Advising Londoners

FOREWORD

The impact of Covid-19 on advice need and advice services in London

July 2020

advice services alliance

The umbrella body for independent advice services in the UK

Foreword to Advising Londoners: The impact of Covid-19 on advice need and advice services in London

The report presented here is based on research carried out over the summer of 2019. It was shaped and written up over the latter part of last year and early 2020. Given the enormity of the life-shaping economic and social changes to hit this country since then, it would be extraordinary not to add some reflection on the impact of Covid-19 on Londoners seeking help with their problems.

Throughout the first three months of lockdown, the social and economic issues that have emerged make more urgent the recommendations in this report. The need for all Londoners to have access to accurate, timely and appropriate social welfare advice is even more relevant post-Covid-19 than before. At the same time, there have been significant impacts on advice organisations themselves which may change the way the social welfare legal advice sector is understood and supported – the focus of this report.

London has been at the epicentre of the Covid-19 outbreak.[1] The lockdown, when it came, was immediate and had a severe impact on London life and its economy. Despite some of the most interventionist policies seen in peacetime, thousands of Londoners were affected, particularly the young, those in insecure low-paid employment, people working in the hospitality, entertainment or service industries. The need for advice has increased hugely during the past three months as the lockdown brought a range of problems including an immediate loss of income, instability in employment and family matters complicated by Covid-19.

But as our report describes, there is a difference between advice need and advice demand and the experience of Covid-19 has shone a light on the importance of these distinctions. The presenting demand for advice has been volatile and patchy and generally lower than expected. The consensus within the sector is that the actions taken by the Government to minimise the impact of Covid-19 have held many problems in abeyance. But they have not gone away, simply been put on hold pending of the lifting of the lockdown. For example, housing courts have been closed to prevent face-to-face contact in the court and any eviction orders suspended to reflect the Government's restrictions on moving home. The indications are that as the courts reopen, these cases will become live again and the problems which have been pent up, will become active.

But as well as those people with existing problems, Covid-19 has also created a completely new cohort of Londoners with problems that have emerged during this period. This represents a different client profile in terms of age, educational achievement etc. and for whom dealing with problems created by the lockdown may be an entirely new and alienating experience. They will seek help on issues with their employer or creditors or their landlord or the benefit system from the same pool of advice services that are already supporting many Londoners.

[1] https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/coronavirus--covid-19 recorded cases in London 27,345 accessed 18th June 2020. Boroughs recording over 1,000 cases located in the North-West (Brent and Barnet) and in the South South-East (Lambeth, Southwark, Croydon and Bromley).

For the managers of advice services, the pandemic and the lockdown have proved to be something of a rollercoaster ride, with beliefs long-held by the sector regarding resilience and sustainability turned on their head. At the start, the very survival of the sector was uncertain. The current picture is less bleak as the role the sector plays in helping the country recover from the pandemic has entered mainstream thinking. There have been two major developments during the lockdown period which are relevant to this report and which will have an enduring impact on the sector: funding and channel shift.

Firstly, funding. Large charities reliant on unrestricted income from charity shops and individual fundraising events like the London Marathon found their financial positions immediately impacted. Meanwhile, smaller organisations funded by local authority grants or funding from philanthropic trusts emerged looking more stable. Advice services providing specialist legal advice funded by Legal Aid initially faced a funding cliff as the courts closed and clients' cases were put on hold - without client contact, no Legal Aid funding could be secured.

The main London funders responded quickly and sympathetically; the London Funders forum – which includes the Greater London Authority– set up the London Community Response Fund which has so far distributed nearly £1.7 million to voluntary and community sector organisations through its advice theme. The Access to Justice Foundation launched an emergency appeal for £200,000 of funding, to be match funded to £400,000 and the London Legal Support Trust rearranged their fundraising events to minimise the drop in revenue. At the national level, the Ministry of Justice bid for (and gained) £5.4 million from the Treasury's voluntary sector support funding (£3 million earmarked for Law Centres across England and Wales, £2.4 million for 'specialist' voluntary legal advice providers) and an additional £36 million has been promised through the Money and Pensions Service for debt advice. Whilst the response of funders from civil society and various tiers of government has helped address the immediate problem, the issue of security of funding in the longer term remains acute. Given the existing funding gap identified in this report, further sustained action will be needed to meet the continued demand as the country recovers from lockdown.

The second major shift has been the speed at which the advice sector shifted from providing face-to-face advice to using remote channels such as telephone or web-based systems. This was necessary to allow services to continue whilst maintaining social distancing requirements (and protecting staff and volunteers). This has been challenging for all London-based advice services as the face-to-face provision often located in community premises has long been an important part of service delivery. With network support from national bodies such as Citizens Advice, the Law Centres Network and AdviceUK, combined with the ingenuity of chief officers and trustees, business continuity plans were rapidly deployed. The mass purchase of smart phones, laptops and software enabled advisers to carry on working from home even when socially isolating. As a result of this remarkable resilience of service provision, advisers have been able to continue to support many clients in a way which would have been unthinkable even six months ago.

The good news is the move to on-line, telephone and remote services is said by some advice service providers (as reported by AdviceUK) to have improved efficiency as the number of clients per hour 'seen' and therefore helped, has increased. The shift to remote advice services – which was happening already and has been accelerated by Covid-19 – may also assist the increasing numbers of Londoners seeking advice, rendering the limitations of London's geography and physical accessibility less significant.

On the flip side is a genuine concern for those Londoners identified in this report who already find accessing suitable help problematic: people who are digitally excluded; people with language or cultural differences; people who do not have smart phones or whose pay-as-you-go phones cannot

cope with long waiting times; the elderly; some people with disabilities; and many young people inexperienced in seeking help. There is also a concern regarding the Londoners who had previously sought advice from the small community-based organisations (local community centres, cultural groups, faith-based groups). This report highlights such organisations as an important route into mainstream advice provision. Many who need help will find these routes have all but vanished with lockdown restrictions. The emergence of Mutual Aid Groups may help to partially fill this gap, but some advice services are starting to report there are 'vanished' clients - those helped in the past, now under-represented in client profile statistics. There is a concern that with a limited advice resource and limited channels for receiving it, those Londoners with more skills will be better able to access help.

The pandemic has exposed in the harshest terms the impact of the decade of public sector cuts and the inequity of their impact on parts of the community. But this has led to a more open debate in the media regarding the role of core public services and need for the government to support and fund vital community resources rather than relying on individuals to help themselves. The strength of public opinion regarding systemic unfairness has expressed itself in many ways – the way the Black Lives Matter campaign has resonated, for example – and may demonstrate a more fundamental change in wider public attitudes. This publication comes at a time when there is both massive challenges for government but also the potential for radical change. We therefore particularly draw attention to the following issues raised in the report:

- **Widening inequalities**. The pandemic has increased the pressure on all communities across London but particularly those who had already disproportionately experienced the impact of the austerity measures. The advice sector must ensure that advice provision is both appropriate to and meets the needs of people from all communities and that where communities lack advice services or find these services hard to access, funding is made available to help the community grow its own services. In particular, the provision of services specifically meeting the needs of the Black and Minority Ethnic communities must be a priority for all advice funders and providers.

- **Maintain opportunity for face-to-face provision.** Face-to-face provision is essential for reaching and offering appropriate help for many people, particularly those facing multiple issues of exclusion. Without some face to face provision in community locations, people who are vulnerable or have a high level of complex needs will simply not be able to access advice. Clearly consideration needs to be given to the safe management of this provision as social distancing and protective measures will be with us for the foreseeable future.

- **Increasing use of technology**. The move to technological and remote forms of provision will become increasingly relevant and useful as we learn more about what people need on-line in order to exercise their rights. The shift to on-line provision gives important opportunities to learn about how to provide advice more efficiently, effectively and appropriately.

- **Range of services.** In thinking about the provision of advice services across London, we must not let a focus on new technology distract from the broad range of advice needs, particularly those 'upstream' needs. A very simple and basic need for some Londoners such as help with completing a benefits form, can save many difficulties at a later stage. We need to provide both services.

- **Workforce challenge.** The workforce challenge for the advice sector is more urgent as many staff and volunteers in the advice sector fall within the 'at risk' category for Covid-19. Many services have reported a difficulty in maintaining their volunteer base with remote working,

as being part of a team is often the reason why volunteers donate their time. However, with the right planning, the pandemic also offers opportunities to fill this skills gap with a new generation of advisers - perhaps drawn from those who have lost employment during the pandemic. Learning from previous programmes such as the Future Jobs Fund; capitalising on apprenticeship schemes and the changes to training for solicitors have the potential to recruit young Londoners as advisers, not only enhancing their life prospects but also creating a new generation of advice workers passionate about fairness and access to social justice.

This is a pivotal moment for policy makers and funders across London to understand the needs of their communities and to place the eco-system of organisations making up the advice sector at the heart of the recovery. We are very encouraged by the many signs that this is happening. The opportunities to open up new relationships and new ways of working are very real as the connection between social capital and health recovery becomes more apparent. We very much hope that the findings of this report will help rebuild and reshape access to advice for all Londoners.

Lindsey Poole
Director, Advice Services Alliance
June 2020