

Building a sustainable advice workforce for a stronger future

Learning event

Wednesday 12 June 2024, Simmons & Simmons, and online

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First Panel: Practical and real-world Problems

Alan Markey

CEO of Coventry Independent Advice Service, Chair of the National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers (NAWRA)

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Traditional routes for entering the legal aid sector are in decline

Volunteering is a luxury, the people who volunteer are often financially independent, are having a career break and/or are in gap years between school

How do we make the legal aid sector attractive again? How do we change the perception people have of us? What is our identity? What do we actually do? What training are organizations able to offer? We've got you how do we keep you?

Pay is low, work is stressful, workforce is getting older, no succession planning, lack of recognized qualifications, funding is hugely precarious. Whatever funding is available is hugely competitive, a focus of reinvention. DWP pressure to take any work. Increased Complexity. Stigma and adverse images. Job insecurity. Lack of progression opportunities

Victoria Speed

Consultant Director of the Employment Legal Advice Network

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With the changes from LPC to SQE, people are no longer allowed to study employment. The times are constantly changing from technology to the law. Clients come in with cases surrounding new technology and often times we don't have the knowledge or background to help effectively. New technology often restricts or fully ignores older people or those with disabilities.

There is not enough collaboration in supervision. There are few people who have the amount of knowledge and we need to share the knowledge.

One thing that is specific within employment advice, you can be really good at it but within the next few years what do you do next?

There isn't a career progression. We've lost people to various other sectors due to the need for employment lawyers. With employment not being covered with legal aid it makes it entirely difficult to retain people.

Matt Howgate

Director of the LAPG Management & Leadership Hub

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The range of challenges facing the sector is huge but if you follow the thread from any of them, that thread is likely to transect four core challenges. They are (a) lack of time to think; (2) lack of money to deal with them; (3) lack of management skill; and (4) lack of shared learning and partnership.

Sometimes the issue isn't the problem, it's our inability to effectively deal with the problem.

The majority of managers in our sector are accidental managers with little training or support who are constantly on the back foot with no time to think and no money to work with in an ecosystem that has just stopped sharing learning and knowledge.

We need to help upskill managers; create space for them to think about organisational development and change; give them the resources they need to make that change; and rebuild our decimated advice ecosystems.

Second Panel: Strategy and solutions for a sustainable advice workforce

Gareth Morgan

CEO of Ferret Information Systems, Dangos Project

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DANGOS - It means to show in Welsh, it's meant to raise awareness of the experiences of frontline workers. It's to raise awareness to those in Wales that there is help available. The idea that everybody who does frontline work (anywhere) to encourage people to showcase help but also seek help. From police officers to hairdressers. It doesn't turn people into advisors but rather create an informed bridge.

We help broaden the awareness- not giving detail but understanding when and how people can get help. Helps avoid inappropriate referrals. Not creating advisors but just better-informed people; people who are already known and trusted.

We are trying to market this to frontline workers via different mediums. For example, our website, online sessions, eLearning Courses (free), etc... We've had up to 250 registrations for some of these webinars. Everything being delivered in Welsh, English and BSL;

We aim to develop a community across Wales – In the past few years we've done 465 sessions, 175 online sessions and 6,420 people total attending.

Zoe Bantleman

Legal Director of the Immigration Law Practitioners' Association (ILPA)

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First we don't know what new change or policy will occur; we have to deal with the implementation and challenges to our work; We're left to explain and give advice to people who are in precarious and difficult situations; we have to console and comfort to those who are in the worst crises of their life due to the whims of the legal changes.

Instead of the government helping the people on the front line they often create an environment of hostility and tension. Many people can't find access to a legal specialist to help with their needs and often struggle to understand the laws that impact them most.

There's a shortage of practitioners that can help them, people are leaving the sector entirely or move onto the private sector and are often overworked. Even though there is a review in place we still need to be realistic and we continue to give recommendations.

We need 3 Changes

1) We need fair pay; we need annual reviews of pay to keep with the rising cost of living

2) Undo the damage done to Legal Aid; we need to undo what has been done and go back to the way we try to help people

3) We need more trust; we need a supportive and trusting approach from the agency and from those who are often these positions of institutional and political power

Dan Manville

Welfare Rights Supervisor, Greater Manchester Law Centre

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We've built a social model coming into our law centre, we use law/bar students to deal with WCA & PIP appeals; they get exposure to judiciary and the work style of our law centre. It's inspirational to work with young minds, we see people wander in and come and learn about our work. Even if they don't go into an advice role they are still knowledgeable of the advice sector

We were able to make the case for advice and why it's imperative to the greater well-being of Manchester.

The case evolved into creating more advice jobs directly- We've created a space to have these conversations going forward. We're working through our group to get buy in, into our work and try to create recruitment opportunities.

The main message is to use the networks. Break down the tension and competition and to create partnership to build a more sustainable workforce.

Questions & Comments from both panels - condensed for easy reading

(1) On organisational and managerial capacity, and the efforts needed to form partnerships:

Comment: To be doing a good job of giving advice you need to know the law, most of our advisors don't have access to Lexus Nexus or other legal resources, there's a massive need/funding to having access to resources.

Comment (on the relevance of individuals', i.e. trustees' and managers' mindsets to partnership working): Mindset - sometimes it's about the mindset of the individuals within and org that can slow progress; but to give hope to everyone, in the case of London Citizens Advice, the CA charities were all working independently,

and it took years to become an informal coalition, and then to become constituted as a legal structure; so these partnerships can be done but it takes time and investment.

Response: Most managers struggle to get papers to the board early because of lack of time; it takes time and commitment to do something like LCA did. It can be done but it can be incredibly difficult.

(2) Perceptions, and siloed nature, of the advice sector

Comment: We helped give advice to volunteers at a food shelter, but people didn't want to volunteer at the law centre itself. There is a real issue of perception and the value of advice. Maybe there needs to be more comms about what advice actually means. There's a gap between reality and fiction. People don't know they need advice.

Response: Comes down to funding as well. We have found that some funders of advice want specific projects but that doesn't reflect what community needs. Funders need to understand that we have lots of pockets that we work within. People's problems aren't packaged up, once a client comes in and they often have multiple issues. It's a huge issue.

(3) Question to Dan: Is it specific to welfare rights advice or broader social welfare?

The funding stream that we've accessed is broader social welfare, we naturally focused it to welfare rights, we have a lot of different funding streams to help with legal aid in general but we've naturally focused on welfare rights.

(4) Q: Has anyone have any ideas of the sector working together to push funders to understand more about the value of advice?

There's a lot of evidence about the value of advice. Economically, it saves money across the board. The challenge is that we can make that case but they are often looking at the bottom-line. They simply don't know how to put it on the budget sheet.

Comments: There's a dangerous slope with a focus on money - there are short, medium and longer-term solutions that require collaboration and innovation that don't necessarily require money. We can't promise solutions based on the political or financial. There are really good ways of better work that don't focus on money. Possibly creating a new pathway in careers, where people can change or see new

jobs, maybe every 6 months to a year where people can change or move their area of work.

Working with students – not just of Law but also other fields: There have been several mentions on working with students, we're wondering if anyone has any experience who has worked with social work students, or politics, or any other field where people are more focused into the social aspect of things rather than law focused.

Response: Prior to involvement to the Law Centre (Dan) we reached out to social work students and humanities students to get them alongside the project. We offered to give social work students to give them experience and perspective. We do work with the Uni of Manchester to work with humanities students, and sometimes they work and volunteer for a few years. They are out there but not on such a grand scale

Additional comments:

(a) In Australia they did have a joint project between social workers and nursing students. There is the ability to combine and join forces. Something we can possibly develop.

(b) Framing it as customer service experience rather than framing it on welfare rights. They packaged it as work experience to students. They didn't encourage students to do welfare rights but rather work experience and customer experience.

Concluding Speaker:

Jo Chimes, Deputy Director of Advice Services Alliance – Learning Partner of the Advice Workforce Development Fund programme

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Summary and Reflections from the Advice Workforce Development programme

Even within the advice sector there is still a lack of knowledge about what we do and how we do it.

There's been talk about building a website that goes over these gaps of knowledge - when there isn't one space the knowledge is dissipated.

The importance of sharing our learning and practice; tips about how to make a job more flexible; more accessible and more diverse.

What can we do to help ourselves do our job more effectively for our clients? Or colleagues? Future colleagues and our future selves?

We need to build more trust and not compete against each other.

When we talk about showing the value is that we find it easy in financial terms but in political terms it can be difficult.

We need to do more about not competing with each other and taking time to make better decisions.

Taking more time to engage with funders and local authorities. Building a wider support network outside of our workforce.

Appendix:

Notes from online info-sharing session at lunchtime

Grateful thanks to Sabrina and Emma for facilitating this session and note-taking.

Notes from Info-sharing session

Hosts: Sabrina Dubash (ASA) & Emma Wilkinson (FRU)

Attendees came from both Wales and outside Wales:

(Very rough & sorry if anyone missed!)

Tasleem -Meadows Advice

Pip- Barking & Dagenham CA

Jaqueline- NRASS (Nottingham)

Zoe Millington -Oxford

Nel Price Age UK Wales

Helene hayes – Cit A

JJ Costello -Shelter Cymru

Taylan- Daymer Advice Centre /ASA

Gareth Morgan – Dangos

Sophie -

Dan Manville -

Wales Specific Issues:

- We discussed how we don't have anything like the Advice Workforce Development Fund in Wales. A collaboration between the advice sector and funders to better support the advice workforce would be great in Wales. We would like more collaboration of this kind.
- Rurality: Discussed how remote advice has assisted in work to reach rural communities. Cit A also finding that reaching rural communities is becoming difficult due to cost & staffing.

- Demand is far higher than supply of advice provision as per Wales 'Needs Analysis' research. What is happening following the research??

Career Entry & Progression:

- Discussion around the 'ceiling' effect once an adviser becomes a specialist -where do specialist advisers go from there? Management? Stay in same roles with limited progression?
- Highlight on the importance of specialists and valuing them within organisations.
- Shelter Cymru & Age UK have introduced 'layering roles' by introducing more entry level roles to build up to specialist advisers role. They also used law students. And those with lived experience of homelessness. And trained them up to work for Shelter Cymru. This has worked well we heard.
- Discussion on how to promote advice as a profession. (just adding my thought here promoting a legal **and advice** profession)

Diversity

- Discussions about diversity and how lack of diversity amongst workforce mean that inevitably services will exclude groups of society. How can we ensure these communities use our services if we are not local to them – language interpretation services/ BSL interpretation/ engaging in ethnic community specific events ...
- Organisations think they're accessible when in fact they're not. NRASS said they travel across country to conduct accessibility assessments.
- One organisation (Zoe Millington Oxford) . Mentioned how they successfully proactively reached out by knocking on doors of communities to advertise their services and for recruitment purposes to reach
- We also discussed in brief how many organisation do not seem to use the Access to work Scheme and how the application for the scheme is too onerous for individuals.
- Overall all organisations felt that they need to do more regarding increasing diversity amongst workforce.