Building the Workforce Capacity of London's Advice Sector: Long Report

January 2026

Contents

Appendices (available in a separate document)

Briefings

Funders, Local Authorities, GLA, Advice, Agencies, Networks/Umbrella Bodies, Training Providers, Advice Service Trustees

The report 'at a glance'

What this review covers

- Workforce capacity of London's advice sector: Focus on five areas: **recruitment, retention, training, peer support, supervision.**
- Commissioned under the **Advice Workforce Development Fund (AWDF)**.

London's advice workforce is under sustained pressure. Rising demand, increasingly complex client need, and long-term underinvestment in skills, supervision and career pathways have created a structural deficit that no single organisation can solve alone. This review identifies a coherent set of actions that—taken together—can stabilise, strengthen and sustain the workforce over the coming years. What is required now is a **combination of immediate practical steps** and **long-term structural reforms**, coordinated across funders, networks, policymakers and agencies.

Headline challenges

- **Recruitment**: Marketing deficit; few qualified applicants; unclear entry/progression routes; low pay; insecure contracts; best practice resources needed.
- **Retention**: Burnout and wellbeing challenges; lack of progression; pay and conditions lagging behind comparable sectors.
- **Training:** Fragmented, costly, inconsistent; unclear pathways and standards; deficits in supervisory and leadership training.
- **Peer support:** Patchy, especially for small, equity-led agencies; time pressures limit access.
- **Supervision and IFR:** Uneven quality and capacity; lack of shared frameworks and time in funding models.
- **Equity-focused, by-and-for and smaller advice services** face particular and acute challenges in all above areas.
- **The challenges are structural and systemic.** They require sector-wide, collaborative and strategic interventions. Networks, umbrella bodies, equity-focused networks, funders and policy makers need to work together to deliver solutions.

Immediate priorities

- **Strengthen recruitment and entry routes:** Expand funded traineeships, apprenticeships and structured placements; embed inclusive recruitment and accessible community-led training pathways.
- **Protect retention, wellbeing and working conditions:** Ringfence supervision and learning time; invest in wellbeing and leadership support; develop a locum pool to relieve pressure and support staff development.
- **Improve access to training:** Create a central training directory mapped to shared competences and qualifications, with bursaries for essential training and supervisor development.
- **Strengthen supervision and quality:** Roll out a supervisor development pathway; develop IFR and peer review pilots; introduce shared templates, workload tools and guidance.
- **Boost peer support and reduce isolation:** Coordinate adviser, supervisor, CEO and trainee peer networks, with stipends and backfill so small and equity-focused organisations can take part.

Long-term structural reforms

- **A London Advice Strategy and Workforce Funding Compact:** Funders and commissioners need to align around full cost recovery, multi-year investment and shared expectations for supervision, training, wellbeing and progression.
- **Phased Workforce Infrastructure ("Hub-Light" to Workforce Hub):** Begin with shared tools, supervision and IFR resources, recruitment guidance and training coordination. Expand to brokerage functions, IFR pools, traineeship pathways and ultimately a fully developed London Advice Workforce Hub.
- **A Training & Qualifications Strategy:** Develop shared competences, role profiles and mapped training pathways; influence NOS reform; ensure accessible routes from entry-level roles to advanced and specialist positions.
- **Leadership, culture and succession planning:** Invest in leadership development, organisational culture, coaching and succession planning, particularly for smaller and equity-focused organisations.
- **Technology and workforce intelligence:** Develop ethical approaches to AI tools that can reduce administrative burden; create shared workforce data to inform planning, advocacy and investment.

Who needs to act

- **Funders and commissioners** must change how advice is funded—embedding multi-year, full-cost recovery contracts and resourcing the training, supervision and wellbeing the workforce requires.
- **Policymakers** should recognise advice as essential civic infrastructure and integrate workforce planning into health, housing, employment and inclusion strategies.
- **Networks and umbrella bodies** must coordinate training, supervision pools, IFR pilots, peer learning and shared recruitment resources, ensuring equitable access across the sector.
- **Advice agencies** should protect supervision and learning time, adopt shared standards and tools, participate in peer networks and develop internal progression pathways.

The case for action

The cost of inaction—lost staff, reduced service capacity, inconsistent quality and rising unmet need—is already visible across London. By contrast, the benefits of coordinated investment are clear: a stable, skilled, diverse and motivated workforce capable of meeting Londoners' needs.

The solutions in this report provide a realistic and sequenced pathway forward. What is needed now is shared commitment and collective resolve.

1. Executive summary

A sector at breaking point – time to act

London's not-for-profit advice sector is a cornerstone of social justice, public health, and community resilience. It delivers life-changing outcomes for individuals and relieves pressure on courts, councils, the NHS and wider public services. Yet its most valuable resource – its people – is under unprecedented strain.

After more than a decade of cuts to funding whilst demand increases, the capacity of the workforce has emerged as one of the most pressing and systemic challenges facing advice providers. Across recruitment, retention, training, supervision (including independent file review), and peer support, the evidence is stark: services are struggling to sustain skilled staff, keep pace with demand, and maintain quality. Decisive action is needed to avoid workforce attrition and reduced service capacity, and to take advantage of the new opportunities emerging.

The time has come to collaborate more closely and coordinate resources to develop a sustainable, skilled and diverse workforce.

Headline challenges

Recruitment

- Agencies across London report unprecedented difficulty filling adviser, caseworker and supervisor posts. Recruitment rounds that once drew scores of applicants now attract only a handful – often underqualified.
- There is no coherent marketing and development aimed at new entrants into the sector. Most people still "fall into" advice work by chance rather than by design. Advice sector careers are invisible, with almost no positive guidance, while other sectors advertise clear entry routes.
- Structural barriers hit equity-focused and smaller agencies hardest. Embedded in marginalised communities, they may lack the economies of scale to compete.
- Brexit has reduced the flow of bilingual and culturally competent candidates.
- The traditional entry though volunteering has shifted due to a combination of the cost-of-living pressures, post-Covid working patterns and demographic shifts in London

Retention

- Burnout, job insecurity, heavy caseloads and low pay is driving high turnover. Staff loyalty is fragile when contracts are short-term and workloads overwhelming.
- Career progression pathways are scarce, especially in smaller agencies and a single departure can destabilise the service.
- Equity-focused services provide vital opportunities through accessible workplaces and support to people with lived experience although with less resources than other parts of the sector.
- Leaders report 'moral dissonance' as the lack of job security and support for staff wellbeing is at odds with their personal and organisational values.

Training and development

- There is training but it is fragmented, resource intensive and hard to find at the right time. Many small and independent agencies face a "training maze" with no clear routes.
- Unlike other sectors, there is no overall training strategy, which plans for the needs of the workforce.
- Pathways from trainee to adviser to supervisor are inconsistent, with major gaps in leadership development.
- Quality standards (AQS, Lexcel, SQM, Money and Pensions Service) include requirements for staff development but do not provide a coherent framework of competences or progression.
- Services find it difficult to release staff for development opportunities, when contracts and funding are focussed on challenging delivery outputs.

Peer support

- Peer support is highly valued, low-cost interventions that improve resilience, practice quality and wellbeing. Yet they are fragile and easily crowded out by case pressures.
- Staff in smaller, non-networked and equity-focused services find access difficult.
- There are existing networks at a local level and at a National level (e.g. Employment Law Advice Network - ELAN, National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers - NAWRA) but their reach is limited. There is no dedicated infrastructure to embed peer support across the sector.

Supervision and Independent File Review (IFR)

- Supervision is central to good quality advice and to staff development, but many services find it difficult to sustain
- IFR is particularly difficult to deliver particularly with complex cases which may require knowledge of different areas of law
- Supervisors may feel isolated in services and reciprocal arrangements between agencies are fragile and pooled models are rare.

Structural deficit – why system action is unavoidable

These challenges are not isolated issues. They are symptoms of a **structural deficit**: a sector reliant on short-term funding, fragmented infrastructure, and an overstretched workforce. Small, equity-led and community-rooted organisations, those closest to and with the most reach to marginalised communities experience the sharpest edge of this crisis. Without systemic intervention:

- Experienced advisers will continue to leave.
- New entrants will not be trained or retained.
- Smaller and equity-focused services will be hollowed out.
- Londoners in crisis will be left without the support they need.

This is not a problem that individual advice service can solve alone, nor is it simply by trying to do more of the same thing; it requires systematic change by all to collaborate and coordinate more effectively. Trustee boards and governing bodies also play a critical role in shaping workforce sustainability through risk appetite, investment decisions, and strategic commitment to supervision, training and progression.

Solutions

Immediate priorities – what agencies, networks and funders must do now

Immediate actions should focus on stabilising the workforce, relieving pressure on overstretched teams, and creating the conditions for people to thrive. These actions are achievable, build on existing practice, and address the most urgent capacity constraints. They are sequenced to avoid placing new expectations on agencies without corresponding enabling support from funders, commissioners and infrastructure bodies.

Strengthen recruitment and entry routes

- Expand and sustain *paid traineeships, apprenticeships and structured placements*, ensuring supervision time is fully costed.
- Develop inclusive recruitment guidance and tools, including DDPO-led best practice, and embed these in workforce planning.
- Support borough-based, community-led training pathways to widen access for under-represented groups.

Protect retention, wellbeing and working conditions

- Ringfence time for *reflective practice, learning and supervision* across all funded roles.
- Provide funded access to *wellbeing support, coaching and leadership development*, especially for smaller and equity-focused organisations.
- Support the establishment of a *locum pool* to release pressure, cover absence, and enable supervisors to fulfil their development role.

Improve access to high-quality training

- Introduce a *centralised training directory* linked to shared competences, including regulated and non-regulated routes.
- Offer bursaries for qualifications, supervisor training and CPD.
- Maintain funded trainee roles and structured learning pathways to build a skilled pipeline.

Boost peer support and reduce isolation

- Establish and fund a *Peer Support Team* to coordinate communities of practice for advisers, supervisors, CEOs and trainees.
- Provide stipends and backfill support so small and equity-focused organisations can participate.
- Extend existing national and regional networks to reach non-networked services.

Strengthen supervision and Independent File Review (IFR)

- Roll out *Essentials-to-Advanced* supervisor training across London.
- Create shared IFR pools and technical supervision brokerage, prioritising subject-area gaps.
- Resource supervision as a core, legitimate cost in all contracts, aligned with the Workforce Funding Compact.

Long-term structural reforms – building the infrastructure we need

Strengthening London's advice workforce requires structural reform. These longer-term solutions reshape the ecosystem so that recruitment, retention, training, supervision and peer support are no longer dependent on short-term projects or fragile goodwill.

A phased London Advice Workforce Infrastructure ("Hub-Light" → Workforce Hub)

A pan-London workforce infrastructure should be developed in phases:

1. **Phase 1:** shared directories, training maps, supervision and IFR resources, peer support coordination and recruitment guidance.
2. **Phase 2:** brokerage functions (supervision, IFR, apprenticeships, traineeships, locum pool).
3. **Phase 3:** a fully functioning *London Advice Workforce Hub* akin to the Mayor's Skills Academies.

This model reduces duplication, improves equity of access and supports smaller services.

A London Advice Strategy and Workforce Funding Compact

A sector-owned strategy should align funders, networks, policymakers and advice providers around:

- agreed workforce standards and expectations;
- consistent investment in supervision, training, leadership and wellbeing;
- multi-year, full-cost-recovery funding as the norm.

The Workforce Funding Compact is the mechanism for embedding this alignment in practice.

A Training & Qualifications Strategy linked to national NOS reform

London needs a coherent skills strategy:

- clear role profiles and competences;
- updated NOS for social welfare legal advice;
- mapped training pathways from entry level to supervisor and leadership roles;
- improved access to specialist legal and cross-sector training.

This creates a structured, transparent and professionalised workforce pipeline.

Leadership, culture and succession planning

Sector-wide investment is needed to:

- develop new leaders, particularly within equity-focused organisations;
- address burnout, founder-dependence and succession risks;
- strengthen governance and organisational culture.

Technology, data and innovation

Long-term system improvements should include:

- adoption of ethical, productivity-enhancing AI tools for drafting, research and training;
- shared workforce data on vacancies, retention and supervision capacity to inform investment and planning.

Who needs to act – and why

Lead actor	What they need to do	Why this matters now
Funders & Commissioners	Adopt a Workforce Funding Compact; fund at *full cost recovery* including training, supervision, leadership and wellbeing; invest in traineeships, apprenticeships, and pooled supervision/IFR; resource the Hub-Light infrastructure.	Workforce capacity cannot be rebuilt without system-level resourcing; underinvestment is driving attrition and instability across London.
Policymakers (GLA, boroughs, MoJ)	Recognise advice as essential civic and social infrastructure; integrate workforce planning into employment and inclusion strategies; align with the GLA Growth Plan, Inclusive Talent Strategy and MoJ Legal Support Strategy.	Advice underpins multiple policy missions: health, housing, safety, inclusion and early intervention. Without workforce capacity, policy objectives will fail.
Networks & Umbrella Bodies	Coordinate training, supervision pools, IFR pilots, peer support programmes, recruitment campaigns and hub functions; convene stakeholders; ensure equity of access for small and equity-focused services.	Fragmented effort wastes scarce resources. Shared infrastructure enables scale, quality and resilience, especially for smaller agencies.
Advice Agencies	Protect learning and wellbeing time; adopt shared competences and supervision standards; engage in peer support; plan for succession; participate in shared pathways for training and progression.	Agency-level practice change is essential to retain staff, reduce burnout and strengthen quality while wider reforms are implemented.

Conclusion

The advice sector is at a crossroads. The choice is to continue to engage in a mode of crisis-driven survival, or to act now to build a sustainable, skilled and diverse workforce. The solutions exist. Many are modest, practical, and proven. Others require strategic investment and coordination but are achievable.

What is lacking is not evidence but resolve.

Services, networks, policymakers and funders must seize this moment. The costs of inaction – staff attrition, collapsing services, unmet community need – will far outweigh the investment required. Conversely, building a resilient workforce will pay dividends: stronger communities, reduced strain on public services, and a sector capable of meeting the challenges of the decade ahead.

The time to act is now.

2. Introduction

This series of papers, background information and resources relate to a review of the organisational capacity of London's not-for-profit (NFP) advice sector relating to its workforce.

This review was commissioned in March 2025 under the Advice Workforce Development Fund (AWDF) Programme. The Advice Services Alliance, as the umbrella body for the independent, not for profit social welfare advice sector has been working alongside partners as the learning partner for the programme and was therefore delighted to be commissioned to look in more detail at the challenges addressing workforce capacity. The research project was tasked to:

- Review and analyse advice sector workforce capacity, support and resources issues focusing on five key areas: recruitment, retention, training, peer support, and supervision.
- Propose actionable solutions to challenges and recommend models for capacity building, support and resources that address workforce needs.
- Ensure the findings inform funders about required resources and support and enable advice providers to adopt best practices.

In the context of advice services, workforce-related organisational capacity refers to the extent to which an advice service has the knowledge, skills, resources, money, systems, culture and infrastructure it needs to sustain an effective, resilient and skilled workforce – its most critical resource alongside funding. It's about whether an organisation can recruit, retain, support, supervise and develop its staff and volunteers in ways that enable it to deliver good-quality advice services.

Research to inform this report took place between April and September 2025 and included a review of literature, interviews, focus groups and meetings with a range of stakeholders, and an open call for evidence. As the research progressed, further reports on pay, conditions and benefits, and on retention, wellbeing and culture in London's advice sector (Hickman et al, 2025a; 2025b; Hickman, 2025) provided important additional insights. Stakeholder feedback informed refinement of solutions, sequencing and framing, particularly regarding funder, commissioner and board responsibilities.

By bringing together research, practice and lived experience, the report aims to strengthen shared understanding and collective action among advice providers, funders, policymakers and infrastructure bodies, ensuring the sector has the workforce capacity it needs to thrive. Whilst it identifies challenges, current responses and solutions, it also highlights opportunities and proposes practical solutions for strengthening the workforce capacity of London's advice sector. The work therefore seeks to support a shared understanding of organisational capacity relating to workforce issues in London's social welfare advice sector. It contributes to the AWDF's ambition to build a more diverse, sustainable and effective advice workforce. It recognises that workforce sustainability depends on aligned action across governance, funding, infrastructure and organisational practice.

This main report was compiled by Phil Jew and Jo Chimes and edited by Lindsey Poole with contributions from Rita Chadha, John Edwards and Marie Burton at the Advice Services Alliance. The research project team are very grateful to all the people who generously have given their time and expertise to inform this review. Any errors or inaccuracies in the report are solely the responsibility of the Advice Services Alliance.

3. Relevant literature

The challenges of attracting people to jobs in the advice sector in London have been well documented in previous research on London's advice sector (Advice Services Alliance, 2020, Rathbone et al, 2022). A review of London Legal Support Trust's Centres of Excellence (COEx) Programme (Jew, January 2024), which examined responses from 43 advice agencies, also identified staff recruitment as a major risk and challenge, noting in particular *"Difficulty hiring experienced solicitors and caseworkers, particularly in specialised areas like asylum support, housing, and legal aid"*.

A Baring Foundation report published in July 2023 on the recruitment and retention of social welfare lawyers (Dr Jacqueline Kinghan, 2023) identified severe recruitment challenges, particularly in housing and immigration, disparities between salaries in legal aid/NFP advice work and commercial practice and barriers to entry for younger and more diverse candidates.

Research into immigration and asylum advice in 2025 found a worsening recruitment and retention crisis *"especially at supervisor level, making it impossible for organisations to train new staff"* (Dr Jo Wilding, 2025). Recent research into pay, benefits and conditions in London's advice sector (Hickman et al, 2025a and 2025b) has provided further evidence of recruitment challenges.

London's advice sector is not alone in experiencing recruitment difficulties. According to the Kreston Charities Report 2024, 54% of UK charities report difficulties recruiting and retaining staff (Kreston, 2024).

Attracting people to volunteer roles in the voluntary sector is also increasingly difficult. Research by Nottingham Trent Business School and Pro Bono Economics found that Volunteer recruitment is difficult for 61% of organisations and has featured as a top three concern since May 2023 (Dr Ben Evans, May 2024).

Advising Londoners (ASA, 2024) documented workforce pressures including limited supervision, a shortage of experienced staff, and ad-hoc training, recommending stronger induction, mentoring and peer learning.

Addressing the Skills Gap (Rathbone et al, 2022) identified persistent problems in recruitment and retention, particularly attracting younger and more diverse candidates, citing poor pay, limited progression routes and weak sector-wide coordination.

The *AWDF Learning Paper* (ASA, 2024) highlighted that workforce issues cannot be solved through recruitment or training alone, but require organisational-level support, leadership development, and a healthier working culture.

4. Background information

a. London's advice sector and workforce

For the purposes of this review, the term 'advice sector' refers to the range of not-for-profit (NFP) advice services which provide social welfare legal advice on topics impacting on Londoners' rights and entitlements. The areas of law this encompasses includes welfare benefits, debt, housing, immigration, employment, disability, discrimination, and community care. Such services are delivered by a variety of organisations including private law firms and legal aid providers, Law Centres, local Citizens Advice and independent advice centres, many of whom are members of AdviceUK. Services are also delivered by voluntary sector organisations working with specific communities or client groups and which may be members of networks such as AgeUK and Youth Access, or focusing on areas of law, such as Shelter and housing advice. Advice maybe provided by user led and equity-focused services, such as Deaf and Disabled People's Organisations (DDPOs) or organisations working with minoritised and racialised communities. Advice may be the only service provided by an organisation or it may be one part of a range of services.

Given this range and diversity of services which make up the sector it is difficult to estimate the exact size of the sector in London or indeed where to draw the boundaries. In 2020, the *Advising Londoners* report (Advice Services Alliance, 2020) identified 494 recognised advice services in London, although it acknowledged that the actual number was between two and three times this number. A more recent report (Hickman et al, 2025a) estimated that the sector consisted of 658 separate services in London. Most of these services are micro or small voluntary organisations: nearly 80% reported operating on incomes under £1m a year.

The same report estimated the total workforce of the sector at just under 10,000 people (estimated 9,562 with a range of ±2,727). According to the pay report, around half of these people are estimated to work in frontline advice-giving roles and the remainder in support capacity such as management, administration, or support roles. However, these estimates are based on survey responses from 82 advice organisations, so should not be taken as definitive.

Advice giving roles may include a helpline adviser, a generalist adviser, a specialist adviser, a debt adviser, a caseworker and a supervisor. Other roles may include a chief executive officer, director, services or operating manager, administrators, receptionists or triage workers, and in larger organisations could include other management roles such a finance officer, HR officer etc. In smaller organisations, these roles may overlap or maybe held by more than one person. In addition to this, there is often a Board of Trustees or Directors who govern the organisation. Not all people in the workforce are paid employees and volunteers remain a crucial part of service delivery, particularly in services such as Local Citizens Advice.

The sector operates as a workforce area in practice, but it is not formally recognised in UK labour force classifications. Advice staff are spread across multiple Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) and Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes (e.g. social work, legal services, community work). Despite this lack of formal recognition, funders and policymakers treat the advice sector as a distinct field with shared workforce challenges. Some advisers are regulated professionals (for example, solicitors, CILEX practitioners), but most are non-legally qualified advisers and caseworkers.

While national networks such as Citizens Advice, AdviceUK and the Law Centres Network provide varying levels of infrastructure and workforce support, over half of London's advice agencies (if we use the 658 figure) are outside national networks, often operating independently with limited capacity. There is some collaboration through borough-level networks such as the Tower Hamlets Advice Network and the Ealing Advice Forum. There are a few pan-London projects, such the Advising Londoners Partnership, Advice in Community Settings project and the Advice Workforce Development Fund (AWDF). There is a project based at the Advice Services Alliance, funded by Trust for London, which is developing an Ethnically Diverse Advice Providers Network. Inclusion London provides support for DPPO's providing advice to their members.

This combination of fragmentation, diversity, and lack of formal recognition makes workforce capacity issues particularly complex but also highlights the importance of collective initiatives to strengthen recruitment, retention, training, supervision, and peer support capacity.

b. Socio-political context

National Government

Family Hubs / Start for Life (England): The government's expanding Family Hubs network includes integrated community services — such as debt and welfare advice — alongside health, parenting and early years. New 2025–26 guidance introduces a tiered model (basic to developed) for local authorities. **Implication:** Advice agencies must prepare for **co-location** within hubs, requiring integrated workforce capability in cross-sector working, safeguarding, and joint supervision frameworks.

Neighbourhood Health / NHS Local Hubs: NHS policy emphasises "neighbourhood health" via integrated community teams and new models of care close to home, supported by the NHS's 10-Year Plan and updated ICB guidance for 2025–26. **Implication:** Advice capacity needs to align with health pathways, placing staff in multi-agency health settings and developing shared supervision and training with health partners.

The Ministry of Justice Legal Support Strategy Delivery Group (LSSDG), comprising government, funders, and sector organisations, to co-develop a long-term strategy for legal support—focusing on improving coordination, quality, sustainability, and evidence-based delivery of non-legal-aid support services. **Implications:**

- Collaborative approach: Agencies need to prepare for enhanced coordination in funding, delivery standards, and data collection driven by LSSDG innovation.
- Data capability: Investment in systems to capture outcomes and service impact will position organisations to participate in emerging evidence-led policy initiatives.
- Strategic leverage: Participation in LSSDG-connected networks enables involvement in shaping future funding and delivery mechanisms.

Review of Civil Legal Aid: a government review of the civil legal aid system is underway, examining provider sustainability, contract models, and strategic procurement. **Implication:** Advice organisations delivering legal aid must anticipate future shifts in funding environments and continue building capacity via supervisory pipelines, flexible training infrastructure, and shared operational systems.

Cross-cutting Implications for Advice Workforce Capacity

- **Integration and Co-location:** Policy shifts require advice workers to operate across sectors (e.g. health, family services), demanding cross-training, shared supervision, and adaptable workforce systems.
- **Structural Preparedness:** Sector growth via hubs and legal support reform necessitates building supervisory capability and career progression pathways to manage growing complexity.
- **Coordination and Infrastructure:** Fragmented advice provision across London (650+ organisations) needs unified strategic responses — e.g. shared training hubs, joint supervision networks, and aligned standards — to meet emerging policy demands.

Greater London Authority/Pan-London

Skills Academies for London's creative, digital, green economy, hospitality, health and social care sectors are supported by the Mayor of London, the London Economic Action Partnership, the NHS, and the Health Education England. They support Londoners to find good jobs in those sectors by providing information on career pathways, providing individuals with advice, coordinating training and apprenticeship activities and provision, and providing tools and resources for employers.

Skills Academies are an important part of City Hall's **Growth Plan for London**, which itself includes an **Inclusive Talent Strategy**, which was consulted on in summer 2025. The Strategy supports the development of a fairer, more resilient workforce with targeted action on matters including entry routes for underrepresented communities. It aligns with the advice sector's recruitment challenges. The Growth Plan identifies "everyday economy" sectors—including social care, education, and civil society—as priorities for workforce investment. The advice sector, while not explicitly mentioned, falls under civil society and shares similar characteristics: high public value, fragmented and under-resourced employer base, workforce inequalities and underinvestment in skills.

A London-Wide Advice Strategy: work is underway, hosted by the AWDF programme, to develop a strategy. This work includes GLA representatives and aims to address key strategic issues and build the capacity of the advice sector in the capital.

c. Phases of development of advice services

This section looks at the characteristics of organisations at various stages of development. It is important to state that this is a continuum - organisations may fall between each stage and have characteristics of more than one stage. A change or crisis may also cause an advice service to revert to an earlier stage, or even close.

1. Foundational / Emerging: New or very small organisations delivering advice with minimal infrastructure. Reliant on founders or volunteers, with ad hoc systems, little or no supervision, and fragile funding. Strength lies in community trust and accessibility, but risks include poor advice capacity and sustainability, founder's syndrome, and adviser burnout.

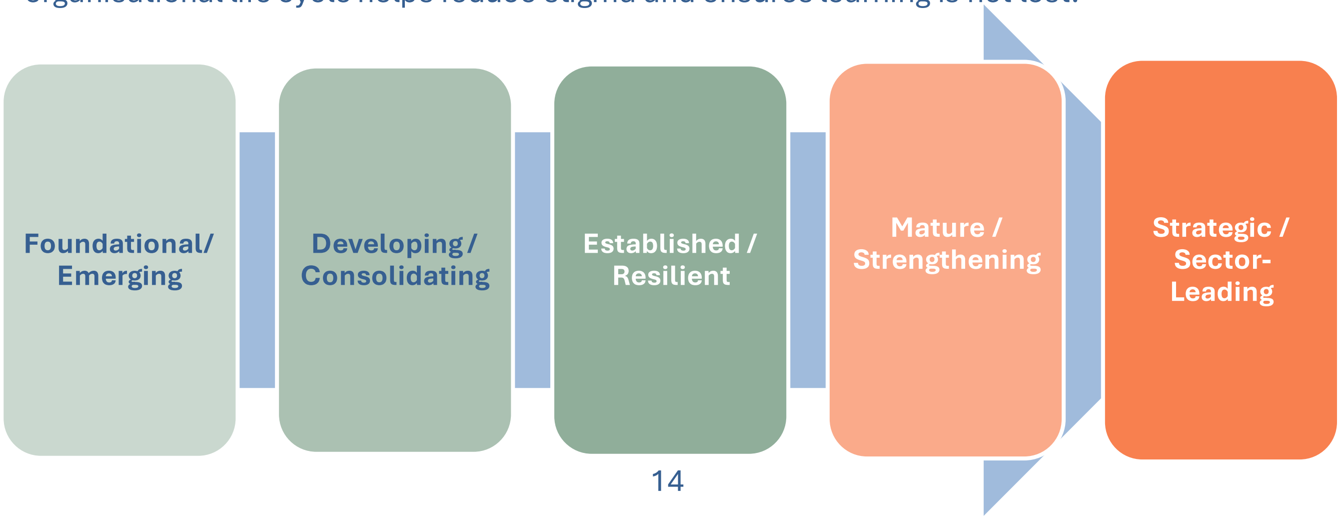
2. Developing / Consolidating: Systems and structures become more formalised, with some paid staff, documented policies, and early workforce planning. Service delivery is more consistent and may be working towards quality standards (e.g. AQS). Outcomes measurement improves, but funding is still fragile and staff under strain from high demand and reactive recruitment.

3. Established / Resilient: Organisation has a more balanced funding mix, stable workforce structures, and a clear workforce development plan (training, CPD, supervision, progression routes). Supervision and peer support are embedded. There is stronger governance, succession planning, and a positive culture focusing on wellbeing and inclusion. The service is resilient, but risks include plateauing and vulnerability to funding cuts.

4. Mature / Strengthening: The organisation is confident and influential locally and regionally. Workforce development is aligned with wider strategy; peer networks and cross-organisational learning are resourced. There is a strong focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion. Leadership succession is planned, innovation is piloted, and the organisation uses data and evidence to advocate effectively. Risk lies in overextension or complacency.

5. Strategic / Sector-Leading: The organisation actively shapes the wider sector, contributing to standards, innovation, and policy influence nationally. It demonstrates sector-leading practice in workforce development, equity, and inclusion. Data and evaluation are used to influence systemic change. Risks include sustaining agility and balancing high external expectations with internal wellbeing.

Wind-down / Closure (possible at any stage): Some organisations may need to wind down services or close, whether due to funding loss, leadership gaps, or unsustainable demand. Even in closure, there is scope for managed transitions: protecting clients, supporting staff, transferring knowledge, and securing a legacy. Recognition that closure is a stage in the organisational life cycle helps reduce stigma and ensures learning is not lost.



Workforce organisational capacity challenges across phases of development

Phase of Development	Recruitment	Retention	Training & Development	Peer Support	Supervision
1. Start-up / Emerging	Limited ability to attract staff; often reliant on volunteers or a single adviser; unclear job roles.	High risk of losing early recruits due to uncertainty, short contracts, low pay, or lack of infrastructure.	Training is ad hoc; informal induction; structured development is rare.	Little or no peer support; staff may feel isolated.	Supervision may not exist or is informal; managers often lack technical supervisory capacity.
2. Establishing / Consolidating	Some staff recruited as funding stabilises, but recruitment still reactive and dependent on short-term grants.	Staff may leave for more stable roles; workload pressures deter retention.	More structured induction begins, but training still project-driven and inconsistent.	Peer support may emerge through small networks, though limited capacity to sustain.	Basic supervision systems introduced, but often patchy; seeking external or reciprocal arrangements.
3. Growing / Scaling	Active recruitment drives to expand capacity; competition with other agencies becomes a barrier.	Retention pressures mount as staff workloads rise; risk of burnout if systems lag behind growth.	Investment in training pathways starts; possibility of apprenticeships or structured CPD.	Peer support more feasible through larger teams; internal mentoring starts to appear.	Supervisory demands increase; adding demands on organisational capacity.
4. Maturing / Sustainable	More strategic recruitment: agencies can market themselves as good employers.	Better pay, benefits, and culture help retention, but risk of stagnation or staff blocked from progression.	Comprehensive training framework in place; staff supported through career pathways.	Peer support networks embedded, participation in external learning groups.	Supervision embedded and differentiated (managerial, pastoral, technical); linked to quality standards (AQS, SQM, etc.).
5. Leading / Influencing	Organisation attracts talent through reputation and influence; may face challenges in diversifying workforce.	Retention strong but risk of losing senior staff to national roles or burnout at leadership level.	Organisation contributes to sector-wide training and develops its own expertise.	Peer support extends across the sector; organisation acts as a hub for learning.	Supervision models used as exemplars; staff trained as supervisors for sector-wide benefit.
Possible Wind-down / Closure	Recruitment freezes: staff uncertainty makes hiring near impossible.	High staff turnover: morale falls as future becomes unclear.	Training budgets cut; focus on immediate delivery rather than development.	Peer support important for resilience but may wither as staff leave.	Supervision risks collapsing if supervisors depart; compliance with standards becomes harder.

5. Methodology

Research for the workforce organisational capacity review was conducted between April and September 2025, using mixed methods. Evidence gathered by the Advice Services Alliance as the Learning Partner for the Advice Workforce Development Fund Programme since November 2023 was also used to inform the review.

It was vital that this review considered the position and experience of the diverse range of advice providers that make up London's advice sector, including smaller, community-based and by and for advice providers, equity focused providers and DDPOs. It was also essential that the review had reference to different types of advice and regulatory requirements in particular subject areas, such as debt advice and immigration advice. We wanted to hear from a good range of advice providers, leaders, managers, staff, umbrella bodies, training providers and funders.

Research methods included:

- Literature and desk-top evidence review – including relevant research and data, regulatory requirements and quality standards.
- An on-line call for evidence, issued in April 2025, which received 19 responses.
- Discussion of workforce capacity issues at a Learning Event for the eight Partnerships funded under the AWDF in July 2025.
- Interviews with a range of stakeholders:
    - Advice agencies: leaders, managers, staff.
    - Training providers.
    - Supervision providers.
    - Specialists.

Consultees

We approached a wide range of organisations and stakeholders to seek their views on workforce related organisational capacity issues. Not all stakeholders responded. The following is a list of people and organisations we spoke with.

AdviceUK	Liz Carboni
Age UK Barnet	Jenny Jean-Charles
Age UK East London	Adam Pervoe
Age UK Lewisham & Southwark	David Colbran
Age UK Richmond	Rohit Dara
Ashiana Network	Shaminder Ubhi
Centre 70	Brian, Helen, Ayshen, Kasia
Citizens Advice Barking and Dagenham	Pip Salvador-Jones
Citizens Advice London	James Sandbach
Citizens Advice Wandsworth	Jeremy Sandell
Disability Law Service	Asma Bennani
Eastern European Resource Centre	Barbara Drozdowicz
Employment Law Advice Network (ELAN)	Emma Wilkinson
Inclusion London	Liz Mercer

Independent Consultant	Vicky Ling
Indoamerican Refugee and Migrant Organisation (IRMO)	Bruna Boscaini
Inspire Project, Centre 70	Nunzia Delle Donne
Institute of Money Advisers (IMA)	Robert Wilson
Island Advice Centre	Jo Ellis, Sarah Sauvat
Kirklees Citizens Advice & Law Centre	Nick Whittingham
LAPG Management & Leadership Hub	Matthew Howgate
Law Centres Network	Simon Brown
London Funders	Geraldine Blake and Shreya Gautam
London Plus	Hannah Norgate
Merton Centre for Independent Living	David Jenkins
Money A+E	Jerry During
National Advice Network Wales	Fran Targett
National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers (NAWRA)	Daphne Hall, Alan Markey
Recognising Excellence	Liz Morris
Refugee Action	Julie Mansfield
Rightsnet	Terry Stokes
The Legal Education Foundation	Deborah Acquaah
University House Legal Advice Centre	Eddie Coppinger

Attendees at Learning Event, 10 July 2025

Andrew, Disability Law Service
Bruna, IRMO
Luana, IRMO
Liz, Inclusion London
Eddie, University House legal advice centre
Kasia, Citizens Advice Wandsworth
Liz, AdviceUK
Simon, Law Centres Network
Chris, LLST
Alban, Money A+E
Keely, Inclusion Barnet
Jeremy, Citizens Advice Wandsworth
Muna, Rooted Finance
Muna's Colleague
Nick, Money A+E
Asma, Disability Law Service

Call for Evidence

A general call for evidence via an on-line survey form was issued in April 2025 and closed in July 2025. 19 Responses were received. (See an appendix for survey results.)

The questions posed were:

1. We're keen to learn about specific challenges and problems you face and examples of good practice in the recruitment and/or retention of advice sector staff, supervisors, volunteers and managers. Do you have any examples, tips, or models that you know work well, particularly to attract and retain a diverse, experienced and skilled workforce? Please tell us briefly about them, include links, and/or send documents to info@asauk.org.uk.

2. We're keen to learn about specific challenges and problems you face and examples of good practice in the recruitment and/or retention of advice sector staff, supervisors, volunteers and managers. Do you have any examples, tips, or models that you know work well, particularly to attract and retain a diverse, experienced and skilled workforce? Please tell us briefly about them, include links, and/or send documents to info@asauk.org.uk.

3. Do you face any specific challenges in the provision of training and development for advice staff, volunteers, supervisors and managers? And do you have any ideas, examples or suggestions about what works well, or could be improved or developed? Please tell us briefly about them, include links and/or send documents to info@asauk.org.uk.

4. Are you part of, or do you know of effective ways of providing peer support within the advice sector, which could be replicated or expanded? Please tell us briefly about them, include links and/or send documents to info@asauk.org.uk.

5. Have you found or heard of solutions to providing supervision and independent file review for advice workers? Do you provide or receive supervisory support from other agencies? Are you part of pooled supervision arrangements? Please tell us briefly about them, include links and/or send documents to info@asauk.org.uk.

6. Workforce capacity challenges and responses

a. Recruitment capacity in London's Advice Sector

Introduction

The challenges of attracting people to jobs in the advice sector in London have been well documented in previous research on London's advice sector. *Advising Londoners* (ASA, 2024) documented workforce pressures including a shortage of experienced staff. *Addressing the Skills Gap* (Rathbone et al, 2022) identified persistent problems in recruitment and retention, particularly attracting younger and more diverse candidates, citing poor pay, limited progression routes and weak sector-wide coordination.

Most of the evidence is anecdotal and qualitative. Statistical data on things like vacancy lengths, applicant numbers, recruitment rounds etc for different roles are not available for the advice sector as a whole.

A review of London Legal Support Trust's Centres of Excellence (COEx) Programme (Jew, January 2025), which examined responses from 43 advice agencies, identified staff recruitment as a major risk and challenge, noting in particular *"Difficulty hiring experienced solicitors and caseworkers, particularly in specialised areas like asylum support, housing, and legal aid*".

A Baring Foundation report published in July 2023 on the recruitment and retention of social welfare lawyers (Dr Jacqueline Kinghan, 2023) identified severe recruitment challenges, particularly in housing and immigration, disparities between salaries in legal aid/NFP advice work and commercial practice and barriers to entry for younger and more diverse candidates.

Research into immigration and asylum advice in 2025 found a worsening recruitment and retention crisis *"especially at supervisor level, making it impossible for organisations to train new staff"* (Dr Jo Wilding, 2025). Recent research into pay, benefits and conditions in London's advice sector (Hickman et al, 2025a and 2025b) has provided further evidence of recruitment challenges.

London's advice sector is not alone in experiencing recruitment difficulties. According to the Kreston Charities Report 2024, 54% of UK charities report difficulties recruiting and retaining staff (Kreston, 2024).

Attracting people to volunteer roles in the voluntary sector is also increasingly difficult. Research by Nottingham Trent Business School and Pro Bono Economics found that Volunteer recruitment is difficult for 61% of organisations and has featured as a top three concern since May 2023 (Dr Ben Evans, May 2024).

For this review, researchers spoke to a range of stakeholders and looked at available evidence to explore the some of the key challenges faced by London's diverse sector and examine solutions.

Challenges

All stakeholders that researchers spoke to confirmed that they are struggling to attract applicants to jobs with the qualifications (where relevant), knowledge, experience and skills to advice roles – particularly at adviser, caseworker and supervisor level. Recruitment exercises for adviser roles that would have elicited scores of applications in the past may now attract just a handful. On the other hand, some stakeholders report that they may receive lots of unsuitable applications (fuelled increasingly by Artificial Intelligence), that must be sifted. It's often the case that applicants have little previous experience in advice roles.

"We might end up with 5-10 suitable candidates for a role a few years ago, whereas more recently it's been hard finding just 1 or 2 people who meet the requirements."

If agencies are to take on employees with no previous advice experience, they must be able to train, support and supervise them, and this can be doubly difficult for smaller advice providers. Funding streams that pay for the post being recruited often come with targets that cannot be relaxed to accommodate training periods.

Several reasons have been put forward for this situation by stakeholders:

Strategic workforce marketing and pipeline deficit: Agencies are advertising jobs and providing information about the role and their work, but research found there is a shortage of any proactive work at an individual service, network and sector-wide level to interest people in a career in the advice sector. The advice sector is not acting collectively to develop a pipeline of new recruits. Researchers consistently heard from advice sector staff – both new recruits and long-standing – how they 'accidentally' came to be involved in the advice sector – it wasn't a conscious career choice.

Pathways unclear: Pathways into the advice sector and potential career progression opportunities are not clearly explained or signposted to potential new entrants into the sector – whether that is at the start of their career, in mid-career or those looking to return to work or switch from other sectors. There is no sector-led/owned website that sets out the qualifications, experience, knowledge, skills or training you may need for welfare advice giving jobs.

There is limited information on the National Careers Service website about welfare benefits adviser roles. Researchers also found an advice worker job profile on the website of an overseas student recruitment agency – The Education Group, London. It contains somewhat negative descriptions of what to expect, including temporary contracts and burnout. Other sectors and professions commonly have these. For example, the Career Development Institute sets out how to become a careers adviser; the NHS gives information on health careers.

Limited career progression opportunities: Career progression opportunities within the same service may also be very limited, or non-existent, particularly in smaller advice services with a sole adviser or very small advice team.

Volunteering is more difficult now: Volunteering is a more difficult option, particularly for working aged people, given recent rises in the cost of living, coupled with tightening of Universal Credit conditions. Research by Nottingham Trent Business School and Pro Bono Economics suggests that lack of time (59%) and lack of interest (50%) are the main obstacles to volunteering identified by voluntary agencies (Dr Ben Evans, 2024). Researchers heard mixed reports about whether volunteer numbers have fallen, and not all advice agencies engage volunteers anyway, but the suggestion is that fewer people are coming through the volunteering route into paid advice roles now.

"Grow your own has proven to be the best method… but volunteer engagement has reduced as the cost-of-living crisis makes volunteering a luxury many cannot afford."

Low pay in the sector is a significant obstacle. This has been well documented in the pay report (Hickman et al, 2025a). Research by London Funders in 2024 found that some advice organisations *"felt that salaries have been artificially depressed because of pressure to put in low bids for work, resulting in community organisations often not asking for enough money because they don't believe that funders will support it"*.

Short-term contracts, driven by short term and insecure funding are less attractive to new entrants. The London Funders research found that *"recruitment and retention of staff were seen as two of the most common challenges facing grantee organisations. The short-term nature of funding was seen to underpin this, making it difficult for advice organisations to provide consistency and security to their staff, or match salaries in other sectors"* (London Funders, 2024). According to the conditions and benefits research *"20% of Adviser/caseworkers are working on a temporary contract compared to 5% of employees in the whole economy"* (Hickman et al, 2025b).

Other recruitment capacity issues identified by stakeholders are:

The cost of recruitment: Bringing people into an organisation can be a very costly experience both in terms of staff time, opportunity loss and in financial resources. For smaller charities in particular, the cost of recruiting may prevent them from looking for new staff until absolutely necessary.

London advice services report that most job advertising is now via on-line platforms. Commonly used platforms are CharityJob, Rightsnet, AdviceJobs and The Guardian. Paid for adverts start at £40 for a single advert on AdviceJobs (for AdviceUK members), to £375 for a permanent role in a small service on Rightsnet and £575 in The Guardian. Having to repeat an advertisement when unsuccessful can quickly burn advice service resources. Smaller, unnetworked agencies may lack the economies of scale to obtain multi-role recruitment deals or access specially brokered deals.

Citizens Advice, Age UK and Law Centres Network advertise vacancies for free for their members but prospective candidates would need to know where to look to find such adverts, hence mainly targeting people already working in the sector. LinkedIn is an increasingly popular way to recruit but again, this only reaches a particular audience and can lead to far too many inappropriate job applications.

Access to good practice recruitment resources: While there are general recruitment good practice resources for charities (for example, see NCVO guidance). Advice sector specific guidance tends to be available only to advice providers in the larger networks. However, we know from the initiatives that have been taken, for instance under the AWDF programme, that the advice sector has a good deal of good practice knowledge to share (this is explored below under emerging practice and sector responses). This can help advice agencies to address the need to improve the diversity and lived experience of the advice sector workforce. For example, DDPOs have a wealth of knowledge about how to recruit disabled people and people with long-term health conditions – about reasonable adjustments and the Access to Work scheme. Global majority led agencies know how to attract and provide equal opportunity for ethnically diverse applicants. Community-based agencies know what people with caring and child-care responsibilities need to encourage them into the advice workforce. The pay report (Hickman et al, 2025a) observed the variable provision by advice agencies of accessible offices, reasonable adjustments, disability leave and use of the Access to Work scheme to support staff with impairments and health conditions.

Apprenticeships can be a great way to enable new people to enter the sector, or existing staff to progress. See an appendix for a guide to apprenticeships relevant to the advice sector. There is growing use and awareness of apprenticeships as a means of providing pathways into and through the advice sector. Examples are given below. However, for smaller advice providers understanding how they work, accessing apprenticeship levy funds and supporting and supervising apprentices can be obstacles.

Sector responses

Several initiatives are underway as part of the AWDF programme to address recruitment challenges, including so called 'grow-your-own' approaches. We will look briefly at these.

Four frontline organisations in Lambeth, led by and for their communities: Indoamerican Refugee and Migrant Organisation (IRMO), Latin American Women's Rights Services (LAWRS), The Baytree Centre and High Trees Community Development Trust, with support from Southwark Law Centre have come together to recruit and train new advisers from underrepresented communities. They offer paid placements, training and support to help them build skills and confidence and move into advice roles. The partnership has recruited eight Welfare and Housing Trainee Advisers and two Immigration Trainee Advisers and received 151 applications for the 10 positions.(See the IRMO case study in the case studies appendix.)

"Being paid to train is essential for many new advisers with lived experience." (IRMO Partnership)

Island Advice Centre, Tower Hamlets: Recruits trainees from the local community and ex-service users, working with AdviceUK and other agencies that are part of the Tower Hamlets Community Advice Network (THCAN) to provide volunteer placements, training and NVQs. Many volunteers have gone on to be paid advisers. (See case studies appendix.)

Rooted Finance and Money A+E, both Black-led and East London based organisations have collaborated to design and deliver an 'incubator' programme. It aims to support diverse London-based community organisations to grow their own advice workers. Two pathways were offered: debt and welfare benefits, with an opportunity to progress to become 'Money Mentors'. Trainees have come from diverse communities including Black African, Black Caribbean, Asian British, Bangladeshi and White mixed communities. Nine trainees started the Debt advice learning pathway, with six completing the learning programme after seven months of training. 16 trainees completed the core Welfare Benefits pathway in cohort one, with eight trainees continuing the Money Mentors programme and six fully completing the training.

Inclusion Barnet and Inclusion London, two DDPO's, have recruited Disabled people with no previous advice workforce experience, providing support to apply for Access to Work and deal with barriers. **Disability Law Service**, also a DDPO, has also worked with two other DDPOs to recruit to trainee posts. DDPOs have created entry-level trainee roles and clear progression routes to supervisory positions. Funding provided by the AWDF programme was instrumental in enabling this. Accessible recruitment processes used by the DDPOs included:

- Extended deadlines
- Reasonable adjustments at interview

- Support with Access to Work applications
- Advertising specifically for disabled applicants – people felt welcomed

"People stayed because they were wanted, not just tolerated. That started with how the job was advertised."

"Progression routes for trainees are essential – they need somewhere to go after training. This should influence funding applications in future."

Citizens Advice Wandsworth has focused on developing new entry routes and enhancing diversity through local collaboration and integration of lived experience. Work included developing supported placements, in partnership with two local community organisations and other local Citizens Advice agencies.

Apprenticeship Schemes: University House Legal Advice Centre scheme has supported thirty solicitor apprentices since September 2020. The Law Centres Network has supported eight solicitor apprenticeships across five Law Centres, under the AWDF programme.

Justice First Fellowship: The Legal Education Foundation has, since 2015, supported a programme of training contracts in social welfare advice agencies for people with some prior legal qualifications (the Legal Practice Course (LPC) or an undergraduate degree and completed and passed the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) Part 1). The programme has seen 125 people qualify, across the UK.

Internships: Law Centres Network is piloting paid internships for Black interns (at 4 London Law Centres) and supporting other law centres nationally to establish similar schemes, in partnership with the 10,000 Interns Foundation. This provides people with at least six-week placements at Law Centres which are paid at the Living Wage rate.

Law student placements: some advice services have arrangements with universities to take students on placement. For example, Citizens Advice Wandsworth has a partnership arrangement with Roehampton University's Law School. These arrangements typically provide a throughput of short-term volunteers duding term times and occasionally lead to students perusing a career in the advice sector.

Kickstart placements: Several stakeholders commented on the success of the Covid recovery scheme, which provided funding to employers to create jobs for 16-24-year-olds on Universal Credit. The scheme was withdrawn in 2023. Several London advice agencies hosted Kickstart trainees, some of whom went on to get follow-on jobs in the sector.

Advice First Aid (AFA) – training for community partners: Citizens Advice Wandsworth (CAW) and the Advising Londoners Partnership (ALP) are using a model of training that introduces people working in non-advice roles in community agencies to advice issues and resources. Though not designed as a recruitment tool, there is some evidence in evaluation reports for CAW and ALP projects that the programme is leading to new interest in advice service roles, and examples of people who have been on an AFA course going on to complete full advice training and move into adviser roles (Jew, December 2024 and Jew, June 2025).

Learning on recruitment practice - As part of this research, a learning event for AWDF funded partnerships was held in July 2025 to discuss workforce capacity issues. The key learning about recruitment that was distilled from these discussions appears in an appended paper.

b. Keeping talent: workforce retention capacity

Introduction

Researchers have heard from a range of stakeholders about the challenges they face in retaining staff. The pay and benefits and conditions reports that were commissioned under the AWDF programme (Hickman et al, 2025a and 2025b) and a report entitled *Stepping off the Hamster Wheel: Retention, Wellbeing and Culture in the Social Welfare Advice Sector* (Hickman, June 2025), also shed important new light on retention issues.

Challenges

There is no empirical evidence of the turnover rate in London's advice sector, but the feedback researchers received is that advice agencies are struggling to retain staff, and particularly those that are experienced and in mid-career. The advice sector pay report (Hickman et al, 2025a) found that, of 229 respondents to its survey of staff: *"Almost half (48%) of respondents had been working in the sector for 10 years or more, increasing to 69% of Manager/supervisor (see Table 25). Support/admin staff were the most likely to have been in role for 1 year or less (50%), followed by Adviser/caseworker (14%). It is notable that 38% of Adviser/caseworkers have been working in the sector for 10 years or more, suggesting a wealth of experience in roles that are not classified as supervisory or managerial."*

It is by no means a universal experience that turnover is high. Some agencies have remarkably stable staff teams. But the general feedback is that retention is a problem. In research for a review of London Legal Support Trust's Centres of Excellence (COEx) Programme (2024), retention challenges identified by advice services included *"High turnover among junior and senior staff, with many leaving for higher salaries or less stressful roles"* and *"Limited career progression opportunities, causing staff to move on after training"* (Jew, January 2025).

Financial pressures, temporary contracts and low pay

A fundamental driver of retention problems in the advice sector is financial. As a report by London Funders on funding for social welfare advice in London found, the short-term nature of and downward pressures on funding and contract values is making it difficult for advice agencies to provide job security and match salaries in other sectors (London Funders, 2024). Respondents said they were losing staff to local authorities and the private sector.

The advice sector's funding model creates inherent instability that directly impacts staff retention. Most organisations rely on short-term grants for projects and services, local authority contracts, legal aid funding or charitable donations, much of which can fluctuate significantly. This uncertainty makes it difficult to offer job security or plan for long-term workforce development.

The value of funding has also gone down for many advice agencies as inflation has risen. Rises in Employers' National Insurance contributions in 2025 have added to advice service staffing costs and forced many to consider redundancies.

The competitive nature of funding also creates pressures. Organisations must constantly pursue new grants and demonstrate impact, which diverts management attention from staff development and retention strategies. This creates a cycle where short-term survival takes precedence over long-term workforce planning. Competitive tendering for contracts can also drive down funding value – a race to the lowest price and largest outputs, depressing salaries, reducing provision for training, supervision and support and creating high targets to achieve.

While some funders have agreed to funding uplifts recently to cover increased running costs, stakeholders reported to researchers that public funders – themselves under fiscal pressure – are less likely to provide this. Contract delays, slow payments and administrative problems within public bodies providing advice funding can make the security of advice agencies precarious. A cyber-attack on the Legal Aid Agency in April 2025 has pushed some agencies to the brink of collapse[1].

Against this backdrop of uncertainty, it is unsurprising that the sector seeks to mitigate the risks of taking new staff on and having to retain them. The pay report found that 20% of Advisers/Caseworkers had temporary/fixed-term contracts, and that 39% of Adviser/Caseworker vacancies were advertised on this basis. As the report noted *"The overall figure for temporary contracts for employees in the wider economy is 5.3% suggesting that there is much greater use of temporary contracts in the advice sector, particularly for Adviser/caseworkers"* (Hickman et al, 2025a).

The problem of relatively low pay in the advice sector is now a well-documented problem. As the pay report also found, 35% of London advice staff that responded to a survey were dissatisfied with their pay and conditions (Hickman et al, 2025a).

The stakeholders that researchers spoke to confirm these pressures. For smaller advice agencies, offering job security can be particularly difficult, as there may not be the opportunities for redeployment at the end of funding terms that exist in larger agencies

Culture and wellbeing

The advice sector's retention crisis is deeply connected to widespread burnout and stress amongst staff. This burnout stems from multiple sources: increased demand for services, reduced funding, higher case complexity, and the emotional toll of working with vulnerable clients.

> ***"Workers are facing growing stress, particularly in welfare rights, due to increasing demand and a rising number of cases where there is no practical help available for clients…The thing [advisers] are finding hardest now is… there isn't anything to offer…The ongoing impact of welfare reform—especially proposals affecting disability benefits—is amplifying the emotional and moral strain on advisers."***

The *Stepping off the Hamster Wheel* report (Hickman, 2025) identifies retention as a persistent challenge across the advice sector, with smaller agencies facing the greatest difficulties. It emphasises that retention is shaped not only by the inherent stress of advice work, but also by organisational culture. Smaller agencies and equity focused agencies, but advice agencies in general, often rely on close-knit teams, strong personal relationships, high intrinsic motivation and values, which can foster loyalty and a sense of purpose. This can also lead to burnout and lack of psychological safety. Where management practices are inconsistent, workloads are poorly managed, or decision-making feels opaque, these cultural

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[1] https://www.theguardian.com/law/2025/aug/03/legal-aid-cyber-attack-has-pushed-sector-towards-collapse-say-lawyers

strengths can be undermined. In such cases, staff may feel undervalued or unsupported, accelerating turnover.

"People love the work, but that's not enough. You need career progression and stability too."

Burnout is a critical risk, particularly in smaller teams where staff cover multiple roles and service areas. The loss of even one experienced adviser can significantly disrupt operations, and the *Stepping off the Hamster Wheel* report warns that *"when one person leaves, the impact on capacity can be immediate and severe."*. The report stresses that improving retention in smaller agencies requires more than financial fixes. It calls for a deliberate focus on creating supportive, transparent, and inclusive workplace cultures; managing workloads; and offering genuine development opportunities. The report also points to the need for organisations to protect around 20% of staff time for activities beyond advice and casework — including professional development, strategic thinking, training, and reflective practice. Without this investment, staff are trapped in a reactive cycle that limits learning, innovation, and resilience. Embedding this time into workload planning is seen as essential for retaining skilled staff and enabling them to work at their best.

Stakeholders consulted by researchers confirm the challenges of stress, burn-out and feeling like they are on a hamster wheel. Researchers also observed that good organisational culture, where people are respected and given agency, can help to retain staff, despite pay disparities and insecurities – even in smaller agencies. The appended case studies of advice worker experiences within a small advice service illustrate the value people place in being trained well, treated like adults, not being micro-managed and being supported by colleagues and managers.

Researchers also heard some comments from stakeholders about the changing expectations of the advice sector workforce regarding working arrangements and support provided. Post-Covid, expectations of office attendance have shifted, and some staff are resistant to coming back to offices. The pandemic may also have shifted staff and volunteer expectations of the support they are offered – not just with everyday work but with their development and progression. The case study on Citizens Advice Barking & Dagenham in the case studies appendix refers to this.

Succession planning and founder's syndrome

Succession planning is an important part of managing the risks to an organisation. The departure of a key member of staff in a supervisor, manager or other leadership role may create a risk to service delivery. Organisations with clear leadership development pathways are more likely to retain talented staff and less likely that they seek prospects for advancement opportunities elsewhere. The risks created by unclear succession arrangements also affects staff confidence in organisational stability, particularly when long-serving leaders approach retirement age and/or show signs of burnout.

For advice organisations, succession planning challenges are particularly acute given the specialised nature of the work and the importance of maintaining relationships with funders, partner organisations, and community stakeholders. The departure of key leaders without adequate preparation can disrupt these crucial relationships and threaten sustainability.

Some advice agencies suffer from "founder's syndrome" - a phenomenon where the original founder's vision and leadership style is dominant, may be difficult to replace and can stifle growth and innovation. Founders can become resistant to change, overly protective of their original ideas, or reluctant to delegate authority to other staff members. Researchers heard the view that this phenomenon tends to affect equity focused organisations in particular, where a community leader has taken the initiative to set up a service for their community.

Limited career development opportunities

The advice sector struggles to offer clear career progression pathways and opportunities. Unlike private sector firms or large public organisations, many advice charities cannot offer hierarchical career ladders or substantial pay increases over time. This limitation is particularly problematic for younger people who may join the sector with enthusiasm for the mission but leave when they realise the constraints on their professional development. It is also a problem when people in the advice sector reach mid-career in advice giving roles and then cannot progress, unless they take management roles.

The training investment paradox also affects retention. While organisations invest significantly in training new advisers—particularly given the specialised knowledge required for areas like welfare benefits, housing law, or debt advice—these newly qualified people often become more attractive to other employers, including private and public sector employers, who may well offer better paid and conditions.

The benefits and conditions research report (Hickman et al, 2025b) found is a significant relationship between overall job happiness and satisfaction with training and career progression. All respondents who were happy with their training and career progression were also happy in their overall job. A quarter of survey respondents were unhappy with their training and career progression and 30% of advice workers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement *"I have good opportunities for professional growth"*.

Sector responses

Several initiatives under the AWDF programme are addressing retention issues.

Inclusion Barnet, working with Inclusion London, is providing training and support to allow five DDPO staff to progress into supervisor roles.

AdviceUK is supporting one of its members in London to develop succession plans to address founder's syndrome issues.

Indoamerican Refugee and Migrant Organisation (IRMO) is upskilling and developing 18 existing advisers, four managers and five trainee supervisors in four community-based organisations that are part of the project it leads. This work involve staff shadowing advice sessions at Southwark Law Centre

c. Training and developing the workforce

Introduction

The advice sector is dealing with some of the most complex and complicated areas of law, with many clients presenting with several legal issues which inter-relate. Well-trained staff will have the knowledge to recognise which cases are more complex, the skills to develop an empathetic relationship with clients and the values follow due process whilst championing social justice. Conversely, poorly trained staff will quickly feel out of their depth, feel more stressed and may give inaccurate or inappropriate advice, making basic mistakes. Training opportunities add to job satisfaction. The shortage of progression and development pathways does nothing to help create a pipeline of new entrants and fuels dissatisfaction amongst those already in the sector (Rathbone et al, 2022).

As the benefits and conditions report (Hickman et al, 2025b) noted, nearly a quarter of respondents to a staff survey are unhappy with their training and career progression. 18% of advice organisations had no formal progression opportunities. And while 61% of organisations reported providing an individualised training and development plans, just 14% of advice staff reported receiving these.

However, training can be time intensive, and it can cost a lot to access good quality courses. It can often be out of the reach of small organisations, particularly those which are user-led or equity-focused. Deaf and Disabled People's Organisations report that training does not always adequately meet their requirements to participate fully. This section gives an overview of training available and required for London advice services and then examines the challenges in accessing this.

Overview

Training and development opportunities can take many forms: online or in person training courses, shadowing and mentoring, attending conferences or meetings, studying for a qualification. Quality standards used by the sector including sector specific standards (i.e. *Advice Quality Standard (AQS)*, *Specialist Quality Mark (SQM)* and *Lexcel)* and general organisational standards (i.e. Investor in People, Trusted Charity etc) all require organisations to provide training and development opportunities, maintain individual training plans, and ensure that staff (advisers, supervisors and managers) are competent.

Previous governments had set up sector training bodies to develop cross sector requirements for job roles which then inform training providers of the course content. The lead body for the advice sector is Skills for Justice and a suite of National Occupational Standards (NOS) were developed for legal advice and underpin apprenticeships and formal qualifications. These standards have not been updated in a decade and now are being reviewed with a Sector Led Steering Group and chaired by AdviceUK.

In the absence of coordination, training provision appears to be extensive but is fragmented and lacks a sense of progression. Many advice services sell their expertise to others as a form of income generation for example to community navigators.

Provision of basic training

The provision of basic volunteer training is well established within Citizens Advice which has a national programme all new advisers are required to complete before they become advisers.

The process of completing the course can take several months depending on the availability of training officers. Many advisers have started their advice career through Citizens Advice volunteer training and to some, it provides the majority of basic training for the entire sector. AdviceUK also provides an entry level training programme entitled *Learning to Advise* which provides structured pathways. However, this training is not compulsory. Other training provided addresses leadership and management, data skills, and emerging areas like AI in legal advice.

Qualifications relevant to advice roles include NVQs/Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) awards in Information, Advice and Guidance at Levels 2–4, plus management diplomas accredited by NCFE (National Council for Further Education). AdviceUK run a suit of courses on Advice and Guidance and which are accredited by City and Guilds[2] including introductory courses and courses for quality assessors. Although a Foundation Degree in Social Welfare Advice and Guidance is offered by the University of Suffolk, there is nothing similar in London. The *Institute of Money Advisers (IMA)*, a membership body for individual money advisers sets Continual Professional Development and qualification standards for accredited debt advisers (CertMAP). University College London have recently started an optional module on Social Welfare Advice for students on the Law Degree.

Required training for regulated advice

Whilst advice services are not defined as a regulated service in the Legal Services Act, there are some specific areas of law which are covered by regulation, and which apply to those services giving advice in these areas. These are:

- Debt and Money Advice is covered by the *Financial Conduct Authority (FCA)* requires debt advice providers to ensure all staff members are competent and have the appropriate training. The framework for meeting this requirement is set out by *Money and Pensions Service (MaPS)*.
- Immigration advice, overseen by the *Immigration Advice Authority (IAA)* and which requires immigration advisers to pass assessments at different levels in order to be registered to give advice on these matters; offering unregulated advice is a criminal offence.
- Services provided by a lawyer acting as a lawyer are covered by the Legal Services Act and regulated by the Solicitors Regulation Authority and the Legal Services Board. It includes the requirement for the lawyer to undergo a certain number of training activities each year.

More detail is provided in an appendix on Standards, qualifications and training for the advice sector section [hyperlink to this].

Challenges

Navigating the maze: Training and development for the advice sector involves a maze of competence and standards frameworks, qualifications, pathways and training providers. Different requirements apply to specific areas of law. Provision remains fragmented, often difficult for smaller agencies to access, and not always linked to clear career progression

[2] Advice and Guidance Support qualifications and training courses | City & Guilds

pathways. Keeping track of, complying with and making use of these is a major undertaking for London's advice agencies. There is a need for more coordination, funded access, and alignment with sector-wide career development.

"People just don't really have a good understanding of what's already out there."

Those in networks with more infrastructure and support available – Citizens Advice and Age UK members, for example – have membership requirements, guidance and access to some free online training courses (particularly at more basic/entry levels). Other advice agencies must find their own ways round the maze, sometimes with help from network bodies or special projects. They may develop funded and free training and development initiatives with other agencies, as seen in the example of Island Advice Centre (see Agency case studies appendix) and other AWDF projects.

Agencies and networks consulted by researchers confirmed that outside of network and locally organised provision there is little coordination of training and development and little by way of mapping standards and competence frameworks to courses, qualifications and development pathways. Rightsnet has a training and events directory, which is searchable by topic and event type. Training providers upload their course information directly, so it's self-serve and the directory runs itself. The Money and Pensions Services has a Learning Pathway Hub, which lists accredited training courses and qualifications relating to money advice.

Cost: For agencies without access to free training, the cost of courses can be a barrier. Purchasing individual places for staff on skills and knowledge courses can be very expensive. Smaller agencies in particular told researchers that they often have difficult decisions to make about what training needs and requests they can support. Many rely on in-house training from more experienced staff. In the benefits and pay research (Hickman et al, 2025b) over one fifth (22%) of organisations identified the affordability and availability of appropriate training as a barrier.

"Sometimes the money hasn't been budgeted for… so decisions are made based on cost rather than actual learning need."

Qualifications can be even more expensive than training courses and while they are not strictly required by most advice sector employers, there is less incentive to fund them. However, researchers heard that staff and volunteers value certification of their learning and skill.

Building the cost of training and qualifications into funding bids is of course what advice agencies should be doing. But researchers heard from stakeholders that funding pots and contracts are not always sufficient to cover these costs, and even when they are funders can be frustrated that agencies do not include them.

Quality, format, content and accessibility: Stakeholders consulted by researchers said that the quality of training they access can be variable. It is not always sufficiently tailored to the needs of trainees, organisations and the advice issues they deal with. That is why equity focused and community advice agencies under the AWDF programme have developed their own programmes that are more flexible and culturally relevant to their workforce and client needs.

"As a Deaf organisation… the training is not provided in British Sign Language and is therefore not accessible for our organisation."

The increasingly online format of training is also not always appropriate for trainees. Online self-led modular courses are particularly disliked by trainees and advice sector managers. Webinar formats can be more time efficient as they do not require travel, permit access for people with mobility and caring issues and can be attended or viewed by multiple members of staff, but they may not provide the interactivity and networking that in-person events do. The opportunity to talk to, share with and learning from peers in other agencies is an important part of training and development.

Inclusion London provides guidance to trainers it works with on making materials and delivery methods accessible and the needs an approach of DDPOs. This gives training providers the confidence to deliver good quality, accessible training.

Availability of training and development opportunities and pathways: There are range of training providers and courses for advice providers to choose from, notwithstanding the above challenges. However, stakeholders mentioned some gaps and shortages:

- The availability of debt advice courses so that debt advisers can fulfil their CPD requirements.
- Shortages of training for supervisors.
- Leadership and management training for Directors, CEOs and senior managers.

However, while gaps in training availability need to be filled, the consensus from the research was that clear pathways for development are lacking. This was also a finding of the *Addressing the Skills Gap* report (Rathbone et al, 2022). As described in papers in this series on recruitment and retention, there is a shortage of progression and development opportunities and pathways for staff and that does nothing to create a pipeline of new entrants and fuels dissatisfaction amongst those already in the sector. As the benefits and conditions report (Hickman et al, 2025b) noted, nearly a quarter of respondents to a staff survey are unhappy with their training and career progression. 18% of advice organisations had no formal progression opportunities. And while 61% of organisations reported providing an individualised training and development plans, just 14% of advice staff reported receiving these.

Linked to this, pathways to development are not clearly signposted and linked to standards, competency frameworks and qualifications. Some agencies (for example Citizens Advice Barking & Dagenham and Kirklees Citizens Advice & Law Centre) have developed their own schematics to fill this gap and allow staff to see the directions they might go in, and skills, experience and training they need to pursue their personal goal.

Entry-level training and pathways: A recurring theme is that for anyone who may be interested in a career in the advice sector, or even just becoming a volunteer or moving into the advice sector later in their working life, the routes into and through the advice sector are opaque. As noted in the recruitment chapter there are few places where roles in the advice sector and how to get to them are described.

The stories of trainee and apprentice experiences on the AWDF website and staff stories appearing in this report (see appendix nine) illustrate the lack of visibility of the sector and fragmentation of training and qualification routes:

"I wanted to volunteer as an adviser and get trained for advice-giving, so I did an energy champion course. I eventually managed to get a placement working in a debt advice service. I started looking into more training over a year ago, but at the time it wasn't clear

whether there was funding for the programme to run. My experience was a bit fragmented: there wasn't a joined-up way of getting initial training, doing a placement and then moving onto an NVQ." [Trainee]

Lack of strategic approach: The advice sector lacks a sector-wide strategic approach to training and skills development. Much of the provision is reactive. There are no cross-sector analyses of current and future training and development needs and coordination of action.

"I don't get the sense that people are sitting down… taking a proper strategic approach to learning and development." (Consultee)

Likewise, many individual agencies tend to take a relatively short-term approach to training, based on the needs of individual staff or projects or in response to changes in law, regulations and standards or the availability of new training programmes. Training needs may be discussed in supervision and appraisal meetings. Courses may be identified and requested by staff on an ad hoc basis. Decisions may be made according to budget availability or whether the time to train can be spared. Training plans are often compiled for the purposes of compliance with quality and membership standards, not part of a strategy. We consequently get the aforementioned disconnect between agencies who say they have plans and staff views on whether they exist.

Coordination capacity: Where pathways - from interest in advice sector work, through training and experience, to qualification and (hopefully) jobs - are working more effectively in the advice sector they require partnership between multiple agencies. As the examples in the research papers show, community based and by and for agencies can help to reach out to people with relevant lived experience and provide know-how about what works in terms of training. Advice agencies need to be able to provide volunteering opportunities, placements and paid trainee roles. Trainers are needed to develop and deliver good quality advice training. Qualification providers are needed, and of course funders are needed to cover the full and real costs of provision (including apprenticeship levy donors). Few agencies have the capacity to coordinate and manage the multi-agency partnerships without substantial investment and involvement of infrastructure bodies like advice networks.

Time to train: Stakeholders consulted talked about the difficulty in finding time for training, development and reflective practice, due to the pressures of meeting client need and achieving contractual and funding targets. This echoes Jo Hickman's observation in the *Stepping off the Hamster Wheel* report that the *"oppressive overwhelm"* that exists in the sector means that time for training, learning and development is not ringfenced (Hickman, 2025).

Advice agencies need the ability to create and support trainee roles in which trainees have the time to observe, shadow, train and develop without the pressure of having to deliver output targets.

Shortage of trainers: Researchers heard from training providers that they rely on a small pool of experience, knowledgeable and skilled trainers. The Institute of Money Advisers said that it is constantly searching for new trainers but gets very few suitable applications. AdviceUK also faces this challenge. It does offer train-the-trainer courses. Advice agencies themselves need in-house people with trainer skills and advice knowledge to provide staff and volunteers with day-to-day training and development.

"There's a limited capacity of available and skilled trainers… It's not as straightforward as saying, 'I've been doing the job, I'll be a trainer'."

Sector responses

Examples of recruitment and training initiatives are provided in the chapter on recruitment. **The Island Advice Centre, Inclusion London and Refugee Action's Frontline Immigration Advice Project (FIAP)** case studies (see appended agency case studies) also give good examples of sector responses which could be upscaled and replicated.

Island Advice Centre's initiative in Tower Hamlets demonstrates how a locally rooted, community-led approach can build a sustainable advice workforce by combining accessible training, structured practice placements and clear progression routes from volunteering into paid roles. Its' Learning to Advise programme blends classroom learning with supervised placements and Level 3 NVQ pathways, supported by practising caseworkers who tailor national materials to local needs. By recruiting trainees from within the community—many with lived experience of advice issues—Island has created a long-term pipeline in which volunteers become advisers, supervisors and even managers. Strong peer support structures, local forums, and coordinated information-sharing (e.g., via newsletters and networks) help maintain quality and resilience. However, their experience also highlights a sector-wide challenge: supervision and coordination, although essential to effective volunteer development and service quality, remain significantly underfunded.

Inclusion London's Propel Advice Project illustrates how targeted training, structured peer support and ongoing mentoring can strengthen the workforce capacity of Deaf and Disabled People's Organisations (DDPOs). By commissioning specialist training for both new entrants and emerging supervisors—and dramatically scaling delivery from 38 places in 2023/24 to 161 in 2024/25—IL has built foundational skills, supervisory capability and specialist welfare rights expertise across the DDPO network. Peer Support Groups have been central, reducing isolation in small organisations and creating reflective spaces for problem-solving, confidence-building and shared learning. Testimonials highlight how the combination of training, mentoring and peer networks enables trainees to progress into confident advisers and supervisors. The project also demonstrates the importance of ongoing support infrastructures, such as IL's DDPO Advice and Housing Networks, and the potential of devolved training budgets and templated training pathways to embed sustainable, long-term workforce development across the DDPO sector.

FIAP provides free-at-the-point-of-delivery, comprehensive training for immigration advice trainees/junior advisers. Since 2016, thousands have taken part. The model works by Refugee Action training a higher number of lower-level trainees, with the in-built assumption that some will leave but a number will be able to progress through the levels. It has been shown to improve the quality of the organisations and the advice provided - with improved triaging and boundaries training.

Asylum Aid's 'Compass' Advisor Development Programme, delivered in partnership with the Justice Together Initiative, provides training, supervision and peer support for immigration advisers from refugee organisations and working in advice deserts. The programme of in-depth training, shadowing opportunities, intensive legal supervision, monthly group clinical supervision, and peer support groups is targeted at those in organisations that would otherwise struggle to afford this support.

d. Building solidarity: The role of peer support

Introduction

Peer support forms an important part of the training and development for staff at advice organisations, at all levels. Working closely with those in a similar role or learning from colleagues is a valued source of support for those working in the London advice sector.

If the question is *"how do we help our volunteers and staff to do the best job they can?"* then part of the answer must be to create the best possible conditions for peer support to happen, formally and informally. The barriers for accessing peer support directly relate to organisational capacity, the time and resources available to organise and facilitate peer support meetings and networks, and the time available to advisers, supervisors and other advice staff to take part in peer support arrangements.

In the advice sector peer support can come from many places: from peers who are working in the same team and in the same advice service; from colleagues in other teams in the same advice service; from colleagues in other advice agencies working in the same advice area, or for similar client groups; from online forums; from colleagues in other advice agencies who are in similar roles and similar levels of career progression. Peer support can be formal and structured: stakeholders talked about dedicated regular peer support meetings, facilitated for new trainees, with colleagues in other advice agencies. All these arrangements are closely linked to supervision, support from line managers, second tier support, communities of practice and mentoring

Peer support is often informal and unstructured, for example in an advice service with an advice team, peer support might happen during a team meeting when cases and issues are discussed and colleagues swop experiences and tactics and strategies. And that is the great benefit of peer support – it can directly help an adviser to improve the ways they can help their clients, with real examples, shared knowledge and practical strategies. Stakeholders told researchers that often the best learning and development is 'on-the-job training' and learning from colleagues.

Peer support can offer a sympathetic ear, help to overcome issues in a 'nightmare case'. It can give confidence to the adviser to push for more. Informal peer support is often given during a chat over a cup of tea, or in an online chat between colleagues, or an exchange of emails.

Challenges

Setting up peer support: Stakeholders consulted noted some of the challenges in setting up peer support arrangements:

- Without peer support, advisers or trainees in small advice teams have feelings of professional isolation, particularly in non-networked organisations, or where advisers are in very small teams (e.g. less than three advisers) in a particular subject.
- Sometimes the people that need peer support the most do not have access to that kind of support. The informal and formal peer support described above isn't available to all in the advice sector.
- Where staff turnover is high, peer support is fragile. Participants cannot build trust or consistency.

- Where funding does not explicitly cover time for participation, engagement in peer support is deprioritised
- Formal solutions are not always the right answer. By its nature peer support is diffuse. Informality is good, and sometimes it is vital for peer support to truly be successful.
- There are fewer spaces for supervisors or leaders to share challenges. One network explained that they have no dedicated peer support for supervisors or managers across their London network. They felt that this resulted in managers solving the same problems in isolation. They were pleased that regional collaboration was more visible during AWDF delivery, although they felt that there was no sustained long-term infrastructure to support learning exchange in the future.
- A leading trainer reported that peer support is highly valued but not universally available. Informal learning between colleagues is often the main source of support, especially in small agencies. However, when turnover is high or teams are stretched, opportunities for peer learning quickly disappear.

"In some agencies, peer support is the only support people get. But that's fragile – it disappears when people leave."

- A funder told researchers that wider peer support or well-being-focused supervision exists but is underused due to:
    - Time pressures and case complexity
    - Lack of trust in external providers
    - Fragmentation and lack of quality-assured provision.
- An advice service reported that their staff attend borough-wide adviser forums, coordinated by Tower Hamlets Community Advice Network, which offer camaraderie and shared problem-solving. However, time constraints are the main barrier to both accessing and offering peer support.
- Sometimes the pressure of workload, targets and the 'pressures of the waiting room' mean that peer support takes last place. One advice service told us that the terms of their funding meant they could not pause or slow down to consolidate or retrain.

"You don't have the luxury of stopping a service for a period to catch up."

Insufficient and ineffective peer support: There are risks where there are ineffective peer support arrangements:

- The quality of advice may suffer. Peer support is a vital component of training and development. It is necessary for a service to provide the best quality advice and outcomes for clients.
- Without peer support, advisers and supervisors are professionally isolated
- In pressured advice services, informal peer support can be limited. When experienced staff are overwhelmed with their own caseloads, this has a knock-on effect on junior staff

"There's not always time for questions or support when you're starting out… you just try not to drown."

Sector responses

Peer support groups, networks and communities

Under the AWDF programme, **Inclusion London and Inclusion Barnet** worked with their DDPO partners to set up facilitated peer support groups for both their trainee advisers and new supervisors. The learning from the AWDF projects has been that peer support is hugely valuable for supervisors, as a very important resource for helping them to develop in their supervisor roles.

"Peer support meetings have been invaluable — they made the transition to a supervisor role possible and have equipped us to offer the best service to our clients."

There are other excellent examples of peer support schemes, noted below:

- **Asylum Aid** launched a pilot scheme in 2023, with the aim of increasing access to complex casework advice through training, supervision and peer support. The aim of the pilot was to demonstrate that *"Investment in training a sustainable pipeline of expert immigration advisers is a key element in creating a strengthened, better coordinated and well-networked immigration advice system."* The pilot continues, with two programmes: the Compass Advisor Development Programme and the Migrant Justice Greater London (MJGL) project.
- **Advice UK** has trialed reflective practice sessions for advisers and supervisors
- Peer support can be provided by online forums created and moderated by external agencies, such as **Rightsnet.**
- Advice networks also provide structured peer support opportunities, for example the **Law Centres Network** provides peer support groups for apprentice solicitors.
- Other formal peer support structures are found in the **professional networks** such as Law Society or CILEX groups. Practitioner associations such as ELAN, or HLPA, or ILPA, or NAWRA also provide excellent peer support between members – at networking and training events, and social events.
- **Citizens Advice London** has recently set up a Community of Practice for its training managers
- **The Community Care Lawyers Group (CCLG)** was set up following the Access Social Care Career Pathways report 2022,

Wellbeing support and clinical supervision

Clinical supervision is hugely important for those advisers working with clients experiencing trauma or, for example, clients who are at risk of losing their homes or liberty.

A London funder noted that they were aware that there is no central resource for identifying good providers of reflective or clinical supervision. Examples of resources and support include:

- **LawCare** offers a peer support programme "for the legal sector in the UK".
- **The Young Legal Aid Lawyers group (YLAL)** lists a range of support resources on its website.
- **The London Specialist Advice Forum (LSAF)** has helpfully created an online page that gathers together resources, guides and support available for supporting frontline staff.
- **The Immigration Law Practitioners Association (ILPA)** lists peer support and wellbeing resources on its members website.

Another useful resource is the LAG handbook *'Vicarious Trauma in the Legal Profession'* described as a practical guide to trauma, burnout and collective care. It contains case studies, as well as tools for self-reflection. It aims to give organisations an understanding of trauma-informed working practices and guidance for implementing collective care, training and support.

It is harder to find wellbeing and support offers for those working in the wider advice sector, outside legal aid, although some of the resources listed above are more widely open to include those who don't work in legal aid.

Learning on peer support

Widespread support, but not enough time: It is apparent that there are many great examples of peer support across the advice sector. The biggest challenge is simply finding the time to set up and participate in peer support. The learning from this review is clear: peer support can significantly improve adviser well-being, confidence, and retention, yet provision is fragile and uneven. This is particularly acute for small advice teams and equity-focused services, who are arguably most in need of peer support, and face the biggest risks to the quality of their services when they unable to access the support they need. The challenge lies in providing advisers and their supervisors with the right conditions that give them the time and space they need to access peer support, and in overcoming the constraints funding models that prioritise outputs over staff development.

The risks of not adopting new approaches to peer support: The risks of not adopting new approaches to peer support are quite clear:

- Lower quality of advice, worse client outcomes and higher risk of client detriment
- Higher risk of adviser stress and burnout
- Decrease in job satisfaction, increased difficulty in recruiting, worse retention
- Worsening position for **small, equity focused, non-networked agencies** in terms of level playing field and value of their specialist knowledge and importance of lived experience

As one interviewee warned, without proper investment, peer support risks remaining "optional and nice to have" rather than a core element of workforce development.

e. Supporting practice and quality: supervision and file review

Introduction

Effective supervision and independent file review (IFR) are fundamental for enabling advisers to give good quality advice, to support advisers training and development, and to ensure that work is allocated safely and appropriately.

Supervision ensures staff are supported to do their work well. IFR gives an independent view of case quality and turns learning into improvement. Both are uneven across the sector and often under-resourced, especially in smaller or equity-led organisations.

What we mean by "supervision" (types and functions)

- **Managerial supervision** focuses on the person and the job: workload, priorities, targets, wellbeing, boundaries, safeguarding and conduct. It aligns day-to-day delivery with organisational goals and duty of care.
- **Technical (professional) supervision** focuses on the client and the advice itself. It covers legal accuracy, case strategy, risk, remedies and procedure. Typically delivered by a subject-matter lead or senior caseworker, it includes structured case discussion and case sign-off where needed. It aims to ensure that caseworkers provide accurate advice that is appropriate to the client's situation, and the client's interests and needs.
- **Clinical/reflective supervision** supports staff exposed to trauma, distress or vicarious risk (common in immigration, housing and complex welfare cases). It develops reflective practice, resilience and ethical awareness; it complements, but does not replace, managerial or technical oversight.

Good supervision combines these strands proportionately to role, experience and service model, with clear frequency, documented outcomes and feedback loops into training and appraisal.

What we mean by "independent file review" (IFR models)

- **Internal independent review:** files reviewed by a colleague who is not the case owner (ideally not the direct line-manager for developmental openness).
- **External paid review:** commissioned reviews by an experienced practitioner outside the organisation (ensuring independence where small teams or conflicts exist).
- **Reciprocal peer review across agencies:** matched pairs or clusters exchange files to benchmark practice and share learning (most effective when centrally coordinated), with external colleagues who have experience of working at the same level, in the same area, for the same community.
- **Regulatory peer review models:** e.g., Legal Aid peer review criteria applied to legally-aided work; many NFP services seek to emulate the developmental features of this approach across non-LAA work.

Whatever the model, IFR is most valuable when: (i) reviewers use consistent tools; (ii) findings are coded and themed; and (iii) learning feeds back into supervision, CPD and service design.

Challenges

The specific organisational capacity challenges for supervision relate to recruitment, training and guidance, arranging technical supervision, supervisor workloads, compliance and quality, funding and general support and supervision for supervisors. There are a number of other organisational capacity challenges that impact directly on the supervision role:

- The absence of someone to supervise the supervisor (managerial, technical and clinical)
- The absence of up-to-date comprehensive legal resources
- The challenge of covering for a supervisor when they are off sick or absent for another reason
- Lack of peer support and second tier support for supervisors

The additional burdens on supervisors – new and inexperienced advisers: The managerial and technical supervision burden for supervisors will be greater when advice organisations recruit staff without the required skills and experience for a role.

Stakeholders in an advice network noted that:

"Capacity issues mean that even when new staff are brought in, services struggle to onboard and develop them effectively."

This is an additional strain on the supervisor, and how many people they can effectively supervise, even where there is an additional resource for training e.g. a training manager.

Capacity, role design and time protection: Supervision is frequently "bolted on" to already stretched roles. Supervisors juggle live caseloads, triage, management tasks and file review without protected time. Where frequency is not specified (or funded), supervision drifts, with sessions cancelled to meet demand. The result is diminished quality assurance and rising burnout—especially when multiple trainees or new starters rely on close oversight.

Supervisor pipeline: There is a shortage of suitably experienced supervisors. There is often no obvious clear progression or route to advance from being an adviser to a supervisor. This creates additional risks, for example, where one stakeholder made a decision to recruit staff outside the advice sector, who would be supervising albeit without any advice sector prior experience.

Skills and support: Without a clear progression pathway and dedicated training, the role can feel isolating and high-risk, undermining retention of senior staff. There is a reported absence of easily available training and guidance specifically for supervisors on carrying out managerial supervision, and technical supervision in specific subject areas. Many supervisors step up without structured preparation in giving feedback, coaching, reflective practice or handling distress

Supervisors need to have in place training and development plans for each kind of supervision that they carry out. Those plans should identify additional training needs - for example supervising more than one area of law, and training in supervisory skills. Training for supervisors should include sessions that focus on reflective supervision, feedback skills and emotional resilience.

Supervisors often do not receive supervision themselves. A supervisor needs to have access to effective supervision for their own work. It is important that they can develop their expertise, tactical and strategic skills for solving client's issues, and that they are supported in their career progression.

Small and equity-led organisations: In many smaller advice organisations, the supervisor may be the only supervisor for their advice team and have no recourse to peer support and second tier support. The supervisor can feel isolated and have limited scope to develop their technical and supervisory knowledge and skills.

Equity-led providers report additional pressure to "do supervision well" while operating with thinner core funding and higher demand from communities they serve.

Micro teams may lack an in-house technical lead or a second reviewer, making independence hard to achieve. Buying in supervision/IFR is costly and ad-hoc; informal reciprocal arrangements are fragile and collapse when key individuals move on.

Consortia and cross-agency delivery: Where posts are hosted by one partner but deliver across a consortium, responsibility for technical oversight can be unclear. Reciprocal file review and shared supervision work well when coordinated but are easily disrupted without a broker and minimal resourcing.

Some caution is needed when arranging external technical supervision. Careful consideration should be given to:

- The number of people being supervised by the external supervisor.
- The hours and frequency of the supervision, and whether it is face to face or remote.
- How feedback will be given.
- The process for that external technical supervision to enable support of the managerial supervision.
- Who has responsibility for taking corrective action.
- Agreement from any relevant quality standard or regulatory auditor.
- Ensuring arrangements are sustainable.

Outside London, Kirklees Citizens Advice and Law Centre have a strong collaborative relationship with four other 'combined' Citizens Advice and Law Centres in Yorkshire. They work together, formally and informally, to help their staff to develop knowledge and skills. They are exploring how they can share supervision across their organisations, for example in family and employment. They say:

> ***"it's important to create possibilities, and for people to be able to make connections with other people in other organisations. If that doesn't happen, then cross organisation working doesn't happen. Working with shared objectives, and a sense that you can and should provide mutual aid and be supportive of each other (rather than working in competition and against each other) – that is what is needed."***

Standards, compliance and duplication: There is a risk that when incorporating regulatory requirements or standards into everyday practice, this is done in a way that uses the negatively perceived 'checklist' approach, rather than focussing on improving quality – which is a fundamental aim of the quality standards. In practice, supervision can become compliance-led and tick-box, rather than developmental and reflective. IFR may exist on paper but not be frequent or independent enough to surface risk and generate learning. How supervision is undertaken should not lose sight of why it is important and necessary.

IFR-specific constraints: Finding experienced, credible reviewers at short notice—and paying for them—is difficult. Tools vary between organisations, making benchmarking hard. Where reviewers are not independent of the case owner or line-manager, candour and learning suffer.

Funding challenges for supervision: Time and resources spent on effective supervision are not always included in funding. For many stakeholders they simply do not have funding in place to cover the time and resources needed for effective supervision. One stakeholder explained:

"Supervision is recognised as vital, but it is underfunded."

Their experience also reinforces the need to fund supervision and coordination roles properly—both to support volunteers and to sustain pathways into the sector.

An advice sector leader gave a broad perspective:

"There is a systemic failure to recognise and fund the true cost of delivering advice. Funders often fail to include the cost of essential functions such as management, supervision, and administration. This results in advisers or senior staff being diverted into tasks they are poorly equipped for and overpaid to carry out"

This a particular challenge for smaller and community-based organisations.

Resources for supervisors: Another issue for supervisors is the availability of legal resources to keep up to date with the law in the form of statutes, case law, Codes of Practice, regulations, guidance etc. In other words, the tools they need to do their job – whether that job is their own caseload or technical supervision. A supervisor who does not have access to comprehensive and up to date legal resources is severely hampered.

Some networks have their own internal resources, for example the Citizens Advice information system. Recent projects have started to make the best use of those resources for example the use of AI to search information systems for answers to client issues (e.g., Caddy), which can boost productivity.

Other advice organisations may also use the excellent LAG publications such as the Employment Advisers Handbook. CPAG also publishes a hugely valuable set of handbooks including the Debt Advice Handbook.

Supervisors who provide managerial supervision told researchers they would welcome specific support on HR issues (for example, making reasonable adjustments and supporting Access to Work applications). It is hugely important that any support shows a good understanding of the issues faced by small community-based advice organisations and DDPO's.

Advice organisations would welcome the opportunity to access second-tier support, to help with advice on legal issues in casework, for example checking legal points, legal procedures, merits, strategies and tactics. Some excellent second-tier support services already exist such as ASK CPAG. However, provision of second-tier support is patchy, and some services are only funded to provide second-tier support to specific groups.

Hybrid/remote working: Distributed teams need more deliberate touchpoints. Without clear cadence, accessible digital tools and explicit expectations, junior staff in particular can feel unsupported.

Formats, templates and tools that work

Across services that do this well, we see a consistent suite of simple, reusable tools:

- **Supervision framework:** purpose, scope (managerial/technical/clinical), frequency by role/seniority, escalation routes, and protected time norms.
- **Supervisor pack:** standard agenda (wellbeing, caseload, priority cases, learning goals), a brief structured **case discussion note** (issue, client's preferred outcomes, options, decision), and a **supervision log** that links to appraisal/CPD.
- **Technical oversight tools:** subject-specific checklists (e.g., evidence, limitation dates, appeal merits), triage/sign-off thresholds.
- **Learning loop:** a short **quarterly learning summary** from IFR/supervision (themes, fixes, training implications), feeding into CPD plans, template libraries and service improvements.
- **Dashboards:** light-touch indicators (e.g., supervision sessions held on time; IFR completion; common error themes resolved).

These formats reduce variation, make expectations transparent, and allow small teams to "plug in" to shared practice.

The risks of not adopting new approaches to supervision

The risks of not adopting new approaches to supervision:

- Lower quality of advice, worse client outcomes and higher risk of client detriment
- Higher risk of adviser and supervisor stress and burnout; slower progression for new staff. Supervisors burn out; trainees stall.
- Decrease in job satisfaction, increased difficulty in recruiting, worse retention
- Organisational learning is lost; and confidence—among funders, partners and regulators—erodes.
- Staff do not get the support they need for their wellbeing, and their development and career progression – worse retention.

Independent File Review

Independent File Review (IFR) is the process in which case files or advice records are reviewed by a third party (not involved in the original case) to assess quality, accuracy, compliance with standards and organisational procedures, and opportunities for learning or improvement.

IFRs are likely to cover matters that fall within managerial supervision, as well as technical supervision. It is important that they are used to support and complement supervision. File reviews should be independent and carried out by someone who has not been significantly involved in advising the client.

IFRs are hugely important in improving quality. Some advice organisations may struggle to find capacity to carry out independent file reviews due to supervisor workloads. Some smaller advice organisations may not have someone within their own organisation who can carry out IFRs for the supervisor.

Sector responses - Independent File Review

There is no set format for an IFR. For example, DG Legal include some generic file review forms on their website. Legal Action Group Journal has a very useful article on Independent File Reviews. The IMA offers a 'quality assurance service' that includes file review of up to 15 closed cases.

Whilst funders may require an advice organisation to provide supervision, and to carry out IFRs, the cost of these activities is not always covered in funding.

Peer reviews are the process where an independent file review is carried out by another adviser or caseworker who is external, and who has current or very recent appropriate experienced in advice work in that subject area.

Over the last years, a small number of well-established peer review arrangements and small pilot projects have taken place. All have recognised the potentially huge benefits for a quality advice service. The small pilots have illustrated the difficulties for small groups to develop robust peer review arrangements and the importance of the role that can be played by the larger advice sector and the wider adviser networks in this area, and the considerable added value and impact that can be achieved by advice agencies across London working together.

They are:

- The comprehensive report by **John Seargeant on *Peer Review in Legal and Advice Services* in 2003** for the Advice Services Alliance. It is dated in terms of the factual descriptions of the peer review arrangements in place at that time, but it remains a hugely valuable resource
- Following on from the 2003 Seargeant report, the Advice Services Alliance produced a toolkit for advice services managers, entitled ***A Practical guide to Peer Review* (2004)**. This practical guide looks at three main areas for an advice service who wants to hire a peer reviewer to help them quality assure their own services: choosing a peer reviewer; how to go about the peer review process; the feedback process, and costs.
- In 2015 the **Brighton and Hove Advice Partnership** commissioned the development of a **framework for cross service file review** and advice/casework supervision. A toolkit "Developing cross agency file review and supervision" was produced by Vicky Ling and Rona Parsons. This guide suggests useful guiding principles, emphasising the importance of sustainability and building trust and confidence.
- As part of their AWDF project work, **Inclusion London and Inclusion Barnet** had highlighted that small advice providers can sometime struggle to arrange or sustain independent file review. The project produced very useful guidance and templates.
- The **Legal Aid Agency** (LAA) has a well-established system of peer file review, for advice organisations who hold legal aid contracts. Quality Guides have been developed, from the findings of Peer Reviewers help to inform the Peer Review assessment. These guides are also useful tools for advice organisations to help them improve the quality of the advice they provide and to ensure best practice. The currently available quality guides are as follows:
  - Peer Review Quality Guide for Crime (PDF, 1.47 MB, 46 pages)
  - Peer Review Quality Guide for Family (PDF, 2.7 MB, 82 pages)
  - Peer Review Quality Guide for Housing (PDF, 1.67 MB, 42 pages)
  - Peer Review Quality Guide for Immigration & Asylum (PDF, 774 KB, 23 pages)

- Peer Review Quality Guide for Mental Health (PDF, 1.57 MB, 38 pages)

The risks of not adopting new approaches for IFR

- Lower quality of advice, worse client outcomes and higher risk of client detriment
- Higher risk of adviser and supervisor stress and burnout
- Staff do not get the support they need for their wellbeing, and their development and career progression – worse retention

What this means for the programme

Priorities emerging from the review are clear.

For supervision: protect supervisor time; ensure supervision is properly funded and resourced; equip supervisors with practical training and a peer network; standardise simple tools; make second tier support more widely available to supervisors.

For IFR: ensure IFR is properly funded and resourced; the need for a joined up coordinated approach to external IFR and peer review, with added support(funded) resources to set up and facilitate; share existing resources to help support external and peer review arrangements

f. Workforce capacity issues for equity focused and smaller advice services

Equity-focused and smaller advice organisations – including DDPOs, refugee and migrant groups, and community-led agencies, and sometimes referred to as by-and-for organisations - are vital parts of the advice ecosystem. They often provide culturally specific, trusted, and accessible services and representation for communities that face barriers to mainstream provision. However, these organisations face disproportionate workforce-related organisational capacity issues. They often have distinct workforce organisational capacity building needs that go beyond the "mainstream" advice sector and larger agencies. This paper looks specifically at these issues, as required by the research brief.

A September 2025 report by the New Economics Foundation entitled *Built-by-Us* describes the contributions, experiences and challenges face of by and for organisations. It validates the general finding of this research that equity-focused organisations face unique organisational capacity constraints, especially around workforce (Dr Abi O'Connor et al. 2025).

Recruitment

Smaller and equity-led agencies often find recruitment particularly difficult. Many lack the resources to offer competitive salaries or long-term contracts, making it hard to attract skilled staff.

Offering job security can be particularly difficult, as there may not be the opportunities for redeployment at the end of funding terms that exist in larger agencies. In some agencies there may be only one or two advice worker roles. A Trust for London report on its *Strengthening voices, realising rights funding programme* for DDPOs, noted low pay pressures, lack of career progression opportunities and the challenges of being a sole advice worker (Kara & Cornish, 2023).

Smaller advice services with flatter structures and smaller advice teams can **struggle to offer clear career progression pathways and opportunities**. The survey for benefits and conditions research (Hickman et al, 2025b) found that 18% of all respondent organisations had no formal career progression opportunities to offer. And smaller organisations (< £500,000 income) were seven times more likely to have nothing to offer than larger agencies (> £1million income).

They also face **structural barriers when seeking candidates with the right language skills, lived experience and cultural competence**. Stakeholders such as IRMO highlighted the impact of Brexit, which has reduced the flow of workers from European countries into advice roles. Finding advisers with Spanish or Portuguese as their first language, for example, has become increasingly difficult. For some organisations, recruiting people with lived experience remains a deliberate strategy, but it requires additional supervision and support.

Recruitment costs can be a barrier - smaller, unnetworked agencies may lack the economies of scale to obtain multi-role recruitment deals or access specially brokered deals.

Equity focused agencies also told researchers they face **competition from private advisers** serving their communities – where earning can be higher.

Retention and progression

Retention is a recurring problem. Smaller providers, and especially equity-led ones, often **cannot match the pay, benefits, or career development opportunities available in larger agencies**. Staff may move on once trained, creating a cycle of recruitment and retraining that drains limited capacity.

Progression pathways can also be weak. It can be difficult for small organisations to create senior and supervisory posts, meaning that experienced caseworkers may leave to progress elsewhere. For DDPOs, retention is complicated by the additional resources required to support Disabled staff, for example through reasonable adjustments and accessible working environments.

Wellbeing, burn-out and job insecurity are also particular challenges for smaller and equity-focused organisations. As the NEF Built-by-Us report found *"Staff wellbeing and job insecurity are key concerns for many organisations.... many leaders in organisations shared that they felt uncomfortable that they are unable to treat staff in accordance with the principles on which their organisation was founded, particularly in terms of the insecurity of employment and job tenure."* The report also describes the impacts of the personal responsibility that many workers in by-and-for agencies can feel: *"The personal responsibility described by participants is compounded by the fact that they have often cultivated personal relationships, due to shared connections of lived experience, and hold deep personal commitments to their work. This creates a landscape in which staff burnout is commonplace."* (Dr Abi O'Connor et al. 2025).

Training and development

Access to training is limited by both cost and capacity. Small agencies often cannot afford paid training or to release staff for extended courses. They are heavily reliant on project-funded initiatives, which are not always sustained. Support infrastructure is needed to plan and procure training programmes. The case study of Inclusion London's AWDF programme training initiative shows what can be achieved when investment in infrastructure is made (see agency case studies appendix).

Equity-focused organisations report that **generic training provision often fails to meet their needs**. They require learning opportunities that reflect community contexts, such as trauma-informed approaches, cultural competence, and leadership development for community-based leaders that is shaped and informed by lived experience.

In smaller organisations with less capacity to 'cover' when colleagues receive training, finding **time for training and development** can be a difficult challenge.

"We have one advice worker... Every minute we spend providing support means we are taking away service provision from those who rely on our services."

Supervision and Independent File Review (IFR)

Supervision capacity is particularly constrained in smaller and equity-focused organisations. They often **lack sufficient senior staff to provide technical or casework supervision**, and managers may carry heavy casework alongside oversight responsibilities. They may have just one or two senior staff who carry all supervisory responsibilities. Where there is an absence of formal clinical and technical supervision, there is a greater risk of burnout and isolation. It is harder to ensure the quality of advice given to clients, and that any risk of client detriment is minimised.

In equity focused organisations it is important that supervision arrangements are **culturally competent**. Supervisors should understand the lived realities of communities served (e.g. disability, migration, racialised experiences).

It is also important that equity organisations are supported to ensure that they can obtain funding that properly reflects their **full costs** – i.e. **sustainable workforce funding**. Many equity focused organisations are often the last and only resort for their clients, who come with legal issues that are at a later stage, and have become more complex. This is often because clients have tried to seek advice elsewhere, which has failed them. This puts additional burdens on supervisors and advisers, adding to the demands on the organisational capacity. Smaller and equity focused services are often non-networked (in terms of advice networks that provide comprehensive support arrangements) and have very small advice teams. Their funding is often project linked and does not cover essential core advice workforce support.

Access to Independent File Review is patchy, with many small agencies unable to resource this vital part of quality assurance. Stakeholders argued that pooled supervision and IFR resources, organised across agencies or at sector level, would allow smaller organisations to participate without over-stretching their capacity.

Peer support and isolation

Isolation is a major issue. Staff in small or specialist agencies are often the only person delivering advice in their area of law or for their community, with few opportunities to share experiences.

"You end up reinventing the wheel because there's no one to ask."

Staff in equity focused organisations may themselves be part of the communities facing systemic discrimination; supporting wellbeing and resilience is essential. Peer support and supervision need to be culturally competent, so that advisers can share support with their peers who understand the lived realities of communities served (e.g. disability, migration, racialised experiences). Peer networks must be safe spaces for equity-focused organisations to share practice, without being overshadowed by larger agencies. Peer support, and other support such as mentoring should support informal and structured cross-organisational mentoring, particularly to support future leaders from diverse backgrounds.

Peer support initiatives such as those under the AWDF Programme have given staff in smaller and equity focused advice services new access to peer support. However, these peer networks have so far been short-term and project specific. Without ongoing investment, staff risk returning to isolated practice.

Organisational resilience and leadership

Equity-focused and smaller providers often operate with minimal resources and are highly dependent on one or two leaders. This makes them vulnerable where succession planning is weak or where founder dominance limits organisational growth. Stakeholders noted that community leaders who founded organisations remain essential, but this can also stifle innovation if leadership capacity is not broadened.

Small and equity-focused advice services need capacity support that is shared and collaborative, with appropriate funding that is built in. Smaller advice teams may have a greater need of robust, simple to use external supervision and file review schemes. They are likely to have greater organisational capacity issues, which make it harder for them to set up their own schemes. It is important that any central or coordinated capacity support must actively include small equity focussed and fully take account of their diverse needs, and the value of their specialist knowledge and lived experience.

The "grow your own" recruitment and progression models addressing the needs of smaller and equity-focused advice services that have been funded under the AWDF programme have been vital in breaking down some of the barriers described above.

For equity-focused and smaller organisations, workforce expectations must be matched by enabling support, shared infrastructure and proportionate compliance mechanisms.

g. Workforce capacity issues for advice consortia/ partnerships

Consortia and partnerships have become an increasingly important delivery model for advice services, offering opportunities for collaboration, pooling resources, and expanding reach. However, they also face distinctive workforce-related organisational capacity challenges that can challenge their effectiveness.

Recruitment is often fragmented across partner agencies. Each organisation tends to run its own processes, leading to duplication, inconsistent job descriptions, and direct competition for a limited pool of candidates. Without a strong shared identity, consortia struggle to present a unified "employer brand" that could help attract new entrants to the sector. Pay and conditions also vary between partners, which can deter candidates or create perceptions of unfairness. Where posts are tied to time-limited projects, onboarding delays are common, meaning staff can join well into the delivery period, reducing overall impact.

Retention is similarly hampered by inconsistent practices. Variations in pay scales, pensions, and benefits across partner agencies mean staff sometimes move between partners rather than staying within the consortium. Many consortium roles are funded on a short-term basis, offering little prospect of long-term progression into permanent positions. Staff loyalty is typically directed towards their employing agency, rather than the partnership, which can weaken engagement with cross-consortium goals. In smaller agencies, the risk of burnout is heightened when staff carry heavy caseloads without sufficient infrastructure or support.

Training and development provision is uneven. Larger partners often have well-developed CPD systems, while smaller ones have little in place, leaving staff with inconsistent opportunities. Duplication is common, with several partners commissioning similar training independently rather than pooling resources. There is usually no shared framework to map progression across the consortium, so staff cannot see how skills developed in one agency could translate into roles in another. Too often, training is tied narrowly to the requirements of a single project, rather than building long-term workforce capacity across the partnership.

Peer support arrangements also vary. In some agencies, reflective practice and peer learning are well embedded, while in others, they are almost absent. Staff often identify primarily with their employing service, which can reinforce siloed working and reduce take-up of cross-consortium opportunities. Differences in IT systems and communication platforms pose practical barriers, while the lack of protected time in funding models means peer learning is easily deprioritised as optional.

Supervision poses perhaps the greatest challenge. While some agencies provide robust technical and pastoral supervision, others rely on overstretched managers. Where a post is hosted by one organisation but intended to deliver across the consortium, supervision responsibilities are often unclear. Quality assurance arrangements, such as reciprocal file reviews, can be fragile and dependent on individual goodwill, breaking down when staff leave. Compliance is also resource-intensive, as different partners work under a patchwork of regulatory and quality frameworks (AQS, SQM, Lexcel, MaPS, OISC).

These challenges are compounded by **cross-cutting issues**. Coordinating workforce practices across multiple agencies requires significant management time, creating hidden costs that are rarely funded. Smaller agencies in particular struggle to keep pace with larger ones in providing training, supervision, and staff benefits, which can exacerbate inequities within partnerships. Short-term project funding makes it hard to embed consistent workforce practices across a consortium, leaving staff and managers caught between the promise of collaboration and the reality of fragmented provision.

h. Conclusions: workforce capacity challenges

This review has shown that workforce-related organisational capacity remains one of the most pressing challenges for London's advice sector. While the sector continues to deliver essential services with significant impact, its ability to sustain a skilled and resilient workforce is under severe strain. The challenges identified are interconnected, reinforcing each other and compounding the risks to service delivery and sustainability. They reflect wider structural and systemic weaknesses in the sector's funding, infrastructure, coordination and strategy.

Recruitment into advice roles has become increasingly difficult, with agencies reporting fewer suitable applicants for adviser, caseworker and supervisor posts. The lack of coordinated sector-wide promotion, limited visibility and availability of career pathways, reliance on insecure, short-term funding and low pay all restrict the flow of new entrants. Shortages are particularly acute in specialist areas such as immigration, housing and supervisor-level posts. Smaller and equity-focused organisations face additional hurdles in accessing recruitment resources and supporting trainee routes. The sector has responded with localised, borough level initiatives and a series of effective projects under the AWDF programme, which can be built on.

Retention of skilled staff is undermined by low pay, short-term contracts, heavy caseloads, and limited opportunities for career progression. Burnout and stress are widespread, especially in smaller teams where the departure of one experienced adviser can destabilise services. While some organisations have retained long-serving staff through strong culture and values, the overall picture is one of fragility and high turnover risk.

Training and development provision is extensive but fragmented, costly, and difficult to navigate. Agencies outside large networks often lack access to affordable, high-quality training and clear progression pathways. The absence of a coordinated framework linking qualifications, competency standards, and career routes further hampers workforce development. Smaller agencies struggle to release staff for training or to fund qualifications, perpetuating inequalities across the sector.

Peer support, a vital source of learning, resilience and reflective practice, remains uneven. Some staff benefit from structured peer networks and communities of practice, while many—especially those in small or non-networked services—work in isolation without opportunities to share experiences. The lack of time and protected space for peer learning is a major barrier, with pressures of workload and funding models pushing peer support to the margins.

Supervision and independent file review (IFR) are cornerstones of quality and staff wellbeing but are delivered inconsistently across the sector. Effective models exist, but capacity constraints mean that supervision is often patchy, overly managerial, or reliant on overstretched supervisors. Where IFR arrangements exist, they are fragile and vulnerable to staff departures or funding changes.

Equity-focused and smaller providers face the sharpest end of workforce capacity challenges. These organisations, often closest to marginalised communities and reliant on lived experience, struggle most with recruitment pipelines, retention, supervision, and access to training. Their limited infrastructure magnifies the risks of burnout, isolation, and service fragility, despite the critical role they play in addressing inequalities.

Consortia and partnerships provide opportunities for collaboration but bring their own workforce challenges. Fragmented recruitment, inconsistent pay and conditions, unclear supervision responsibilities, and siloed cultures undermine the potential benefits of joint working. Coordination costs are high, smaller partners often struggle to keep pace, and short-term project funding prevents the embedding of consistent workforce practices across agencies.

Structural deficits

Taken together, these challenges highlight a structural deficit in organisational workforce capacity across London's advice sector. They are not problems that individual agencies can solve alone, despite examples of excellent sector responses, nor can they be addressed by asking overstretched organisations simply to "do more." Instead, they require coordinated, sector-wide responses. Unless systemic and structural workforce capacity challenges are addressed, the sector risks losing experienced staff, failing to develop the next generation, and being unable to meet the needs of the communities it serves.

Cross-cutting workforce organisational capacity challenges in the advice sector

Theme	Key challenges
Recruitment	➢ Declining applicant pool, especially for specialist roles (e.g. housing, immigration, supervisor). ➢ Limited visibility of careers and progression pathways. ➢ Reliance on insecure, short-term funding undermines job attractiveness. ➢ Access to best practice resources. ➢ Smaller/equity-led organisations face additional barriers to accessing resources and recruitment pipelines.
Retention	➢ Low pay, temporary contracts and high workloads drive turnover. ➢ Stress and burnout widespread; risk acute in small services. ➢ Few clear progression routes; staff leave for more stable sectors. ➢ Departure of one experienced worker can destabilise teams.
Training & development	➢ A maze of training and qualification provision and routes. ➢ Lack of sector-wide training strategy. ➢ Fragmented, costly provision; lack of coordination across sector. ➢ Gaps in entry level and progression framework linking qualifications, standards, and careers. ➢ Smaller agencies lack resources to release/pay for staff training. ➢ Inequalities in access between large networks and independent providers.
Peer support	➢ Uneven opportunities; strong in some networks, absent in others. ➢ Time pressures mean peer support often deprioritised. ➢ Many advisers work in isolation, especially in small/non-networked organisations.

Theme	Key challenges
	➢ Limited protected time for reflective practice.
Supervision & IFR	➢ Inconsistent models; often managerial rather than developmental ➢ Supervisors overstretched; gaps in technical/pastoral support. ➢ Fragile IFR arrangements, reliant on individuals. ➢ Multiple compliance regimes (AQS, SQM, Lexcel, MaPS, OISC) create burdens, especially for small services.
Equity-focused & smaller providers	➢ Struggle most with recruitment, retention, supervision, and training. ➢ Reliant on lived experience but face burnout risks and lack infrastructure. ➢ Limited access to funding, training, and peer support compared with larger networked agencies.
Consortia & partnerships	➢ Fragmented recruitment, inconsistent pay and conditions. ➢ Weak shared identity; staff loyalty tied to host organisation not consortium. ➢ Coordination costs high; smaller partners disadvantaged. ➢ Project funding prevents embedding of consistent workforce practices.

Despite these challenges, the review surfaced many promising practices: DDPO and by-and for agency led recruitment pathways, cross-service peer networks, effective models of supervision and IFR, and pan-London collaboration through AWDF and other initiatives. The task ahead is to consolidate these gains into sustainable, sector-wide infrastructure and strategy.

The AWDF programme has seen the advice sector come together to coordinate responses to the workforce crisis. This should provide a foundation for making lasting changes to support the diverse eco-system of social welfare advice providers. But it requires existing infrastructure providers – the advice networks, umbrella bodies, equity-focused groups, training and qualification providers, funders and commissioners and policy-makers to come together to find new solutions.

7. Solutions

The evidence gathered for this review shows that London's advice workforce is operating under severe and prolonged strain. Workforce challenges in London's advice sector are deeply interlinked. Recruitment blockages, fragile retention, patchy training, uneven supervision, and under-supported peer networks all diminish capacity at a frontline agency level and weaken the sector's ability to meet advice demand and provide good quality advice services. Structural weaknesses in funding, training, supervision and recruitment have converged with rising demand and complex client need. Incremental or organisation-by-organisation responses will not be sufficient.

The advice sector has for many years suffered from serious under-investment and insufficient funding. But simply providing more funding for advice services without addressing workforce capacity challenges would be short-sighted. Advice agencies, funders, commissioners and networks need to invest in people and build on the workforce initiatives described in this report, including the AWDF programme, but also consider more systemic and structural changes. The sector faces a choice: continue to firefight with fragmented, short-term measures, or invest collectively in the infrastructure and resourcing needed for a sustainable, skilled, and resilient workforce. Both quick fixes and system reforms are essential if advice services are to remain a cornerstone of social justice in London. Solutions must therefore operate at multiple levels: what individual advice organisations can do now; what the sector and networks can achieve together; and what requires wider system and structural change, policy alignment, and funding/commissioning reform.

What the sector needs now is a coordinated combination of:

- System conditions that enable sustainable workforce development
- Shared infrastructure to reduce duplication and extend access, and
- Immediate and short-term actions that agencies and networks can take now

This section sets out a coherent set of solutions across these three domains. They are interdependent: progress on any single strand increases the likelihood of success on the others. Together, they provide a realistic, sequenced pathway towards a stable, skilled and supported workforce in London.

This section first considers the actions that are needed to address the issues raised about recruitment, retention, training, peer support and supervision capacity.

a. Recruitment solutions

Recruitment difficulties are among the most urgent challenges. Agencies struggle to attract applicants, particularly for specialist and supervisory roles, and smaller or equity-focused organisations face additional barriers. There is no effective sector-wide marketing of the advice sector as a place to work or volunteer, or coordinated development a pipeline of new entrants, nor clear identification of pathways into and though the sector. Resources to support recruitment best practice are patchy and not readily available to all advice services. Grow-your-own initiatives under the AWDF and other programmes are positive developments but are relatively small-scale.

Recruitment resources and training for advice sector employers

Shared resources for advice agencies in London should be provided via the AWDF website and/or advice network and umbrella body sites. Resources needed are:

- Guides to and training best practice in the targeting and recruitment of disabled people and people with long-term health conditions, reasonable adjustments and the Access to Work scheme.
- Guides to and training on best practice when targeting and recruiting from diverse, minoritised communities, carers, people returning to work and ex-services users.
- Model application forms.

DDPOs and other equity focused organisations should be commissioned to draft guidance, resources and associated training.

Provision of advice sector 'job-readiness' training

The provision of short courses to equip people with the knowledge and skills to enter the advice sector workforce could help to build a pipeline of new entrants. GLA funded Skills Bootcamps help Londoners aged 19+ to enter employment, upskill or change career and are open to adults who are full-time or part-time employed, self-employed or unemployed, as well as adults returning to work after a break. The training courses, which last up to 16 weeks, give people an understanding of the work of the industry/sector and basic skills and knowledge needed. They provide trainees with guaranteed interviews for jobs at the end of the course.

Fund trainee roles, with funded training and supervision and that offer progression to non-trainee roles

The creation of traineeships and grow-you-own provisions under the AWDF programme, which are not tied to service output targets and where the training programme and supervision costs are also fully funded have been of high value to the advice services that have been involved, and particularly the smaller, equity focused agencies. They allow agencies to take on and support people without advice knowledge and experience. Researchers heard how it is important that such roles then lead to full adviser positions. Continued and expanded funding for such initiatives is vital.

Apprenticeships: funding and infrastructure

The successful use of apprenticeship schemes by University House Legal Advice Centres and Law Centres Network, for example, has demonstrated their value in bringing new people into the advice sector and providing progression pathways. They work because the two organisations provide the infrastructure to support the advice agencies that host and employ apprentices. They make the arrangements with law firms to donate apprenticeship levies, coordinate with law schools, advise on and provide supervision for apprentices and bring apprentices together in peer support groups.

To make apprenticeships more widely available to the advice sector and smaller agencies, funding for apprenticeships (to pay salaries and supervision costs) and expansion of infrastructure to support them is needed. The sector would benefit from the provision of resources in a central location including:

- The types of apprenticeships available to the advice sector

- A how-to manual for setting up apprenticeship programmes in advice organisations
- Levy transfer arrangements guidance for smaller charities
- Partnership templates for collaboration between organisations to support apprenticeships

Fund internships and work placements

These give people a taste of working in the advice sector and are an important part for creating a new pipeline of advice sector workers. Internships and placements targeted at people who are under-represented in the advice workforce will help to improve diversity. However, agencies hosting interns and people on placement must be provided with the management and supervision resources to support them without this placing new strains on organisations and services. Sustainable workforce funding must be provided.

b. Retention solutions

Retention is undermined by low pay, burnout, lack of supervision, and limited progression opportunities. Addressing these challenges is largely a longer-term project for individual agencies, network and umbrella bodies, funders and commissioners, because they are about funding and contract value/fee levels targets and KPIs and organisational cultures. However, it's vital that a start is made.

Action on wellbeing and culture

The Stepping off the Hamster Wheel report makes several recommendations for short-term and longer-term actions and pan-London collaboration to address wellbeing and retention issues (Hickman, 2025). These include immediate action to:

- Standardise and share data on wellbeing.
- Adopt wellbeing and 'good jobs' as goals.
- Ringfence 20% of organisational time for strategic and development activities.

The conditions and benefits report (Hickman et al, 2025b) also recommends:

- The funding of relational leadership training
- Facilitated development pathways for those with leadership/management roles
- Regular, shared leadership, learning and training programmes.

The authors of this report endorse the above suggestions, but caution that the capacity to implement and participate will be very limited in most advice agencies and certainly within the smaller ones. A substantial investment will be needed by funders and commissioners to create the 'space' within advice agencies and to fund training, coaching, workshops, training and qualifications. Because many advice agencies will already be committed to the achievement of targets and KPIs under funding streams and contracts, the aim of ringfencing 20% of time for reflection, strategy, training and development may be a longer-term goal.

However, where advice organisations can, they should take steps to reduce burnout by protecting time for reflective practice and training, setting realistic caseloads, and embedding wellbeing policies. Leadership coaching and action learning sets could provide support at modest cost.

The Stepping off the Hamster Wheel report makes recommendations longer-term actions:

- Piloting the use of wellbeing tools.

- The use of toolkits to raise levels of psychological safety.
- Increasing access to support for leaders including coaching, action learning and leadership development workshops.
- Trialling new and accredited development pathways backed by coaching, workshops for junior staff and emerging leaders.
- Optional wellbeing and stress management workshops for staff.

Subject to the same comments as above regarding investment by funders and commissioners, these are sensible solutions.

In the longer-term developments in the use of Artificial Intelligence in the advice sector (for example, the use of AI to draft case notes (e.g., Wyser ASSIST) and search information systems for answers to client issues (e.g., Caddy), which can boost productivity, should be used to free up 20% of the time for reflective practice and wellbeing, training, development and planning.

Best practice guidance and resources

The conditions and benefits report also recommends actions to improve practice, templates and guidance on accessibility, reasonable adjustments and disability leave, by drawing on DDPO expertise.

Again, these recommendations are endorsed. Guides to and training on best practice when employing people from diverse, minoritised communities, carers, people returning to work and ex-services users should also be commissioned from equity-focused organisations. Resources and linked training should be provided as a package of recruitment and retention measures.

Investment in training and development

There is a need for increased funder investment in initiatives by agencies to train and develop existing staff to become supervisors, specialist caseworkers, managers, CEOs. Investment should encourage cross-service and sector participation, to enable two-way learning and resource sharing between less well-resourced agencies and larger agencies, generalist advice agencies and specialists, equity focused and 'for everyone' agencies.

Action on pay and conditions

The pay, conditions and benefits reports (Hickman et al, 2025a and 2025b) make a series of recommendations to address advice sector pay issues, including pay scales. These are all sensible. However, implementation depends on the willingness of funders and commissioners to support increased salaries, so realising improvements is probably a longer-term aim. Smaller agencies will need targeted support to enable them to uplift pay and conditions.

A London Advice Workforce Hub could provide a vehicle for implementation of many of the above suggestions, in the longer term. In the short term, resources such as those recommended in the *Stepping off the Hamster Wheel* and conditions and benefits reports could be made available on the AWDF website.

Partnership/network measures

Consortia and partnerships can mitigate retention risks by harmonising pay bands where possible, introducing cross-agency progression pathways, and creating opportunities for staff to move between partners when project funding ends. Shared wellbeing initiatives (e.g. group counselling access, joint reflective practice sessions) can also spread cost.

Sustainable workforce funding

Without funding and contract fees that cover the real cost of managing, supporting and developing the workforce, retention measures cannot be sustained. Funders and commissioners should support funded agencies to include not just salary costs, but also supervision, training, wellbeing, peer support, management, and HR costs. Most trusts and foundations do this already, but commissioners of competitively tendered contracts can often encourage a race to lowest cost and highest output, which can lead to agencies not adequately costing bids and failing to put staff support, training, development and wellbeing measures in place.

Locum pool

The conditions and benefits report (Hickman et al, 2025b) recommends the establishment of a small bank of locum staff to help cover periods of staff leave in smaller advice organisations. This would be one way of supporting smaller agencies to address wellbeing issues, if the pool was able to cover not only leave, but also participation in training and development activity for staff at all levels. The suggested Advice Workforce Hub could be vehicle for the creation of the locum pool.

"Everyone's talking about workforce issues, but no one wants to fund the real cost of supporting the people doing the work."

c. Training and development solutions

Training provision is extensive but often inconsistent, uncoordinated and not strategic. Smaller agencies in particular can struggle to navigate the "training maze" or fund staff attendance. Excellent initiatives have been taken by some agencies under AWDF and other funding streams to create accredited training and development pathways.

Fund existing and new grow your own and place/borough-based training schemes

Initiatives taken under AWDF and in Tower Hamlets by Island Advice Centre (see agency case studies appendix) to provide flexible, culturally and community-relevant training to attract new and diverse people into the sector have proven their value. Refugee Action's Frontline Immigration Advice Project is also providing a clear package of support for agencies and workers delivering immigration advice. It is essential that these schemes continue and that new ones are added, with an emphasis on funding community and by and for agencies to lead them.

Fund trainee roles

The sector needs more funding to support people entering the sector without prior experience and develop their skills and knowledge without having to hit output targets. Trainees need to be provided with opportunities to progress to fully trained roles, however, and agencies also need the resources to manage and supervise trainees and pay for courses and qualifications.

To equip people with some knowledge and skills prior to entering trainee roles, the development of a Skills Bootcamps for the advice sector could be developed. For more information on this, see the recruitment solutions section.

Develop and fund new/expanded leadership and coaching programmes for managers

There is a clear gap here. Given the real need to address cultural issues in the sector, as highlighted in the *Stepping off the Hamster Wheel* report (Hickman, 2025), leadership training and coaching for the advice sector specifically is urgently needed. It would be good to develop a sector-wide approach to this and to ensure that smaller advice providers are adequately provided for and supported to participate.

Sector bodies, agencies and funders to agree to a standard 'sustainable workforce funding' model for advice

There is an urgent need to ensure that all projects, service and contract funding for advice services include resources for fair pay, training, development and qualifications. A standard template that requires agencies to identify and quantify their needs now and in future and funders/commissioners to support them would help to address the deficit in training and development provisions.

Partnership/network measures

Consortia could pool resources to negotiate discounted training, share trainers, or host joint induction programmes. Networks could maintain central training calendars and map provision against National Occupational Standards (NOS).

Input in the review of National Occupational Standards (NOS)

The advice sector must be actively involved in the upcoming review of NOS for legal advice (2025/26) to ensure standards reflect the realities of casework, supervision, and lived-experience entry routes. It would also be beneficial for the sector for a formal group of interested advice sector representatives to come together on a regular basis to share information and updates about work being done in the advice sector on NOS and other competences and standards, and their relationship with career pathways, and training plans.

Mapping the maze – for agencies

Stakeholders consulted for this research have supported in principle the idea of an Advice Workforce Hub or similar infrastructure provision that provides central resources and guidance for advice sector employers and training providers. Ideally, the Hub or other central infrastructure would provide an interactive central web-directory of standards, competence, skills and knowledge requirements matched against up-to-date sources of training, coaching and qualifications provisions. This tool would allow agencies to search the requirements of different areas of law, levels of advice, tailored for their service type (size, model, development stage etc.). The tool would also allow training providers to identify the potential needs of agencies.

In the short-medium term, simple non-interactive guidance could be commissioned and made available.

Explaining training and development pathways for new and existing staff

A London Workforce Hub or similar infrastructure provision could provide central coordination of advice sector marketing and pipeline development and help the workforce to see their options for entry and development. This could include a further interactive web-tool for people interested in working in advice or wishing to develop to see what they need by way of skills, knowledge and experience. By inputting details of circumstances, experience and interests, people could be directed to information about possible roles, their requirements and routes to them – identifying current opportunities, courses and vacancies.

In the short-medium term, simple non-interactive guidance could be commissioned and made available. This should ideally be backed by a communications strategy to ensure that the advice workforce is aware of and uses the guidance.

Workforce, training and development strategy

The sector needs a long-term and cross-sector plan that looks toward training and development needs and provision now and in the future. This needs to consider changing patterns of advice need and provision, including digitisation and artificial intelligence and how this changes the skills and knowledge needs of the workforce. It should identify gaps and ensure there is a plan for meeting needs, in close liaison with and by bringing together a representative range of advice agencies, networks and training and qualification providers.

A London Advice Workforce Hub could ultimately take responsibility for this strategy. However, there is a need to start working on such a strategy urgently and a cross-sector group with representatives from all networks, a range of service types and training/qualification providers should be convened as part of the AWDF programme. An Advice Workforce hub could act as a broker of new training provision and funding to support it, to make courses available and affordable for the sector.

Training priorities should align with National Occupational Standards, the London Skills Strategy, and where possible funding should be unlocked through co-investment with law schools, GLA skills programmes, and employers.

d. Peer support solutions

Peer support emerged strongly in this review as a low-cost but high-impact solution. Trainee peer groups, supervisor networks, and CEO forums all create vital spaces for reflection and problem-solving. Yet without explicit resourcing, they are easily squeezed out. Agencies can protect time for peer networks and use online tools to reduce barriers of distance or IT systems. Consortia can sustain cross-agency peer groups for supervisors, trainees, and CEOs with modest shared investment.

Systemically, peer support should be embedded as a recognised part of workforce development. The GLA London Advice Strategy and funders' workforce frameworks could set expectations that peer support time is costed into contracts. The Hub/Skills Academy could host and expand peer networks, adding strands on trauma-informed practice and equity-led organisational development.

Stakeholders have said that there is a need for an emphasis on cultural change: funders and organisations need to prioritise reflective practice and personal development, not just case throughput.

A particular challenge is that staff in small community-based organisations may be those who feel most isolated, are least likely to be able to access peer support but need it the most. Any solution must find a way to reach those advisers, and ways in which accessing peer support can be made possible for them.

It is important to develop infrastructure (small scale and larger scale) that will help advisers and organisations to identify and access trusted well-being and supervision support. This could be done through a multi-step approach.

Create a small, funded Peer Support Team to share and disseminate information about existing open peer events, and coordinate next steps, with a specific remit for supporting small, equity focused, non-networked advice organisations, and the important value of lived experience.

Secure **additional funding for the existing thematic/ subject-based peer support networks (e.g. ELAN, NAWRA) to extend their peer support offer** and target advisers in small, equity focused, non-networked agencies who do not currently have access to informal or formal peer support mechanisms. These peer support networks will reflect the different environments for the different categories of law, and the priorities for peer support in each (depending on the subject area this might be access to caselaw, making FOI requests, strategic litigation, finding clinical supervision etc).

Offer all small, equity focused, non-networked advice organisations a **'peer support' audit**, assistance and facilitation service to set up their own peer support arrangements.

Create a London wide peer support group for advice agency Directors/CEOs, working together, leading by example and championing peer support – with action plans for each CEO to create action plans to make it possible for their staff to access peer support.

Offer participation stipends for small, equity focused, non-networked organisations so that it is possible for their advisers to take part in peer support

Create an overall guide to staff development for managers, supervisors, and individuals. This could answer questions like: 'what does good development and career progression look like in the advice sector?' 'What can I expect, what do I need to do to enable my staff to access peer support?'

Sustainable workforce funding: Funders, commissioners and policymakers should recognise peer support as a legitimate workforce cost, building it into contracts and monitoring frameworks.

An **Advice Workforce Hub could host peer groups**, add trauma-informed practice strands, and support equity-led leadership cohorts.

Embedding peer support expectations into the **London Advice Strategy** would normalise it across the sector.

e. Supervision and IFR solutions

Supervision is central to quality and staff development, but capacity is stretched. Many managers lack time or training to supervise effectively, and agencies often cannot budget for it. Immediate solutions include reciprocal cross-agency supervision agreements, use of templates and supervision logs, and identifying low-cost training for new supervisors. Independent File Review can also be expanded through peer-to-peer arrangements or reciprocal reviews between agencies.

System reforms should go further. A sector-wide IFR pool, backed by training for reviewers and standard tools, would ensure consistency and spread good practice. A three-tier career pathway for supervisors, underpinned by training and peer support, would professionalise the role. Funders should require and resource supervision and IFR within contracts, using FCR templates to make expectations clear. Alignment with quality and compliance standards would ensure that supervision and IFR are integral to quality assurance across the sector.

Training for supervisors

Create an 'essentials' training course that is aimed at providing supervisors with the skills they need to be effective supervisors. For example, this course could be an adapted version of the training provided by LAPG for legal aid supervisors, taking good practice from the existing supervision guides. Develop an easily accessible and searchable directory of training courses for supervisors, including peer support networks, 2nd tier support and resources for supervisors.

Peer support for supervisors

A small Peer Support Team set up to assist with the set-up of a London wide peer support grouping for supervisors, targeting staff in small, equity focused, non-networked agencies who do not currently have access to informal or formal peer support mechanisms.

More accessible resources

Make it easier for advice organisations to access the existing, very good, resources on supervision – in one place that is easy to use. Whilst some of the existing resources are aimed at particular situations (e.g. Legal Aid work) they all contain very helpful and sensible guidance of potential assistance to all. For example, the resources produced by Law Works, the SRA, the Law Society, and the Advice Brighton & Hove toolkit. In the longer term, it would be helpful to have a supervisor resource that is interactive and enables trainee and new supervisors to quickly find the guidance that they need. Produce and share 'Improving Quality' guides like those produced by the LAA ones, for social welfare subjects where they aren't already available e.g. welfare benefits, employment. Develop a supervision toolkit including a career pathway with role definitions, templates, and training modules.

Good practice on supervisor workloads and practice

The sector should agree good practice principles on supervisor workloads. For example the number of advisers that one full time supervisor (and part time pro rata) can supervise, proportion of number of advisers supervised and caseload (with the provision that these can only be outline guidelines as caseload time will vary by subject and case type); supervisor protected time for training – as a supervisor, and technical subject knowledge; how many subjects can one supervisor supervise etc. The guidance should cover supervising trainees, taking some of the good practice from the IAA guidance.

A short simple quick to use guide for individual advice organisations to carry out their own 'mini- audit' of supervisor and managers workload and capacity, with suggestions for identifying urgent needs, ideas possible streamlining and creating an action plan. With a channel to feed back to the adviser networks, and the wider advice sector – to inform future longer team advice sector actions.

Supervisor training model

A model of training for supervisors should be developed that enables and supports the creation of peer support networks and career progression framework. For example, training courses might use a cascade model, with 'train the trainers' courses to ensure there is a pipeline of high-quality training. Where appropriate training could be provided in formats that can be shared at local or regional levels, to enable and support collaborative approaches to supervisor training between groups of supervisors.

Independent File Review and Peer review guidance

Bring existing guides and resources on all aspects file and peer review together in one easily accessible online place (subject to the agreement of the various authors). Produce and share 'Improving Quality' guides like those produced by the Legal Aid Agency, for social welfare subjects where they aren't already available e.g. welfare benefits, employment.

Sustainable workforce funding

Funders, commissioners and policymakers should agree a new real workforce cost resourcing model that takes fully into account the time, cost and resources needed to provide effective supervision and independent file review. All projects, service and contract funding for advice services should include resources for training, development and qualifications and supervision. The model could ensure that targets, and meeting client needs, were set at a level that fully takes account of adviser and caseworker 'absence' and time needed for activities including:

- Training (technical and supervisory skills)
- Accessing mentoring or other professional support,
- Providing and accessing managerial and technical supervision,
- Clinical supervision
- Team and organisational meetings
- Strategy development
- Support for advisers to improve quality of advice
- Holidays
- Sickness
- File review and stand-alone or reciprocal peer review
- Accessing peer support and other reasons.

Pilot external IFR and peer review projects

The sector should explore the potential of a small number of pilot external IFR and peer review projects in specific subject areas. These pilots might work alongside existing strong networks (for example ELAN or NAWRA), building on strong relationships between advisers and supervisors in those networks. The existing resources mentioned above contain much guidance on setting up peer review schemes, which could be utilised and adapted.

A clear, simple three level 'career pathway' framework for supervisors

A framework of competences should be developed, aligned with the National Occupational Standards. In outline, a career pathway for supervisors might look like this:

- **Level 1 – the basic essentials** of effective supervision, and good practice in supervision This could be supported by an 'essentials of supervision' training course.
- **Level 2: supervisors supporting quality** and advisers: how a supervisor can pro-actively use supervision to support and improve quality, and develop advisers, and offering peer support and /or mentoring to other supervisors. This Level 2 could be supported by training in specific subject areas looking at the kinds of issues covered in the LAA Improving Quality Guides

- **Level 3 – Advanced** for supervisors who want to supervise other supervisors, and train other supervisors at Levels 1/ 2.

This framework would give supervisors clear expectations of their role, matched with resources to enable those expectations to be fulfilled – on what skills, training etc a supervisor needs to (1) give managerial supervision and (2) technical supervision in specific subjects.

The supervisors 'career pathway' framework fits with the organisational model for capacity development phases for organisations. This might look like:

- Level 1: One or two supervisors supported by external peer support, second tier support for supervisors, and external supervisors for their own caseload;
- Level 2 – able to do all supervision in house (managerial, technical, clinical, IFR)
- Level 3 – have supervisors with capacity and experience to support organisations at Level 1 phase

Second tier support for supervisors

Explore extending funding for second tier models of flexible support that complement supervision and IFR, thus building organisational capacity. Note the multiple good examples of second tier support set up by University House LAC (Legal Advice Centre).

f. Solutions: overall conclusions

The advice sector delivers huge value: improving lives, reducing pressure on public services, and contributing to health, safety and wellbeing across London. Yet persistent and worsening workforce capacity challenges – in recruitment, retention, training, supervision (including independent file review), and peer support – are undermining its ability to sustain services.

Some of these challenges are directly about capacity (for example, being unable to recruit skilled staff reduces an organisation's ability to deliver). Others are harder to address precisely because capacity is already stretched (for example, supervision requires time and skills that many agencies cannot spare). Simply asking organisations to "do more" is not realistic.

These pressures are felt most acutely by smaller, community-based, equity focused and non-networked organisations, which often lack the infrastructure and resources available to larger agencies. Unless solutions deliberately include and support these organisations, inequities in the sector will persist.

What is needed is a collaborative, sector-wide approach that levels the playing field. This means:

- **Practical support and facilitation** – a small team or hub function that can help smaller organisations access guidance, resources and training.
- **Central coordination** – to scale up what works, such as through a London Advice Workforce Hub.
- **Sustainable workforce funding models** – with funders and the sector agreeing real workforce cost funding approaches so that even the smallest organisations can build and sustain capacity. *See note below.

The solutions that follow are therefore not just short, medium and long-term fixes. They are about creating the conditions for advice organisations to:

- Build themselves up with support,
- Progress through different stages of organisational capacity, and
- Form part of a sustainable, collaborative ecosystem in which workforce development is shared and reinforced across the sector.

The actions set out below are intended to support dialogue and collective action across the system, recognising that progress depends on alignment between funders, networks and advice providers.

While advice agencies can take important steps to support their workforce, many actions depend on enabling conditions such as realistic funding, shared infrastructure and network coordination. Placing expectations on individual organisations without these supports risks increasing pressure, particularly for small and equity-led providers. For this reason, system-level actions by funders, networks and commissioners are a prerequisite for sustained change, rather than something that can be deferred until after agency-level improvements.

1. London Advice Strategy

Support and encourage the development and adoption of a London Advice Strategy to set out the road map for advice services over the next five years. The strategy can draw on work previously undertaken on advice strategies and should include all the main stakeholders in the advice sector in its production. The strategy will need to be fully owned by the London Advice Sector and should include an Advice Workforce Strategy to run alongside and should reflect the key policy changes pending.

2. Cross-sector collaboration to develop new positive narrative and culture for the advice sector

Based on the work undertaken at the Law Society on the legal profession, review how to talk about advice, the great work the sector does and the interesting job opportunities. Consider establishing an online public facing presence for information and signposting to careers in the advice sector. Encourage services to engage in the review of the Advice Quality Standard and the development of the Access Pathway (Entry Level AQS).

3. Promote the advice sector as a great career choice for young people and others

Develop some materials to be used in London schools discussing rights and responsibilities but also working in the advice sector. Develop partnership with other voluntary sector organisations working with young people including Youth Access and Young Citizens. Discuss opportunities to work with the Pro Bono Sector in delivering sessions to young people, for example Bar in the Community. Liaise with London University Law Schools and the Legal Clinics to deliver sessions to students on careers and further volunteering sessions within the advice sector. Consider which Londoners may be attracted to volunteering in the sector and promote the opportunities to them.

4. Collate better data on London Advice Services

Discuss with the advice networks and others collating key statistics on advice services in London and monitor the changes in staffing and recruitment over a few years. Undertake a workforce survey of all London advice services and repeat on a regular basis

5. Collaboration, Group Purchase or reduced rates for advertising vacancies

Review the various recruitment platforms for advice posts and report whether opportunities for further collaboration, considering income generation lost and whether need to develop new recruitment channels. Together, the sector offers a considerable number of vacancies each year and the group purchasing power can be used to gain better deals, particularly benefitting smaller voluntary organisations.

6. Develop support for recruitment particularly small organisations

Review the support available for advice services with recruitment processes and procedure and identify the need for different services for organisations with a high staff turnover (for example consultancy, recruitment materials, support with interviews and selection procedures etc). Acknowledge the role small equity-focussed services play in providing the first advice experience for people under-represented in the advice sector and examine how larger advice services who benefit from this recruitment gateway can offer other support in exchange.

7. Explore expanding the role of apprenticeships

Commission a report on the expansion of apprenticeships in the advice sector based on the existing model. The report should consider the views of the legal businesses and the levy providers as well as the government's proposed changes to the apprenticeship model and how the advice sector could apply this.

8. Consider the development of sector specific trainees

With reference to current and historic advice sector trainee schemes, examine the opportunities to create new recruitment pathways including 'grow-your-own' paid trainee opportunities, internships, funded training and qualification packages as well as creating advice job readiness training schemes ("Skills Bootcamp"). The development of the schemes should link with the governments plans for young people leaving school and/or in receipt of state benefits and the GLA Jobs and Skills programme. Other opportunities should be considered such as the recruiting offenders undertaking community-based sentences. Link with the development of the Advice Sector NOS and seek to create recognised and transportable qualifications or certification.

9. Training coordination and workforce strategy

Linked to the London Advice Workforce Strategy, devise a central online directory of all known training and qualification provision, linked to role competences, national occupational standards (NOS) and tailored for different service types. Coordinate the provision of training by highlighting training needs, helping services with similar training needs meet these and providing a platform for trainers to advertise their services and checking the quality of training services provided. Examine the need for a pool of 'locum advisers' who could be brought in on a temporary basis when services have acute staff shortages.

10. Support the Development of the National Occupational Standards for advice

Continue the cross-sector support for the review of legal advice NOS in 2025/26. Bring together training providers and advice services to plan for London advice sector training needs and ensure accessibility and relevance of programmes and courses. Link the training to the NOS for different job roles in order to help navigate through which courses deliver what training outcomes.

11. Improve practices for managing case loads

Work with advice services to identify different ways to manage the case loads of individual advisers. This could include assertive case closure policies, team discussions on closing cases or administrative involvement in case closure. Give confidence to managers and to supervisors to make the decision to 'close the doors', turn away clients or take cases away from caseworkers when the workload is likely to impact on staff's stress level.

12. Encourage training and development plans tailored to individuals career plans

Work with framework owners and regulators to ensure training requirements reflect the knowledge skills and experience required for a role. Work with standard owners to ensure the standards requirements reflect the full range of development opportunities available for people working in the sector including mentoring, peer support networks, attendance at conferences as well as training events.

13. Develop supervision capacity across the London advice sector

Establish cross-agency supervision arrangements and providing a central directory of supervision providers, building supervisor peer support networks, and producing practical templates, guidance and training. Crucially, advice services need support to budget realistically for supervision, and funders should require and enable this – supported by an agreed full cost recovery template for advice services.

14. Embedding independent file review (IFR)

Develop and share resources to assist with IFR including reviewing the Legal Aid Agencies guides to peer review and adapting for the advice sector. Revisit some of the earlier projects which established pilots for external file review and/or reciprocal arrangements and more collaborative ways of working. Identify the areas of law with particularly difficulty in recruiting independent file reviewers and devise training and support packages for developing people in this area, particularly in relation to Peer Review systems. Identify whether a cross-sector resource is required to enable better independent file review.

15. Develop opportunities for peer support and communities of practice

Support the development of peer support opportunities through the advice networks. Identify the key topics and staff groupings and learning needs to be delivered through peer support. Such groupings might be supervisor networks and CEO forums to create space for reflection and problem-solving. Identify how to establish these groups initially and then how to sustain these in the long run. Encourage the cooperation and collaboration of advice services in localities through local Borough advice forums.

16. Leadership programmes and succession planning

Revisit some of the earlier leadership programmes and examine whether these could be replicated. Identify support needs for small organisations considering leadership issues such as planning for succession, strengthening governance, and developing new and existing leaders. This could take the form of mentoring programmes, advice sector leadership training, and succession planning toolkits and the source of such programmes could be from within the sector or beyond.

17. Pay, conditions and sustainable advice services

Encourage recognition by the sector and key stakeholders that sustainable advice services are those where pay and conditions are competitive, the workloads are manageable and the opportunities for supervision, training, support and progression are valued. The sector needs to develop the confidence to challenge competitive commissioning and a drive to minimise costs whilst delivering unrealistic outputs. Examine whether salary benchmarks and sector-wide guidance can play a role in stabilising sector salaries, and assist services and funders adopt a more consistent approach.

18. Role of Tech and AI Solutions in Advice Delivery

Examine whether the projects which use AI solutions to research legal issues and to write up case notes can be successfully deployed to release staff capacity for more face-to-face contact with clients. Examine the role of tech solutions for training, supervision and peer review and for the coordination and collaboration of services.

19. Policy engagement and alignment

Advice sector needs to examine the position of advice services in relation to wider policy agendas – including the London Advice Strategy, the GLA Growth Plan, NHS integration initiatives and the Ministry of Justice's Legal Support Strategy. By embedding advice services and workforce priorities into these frameworks, the sector can leverage new investment, strengthen cross-sector partnerships and ensure that advice services are recognised as part of London's essential infrastructure.

20. Building shared infrastructure and workforce strategy

Implementing these proposals will require a scoping across existing networks and resources to identify what may already be established to carry the work forward. Given the fragmented nature of the sector, the option of a new **London Advice Workforce Hub or Skills Academy** should be considered. Such a hub could be an important vehicle to coordinate and/or provide a single point of contact for training, peer networks, supervision resources, and careers promotion. Rather than replace, its role would be to consolidate existing good practice and make it accessible to all service, including smaller or equity-led organisations. It could host a training directory, broker supervision exchanges, develop a pool of independent file reviewers, and run campaigns to attract new talent into the sector. It could provide a platform for the development of a shared workforce strategy for London's advice sector.

Why it matters

For advice agencies, people *are* the service. Yet too often, funding and contracts only cover delivery costs — not the real cost of sustaining a skilled, supported and motivated workforce. This leads to burnout, churn and declining service quality. If funders and commissioners want advice services and outcomes that are safe, effective and enduring, they must invest in the workforce infrastructure that underpins them.

What it means

"Sustainable Workforce Funding" (sometimes called *real cost resourcing*) means ensuring that all grants and contracts cover the full range of resources needed to deliver high-quality, person-centred advice. It moves beyond "full cost recovery" — which implies a backward-looking calculation — towards a forward-looking commitment to *workforce sustainability and fairness*.

A sustainable workforce funding model includes:

- **Competitive salaries** benchmarked to comparable roles in adjacent sectors
- **Structured training and professional development** pathways
- **Supervision and reflective practice** built into delivery models
- **Peer learning and support** mechanisms across agencies and networks
- **Wellbeing and workload management** measures to prevent burnout
- **Investment in management capacity** to lead, mentor and retain staff

The benefit

Such an approach enables advice agencies to recruit and retain skilled staff, deliver consistent quality, and innovate in response to need. For funders, it ensures value for money, continuity of service and alignment with wider Good Work and Inclusive Economy missions.

How funders can act

- Use *sustainable workforce funding* language in guidance and application materials
- Require applicants to cost in training, supervision, peer support, CPD and wellbeing as standard
- Offer multi-year or flexible grants that allow for workforce planning and retention
- Work collectively to establish shared benchmarks for fair pay and training investment

Strengthening the System Conditions for a Sustainable Workforce

A stable advice workforce requires system-level changes in how the sector is funded, coordinated and supported. Without these conditions, workforce shortages, burnout and recruitment difficulties will continue to undermine service quality and organisational resilience.

A London Advice Strategy and Workforce Funding Compact

A coordinated London Advice Strategy is needed to articulate a shared vision for the workforce and set expectations around training, supervision, working conditions and progression. This should be underpinned by a **Workforce Funding Compact** that brings together funders and commissioners around common principles:

- **Multi-year funding as standard**, reducing turnover and precarious staffing
- **Full cost recovery**, including supervision time, learning time, leadership development and wellbeing
- **Aligned expectations** about workforce standards, competence development and quality assurance
- **Investment in organisational capacity**, especially for small and equity-focused services
- **Commitment to shared workforce infrastructure**, rather than duplicative project-level investment

The compact creates the enabling conditions for agencies to plan, recruit, train and retain staff effectively.

Training and Qualifications Strategy, aligned with NOS reform

London needs a clear, coherent skills and qualifications framework that defines what knowledge, skills and behaviours are required at each stage of an adviser's journey—from entry-level roles through to specialist roles, supervisors and leaders.

This requires:

- Updating role profiles and competences through a **Pan-London Workforce Reference Framework**
- Coordinated influence on the **review of National Occupational Standards (NOS)** so that they reflect the realities of social welfare legal advice
- Mapping training routes, qualifications and CPD options to these shared competences
- Ensuring accessibility for under-represented groups, including through DDPO-led design

This strategy creates a transparent pipeline and a shared understanding across funders, agencies and training providers.

Leadership, culture and organisational resilience

Workforce sustainability also depends on leadership capacity and organisational culture. As many services rely on overstretched leaders, or single individuals with specialist knowledge, investment is required to:

- Develop new leaders, particularly in smaller and equity-focused organisations
- Strengthen organisational culture, staff wellbeing and reflective practice
- Support succession planning and reduce founder dependency
- Enable leadership coaching and peer learning

These investments reduce risk and improve long-term organisational capacity.

Building the Shared Workforce Infrastructure London Needs

There is strong support amongst stakeholders consulted by researchers for coordinated pan-London and pan-sector action to promote careers in advice, generate a pipeline of new entrants and 'returners' and to support advice sector employers with recruitment. The suggestion that a **London Advice Workforce Hub** could be created, akin to the *Skills Academies* that exist for other sectors, was first floated in 2024 under the AWDF programme and a Task and Finish Group has already been established to take this idea forward. See Appendix 13 for further information on the potential role of a Hub.

The creation of a wholly new body could be complex and costly, but existing structures – advice networks and umbrella bodies – could be used as a platform for a Hub. The AWDF Task and Finish Group will need to develop this model thoroughly in liaison with potential funders and stakeholders. Questions of governance and delivery must also be addressed. Stakeholders have therefore urged some caution in seeing a Hub as a workable solution in the short or medium term. A phased approach to infrastructure development may be needed.

While strong system conditions provide the foundation, London also needs shared infrastructure to reduce duplication, achieve economies of scale and ensure access to essential workforce functions across the whole sector.

Phased Workforce Infrastructure ("Hub-Light" to Workforce Hub)

A full London Advice Workforce Hub is a long-term aspiration. Stakeholder feedback indicates the need for a **phased, practical approach**, beginning with a "Hub-Light" model focused on coordination rather than centralisation. Over time, this could evolve into a more formal hub aligned with the GLA Skills Academies.

Phase 1: Low-cost, high-impact shared functions

- Training directory mapped to shared competences
- Recruitment and inclusion tools
- IFR and supervision templates
- Peer support coordination
- Directory of supervision and IFR providers
- Practical resources for workload management, supervision and reflective practice

Phase 2: Intermediate shared services

- Apprenticeship and traineeship brokerage
- Technical supervision matching
- IFR pools in specialist areas
- Template policies and job descriptions
- Locum pool to release pressure and support staff development

Phase 3: Workforce Hub

A consolidated model offering coordinated pathways, quality assurance, brokerage, training alignment and strategic intelligence. This would require broad buy-in and pooled investment.

Recruitment, inclusion and early-career pathways

To address chronic shortages and diversify the workforce, London needs:

- Funded **trainee roles**, **apprenticeships** and **structured placements**
- Community-based training schemes and partnerships
- Inclusive recruitment resources, especially DDPO-led materials
- Shared advertising and reduced-rate recruitment channels
- Job-readiness training and bootcamps with guaranteed interview options

These approaches widen access while reducing recruitment costs for individual agencies.

Supervision, IFR and quality assurance infrastructure

Supervision remains one of the most pressured parts of the system. To support quality and reduce risk:

- Implement a three-tier **Supervisor Development Pathway** (Essentials → Development → Advanced)
- Develop guidance and tools for supervisor workload management
- Expand sector-wide **IFR and peer review pilots**
- Create shared resource libraries for supervision, IFR and quality assurance
- Support cross-agency supervision schemes and reciprocal arrangements

Peer support and sector connection

Peer support is critical for professional growth, wellbeing and retention. To reduce isolation—particularly for smaller and equity-focused organisations—a coordinated approach should establish:

- Adviser, supervisor, CEO and trainee peer networks
- Stipends and backfill for participation
- A Peer Support Team to coordinate sessions, curate resources and ensure accessibility

Technology, AI and workforce intelligence

Emerging technologies provide opportunities to reduce administrative workload and support quality. A shared approach is needed to:

- Explore ethical and appropriate AI tools for drafting, case management, training and supervision prompts
- Develop guidance to ensure safe, equitable adoption

- Build a **light-touch workforce data model** to track vacancies, retention, supervision capacity and skills needs across London

These tools support smarter planning and investment decisions.

A Sequenced Pathway Forward

The evidence points to three interdependent areas of action:

1. **Create the system conditions** that enable agencies to recruit, retain and train staff sustainably
2. **Build shared infrastructure** that expands access and reduces duplication
3. **Support agencies to act now**, using practical tools that improve retention, supervision and quality

Taken together, these actions form a coherent and achievable strategy for strengthening London's advice workforce. They will require commitment from funders, networks, policymakers and agencies, but the cost of inaction is substantially higher. The conditions for change are present; what is needed now is collaboration, prioritisation and collective resolve.

Development, communication and implementation of solutions

It is essential that the solutions identified in this report are fully considered by the advice sector, funders, commissioners and policymakers. Decisions will need to be made under the AWDF programme about immediate priorities, and a communications and implementation plan will be needed to ensure the solutions are taken forward.

Briefings

A series of briefings has been drafted for funders, local authorities, the GLA, advice agencies, networks/umbrella bodies, training providers and advice service trustees to assist with the next steps.

8. SOLUTIONS TABLE

Solution	Description	Who Must Commit	Specific Lead(s)	Costs (Indicative)	Funding Routes	Timescale	Risks & Mitigations
1. London Advice Strategy & Workforce Funding Compact	Sector-wide Advice Strategy including workforce strategy, plus a funding compact aligning expectations on full cost recovery, multi-year funding, supervision, progression and equitable investment.	Funders; GLA; Commissioners; Networks; Umbrella bodies	**AWDF Advice Strategy Group**; London Funders; GLA; Networks	Low	Pooled funders; GLA	Short–Medium	Fragmented sector, funder buy-in → start with early adopters, make benefits explicit.
2. Training & Qualifications Strategy (linked to NOS review)	Mapping skills/knowledge needs; aligning training; input to NOS review; regular convening of agencies, networks and training providers.	Networks; Training providers; GLA Skills; Funders	NOS Review Group; Training Providers; Networks; form **cross sector training working group**.	Low–Medium	Networks; funder grants; GLA Skills	Short–Medium	NOS reforms diverge from sector needs → cross-sector working group.
3. Pan-London Workforce Reference Framework	Voluntary shared framework: role profiles, competences, supervision standards, templates for QA, recruitment and training.	Networks; Funders; Agencies	AWDF Steering Group; ASA; Networks; form **cross sector working group**	Medium	GLA small grant; pooled funders	Short–Medium	Reaching agreement on standards → form cross sector group with appropriate expertise. Low uptake → embed in funding expectations; ensure high practicality.
4. Phased Workforce Infrastructure (Hub-Light → Hub)	Start with shared tools, directories, supervision brokerage and peer support; scope long-term feasibility for a full Hub.	Funders; GLA; Networks	**AWDF Marketing T&F Group**; form **cross sector working group;** ASA; GLA	Medium–High (if full Hub)	GLA; funder consortium	Medium–Long	Sector wide-buy-in, Governance, Overcomplexity → phased, modular trialling; evaluate value-added.

Solution	Description	Who Must Commit	Specific Lead(s)	Costs (Indicative)	Funding Routes	Timescale	Risks & Mitigations
5. Recruitment & Inclusion Resources	Good-practice guides, DDPO/equity focused designed - inclusive recruitment tools, reasonable-adjustments guidance, model templates.	Funders; Networks; Agencies	**DDPOs; Equity-led orgs**	Low–Medium	Commissioned packs via funders	Short	Underuse → promote via networks; embed in Framework.
6. Shared Advertising & Group Purchasing	Shared vacancy promotion, reduced-rate advertising, sector-wide job campaigns.	Networks; Agencies	Advice networks - form **cross sector working group;** ASA	Medium	Joint sector contributions	Short	Coordination capacity → centralised booking model.
7. Fund and Upscale Trainee Roles & Progression Pathways	Fully funded traineeships with supervision, structured learning, career progression routes.	Funders; Agencies	Equity-led orgs; funder consortium	Medium–High	Dedicated workforce funding – Propel funders	Short–Medium	Shortage of funding → build case for increased investment via AWDF. Progression bottlenecks → link to Framework and planning tools.
8. Fund and Upscale Local & Community-Led Training Schemes	Locally rooted, accessible training routes (community agency/DDPO/equity-led, lived-experience).	Funders; Local authorities; Equity-led orgs; Training Providers; networks	Advice agencies; DDPOs; equity led agencies; Networks	Medium-High	Borough grants; AWDF/Propel	Short–Medium	Sustainability risk → embed into borough strategies and London Advice Strategy
9. Job-Readiness Training & Bootcamps	Pre-employment 'bootcamps', awareness-building, guaranteed interviews, accessible formats.	GLA; Funders; Training Providers; Advice Agencies (hosts)	GLA Skills; Networks.	Medium	GLA Skills	Short	Low conversion rates → integrate with traineeships.

Solution	Description	Who Must Commit	Specific Lead(s)	Costs (Indicative)	Funding Routes	Timescale	Risks & Mitigations
10. Apprenticeships Infrastructure Expansion	Expand apprenticeship brokerage, supervision support, levy transfer coordination and peer support.	Networks; Funders; Agencies	LLST; Networks; University House	Medium–High	Apprenticeship levy; trusts; corporate social responsibility funds	Medium	Insufficient placements → toolkit + central brokerage offer.
11. Paid Internships & Work Placements	Internships and structured placements with funded supervision, targeted at under-represented groups.	Networks; Funders; Agencies; Universities	Advice networks; Advice Agencies; Training Providers	Medium	Universities; Funders	Short	Burden on small orgs → fund managerial/supervision time.
12. Leadership Development & Culture Change	Coaching, training, pathways for emerging leaders, organisational culture work. Implement findings of 'Hamster Wheel' report.	Funders; Networks; Advice Agencies: Training Providers; LAPG Leadership Hub	Leadership Training Providers; Networks	Medium	Leadership fund; pooled funders	Medium	Smaller orgs excluded → stipends/concessions + locum pool.
13. Supervisor Training Pathway (Essentials → Advanced)	Tiered training offer, modules, peer networks.	Funders; Networks; Agencies; ASA (AQS); Lexcel; SQM	Training Providers; Networks; ASA	Low–Medium	Funders + networks	Short–Medium	Supervisor overload → Compact includes protected time.
14. Supervisor Workload Guidance & Audit Tools	Caseload ratios, protected time guidance, workload audits, escalation routes.	Networks; Agencies; ASA (AQS);	Advice networks; ASA	Low	Funders (tool design)	Short	Adoption risk → link to grant requirements.

Solution	Description	Who Must Commit	Specific Lead(s)	Costs (Indicative)	Funding Routes	Timescale	Risks & Mitigations
		Lexcel; SQM					
15. Supervision & IFR Resource Library	Sector-wide library including LAA, LawWorks, SRA, Law Society resources and new templates.	ASA; Networks; Funders	ASA; Networks	Low–Medium	AWDF / pooled fund	Short	Duplication → single curated repository.
16. External IFR & Peer Review Pilots	Pilots in priority areas; peer network-led; reciprocal or funded models.	Funders; Networks; Agencies	Networks; ASA	Medium	Funder pilots	Short–Medium	Inconsistent standards → align with Framework competences.
17. Peer Support Structures (Supervisors, CEOs, Advisers)	Ongoing communities of practice, stipends for small/equity-led orgs, funded coordination.	Funders; Networks; ASA	Peer Support Team; Networks; ASA; Existing Peer Support bodies	Low–Medium	Funders; AWDF	Short	Time constraints → stipends + locum cover.
18. Locum Adviser Pool	Shared pool to cover leave, training time, supervision development and wellbeing.	Funders; Networks	Networks	Medium-High	Funders;	Medium	Hard to recruit locums → pipeline links via traineeships.
19. Tech & AI Productivity Tools	Explore AI for drafting, research, training, supervision prompts; sector guidance and pilots.	Funders; Networks; Agencies	AWH; digital partners	Medium–High	Innovatio n funds; GLA digital	Long	Ethical/uneven capacity → piloting + guidance.
20. Workforce Data & Intelligence Model	Shared light-touch data on vacancies, retention, skills needs, supervision capacity.	Funders; Networks; Agencies	London Funders; Networks	Low–Medium	Pooled funders	Medium	Low data return → simple templates + incentives.
21. Immediate Low-/No-Cost Actions for Agencies	Use shared templates for supervision, file review, job descriptions and workload planning. Protect supervision time and embed wellbeing and manageable caseload discussions.	Agencies	Agency leaders, Networks	Minimal	None required	Immediate	Competing pressures → choose 1–2 priorities + use shared templates.

Solution	Description	Who Must Commit	Specific Lead(s)	Costs (Indicative)	Funding Routes	Timescale	Risks & Mitigations
	Strengthen induction, buddying and mentorship for new staff and trainees. Introduce reciprocal or cross-agency supervision arrangements. Build short reflective-practice routines into team meetings. Encourage participation in peer networks and sector learning activities. Begin costing bids/contracts realistically using full cost recovery and brief boards on workforce risks.						