

Unlocking the helpline

An independent analysis and evaluation of
conversations on the Unlock helpline

Final report

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More information

Visit www.unlock.org.uk/helplineevaluation

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Executive summary

- *Unlocking the helpline* is a report that follows an analysis and evaluation of conversations on the Unlock helpline, based on a sample of recorded calls.
- It provides an overview of the service; and a more in-depth analysis of some key conversational features of the calls.
- It shows that most calls to the helpline are from male PWCs, convicted for violence, theft or motoring offences.
- Most are making enquiries about the need to disclose a criminal record, including specific questions about CRB and/or DBS checks.
- The study shows that call-handling primarily entails providing information (in 100% of calls).
- However, two kinds of non-informational help are also commonly offered: advice & encouragement (in more than half of calls); and understanding & empathy (in more than a third of calls).
- Providing advice & encouragement, and understanding and empathy entail mobilisation of an impressive range of strategies, and are reflective of the peer support aspect of the service.
- These kinds of non-informational help also help to fulfil the charity's key aim of empowering callers to move on with their lives.
- Callers are clearly appreciative of the service: around a quarter of calls contain extended praise or thanks, and some of these comments are also suggestive of caller empowerment.
- Overall, the helpline appears extremely effective as a source of information, and it is clearly also providing callers with a significant amount of non-informational support and assistance.
- The study suggests that the helpline as it currently operates provides an effective balance of informational and non-informational assistance to PWC.
- It also suggests that the non-informational assistance draws on, and reflects, the peer support nature of the service.

1. Background

Unlock is a small, independent charity for people with criminal convictions. Its key aim is “to assist people to move on positively with their lives by empowering them with information, advice and support to overcome the stigma of their previous convictions” (www.unlock.org.uk). Its telephone helpline is one of a range of services provided by the charity - including an Information Hub, Disclosure Calculator, Online Forum and Magazine. The helpline offers confidential peer advice to people with convictions. Its stated commitment is to provide “accurate, reliable, honest and non-judgemental advice from people who can understand where you’re coming from” (www.unlock.org.uk).

2. Overview of the study

This study is an analysis and evaluation of conversations on the Unlock helpline, based on a sample of recorded calls. It provides an overview of the service; and a more in-depth analysis of some key conversational features of the calls. It highlights what is done particularly well and offers some pointers towards what could possibly be improved.

3. Method

The study was designed in consultation with the stakeholders – key staff at Unlock - and approved by the Loughborough University Ethical Advisory Committee. Two helpline call-takers from Unlock recorded a sample of their calls during the period March-July 2014, with informed consent from callers. (The original aim was to include three call-takers – this proved not possible for logistical reasons.) Call-taker A recorded 116 calls; call-taker B recorded 89 calls, so the analysis is based on a total sample of 205 calls. Very few callers refused consent to record their calls. The sample of calls recorded is opportunistic rather than representative of all calls received during the five-month data collection period, as call-takers either did not record or limited their recording at times when they were particularly busy; also, short-term volunteers working on the helpline did not record any calls. All calls were fully transcribed and anonymised prior to analysis. An interim report was produced and discussed with the stakeholders in February 2015 - these discussions informed the final decisions about what to analyse (see below).

Coding of the calls for analysis

An initial coding frame was developed by Sue Wilkinson (SW) on the first 51 calls recorded (i.e. 25% of the sample), across the two call-takers. This was refined in discussion with the stakeholders, and the final coding frame was then used to code the entire sample of 205 calls.

Fourteen variables were coded systematically, as follows, in order to provide a basis for analysis:

- (i) Status of call (direct or call-back)
- (ii) Calling for self or other?
- (iii) Sex of caller
- (iv) Geographical location of caller (if given)
- (v) Status of caller (PWC or other)
- (vi) Custodial sentence?
- (vii) Number and nature of offence(s)
- (viii) Number and nature of enquiries
- (ix) Nature of help provided – information
- (x) Nature of help provided – other than information
- (xi) Managing expectations
- (xii) Praise and thanks
- (xiii) Other points of interest
- (xiv) Calls handled particularly well, or less well

Further details of the coding frame are provided in **Appendix 1**.

Coding was undertaken by an expert coder, with substantial experience in analysing interactional data. She listened to the recording in conjunction with reading the transcript for each call (and making any necessary corrections). While listening, she systematically recorded information about each of the fourteen variables on the first page of a spreadsheet, and further explanatory and additional notes about each call on the second page of the spreadsheet.

Analysis consisted of a content analysis of the first page of the spreadsheet; and both thematic and conversation analysis of selected aspects of the second page of the spreadsheet. The content analysis provides an overview of the helpline service (Part 1 of the Results section); and the thematic and conversation analysis provides a more in-depth qualitative analysis of some key features of the calls (Part 2 of the Results section).

4. Results

Results Part 1 - Overview of the helpline

This part of the Results section provides an overview of the helpline service in mid-2014. It is based on a statistical summary of the first 12 of the variables listed above. This summary includes information about the demographic characteristics of the calls and the callers; and the content and handling of the calls.

Status of the call

Calls were coded according to whether they were taken directly as they came in; or whether they were call-backs following call recording on the helpline answerphone. Thirty of the calls were taken as they came in; and four were call-backs. Because the very beginning of the calls – before permission to record was obtained – was not recorded, it was not possible to ascertain the status of the remaining calls.

Who the call is for (self or other)

Calls were coded according to whether the caller was calling on his/her own behalf, or on behalf of someone else. The majority of callers (N=169; 82%) were calling on their own behalf, with 31 (15%) calling on behalf of someone else. It was not possible to tell who the call was for in the remaining calls.

Sex of caller

Two-thirds of the callers (N=135; 66%) were male; one-third female (N=70; 34%). Sex determination was made by the coder on the basis of name (if given), and/or vocal characteristics.

Geographical location of caller

The caller's geographical location was only ascertainable if they gave an address - which they did in only 48 (24%) of the calls. All but one of these callers were UK-based. Geographical location was coded into: London/SE England (N=11); elsewhere in England (N=18); and elsewhere in UK (N=19).

Status of the caller

The majority of callers (N=163; 66%) were persons with convictions (PWCs) – and in two cases they had a conviction pending. Fifteen callers (7%) were friends or family members of PWCs; and fourteen (7%) were institutional callers. One caller was a family member of a PWC, and also a PWC himself; one was an institutional caller and also a PWC. It was not possible to determine the status of the caller in 11 cases.

Custodial sentence

Around a quarter of callers (N=55; 27%) had received a custodial sentence; and around half (N=96; 47%) had not. In the remaining cases, it was not possible to tell.

Number and nature of offence(s)

Around a quarter of callers (N=56; 27%) reported no specific offences – or the nature of their offence(s) was unclear. The majority of callers (N=127; 62%) reported just one offence; sixteen (8%) reported two offences; and six (3%) reported three or more offences. In total, 173 discrete offences were reported.

The following table (**Table 1**) classifies these offences into seven main categories (plus an 'other' category). For a fuller characterisation of each category, see the coding key in **Appendix 1**.

The table also shows the frequency of offences reported in each category (listed in descending order). The most frequently reported offences were violence (including ABH and GBH); theft (including shoplifting and burglary); and motoring offences.

Table 1: Nature of offences reported

Category	No.	%
Violence	37	21
Theft	30	17
Motoring	24	14
Sexual	15	9
Drug-related	14	8
Fraud	14	8
Criminal damage	6	4
Other	33	19

Number and nature of enquiries

The majority of callers (N=143; 70%) made just one enquiry in the course of the call; however 51 callers (25%) made two distinct enquiries; and 11 callers (5%) made three or more distinct enquiries in the course of a single phone call. In total, 249 discrete enquiries were made.

The following table (**Table 2**) classifies these enquiries into six main categories - on the basis of frequency - and 5 further categories (plus an 'other' category). For a fuller characterisation of each category, see the coding key in **Appendix 1**.

The table also shows the frequency of enquiries in each category (listed in descending order). The most common kinds of enquiry were general questions about the need to disclose a criminal record, and specific questions about Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) and/or Disclosure and Banning Service (DBS) checks. In addition, 31 of the 51 callers who made two enquires asked both about disclosure in general and about CRB/DBS checks in particular.

Table 2: Nature of enquiries made

Category	No.	%
Disclosure of criminal record (only)	69	34
CRB and/or DBS checks (only)	49	24
Disclosure record + CRB/DBS checks	31	15
Insurance	27	13
Paid employment	18	9
Travel	12	6
Voluntary work	5	
Finance	5	
Immigration	5	10% in total
Working overseas	4	
Education and training	2	
Other	22	11

Nature of help provided - Information

The kind of help provided by call-takers was coded under two main headings: 'Information' (reported in this sub-section) and 'Other than information' (reported in the following sub-section).

All of the calls in the sample involved the call-taker in providing information to the caller. This informational help was provided in a number of different ways, (and sometimes in more than one way during the course of the call). The vast majority of calls (N=197; 96%) involved providing information there and then; 42 calls (21%) involved directing the caller to the Unlock website; 26 (13%) involved an offer to

send information to the caller; and 7 (3%) involved an offer to look up information and get back to the caller. The majority of calls (N=149; 73%) involved just one of these types of information-provision; 50 (24%) involved two, and 6 (3%) involved three or more.

Nature of help provided – Other than information

Around two-thirds of the calls (N=130; 63%) also involved providing help other than information (and sometimes more than one other type of help during the course of a call). Other types of help were: providing advice and suggestions (N=108; 53% of calls); displaying understanding and empathy (N=67; 33%); and offering support (N=7; 3%). Of these 130 calls containing non-informational types of help, 80 (62%) involved one non-informational type of help; 48 (37%) two types; and 2 (1%) three or more types.

More detailed analysis of the nature of the non-informational help provided is included in Part 2 of the Results section.

Managing expectations

It was sometimes necessary for the call-taker to manage the expectations of the caller by offering information about the charity and its activities. Management of caller expectations was present in 38 (19%) of the calls.

Praise and thanks

Most of the calls ended with the caller thanking the call-taker for his/her help. However, nearly a quarter (N=43; 21%) contained elaborate or extended thanks, and/or spontaneous praise or compliments for the charity and its services. This is examined further in Part 2 below (see also **Appendix 2**).

Results Part 2 - Key features of the calls

This part of the Results section provides a more in-depth analysis of key conversational features of the calls. It is based on thematic and conversation analysis, and looks in turn at:

- (i) Praise and thanks offered by the caller
- (ii) Non-informational help provided by call-taker:
 - Advice and encouragement
 - Understanding and empathy
- (iii) Good – and less good – call-handling

(i) Praise and thanks offered by the caller

Elaborate or extended thanks from callers, together with spontaneous praise for or compliments on the helpline service provided, are one valuable index of its effectiveness. **Appendix 2** shows a selection of instances of extended thanks, and spontaneous praise/compliments.

Callers' positive assessments include:

- "very helpful"
- "really helpful"
- "great"
- "fantastic"
- "lovely"
- "absolutely fantastic"
- "fab"
- "brilliant" (multiple times)

They say (for example):

- "I really appreciate all your help"
- "You've been really helpful. I can't thank you enough"
- "Thank you for all you did"
- "You've been brilliant"
- "You've made my morning"
- "You've made my smile a little bit bigger".

And more generally, they say:

- "You're doing a great job"
- "All of the work you've done is fantastic"
- "You do an excellent job".

Across these examples of praise and thanks, recurring comments from callers suggest:

- (a) That Unlock has proved much more helpful than other organisations contacted for information: e.g. they specifically mention the DBS service, the Metropolitan police, and Citizen's Advice.

(b) That callers have felt 'reassured' or 'relieved' of their anxieties. They say, for example:

- "Oh that's a weight off me sh- mind"
- "It's just that word of reassurance"
- "That is a big relief"
- "You've really put my mind at rest";
- "My worries for it is kind of fading away a little bit"
- "You've put my mind at ease"
- "That's a big relief really now"
- "Well it's just I've got peace of mind now"
- "Well that's a relief anyway"
- "Well that's put my mind at rest".

(c) That, through the information provided (or confirmed), callers have gained in 'confidence' to tackle their problems. They say, for example:

- "Okay, that's my question answered"
- "That's what I thought, but it's nice to hear you say that"
- "Gives me a better idea of what I need to say and what I don't need to say"
- "You've given me bit more confidence"
- "I feel like I can just go somewhere now, if that's all it takes"
- "... before I wasn't quite sure. So it's really helpful to have you say that."
- "That's given me a lot more confidence".

Offering reassurance and boosting confidence fit well with Unlock's aim of empowerment of PWCs (as does the non-informational help provided by the call-taker – see below).

(ii) Non-informational help provided by call-taker

While all calls involved providing information, more than half also involved providing other kinds of (non-informational) help, as noted in Part 1 of the Results. In discussion of the preliminary report on this study, the stakeholders expressed a particular interest in a more detailed examination of this aspect of the helpline. The further analysis presented here focuses on two key aspects of non-informational help: advice & encouragement; and understanding & empathy.

Advice and encouragement

Call-takers offer advice and encouragement in more than half of the calls – in line with the stated commitment of the helpline. The range of ways in which they do this is impressive, suggesting considerable experience of what is likely to be effective, as well as awareness of, and sensitivity to, callers' needs.

Only occasionally do call-takers explicitly preface their suggestions with phrases such as “My advice to you is ...” or “I’m advising you to ...”. Much more commonly, they offer more tentatively framed suggestions, typically using conditionals (“would”, “might”): as in, for example:

- “I would say ...”;
- “What I would say to you is ...”
- “You might want to try ...”
- “You might want to consider ...”.

They also often use minimisers, such “just” or “only”: as in, for example:

- “I would just suggest ...”
- “I would just keep an eye out”
- “The only thing I would say is ...”
- “The only other thing to consider is ...”.

Other common strategies are for the call-taker to offer advice purportedly based on what s/he would do in the caller's situation (e.g. prefacing suggestions with “If I were you ...”, or “If I were in your shoes ...”); or to suggest that the organisation regularly offers this kind of advice (e.g. prefacing suggestions with “We often say to people ...”, or “We usually find ...”). All of these strategies are designed to minimise advice-resistance (Hepburn and Potter, 2011), and their use is highly-skilled.

Conversation analysts (e.g. Emmison and Firth, 2012) have documented some of the ways in which advice-giving practices on telephone helplines can reflect their institutional remit and guiding policies. Unlock undertakes to provide advice to people with convictions in the context of empowering them to overcome the stigma of conviction and ‘move on’ with their lives. This undertaking is apparent in several of the ways in which advice is given – often making it seem more akin to encouragement.

One way call-takers provide encouragement is by minimising what is needed in order to ‘move on’ – for example, they say:

- “I would just take the one prudent step ...”

- "All you need to do is just, you know, sort of sell yourself ..."

Another is by suggesting that the caller has *already* 'moved on':

- "By the sounds of it, things are really different now."

- "You're in a different place now and hopefully, you know, doing quite well in your current job and that's all going well."

Callers who sound discouraged or defeated may be given an upbeat direct injunction - e.g.:

- "Give it a go"

- "Stick to your guns"

- "Don't let him give up"

- "Don't just wait for that to happen"

- "Don't let it stop you from putting yourself forward for this".

And, in general, call-takers promote positive thinking and discourage negative thinking:

Caller: So there's a light to see in these things?

Call-taker: There is- well there is- that is a bit of light.
There's a LOT of light.

Call-taker: "You know, I would say to you [name], don't- don't even listen to anybody that says 'No you can't do that. You won't be able to get a job there'. If-, you know, if you want it badly enough, you will find a way of selling yourself to an employer and getting that job. And that's all it is. It's just proving to an employer that you're not- you, you're not going to put them at any risk. ... That's all you've got to do."

Notice that in this second example the call-taker also minimises what is needed in getting a job as "that's all it is" and "that's all you've got to do".

In many instances, the advice offered – and the way in which it is offered - is specifically tailored to the caller and his/her individual situation or particular needs - this is known in the conversation analytic literature as 'recipient design' (Wilkinson, 2011). One strategy is particularly useful to call-takers, insofar as it allows them to maximise recipient design, and has also been shown to help overcome advice-resistance.

It is called a 'script proposal' (Emmison, Butler and Danby, 2011). This involves giving a caller an example of what they might say in a given situation (in effect, a 'script' they might follow).

In the two examples below, both concerning disclosure of offences, the call-taker uses a script proposal to 'model' what the caller might say about a previous conviction, in the situation he or she is currently in: applying for a job, and applying for a University course, respectively. The script is presented in direct reported speech - i.e. as if the caller were speaking. (In each case, "it" refers to the caller's previous conviction.)

(In talking to a potential employer)

Call-taker: "If you disclosed it to them and said in an interview, 'That happened to me then. Obviously I was much younger. If I was in the same position again, I would take a very different course of action'."

(In talking to a University admissions office)

Call-taker: "It's gonna show up at the time you're doing your course, but you can very much say to a Uni, 'Yeah, I understand it's there now, but moving on, it's not going to prevent me from working'."

In each case, the proposed script is designed to minimise the importance of past offences in the present and/or future.

Here is one more example of a script proposal in which the call-taker models how the caller should be *thinking*. In effect, this is a script proposal for how he might talk positively to himself:

Call-taker: "But the fact remains that you've got a choice right now. You can either let the past experiences of yours determine your future direction ... The alternative view is, you say to yourself, 'Look, I know I've got these convictions and they're going to come up and I don't think that's right that they should come up and I think they are that old that they're not relevant. But you know what, I can do those jobs that involve enhanced checks. Yes I might get knocked back. Yes I'll probably find a few people look at me a bit funny when I start saying this and they might treat me a bit differently, but at the end of the day I think I can do the job, so I'm going to put myself in front of them and see what they say.' "

These are very skilled techniques, combining specific advice-giving with general encouragement to move forward in life.

Understanding and empathy

In around a third of the calls, call-takers display understanding and empathy, in addition to providing information. Again, the range of ways in which call-takers are able to do this is impressive, and again it reflects the ethos of the organisation: in this case, its aim to provide peer support (as distinct from peer advice), in the service of empowerment.

One way of expressing an understanding of a caller's situation is to say something like: "I understand what you're saying", "I fully understand the issue that you're having", or "I understand entirely the problem" – and the Unlock call-takers frequently do this. In addition – and understandably, given that the helpline is advertised as staffed by "people who can understand where you're coming from" – one call-taker frequently says something like: "I get where you're coming from", "I understand exactly where you're coming from", "I can absolutely understand where you're coming from". However, conversation analysts – from founder Harvey Sacks onwards – make an important distinction between *claiming* understanding and *showing* understanding (e.g. Sacks, 1995, Vol. 2: 141-2). The utterances above *claim* an understanding of the caller's situation, whereas it can be more powerfully supportive to *show* an understanding – which the call-takers also do. This distinction links nicely with contemporary understandings of effective clinical empathy – as consisting not only of the ability to *understand* someone's situation, perspective and feelings, but also the ability to *communicate* that understanding to them (Coulehan et al, 2001: 222).

The call-takers *show* understanding – and so effectively display empathy – in a variety of ways:

Naming how caller is (or is likely to be) feeling

One way of showing an empathetic understanding of the situation someone is in is to give a name to what they are feeling, or likely to be feeling (Pudlinski, 2005). So, for example, call-takers say things like:

- "This probab- quite understandably feels like a bit of a blow to you now."
- "It's hard to talk about your convictions."
- "You've obviously had a really bad experience."
- "Clearly you are going to worry."
- "It's not knowing that makes you very anxious and very worried."
- "Where you find yourself then ... is quite a lonely place in the world."
- "The feeling I get is that it might be a bit of a concern to you to travel without going through the proper processes."
- "It is hard and it is demotivating."
- "It's a bit of a difficult cycle when you're knackered and you need to do some job searching, isn't it."

This kind of response shows not only that the call-taker is listening, but that he or she can put themselves 'in the other person's shoes'. Call-takers clearly draw on their personal and professional experience in order to be able to do this.

Occasionally, call-takers offer a reformulation of what the caller's situation 'must be' – e.g.:

- "So all you want to do is just finish this Order and then get on with your life by the sound of it."
- "Well I mean by the sounds of it for you it's just a job that you can start again and that you know is gonna be sort of regular work."

Again, this shows a substantial degree of understanding and empathy.

Reacting to the caller's situation/feelings

An alternative way of showing understanding of a caller's situation is actually to *react* to their presentation of it. A 'reaction token' (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2006) - such as 'Oh no', or 'Oh God' - is essentially a little performance of surprise, horror, dismay, or other emotion - and can be a very powerful indication of empathic understanding. Here are three examples:

Caller: This licence is costing me three grand a week.
Call-taker: Ohh my good(h)ness!

(In response to hearing caller is about to lose his job due to misunderstanding disclosure rules)
Call-taker: God, what a mess!

(Talking about the way motoring offences accumulate)
Caller: It's a bit of a joke really, isn't it?
Call-taker: Yeah. Oh God! Trust me, we know!

Across the literature on telephone helplines, there is an emphasis on call-taker neutrality, together with an analysis of how this neutrality is achieved, how difficult it is to achieve, and how (often) it breaks down (e.g. Emmison and Danby, 2007; Hepburn, Wilkinson and Butler, 2014). However, the Unlock helpline is relatively unusual in that the call-takers do not strive for neutrality: rather one of its 'hallmarks' is the degree of understanding and empathy that is displayed by the call-takers, as part of the process of providing non-informational help and support for callers. Uttering a reaction token is very far from being neutral!

Normalising the caller's situation/feelings

Another strategy call-takers use in displaying understanding and empathy is to indicate that the caller's situation/feelings are not unusual, but something they (as call-takers) encounter frequently, and that is typical of PWCs more generally. They say, for instance:

- "I think a lot of people in your position now, feel inclined to just avoid those types of jobs."

- "You know for anybody that's got any sort of cautions or convictions, the whole sort of issue around disclosure and the whole thing about 'Oh, how is it gonna affect me' is obviously gonna make anybody anxious."

- (Caller has said s/he's "angry and anxious and really kind of upset".)
"A lot of people do find themselves in that situation. They feel a little bit sort of screwed over by the system."

- "People in your position will understandably get a bit wary, and a bit lacking in confidence when you ask- when you see questions that say you must disclose all convictions."

- "There is so many people that we speak to, [name], that experience that."

In normalising a caller's situation/feelings, call-takers rely on on their *professional* experience of talking to PWCs. While their own personal experience may also underpin what they say, very rarely do they explicitly refer to it. Here is one exception (in which the call-taker talks about feeling guilty enough to make a false confession in certain circumstances):

- "I'd, you know, I would probably confess to murdering JFK if I had some burly officer in front of me."

Occasionally, call-takers use an inclusive "we" to link their own and the caller's experience:

- "And I think we've all done it, you know, you're definitely not the only one there at all."

- "I think we're all sort of- in the nicest possible way, guilty of being a bit paranoid when we're waiting for information to come through."

And, just once, a call-taker uses an inclusive "we" to make explicit reference to the peer support aspect of the helpline:

- "We understand that ourselves because everybody that's on this helpline has convictions."

Compliments and affirmations

Call-takers also sometimes compliment the caller on what they have done, or affirm their actions as 'the right thing' to have done – e.g.

- "I think the stuff you've done will put you in good stead and move your career further."
- "You've done absolutely the right thing."
- "I think you've done exactly what anybody would have advised you to do."
- "I think you're absolutely right to do that."
- "Good on you. That's fantastic. Really nice to hear that, you know, somebody has done such great stuff."
- "It sounds like you've got quite a good understanding anyway, to be honest."

This practice was first noted on a (home birth) helpline by Shaw and Kitzinger (2012), who suggested that it is a technique used by call-takers to empower the caller to action. Again, this is precisely what Unlock is aiming to do.

All of these different ways of expressing understanding and empathy with callers contribute to the substantial amount of (non-informational) help and support that is offered on the helpline.

(iii) Good – and less good – call-handling:

The two Results sections above – on 'Advice & encouragement' and on 'Understanding & empathy' have documented many instances of good call-handling on the part of both call-takers. This final Results section will briefly highlight some other practices – both good, and less good - seen in specific calls from each call-taker.

The - very experienced - coder made brief notes on call-handling practices for any calls she felt were handled particularly well, and also any calls where she identified problems. There were many instances of good practice, and relatively few calls (around 20 in total, across the two call-takers) were identified as containing instances of less good practice.

For call-taker A, instances of good practice included:

- Carefully breaking down a series of events and not allowing the caller to get carried away with repeating things (A17)
- Moving the call along effectively (A24; A29)
- Effective and appropriate use of humour (A25)
- Offering a call-back (several calls)

For call-taker B, instances of good practice included:

- Effective and appropriate use of humour (B2)
- Careful phrasing: juxtaposing good and bad news (B6)
- Offering a personal call-back (B7, B66)
- Showing 'kindness' (several calls)

For call-taker A, instances of less good practice included:

- Too much reliance on 'stock phrase' "I understand where you're coming from" (several calls)
- Sometimes could offer more support and advice (A67)
- Sometimes misses (or decides to ignore) emotional cues (A77)

For call-taker B, instances of less good practice included:

- Directs callers to website/calculator too readily (several calls)
- Manages expectations too strongly – emphasis on what Unlock CAN'T provide rather than what it CAN (several calls)
- Sometimes asks callers for information too soon – i.e. 'out of place' in call (B2, B21)
- Sometimes misses (or decides to ignore) emotional cues (B7, B12)
- Sometimes tends to be condescending, assumes no knowledge (B58, B64)
- Sometimes reveals own frustrations (B100)

These instances of less good practice constitute areas for possible improvement. However, they are sufficiently infrequent not to detract from the high quality of the service provided overall.

5. Concluding comments

This analysis and evaluation of the Unlock helpline has provided an overview of the service; and a more in-depth analysis of some key conversational features of the calls. It has shown that most calls to the helpline are from male PWCs, convicted for violence, theft or motoring offences. Most are making enquiries about the need to disclose a criminal record, including specific questions about CRB and/or DBS checks. It is likely that the large number of requests about disclosure and record checking relates to the timing of the study: just after changes to the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act.

The study has shown that call-handling primarily entails providing information (in 100% of calls), but that two kinds of non-informational help are also commonly offered. Advice & encouragement are provided in more than half of calls; and understanding & empathy in more than a third. Both of these entail mobilisation of an impressive range of strategies, and are reflective of the peer support aspect of the service. These kinds of non-informational help also help to fulfil the charity's key aim of empowering callers to move on with their lives. Callers are clearly appreciative of the service: around a quarter of calls contain extended praise or thanks, and some of these comments (about reassurance and confidence) are also suggestive of caller empowerment.

Overall, the helpline appears extremely effective as a source of information, and it is clearly also providing callers with a significant amount of non-informational support and assistance. This kind of support and assistance draws on, and reflects, the peer support nature of the service. It would, of course, be possible for Unlock to develop and extend this aspect of its service, but the present study suggests that the helpline as it currently operates provides an effective balance of informational and non-informational assistance to PWCs.

One final point for reflection: The helpline is not currently flagged up on the home page of the Unlock website. Is this because – as it says elsewhere on the website – it is intended to be ‘a service of last resort’? If so, should it continue to be viewed in this way – or might it become more prominent among the range of services offered by Unlock, particularly in the light of this very positive evaluation?

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Biographical Note

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Appendix 1 - 'Unlock' helpline calls – final coding key

Spreadsheet Page 1 – Basic coding

1. Status of call:

- Call taken as comes in (C)
- Call-back from message on ansaphone (CB)

2. Calling for self or other? (S/O)

3. Caller gender (M/F/DK)

4. Caller geographical location (if given):

- England – London or SE England (E/S)
- Elsewhere in England (E)
- Elsewhere in UK (UK)
- Outside UK (O)
- DK

5. Status of caller

- Person with conviction (PWC) – includes cautions & reprimands
- Person with conviction pending (PWCP)
- Friend or family member of PWC (F)
- Institutional caller (I)

6. Custodial sentence (ie prison)? (Y/N/DK)

Apply either to caller, or to person under discussion

7. Nature of offence:

If more than one offence, list in same column

- Drug-related (D)
- Motoring offences (e.g. drunk driving, speeding) (M)
- Theft/shoplifting/burglary (T)
- Fraud/money laundering (F)
- Sexual offences (S)
- Child-related (C)

- Assault/battery/ABH (actual bodily harm)/GBH (grievous bodily harm) (AB)
- Criminal damage (CD)
- Other (O)

8. Nature of enquiry:

If more than one, list in same column

- Paid employment (PE)
 - Voluntary work (VW)
 - Education/training (ET)
 - Qs about need to disclose criminal record; spent/unspent convictions (inc. how to calculate); changes to RoA (Rehabilitation of Offenders) Act (DISC)
 - Qs specific to CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) or DRB (Disclosure & Banning Service) checks (CHK)
- If both DISC and CHK, list both
- Finance (F)
 - Insurance (I)
 - Travel (T)
 - Working overseas (WO)
 - Immigration (IM)
 - Other (O)

9. Nature of help provided by call-taker: Information

- Provides information (there and then) (PI)
- Directs to Unlock website (WEB)
- Offers to send info (SEND)
- Offers to get back to caller with info (CB)
- Other (O)

10. Nature of help provided by call-taker: Other than information

- Advice + suggestions (AD)
 - Support (SUP)
 - Displays understanding/empathy (UE)
 - Other (O)
- *(Keep some notes on these) SEE NOTES 1 BELOW

11. Managing expectations:

Call-taker provides info about the charity and what it does (ME)

12. Praise and thanks:

Caller praises/compliments charity/helpline; &/or gives more than standard 'thank you' (PT)

*(Also collect these) SEE NOTES 2 BELOW

13. Other points of interest:

OI

*(Keep some notes on these) SEE NOTES 3 BELOW

14. Calls handled partic. well or less well

PW/LW

*(Keep some notes on these) SEE NOTES 4 BELOW

Spreadsheet Page 2 – Additional notes

***Nature of help provided by call-taker: Other than info: - expanded (NOTES 1)**

- Advice + suggestions (AD)
- Support (SUP)
- Displays understanding/empathy (UE)
- Other (O)

***Praise and thanks: - expanded: (NOTES 2)**

Caller praises/compliments charity/helpline; &/or gives more than standard 'thank you' (PT)

***Other (misc): (NOTES 3)**

- OI
- Other points of interest

***Calls handled partic well or less well (NOTES 4)**

PW/LW

Make a note of why (of possible use for feedback purposes).

Note diffs between the 2 call-takers.

Appendix 2 - Examples of extended thanks, praise and compliments

"I appreciate your advice."

"That's very helpful. Thank you very much indeed."

"Brilliant. Brilliant that's excellent news. Okay that's my question answered."

"That's what I thought but it's nice to hear you say that."

(About spent conviction calculator, in particular)

"That's very clever, I bet that took hours to make

I'm well impressed with that. I think that should be more publicised

I'm so impressed. The solicitors couldn't give me an answer...It's probably the best thing for offenders I've heard of in a very long time. Very long time."

"Oh that's great. Oh that's a weight off me sh- mind."

"It's just that word of reassurance. Because some places, the information because it's so wordy and the terminology is so unclear..."

"Thank you very much for your- for your help. I called the DBS service but they were just so, he wasn't sure about what he was saying and he couldn't really reassure anything or really like, give any suggestions. "

"Okay, well that clears up a bit anyway. Just gives me a better idea of what I need to say and what I don't need to say."

(After saying she read about upcoming changes to the ROI Act)

"Yes, and thank you very much for making it happen.

But thank you for all you did. Thanks for all your help. And thank you for helping me out right now as well."

"Thank you so much for your time mate. Just- you know, you've given me a few things to think about and, certainly it was great having a conversation with you about this."

"So as I say, all of the work you've done is fantastic. It's made a big difference to me."

"I read on your site, which is very helpful by the way..."

"Lovely, I do REALLY appreciate your time."

"Okay lovely. Great. Thanks for your help. It was very um interesting and very informal, er very informative. Thank you very much."

"Oh that is so fantastic."

"You sounded much surer than the last person I asked about this. ...That is fantastic, That is a big relief."

"Right. You've made my morning. Hah! I don't know what your name is but that's great news."

"Your website's very very helpful."

"That's put my mind at rest a bit."

"Thank you very much, you've really put my mind at rest."

"But I'm quite confident in what you say, I'm a very- heh, that you've actually given me the information that I required."

"You've given me a bit more confidence."

"Oh that's absolutely fantastic news, thank you very much indeed for that. That's brilliant."

"Well you're doing a great job and I greatly appreciate you getting back to me because, um, the Metropolitan police are no help at all, as regards to it."

"I found your website very useful"

"You've made my smile a little bit bigger, and you know, my worries, you know my worries for it is kind of fading away a little bit."

"Right. Thanks. I feel a bit better now actually. I feel like I can just go somewhere now, if that's all it takes, just a little bit of explaining."

"But I do feel better now that I've had a talk to you and even Citizen's Advice because even she said, just go for it, and I said I don't want to waste me energy."

"Brilliant. Brilliant. Well thank you very much. You've put my mind at ease."

"Well, you've been brilliant [name]."

"Oh that's brilliant. Thank you. I appreciate that. That's a big relief really now."

"Well, keep up the good work, okay?"

"I mean, you've- you've sort of helped me out a lot just- just answering that."

"It's been brilliant. Well it's just I've got peace of mind now that I don't have to say anything, whereas before I wasn't quite sure. So it's really helpful to have you say that. ...And I really appreciate and it's really nice talking to you."

"Well that's a relief anyway. Well great. Thank you very, very much. You've been really helpful. I can't thank you enough."

"Thanks a lot for your information because it's been quite in fact really helpful."

"Alright, well do you know what, That's given me a lot more confidence

"That- that's brilliant

"But thanks a lot you do an excellent job, take care."

"Oh that's fab. Alright. I really appreciate that. That's great."

"I just appreciate your help. You've helped me a lot, thank you."

"Well that's put my mind at rest at least about jobs in this country. ...I really appreciate all your help. Thank you so much."

"That's brilliant. No, thank you very much. Listen I can't thank you enough."

About Unlock

Unlock is an independent, award-winning charity for people with convictions which exists for two simple reasons. Firstly, we assist people to move on positively with their lives by empowering them with information, advice and support to overcome the stigma of their previous convictions. Secondly, we seek to promote a fairer and more inclusive society by challenging discriminatory practices and promoting socially just alternatives.

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