

Advice Workforce Development Fund Programme

Summary of Learning from the First Year, July 2024



Introduction

This report encapsulates the initial learnings from initiatives aimed at addressing workforce challenges in London's social welfare advice sector. Appointed as the Learning Partner, the Advice Services Alliance collaborated with eight funded partnerships, the Programme steering group, task and finish groups, and participants to gather and comprehend these learnings.

Programme activities started in April 2023, with most partnerships becoming active in autumn and winter 2023. Consequently, this report covers the first 7-15 months of Programme activities, providing early insights rather than definitive conclusions. Almost 500 people could benefit from the Programme, including 67 apprentices, trainee solicitors and advisers. A set of case studies is available online, depicting individual journeys of beneficiaries in the advice sector workforce.

Programme Aims, Questions, and Theory of Change

The Programme, addressing challenges from previous reports, focuses on three primary questions:

- Effective ways to recruit and retain staff.
- Key factors in staff development and progression.
- Lessons that contribute to developing further solutions.

A Theory of Change framework, constructed by the Learning Partner, outlined the Programme's desired outcomes:

- New entry and progression opportunities in the sector.
- Enhanced diversity and representation.
- Equity-led agencies able to recruit needed skills.
- Increased influence of equity-led agencies on workforce systems.
- Tested models for traineeships, apprenticeships, recruitment, and retention.
- Enhanced capacity and capability within organisations and participants.
- Sustainable collaborations and a body of learning and resources.

The anticipated impacts included:

- Replicable and scalable workforce provisions.
- Improved supply, diversity, and quality of advice.
- Enhanced reach of advice services.
- Systemic changes supporting workforce challenges.
- Resources and evidence for future workforce initiatives.

Emerging Learning

Recruitment and Retention: A major finding is the lack of centralised, accessible information about the advice sector and career opportunities. Trainees and apprentices were often unaware of sector opportunities. Proactive efforts to attract people to the sector are minimal, and existing staff are not

well-informed about development opportunities. A centralised location with comprehensive sector information and a marketing strategy could address this gap.

Inter-Agency Collaboration: Collaborative work has enabled the sharing of good practices. Partnerships led by Deaf and Disabled People's Organisations (DDPOs) have highlighted the importance of advertising roles as suitable for people with long-term health conditions. Collaboration has also helped ethnically diverse agencies share recruitment practices. Building trust with community partners is crucial for recruiting a diverse workforce with lived experience.

Flexibility and Accessibility: Flexibility in training offers and working hours is essential for attracting people with lived experience and disabled people. Reasonable adjustments and Access to Work support are vital but inconsistently applied. Volunteers face barriers to obtaining Access to Work funding, suggesting a need for a fund to cover reasonable adjustments for disabled volunteers. Training providers need to build in access and communication support into their programmes to make them accessible for disabled people and people from diverse communities.

Peer Support Networks: Peer support groups for trainees and apprentices have been successful in creating a sense of community and shared learning. They are important for newly promoted or newly recruited casework supervisors and indeed caseworkers in general. This is especially important for small advice providers where there is limited support in-house. It is an essential way for advice workers to feel supported and learn together. These networks could benefit from further exploration of optimal group compositions.

Sustainability: The sustainability of trainee posts is uncertain, raising concerns about the retention of trained individuals. Follow-on positions are necessary to maintain the sector's workforce. For example, funders may need to look at a minimum funding of trainee posts for two years followed by increased funding to allow people to develop into casework roles.

Infrastructure and Centralised Resources: Centralised coordination has been beneficial, enabling resource-sharing and efficient management of training and apprenticeship offers. Developing a pool of trainers and supervisors could enhance workforce development.

Collaboration and Capacity Building: Collaborations have facilitated resource and expertise sharing. However, smaller community advice organisations face capacity challenges, requiring support for successful workforce initiatives.

Funding Challenges: Short-term funding and rising costs have constrained partnerships, highlighting the need for longer-term, flexible funding solutions.

Early Recommendations:

- Develop a brand neutral 'Work in Advice' website/social media and marketing strategy to provide central information about the sector, co-produced with the sector's workforce.
- Facilitate learning events for trainees and apprentices to share experiences and opportunities.
- Share recruitment best practices and resources on the Programme website.
- Funders should consider early funding extensions and increased funding levels to cover rising costs.