**Advice Funders Network**

15th January 2020, 2pm-4pm

Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1R 4RL

**Attendees**

Lindsey **Poole** Advice Services Alliance

Anne **Shewring** Cripplegate Foundation

Rupinder **Parhar** Greater London Authority

Matthew **Smerdon** Legal Education Foundation

Jayne **Carter** London Borough of Camden

Katherine **Pitt** London Borough of Southwark

Shona **Harris** London Borough of Sutton

Yolande **Burgess** London Councils

Grace **Perry** London Funders

Geraldine **Tovey** London Funders

Nezahat **Cihan** London Legal Support Trust

Cristina **Andreatta** New Philanthropy Capital

Alex **Sutton** Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Kari **Holtung** Pears Foundation

Charlotte **Haywood** Social Finance Ltd

Clare **Carter** The Access To Justice Foundation

Sandra **Jones** The City Bridge Trust

Matt **Dronfield** Toynbee Hall

Sioned **Churchill** Trust for London

**Chair’s welcome & introductions**

Nezahat welcomed all to the second Advice Funders Network and gave an overview of the last [meeting](https://londonfunders.org.uk/what-we-do/events-training/advice-funders-network). This network was created following a Funding Legal Advice meeting on May 2nd. Three key issues were discussed and are the basis of this network:

1. There is a lot of duplication in the sector, there is a need for us to work together more and collaborate

2. Technology - it can be a major barrier to change; from access to ability

3. The sector’s relationship with funders is shifting. Are they partners, and should the sector be challengers?

The Advice Network has two aims:

1- To showcase relevant learning and ideas for funders looking to support advice services in London

2- To connect, contribute and cooperate together on ideas and funding to have a more coordinated approach to help people across London's communities to have better and increased access to advise services.

**Presentations**

**Lindsey Poole – Advice Services Alliance**

Advice Service Alliance has been working with the Greater London Authority (GLA) to produce a report on ‘An Evaluation of the provision of social welfare advice across London.

The research, now concluded, was compromised of desk research, surveys, meetings, interviews and focus groups. From this research we have seen:

Need for advice in London:

* Risen during the past decade, based on predictive demographic and socio-economic changes: population growth, migration, relative youth, benefits, low-incomes (20% below living wage)
* Not evenly distributed, with some communities and some areas presenting multiple and complex advice needs
* Need shifting from inner to Outer-London boroughs
* Brent, Enfield, Haringey, Newham and Barking are more likely to have a high need for advice than other London Boroughs. Croydon experiencing growth in need.

Demand for advice services:

* Advice services over-subscribed on all channels
* Big increases in enquiries regarding:
  + Universal Credit (UC)
  + Challenging disability benefit decisions, assessments and sanctions (particularly for sickness and disability benefits)
  + General welfare benefits, pensions, health and social care system changes
  + ‘Priority debt’ indebtedness
  + Housing affordability, security of tenure and homelessness
* Rise in hardship, complexity and difficulty in resolution
* Drivers: welfare reform, indebtedness, Brexit, digitization, systemic failure

Gaps and shortages:

* Often expressed as a physical presence (or lack) in a locality
* Advice provision more complex than this and more useful to consider in terms of Access to Advice for different clients
* Most acute where professional legal advice and representation is required: immigration, welfare benefits and housing
* Gaps in services on the ground in Outer-London boroughs
* Shortages in advice for young Londoners (16-25), BAME Londoners and disabled Londoners
* Focus group on advising young Londoners with input from a large group of agencies wishing to address this issue

Changing face of advice:

* Channel shift from face-to-face drop-in to telephone and web-based services (including web chat)
* More use of volunteers to deliver services (skills issue?)
* More outreach advice provision
* Often driven by funding cuts – but few think new methods are cheaper
* More health and other partnerships
* Work around use of AI – e.g. Citizens Advice Lab, Etic Lab (Routes to Justice project)

From this research it is clear that there are strategic challenges that need to be addressed in the sector. From funding shortfalls (estimated £13m), workforce retention and recruitment, infrastructure and challenging systemic failures at the source.

Recommendations from this report call for:

* Develop a shared vision of increasing access to advice through engagement with the sector
* Provide services to those most excluded and in need, facilitate services for others
* Recognize ‘vulnerability’ many forms and can change for individuals
* Facilitate Pan-London networking and strategic action across the range of policy areas through real or virtual hub
* Major push to support and engage BAME organisations, particularly in strategic bodies where voice is not heard
* More user research, engagement of users in design and delivery

**Questions for Lindsey**

Q. In terms of inner boroughs i.e. Lambeth, there is still a reasonable demand. Since the law centre and advising communities have shut down it has left a gap in the borough. Was the research specifying outer-boroughs done after this?

A. Those closures happened while the research was going on. It was interesting how quick the sector came into fill some of those gaps (Southwark law centre has stepped in to assist Lambeth).

It brings up an interesting issue about governance, ensuring organisations are strong and resilient and can cope with the knocks.

Q. How did you define ‘Advice’?

A. We referred to AQS. There was also a certain level of self-definition as well. When trying to estimate the number of non-profit organisations we pulled a list from charity commission and then skimmed through to see those we know offer advice. We found lots that said they give advice, but not we would define as advice i.e. planning

Matt also added that there are a lot of organisations who know they deliver so actively join a network. Then the ones on the side, or give advice because it is coming through, but not getting the help / resources or identifying as an ‘advice’ organisation.

Lots of faith groups and small community organisations receive people asking for advice. It may be good advice and they may be networked with local law centres, but we don’t know the numbers.

Q. Regarding the channel shift, of platforms being accessed online, is it a replacing one with another or are you seeing a multichannel approach?

A. It’s a combination of both and it depends on who’s doing it. Some new organisations are springing up online and that’s how they will be accessed. Citizens Advice have improved their website dramatically to make for easier online access. At the same time, organisations are saying they can’t keep their services going and need to find another way. More exploration is needed around how else they can deliver their services in a different way. Some are responding to ‘tech challenge’ others just need to find a different way of delivering advice.

Q. Are these organisations measuring how much people spend on different channels before they reach a solution to their problem?

A. Some organisations are, some aren’t. It is difficult to get an idea of who is using the advice and whether they have been to other places first. It’s getting better all the time and organisations are becoming more user lead and informed. But still the problem is that the person accessing needs to ‘know they have a problem’ which can be challenging if no idea of your rights.

Q. Looking at the recommendations that will come out with the report, is there a plan to implement these and where does that responsibility lie?

A. The report was done with the GLA. The recommendations are partly for them, but also for the sector as a whole. It is for group like this to take these recommendations and implement them.

Nezahat noted that some of the responsibility lies with those in this network group. Making sure we check we are following these recommendations and helping those we fund meet them also. We can check we are consistent and working from the same page.

Q. You touched on young people and how they should be brought into more discussions. Will the final report contain more recommendations?

A. The youth sector is quite strong and the advice sector overlaps with them. They’ve been working hard to set up hubs in each local authority area, where young people can go for a variety of services with advice. Help seeking behaviours are different for younger people. The youth sector to have already established and trusted places to talk about problems so they can then be directed to where they need.

Coordinating the advice sector is difficult but having specialist hubs would be great, there is talk about a lot of local partnerships coming together. But how do we get people quickly to the level of advice they need? Firstly, there is a funding issue. Core funding from boroughs has depleted and then centres became protective about advice being delivered within the borough to residents of the borough.

Q. Digital transformations are happening quickly and the expectation that people (especially young people) can access this easily turns out not to be the case in research. Lots of investment in digital / technical, but there is a worry that no one is getting people ‘ready’ to access advice services online.

A. It’s a big issue, who is it we want to target the limited resource at? There are always people excluded and we need to limit that. The sector needs to be very conscious, by not making our services more difficult for people to access. Needs to be user led and be able to strike a balance.

**Mathew Smerdon - Legal Education Foundation**

Matthew Smerdon (Chief Executive, Legal Education Foundation) presented on LEF's work developing new initiatives that respond to the need in the sector.

LEF’s new strategy, launched in January 2020, has vision to foster justice and fairness. Helping people to understand the law and bring about positive change and to prevent harm where public systems and structure uphold the rule of law.

Our work will be divided into three main programmes

1. Stronger sector
   * Development and delivery of legal education and training programmes to address systemic gaps in knowledge and practice among advice workers, paralegals, lawyers and managers.
   * Sharing learning and knowledge between practitioners and organisations to improve practice and to increase access to justice.
   * Policy work to influence the local or national statutory and regulatory framework for legal education.
   * Piloting and evaluating new approaches to delivering legal education, including, for example, flexible working, apprenticeships, remote supervision
   * Development work, led by PHF, pooled fund for tackling immigration advice. In order to host that fund (10 funders around £8million) we have had to create a subsidiary vehicle to host the fund, as doesn’t work with our charitable purpose.
2. Fairer Systems
   * Constitutional and legal implications of leaving the EU – increasing understanding of how these changes will affect the UK and devolved nations.
   * Automated decision-making by government – ensuring that government digital systems and processes are clear, fair, and protect people’s legal rights. We are particularly interested in the use of technology in relation to welfare benefits and immigration processes.
   * We will fund a range of activates across these areas of focus, including: Work to inform, advise, and support policymakers and decision-makers.
   * Co-ordination and networking between practitioners and organisations, including across sectors, to share learning and to increase effectiveness.
   * Building civil society organisations’ wider skills and knowledge in relation to our two areas of focus (above).
3. Smarter Justice
   * Develop the quantitative evidence base for what works in assisting individuals understand and use the law, and in particular, the need to address gaps in research about the outcomes people secure in relation to their legal problems.
   * Increase the use of methods that demonstrate cause and effect between intervention and outcome and improve the quality of evidence that is available to help us understand “what works”.
   * Improve the collection of, and access to, data on the justice system and related administrative datasets; and to strengthen the ability of frontline agencies to collect and use data to learn from their work
   * Expand the field of academics and researchers with the multidisciplinary skills, knowledge and expertise to conduct robust quantitative research into issues around civil and administrative justice;
   * Address the decline in funding for research exploring legal education and justice system issues.

Through these branches we are also looking at our approach to:

* Provide grants for a longer period of time
* Focus on collaborations
* Value the impact over output

**Questions to Matthew**

Q.Do you think that the upcoming court reforms will start a trend of erosion of access to justice, making it even harder for people to understand their rights?

A. Over the last month or two, we have gained *some* certainty of political context of next five years. No doubt, there will be fundamental issues around transparency and access. Technical interventions will be key to see the changes through. We need to raise this to the top of people’s agendas, such an important consideration in areas of law i.e. migration context. Parts of society whose rights will be affected, if that happens without civil society being engaged then who will observe and fight bad choices?

Q. Looking at research, what is the next step of how you feed that in to positions of change, what do you do with the evidence and hold people to account?

A. We need to answer ‘How does this lead to influence?’ We are looking at this in foundations and across funder collaborations. What are our powers of influence? Also relevant to the sector, coming together and it is not very clear at the moment about its role and opportunities and capacity. i.e. last year there were many good relationships with MPs, who are now gone and we have to start from scratch. There is the possibility of now having great access to government departments than before, but the notes the difference between access and influence.

Q. In terms of data, algorithms and decision making, is that part of smarter justice? And what part can we play when funding?

A. The way we have approached this is by asking ‘how does it adhere to rules of law?’ Transparency, accountability and rights protected.

It may be that the application of these technologies can make better decision making. Not for against, but if these tools can improve the advice sector then it would be great.

PHF – just funded organisation about advocacy and campaigning and algorithms. What role can the foundation play?

Q. Do you have plans to scale up the fellowship programme?

A. At the moment we are funding 20 fellows a year. One of the factors that determine is applications of places who can host fellows. We will be looking at how we can help organisations so they can host fellows and provide great training for them as well as getting the benefits themselves. In terms of scale, we don’t want the programme to grow too large, as it loses the connections being developed by the trainees. In the distant future there will be reforms to solicitor training, this will give the sector and us an opportunity for flexibility.

**Further Resources**

Universal Credit, London Borough of Southwark - <https://www.southwark.gov.uk/benefits-and-support/safe-as-houses-universal-credit>

2020-2025 Strategy, Legal Education Foundation - <https://www.thelegaleducationfoundation.org/about-the-legal-education-foundation/our-strategy-2020-2025>

Research & Evidence, Advice Services Alliance - <https://asauk.org.uk/whats-useful-research-and-evidence/>