Liverpool Access to Justice

Executive Summary

In 2020, the School of Law and Social Justice, University of Liverpool, in partnership with Citizens Advice Liverpool, led a Liverpool City Council funded project to combat and evidence the severe impact of cuts to access to free legal advice in Liverpool; an important part of Liverpool’s anti-poverty strategy. The research has highlighted the necessity of access to free legal advice in people’s everyday lives and the negative socio-economic and health impacts its absence can have.

The project has initiated a Liverpool *Access to Advice Network* and started a new referral system. This is a strong foundation for future collaboration and on which to build relationships between agencies, to develop the referral system, and share training resources. The mapping of the sector and project research provides a strong evidence base to inform and help sustain network development. Further collaboration and partnership working will increase the effectiveness of the existing free legal advice availability, improve outcomes for people at this critical time, and bring new resources in to the city.

The project contained four work packages (WP). Although the Covid-19 crisis forced a major reorganisation of the project, all four work packages were successfully delivered:

**WP 1 - Mapping the advice network** – the project has mapped the free legal advice ecosystem in Liverpool. Interviews and data analysis have provided a detailed assessment of capacity in different areas of law and levels of advice. The participants represented 37 of the 89 identified charity and voluntary sector (CVS) organisations that publicise an offer of free legal information or advice in Liverpool. (Skills) A visual representation of this complex network is available that shows the interaction between organisations and the availability of (and gaps in) legal advice for clients.

**WP 2 - Network Development** - A new e-referral system – Refernet - was set up and protocols established in April 2020. To date, 36 organisations and services are part of the network and 20 expressions of interest are pending. There have been 1639 client referrals made from April 2020-December 2020. This strengthens links between advice providers, gives people quicker access to the advice they need, and helps increase effectiveness of free legal advice in Liverpool. Growing and strengthening this referral network is a priority for the year ahead. Research has highlighted the high prevalence of multiple advice needs for clients, and the importance of effective referral from first point of contact about an advice issue to an advice provider, and between organisations providing different areas or levels of advice.

A second project priority was to establish a Liverpool *Access to Advice Network* group. This is a new initiative developed without a history of this form of coordination between agencies. The network already has 29 active members and the first steps towards sharing resources and joint funding bids have been taken. Despite the complexity and challenges, particularly this year, of bringing such a wide, diverse network together, a strong foundation on which to build capacity and coordination in the future has been established. A sustainable governance model is established involving the Liverpool Law Society, the University of Liverpool and John Moores University. Maintaining this strong momentum towards full coordination of a Liverpool Advice Network is a key priority in the year ahead.

**WP 3 - Training –** Identification and initiation of training for advice organisations has been carried out. The first training sessions in family law, BAMER services and Employment Law events were held in autumn 2020. A training portal has been integrated in to the new network website for publicising and booking future training events.

**Research –** Despite the forced reorganisation of the project, the research interviews, focus groups and analysis were successfully completed, and new insights in to Liverpool’s advice ecosystem were gained. Initial policy recommendations were published in September 2020: *Access to Legal Advice for All: Essential to Reduce Social and Economic Impacts of COVID-19.* The first research article titled *How legal advice can ameliorate the unequal health impact of Covid-19* will be published in February 2021. This provides analysis of Liverpool’s advice network in the context of health inequalities. It highlights the importance of free legal advice to the social determinants of health, such as housing, unemployment and food, and the need for collaboration within and across public sectors.

Numerous themes requiring further analysis have emerged from the research: the value of collaboration, the high levels of demand, lack of funding, the negative impact of competition between organisations, the need for diverse organisations, the need for increased consistency in referrals and partnerships, and the importance of trust. The difficulties facing the advice sector, particularly the high levels of demand and limited supply of free legal advice have increased in recent years. This evidence base will help inform decision-making and further research in to access to justice in Liverpool, and the development of the Liverpool Advice Network to address these difficulties.

The timing of the project enriched the research by providing an unexpected opportunity to understand how people are trying to respond to the social and economic upheaval of Covid-19, and the central role of and rapid changes in the legal advice sector. Covid-19 has increased the incidence of social welfare law issues, both income-related and not, at a time of limited access to and availability of free legal advice. People in need of free advice must rely on an uneven patchwork of not-for-profit organisations and council services, residual legal aid contracts or pro bono activities. Covid-19 has not created new problems, but it has multiplied existing issues caused by a lack of legal advice, limited understanding of legal rights, and the deep inequalities in society. This has highlighted the urgent need to coordinate and maximise the availability of free legal advice. This means that the *Access to Advice Network* is especially important as people in Liverpool attempt to resolve multiple, inter-connected issues.

**The next phase of the project**, resource permitting, will build on the strong foundations established in 2020 for the Liverpool *Access to Advice Network* group. Work will focus on the following deliverables: complete roll out of the referral system; further digitalisation of services, such as an e-triage system for clients; linking to other information sources; cross-sector training; developing partnerships and joint funding. Funding is sought for a partnership coordinator at this critical juncture for the Liverpool Advice Network to ensure that the benefits of phase 1 are sustained, and to take on tasks that individual organisations do not have capacity for in relation to the phase 2 deliverables.