

London Advice Strategy

Introducing the strategy

Londoners' problems come in many shapes and sizes, huge inequalities stalk the Capital and available data suggest, taking housing costs into consideration, that London has the highest poverty rates in England and Wales. Londoners face significant unmet needs for social welfare advice, particularly in areas like welfare benefits, debt, housing, and immigration. The demand for these services has increased due to factors like the cost-of-living crisis and changes to the welfare system.

Support comes from a diverse economy of advice providers, but with demand significantly outstripping supply it is not enough and our system of advice and support is feeling the pressure from rising costs alongside constraints both in public and philanthropic funding. Whilst London's advice ecosystem is diverse, spanning recognised brands, statutory bodies, specialist charities, consortia, local authorities, and informal community networks including faith and diaspora groups, advice is rarely recognised as a sector. But there are multiple challenges shared across London advice organisations, as evidenced by reports such as "Advising Londoners" and 'Mind the Gap'.

- Increased demand for advice services often means longer waiting times, more complexity in casework, barriers for hard-to-reach and marginalized groups, significant service gaps exacerbated by public funding cuts, there is uneven distribution of advice services across London's boroughs and gaps in provision.
- There are significant workforce challenges, recruitment and retention, loss of skills, talent and knowledge, increasing pressures on the remaining advice workforce leading to stress and burnout, and the challenges for the sector in offering good pay, conditions and career development pathways.
- Developments in technology offers opportunities to change how advice is accessed and delivered but technological change can be disruptive, and whilst there is consensus on the need for better investment, joined-up services, and integration with statutory services such as NHS and justice, systems change takes time

Working collaboratively, sector organisations and stakeholders like London Citizens Advice, London Legal Support Trust and the Advice Workforce Development Fund, the Greater London Authority, with other advice partner or funder organisations initiated a project to develop a London Advice Strategy.

The overarching aim of this Pan-London strategy is to strengthen the city's social welfare legal advice ecosystem over the longer term. Advice organisations cannot do this on their own – there is a need to involve stakeholders and to work collaboratively. The advice ecosystem involves multiple stakeholders such as national providers, government, health services, funders, umbrella bodies, private sector, and most importantly of all our clients – the aim is that all should be engaged in shaping the future.

Vision: *"Over the next decade all Londoners will have improved access to the help they need by improving the quality, reach and access to social welfare advice. We want to empower individuals to manage their own needs and to know where to go to access support when they need it."*

This strategy for the future provision of social welfare advice services in London will focus around:-

- Improving quality, reach, and access to the full range of social welfare advice.
- Empowering individuals to manage their needs and realise their rights
- Establishing standards for service delivery that are co-owned and adaptable.
- Securing long-term sustainable funding beyond reliance on private trusts.
- Enhancing collaboration across statutory, local, and community providers.
- Investing in workforce development and reducing dependency on advice services.

Stakeholder engagement and a strategic roadmap

Work to map out a longer term strategy is already underway. Initial consultation with London advice providers and stakeholders shows that there is significant buy-in around the need for a London specific advice strategy to address these broad challenges. Under the Advice Workforce Development Fund a piece of work was commissioned to chart a **Roadmap** and facilitate wide engagement; umbrella bodies, providers and key stakeholders were engaged and invited to take part in workshops.

An early challenge identified from this work, especially when assessing the external factors - social, technological, economic, environmental, political, legal, and ethical (*Steeple analysis*), is that the sector is having to navigate huge risks and uncertainties. The operating context is changing in ways that are unpredictable, so the approach needs to offer a 'living strategy' that adapts to change. A common observation is that too often strategy documents 'gather dust', lead to inaction, become quickly out of date, and/or lack the tools to deliver meaningful change.

It was also acknowledged that there are specific challenges concerning the development and implementation of a London wide strategy for advice.

- The sector is not homogenous; for the purposes of the strategy there is a need for greater consistency of understanding in the language, typologies and definitions used (eg., generalist, and specialist advice), and the scope of different brands and strands of advice
- There is no single agreed baseline that is indicative of the scale of advice demand in London and unmet needs; linked to this is the need to better understand client, service users and marginalised communities experience, and to engage the sector's beneficiaries in a process of co-production.
- Many advice organisations are too overburdened to engage in what is happening in the wider ecosystem; there are also some subsections of advice work who may not actively engaged in this process and need to be.
- Mainstream public service systems of support like the health service need to be involved in the strategy, but do not always understand the case for, and added value of, social welfare advice
- Advice work needs investment to enable strategic change and sector and systems level, it is therefore necessary to make a case for both greater statutory and philanthropic financial support.

The strategy also needs to take into account the complex dependencies across the issues which are currently impacting the ecosystem, and prioritise accordingly.

To be co-produced, the sector needs to have a sense of shared 'ownership' of the strategy, whilst currently hosted by the Advice Workforce Development Fund and driven by a cross-sector group, the legitimacy of the strategy needs to be underpinned through a shared governance approach.

A theory of change and prioritisation

A Theory of Change was therefore designed to better understand the interconnected processes that advice providers go through in order to enable and support the clients they work with. It focuses on the drivers and inputs to improve access, client centredness, collaboration and the sector's strategic position (See Appendix).

As part of the roadmap discussions the following priorities were worked on by the Strategy Working Group

- Needs Driven Support - fostering Client Centred Services, ensuring that the lived experience and needs of users are central to advice delivery
- Prevention & Early Intervention with accessible and inclusive local support pathways
- Data & Digital - Joined up systems and practice to embed standards and quality
- Securing Funding and Resources across the ecosystem to adequately support advice work the advice workforce, and the sustainability of the sector.
- Engaging impactfully in Policy & Advocacy – demonstrating the value of advice, strengthening the position of the sector and challenging injustice

Roadmap recommendations

The consultant completed their work on the roadmap with the following recommendations

- A focussed strategy for user engagement, including for both those who access support and those who have struggled to access it
- Further consultation to understand the roles of formally constituted local charitable advice providers, and wider informal networks e.g. community/faith groups, food banks and diverse partnership structures.
- Through research, focus groups, engagement, identify the most effective way to improve access and inclusion
- Secure further buy-in and validation across the sector around the key priorities and themes set out in the Roadmap and the Theory of Change, testing with regional stakeholders, and iterating in respect of developments in the regional landscape.
- Promote cohesion and communities of practice across the sector so that advice organisations can better understand what those receiving support need, what advice providers need, how they can collaborate, solve shared challenges and use their collective voice for influence
- Build the evidence for the case for investment in advice to understand what the return on investment is across the ecosystem
- Explore alignments around stakeholders' strategic planning cycles (eg, NHS Plan) through horizon-scanning – given the uncertainties and complex operating environment, there needs to be an iterative approach to testing and learning around new models and partnerships.

Our next steps

The roadmap provides a solid basis for taking forwards a London Advice Strategy, but there is still a long way to go. Next steps are

- Developing an engagement plan that builds on the roadmap, emphasizing collaboration across ecosystem sectors, fostering shared purpose, and addressing key themes such as data, inclusion, workforce capacity, funding, policy advocacy, and engaging with the lived experience of clients
- Resourcing the expertise and capacity needed to develop the strategy, undertake consultation and produce a meaningful and impactful strategy in documentary and online form, with appropriate communications support to ensure this is noticed.
- Resolving the issue of how to ensure that the governance of the strategy can enable it to be co-produced, secure sector wide buy-in, and the confidence and legitimacy of this work with wider stakeholders.

September 2025