

The poor relation - immigration and nationality information deficit

Background

ASA Advicenow provides an information search on its website which brings together information on rights and the law from over 300 UK websites. Information is selected, checked for accuracy at least every six months, summarised and classified. Our aim is to produce a short, tailored list of the best information available for each search term. As well as providing a useful service for the public it also gives us a good overview of the range and quality of information that is available on the law and rights.

Immigration and nationality

You will often hear people bemoaning the fact that there is too much information. This is certainly not the case for immigration where there is comparatively little public information of any description: good, bad or indifferent.

This was brought into sharp focus recently when the Immigration Advisory Service (IAS) closed its information service. IAS was a major provider of information on immigration issues and the loss of their resources is significant.

In the light of IAS's decision we carried out a quick review of the immigration section on Advicenow to see how much information was still available and what type of information it was. And to check whether or not the situation has changed over the last few years we compared our findings against a more detailed review that we carried out for the Legal Services Commission in 2006 ('Research report on the selection and scoring of information materials for inclusion on the CLS Direct operator database').

www.advicenow.org.uk/reviewing-and-scoring-information-resources/

What we said in 2006

'Fewer resources than other categories

Immigration and nationality appears to be the one area where there really is a 'gap' in information in the traditional sense. There were far fewer resources to assess and our impression is that the quantity is declining. During our research we spoke to a number of providers to try to track down resources that used to exist, or resources in other formats. The problem of updating materials frequently and the difficulty of funding this came across quite strongly during these informal conversations.

Finding resources which are available in hard copy was also very difficult. Again it seems that the cost of printing and distributing leaflets which need to be frequently updated is considered too expensive.

Low scores against indicators

Resources were scored out of six for each type of indicator. Unlike other categories we assessed where many resources attained an acceptable score against our indicators about the legal problem, immigration resources were average at best. And scores against skills and support indicators were even worse.

We were particularly struck by how unsupportive many of the resources are, particularly when you consider how alien many immigration processes must appear. Only four resources out of thirty assessed acknowledged stress or tried to boost confidence. Few resources attempt to provide route maps or step by step guides to processes, and few provide generic 'how to' information on the skills people may need to help them solve their problem. When you consider that many people with immigration and nationality problems will be newcomers to this country and may be used to different cultural norms it's disappointing that resources don't address these issues.

For all of the above reasons the standard of resources selected for inclusion in this category was therefore lower than for other categories. However, surprisingly this category does include one of our highest scoring resources. Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID) believes that there should be advice and representation available for anyone in detention but are aware that this is not always possible. Despite being long their 'Notebook on bail - Part 1' is excellent in that it contains a variety of material that would prove a guide to action for a client; standard letters, action lists, how to record and how to behave. It scored five for information about the problem and six for skills and support.

Key providers in this subject are the Immigration Advisory Service; Refugee Council and the Immigration & Nationality Directorate of the Home Office and Yourrights from Liberty.'

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For our review in 2009 we did not score resources in the same way as we did in 2006, but our feeling is that little has changed, and indeed things have probably got worse.

For some terms there is very little information available at all, for example asylum for children and detention and enforcement. And what is available is bordering on statements of policy rather than information for the public. As in 2006, I would suggest that for the majority of terms in this section the standard of information is much lower than it would be for other sections. Unexplained jargon is rife, little is done to provide an overview or explain related issues, emotional issues are not addressed, information is not tailored to its audience.

There are exceptions, in particular Bail for Immigration Detainees' notebook on bail which is an excellent resource.

Whatever the quality, it seems that there is a trend for organisations other than the UK Border Agency to produce less and less information on immigration issues. Changes in the law are so frequent and the issues are so complex that the cost of keeping up to date must be prohibitive for lots of organisations, particularly community-led organisations.

This is particularly obvious in information on new legislation such as the points based scheme which came in to force last year. None of the 'key providers' mentioned in the 2006 report extract above, except for UK Borders Agency, have covered these rules in any detail.

Our review suggests that immigration and nationality information is definitely the 'poor relation' across civil law and rights topic areas. Yet we only looked at web based information in English. The issue of translations, hard copies, literacy levels, immigrant's ability to get hold of the information when they need it and the skills and confidence needed to act upon it has not been analysed, but doubtless presents a similarly disappointing picture.

Theresa Harris
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June 2009

Quote from Keith Best, Chief Executive, Immigration Advisory Service

'We decided to withdraw the written advice on our website because (1) the law and regulations have been changing so rapidly that it would require resources we do not have to keep it updated without it being misleading (2) the danger of providing out-of-date, inaccurate information is very great both to potential clients and to the organisation even with a disclaimer. We recognise the great need for such a service. We used to provide immigration advice over the telephone under Level 1 of the Legal Services Commission's funding but then they discontinued funding for this so all we can now provide is a fee-paying telephone advice service.

'We should very much like to provide a free service by telephone and written advice on our website (which is visited from all around the world) but it is clear that the Legal Services Commission will not fund either of these. We shall see if there are alternatives.'

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