Social welfare legal advice and engaging with communities: a blueprint

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Acknowledgments

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Our research examined how access to social welfare legal advice interacts with community connectedness, (in)equality, and wellbeing. We conducted case-studies with four communities in England and Wales. We mapped community characteristics and advice organisations; engaged with advice providers and other local stakeholders; and conducted semi-structured interviews to examine residents' social networks, problems experienced, and approaches to advice seeking. This briefing reports on key themes from a workshop bringing together representatives of local community organisations, formal advice services providers and local authorities, from across the case-study areas. Although we engaged with representatives in each case-study area separately, the aims of this workshop were to foster collaborative discussions about findings already identified in our case-study reports and co-produce ways of improving experiences and the effectiveness of service delivery in future. There was a specific focus on sharing promising practices that have had positive impacts on communities, whilst further acknowledging barriers, and thinking about where future research would be beneficial. As such this briefing note stands as a form of blueprint for what effective engagement with communities looks like, and how this can be further improved.
The four case-study areas were:

- Deeplish, Greater Manchester: a densely populated neighbourhood in Rochdale with a primarily South Asian population, high levels of deprivation, comparatively large and young households, and English less commonly spoken as a first language.
- Bryngwran, Anglesey, Wales: a rural village with a comparatively older and ageing population, a high (though declining) number of Welsh speakers and strong Welsh identity, net inward migration of retirees and outward migration of young people.
- Dartmouth, South Hams District, Devon: set in rural remoteness, a 'town of two halves' with visible affluence and hidden poverty, subject to the impacts of a tourist economy and outflux of young people.
- Several areas in the London Borough of Hackney: one of the most deprived areas in the UK, with comparatively large Black African and Caribbean populations, subject to population churn due to immigration and ongoing gentrification.

The following key themes emerged:

Trust and trusted relationships

Trust appeared to be the single most important theme arising from the workshop and related to all types of relationships and stakeholders: for those seeking help, to trust providers, and to develop relationships between them; and for community

organisations to develop trusted relationships with more formal advice providers and local authority statutory services. Individual trusted relationships with people in organisations, at all levels, were seen as key to promising practices i.e., trusting relationships are formed with individuals in organisations, more so than with the organisations themselves. It was also acknowledged that it takes a substantial amount of time to build these trusting relationships, and they need to be sustained and maintained. There are varied networks of support across the case-study areas, but where trust sits within these networks, and their sustainability, and who is seen to be holding the power in these networks also plays a key role, in addition to transparency being a central factor to trust.

Listening and being heard

A key theme was that more formal advice services providers and local authority statutory services, and various commissioners and funders, must spend time within communities to properly understand their unique and diverse needs. Organisations and individuals within them must properly listen to communities and do this by being embedded within communities over days, weeks, months and years, not by 'parachuting in' for occasional engagement exercises. The feeling of the community must be understood, and this takes meaningful engagement over time.

Genuine partnerships and local networks

Partnerships with a range of stakeholders, including advice services, community groups, foodbanks, GPs, schools, health and wellbeing services, faith organisations etc, are key, but these must be genuine and, as with all trusted relationships, they take time to develop and create effective and efficient networks. Funding streams specifically devoted to developing networks and connections have been key to building strong, long-term partnerships that are truly collaborative and not competitive. There are good examples of organisations/services working together when the commissioning and funding environment encourages genuine collaboration and not competition, and in areas where there has been investment in long-term partnerships and active discouragement of siloed working. Local networks, which must be properly resourced, have been central to effective partnership working.

Being equal to and physically embedded within the community

The importance of place was also a key theme. Although remote services are valued by some, genuine co-location of organisations and services embedded within the community has been central to what works well. But these must be the right places for the community: for example, a service/hub can be just 100 metres away from being in the right place, and it will not be used. Organisations and services need to be properly

embedded and integrated within the community, listening to and observing the community over the longer-term to understand where the right places are.

Organisations must stay for the journey

The provision of information, support and advice within communities must be longer-term, and planned longer-term in lockstep with communities. What a community needs now may not be what it needed 5 to 10 years ago and may not be what it needs in the future. Provision must be sustainable, responsive, flexible and capable of evolving around the community's needs. Organisations, services and funders must stay with the community for the journey. Again, as mentioned above, having organisations 'parachuting in' for the short-term does not create sustainable and effective advice provision.

Advice offer must be strategic, integrated and well led

Leadership provided by local authorities and larger more formal advice organisations is valued, where this is genuinely in lockstep with the community and based on longer-term engagement. Networks and connections as a whole ecosystem of information, help and advice provision must be looked at on a local authority basis, seeing and developing the offer as a totality, rather than focusing on individual organisations. Larger organisations, such as Citizens Advice, can take leadership roles within a local authority area, providing a coordination function and a holistic understanding of advice journeys. But the success of this leadership role is premised on sufficient funding, long-term trusted relationships, immersion within the community, listening, and genuine partnership working.

One size does not fit all

Although for many of the communities participating in this research, particularly for communities with high proportions of ethnic and linguistic minorities, and/or high proportions of 'vulnerable' individuals, face-to-face in person advice from a familiar person is essential, but there is space for 'transactional' online and phone advice as part of the offer to communities. Transactional here generally means a 'one off' engagement seeking to resolve a less complex or multifaceted problem, rather than delivering holistic person-centred advice. Resources are scarce and there will not be a return to in-person advice for all. Online and phone services should be accessible for those that can benefit from more 'transactional' and more often 'one off' information, help and/or advice. This 'transactional' offer must be carefully positioned within the overall strategy for the local area and for people with particular needs and abilities.

Local is best

National initiatives and networks are good for sharing information, trends, and promising practices. Regional initiatives can be beneficial for some 'transactional' offerings and for advice on more specialist topics based on regional needs. However, information, help and advice should generally be strategically developed, led, and delivered at a local level. The increase in 'remote' provision (both over the telephone and online) is linked in case-study areas also to regionalisation or re-centralisation of services, and this is largely not a positive development. Provision at a local level is better for communities.

Prevention and early intervention are crucial

Prevention and early intervention remain crucial and form a significant part of the support provided by more informal community based local organisations. However, it can be hard to identify early signs before a crisis hits, and the value of prevention is difficult to demonstrate. Thus, rendering it difficult to secure funding for preventative initiatives.

Funding structures must be improved

Funding is too short-term, project-based, fosters competition rather than collaboration, and centres on innovative new solutions rather than continuation funding for proven interventions, needs and demand. Organisations and services lack sustainable sources of core funding to keep them running. Smaller organisations struggle to collate the evidence of impact needed to satisfy funders and be successful at getting funding. What has worked well is where larger organisations can support smaller organisations both in terms of including them in funding bids, and supporting them with resources (time, money and expertise) to help demonstrate evidence of actual and potential impact. However, this requires effective ways of working collaboratively and up-to-date awareness of what services are available from large and small organisations.

Research is needed around demonstrating impact

Future research would be welcomed that can provide smaller community based local organisations with tool kits and other resources for demonstrating impact, particularly for collating and presenting case-studies, in a way that provides narrative evidence but without identifying individuals in close-knit communities. There is scope for researchers to become more embedded within communities over the medium to longer-term, and for more opportunities to be developed for community/peer researchers. Future

research is also needed around evaluating the effectiveness of collaborative working, including co-production and co-design of effective services.