



Sedgemoor

# READ ALL ABOUT IT

A Study of Literacy and Numeracy Issues  
in the Lives of our Clients

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*By  
the Research and Campaigns Team  
of  
Citizens Advice Sedgemoor*

## Foreword

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Just over a year ago, we decided to explore what part literacy and numeracy issues played in the problems in the lives of our clients.

We set out to find evidence of the problem and to quantify it - and here it is.

About half of our clients have some sort of problem with “official correspondence”.

*The number one problem in today’s generation and economy is the lack of financial literacy (Alan Greenspan – speech “Economic Development and Financial Literacy” 2002).*

One of our clients has a predicament that illustrates several aspects of this:

### **Case 1:**

*This is a client that returns to us frequently (10 occasions at the time of writing).*

*Advisers would say that he is challenging and requires additional time and patience to try and communicate with him effectively.*

*He says he has learning difficulties, speaks of dyslexia and that he can't hold information in his head, he just can't remember.*

*He has applied for benefits but is categorised as Fit for Work. He is currently working in refuse collection, but he has a history of problems with employment.*

*From time to time he claims Jobseekers Allowance but this is not easy for him.*

*He says that he has always had problems with reading, but his problems worsened significantly after a 2007 accident. He fell off a roof while working and he suffered brain damage.*

*The client needed specialist housing and money advice which was not immediately available so we tried to arrange an appointment. However, he doesn't read, and he says that he can't remember things. An appointment was made, but he failed to turn up.*

Appendix B contains six case studies from our research, and they make interesting reading.



**Sedgemoor**

We have formed partnerships with some of the organisations that help and support individuals improve their skills and abilities.

We can encourage and facilitate our clients to improve their skills and we can make sure that we write simple letters in plain English, communicating with them appropriately. These things will help our clients, raise awareness with organisations that correspond with our clients and contribute to the local economy.

We now need to raise awareness of the problem among those who write “official correspondence” – they could help by keeping it simple and using plain English.

**Amy Jones** - Chief Executive of Citizens Advice Sedgemoor  
July 2017



**Sedgemoor**

# Citizens Advice Sedgemoor

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*Citizens Advice Sedgemoor is a registered charity. It is part of a Citizens Advice service which operates at 2700 locations in England and Wales to provide advice which is free, confidential, independent and impartial.*

*The service helped 2.7 million people face to face, over the phone, by email and webchat in 2016-17 with the help of 23,000 volunteers.*

*Twin aims of the service are:*

- *To provide advice people need for the problems they face*
- *To improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives.*

*Each local Citizens Advice is an independent charity, giving advice on a wide range of issues including debt, benefits, consumer and employment.*

*Citizens Advice Sedgemoor consists of 12 paid staff and about 35 volunteers.*

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## LITERACY AND NUMERACY ISSUES IN THE LIVES OF OUR CLIENTS:

### A BRIEFING FOR THE BUSY READER

53% of our clients reported having some degree of difficulty with “official correspondence” – in terms of reading, writing, numbers and/or IT literacy. 13.81% reported difficulty in all three areas. 27.82% of clients reported some degree of difficulty with reading and/or writing.

By official correspondence we mean the correspondence from branches of government, such as the Department of Work and Pensions, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and local authorities as well as from corporations, such as Estate Agents, landlords, banks and solicitors.

12% of our clients reported that they had been diagnosed as dyslexic. While this suggests a baseline minimum, we suggest that it is not very helpful in understanding the scale of the problems.

7% of our clients reported that English is not their first language. Of these, more than a third reported having problems handling “official correspondence”.

8% of clients told us that the problem of reading, writing, numbers or IT literacy had caused them to seek advice. This was less than we expected.

Clients with some degree of difficulty were from all age groups. The average age of those experiencing difficulty with IT was only very slightly higher than the average age of people responding to our survey. One of our clients reported a problem that had developed with illness in later life, but none of our clients explicitly referred to dementia. Age does not seem to be a significant factor.

#### *What Can Be Done About It?*

People experiencing problems with “official correspondence” can be encouraged to improve their skills. Or to ask for help – assured by the fact that they are not unusual. Worst of all is to put off the problem for another day when you receive a difficult letter. We have formed a partnership with LearnDirect to offer help; and we are aware that the Taunton Association for the Homeless offers excellent support.

Those who write official letters can be encouraged to think of the audience – to consider alternative forms or supplementary ways of communication: to telephone instead/as well. We commend the work of the Plain English Campaign and we urge writers to write in simple and direct language, using short sentences and avoiding long words.

### *The Benefits of Doing Something*

- Improving the skills of individuals is likely to bring them massive benefits in all parts of their lives. Not least in their ability to handle “official correspondence”.
- Improving literacy (and numeracy and IT literacy) is likely to have a positive effect on the economy locally and nationally.
- As individuals improve their skills and increase their abilities, and/or as organisations respond to the problem as they send “official correspondence” this is likely to have a positive effect on an individual’s financial capability.
- The welfare benefits system relies on “official correspondence” – and on the ability of the recipient to handle it. Improving this relationship seems likely to yield a massive improvement in efficiency. For example, we think that a massive reduction in sanctions would follow a more empathetic approach to correspondence.
- The tax system also relies on “official correspondence” – and again on the ability of the recipient to handle it. Improving this relationship seems likely to yield a major improvement in efficiency here too.

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## 1 Introduction

You are one of the lucky ones if you are able to read this.

About 15% of the population of England and Wales are not able to do so<sup>1</sup>.

It is surprisingly difficult to establish levels of literacy in practice and the number is probably greater. It has been estimated that 15.86% of the population of Sedgemoor has a problem of literacy, numeracy or IT<sup>2</sup> literacy<sup>3</sup> because their skills are below a threshold level. In the UK, 22% of people leave school with no formally recognized qualifications; in Sedgemoor the number is 25%<sup>4</sup>. These are the most reliable indicators in existence.

In this report, the expression “literacy” is generally used to include numeracy and IT literacy. But literacy is not an easy concept to define.

Dealing with and coping with “official correspondence” is obviously more difficult for those people with lower levels of literacy skills.

By “official correspondence” we mean the correspondence from branches of government (such as the Department of Work and Pensions, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs) and local authorities as well as from corporations (such as Estate Agents, landlords, banks and solicitors.)

***Our central suggestion is that without literacy and numeracy skills, it is unlikely that our clients can successfully carry out many basic transactions, such as opening a bank account or committing to a tenancy agreement.*** And numeracy skills are critical to Financial Capability.

We have identified that this is a problem locally. We think that the problem is slightly greater than average in Sedgemoor – and we now have some evidence that it is significantly greater than average among the clients of Citizens Advice Sedgemoor. Further research may one day establish that this is a national rather than a local issue.

On one hand, some mental health issues may support claims to benefits and attract additional support; on the other hand some mental health issues, learning disabilities and more specifically literacy and numeracy issues may affect people’s ability to carry out transactions that are otherwise regarded as fairly routine.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Business Innovation and Skills “2011 Skills for Life Survey” (published December 2012).

<sup>2</sup> IT - Information Technology

<sup>3</sup> Department of Business Innovation and Skills “2011 Skills for Life Survey” (published December 2012).

<sup>4</sup> 2011 Census for England and Wales - Table QS501EW - Highest level of qualification



The purpose of this report is to draw attention to a major and fundamental problem, and to point the way forward. It is an interim document because we have as yet no direct evidence of the connection between literacy issues and the problems presented to our advisers. However it will be beneficial to stimulate debate and it is hoped that this may, in turn, help to gather evidence.

This document focusses on literacy and numeracy issues in relation to Citizens Advice clients: however, there are a number of other aspects to the lives of those challenged by literacy and numeracy that seem unfair.

If this suggestion is correct, and is acted upon, it is possible to hope for benefits:

- Reduced worry and anxiety for individuals affected by literacy and numeracy issues ;
- Reduced effort (and costs) among parties to transactions with affected individuals, such as banks, landlords and Her Majesty’s Government ;
- A reduction in the number of affected clients seeking advice.

The picture of literacy and numeracy issues is complex. This document attempts to clarify.

### Classification/Definition

The picture is complex partly because it is difficult to classify people as having literacy problems: it is difficult to define “literacy”.

The Skills for Life Survey<sup>5</sup> refers to a National Qualifications Framework. It refers to some individuals as having weak skills where they were assessed as being below Level 1 on the Framework.

**Level 1** is equivalent to General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE grades D to G).

Entry Level criteria (below Level 1) are:

- **Entry level 1** – The holder progresses along a continuum that ranges from the most elementary of achievements to beginning to make use of knowledge and/or understanding that relate to the subject or immediate environment
- **Entry Level 2** – Holder has basic knowledge or understanding of a subject and/or can carry out simple, familiar tasks; and knows the steps needed to complete simple activities. And/or holder can carry out simple, familiar tasks and activities, follow instructions or use rehearsed steps to complete tasks and activities.

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Business Innovation and Skills “2011 Skills for Life Survey” (published December 2012).

- **Entry Level 3** – Holder has basic knowledge and understanding to carry out structured tasks and activities in familiar contexts; and knows and understands the steps needed to complete structured tasks and activities in familiar contexts. And/or Holder can carry out structured tasks and activities in familiar contexts. Holder can be aware of the consequences of actions for self and others.

The Census for England and Wales (2011) relies on the holding of qualifications – which is similar.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development has carried out a Survey of Adult Skills (ending in 2013) using a robust assessment of the personal skills of individuals.

These studies indicate the scale of the problem. But they do not establish the extent to which people can cope with “official correspondence”.

Expressions are often used interchangeably: such as learning difficulties, learning disabilities, learning disorders, and Special Educational Needs. These can be further confused with mental health issues and/or can overlap with them.

Dyslexia<sup>6</sup> is seen as part of a range of learning disabilities. Dyscalculia<sup>7</sup> is treated similarly.

Learning disabilities may also relate to autism (which is characterized by a difficulty in forming relationships with other people) and other disabilities.

One helpful definition is as follows:

*A learning disability is a reduced intellectual disability and difficulty with everyday activities – for example household tasks, socializing, or managing money – which affects someone for their whole life.<sup>8</sup>*

Note that this definition rules out those who are experiencing dementia – as they do not normally have the condition for their whole life. And it is of limited assistance when we try to assess an individual case.

The law talks about “Special Educational Needs”: Section 20 (1) of the Children and Families Act 2014 says that:

*A child or young person has special educational needs if he has a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision...*

Section 20 (2) explains:

<sup>6</sup> Dyslexia means a problem with reading although intelligence is normal.

<sup>7</sup> Dyscalculia is a severe difficulty with arithmetical calculations.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.mencap.org.uk/?gclid=CIC22aL5isoCFVFuGwodatIB7g> - the website of Mencap.

*A child of compulsory school age or a young person has a learning difficulty or disability if he or she:-*

- a. Has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or*
- b. Has a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others...*

Again, this leaves room for discussion about whether an individual has a significantly greater difficulty.

Other expressions may cause confusion. Learning disorder, for example, is used to indicate learning issues in an academic area; which may or may not be diagnosed.

Mental ill health is usually considered to be different.

The Mental Health Act 1983 defines the term ‘mental disorder’ as any disorder or disability of mind. It includes conditions such as:

- Schizophrenia
- Depression
- Bipolar disorder
- Anxiety disorder
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder
- Eating disorders
- And personality disorders<sup>9</sup>

Note that these conditions may suggest the possibility of difficulties in terms of literacy and numeracy – but do not necessarily do so.

An individual may experience learning difficulties and a mental disorder – ***or learning difficulties without a mental disorder*** (or a mental disorder without learning difficulties).

This report focuses on literacy, numeracy and IT literacy issues because they seem to be critically important in terms of financial competence and relevant in other areas of Citizens Advice business. These issues are not necessarily diagnosed (diagnosis or formalized: practical difficulty is enough).

***Our interest is in a standard that identifies people who are unable to deal with “official correspondence” because of challenges with literacy and/or numeracy and/or IT literacy.***

It is acknowledged that our area of interest does not necessarily coincide with law on the subject, or medical understanding, or educational understanding – but it has something in common with all of these. Our interest includes clients experiencing

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<sup>9</sup> Derived from <https://www.rethink.org/resources/search?a=sectioned> - a Factsheet issued by Rethink Mental Illness.

dementia ; it excludes people whose first language is not English; intelligence is not directly relevant – the focus is on the practical ability alone.

It is also acknowledged that identifying those who are affected is a matter of judgment. And they may well be embarrassed by the problem. They may well deny and obscure their difficulty. We can sometimes see cues – where in practice they ask for help to complete a simple form (such as an advice registration form) – perhaps on the basis that “I’ve forgotten my glasses”, or “my wife does that sort of thing for me.”

Our focus is not exclusively on their employment, or their role in the economy or their health.

Our focus is on people with difficulties with language or numbers, paperwork, and people with difficulties using technology. We include people whose problem developed later in life.

Our focus is on their needs for advice. These are routinely classified as one or more of the following:

- Benefits
- Work
- Debt
- Consumer
- Family
- Tax
- Law & Rights
- Discrimination
- Immigration
- Health
- Education.

Advice needs have a lot in common with other cries for help. And we believe that good levels of literacy make a major contribution to many aspects of quality of life.

A second major complication is that discussion of literacy makes many people uncomfortable. If asked directly, many people will be reluctant to give an accurate picture.

So we have carried out our own survey.

## A Wider Problem in British Society

Our primary focus is on our clients in Sedgemoor, but this is a much wider problem.

### *Prisons*

People serving prison sentences have significantly lower levels of literacy and numeracy than the general population. This is a possible indicator of the outcomes that could flow from poor levels of literacy.

In 2015, 46% of people entering the prison system were found to have literacy skills no higher than those expected of an 11 year old<sup>10</sup>.

46% of prisoners were found to have Level 1 and Level 2 literacy skills, which compares to 85% of the general population.

39% of prisoners had the equivalent level of numeracy skills, which compared to 50% of the general population.

### *The Army*

Each year, up to 50% of the Army's recruits have literacy or numeracy skills at level 3 or below<sup>11</sup>.

### *First Language*

Language is a factor in the problem.

In 2011 census, 7.7% of people reported that English was not their first language.

Many will be perfectly competent in their own language, but will inevitably experience some difficulties in reading English.

### *Readability and Plain English*

28% of clients at Citizens Advice Knowsley thought that the language used in benefit letters was rarely easy to understand. 69% of clients did not think that their letters were clear and concise. 74% of clients did not think the structure of letters made sense. 79% did not think their letters told them clearly what to do next and when.<sup>12</sup> Test analysis indicated that a typical DWP letter requires a reading age of 9 to 10 years in order to understand it.

<sup>10</sup> Offenders Learning and Skills Service English and Maths Assessments: Participation 2014/15.

<sup>11</sup> Armed Forces Basic Skills: Longitudinal Study by Department for Business Innovation and Skills, Ministry of Defence, National Research and development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy and National Institute of Adult Continuing Education: June 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Readability – a report by Citizens Advice Knowsley.

So the Plain English Campaign<sup>13</sup> is very relevant. Their campaign against “gobbledygook, jargon and misleading public information.” One of their most useful points is a campaign against long sentences. Another of their points is a campaign against the use of jargon. “Management speak” and job titles can also be unhelpful. Key points from their guidance are:

- Keep your sentences short (15 to 20 words)
- Prefer active verbs (80 to 90%)
- Use ‘you’ and ‘we’
- Use words that are appropriate for the reader
- Don’t be afraid to give instructions
- Avoid nominalisations (e.g. we ‘discussed the matter’ is easier to read than ‘We had a discussion about the matter’)
- Use lists where appropriate.

### *Locally*

There is no single organisation with responsibility for adult literacy issues in Somerset.

Somerset County Council offers a Learning Disabilities service, and a service for Children and Learning, both of which relate to the problems we refer to in this report.

A number of charities/voluntary organisations also offer help to individuals, including the National Literacy Trust, the Somerset Literacy Network and Literacy Somerset. They undoubtedly face significant difficulties in persuading clients to take advantage of them.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk>

## 2 Our Survey

Citizens Advice Sedgemoor designed a survey to establish what proportion of our clients may experience literacy problems – including problems with numeracy and with IT literacy. It was also designed to establish the proportion of cases in which a literacy problem created the need for advice, and to identify the work streams that were most affected.

It was carried out by inviting clients to report their difficulty with “official correspondence”. The survey was difficult to carry out.

It was carried out in the context of a visit which was for the paramount purpose of obtaining advice about a problem. Researchers concluded that an invitation for a special visit would be unproductive, so the opportunist approach was deployed.

Clients are sensitive and at all costs we wished to avoid offending them. This implies that we must avoid any suggestion of judgment.

Asking directly about qualifications or literacy was also considered to be unacceptably intrusive and testing clients was unacceptable.

The opening question was carefully formulated. The questionnaire that was used is included in Appendix A.

Clients were invited to contribute to our survey on Coping with Official Correspondence while waiting for an adviser at our Bridgwater office. As a result, a number of the forms were incomplete.

We were able to question only face-to-face clients.

In some cases, they were interviewed by a researcher, but in most cases they completed the form, often with the help of friends, family or Citizens Advice staff.

Questionnaires are anonymous and advisers were not aware of the questionnaire unless it was discussed by clients. Every effort was made to be non-judgmental, and there were no consequences for clients from response or otherwise.

The survey ran from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2016 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017. This produced a total of 514 responses – which suggests that roughly 10% of our clients (including telephone and e-mail clients as well as clients at outreach facilities) responded. There is no information about reasons for non-responses.

The central question was:

**“How easy do you find it to deal with official correspondence ? Such as our reception form, or correspondence from the council (e.g. Electoral Roll).”**

We also asked about dyslexia. This is a reading difficulty, once referred to as “word blindness”. It has been used to identify a reading difficulty that exists **despite normal intelligence** and there is room to discuss the definition of the expression “despite normal intelligence”. In the UK, the Dyslexia Society and the Department for Education refer to it only as a learning difficulty that affects the ability to read and spell<sup>14</sup>.

Dyslexia affects people to very varying degrees. Sometimes it is identified in childhood, but in others it arrives as a result of injury or illness. One of our clients told us that she now has literacy problems, although she used to be far more literate – her problems stem from age-related illness.

Dyslexia is linked to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in some cases.

Dyslexia was not widely considered in British schools until 1980s and so older sufferers are less likely to have been identified.

The Dyslexia Society tells us that one in ten people in the UK are affected by the disorder<sup>15</sup>.

We asked some questions about Media Willingness, dates and the person completing the form for administrative purposes.

### Acknowledged Weaknesses In the Data

Our survey contains a number of weaknesses:

- Clients classified themselves: there is no validation of that classification. There is scope for a variety of inaccuracies. However, questionnaires were anonymous, non-judgmental and there were no consequences for clients whether they completed them or not. Our conclusions have something in common with such national statistics as exist.
- Classification was brutally pragmatic and heavily simplified and does not align with Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development or census standards – for practical reasons of administering a survey.
- Response to the survey was voluntary. In many ways, there was no alternative available to us. Slightly less than 10% of our clients (including telephone, e-mail and outreach) responded. It could be argued that clients with problems were more – or less - likely to complete a questionnaire.
- Partial and incomplete responses were counted.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.dyslexiaaction.org.uk/page/about-dyslexia-0?page=1>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.dyslexiaaction.org.uk/page/about-dyslexia-0?page=1>



- Data is limited in that it is from a single site (our main site) and only from face-to-face clients. It is entirely possible that other sites or other methods of access to our service would produce a different picture.
- Some clients were interviewed by the researcher, others completed their own questionnaire. Case studies are drawn entirely from those who were interviewed. Where clients completed their own form, many had help from a friend, family member or partner; some had help from our receptionist or from their adviser.
- Data does not refer to those clients experiencing dementia.

It is not suggested that our conclusions apply universally. They are local and we see them as indicative.

Results are roughly consistent with the expectations of local staff, managers and researchers. Some staff had expected a higher incidence of literacy issues; others lower.

We refer the problem as one of literacy, but the picture may be confused by complex language or foreign language.

## CONCLUSIONS

*514 Clients responded.*

*40 respondents (7.78%) reported that reading/writing is “very hard” for them. 103 respondents reported that reading/writing is “a bit difficult”. So 27.82% of respondents reported some degree of difficulty.*

*244 respondents (47.47%) indicated that they had no problems coping with “official correspondence”. 52.53% had some degree of difficulty in relation to reading/writing, numbers and/or IT literacy. We acknowledge that it remains difficult to establish exactly what degree of difficulty.*

*32 respondents (6.23%) reported that numbers are “very hard” for them. 22.96% of people have some degree of difficulty with numbers. This seems to be the smallest part of the problem.*

*54 respondents (10.51%) reported that IT is “very hard” for them. 34.63% of respondents indicated some degree of difficulty with IT. IT is the most common problem that people have.*

*10 respondents (1.95%) reported that reading/writing, numbers and IT matters are “very hard”. 71 respondents (13.81%) reported some degree of difficulty in all three areas.*

*61 respondents (11.8%) told us that they had been diagnosed as dyslexic. The fact that this is a significantly greater number than the number who reported “very hard” for reading/writing underlines the difficulty of classifying/defining the problems and the reluctance of individuals to admit or confront the problem. A diagnosis indicates a baseline, minimum number for the problem and does not seem to help our enquiry. Diagnosed problems seem to be “the tip of the iceberg.”*

*32 respondents (6.23%) indicated that English is not their first language. 12 clients (36.6% of those with English not their first language) reported that they had nonetheless no problems handling official correspondence. So 63.4% of clients for whom English is not their first language reported some degree of difficulty.*

*41 respondents (7.98%) reported that their request for advice was caused by problems of literacy (or numeracy or IT literacy). This was less than we expected.*

*Clients disclosed ages ranged from 19 to 73. The average disclosed age of clients was 41. The average age reporting some degree of difficulty with reading/writing was 42. The average age of those reporting some degree of difficulty with IT was 44. Clients indicating some degree of difficulty with reading/writing, numbers and/or IT also ranged from 19 to 73. We conclude that age does not seem to be a significant determining factor in literacy or IT literacy.*

*One of our clients referred to a problem that has developed in adulthood, following illness. But, surprisingly, none of our clients explicitly referred to dementia.*

*Of the clients who reported some difficulty, 23 (4.5% of the total response, 8.5% of those reporting difficulty) had come to us for help in relation to benefits. This was by far the largest work type disclosed; debt, housing and accessing the Food Bank were also in evidence. However, we do not rely heavily on this data because responses to this question were very poor. We think that they were poor partly because clients were unclear about classifications; partly because responses were interrupted by the availability of an adviser to address the core issue and partly by the choice of the client. In any case, the picture broadly reflects the work of Citizens Advice Sedgemoor.*

## **INSIGHTS**

### **“Judgmental”**

*There is some evidence that when people struggle with literacy issues, their ability to deal with problems worsens significantly when they feel “judged”.*

### **Stressful**

*There is some evidence that the problem of “official correspondence” is worsened when recipients fail to handle it – not because of a lack of skills, but because they find it stressful and emotionally difficult. Literacy problems may make this worse. And we have an impression that some clients simply throw difficult correspondence away rather than confront it.*

## OTHER BENEFITS

*We think that individuals' lives could be hugely improved and they could become more independent through improved skills.*

*But there are other major benefits on offer:*

- *Improving the skills of individuals is likely to bring them massive benefits in all parts of their lives. Not least in their ability to handle “official correspondence”.*
- *Improving literacy (and numeracy and IT literacy) is likely to have a positive effect on the economy locally and nationally.*
- *As individuals improve their skills and increase their abilities, and/or as organisations respond to the problem as they send “official correspondence” this is likely to have a positive effect on an individual’s financial capability.*
- *The welfare benefits system relies on “official correspondence” – and on the ability of the recipient to handle it. Improving this relationship seems likely to yield a massive improvement in efficiency. For example, we think that a massive reduction in sanctions would follow a more empathetic approach to correspondence.*
- *The tax system also relies on “official correspondence” – and again on the ability of the recipient to handle it. Improving this relationship seems likely to yield a major improvement in efficiency here too.*



## APPENDIX A

### THE QUESTIONNAIRE

# Client Questionnaire

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*Feel free to write notes on this form.*

**Date**

**Completed by**

**“How easy do you find it to deal with official correspondence ? Such as our Reception form, or correspondence from the council (eg Electoral Roll).”**

**Reading/Writing** Easy/Bit difficult/Very Hard

**Diagnosed** Y / N

**Numbers** Easy/Bit difficult/Very Hard

**More than one kind of problem** Y / N / Q

**Using IT** Easy/Bit difficult/Very Hard

**Other difficulty** Y / N / ?

**Are you happy to talk about it ?** Y / N

**Is English your first language** Y / N / Q

**Does this Cause the problem you came in for help with**

Y / N / ?

**Age**

**Subject of Visit**

LASS /Benefits /Work /Debt /Consumer /Relationships /Housing /Law /  
Discrimination /Tax /Health /Education



## Completing the Form

*It is envisaged that this questionnaire would be completed by R & C while the client is waiting to see an Adviser.*

Date – of interview

Lit – designed not to make this uncomfortable for the client. Does this client suffer a Literacy Problem so that they need help to deal with official correspondence – such as Sedgemoor CA reception forms? This is the key question. In marginal cases, this is a matter for the judgment of the Interviewer, and it is anticipated that the client's answer to the main question will disclose any relevant problems, or that the interviewer will tactfully probe for them if necessary. Q indicates a marginal case (preferably in addition to Y or N). If N, then no further fields need to be completed. N answers to be recorded so that we know that out of C clients, % suffered from Literacy Problems.

Diagnosed – with dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dementia or other.

Reluctant – to disclose a literacy problem.

Language – may be a disruptive factor in the study

Other – such as dementia, or finding the language impenetrable.

IT – IT skills are a barrier.

Multiple – more than one operating barrier.

Cause – is a Literacy Problem an operating cause of the problem with which they seek advice.

Space for more notes.

## APPENDIX B

### CASE STUDIES

#### *Case 1*

This is a client that returns to us frequently (10 occasions at the time of writing).

Advisers would say that he is challenging and requires additional time and patience to try and communicate with him effectively.

He says he has learning difficulties, speaks of dyslexia and that he can't hold information in his head: he can't remember.

He has applied for benefits but is categorised as Fit for Work. He is currently working in refuse collection, but he has a history of problems with employment.

From time to time he claims Jobseekers Allowance but this is not easy for him.

He says that he has always had problems with reading, but his problems worsened significantly after a 2007 accident. He fell off a roof while working and he suffered brain damage.

The client needed specialist advice which was not immediately available so we tried to arrange an appointment. However, he doesn't read, and he says that he can't remember things. An appointment was made, but he failed to turn up.

#### *Case 2*

This client is 45 years old and has 9 GCSEs, but has difficulties with the written word since becoming epileptic. She is not certain whether this is because of the illness or the medications. She has never considered herself IT literate.

#### *Case 3*

This client is 60 and is unable to write unless copying. He is able to read and is completely unable to use IT. He has suffered a brain haemorrhage and considers himself to be dyslexic but has never been formally diagnosed. He has worked as a builder, has quite good memory skills and can handle appointments. He speaks of being frightened by the written word and being compelled to admit to his problem. Help would take the form of using simple plain English, and an offer of help for people with problems.

#### Case 4

This client is homeless and is in receipt of Disability Living Allowance. He has been diagnosed with mental health issues but can't remember what they are. He relies on family to help with problems with the written word.

#### Case 5

This client is 55 and considers that diagnosis was not available for his age group.

He is normally reluctant to discuss his problem - because it is a negative experience: he can't stand being judged. He has a well-developed strategy of copying personal details onto forms. He is a competent builder and operates by memorising an oral briefing.

He left school at 14 because of being punished for not doing homework – he understood the physics but was unable to commit that in writing.

He can “see” numbers so can read the time and date of an appointment from correspondence; he can recognise the letterhead and so he attends without knowing who to see, or what it is about.

His opinion is that prisons are full of people for whom the root cause (with substance abuse as an intervening cause) is literacy: people resort to alcohol and drugs because they can't function in a world that takes literacy for granted.

#### Case 6

This client is 38 and was educated at a Special School for Learning Difficulties.

As an adult, he undertook training with Learn Direct, YTS and Adult Learning. This helped, but he considers that his remaining problem is with “big words”.



## APPENDIX C

### WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?

If I am not good at handling “official correspondence”:

- *I might consider improving my skills, through Learn Direct.*
- *If I am homeless, Taunton Association for the Homeless offers help.*
- *I can ask for help from friends or family. I can seek help from the person who wrote the letter. There is no need to be embarrassed – one in every four people has this problem. Most people are pleased to help.*
- *Worst of all is to put the problem off and hope for the best.*

If I am writing official letters:

- *I need to think about the person who will read it. Do they read and write well? In English?*
- *If I don't know about them, I must remember that between 15% and 25% of people don't read and write well. They may read and write, but in another language.*
- *The least I can do is to use simple, direct language (Plain English):*
  - *Keep your sentences short (15 to 20 words)*
  - *Prefer active verbs (80 to 90%)*
  - *Use 'you' and 'we'*
  - *Use words that are appropriate for the reader. Longer words are less helpful.*
  - *Don't be afraid to give instructions*
  - *Avoid nominalisations (e.g. we 'discussed the matter' is easier to read than 'We had a discussion about the matter')*
  - *Use lists where appropriate.*
- *Maybe it would help if I telephoned the person I want to communicate with. As well as a letter, or instead of a letter. Maybe the other person would respond better to social media (e.g. Facebook) as well as a letter, or instead of a letter.*
- *The image of you and your organisation is important. But your image suffers, and you are likely to fail in your objective, when the letter is too difficult for the reader to understand.*
- *Bear in mind that when you are delivering bad news, such as that a payment (e.g. rent) is due, or benefits are reduced, the reader is tempted to bin it, and put the problem off for another day.*
- *If you need an answer, think about the easiest way for the reader, as well as the easiest way for you and your organisation. It is not safe to assume that if you can read and write, you can answer online or by e-mail, or through an automated telephone system.*
- **You can earn respect and improve success rates by communicating clearly and accurately to all your customers.**