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School for Public Health Research

Charting the impacts of Citizens Advice Bureau activities: strategies to orchestrate a realist analytical process

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Background: Citizen’s Advice Bureau (CAB) provide people with ‘independent, impartial, confidential and free advice’ on problems related to debt, benefits, employment, housing and discrimination. It is well evidenced that CAB services help people to be better off financially, however, due to the complexity of these interventions, evidence on the impact of CAB in improving people’s health has proven much more difficult to establish.

Methodology: A realist evaluation of how, for whom, and in what circumstances CAB interventions improve people’s health is currently being undertaken. Realist evaluation is a theory driven approach that seeks to generate or make explicit theories about how an intervention is supposed to work at the outset of the evaluation before going on to test these theories through the collection of empirical data. NVivo software was used to keep an audit trail of developments and refinements to the multiple theories required in order to represent the diversity in individual needs, support received and potential health impact.

Data management processes using NVivo (illustrated with select programme theories)

CAB staff interview transcripts stored in NVivo as sources and data coded against each programme theory node

“If the client is vulnerable – if the DWP doesn’t do their part – they’re not going to chase them up and they don’t know. So you’ve got to be there and, you know, make sure that everything is, you know, given to that client.”

“The wellbeing benefit of having some platform, for a while, where you’re not scared of being pushed off it at any given point. I mean that, to me, it’s invaluable”

“Most of them [clients] say they feel much better because they feel like that stuff is off their shoulders now, and they can concentrate on some of the other things that are going on in their life”

One NVivo node for each programme theory about how CAB improves people’s health

Theory 1: In a context of neo-liberalism, CAB advice leads to increased knowledge about rights and a feeling of support to challenge people in authority, resulting in confidence to take action and reduced stress

Theory 2: In a context where financial stress is exacerbating a client’s mental health problem, CAB provides advice which reduces the person’s stress, preventing a continuing decline in their condition and meaning they can continue to self-manage.

Theory 3: In times of stress, CAB workers take responsibility for finding solutions to people’s problems, reducing the burden and increasing the person’s locus of control with respect to their health, resulting in greater capacity to prioritise health and wellbeing

Linked memo created for each theory node to record debate and decision making during collaborative meetings to develop and refine programme theories

Iterative process whereby theories inform, and are refined in response to interview data

Conclusion: The use of NVivo to formulate and organise our realist theories has been hugely beneficial for enhancing transparency in our thinking and decision making processes