

Written evidence submitted by Bangor University Access to Justice and Law and Technology Research Groups (ATJ0121)

Summary

Access to justice is severely limited by legal aid cuts, ‘advice deserts’, and systemic inequality. Supplementary community services help but cannot replace professional legal advice. Sustainable funding, better public legal education, hybrid digital-human solutions, and stronger regulatory/IT infrastructure are needed to close the justice gap.

Research Background

- Based on Bangor University’s research into Access to Justice, Law & Technology, and experiences of its Legal Advice Clinic.
- Funded projects included studies on community-level legal advice (British Academy/Nuffield Foundation) and legal innovation/AI systems (SRA/Regulators Pioneer Fund).

Access to Justice

- Social Welfare Legal Problems: 2/3 of 191 interviewees had experienced legal issues; only 2 had seen a solicitor (self-funded).
- Legal Aid Deserts: Many areas lack accessible legal aid, with demand exceeding supply in places like Hackney.
- Social Networks: Communities influence advice-seeking; negative perceptions spread quickly and discourage engagement.
- Digital Legal Services: Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) shows potential but remains fragmented and poorly understood.

Role of Supplementary Advice Services

- Informal services (community centres, faith groups, foodbanks, local organisations) play a critical role in guiding people through rights and entitlements.
- Community navigators/super-connectors help signpost but face limits due to capacity, resources, and sustainability.
- Networks and wellbeing: Larger/more connected social networks correlate with better wellbeing and higher problem resolution.
- Limits: Many problems still require specialist legal advice, especially where caused by structural inequality, service failures, or cuts.

Litigants in Person

- Lack of legal aid means most family and housing cases in North Wales involve self-representation.
- This causes delays, pressures courts/judges, and worsens stress for clients (including children).

Funding Priorities

- Public legal education to raise awareness of rights and advice services.
- Sustainable core funding for advice services, ideally long-term and grant-based, not short project contracts.
- Focus on local dynamics—services must be embedded in communities, not imposed.
- Reduce failure demand (problems created by system failures, e.g., government errors).

- Community hubs should be culturally/linguistically reflective and well-connected to formal services.

Regulators & Innovation

- The SRA and partners funded work exploring ODR and AI tools for unmet legal need.
- Prototype systems were built to test LLMs in recommending ODR tools (e.g., for employment law).

Pro Bono & University Clinics

- Citizens Advice and third-sector groups heavily relied upon.
- University legal clinics provide some help, but usually only letters of advice, not representation; demand exceeds capacity.

Early Dispute Resolution

- Mediation, restorative justice, and ODR could help but need funding, incentives, and standards.

Digital Innovation & Data

- Preference for in-person advice remains strong, due to trust and accessibility.
- Digital tools best suited for transactional/simple issues (triage, one-off queries).
- Hybrid model recommended: digital pathways plus human support.
- Explanatory visualisation tools (e.g., Artemus, EmployODR) help clients and advisors understand pathways.
- Shared referral platforms needed to overcome IT/data barriers between agencies.
- Standardised data collection (demographics, outcomes) essential to target underserved groups.

Legal Aid Reform

- Must be sustainable and better remunerated to keep lawyers in the system.
- Suggested improvements:
 - Higher fees and simplification of processes.
 - Stronger incentives for early settlement.
 - Investment in IT to cut costs.
 - Avoiding a “fast food” model by maintaining quality oversight.

Full Submission

This submission is primarily based on Bangor University led research into Access to Justice, especially at community level, and research into Law and Technology, particularly our collaborative work researching legal innovation and explanatory visualisation for access to justice, which spans the design of explainable legal AI systems, ODR tools, and legal design evaluation methods. Additional comments also relate to experiences of Bangor University Legal Advice Clinic and local partners.

Our recent research into *The Role of Communities and Connections in Social Welfare Legal Advice* was funded by the British Academy and Nuffield Foundation collaboration on Understanding Communities, and our submission reflects the views of the authors, not those of the Academy or Foundation. This research compared the social welfare legal advice-seeking behaviours of people in four diverse case-study areas across England and Wales, their social

networks, and their community facilities and characteristics, and examined how access to advice interacts with community connectedness, (in)equality and wellbeing. In this research we undertook desk top analysis of community characteristics and advice organisations; engaged with social welfare legal advice providers, the community voluntary and social enterprise (CVSE) sector, and other key local individuals, through workshops and other activities to understand how they connect with communities and the challenges faced; and conducted semi-structured interviews with local people, examining their social networks, the legal problems they had experienced, and their approaches to advice-seeking.

Relating to digital innovation, we draw on our recent works – including an IEEE (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers) VIS 2025 poster on explainable visualisation for law, a study on harnessing generative AI for ODR in employment law, a comprehensive survey of visual tools for legal interpretation, and a critical design strategy for evaluating visualisation designs. Some of this work was funded by the UK Government, via the Solicitors Regulation Authority, as part of the Regulators Pioneer Fund (RPF). As part of an RPF3 project, Bangor University developed a prototype Web-based system to assess the effectiveness of AI, specifically Large Language Models (LLMs) in facilitating the recommendation of appropriate ODR tools to people with issues related to employment law. The research reported here represents the views of the authors, and not necessary those of the funders.

We draw on this various research in response to the key questions where our expertise and research-based evidence is relevant.

1. How does the current state of the legal services and representation market in England and Wales, and associated operating pressures, affect access to justice for clients?

In our research into social welfare legal advice and communities, we interviewed 191 individuals (52 in Deeplish in Rochdale; 39 in Bryngwran a village on Anglesey; 49 in Dartmouth; and 51 in Hackney). At least two-thirds of these interviewees reported experiencing at least one social welfare legal problem in the last two years. Only two of the 191 interviewees had received legal advice from a solicitor, and this was self-funded on the recommendation of family members. Many of the interviewees had received information, support and/or advice from ‘supplementary advice services’ which we discuss below in answer to question 2.

Communities engaged in our research experienced various problems in seeking access to legal advice from lawyers. Bryngwran, Dartmouth, and Deeplish, are located in so-called ‘legal aid deserts’ for most, if not all, areas of social welfare law. Although Hackney is not a ‘legal aid desert’ as such, legal professionals engaging with our research were clear that demand far outstrips supply here and that many potential clients cannot be assisted, with firms turning to strategic litigation as a means to support communities facing systemic issues.

Our research focused particularly on social networks, including the size, connectedness and composition of interviewees’ social networks. We found that in addition to the benefits of social networks (discussed further below), social networks also have the potential to impede access to help and advice for problem resolution. Where members of well-connected communities share negative experiences of advice and/or of public services, others are subsequently less likely to access those services. A perception or reputation that certain services ‘won’t be able to help’, or that state processes are set against you and deliberately complex to navigate, can sometimes be based on a one-off experience or unjustified assumptions, which are then widely shared, having potentially unwarranted effects on services’ reputations and inhibiting effects on advice-seeking behaviour. We found, in particular, perceptions about difficulties accessing

legal services, especially legal aid funded services, were shared in social networks, and that perceptions around ‘advice deserts’ and the relative (un)affordability of legal services, might be more negative than the reality for some communities. Negative media coverage about welfare benefits claimants, and about social welfare lawyers, was shared in close-knit social networks and appeared to have a detrimental impact on advice-seeking behaviours.

The operating pressures facing legal aid funded services are already well-documented, our research provides further evidence that these pressures lead to a reduced service, with no reported use of legal aid funded services across our research, but also that the operating environment of negativity around welfare claimants and social welfare lawyers dissuades people from seeking the legal advice that is available. Across our various methods of research, we found a perception that social welfare has become more abstracted from communities, with the responsibility for resolving social welfare legal problems seen as lying solely with those experiencing them, rather than as a collective responsibility of communities, advice providers and of society; thus, negatively impacting access to justice.

North Wales in particular includes some extremely rural communities so access to legal services is limited. Unlike the South and most of England pro bono services are also relatively limited so clients that cannot afford to pay for legal advice are often left to fend for themselves.

The growing market for digital online legal services is also important here. For example, Online Dispute resolution (ODR) has emerged as central to the digital transformation of justice. However, our research finds that the concept of ODR remains insufficiently articulated, and the developing market for ODR tools is poorly understood and fragmented. At its widest, ‘ODR tools’ could mean any online sources that may assist people in resolving disputes, this then expands to any websites providing legal information, public legal education sites, advice provider websites, government websites, as well as specific tools providing more active help and support with the resolution of existing or emerging disputes, up to and including law firms providing legal services through AI. In our research we found that ODR remains little understood among the wider legal and adjacent professions, and among the public as potential users. Alongside the enormous potential positives for access to justice of online legal services, including ODR tools, the fragmented nature of the online legal services environment at this time also has negative consequences in terms of awareness, appropriateness, accessibility, and effectiveness. Several respondents to our research described the current environment as somewhat of a ‘wild west’. It is likely that initiatives, such as the Online Procedure Rule Committee inclusion framework and pre-action model for the digital justice system will start to address some of these concerns.

2. What is the role of supplementary advice services in supporting access to justice?

In our research we focused on social welfare legal advice providers as services that provide free and independent advice on social welfare issues to members of the public. The majority of social welfare legal advice services are classified within the voluntary, not for profit or charitable sectors, although some are provided by statutory bodies (such as local authorities or social housing providers) or through law firms or Law Centres acting under legal aid contracts, and University legal advice clinics. We distinguished, for our purposes, between the ‘formal’ advice sector (primary purpose to provide social welfare legal advice), and ‘informal’ advice providers (offering advice as part of a range of support services). As noted above, no participants in our research had received advice from lawyers, the main ‘formal’ advice service turned to and assisting participants in our research was Citizens Advice.

Although the terms are unlikely to map precisely, here we equate ‘informal’ services (on our classification) with ‘supplementary advice services’. In our research, we found that informal organisations such as community centres and hubs, faith-based organisations, foodbanks, local small businesses, and voluntary or public sector financial wellbeing forums, are supporting people in times of need and in navigating their rights and entitlements. Informal organisations do this through giving support and information, signposting and referral, by guiding people through complex processes, and sometimes by helping begin or continue legal claims. Our research demonstrates that community-orientated, well-networked, often third sector organisations, have become amongst the best placed to sensitively assess and flexibly respond to local legal needs, particularly during waves of emerging crises.

The community-based nature of these ‘supplementary’ or ‘informal’ services is crucial. In our research we found that where someone lived appeared to have a greater effect on what people did (or did not do) about their social welfare legal problems, and the likelihood of their receiving help and of having problems resolved, than did people’s individual characteristics (e.g., age, gender, employment, disability, even digital confidence). Digital by default or digital only services, were clearly not meeting many people’s needs (as we discuss further below in answer to question 9).

In our research we found that local community-based organisations, which are culturally and linguistically sensitive to the communities they serve, play a crucial role in helping identify those struggling and in providing early help to prevent problems occurring or worsening. To be effective, these services must be embedded physically and socially in communities and have good connections to formal social welfare legal advice providers, though the optimum form of connection varies. Providing these services is complex, especially in areas experiencing multiple deprivation and those which are remotely located, where poverty and affluence are juxtaposed, or where communities are otherwise divided.

A particular type of ‘supplementary advice service’ could be so-called ‘community navigators’, ‘community connectors’ or ‘community justice workers’. These are individuals with specific paid or volunteer roles to provide help, and to signpost and refer people to services, including legal services. In addition, our research also identified what we called ‘super connectors’ (based on the size and connectedness of their social networks) within each of our community case-study areas. These super-connectors could hold specific job roles as community-connector/community-navigator etc, or be the staff/volunteers of community organisations, be local councillors, or simply be well embedded in the community (elsewhere these individuals are likely to be referred to as ‘trusted intermediaries’). In our research we found that ‘super connectors’ provide a significant source of support and signpost many people to help and/or advice. However, we did not find evidence that the interventions of those with specific job roles as community-connectors/community-navigators necessarily improved social welfare legal problem resolution as reported by our interviewees, and the impact of other well-connected individuals in the communities also varied. Several of those working/volunteering in roles as community-connectors/community-navigators expressed frustration about not being able to solve people’s problems, for reasons including their own capacity, challenges around data sharing, and high demand and limited resources in the services they were connecting into. Several interviewees said community connectors/community-navigators were able to make sure the matter was ‘chased up’ or ‘got the attention of’ public or private service providers, but often this didn’t lead to satisfactory resolution. Other challenges related to the sustainability of the help well-connected individuals within the community provide; several such people in our research were older volunteers, without obvious successors.

In our research, we found that the likelihood of people experiencing social welfare legal problems, the types of problems experienced, and how people use their social networks to seek help, are significantly shaped by the characteristics of their communities. Across our data, we found that people with larger social networks, and people with more connected social networks, report experiencing fewer social welfare legal problems, report higher levels of life satisfaction, and report higher levels of agreement that the things they do in their life are worthwhile (the latter being some ONS measures of wellbeing). In terms of problem resolution specifically, across our data, we found a weak positive correlation between social network size and problem resolution, indicating that people with larger social networks are somewhat more likely to report that their problems have been either partially or fully resolved. The connectedness of interviewees' social networks also came close to being a significant predictor of problem resolution (i.e., people with more connected networks tend to report higher levels of problem resolution). In this respect, informal advice providers or supplementary advice service providers, especially local community-based organisations, are crucial to preventing problems occurring or worsening, including by acting as spaces to help build, strengthen and maintain the social networks that our research has shown are related to wellbeing and problem-resolution. Local public services closures can mean the loss of the very physical community spaces where people meet to build and develop their social networks, without these spaces it is much harder for communities to make a difference to access to justice.

Despite the above, we also found a limit to the help that can be provided by supplementary advice services. Many of the problems people faced in our research stemmed from shrinking public services provision and long-term structural inequalities. We found that communities can provide substantial support in the form of food, goods, furniture, social support, and connections to advice and other services, but this reaches a limit where three types of circumstance apply, often in combination:

- Problems require more specialist advice from formal social welfare legal advisers, including lawyers especially, to address legal rights and entitlements;
- Problems arise from 'failure demand' (where another part of the system fails to do something or to do it right), especially in government decision-making;
- Problems are caused by cuts to local public services provision, compounded by cuts to advice sector funding.

While informal community and identity-based organisations (supplementary advice services) can connect people to formal social welfare legal advice services, if these formal services don't receive proper funding, we concluded that there may be access to help but only limited access to justice.

Our focus in this question has been on physical supplementary advice services; we discuss digital innovations in question 9 below.

3. What is the impact of those acting without legal advice and / or representation having on access to justice?

The vast majority of enquiries received by Bangor University Legal Advice Clinic relate to family matters or housing. As legal aid is only available for family cases involving domestic abuse the vast majority of clients entering the court system are acting as litigants in person. This means that cases are often taking longer, putting pressure on the judiciary, clogging up listing and generally making access to justice more stressful for all involved (including children). Whilst legal aid is available for some housing issues, there are virtually no firms in

North Wales with housing legal aid contracts. This means that, as with family, the vast majority of clients will be acting as litigants in person. Unlike England and South Wales there are few Support through Court projects meaning that these clients are often acting without help or knowledge of the procedural requirements of cases or the law. This will again have an effect on the Court system. There is substantial research to suggest that unresolved legal issues or protracted litigation not only effects the financial resources of the litigants it can also lead to health issues, meaning that this could also have an impact on the health providers in the area.

5. If limited funds were available, what would be the priority areas for spending?

In our research, one of the biggest barriers to accessing social welfare legal advice, and relatedly access to justice, was lack of education around legal rights and entitlements, and lack of awareness of local organisations/services providing help and advice. For most interviewees across the case-study areas, the only formal social welfare legal advice organisation they were aware of was Citizens Advice, with local Citizens Advice also being the most contacted formal advice service.

Across the research, and particularly outside London, there was also a very low level of awareness of the professional legal sector and the potential help on offer from lawyers. We found that lack of access to legal aid or professional legal help was partly due to the reality of the case-study areas having ‘advice deserts’, but also partly due to a lack of awareness within communities of what is still available. A theme across our interviews was that waiting for a problem to occur before learning about which organisations/services are available negatively impacted the chances of resolution. In our research we recommended the development of further work around public legal education to ensure that communities are aware of social welfare legal advice services more generally and how people can access them, as well as raising awareness of the areas where legal aid funding for advice services is still available, and how such services can be accessed. We proposed that more resources could be directed to providing public legal education and equipping people within communities with the skills and expertise to address some social welfare legal issues, undertake campaigns, or use legal tools to challenge decisions.

Our research shows that whilst social networks are valuable to wellbeing and help-seeking, social networks alone turn out not to be a panacea for resolving legal problems. We found that there is a need to focus more on relationships between formal networks of services and informal networks. In particular, funding could be better directed to community needs if this is more focused on local community dynamics, and relationships between formal and informal services, and how communities engage with advice networks, rather than being more narrowly focused on how individuals engage with advice services. This would enable knowledge about advice seeking behaviours to be incorporated into policy and funding in a way that is more relationally sensitive to community dynamics.

In our research we proposed that government should provide sustainable core funding for advice services as part of their offer to communities, and that this must be in addition to the formal legal aid system. Decisions on how to spend funds to meet social welfare legal advice needs should be made at a local authority level, and funds for sustainable advice services must be allocated on a longer time scale and be offered as grants rather than contracts, and for core funding rather than projects. Our research found that funding models most likely to ensure access to justice for communities are those which foster genuine partnership at the local level (such as the Advice Services Transition Fund and the model proposed by the Low Commission of ‘local advice and legal support plans’).

Reducing so-called ‘failure demand’ is another priority area. Policies should be designed in a manner which protects people’s rights, reduces ‘failure demand’ and therefore reduces social welfare legal advice needs.

Community hubs are valuable, and our main research report makes several recommendations to ensure that hubs reflect the communities in which they are based; one size does not fit all in this context. For community hubs to be effective in supporting access to justice, funding for them should be premised on staff and volunteers generally being drawn from the community and reflective of the community, and the languages of the hubs reflecting those of the community; onward referrals must be as effective as possible, minimising the number of times a person needs to explain their problems; staff should be equipped with good knowledge about the eligibility criteria for and current capacity of the other services they refer to; and hubs must provide genuine and ongoing support to people in communities, including follow-up after advice/support referrals.

Our research also found that whilst what we refer to as ‘super connectors’ (in question 2 above) with large and diverse social networks, are evident in each case-study area, their achievements in terms of supporting people to access advice, and in helping people achieve positive legal problem resolution, are variable. Appointing more community-connectors, navigators, or justice workers, whether volunteers or funded posts, then, only takes communities so far. Likewise, more services, whether formal or informal, are not always the solution to justice gaps if these services are not tailored towards the community’s needs. Preferred help could be rejected, and funds wasted, if communities feel that services are being ‘done to’ them rather than ‘with them’. Co-location of services in the community is seen as especially important; that is offering services permanently in the same location, in contrast to periodic ‘outreach’.

6. How are the legal services regulators responding to their obligation to improve access to justice under the Legal Services Act 2007?

We note one example here, a research project in which we were directly involved. As part of the third round of Regulators Pioneer Funding (RPF3), the SRA along with the England and Wales Law Society and the Access to Justice Foundation (ATJF), were awarded funding for a project on ‘Solving legal issues through technology’ exploring how ODR can help tackle unmet legal need of individuals, consumers and micro/small enterprises. The project involved desk-based research to understand current ODR provision, gaps and opportunities, and an engagement phase including service providers, developers, consumers, legal professionals, and public bodies. The ATJF led work to engage with users and providers, particularly around barriers to accessing ODR. As part of the RPF3 project, Bangor University developed a prototype Web-based system to assess the effectiveness of AI, specifically Large Language Models (LLMs) in facilitating the recommendation of appropriate ODR tools to people with issues related to employment law. The purpose of the wider RPF3 project and our involvement was essentially how technology can be harnessed to improve access to justice, with the wider project being designed and led by the SRA. There is also potential for further collaborative work in this field, suggesting additional commitment from the SRA to pursue its obligation to improve access to justice.

7. How is pro bono work and free legal advice being used to support access to justice and what reliance is placed on it?

The third sector are heavily involved in this, particularly local Citizens Advice and some community groups. Most universities have pro bono clinics attached to their law programmes but often these are run in term time only and all report that they cannot meet the demand. Most university clinics provide a letter of advice service only as few have the resources to manage case work or representation. This means that whilst clients will be given some information and guidance the vast majority will still be litigants in person meaning that cases will take longer and be much more stressful, if they get to court at all.

8. How can advice, legal support or non-court dispute resolution, such as mediation and restorative justice, help the early resolution of disputes?

In principle, these measures can help disputes (particularly family matters and employment) but more effort must be made to encourage engagement and incentives, and funding would need to be provided to make this accessible for the vast majority. Online Dispute Resolution also has significant potential, but as yet provision is fragmented and standards vary, the work of the Online Procedure Rules Committee in the pre-action space in particular should begin to address some of these concerns, therefore widening accessibility and interoperability and ensuring both legal-ethical and technical standards.

9. What role is there for digital innovation and data collection in supporting access to justice?

Our research provides several different insights here. In our research with community members, we actually found little evidence of community demand for more online provision of advice. Locally based in-person services are generally preferred for reasons of accessibility but perhaps most importantly due to the importance of building familiarity and trust with an adviser. Of those respondents to our social welfare legal advice research having accessed advice, the majority had accessed advice either physically in person and/or over the telephone, few had sought to access advice online, and those that had primarily mentioned emailing organisations or filling in online forms when other methods of contacting (primarily public services providers) had not worked. That said, advice providers and community organisations engaging in our research were clear that they do see an important place for what they described as more ‘transactional’ advice, generally meaning a one-off online engagement seeking to resolve a less complex or less multifaceted problem, rather than delivering holistic person-centred advice. Service providers acknowledged that resources are scarce and that there will not be a return to in-person advice for all. Online and phone services should be accessible for those that can benefit from more ‘transactional’ and more often ‘one off’ information, help and/or advice. But the ‘transactional’ offer must be carefully positioned within the overall strategy for the local area and for people with particular needs and abilities.

While digital services cannot fully replace human support, they have a vital complementary role. Whilst our community research found little grassroots demand for online-only advice, this was also mainly because people value face-to-face interactions and trust. Nevertheless, many lawyers and service providers see scope for ‘transactional’ online tools, such as automated forms, symptom checkers, and chatbots for simple queries. For lower-complexity issues, an online Q&A might suffice or at least triage a case, as long as it is seamlessly linked to human advisors when needed. A central theme is hybrid design: technology should augment, not supplant, personal service. As the ATJF warns, ‘ODR platforms cannot replace tailored legal guidance. Early legal advice remains essential’. Tools must be designed with users in mind: front-line advisers play a key role in guiding clients to digital resources and vice versa. In practice, this means building pathways that blend online and offline help. For example, a

guided online interview could produce a clear visual roadmap of a client's options ('you may be entitled to benefit X, you may need form Y or mediation with Z agency'). Such explanatory visualisations (an approach we have prototyped in our 'Artemus' and 'EmployODR' projects) allow even non-experts to grasp a dispute's 'path to resolution'. These visual guides can be used in person (an adviser and client looking at a screen together) or online with remote support. By layering on-demand case law or legislation (for advisors), they serve both novice and specialist users. In short, guided digital flows promise improved understanding and triage without forfeiting the personal aspect.

Across our research we have found a pervasive interest in, and perceived need for, guided pathways, with much promise attributed to explanatory visualisation. Several participants in our various research projects have seen value in digital tools that guide users through pathways to potential resolution of disputes. Whilst, in our experience, even AI generated answers to legal questions, including recommended actions, can reach high degrees of accuracy (especially where Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) is deployed to use both human-curated data and a custom model to influence the LLM into returning contextually relevant information), this is still no supplement for 'holistic' advice given by a human being. In user testing of our 'Artemus' tool (mapping paths to justice in administrative law) and in our 'EmployODR' project (recommending ODR tools in employment law) user testing suggested that explanatory visualisations such as these would be of significant benefit to the advice sector, including lawyers. These tools could be especially useful at the 'triage' or 'gateway' stage of an advice journey, considering that a triage or gateway administrator or trainee advisor could use the visualisation tool alongside the client, both to help the client better understand the issue they might be facing, and to provide a summary analysis and recommendations to then be passed to the more specialist advisor. Through incorporating additional information 'on demand', such visualisation tools can also provide visual guides to more detailed legislation and case-law for more experienced and specialist lawyers.

Another area where there is much promise for digital tools is in referrals, with data privacy rules being seen as a specific barrier to the ability to make effective referrals between advice services. Incompatible IT systems also hamper referrals between agencies. Developing shared referral platforms – underpinned by common standards and robust security – would enable one hub to seamlessly connect a client with the right lawyer, council service, or benefit agency, ideally with a single consent form. The Online Procedure Rules Committee is already working on an interoperability framework (for courts and advice agencies), which we welcome. Properly implemented, digital referral networks could dramatically cut the 'I've told my story four times' problem. Meanwhile, advice networks benefit from up-to-date online directories; however, many such resources now rely on overworked volunteers and go stale. We see a role for funded 'meta-platforms' that crowdsource updates and ensure accuracy. Networks of advice services were also seen as especially valuable in our social welfare legal advice research, but it was noted that whilst some online network resources are funded and maintained by government, most are run on a voluntary basis, largely by practitioners in the advice or CVSE sectors, and often with limited resources. When such resources are not regularly updated, they can be more hindrance than help.

Finally, data collection is an area we emphasise. To measure and improve access, advice providers should routinely gather key user data, including not only case outcomes but also demographic and contextual indicators. Recent work (by JUSTICE Lab and HMCTS) recommends a standard set of 13 attributes (age, disability, income, language, postcode, etc.) to capture vulnerability and need. If all services adopted a common data standard, we could identify underserved groups and tailor interventions. This must be done with strict privacy

safeguards; for example, in the LAA breach (Q11), the absence of robust data protection was painfully exposed. In summary, digital tools – when designed in collaboration with frontline advice services – offer a good supplement to in-person help. They can assist users through complex information, streamline referrals, and generate data to make systemic fixes. However, as our research confirms, no amount of AI or online chat can substitute for a trusted advisor when problems become complex; innovation must free up person-to-person help where it matters most.

10. How could the current system of legal aid be improved to provide a cost-efficient and cost-controlled service, with suitably remunerated legal practice across civil, criminal and family law?

Any reform of legal aid must balance sustainability with adequacy. The system requires more intelligent triage (so that only cases requiring full representation utilise scarce funds) and improved remuneration for providers. On the former, digital pre-assessment and early advice (see above) can filter out minor cases. On the latter, current legal aid rates are widely regarded as too low: the Law Society has urged a fee rise after 28 years without an increase, noting that stagnant pay forces providers to cross-subsidise from other work or quit the sector. Indeed, the Law Society's desert maps show that nearly half the population lacks access to a housing legal aid lawyer. Restoring competitive fees would help ensure that lawyers stay in the market and that law firms can afford to take on legal aid cases in areas such as family and housing. Beyond rates, legal aid could be made more cost-efficient by simplifying procedures and encouraging settlements. For example, higher fixed fees for early case resolution (or advance payments for urgent judicial review cases) could reduce prolonged litigation. Block contracts or planning zones (as piloted in some councils) may allow providers to handle multiple related cases under a single budget, thereby reducing administrative costs. Legal technology itself offers gains: modernising the Legal Aid Agency's IT (an urgent need) should reduce claim-processing costs. Finally, any changes should protect quality: we must avoid a 'fast food' model of legal aid. Structured oversight (e.g., regular case audits) can maintain high standards even as we experiment with fixed fees or digitised case handling. In essence, the goal is to ensure adequate pay and sustainable budgeting so that providers remain available in all regions, rather than being driven out by low fees and high demand. As one lender metaphorically put it, 'starving the system is penny-wise and pound-foolish' – investing in proper legal aid now saves greater costs (and injustice) later.

11. What has been the impact of the Legal Aid Agency cyber-attack, revealed in April 2025, on recipients and providers of legal aid work, and how have the Legal Aid Agency and Ministry of Justice responded?

We note that the LAA is working in phases to restore functionality following the cyber-attack: key systems (grants calculator, benefits checker) are priority, while new features are being carefully security-tested. In the meantime, we note that regulators have been somewhat flexible: for example, some application deadlines have been extended, and emergency certificates have been prolonged to account for the chaos. The LAA cyber incident had a negative impact on the legal aid community. Thousands of clients have had their privacy violated, and providers have endured months of turmoil processing cases in 'contingency mode'. The attack also exposed the fragility of current justice IT. On the positive side, it has spurred immediate reforms: accelerated upgrades to LAA systems, stronger cybersecurity protocols, and emergency funding support for providers affected by delays. We are closely monitoring the implementation of the new portal and data protection measures, as any failure in this area would only exacerbate existing access gaps.

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