appropriate, ie: assertive, persuasive, conciliatory, polite passive, accepting, apologetic. Is the purpose of the letter to:

* inform
* persuade,
* build goodwill
* complain/ respond to complaint

**Should you write the letter from you (or the agency) or from the client;**

If you write on headed paper, ie from you / your agency, you are really acting on behalf of the client and any response from the third party is likely to be sent to you. A copy on any letters sent or received on their behalf should be sent to the client. If you write a letter for them (ie as if they were writing it themselves) any response would be sent to the client. You may not get to see the response or result of your work. Where you are unsure or there is no evidence of clients’ information it may be preferable to write from the client, it is then a statement of what they say.

Attach a form of authority to act on the clients behalf if writing from agency (or client to sign if writing it on their behalf) also put your name and job title ‘Advice Worker’

**Tips/suggestions for writing business letters:**

* Structure you letter with a beginning, middle and end
* Put underlined/bold headings where there are multiple issues
* Generally no more than 15-20 words per sentence, not more than 5-6 sentences per paragraph

**Content & Other information**

* Quote guidance, legal redress, ask for complaints system/procedure
* Agency should have general letters for reoccurring advice issues – information kept up to date
* Save any letters under client surname/then first name - remember data protection, letters saved on computers should have password protection, hard copies in locked filing cabinets
* See websites/books for general letters that can be used – see National Debtline, Shelter also you and/or your agency should have general letters for reoccurring advice issues – but make sure the information is kept up to date
* State the date you expect response by (most agencies have guidance on how long they will take to respond), also what you will do if don’t get response (and review your case on this date)
* Copy for file, copy to client, send with form of authority
* Emails are more informal but less ‘safe’, there is evidence of being sent, its cheaper, quicker, not always substitute for ‘hard copies’, send with scanned form of authority
* Attach supporting evidence (possibly the letter you’re responding to?)
* When finished check yourself – or get it supervised
* Emphasise important points in bold – use bullet points
* Without prejudice can be put on top of letters when you are writing, making offers or negotiating and do not want the letter to be used in future court action

Structure of letters

* + 1st paragraph set scene, summary why writing/introduction
  + 2nd paragraph sets tone/objective
  + Facts should be in a logical/chronological (date) order
  + Last paragraph state what you want and set deadline for response/action
  + Use **words** for numbers, one to ten, **numbers** for 11 and above
  + Put named person of who you are writing to wherever possible – department where not (and address)
  + Put clients full name and address including postcode, also the reference number. This may be their national insurance number (DWP letters), date of birth (medical or GP’s), check letters received from third parties for other reference, housing benefits for example use their own ‘claim number’ for client letters, creditors will have account numbers
  + Date of writing
  + Include and list attachments where appropriate
  + Dear Ms Ellis (yours sincerely), Dear Sir or Madam (yours faithfully), Kind regards, Best wishes, Yours truly where more familiar
  + CC if sending to others, PP if signing for someone else
  + Note/list appendices/attachments
  + Keep short and only relevant information
  + Letters should be visually attractive, good reflection on your agency, consistent throughout agency, ‘corporate’

**Sample letter from client to creditor (available from National Debtline website)**

79 Benefit Street

London

E14 9OK

February 7, 2014

Barclays

Canary Wharf

London

E14

Dear Sir/Madam

Account No: 1234567

Thank you for your letter of 7-2-14. I am very disappointed that we seem unable to reach a satisfactory compromise in this case. As I have already explained, I can only afford £2 per month at the present time. This is the only realistic payment proposal bearing in mind the enclosed personal budget sheet.

You have stated in correspondence your intention to commence proceedings in the County Court against me. The commencement of legal proceedings under such circumstances could be counter to the 'Overriding Objectives' of the new Civil Procedure Rules. You will be aware that the 'Overriding Objectives' underpin everything the court does. Moreover, paragraph 4 of the Protocols Practice Direction states that in the cases not covered by an approved pre-action protocols, the court will expect the parties "to act reasonably... in trying to avoid the necessity for the start of proceedings".

I have recently been made redundant and have claimed Job Seekers Allowance.

I would suggest that your refusal to accept my offer could be viewed as unreasonable and I would ask the court to consider this matter with reference to the 'Overriding Objectives'.

The offer of £2 is of course still open to you to accept.

Yours faithfully

Ms Jo Ellis

**Sample letter from organisation/advice worker (see NHAS website)**

Housing Options Team

Albert Jacob House  
62 Roman Road  
E2 0PG

7th February 2014

Dear Sir Madam

**Re: Ms Diane King (homeless) Date of birth 24/2/1992**

**C/O 79 Stewart Street, London, E14 8PY (friend/postal address)**

**Ref: Application for housing under the housing act 1996 part VII S183.**

**Homelessness or Threatened with Homelessness (9S185)**

We believe that our client should be treated as homeless or threatened with homelessness because she has been told to leave her parents house. The property was in her mother’s sole name/tenancy. She has no right to remain in the property without the tenants’ agreement and authorisation. She has been sleeping rough in the local park for the past two weeks.

**Eligible for Assistance (S185)**

We believe that our client is eligible for assistance as, she is a British citizen.

**Priority Need (S189)**

We believe that our client fulfils a priority need category because she is pregnant.

**Local Connection**

We believe that our client fulfils Local Connection because her last accommodation (parents house) was In Tower Hamlets, she had lived there for over ten years.

**Duty to Make Enquiries (S184)**

We note that on the basis of the presenting evidence your authority has a duty to make reasonable enquiries into this case.

Please find enclosed written authorisation to make this application on behalf of our client and keep us informed of the progress of your enquiries as an authorised representative of our client. Please also provide us with a copy of your decision letter (section 184 notice).

Thank you for your co-operation in this matter.

Yours faithfully

Jo Ellis

Advice Worker

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| Advice Services Transition Project - Client Interview Sheet | |
| **Agency Name** | |
| **Client Details** | |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | |  | Supervised | |  | Client given copy | |  | Follow up work complete | |  | Review date | |  | Review complete | |  | Referral carried out |   Name: Date:  Address:    Post code:  Tel/Mob No:  NI/ref Number: Date of Birth:  Advisor: Supervisor: | |
| **Facts of Case** | |
|  | |
| **Advice Given** (including options and action to be taken by client/advisor) | |
| Confirmation of advice being given: client signature:............................................. |