

Legal and Advice Sector Roundtable

Tuesday 20 July 2021, 4–5pm

Via Zoom

Meeting Notes

The July Legal and Advice Sector Roundtable (LASR) was a shorter meeting and opportunity to share updates across the group before a break over the summer. Meetings will resume in September.

1. Collective policy update and opportunities

The previous Legal and Advice Sector Roundtable focused on engagement with the Comprehensive Spending Review and highlighted the need for and value of collaborative cross sector working on joint policy initiatives. The topic was picked up again and explored further at the July meeting.

LawWorks gave a background to their involvement with policy work. The organisation is aware of and sensitive to the negative perception that there is a use of or reliance on pro bono to fill gaps caused by cuts to and lack of investment in legal aid. LawWorks invested in policy work as a way to address this head on. Since then, the LawWorks policy function has contributed to calls for cross sector support such as lobbying for early intervention.

Committing resources to policy work is a difficult commitment to make, particularly against hostile government approaches, but the long-term benefits can be significant, and it is important to continue to invest and involve ourselves in these issues and to keep positioning ourselves well for the future.

One good example of this is the legacy of the **Child Poverty Action Group's** policy work, their investment in policy work, particularly with backbenchers eventually resulted in commitment from the government to abolish child poverty within 20 years when one of those backbenchers became Prime Minister.

A brief presentation was given on the policy issues we will be likely to face as we come out of the pandemic. Context was given on the circumstances in which policy makers are making decisions, namely the impact of the pandemic, the drop in the economy, the acceleration in digitalisation trends, and the imminent withdrawal of support measures. The priorities for legal and advice sector engagement will be around:

- Health and public health in the broader context, particularly where Covid-19 vulnerability maps with poverty and other indicators of disadvantage. There has never been a national health issue that has not required a social justice element in its solution. Social welfare is part of the health and welfare spectrum that is needed to tackle resulting issues, including economic issues.
- Labour market
- Welfare rights
- Justice: Courts returning to face to face, addressing backlog, mediation as part of CJS, Law Reform

The presentation can be found in full [here](#).

Attendees were reminded that the policy and political situation would differ in Wales:

- Wales will be working on health, but it will be very different to the approach in England.
- The Renters Reform Bill applies to England only, a landlord register already exists in Wales but isn't working as well as had been hoped (**Shelter Cymru** can give more insights on this).
- Wales will be piloting a Universal Base Income on care leavers. This represents a big shift which we will want to keep an eye on as policy develops.

Several attendees reemphasised the importance of continued attention to policy contributions and collaborations. The **Law Centres Network** has been reviewing its membership offering and now considers its biggest value to be its policy work and using its voice to advocate for members.

Law for Life have recently undertaken some successful policy-based campaigning ([see update below](#)) and highlighted the desire for government departments to understand the impact and implications of policy decisions on the frontline. In order for this type of work to succeed it is necessary to be able to draw on faint signals of issues from a broad demographic, collate these, and then discussing with likeminded colleagues, collaborating, accessing expertise, and delivering joint initiatives to address these issues for all.

This type of work is incredibly time consuming but achieves practical positive change for thousands of people.

A number of roundtable attendees expressed support for staying involved in, supporting, and contributing to cross sector sharing and collaboration on policy work, and using the roundtable as the vehicle to facilitate this was discussed.

2. Sector updates

LawWorks

The *LawWorks Clinics Network Conference* was held online, on the 8th and 9th July, and brought together clinic coordinators, supervisors and volunteers from different organisations and specialisms as well as the wider advice sector. The conference focused on the challenges faced by pro bono clinics over the past year, and what can be done to continue to build a strong pro bono community into the future.

You can find the recordings [here](#).

Law for Life

Law for Life [celebrated its tenth birthday](#) at the start of the month with a notable victory over the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). As a result, the DWP has agreed to [change its controversial policy of cold-calling vulnerable and disabled people](#) and trying to persuade them to accept lower benefit claims than they are legally entitled to. The Law for Life team worked tirelessly on this with the **Public Law Project**, and this is a fantastic result.

In addition, this month Law for Life has:

- Published anew civil guide: *Appealing against a county court decision*, funded by the Legal Support for Litigants in Person (LSLIP) project.
- Updated *How to deal with a section 21 notice*, funded by LSLIPS.
- Updated *What to do if you are homeless*, funded by the Litigant in Person Support Strategy (LIPSS).
- Updated *How to fix problems in your privately rented home*, funded by LIPSS.

- Continued the six-session course on *Housing rights for Refugees*, funded by **Trust for London** with trusted intermediaries, grassroots organisations, and refugees in London. Approximately 20 participants per week attend.
- Run a course on housing and homelessness law for social prescribers. The course was funded by the **Bar Standards Board** and attended by 25 social prescribers, mainly from the North West.

Training on housing and updating housing guides is a real challenge at present as the guidance and rules change regularly, the process is complex and likely will need to be repeated soon.

Legal Aid Practitioners Group (LAPG)

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Legal Aid's inquiry into the sustainability of legal aid will report in September. The workforce survey now has an additional 400 student responses to add to the 2,000 independent responses.

Pro Bono Week

This year's annual Pro Bono Week will be the 20th celebration. As part of this the committee are looking for case studies on exceptional pro bono which are representative of different geographical areas, different areas of law, and local communities.

Please contact the Pro Bono Week committee if you have any stories you'd like to share.

Rightsnet

Regarding the relaxation of lockdown rules, a number of staff have been caught up in the "Ping" demic resulting in people continuing to self-isolate.

Public Law Project

Public Law Project (PLP) is doing some research on the impact of a piece of litigation from last year relating to the financial means test for legal aid and the capital threshold (the case of *R (oao GR) v DLAC [2020] EWHC 3140 (Admin)*). The case established that where capital is 'trapped' and cannot be accessed by an individual applying for legal aid, the Legal Aid Agency has a discretionary power to value it as 'nil' so that it is not considered for the purposes of the means assessment.

A practice note on legal aid eligibility and trapped capital, with further information, is available [here](#).

PLP is keen to better understand a) whether people are aware of the judgment and b) experiences of those with 'trapped capital' seeking legal aid since the judgment. Initially we are primarily focusing on the experiences of practitioners applying for legal aid on behalf of those clients and advice organisations supporting individuals potentially affected by the judgment.

We have produced **a short survey, which is open until 30 August 2021 and can be [accessed here](#)**, to capture some initial data and then will be seeking to conduct some follow-up interviews. The survey should take around 5 minutes to complete and we will use the survey to help identify any issues that PLP needs to focus on next.

Hybrid working

Approaches to hybrid working continue to develop, as does sector thinking around the distinction between hybrid working, remote working, and hybrid/ remote service delivery options.

In advance of further discussion at the September meeting the Roundtable will be exploring how it uses hybrid working into the future. Further information and resources can be found here:

- <https://www.passmoreconsulting.co.uk/home-office-or-hybrid>,
- <https://medium.com/antlerglobal/how-to-manage-meetings-in-hybrid-teams-c17ddd86d73a>, and
- Via the [Justice and Innovation Group](#).

3. Future of LASR

The Legal and Advice Sector Roundtable (LASR) will be on hiatus over the summer. During this time the Steering Committee will be reviewing and appraising the impact and value of the roundtable in order to inform future work.

Carol Storer will be undertaking some interviews with members of the group to get detailed insights but if you have any additional feedback please [contact Carol](#) to share your thoughts. This information will then be used to shape future roundtable activities and meetings.