

Legal and Advice Sector Roundtable - responding to COVID-19

November Meeting Minutes

Remote Meeting via Zoom Thursday 12 November 2020 at 16.00 – 17.30

Attendees

Organisation
Access Charity
Advice Services Alliance
AdviceUK
Advocate
CILEx
Citizens Advice
ELAN
Etic Lab
UK Collaborative Plan for Pro Bono
JUSTICE
LASA / Rightsnet
Law for Life
Legal Aid Practitioners Groups / APPG on Legal Aid
Law Centres Network
SW London Law Centres
Law Society
LawWorks
LCN
LIP Support Strategy
Litigants in Person Network
LLST
Ministry of Justice (MoJ)
National Advice Network Wales
Omega Alpha
Public Law Project
RCJ Advice
Shelter
Support Through Court
UK Collaborative Plan for Pro Bono
National Pro Bono Centre

The discussion started at 16.05.

1. Updates from the sector

Parliamentary work and Legal Aid: Justice Select Committee, and LAPG/APPG Westminster Inquiry on Legal Aid.

LAPG introduced the APG on Legal Aid Parliamentary Inquiry. It will be forward thinking and focussed on sustainability, as well as covering immediate challenges such as fees & salaries, recruitment & relation, mental health & wellbeing.

The first session was held in October, the aim is to build momentum in support of a sustainability agenda for legal aid, building on the work of the Justice Committee and the legal support plan teams at the MoJ. Five more sessions, with a session on family legal aid next week, and civil and law public December. Through a pilot survey, LAPG is gathering

data and evidence need from and interested organisations will be invited to contribute. This will also be hugely helpful in contributing to the MOJ's Criminal Legal Aid Review, and their scoping work on civil sustainability.

Pro bono and rule of law, including report back on Pro Bono Week

Reports were provided on this year's pro bono week which had presented both challenges and opportunities – see probonoweb.org.uk. With all events run online, this had been truly national event. Themes around the pandemic response, the rule of law, ethics, digital exclusion, coordination, hybrid services, triage and co-ordination had all been raised. The rule of law event was especially topical and the participants plan to make that an ongoing seminar. The committee were now working on producing learning report which is hoped will be valuable for pro bono charities.

On rule of law work more widely various participants mentioned their responses and concerns over the Faulks Review.

Funders update

London funders provided an update, £41.8M had been provided in London grants with over 100 collaborators. 48.9% in Wave 3 grants went to BAME, Women, Disability, LGBT groups/charities, and now preparing for wave 4 launch - up to £10 k inc. advice. There have been surveys of grantees and funding beyond crisis is emerging a key issue

National Advice Network Wales

Wales returned earlier than England to "lockdown" services, and further slowed the prospects of return to face to face services, however concerns about digital and phone access remain the same. Advice organisations in Wales were beginning to have big concerns around funding a big concern and access is difficult.

ELAN

Significant concerns are emerging around redundancies, and impact also on recruitment practices and retention practices. With all the changes to the furlough scheme, advisers are sometimes struggling to keep on top, especially the proliferation of guidance.

LCN also observed that we could be facing a job losses precipice – for many clients this often represents a “trigger event.”

On remote access issues more widely, Law for Life emphasised the importance of working with community organisations as intermediaries. They'd had great success in rolling out online training

HMCTS said they were now moving to a mixed access model - 70:30 remote:f2f, but they needed better data to work out what was needed/wanted.

2. Civil Justice Council National Forum – December 11th

The agenda was being finalised for running this as a remote event this year. There will be plenary sessions in the morning, followed by workshops in the afternoon.

3. Housing repossessions

Since the stay was lifted, it was reported that there was a stronger compromise rate which may be partly attributable to the rule changes and measures introduced through the civil justice council.

4. Impact of current lockdown – networks to report back and discussion

Issues about the uncertainties for both clients advice organisations were discussed in moving to and from face to face services with the lockdowns, especially for clients' trigger problems and the roundtable discussed

- o How will these trigger point issues play out and develop?
- o What does this mean for future service delivery

However, as LCN said ""We're still here" – LCN flagged their forthcoming Conference in December. A common theme for all advice organisations was around uncertainty, and the challenges that inconsistent messages presented. In the justice system, this is particularly difficult for LIPS, feedback to courts that inconsistency is damaging, particularly in LIPSS experience.

Advocate provided a powerful story on the suffering that the confusion around changing pathways has caused; with gaps in getting initial advice many pathways have gone. RCJ Advice noted that change in kind of problems, around loss of work, UC users, debt, homelessness and a steady rise in DV. With lack of face to face advice, people are seeking out different routes of access and advice organisations need to engage differently (for example with schools open, there easier contact with DV survivors via schools.)

5. Sustainability issues – follow up from previous meeting

Following up from the previous discussions on sustainability, investment in support and outreach were critical areas to meet the challenges of being able to engage in communities in difficult circumstances, and support staff and volunteers' wellbeing. Part of the challenge was about creating the a policy environment (i.e., a positive campaign for legal aid) and specific policies with funders to support the right investments, and where additional resource is most needed. Technology as a remote delivery tool for example takes investment – there needs to be an approach of long term give for long term gain.

6. Roundup

This would be the last roundtable of the year, but the information exchange provided by the Roundtable showed that a lot had been accomplished although there significant challenges around consistency and sustainability. An overall message was to keep on collecting data, evidence and stories, to share information, participate in surveys and campaigns - do what you can, when you can, including taking care of yourself.