

advice services alliance

Advice is the Key



Social Welfare Advice and the UK Government

The Advice Services Alliance is the umbrella body for independent advice services in the UK. Our members are national charities and networks of not-for-profit organisations providing advice and help on the law, access to services and related issues.

Our Alliance believes that free social welfare advice services delivered by independent advice agencies can play a key role in supporting the UK Government's missions and priorities. These agencies include independent community groups, 'by-and-for' and ethnically diverse organisations, local Citizens Advice, Law Centres, Age UK and young people's and disabled people's agencies. Access to early advice on benefits, money, debt, housing, employment, immigration, care, family, and other matters is critical to rebuild trust in public systems and democracy. Advice services have played an essential role in helping people through the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis in recent years. And there is strong evidence that investing in social welfare advice generates savings for the public purse¹. Advice services can also play a big role in system design and improvement.

However, social welfare advice services are under severe pressure. They face high and rising demand that outstrips supply, and insufficient and fragile funding following cuts to Legal Aid and local authority financial pressures. Local authorities are the major funder of advice services. Apart from under the Care Act 2014, and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, there is no statutory duty to provide advice, so services are vulnerable. Even under care and homelessness law, the duties are often discharged by simple information and signposting, not independent advice. Advice services are also grappling with a workforce welfare, recruitment, and retention crisis and are dealing daily with broken and strained social security, housing, immigration/asylum, and administrative justice systems. There is an urgent need for cross-departmental support from the UK Government to enable the advice sector to play its role in national renewal.

This paper sets out the advice sector's requests of the UK Government and how these align with the new administration's missions, priorities, and legislative plans. In summary, our asks are:

- **Boost the funding for social welfare advice and legal aid.**
- **Build social welfare advice into missions, priorities, and legislation.**
- **Give the advice sector a seat at the table to improve welfare systems.**



Boost the funding for social welfare advice and legal aid.

In 2014, The Low Commission on the future of advice and legal support estimated a £100 million funding gap for the advice sector in England and Walesⁱⁱ. Allowing for inflation alone, the gap would be £134 million in 2024 and we think that is a big under-estimate. But even a figure double that is not a huge sum in the scheme of Government spending. Investing in quality assured social welfare advice would generate a good return for the Government. Much of this investment would need to be channelled via local authorities, mayors, devolved administrations, and National Lottery Community Fund in the form of grants and commissions. Closing the funding gap for social welfare advice services can be achieved by placing advice provision at the heart of the Government's reform programme and ensuring that local authorities have the funds to ensure access to advice. In this briefing we set out ideas for how advice fits with a range of government agendas.

Reversing the cuts to Legal Aid across England and Wales that were introduced in 2013 would also greatly improve supply of legal advice for people in need. Restoring legal aid for benefits, housing, and debt problems, ensuring suppliers are paid economically viable fees and raising the threshold for the legal aid means testⁱⁱⁱ would help to restore access to legal advice and justice.

Build social welfare advice into missions, priorities, and legislation.

Provide strategic leadership.

The social welfare advice sector lacks strategic sponsorship at Government level. The Legal Services Commission (2000-2013) did attempt to provide some strategy for social welfare advice, beyond the legal aid scheme. Since its demise, there has been no department or body with responsibility for ensuring access to good quality social welfare advice outside the now very limited scope of legal aid. The Westminster Government could follow the Welsh Government's example and develop an action plan in partnership with the advice sector for funding and coordination of quality assured advice services^{iv}. This could ensure that access to independent advice is recognised a cross-cutting issue that supports the UK Government in its missions, priorities and legislative programme, including the following:

Economic Growth: Back to Work Plan

Tackling economic inactivity is central to the Government's number one mission of growing the economy. The provision of social welfare advice is a key element of the support that many people need to get back into work. The recent Pathways to Work Commission report noted the need for several levers to work in sync to build pathways to work, including the provision of access to debt advice^v. Access to benefits, employment and housing advice is also critical to people gaining and retaining employment.

Housing: Building 1.5m Homes, Renters Rights, homelessness

The occupants of new homes will need social welfare advice to be part of the local infrastructure. Access to free advice will enable people to retain their homes. Each new housing development should ensure that access to in-person social welfare advice available within 15 minutes.

The Renters' Rights Bill should make things fairer for renters – but only if renters have access to independent advice services. Making it mandatory for local authorities to ensure that advice is available for private renters would give them the means to enforce their new rights.

Housing and welfare advice is key to tackling homelessness and ensuring that veterans, young care leavers and domestic abuse survivors avoid homelessness and secure social housing.

Young Futures Programme

The Government is committed to establishing a network of local Young Futures Hubs, so that young people can receive the support they need. It is essential that this support includes independent, youth-focused social welfare advice.

Child Poverty and Emergency Food

Social welfare advice services see the impact and causes of poverty daily. The advice sector has unique insights into the systemic failings that have led to record levels of child poverty and need for food banks. The sector should be consulted and contribute to the work of the Child Poverty Unit and Taskforce and advice agencies funded to provide the advice that can help lift families out of poverty. Connecting people with the right support, at the right time and through the right channel to meet their individual needs can prevent someone being forced to turn to a food bank. Addressing funding gaps will help build capacity across the advice sector to reach people on the lowest incomes and help the Government meet its goal of ending 'mass dependence on emergency food parcels'.

New Deal for Working People

The Employment Rights Bill will give a welcome range of new rights to employees. But rather like the Renters' Rights Bill, people will need access to independent employment advice to enforce these rights. Built into the Bill should be provision for ensuring that properly funded independent advice is available for working people.

An NHS Fit for the Future

Social welfare advice in primary and secondary health settings is making a real difference to health outcomes: dealing with the social determinants of health and the money, debt, housing, employment, and other issues that so affect physical and mental health and place consequent pressures on the health service^{vi}. Research for the Ministry of Justice (to be published autumn 2024 is expected to show good returns to the public purse and savings in health and social care resources^{vii}. We need social welfare advice to be routinely commissioned and integrated into health services.

Take Back Our Streets: Prisons and Probation

The Labour Party acknowledged in its manifesto that, due to lack of coordination, prison-leavers are not getting the right support, raising the risk that they go straight back to crime. The Government is committed to the reform of prisons and probation services. We believe it is vital that the Government ensures that coordinated and integrated social welfare advice is available to prisoners and their families and people with convictions when they are released.

Opportunity for All: Addressing the Advice Workforce Crisis

The social welfare advice sector has a workforce crisis. Many advice providers are struggling to recruit and retain advisers. The Government can help the advice sector via Skills England and improvements to apprenticeship arrangements. We know the Government is also looking to reform the Apprenticeship Levy into a new Growth and Skills Levy. This provides an opportunity to enable the levy to cover the salary and supervision costs of trainee advisers and lawyers.

Give us a seat at the table to improve welfare systems.

The Prime Minister has pledged to reset the relationship between government and charities, and invited those who want to “make our national life better to take their place at the table to shape the future”. The advice sector has a huge contribution to make to the early design of and improvement in welfare systems – for example, disability benefits and Universal Credit. We see the systemic failings daily. We would welcome a seat at the table that is designing and planning improvements.

For more information, please contact the Advice Services Alliance at info@asauk.org.uk.



ⁱ For example: [The Value for Money of the Early Legal Advice Pilot](#), WPI Economics, Ministry of Justice Analytical Series, 2024; [The value of justice for all](#), Pragmatix Advisory, Access to Justice Foundation, The Bar Council, 2024

ⁱⁱ [Tackling the Advice Deficit: A strategy for access to advice and legal support on social welfare law in England and Wales](#), The Low Commission, 2014

ⁱⁱⁱ [Running up a down escalator: Improving the legal aid means test as living costs rise](#), Donald Hirsch and Matt Padley, Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University, 2024

^{iv} See [Welsh Government Information and Advice Action Plan, 2016](#).

^v [Pathways to Work Commission Report](#), by Barnsley Council and the Pathways to Work Commission, July 2024

^{vi} For example: [Reducing health inequities in London by improving access to social welfare advice through greater collaboration between the healthcare, local authority and advice sectors](#), Bromley By Bow Insights, October 2023; [Impact of co-located welfare advice in healthcare settings: prospective quasi-experimental controlled study](#), Charlotte Woodhead, Mizanur Khondoker, Robin Lomas, and Rosalind Raine, 2017; [The Role of Advice Services in Health Outcomes](#), ASA/Low Commission 2015

^{vii} [Evaluation of integrated advice hubs in primary healthcare settings](#), IFF Research & York Health Economics Consortium for Ministry of Justice.