

Second legal and advice sector forum and roundtable – responding to Covid 19. March 31st (3.30-5pm) on Zoom

1. INTRODUCTION

Carol Storer (LAG) and Robin Knowles opened the meeting as co-chairs, they identified five key areas to discuss from the agenda and for potential further consideration by subgroups:

1. Systems for delivery
2. Sustainability, including funding
3. Property-related issues for charities in the sector in light of current circumstances
4. Practical resources for delivery
5. The policy issues and the policy environment

2. SYSTEMS FOR DELIVERY

The discussion addressed shared systems and platforms ('front-end' and 'back-end') for the sector, both for client points of access and referral, and also for sharing information, resources, and remote working methods.

The UK Collaborative Plan for Pro Bono have developed a single platform for firms to address the issue of email overload, and provides a way to capture key updates on one single web page. 145 law firms around the world are using this platform, to coordinate and understand the legal needs arising across 104 legal jurisdictions, it a platform that can also be used by the non-profit sector. The aim of the platform is to offer "ongoing mapping" to understand what resources and specialist organisations are doing and help build a clearer picture of issues the government will address, issues specialist organisations might already be working on but may need support in terms of scaling up, and from there starting to spot where is there a potential role for pro bono, but also for firms to be able to identify where pro bono is not appropriate.

For development of more public, referral tools and case-management focussed platforms, LawWorks and LCN have had discussions about the **Justice Connect** platform and how it may be adapted for the UK market. LawWorks' **Free Legal Answers** platform, supported by Deloitte, will also be rolled out shortly.

It was agreed in the discussion that shared platforms and systems need to 'add value' rather than 'duplicate'. For example FLOWS works because they have something clear to offer and organisations know how to use it - eg with FLOWS addressing the challenge is helping frontline workers to direct domestic abuse issues to the right organisation, as a way of dealing with the "tsunami" of issues that are coming through the door. Etic Lab, who are working with the litigant in person support strategy, have been looking at the operational issues around joining services and organisations together. Their report could be useful in relation to potential next steps for either a single point of access or a more joined together access to the justice ecosystem.

A challenge for the public facing platforms is that for users and those in need it can be irrelevant whether it is pro bono, advice sector, legal aid, it is just about the help that they need and that there should be 'no wrong door'. However, different types of service, legal specialisms, and level of provision and support (e.g, from information, to advice, casework, legal help and representation etc.) need to be catered for.

ACTION: These issues would need to addressed by one more sub-groups.

3. UPDATES FROM STAKEHOLDERS

Stakeholders felt that there was space and potential for co-ordination around priority need.

ELAN (the Employment Legal Advice Network) provided an update on the work it has been doing as an employment legal advice network coordinated by Trust for London. ELAN has weekly meetings with all members to discuss needs of workers, employees and the advice sector, to try and find a way forward, and the Resolution Foundation are involved in collecting information about gaps in provision for workers and employees. They will report back to the government with a view to plugging the gap.

A full-time clinic co-ordinator is being appointed for six months to set up processes for delivering advice, including collaboration between agencies; they will be based with an advice centre but the aim is that they will work with all London advice agencies. ELAN aims to set up a helpline for inquiries on employment law matters, and is working with the GLA who will publicise that as a "single point of access" so workers and employees know where to get advice. ELAN are collecting legal information and providing webinars and FAQs, and wish to collaborate further with the GLA and advice agencies around this roundtable. ELAN is also aiming to set up a mediation service (with Cloisters Chambers) for COVID-19 related issues but, first needs to prioritise resolving existing claims (some are dormant at the moment).

MENCAP provided that there were a lot of common issues in the social care sector needed addressing that were trying to address the following:

- Access to medical treatment for people with learning disabilities and autism;
- Issues in relation to the suspension of the Care Act duties, including concerns around the guidance released by NICE;
- Challenges of misinformation around quite complex issues of care rights;
- Demand had been difficult to manage (more inquiries as people are anxious).

Shelter is going through consolidation at present, they have moved to a model of delivering their services from home and adapting to the new guidance around remote working. They have seen a considerable drop off in demand because everyone is in a state of shock and working through the issues of the last few weeks. They are expecting to see that demand return over the course of the next few weeks. They are also in the process of working to move their legal advice services over to work with their helpline colleagues to try to meet some of the currently unmet demand that's coming through to those services. Shelter has through their channels identified the following COVID-19 related issues

- *Homelessness*: People who need to make a homelessness application are struggling because many local authorities have closed their offices, but applicants are still expected to provide evidence of their priority need;
- *Self-isolation*: There are a lot of families in accommodation where they can't easily follow the advice from government in order to self-isolate;
- Local authorities are trying hard to accommodate people and it is hoped that the increase in local housing allowance will help them to do that;
- *Evictions*: Although the new legislation on preventing evictions in the next few months is welcome, there are a few categories of people that won't be protected for example homeless people accommodated in interim accommodation, and people living in homeless hostels;
- *Street homeless*: People who are living on the streets with no recourse to public funds, especially concerns about immigration status;

- *Digital exclusion:* There are concerns about access to services for people who wouldn't usually be in contact with them via digital channels;
- *Policy and litigation:* The work that Shelter's strategic litigation have been doing has resulted in increases to the local housing allowance, and also changes to legislation in terms of preventing evictions during the next few months.

Citizens Advice: Have had to quickly shift their service provision from a face to face model to telephone and online services. They are carefully tracking in real time demand for advice using their information system/website search analytics. The most common queries are about

- 1) Universal Credit and other legacy benefits
- 2) Employment matters
- 3) Debt and paying bills.

Demand through phone is enormous and not all met. They are looking to work with others, but has to be done carefully to avoid overloading or duplicating other organisations.

4. UPDATES FROM FUNDERS

Funders were open to having conversations with grantees about ability to be flexible, and some funders have launched emergency funds. Funders have been willing to be flexible with existing grants, agreeing to repurpose them, to amend budgets and timelines. It was recognised that the sector is on a knife-edge already; there are immediate costs which needs to be borne but there may be considerable resources needed further down the line as further challenges kick in. Across all funders there is commitment to ensuring that accessing funding is as simple and swift as possible, and a commitment to capturing what is being learned, and how that can feed into future resources and funding cycles. Other feedback points from recent meetings of funder networks included:-

- A welcome and support for flexibility in new Charity Commission guidance;
- Interest in how to support mental health of staff and volunteers;
- There is a sector wide challenge of keeping on top of very rapid policy change
- There is a key role for regional and national infrastructure; the London Community Response Fund has been a good model;
- Willingness to lend weight to the sector calls for action and greater flexibility from the Legal Aid Agency;
- There is potential value to helping organizations access some of the government schemes;
- A National Emergencies Trust has been created and been a focal point for resources but advice was not included in that program; funder networks are following this up;
- Could/should foundations should be thinking about spending endowments?

5. SUSTAINABILITY

Following the funders feedback, it was emphasised what a difficult position the sector is starting from in terms of not having enough resources and the problem of pulling money forward but not knowing what financial position will be like. It be useful to have sub-group on sustainability; the subgroup may also want to engage with the funders.

6. PROPERTY-RELATED ISSUES FOR CHARITIES IN THE SECTOR

A key overhead charities have to cope with is rent, as well as property and premises and amenities costs. There are a number of practical solutions organisations could consider implementing, these specialist issues could be addressed by one of the sub-groups.

7. PRACTICAL RESOURCES FOR DELIVERY

Beyond those mentioned above there are other practical resources that different networks are developing. For example, LawWorks have held two (remote) roundtables with pro bono clinics and are sharing tools about how to work remotely effectively, and will share further information about that (and will also be available through the LawWorks website).

Many organizations are at capacity, and are also being offered a lot of opportunity to do extra pro bono work. He suggested that this lends itself to a further step out of this group to discuss how a point or points of contact can be developed for the people that need it (eg like ELAN's work on employment rights). The ELAN model and the resources sitting alongside it could potentially replicated or scaled in partnership with others. For example, Advocate have been approached by NHS and other key workers who have been asked to go into work without support from their employers. Could Advocate work with ELAN to support such people, or alternatively is there a need or potential for a bespoke clinic for NHS workers?

Action: These ideas could be looked at by one of the sub groups.

8. THE POLICY ISSUES AND THE POLICY ENVIRONMENT

As the discussion was running short on time it was suggested that this topic could be most usefully discussed in a subgroup, as there were big issues to address from public health, to employment/incomes, welfare rights, individuals-state digital interactions (eg tribunal video hearings), economic interventions and the impact of emergency powers on people lives.

9. CONCLUSIONS: NEXT STEPS AND ACTION POINTS

There is now significant interest in sector-wide collaboration, the summing up point were:-

1. Clients' needs

- There are issues that the sector hasn't managed to make progress on over the years but what has happened over last week is remarkable, with long-standing issues being addressed and organisations (& individuals within them) looking at how to respond to clients' needs in a different way whilst recognising that their needs are changing.
- It was important to keep a focus on those who can use technology, and those who cannot use technology.

2. Points of access

- This is a longstanding discussion; delivering a 'single point of access' would not be easy. Too big an issue to cover in this group, so should be pursued in a sub-group.

3. Information overload

- Information overload is a key issue that can be addressed by collaboration.
- The LIPNetwork have offered to help with resource-sharing, web-hosting of the roundtables outputs, and as a way of sharing information more widely.
- A few examples of the PDFs that are going around could be circulated.

4. Volunteers and employment

- There are some challenging issues, but also very significant opportunities for volunteer deployment (furloughed staff/workers, students, retirees etc). It would also help to have a clear understanding of who are 'key workers' in the justice system.

5. Sub-groups

- There is value in having small groups, and encouraged groups to form.

11. DISCUSSION ON HOW WE SUPPORT EACH OTHER

The roundtable ended with a brief discussion with **LawCare** emphasising that it was important for those on the call, as people in senior roles, that they look after their own mental health, as well as the people that may be in their teams and their wider networks, and that they are communicating that message