

NIHR School for Public Health Research

Public Health Practice Evaluation Scheme

Addressing the challenges faced by 'front line' practitioners

Exploring the impact of Citizens Advice activities on improving health



Background: Welfare advice is suggested to improve people's health through action on the wider determinants of health and reducing stress and anxiety. However, due to the distal nature of health outcomes, and as advice services are highly tailored and nested in a wider system of health provision, evidencing the potential health impact of advice services has proven difficult.

The intervention: Citizen's Advice (CA) provide 'independent, impartial, confidential and free advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities', including, but not limited to, advice on debt, benefits, employment, housing and discrimination.

The evaluation focuses on 3 projects which provide intensive support for clients with complex needs:

- ❖ A young person's project targeting individuals between 16 and 25 and their family members
- ❖ A mental health project targeting people with severe and enduring mental health issues
- ❖ A project for people referred by GP practice staff targeting people who have difficulty leaving their home

Methods : realist evaluation is used to explore how, for whom and in what circumstances CA intervention improve people's health. Programme theories are developed and tested using quantitative and qualitative data aiming to find:

- ❖ What are the health **outcomes** (positive, negative and /or unintended) for CA clients?
- ❖ What are the **mechanisms** (including **resource** and **reasoning**) by which these outcomes are achieved?
- ❖ What are the facilitative **contexts** that allow mechanisms to 'fire'?

Key findings and learnings for practice

- ❖ CA interventions substantially decrease stress and improve wellbeing. Interim findings suggest that this is because:
- ❖ Support from CA with financial concerns reduces people's stress and anxiety, helping them to feel more in control and able to make healthy lifestyle changes.
- ❖ The impartial and non-judgmental nature of CA advice helps clients who are mistrustful of state services to feel supported in navigating the welfare system, resulting in greater confidence to take action.
- ❖ People with an existing health condition are more likely to use income to support healthy decisions than those who see health consequences as very distant.

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The NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR) is a partnership between the Universities of Sheffield, Bristol, Cambridge, Exeter, UCL; The London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine; the LiLaC collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster and Fuse; The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, a collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities.

The research was funded by the NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR) Public Health Practice Evaluation Scheme (PHPES).. The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health.

