

- A partnership of public health researchers across the five universities in North East England
- Focused on working with policy makers and practice partners
- A founding member of the NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR)
- A UK Public Health Research Centre of Excellence

How do Citizens Advice Bureau services improve people's health?

While it is established that welfare advice services improve people's financial position, understanding their potential health impact has proved more difficult. Fuse researchers are undertaking an innovative evaluation exploring if, how, when and in which circumstances Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) services improve client's health.

CAB provide people with independent, impartial, confidential, and free advice on issues related to debt, benefits, employment, housing and discrimination. CAB are therefore one example of a service that addresses the social determinants of health, which can affect health inequalities.

CAB deliver complex services, providing support that is highly tailored to the needs of individuals and potentially leading to very different health impacts depending on the individual circumstances of the client. Due to this variation, establishing evidence on the effectiveness of CAB services in improving health has been challenging. Further work is needed to unpick the different kinds of support offered by CAB, how this may trigger changes in health, and the contexts in which health improvements are most likely to happen.

Researchers from Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, are undertaking a realist evaluation to explore the potential health impacts of CAB services in the large town of Gateshead, Tyne and Wear, England. Realist evaluation is an approach that seeks to generate theories about how an intervention is supposed to work from the outset of the evaluation before going on to test these theories in later phases. This approach is well suited to the evaluation of complex interventions such as CAB services as it explores how interventions may have different effects for different people, and in different circumstances.

The project is scheduled to run until 31 March 2017 and will be conducted over five phases:

1. Development of initial theories around how, for whom and in what circumstances CAB services may lead to health outcomes in consultation with CAB staff.

2. Refinement of these theories through engagement with existing research.
3. Testing these theories through interviews with CAB staff, and questionnaires and interviews with CAB clients.
4. Developing a package of data collection measures that can be incorporated into CAB routine practice to assist in capturing longer term impacts
5. Sharing and seeking feedback on findings from other CAB services.

Key progress to date

- A number of initial theories have been produced around how CAB services may lead to changes in people's health. These theories were developed from a scope of the literature and interviews with CAB staff. They have been developed and recorded in collaborative team meetings.
- For example, one theory is that support from CAB to address financial concerns reduces people's stress and anxiety, helping them to feel more in control and giving them more space to think about making healthy lifestyle changes.
- Another theory suggests that people who have an existing health condition and/or perceive their health as more immediately threatened are more likely to use income to support healthy decisions than those who see health consequences as very distant.
- Other theories focus on the particular kinds of support provided by CAB. For instance, where clients are mistrustful of state services, the impartial and non-judgemental nature of CAB advice may lead clients to feel supported in navigating the welfare system, resulting in reduced stress and greater confidence to take action.
- The next phases of the research will involve interviews with CAB staff, as well as questionnaires and interviews with CAB clients in order to test whether or not CAB services work to improve health in the ways suggested.

Policy relevance and Implications

- This research will enhance understanding of the types of, and circumstances under which, advice services can lead to a health impact. As such, the findings have the potential to inform decisions around the commissioning, design and delivery of advice services.
- Working collaboratively with CAB staff, findings on the most likely health outcomes of CAB services will be used to develop existing data recording systems in order to best capture health impact and facilitate the continued collection of data on health outcomes beyond the evaluation timescale.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

Little is known about the impact of Citizens Advice Bureau services on people’s health. Researchers from Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, are currently undertaking an evaluation to understand how, when and for whom CAB services lead to health improvements. This work is supported by the National Institute for Health (NIHR) School for Public Health Research (SPHR), through the Public Health Practice Evaluation Scheme (PHPES).

Find out more about this project as it advances by visiting: www.fuse.ac.uk/nihrsp/hr/phpes

FURTHER INFORMATION

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