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Increasing Access to Justice in Liverpool Project: Preliminary Findings



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Executive Summary

In 2019 Liverpool City Council agreed to fund a project to combat and to evidence the severe impact of cuts to access to justice funding, particularly access to free legal advice in Liverpool. The project is a strong partnership between the Council, the School of Law and Social Justice at the University of Liverpool, and Citizens Advice Liverpool (CAL), who won the tender to employ the project's network development manager.

The project aims to interview every organisation in Liverpool that gives free legal advice, and all those that refer people to these organisations. This research will enable us to map and understand advice provision in Liverpool. It will provide evidence of the impact of government access to justice policy in Liverpool, and also the impact of COVID 19 on the advice sector.

The project will strengthen the collaboration between agencies through establishing an *Access to Advice Network*. The mapping and research conducted will inform this network development. Central to this is an e-referral system, which will give people quicker access to the advice they need, and the sharing of training resources.

The COVID 19 pandemic has led to the project being reorganised. We brought forward the network development and started it alongside the mapping of advice provision. The research has been conducted through online interviews with individual organisations. We have had strong engagement from advice agencies, local support organisations, MP offices, and national charities across Liverpool.

The referral network has been set up, and protocols established. To date, 5 organisations have joined, 19 are at the final stage before joining, and another 24 organisations have expressed an interest. The mapping of provision is almost complete and we have interviewed 29 organisations about advice provision and the impact of COVID 19. Themes emerging from the first phase of advice provision research analysis are lack of funding, the negative impact of competition between organisations, the need for diverse organisations, the ad hoc nature of referrals and partnerships at present, the importance of trust, and the variation in understanding of the boundary between information and advice.

The launch of the project in January meant we were ideally placed to get early evidence of the COVID 19 impact on Liverpool in terms of access to justice, which will help planning. Interviewees have described rapid service delivery changes due to COVID 19, with the closure of face-to-face services and considerable efforts put in to reaching people they support. Interviewees indicated the impact of the crisis on essentials, such as accommodation and food. There is also a sense that the crisis has temporarily delayed problems and that the months ahead will bring an avalanche of client issues when benefits assessments, evictions and debt collections resume, and as the economic consequences unfurl. Finally, there is evidence of a COVID 19 exacerbated communication and digital divide.

This analysis will inform the development of the network, decisions about training priorities, and the online research interviews and group meetings in the second half of the project. The aim is to have the main advice providers using the referral network by the end of the year, and to have developed a plan for the sustainability of the project so that all relevant organisations can connect through the network.

1 – Outline and aims of project

Project Aim – Increase evidence of impact of legal aid cuts and welfare reform in Liverpool, and increase the effectiveness of free legal advice provision in Liverpool.

- Map and understand advice services and organisational partnerships in Liverpool
- Provide a strong evidence base of the impact of access to justice policies and of COVID 19.
- Increase access to justice:
 - Improve partnership working between local advice agencies, particularly referrals within and across sectors.
 - Improve access to advice services
 - Develop training capacity in relation to access to advice

Project Scope – Free legal advice providers in all areas of social welfare law, and organisations that refer people to these providers, usually those that deliver support that is complementary to these services, such as in companion legal areas or advocacy.

Project Activities

The project is organised in to four work packages, two that are research related, led by the University of Liverpool, School of Law and Social Justice (SLSJ), and two that are related to network development, led by the network development manager, employed by Citizens Advice Liverpool:

- WP1 – Mapping of existing free legal advice providers in the private and third sector, the partnerships between them, and understanding the availability and type of free legal advice services in Liverpool.
- WP2 – Network development of free legal advice providers in Liverpool. Focus is the development of a system for client referrals between agencies with agreed protocols, and the development of an access to advice network that will see stronger collaboration between organisations.
- WP3 – Identifying and maximising training opportunities to reskill legal help providers in Employment law, Housing law and welfare rights law.
- WP4 – Publication of research outputs based on project evidence, and further research related to legal aid cuts and welfare rights reforms.

Project Background

As part of the decade-long austerity programme begun under the Coalition government, legal aid funding for civil law issues was cut dramatically.¹ At the same time, there are increased financial pressures on advice-giving organisations from the extensive cuts to local authority budgets and other sources of funding. Evidence, including from a major research study conducted in Liverpool, has shown that the cuts to legal aid and reduction in its scope have had a significant impact on people's lives and on their ability to resolve legal issues.² The result is that people are unable to

¹ Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012.

² J. Organ, J. Sigafos, B. Crawford, A. Eaton, M. Pötschulat, P. Sharma, M. Waite and M. Whiteford, *Routes to Justice? The Impact of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012* (2018) EHRC <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/impact-laspo-routes-justice>; C. Fitzpatrick,

resolve legal issues, or resolution is delayed. This leads to financial, mental and physical health, and emotional issues, either directly caused, or contributed to, by the inability to resolve a legal issue. A significant number of people have multiple legal issues at once that combine to exacerbate problems and lead to the most serious possible consequences, such as homelessness and suicide.

These cuts to sources of free legal advice have significantly affected all areas of civil law. As a result, there is a dramatic reduction in the capacity of organisations from all sectors to provide free legal advice. In welfare rights, for example, legal aid funded cases dropped from 135,000 to approximately 400 today. There are fewer caseworkers to prepare or represent client cases, decreased capacity for early legal advice, and a loss of skills available to support organisations as they try to adjust to the new funding reality, and an increased reliance on volunteers.³

Reform of the welfare system was another important and related part of the austerity programme. By 2020, there has been an estimated £27 billion less spent on welfare than in 2010,⁴ and this figure is expected to reach £37 billion by the end of 2021.⁵ These welfare policies have had direct consequences for people's health, and there are widespread concerns that health impact evidence has been ignored. For example, the Working Capabilities Assessment (WCA) and Universal Credit (UC), which were introduced as part of these welfare policies, are associated with numerous health and social issues, such as suicides, mental health problems, antidepressant prescribing, and increased foodbank use.⁶ The impact of these austerity cuts was unevenly felt across the country, with areas of relatively greater deprivation experiencing larger cuts. The impact of the reforms has included an increase in destitution in the UK, and it is estimated that at some point in 2017 over 1.5 million people were destitute in the UK, including 356,000 children.⁷

Access to welfare and legal advice is an important component in understanding the pathway from poverty, welfare support and health outcomes. The latest DWP data has shown that 70% of WCA

G. McKeever and M. Simpson, 'Destitution and paths to justice' (2018) Joseph Rowntree Foundation. <https://research.thelegaleducationfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Destitution-Report-Final-Full-.pdf>.

³J. Organ, J. and J. Sigafos, 'What if there is nowhere to get advice?'. (2017) In A. Flynn, and J. Hodgson (Eds.), *Access to Justice and Legal Aid: Comparative Perspectives on Unmet Legal Need*, Oxford: Hart Publishing.

⁴ J. Tucker, *The Austerity Generation: the impact of a decade of cuts on family incomes and child poverty*. (2017) Child Poverty Action Group. Available from:

<https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/Austerity%20Generation%20FINAL.pdf>

⁵ https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/sep/23/welfare-spending-uk-poorest-austerity-frank-field?CMP=share_btn_link

⁶ B. Barr, D. Taylor-Robinson, D. Stuckler, R. Loopstra, A. Reeves, M. Whitehead, 'First, do no harm': are disability assessments associated with adverse trends in mental health? A longitudinal ecological study.' *J Epidemiol Community Health*. (2015) 70(4):jech-2015-206209; S. Arie, 'Doctors' concerns over universal credit are mounting', *BMJ* (2018) 5131 (December):k5131–k5131; A. Jitendra, E. Thorogood, M. Hadfield-Spoor, G. Samaras, *Left behind. Is universal credit truly universal?* (2018) Trussell Trust, 1–21; The Trussell Trust, *The next stages of universal credit: moving onto the new benefit system and foodbank use*, (2018)

<https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/universal-credit-and-foodbank-use/>; M. Cheetham, S. Moffatt, M. Addison, 'It's hitting people that can least afford it the hardest' the impact of the roll out of Universal Credit in two North East England localities: a qualitative study.' 2018;1–47; M. Cheetham, S. Moffatt, M. Addison, et al, 'Impact of Universal Credit in North East England: a qualitative study of claimants and support staff', *BMJ Open* 2019;9:e029611; S. Wickham, L. Bentley, T. Rose, M. Whitehead, D. Taylor-Robinson, B. Barr, 'Effects on mental health of a UK welfare reform, Universal Credit: a longitudinal controlled study', *Lancet Public Health* 2020;5(3):e157–e164.

⁷S. Fitzpatrick, G. Bramley, F. Sosenko, J. Blenkinsopp, J. Wood, S. Johnsen, M. Littlewood, B. Watts, *Destitution in the UK 2018*, (2018) The Joseph Rowntree Foundation <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/destitution-uk-2018>.

appeals were overturned.⁸ This factor highlights the importance and need for access to advice and support around welfare changes and the benefit system for those in need. Given that before the COVID 19 pandemic it was estimated that 64% of households in the UK receive some kind of welfare benefit,⁹ changes to the welfare system—even those that have small individual effects—can have major implications for population health. Many local areas have developed strategies to try and mitigate the adverse effects of UC, and indeed other welfare changes,¹⁰ through providing advice and discretionary payments. Liverpool’s Citizen Support Scheme and the Council’s Inclusive Growth Strategy are excellent examples.

The COVID 19 crisis has further highlighted the value of access to legal advice at times of sudden change to people’s lives. This was already evident to organisations working to support and advise people, and the impact of sudden changes in life circumstances and the spiral in to multiple interconnected legal issues this can cause is well-documented.¹¹ As is the connection between health and legal issues, and to poverty. The implications for population health of changes to welfare policy is now likely to be higher in light of the large influx of new claimants to UC, as well as ESA and JSA, during the COVID 19 pandemic. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Dr Therese Coffey stated in May 2020 that the volume of new UC claims was at six times the normal rate, with 1.8 million new claimants from 16 March 2020 to the end of April.¹² A strong access to justice policy, particularly one that facilitates access to advice, is now even more essential to break these links and the negative spiral that divorce, job loss, health and financial problems can often trigger. The aim of advice is to limit the impact of these life events to the short term, rather than worsening over the longer term and multiplying problems. In extreme cases, advice at the right time can save lives.

This project will mitigate some of the worst impacts of the legal aid and austerity reforms on access to justice for social welfare by increasing the effectiveness of the remaining services through a stronger referral network in Liverpool. Doing more with less though is only one part of the solution, so this project will also identify more clearly the issues that the reforms have caused and indicate some of the longer-term policy changes needed to increase access to justice. The resources and knowledge shared and developed in this project will help build a more sustainable legal advice network in Liverpool, and ensure that decisions relating to access to justice in Liverpool are made with a strong evidence base to maximise resources, impact and innovation.

⁸ Department for Work and Pensions, *Employment and support allowance: outcomes of work capability assessments*. (2020) London: Department for Work and Pensions.

⁹ The Guardian. Benefits in Britain: separating the facts from the fiction. April 6, 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/06/welfare-britain-facts-myths>.

¹⁰ S Wood; CIPFA Benefits and Revenues Service. *Preparing for universal credit in local authorities. 3. Impact of welfare reform and universal credit roll-out* (2015) [https://www.cipfa.org/tisonline/~media/files/policy%20and%20guidance/panels/housing/welfare%20background%20document.pdf?la=en](https://www.cipfa.org/tisonline/~/media/files/policy%20and%20guidance/panels/housing/welfare%20background%20document.pdf?la=en)

¹¹ J. Organ, J. Sigafos et al (2018) fn (2); C. Fitzpatrick, G. McKeever and M. Simpson (2018) fn (2).

¹² Parliament, ‘Covid 19: Update from the Department of Work and Pensions’, 04/05/20 <https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2020/may/covid-19-update-from-department-of-work-and-pensions/>

2 – Research report - activity and preliminary emerging themes

The project includes a strong research element to support the long term planning of legal advice in Liverpool, to identify the impact of legal aid and welfare rights reforms, and to effect change that will reduce these impacts in the long-term. The research is led and part-funded by the University of Liverpool School of Law and Social Justice.

The research has three strands that support and draw on the other aspects of the project:

First, the definition of legal advice and information in the advice sector.

Secondly, a mapping exercise to identify the provision of social welfare law at different levels of legal advice in Liverpool, the gaps in this provision, and the partnerships between organisations.

Thirdly, the impact of COVID 19 on advice provision in Liverpool.

This report presents interim findings about the legal advice landscape in Liverpool. To date, the project team have conducted 29 interviews with third sector organisations, large and small, private legal advice providers, MPs offices, and others. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and analysis has begun. Key emerging themes include:

- **Negative Impact of Precarious Funding and Competition**

Organisations emphasised their dependence on various funding streams, and the limited resources available. Funding is often short-term which can lead to successful services being stopped and skills being lost, and time spent reorganising services focussed on the funder rather than clients' needs.

'Funders will only fund you for a certain period of time, and once you've hit their objectives and you've hit their target ... you can't go back to them for a certain period of time, you need to sort of plan a completely new project.'

Competition for funding is seen as negative with time spent fighting for funds with potential partners and former colleagues. It is also seen as taking focus away from the clients.

'We found ourselves in competition with our own colleagues and with organisations that we've previously worked with, and that is really heart breaking. ... But I think on the top of it, what we then lose sight of is the humanity and we lose sight of the person, and the individual.'

- **The local advice ecosystem needs all of its parts**

There is a need for a diversity of organisations providing advice services to particular populations or to people with particular advice needs. There is also a need for the big advice organisations in the city, such as Citizens Advice Liverpool. Funding needs to reflect this so that smaller organisations do not get overlooked.

'The difficulty for us is, we cannot win in that situation because ... no one, least of all us, wants to undercut a CAB contract that props up the advice sector in Liverpool. Because the CAB is doing the lion's share of the work and if they weren't there we'll be in disaster territory. But we know they are not meeting the demand at a every local level. There need needs to be CAB plus something here.'

'You can't survive without the smaller [organisations] ... if they fall over then then we fall over. But then that's the other side. You know, if Citizens Advice Liverpool fell over we'd all be screwed. So we can't cope without each other.'

- **Collaboration, Referrals and Communication in the sector are piecemeal, rather than general**

There is recognition of the need for collaboration across the advice sector to improve quality of referrals and services delivered.

‘Yeah. I think it’s really important and make best use of resources really. I mean resources for the voluntary sector are poor. So, we could, we can only benefit from more joint working ... any initiatives to improve the linkage, partnerships can only be beneficial.’

Currently collaboration is ad hoc and limited, and less ‘joined up’ than in other cities, such as London and Birmingham.

‘There's no meetings, there's no email exchange. There's no updating each other about when we're open, when we're closed, if we were sent a referral that's wrong, if we could signpost to them or not. That's the bare minimum, and that isn't even happening.’

There are referrals being made between organisations, but no consistency of process or expectation, and tend to be to a few trusted partners. Partnerships and trust have been built up over the years, and the referral process varies from partner to partner. The appropriateness of referrals is a key concern. Outcomes do not tend to be tracked, but there is recognition of the importance for follow up with vulnerable clients and in complex situations and organisations act on this where possible.

The distinction between signposting and referrals is recognised by most organisations, but not always clear. Organisations using the Refernet system are one of the exceptions.

‘So, if people are referred through Refernet, then ... they know we’ve accepted that referral because this is a hard referral then, it’s different than signposting. ... So, we’ll say we’ve received that referral and then, say two weeks later, once we have remedied the situation, we will say that person’s been advised, and it’s now closed. Without going to what the advice is.’

For partners, such as MPs’ offices, that are referring clients to advice agencies there is a clear sense of the limited availability of advice provision, and difficulties of accessing it.

‘The average person would find it very difficult to access these [advice] services sometimes, because of the amount of people going through the services. ... I know they’ll spend a few hours queuing, waiting, just to get their advice ... I just wish there was more, more staff in the advice centres. Because I feel sometimes we are overwhelming them.’

- **Specialist representation for appeals is scarce but needed**

A few organisations have capacity to provide specialist representation for people appealing benefits decisions. A number of others have occasional situations where they provide this assistance for complex cases or vulnerable clients, but this is rarely funded. For most, this was identified as a gap.

‘So we will represent on all employment support allowance but only PIP when, the client’s vulnerable, and we don't feel that may be the submission is going to give it the chance of success that we would hope. Otherwise we let the client attend alone with the PIP.’

- **There is a need for linked-up services**

Clients present with an immediate issue, but it is often part of an interlinked set of problems. They may need a food parcel because they need help sorting their benefits claim, and that may be linked to a need for employment law advice. Organisations are trying to join up service delivery and using some co-location in order to address these root issues.

‘So, ... in the process of dealing with that debt, they’ll say, I have got so much money coming in, and we’ll say wait a minute, that’s not right. You should be entitled to benefits. And then you know, we could identify a benefit issue. There are 6 of you living in one room, we identify a housing issue.’

Some aspects of this are working well.

‘Council Tax Support is pretty seamless now ... Once you put in your UC claim in, you would tick the box that you’ve agreed... for them to let your local authority know, Liverpool City Council will then process the Council Tax Support based upon UC Claim information.’

- **No Recourse to Public Funds/ Lack of Status is a gap.**

Some potential clients fall outside of the support services that are available because they are asylum seekers or others with no recourse to public funds. These clients cannot access a number of services. Immigration advice is very limited. A number of organisations indicated that they can help these potential clients with their issues once they have received their status allowing them to settle, but not before.

- **Trust is essential for Clients and Organisations**

Trust is important for client access to services. Clients trust particular organisations, because they are based in a community, geographical or otherwise. Trust is important for a referral network and partnerships to function. Organisations trust those they have developed relationships with over a period of time.

‘When you hit a certain stage where you may not be able to support [service users], it is very difficult because that service user has got so much trust and so much security in you ... also if they move to anyone else, it means that they are constantly having to repeat their story meaning that they are reliving that story and potentially re-traumatising.’

‘There is trust, you know, and don’t forget, there is 30 years behind the charity.’

‘I think that the biggest way that we’ve got cases in the past it’s being by word of mouth, because we’ve been based in the community that we are in since 1973.’

- **Organisations have adapted their service delivery in response to COVID 19**

It has been a challenge and many organisations are worried about the clients that they are not seeing. Nevertheless, they have adapted their models to serve their clients online or over the telephone. Some saw increased demand immediately, but many are expecting a storm of increased demand after the pauses in the official mechanisms that brought clients to their services – benefits assessments and reassessments, evictions, etc.

There has been a particular focus on maintaining the availability of essential items, such as food, accommodation, cleaning products and so on.

There is a digital divide that has been exacerbated by the COVID 19 crisis due to the reliance on technology to adapt services. Some clients do not have the capacity to navigate an increasingly digital welfare system. The closure of almost all offices has badly eroded the support systems that were in place to remedy this. Their closure has also impacted access to services for those with English as a second language.

‘A lot of our clients fit into the vulnerable category, and the advice workers give them the support that’s necessary really to move forward particularly in terms of any digital claims they have. Now obviously this is a relatively new area of work. But I think the concerns that the advice workers have

got is that these people are not getting a service from us or anyone else because of the nature of their emergency and the way the benefit system is gradually being transferred to a digital system. So, it's not taken into account the fact that a lot of vulnerable people in our society are excluded from digital.'

The COVID19 crisis has led many services to look to work in partnership with other agencies.

'The other side of it is people who maybe have multiple problems, maybe got chaotic lifestyles. They haven't got access to phone or digital. That's more of a challenging one and we are looking at partnering with organisations like Whitechapel to put video conferencing facilities in there where people can go activate a video chat with one of our advisers.'

- **There is no clear division between advice and information**

The terms 'information', 'advice' and 'legal advice' mean different things to different people. Many participants were reluctant to call their services advice, even when providing services that could be categorised as such. The meaning of these terms depends on a range of factors, such as the type and size of organisation, the funding requirements for a service, the complexity of a case, and the presence of a quality mark.

'So, the information and guidance for the complex cases is more about directing the service user as to what path they may wish to go down. So, it's kind of identify what their key kind of issues are and what they want to.'

Some, but not all organisations recognise the importance of making a clear distinction between advice and information.

'You need to be really clear about what's information you are just reading versus your knowledge base and experience and training. ... With advice rather than information, you will be going through choices and opportunities for people. Going through their choices and thought process.'

3 – Network development report

Preparatory Phase - Month 1-2:

- Planning project delivery and establishing project outcomes, indicators and deliverables
- Access to Justice Project timeline created after discussion with University around timescales to deliver project activities and outcomes: mapping of existing free legal advice providers in the private and third sector; developing the access to advice network.
- Due to the time sensitive nature of the project, agreed it would be more efficient to carry out mapping exercise and network development simultaneously.
- Changes were made to the project time-line. We focused instead on development of referral network at this stage, rather than training provision or training needs analysis, to complement the ongoing work by the University.
- Mapping out key services, service provision over lockdown and identifying key network groups/forums already operating in the city.

Progress so far - Months 2-4:

Development of the referral process and system has advanced positively. Extensive work has gone into developing procedure on the addition of new partners to the network, as well as how to work with our city region CA offices in relation to the Liverpool funded project. It was important to spend a substantial amount of time and effort into the development of a carefully planned and measured procedure for adding new partners and managing those partners once using the system. Connecting with similar network groups around the country (NCAN – Norfolk, EAPN – Refugee Action, National, Access to Justice Foundation – National, GBAS – Birmingham), was extremely useful, having obtained shared resources and guidance on creating a referrals network.

Alongside CAL's I.T. Manager, we have created a '*Data Sharing Agreement*' & '*Memorandum of Understanding*' for partners using Refernet. The MofU was chosen instead of a partnership agreement as it is not defined as a legally binding document. It explains the expectations and responsibilities of both the licence holder and partner agency in relation to the use of Refernet and outlines the principles of collaboration, information on intellectual property and problem solving. Both documents need to be signed by joining agencies and sent to us with a confirmation of various policies and ICO registration number.

As part of the referral group joining procedure, organisations are also required to fill out our '**New Proposals Form**' & '**New Partner Checklist**' – both of these documents are used to ensure that we have all of the correct information about organisations before their profile is created on Refernet. This part of the role involves coordinating with external partners to get as much information as possible to try and understand their service, and translate that into their Refernet profile to share with other agencies. Formally, the network of agencies that use Refernet is called the "Multi-Partner Referrals Group" and we have also developed a site which contains 3 in depth user guides and power-point presentations on how to use refer-net. The Group also has a committee, the Multi-Partner Referrals Committee, which is made up of an I.T. sub group (responsible for ensuring and checking that partners meet the minimum security requirements) and what we call, City Region

Sponsors. Our sponsors in the local CA city region offices will ensure that the correct procedure is followed when adding on their partners to Refernet.

We have developed a standard framework for using the referral system. The “Policy & Procedure” guide for agencies using the system will ensure that all referrals are handled correctly and fairly. It also encourages organisations to make good quality referrals, and ensure that organisations receiving those referrals improve access to advice for the client.

We have also been liaising with Refernet developers regarding suggested improvements to the system and developing the system’s reporting function for which they have now completed a proposal. The estimated cost for the new reporting function is estimated at £10,000. This will almost certainly add value to their product and is a feature that appears to be highly attractive to partners joining the system. Potential routes of funding this should be explored.

Status of Organisations in relation to Referral System

Project Phase	No of organisations	Notes
P1 - Initial Contact	37	Including MP offices and local councillors
P2 – Organisation Responded	32	No response from 8 organisations
P3 – Expression of Interest	24	
P4 – Agreed to join referral system	19	14 have booked a demo
P5 – Joined Referral System	6	

Feedback from organisations that have started to use Refernet has been positive:

‘Really useful as I can now get some referrals closed. We have had nearly 50 so far. It’s really working very well. Thanks so much for involving us in Referent – I think it’s a great system and the way forward.’

Access to Advice Network

The group containing the partners using the referral system – the ‘multi partner referral group’ - will be one part of the **‘Access to Advice Network’**. The Network will bring together advice agencies and organisations delivering services that include information giving and advocacy that leads to legal advice. Its aim is to increase access to advice and the effectiveness of legal help provision through improving networking and referrals within the sector. Terms of reference for the network and its steering committee will be developed with partners. Initiatives within the network include;

- an advice and referrals forum
- the multi-partner referral group
- a training booking platform and shared training scheme
- Website for access to and information about the network.

Liverpool Advice Forum

The development of the Liverpool Advice Forum is central to the long term success of the advice network. As we continue to work with existing and new partners in the referral group, preparations into establishing the advice and referrals forum are underway. Initially, our main focus will be to invite our main stakeholders to join the forum to;

- Share information, updates, experience, resources and skills across key thematic areas
- Develop effective working practises across the advice sector
- Work together to identify solutions for our mutual clients
- Increase capacity and access to legal help provision
- Eliminate duplication of effort
- Discuss cross sector issues and welfare reform.

The forum will include representation from the main network groups and will strengthen the alignment between welfare benefits, debt, housing and other advice services. The initial forum will be an important milestone in the future of the advice network, as we will collectively finalise the network's terms of reference. Additionally, we will work towards agreed representation to the forum from various strategic groups across Liverpool, and best to liaise with other forum, such as the Law Society's Access to Justice forum. Advertisement of the forum is underway and we aim to have the first forum by beginning to mid-October.



4 – Looking ahead

Research

Analysis of the first round of research interviews will be completed in July. The objective is to identify the themes that have emerged from the first round of interviews and to identify any gaps in the research, either by type of organisation, area of law, client demographics or the geographic focus of organisations. We will conclude phase 1 of the research by interviewing organisations that would fill any gaps identified.

We will write an academic journal article to submit in October, and publish a policy brief in September based on the findings from phase one of the project.

Phase 2 of the research side of project will then be redesigned based on this analysis. We will hold group meetings online with a small, selected group of organisations well placed to explore in greater depth specific themes that have emerged in the first phase of interviews. These meetings will last approximately 1 hour and the small group of organisations will allow for meaningful group interaction despite the online approach. We expect these meetings to take place in September and October.

After the meetings in September and October we will transcribe and analyse the meetings, and then write up the research findings. We will publish a project report at the end of 2020 that will describe free legal advice provision in Liverpool and include policy recommendations to develop access to legal information and advice for people in Liverpool.

Network Development

Continuing the growth of the referral network, in the second half of the project and beyond, is central to the aim of increasing access to justice in Liverpool. In the second half of 2020 we aim to double the number of organisations using the referral system, and the number of clients that are referred between organisations. This will speed up access to advice for people in Liverpool and reduce the impact of civil law issues on their lives. The main providers of advice in Liverpool will be using the referral network to receive and make referrals by the end of 2020.

We will establish an Access to Advice Network, as outlined above, to build collaboration between network users and across the 3rd sector, and implement the training programme. The development of the Liverpool Advice Forum is central to this. We will monitor the quality of referrals in terms of appropriateness, timeliness and quality of information and feedback to the Access to Advice network. We will also monitor organisation and client satisfaction. We will also seek to use the Access to Advice network to collaborate between organisations beyond the parameters of the project.

We must plan for the sustainability of the advice network. This first year is just the start of much needed collaboration between advice agencies that will have a significant impact on access to justice in Liverpool. The rewards will be felt more strongly in future years as the network strengthens, and without further funding the gains in terms of relationship building and improved referral processes may well be lost.