

## **Legal and advice sector roundtable – responding to COVID-19. Discussion summary, Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020 (Chaired by Carol Storer and Robin Knowles.)**

The current public health crisis and global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented event with both short and long-term consequences, including a wide range of social and legal issues for people in their everyday lives, and huge policy interventions by Governments. This forum brings together organisations from the voluntary and legal sectors with the following purpose:

- to identify legal needs arising from the health crisis;
- to monitor and review the impact for providers of legal information, support, advice and representation;
- to consider responses and recommendations to help address the above needs, including any potential policy recommendations (to Government and others);
- to inform and support the mobilisation and co-ordination of the advice sector, legal aid, charities, volunteer lawyers and legal professionals, for people with legal and advice needs;
- as part of that mobilisation, to encourage sector-wide collaborations, initiatives and technology driven solutions - sharing information, resources and learning

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Welcome, outline of the agenda and flagged the briefing note prepared summarising some of the key Government announcements and key policy issues so far. The purpose of the discussion was to identify how the sector can best respond and deliver and how it can reach people at these difficult times, share thoughts about how the different organisations work together and help each other and those in need.

### **2. FUNDER PERSPECTIVES**

A sub-group of the advice funders network chaired by the Access to Justice Foundation is meeting on 26<sup>th</sup> March. Matthew Smerdon made a few points under the following headings:

- Providing flexibility with existing grants
- Sensitivity to cash flow issues
- Repurposing existing grants
- Support organisations with accessing ~~the~~ government schemes
- Support IT upgrades and business continuity
- Unlocking new funding – emergency needs, adaptations, infrastructure and co-ordination
- Funder support for strategic level and policy work.

### **3. STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES**

#### Coordination and planning

There is experience and expertise in handling crises where there are many different people trying to coordinate a response, and many different legal needs and policy issues. A global platform has been established which provides a single place where people can highlight legal issues and coordinate responses.

#### Operational – legal aid

Need for a robust feedback conduit between LAA and legal aid providers; the legal aid scheme is too complex to enable flexible deployment, and bureaucratic excess needs to be dropped.

### Operational – demand especially on telephone, online, and information systems

Many provider organisations are experiencing a massive increase (around a third) in demand through these channels. With new channels being set up could there be more co-ordination.

### Operational – business continuity and adaptations

Many organisations reported facing similar challenges with staffing support, continuity planning and wellbeing, moving to homeworking etc., (e.g, sensitive client data on personal PCs, for example, can be an issue, personal mobile bills etc).

### Operational – tech

Much bigger role now for tech at the community level.

### Operational – premises

With organisations leaving premises/buildings vacant possibly for months, there are difficult conversations with landlords (and about insurance, security etc) and about the sectors' future premises needs. Redirecting post appropriately to peoples' homes also a common issue.

### Operational – workforce and volunteer deployment

Potential development of roles for students, retired lawyers.

### Policy – peoples' rights

Changes to the Care Act as a result of emergency legislation identified as a concern for many.

Emergency powers still need to operate within the rule of law.

### Policy - operational

HMCTS appearing to be slow on moving to online hearing etc., and an outlier in trying to continue "business as usual".

DWP – Universal Credit demand is blocking the systems, not enough processing capacity.

### Communities

New groups, support networks and initiatives developing at community level – how do we join up with these?

What channels can we now use for communicating with communities (social media, local media etc). Important physical contact points and hubs such as libraries are of course closes.

### Emerging needs

As well as employment rights, debt etc.,, pro bono services seeing more interest in probate, wills, powers of attorney etc. Other non-legal need impacts may be around food inaccessibility (foodbanks not set up to deal with this but rather food poverty), mental health, loneliness etc.

## **CONCLUSIONS: NEXT STEPS AND ACTION POINTS**

1. **Clients:** Clients are the starting point and there are many people we need to reach but the problem we have is that even practical resources, such as the day centres and advice lines, are overwhelmed.

2. **Pooling ideas to address practical issues:** Eg., - access points – ‘one’ or ‘many’, tapping into a network of volunteers etc.
3. **Technology:** This was been highlighted repeatedly. There are lots of technical resources and ways of sharing information.
4. **Policy issues:** Importance of safeguards to individuals, and noted that those community contact points provided previously by for example libraries are now gone. The update regarding the Care Act provisions and the proposals around these are concerning. It was important to monitor these issues.
5. **Feeding into and from other discussions:** Eg CILEX, Law Society and Bar Council meetings with MoJ.
6. **Useful practical tools:** Many now being quickly developed – need to share resources.
7. **Swift and strategic response / coordination and planning:** More needs to be done and it is important to move quickly on issues, and emphasising that the issues are long-term. This requires a coordinated response. If funding is pulled forward, the question is, where will the sector be in 6-9 months? So coordination and planning is important.
8. **Funding:** As per funders update above, but a reiterated concern also: that the sector is on a knife edge already.
9. **Future meetings:** Everyone invited to identify any obvious additions to this group. This meeting should be a standing group, but could also generate sub-groups of coordinated and shared activity. Aim to reconvene next week.