



Young people's access to advice

Summary of a report¹ setting out research evidence on young people's access to advice on social welfare issues

This briefing is for providers, planners and researchers with an interest in: Integrated Youth Support Services; the Community Legal Service; services for young adults in transition

1 Key findings

- Young people's access to advice is disturbingly poor – they are considerably **less likely to get advice** (or to get good advice) than the general population.
- Many young people lack the skills and knowledge that are required for successful advice-seeking and experience significant **psychological barriers** to getting advice.
- Young people want to get advice from **services** that are informal, confidential and focussed on young people; and from individual **advisers** whom they can trust and who can offer powerful independent assistance to resolve their complex problems.
- The available evidence challenges common assumptions about young people's use of **technology** to get advice.
- Existing policy and services – both in the youth and the 'mainstream' adult advice sectors – are currently failing to meet young people's social welfare needs and would benefit from greater **collaboration and joint-working**.

2 Why is this an important issue?

Each year:

- 16–24-year-olds will experience at least 2.3 million rights-related problems requiring advice.²
- Young people will not even seek advice in relation to around half of their problems – about 1.15 million problems each year.
- A further 200,000 problems will result in young people trying, but failing to obtain advice, often because there is no service able to help them.
- In all, considerably fewer than half of all young people with serious social welfare problems will actually manage to obtain advice – leaving at least a million of our most vulnerable citizens to cope with their problems unassisted each year.

This is despite evidence indicating that young people are more likely to need advice when they have a problem than other age groups, as their problems have a greater adverse impact on them, and that getting advice makes a bigger positive difference to the outcomes of their problems.

The cost of the country's collective failure to provide this vulnerable group with the rights-based advice services it needs is likely, based on existing research,³ to amount to several hundred million pounds a year.

Recent indications are that the effects of the current UK recession are leading to a sharp rise in demand for advice from disadvantaged young people on debt, welfare benefits, homelessness and employment.

In this context, it is vital that service planners and providers gain a better understanding of how young people access advice.

3 Introduction

This briefing provides an overview of the key findings from a research report setting out evidence of young people's access to advice and advice-seeking behaviour in relation to social welfare issues, such as housing, homelessness, welfare benefits, debt, employment rights, education rights, social services and discrimination.

The full report provides a comprehensive source of evidence on the subject for practitioners, policy makers and funders to turn to as they attempt to understand and tackle unmet need. It is of particular relevance to the development of Integrated Youth Support Services and Community Legal Services.

It is complemented by *The Advice Needs of Young People – The Evidence*, a separate report published by Youth Access in July 2009, which provides evidence on the extent and nature of young people's social welfare advice needs.

4 Methodology

The report's findings are based primarily on desk research, but also draw extensively on data from the English and Welsh Civil and Social Justice Survey (CSJS), which is a major, and increasingly influential, national private household survey of adults aged 18 and over focusing on people's experiences of everyday problems. In addition, the findings draw on the results of focus groups with young people and consultations with youth advice practitioners.

5 Seeking and obtaining advice

Young people's advice-seeking experiences differ markedly from those of the general population. Their attempts to obtain advice are relatively haphazard and unsuccessful, resulting in poor outcomes.

Young people are less likely than the general population to obtain advice when they need it ...

The proportion of young respondents to the CSJS who have not obtained advice for their problems is consistently greater than that for other age groups (see Fig. 1). Moreover, those young people who obtain advice rarely do so from a recognised advice provider.

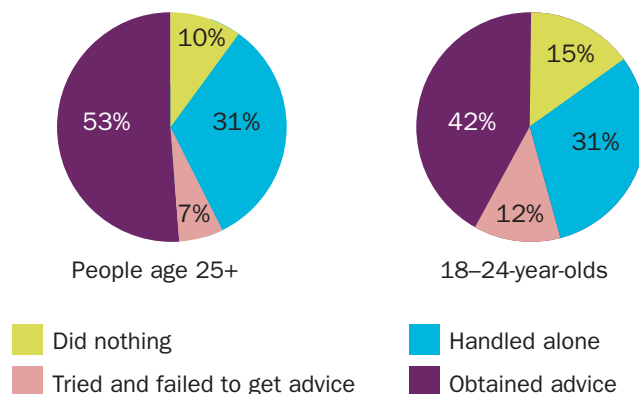


Fig. 1 Advice-seeking strategy & success (Source: 2004 CSJS)

... particularly in key areas of social welfare law

Young people are particularly unlikely to obtain advice in relation to core areas of work for most advice agencies: only 37% with problems involving money/debt, welfare benefits, rented housing, homelessness, discrimination, employment or consumer issues obtained advice (see Fig. 2).

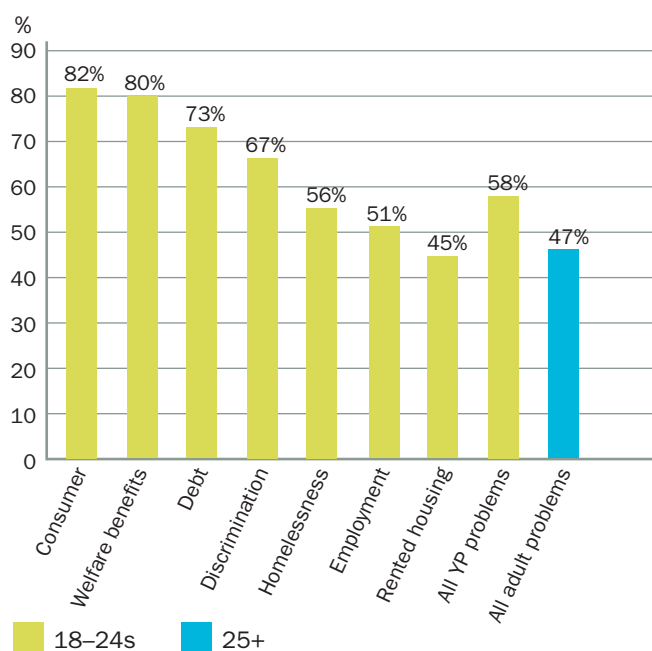


Fig. 2 Percentage of 18-24-year-olds with problems who did not obtain advice (Source: 2004 CSJS)

Young people are more likely than other age groups to take no action to resolve their problems

This particularly applies to younger young people and those with problems relating to homelessness, employment rights and domestic violence. As well as being less likely to seek advice, young people are also less likely to turn to courts, tribunals and ombudsman services.

Reaching the most disadvantaged

The LSRC have analysed the comparative advice-seeking success of 18–24-year-olds who were not in employment, education or training (NEETs) and other young adults (i.e. non-NEETs).⁴ The NEETs group, which can be used as a proxy for disadvantaged young adults, was, compared with the non-NEETs group:

- more likely to have experienced severe and multiple problems;
- half as likely to have handled problems alone (19% vs 38%);
- more likely to have sought advice – NEETs account for approaching half of all young adults seeking advice;
- more likely to have obtained advice (51% vs 36%) – partly because they are relatively unable to deal with their problems without help;
- equally likely to have tried but failed to have got advice.

NEETs' mistrust of 'the system' affects their advice-seeking

Although some disadvantaged young people may be more familiar with 'the system' than non-NEETs, a significant minority will not seek help or advice of any type from any professionals.

'Remote' advice services may not reach the most disadvantaged

Disadvantaged young people, who experience the more severe problems, are, compared to other young people, considerably less likely to have access to telephones and the internet and more likely to use printed material when seeking advice and support.

When they do take action, young people are prone to delaying or giving up seeking help ...

Many young people find their problems, and the thought of trying to resolve them, extremely daunting. Their tendency to put off dealing with their problems can exacerbate their situation and render their problems considerably more difficult to resolve by the time they reach a professional adviser.

... and are more likely to fail to get advice

Looking only at those who sought advice in the 2004 CSJS, young people were more than twice as likely to be unsuccessful in obtaining advice as the general adult population. Older young adults (22–24-year-olds) and those with homelessness and welfare benefits problems appear to experience the greatest difficulties.

Early experiences can be highly influential on future advice-seeking behaviour

A negative experience can put a young person off seeking help again.

Some young people deal with their problems independently

Nearly a third of young people handle their problems alone, i.e. they take some action, but do not seek advice.

Many young people who don't get advice regret it

Young people who try but fail to get advice or who deal with their problems alone are far less likely to meet their objectives and often feel that advice would have improved the outcome.

6 Modes of access

There is no doubt that the internet and other new technologies offer exciting opportunities for improving young people's access to advice and that the greater the range of modes of access available, the more accessible a given service will be to young people. However, the available evidence raises a large number of issues for service providers and planners to consider.

Most young people access advice through 'old-fashioned' means

Despite the proliferation of new technology amongst young people, a large majority choose to access advice and support for their social welfare problems either in person or by telephone.

Young people are far more likely to access advice face-to-face than other age groups

Data from the 2004 CSJS indicates that whereas people aged 25 and over were more likely to make initial contact by telephone than face-to-face, the opposite was true for young people (see Fig. 3). Young people particularly tend to prefer face-to-face over telephone advice for more complex problems.

Young people's preference for face-to-face advice relates to trust

The evidence suggests that remote mediums, such as email and the telephone, are not as conducive to building the trust with an adviser which is necessary for young people to open up about their complex problems.

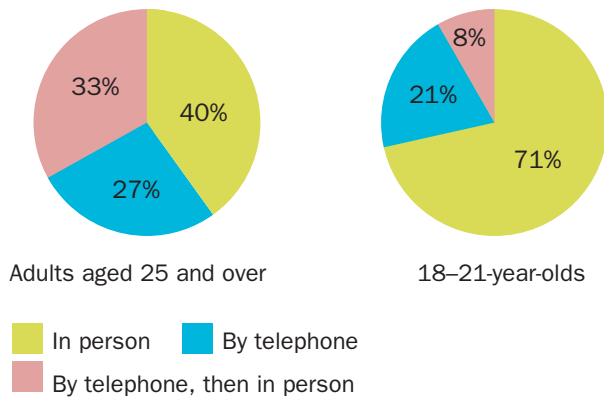


Fig. 3 Mode of initial access to advice on social welfare problems (Source: 2004 CSJS)

Cost, deprivation and communication skills are barriers to accessing advice by telephone ...

Those least likely to benefit from telephone advice services include young men and those with lower levels of education, language difficulties or lower incomes.

... but the telephone remains the most popular method of contacting advice services remotely

Whilst not appropriate for all young people, many like the speed, accessibility and anonymity of telephone advice, which is particularly valuable for those who face obstacles to accessing advice by other means, e.g. due to distance, disability or mobility problems.

Texting can be a valuable tool for initial contact

Texting can also be useful for advisers to keep in touch with clients where they have an ongoing case and issue reminders about appointments.

Do not assume that the internet will solve everything!

Use of the internet for seeking advice and information has increased rapidly over the last few years, but remains a minority activity. The extent to which young people currently use online advice and information services remains limited.

Young people are less likely to use the internet for information and advice than other age groups ...

Although they are major users of the internet overall, young people mainly use the internet for entertainment and social networking and appear to be less likely than other age groups to use it for formal information gathering or for getting advice.

... and have problems finding online information they can trust and understand

Many young people encounter problems finding relevant information and express concerns about whether they can fully understand or trust the information that they do find on the internet.

Some young people will nevertheless have a preference for getting their information online ...

Although most young people prefer more traditional forms of communication when accessing help, there is

a small, and probably growing, group who are more likely to use modern communication technologies, including the internet. Reasons given for choosing the internet include that it is quick, anonymous, confidential and you can use it at any time.

... but relying on internet information services may not reach the most disadvantaged

There is evidence indicating that information websites may be most useful for helping more capable people deal with their problems themselves.

Email advice can extend access but can be limited in its depth ...

Because emails are limited in the process of question and answer that can happen quickly by phone or face-to-face, it tends to be easier to provide generic information or initial advice rather than in-depth personalised advice via email.

... and requires a specialist approach

Email advice services appear to work best for young people when they are targeted specifically at this client group and are provided by specialist online advisers, often at a national rather than local level.⁵

Social networking and internet forums

There are likely to be rapid developments in service delivery methods over the coming years as technology develops. Currently, young people tend to reject internet chat rooms as reliable sources of advice. However, tightly moderated message boards, delivered alongside self-help material, could become an effective way of providing peer support.

Printed information still has a role to play

Young people surveyed in the 2004 CSJS were more likely to use printed material than the internet to resolve their problems.

7 Sources of advice

Given young people's unique pattern of advice-seeking behaviour, it is vital to understand where young people turn when they want to get advice, and why.

Young people want to talk to someone they can trust ...

Key characteristics young people seek in any source of support include: friendliness; patience; an understanding of young people's issues; respect for confidentiality; an ability to listen; safety; and a non-judgemental culture. Above all, a trusting relationship between client and adviser appears key to conducting any effective work with young people at risk.

... and are most likely to trust someone known to them

The overwhelming majority of young people, particularly younger young people, approach people or organisations known to them. This reliance on

familiarity leads many young people to approach non-expert sources of help, often family and friends, in preference to professional advice agencies.

When they do seek professional advice and support, it is often from non-expert, non-independent sources ...

Young people are much less likely than other age groups to approach an independent and appropriately qualified or trained source of legal advice, such as a solicitor or a Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB). Only one in seven of those young people who obtain advice do so from a recognised independent advice provider.

... including the local council ...

Young people, particularly disadvantaged young people, are more likely than other age groups to seek advice from the local council, probably due to the type of problems they experience and their ignorance of other sources of advice.

... and youth professionals

Teachers and youth workers tend to be cited by young people as the most effective and approachable problem-solving professionals. Youth workers, with whom young people have one million contacts each month, are an important source of help. 'Detached' youth work can be effective at reaching isolated and disaffected young people on their own territory.

Many young people are reluctant to go to mainstream legal advice services

There is a considerable body of evidence confirming that young people rarely access advice services established for the general population, such as CABx and most solicitors. Research with such agencies typically finds that young people are the most under-represented client group of all. Access appears particularly poor for younger young people.

Young people want their advisers to specialise in working with young people ...

Due to a strong sense of belonging and identity, young people tend to be far more comfortable getting advice from advisers who are focused solely on their age group rather than on the public as a whole.

... and to be a 'powerful friend' who can advocate on their behalf

Whilst young people are rarely impressed by quality marks or qualifications, they value the ability of their advisers to get things sorted out.

Some young people may like to get advice from peers, but more research is needed

Given the Government's stated desire to see an increase in peer-to-peer advice services, there is a notable paucity of evidence to assist in gauging the extent to which peer advice services are either effective or desired by young people.

Continuity of advice is important to young people

Services will need to find a balance between young people's desire to deal with a single worker and the need for advisers to have an appropriate level of knowledge and expertise. Continuity of service may be more important than continuity of adviser.

8 Locations

The location of an advice service is crucial to its accessibility. It often makes sense to integrate advice services alongside other support services already used by disadvantaged young people.

Advice needs to be available where young people already go ...

Due to the difficulties many agencies have in reaching out to disadvantaged young people, it is sensible to locate advice services where young people already go.

... such as youth drop-in centres offering co-located support services in accessible and safe locations

Young people prefer to get all the advice they need within one building rather than being passed around different agencies. One stop shops and drop-in centres for young people located in the community – and not too closely linked to authority – tend to be most effective in reaching and engaging disaffected and excluded young people

Mainstream advice services may need to establish separate provision ...

Wherever possible, advice services for young people should be co-located with other relevant services for young people rather than co-located with advice services for adults.

... or conduct carefully planned outreach work

Establishing outreach advice services in youth settings is a realistic option for many mainstream services⁶ and can facilitate the 'trust transfer' between professionals that is necessary for effective referrals.

Advice in schools may not reach the most disadvantaged

Although schools meet the essential criterion that advice should be delivered where young people already go, they tend to be too closely associated with authority and raise confidentiality concerns for many disadvantaged young people.

Locating services can be particularly tricky in urban areas

Young people are often unfamiliar with anywhere outside the immediate areas in which they live and go to school. For young people in gangs it can be dangerous to travel through the territory claimed by another gang – an advice service in the 'wrong' area is effectively inaccessible.

9 Legal capability

Young people's 'legal capability' – their knowledge, skills and attitudes – is highly influential on their advice-seeking behaviour and success. Psychological factors are particularly significant for adolescents.

Low awareness of rights and services is a major barrier

- Young people often lack the critical knowledge of rights necessary to deal with social welfare problems.
- Young people's awareness of structures for advice and the existence of local advice services that could help them is low, particularly amongst those most in need of advice, and renders them less likely to take action to resolve their problems.
- Young people struggle to match the problems they are experiencing to advice agencies' categorisations and often hold misconceptions about what services actually do.

Some young people lack key emotional and practical skills

Young people's ability to resolve their problems can be hampered by

- difficulties identifying that they have a problem that requires advice and when to get help;
- poor verbal communication skills;
- difficulties dealing with the emotional impact that their problems have on their lives;
- a lack of confidence and persistence.

Psychological factors play a highly significant role in young people failing to get advice

- **Disaffection** – Disadvantaged young people with the greatest experience of the legal system often view the law as something to be used against them rather than for their benefit.
- **A sense of powerlessness to resolve their problems** – Not thinking that advice would make any difference to the outcome is the most common reason given by young people in the CSJS for not seeking advice. Other reasons for inaction include: not knowing what to do; feeling that they won't be listened to or will have their problems trivialised by adult professionals; finding their problems too stressful to sort out; being scared of the consequences if they complain.
- **Concerns about confidentiality** – Many young people hold strong concerns about their parents, teachers or friends finding out that they have sought help. Young men and those in lower social grades are particularly concerned about peer attitudes.

10 Shortcomings in service provision and planning

Structural problems with the way services are currently planned and provided impact adversely on young people's access to advice.

Youth organisations can lack the focus, knowledge and skills needed to identify legal issues and provide good-quality advice

A wide range of youth professionals have a vital role to play in assessing and meeting young people's social welfare needs – but many are ill-equipped to do so.

- There is evidence that some Connexions Personal Advisers fail to identify a range of underlying social issues that represent significant barriers to learning and careers.
- Training of youth professionals rarely includes a substantial focus on rights-based issues, such as housing, homelessness, benefits and debt.
- Youth workers often lack confidence to play the crucial advocacy role needed to enable young people to negotiate their way through complex bureaucracies.
- Youth organisations, in a mirror of the experiences of their clients, are often marginalised from mainstream advice sector structures, processes and referral networks.

Statutory services can offer poor access and quality, as well as lacking the ability to advocate independently in young people's best interests

- There is evidence of poor levels of access and service (including poor quality advice) offered by some statutory bodies, including local authorities and JobCentre Plus.
- Young people generally express a preference for getting advice from voluntary organisations, where they tend to find services more approachable and responsive, as well as liking the independence on offer.
- There is anecdotal evidence that, in the transition of Connexions services to local authorities, the capacity of Personal Advisers to provide independent advice has been eroded in many areas.

Mainstream advice agencies are not set up to deal with the range of non-legal issues on which young people also need support

Young people's desire for holistic, age-specific services that can deal with a range of inter-related emotional, personal and health issues, as well as legal problems, poses major challenges to advice services established for the general public.

- Young people can be deterred by advice agencies' intake systems – 'rules' set by agencies on how to contact them; long queues at drop-in sessions; intimidating waiting rooms full of adults; offers of appointments two or three weeks ahead.
- Mainstream advice agencies suffer from an image problem – young people perceive them as unapproachable, stuffy, bureaucratic and old.
- Young people may perceive staff attitudes and skills as not being sensitive to their needs – unwelcoming; judgemental; not listening; and full of jargon.
- There can be a gap between the legal knowledge of advisers and the kinds of advice that young people actually need.

- In practice, many advisers, particularly where they are funded under the current legal aid system, may not have the capacity to attend to young people's wider needs beyond simple legal casework.
- The evidence raises interesting questions about whether the current generation of young people might struggle to connect with services like CABx even when they are older, unless those services are able to better adapt to their needs.

In 2010 Youth Access will be developing guidelines for mainstream advice agencies setting out practical steps that can be taken to improve the quality of access and service offered to young people.

A lack of joined-up policy and planning is stifling development

- There is a distinct lack of any concerted attempt by the relevant government departments to produce a joined-up strategy for addressing young people's access to advice.
- Planning of young people's Information Advice and Guidance services tends to be highly careers-focussed and often overlooks young people's wider social welfare advice needs.
- Young people are not a particular priority for the Community Legal Service and the legal aid system's adult-centred funding models are not conducive to meeting the needs of children and young people.
- Partnerships and referral relationships between youth services and advice services are under-developed.

11 Some implications of the research

- As with financial capability, whose value appears to have been accepted by policy makers, there appears an equal need for **a national strategy to develop**

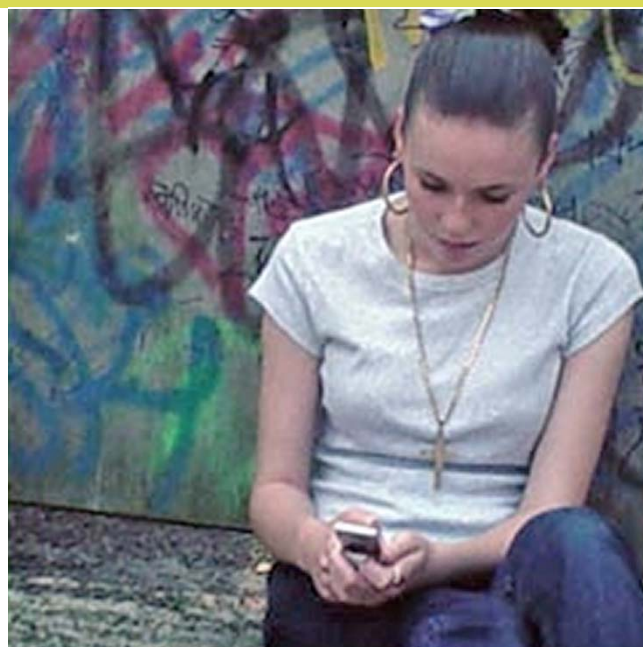
young people's 'legal capability' in order to improve their problem resolution and advice-seeking skills.

- The evidence raises important issues for funders and planners of advice services about what proportion of finite resources to devote to **remote services**, such as telephone and internet, which can reach large numbers of people relatively cheaply, in comparison to **face-to-face** advice services, which may be relatively expensive, but are better placed to conduct in-depth work with disadvantaged young people.
- There is a clear need to **develop the competence of youth professionals** to identify legal problems, provide good quality information and advice within the limits of their competence and make timely referrals to more specialist services.
- There is a case for all front-line staff in **mainstream adult advice agencies to receive basic training** to understand young people's unique needs and behaviour and to develop the specific skills needed to engage and communicate with young people effectively.
- There is considerable scope for youth services and mainstream legal advice services to develop closer **referral relationships and joint services** at local level.
- Given current pressures on public spending, there would appear to be a strong case for **re-focussing legal aid spending** in order to increase investment in 'early intervention' services targeted at young people.
- There is an urgent need for a **joined-up cross-Departmental approach** to the planning and funding of young people's advice services in order to redress systemic failures.
- There may be scope for forward-thinking **local authorities to link their own grants budgets** for advice services with those for Integrated Youth Support Services and youth homelessness services to ensure adequate social welfare advice provision for young people.

Characteristics of an accessible advice service for young people

- Service is independent, impartial, confidential, accountable, professional and free at the point of access/delivery.
- Specialist service for young people – no adult clients.
- Wide range of help available to cater for holistic needs of young people.
- Flexible provision to ensure responsiveness and availability, e.g. evening and weekend opening as well as daytime, ability to respond to emergencies.
- Care taken to ensure the psychological as well as physical access to the service.
- Informal setting to build confidence and respect.
- High level of and respect for right to confidentiality.
- Voluntary participation of users.
- Involvement of young people in design and delivery of service.
- Balance struck between empowerment of clients to make their own choices and decisions and provision of active assistance and advocacy where required to achieve a result.

- 1 *Young People's Access to Advice – The Evidence*, Kenrick, J., Youth Access, 2009.
- 2 These figures have been calculated by Youth Access using data from the 2006-08 Civil and Social Justice Survey. The calculations have been checked by the Legal Services Research Centre and are deemed to under-estimate the extent of young people's unmet needs for advice. For further details of the calculations, see Appendix 1 of companion paper, *The Advice Needs of Young People – The Evidence*, Kenrick, J., Youth Access, 2009.
- 3 Ministry of Justice economists have used CSJS data to estimate that over a three-and-a-half-year research period, unresolved law-related problems cost individuals and the public purse at least £13 billion (DCA 2006).
- 4 Unpublished analysis by the LSRC of data on NEETs aged 18–24 from the 2004 CSJS.
- 5 TheSite.org is particularly notable for its success in delivering information and advice targeted at 16-25 year-olds.
- 6 See *Rights Within Reach: developing effective legal advice outreach services for young people*, Verma, P. and Wilkins, M., Youth Access & Law Centres Federation, 2009.



Copies of the full report, *Young People's Access to Evidence – The Evidence* by James Kenrick, are available from Youth Access or can be downloaded at: www.youthaccess.org.uk/publications

About Youth Access

Youth Access is the national membership organisation for a network of 200 youth information, advice and counselling services.

Through its members, Youth Access is one of the largest providers of youth advice and counselling services in the UK, dealing with over 1 million enquiries a year on issues as diverse as sexual health, mental health, relationships, homelessness, benefits and debt.

Youth Access provides the training, resources, research, campaigning and other infrastructure support to ensure high quality services exist to meet young people's diverse needs.

Youth Access has published a number of reports on advice, covering: young people's needs; advice-seeking behaviour and access; effective models of delivery; the impact of advice. All our reports are available to download from our website.

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