

LONDON LEGAL SUPPORT TRUST CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE (COEX) ANNUAL REVIEW 2024

“I didn’t think there was a light at the end of the tunnel, but now my children and I aren’t just surviving; we are thriving.”

London Legal Support Trust

Centres of Excellence (COEx) Annual Review 2024

Report by Phil Jew Consultancy

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. This report sets out and analyses the results of the annual survey of agencies supported by LLST under its Centres of Excellence (COEx) programme. It builds on the results of four previous surveys, conducted in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 and compares findings and trends. Its format is deliberately consistent to help readers to compare results and see the trends.
- 1.2. The COEx programme provides core funding and support for 43 free specialist legal advice agencies in London and Home Counties, to help them become stable and remain viable.
- 1.3. All COEx programme agencies responded to a survey conducted in late 2024. The survey was conducted using *Survey Monkey* and was split into three parts. The survey questions are set out in Appendix One. A list of all responding agencies appears at Appendix Two. Draft findings were presented to COEx agencies in March 2025 and comments invited, to ensure that the survey results had been correctly interpreted and reflect frontline experience.
- 1.4. This review provides an important snapshot of the state of the free specialist legal advice sector in London and South East. It is unique in that it provides annually comparable information about a diverse range of free legal advice agencies and the political, economic, social, technological, staffing, volunteering, governance, finance, funding, and risk issues they face. Core survey questions have remained consistent for the past four years, supplemented by specific lines of enquiry as COEx agencies negotiated the rough waters of the Covid-19 pandemic, followed by the cost-of-living crisis.
- 1.5. The results will inform the Trust's COEx programme in 2025 and beyond. They will also be of interest to policy and strategy makers, advice networks and advice service funders. LLST is currently undertaking a full review of the COEx programme, and this report along with previous survey findings will help inform this process.
- 1.6. **Caveat:** Obtaining consistent data from advice services is a major challenge. Agencies across the broad and diverse advice sector use different databases, case management systems, taxonomy and definitions. The data we requested for this report, on people advised, channels used, and cases opened under different areas of law has been aggregated to produce overall figures for the 43 agencies that make up the COEx group. But we know that there are differences in how agencies define and record their advice work.
- 1.7. Different people may also have completed the 2024 survey and could have interpreted questions slightly differently. For example, income and funding figures may have been provided for a whole organisation in 2023 and just the advice activity in 2024.
- 1.8. The figures provided are also for a full year, but the actual start and end of each statistical and financial year for agencies does vary.
- 1.9. Every effort has been made to check the accuracy of data provided, by checking all survey returns and their consistency, double-checking analysis and consulting COEx agencies on drafts of this report. However, it is possible that unidentified errors may have been made in survey returns and analysis.
- 1.10. It would therefore be unwise to rely on the figures presented as a completely accurate picture. They do, however, provide a reasonable indication of trends.

2. Headline findings

Increased demand and case complexity

- 2.1. The 43 COEx agencies handled 196,018 enquiries in 2024, compared to 187,028 in 2023, reflecting increased demand.
- 2.2. Welfare Benefits, Housing and Immigration are the main topics advised on, followed by Debt, Employment and General Advice.
- 2.3. The number of cases or matters started fell from 165,685 in 2023 to 148,781 in 2024, largely due to a significant decrease in reported family cases from one agency only. However, Housing cases increased by, on average, 23%. The fall in cases is partly attributed to agencies being unable to recruit to specialist advice posts and therefore having reduced capacity. It is also linked to the complexity and length of cases.
- 2.4. Clients presented more complex, interlinked issues, requiring longer engagement and additional support. Longer engagement relates to delays and lengthy processes in the systems that advice agencies must work with – such as the welfare benefit systems and its mandatory reconsideration and appeals processes. Complexity is also related to the strain on many public services and their increasing digitisation.

Shifts in service delivery channels

- 2.5. Face-to-face services rose to 25% of total delivery, nearing pre-pandemic levels, while telephone services declined slightly to 56%.
- 2.6. Digital and remote service channels (webchat, WhatsApp, video calls) are slowly growing but still account for only 1.2% of client interactions.

Financial pressures from the cost-of-living crisis

- 2.7. The cost-of-living crisis remains a significant driver of demand while worsening financial conditions for clients.
- 2.8. Many clients have "negative budgets," meaning their income is insufficient even after maximisation efforts.
- 2.9. Agency finances remain precarious, with 23% reporting cash flow difficulties and many relying on short-term funding.

Workforce challenges

- 2.10. Staff turnover averaged 15%, with burnout and financial strain cited as key challenges.
- 2.11. Recruitment and retention of skilled staff continue to pose significant risks to agency operations.
- 2.12. Volunteer numbers remained stable, with 64% of agencies maintaining previous levels and 21% reporting increases.

Financial risks and income growth

- 2.13. Total income increased by £8.0m to £49.2m, though the distribution remains uneven and 17% of agencies reported a fall in funding. New funding primarily came from trusts and foundations.
- 2.14. 23% of agencies reported cash flow difficulties, and 10 agencies (23%) held reserves below their policy requirement.
- 2.15. Corporate donations increased slightly, with one agency reporting corporate contributions rising from 12% to 15% of total income.
- 2.16. Local authority funding declined, though it remains a crucial funding source for some agencies.

Risks and challenges

- 2.17. IT infrastructure risks increased significantly, with 67% of agencies citing concerns in 2024, up from 38% in 2023.
- 2.18. Political and legal risks persist, especially for immigration-focused agencies facing policy hostility and operational uncertainty.
- 2.19. Financial sustainability remains the top risk, with many agencies heavily reliant on short-term grants and uncertain funding streams.
- 2.20. Recruitment of experienced legal professionals is becoming increasingly difficult, affecting service capacity and staff retention.

Conclusions

- 2.21. COEx agencies continue to navigate increasing demand, growing financial instability, and recruitment challenges.
- 2.22. More flexible, long-term funding and workforce investment are needed to sustain services.
- 2.23. The legal aid funding model requires urgent reform to ensure financial viability for agencies delivering specialist legal advice.

3. Services

3.1. This section of the report looks at the range of services provided by COEx, and who they have helped. Case studies have been included this year, illustrating the

Subjects advised on

3.2. The 43 respondent COEx agencies provide a wide range of legal advice services. Housing, Welfare Rights/Benefits and Immigration advice is provided by over half of the agencies. Just under 50% provide Asylum and Employment advice and around one third offer Debt/Money Management advice and advice on Family Law matters, public law and general information and signposting services.

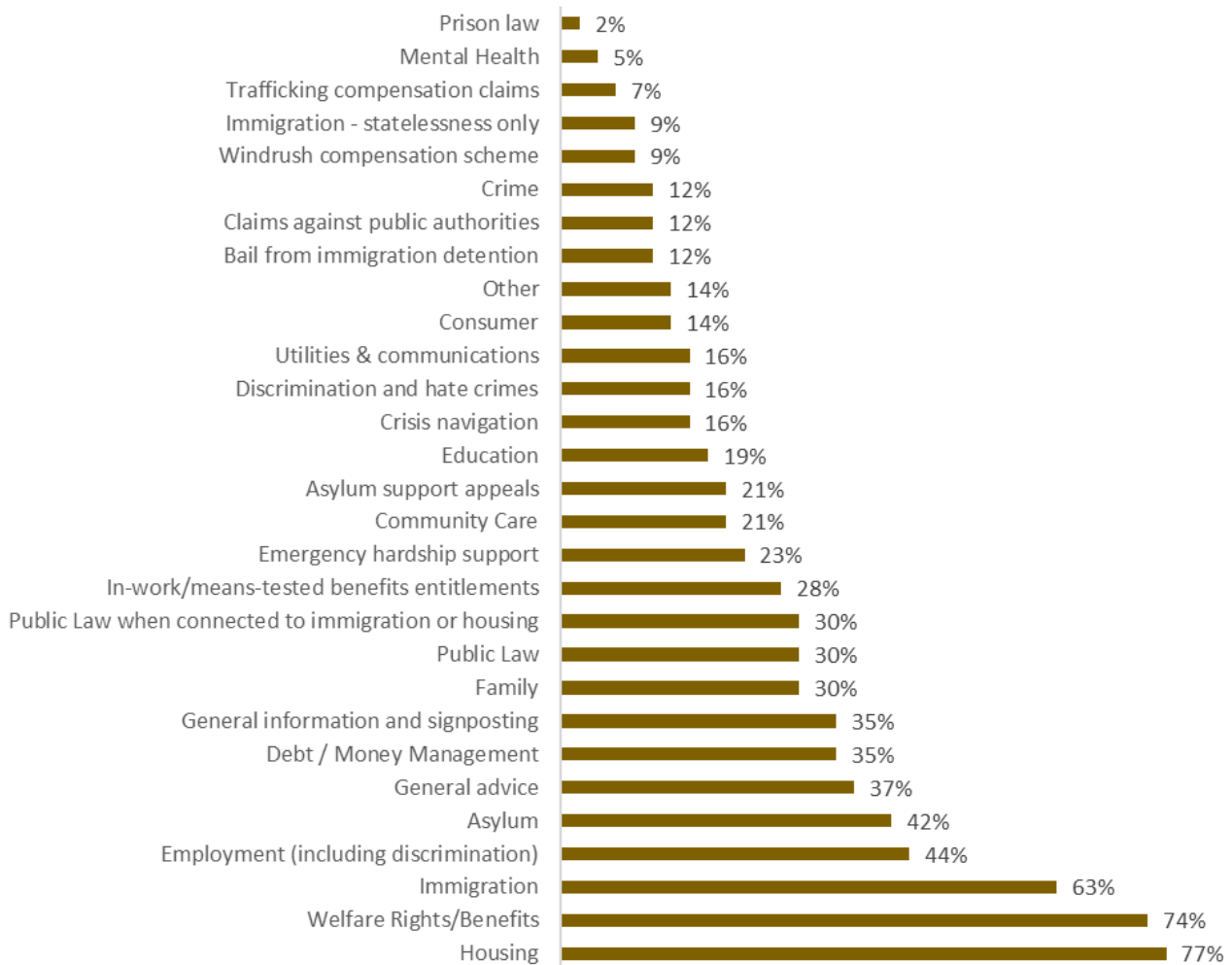
Services provided	Orgs	43
Subjects	%	n.
Housing	77%	33
Welfare Rights/Benefits	74%	32
Immigration	63%	27
Employment (including discrimination)	44%	19
Asylum	42%	18
General advice	37%	16
Debt / Money Management	35%	15
General information and signposting	35%	15
Family	30%	13
Public Law	30%	13
Public Law when connected to immigration or	30%	13
In-work/means-tested benefits entitlements	28%	12
Emergency hardship support	23%	10
Community Care	21%	9
Asylum support appeals	21%	9
Education	19%	8
Crisis navigation	16%	7
Discrimination and hate crimes	16%	7
Utilities & communications	16%	7
Consumer	14%	6
Other	14%	6
Bail from immigration detention	12%	5
Claims against public authorities	12%	5
Crime	12%	5
Windrush compensation scheme	9%	4
Immigration - statelessness only	9%	4
Trafficking compensation claims	7%	3
Mental Health	5%	2
Prison law	2%	1

3.3. The 'other' category includes (in the words of respondents):

- Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (CICA)
- Legal Issues (6 cases)
- Tax (4 cases)
- Transport (6 cases)
- Pro Bono Services (34 cases)

- Private Matters (22 cases)
- Various Miscellaneous Cases (Unspecified)
- Access to Healthcare (98 cases)
- Women's Support Group (79 participants)
- Wills and Estate Planning (85 cases)
- Group Work (6 instances)
- Health and Safeguarding (117 cases)
- Miscellaneous Legal and Civil Issues (17 cases)
- Domestic Abuse Legal Advice (5,856 cases)
- Civil Matters (3,002 cases)
- Pro Bono Personal Injury Cases (16 cases)
- Planning (12 cases)

Services Provided



Numbers helped

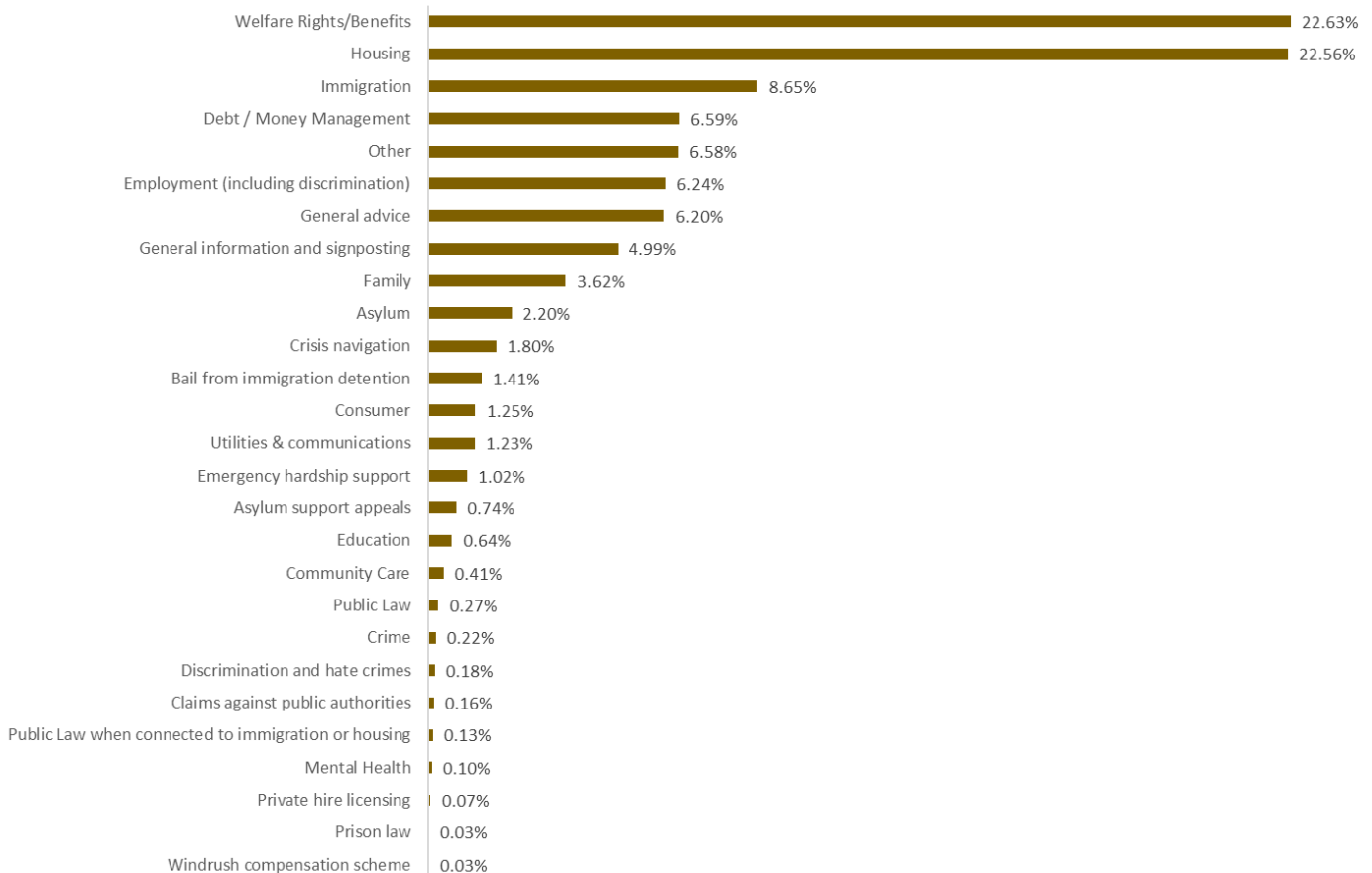
- 3.4. We asked COEx agencies to tell us about the number of people they had helped in the last full year for which they had data. We asked them to break this down by channel.
- 3.5. Based on the channel figures, COEx agencies helped a total of **196,018 enquiries**. This total excludes over 10,300 enquiries dealt with by one agency's on-line tool. This compares to 187,028 enquiries in 2023, 187,101 in 2022, 173,254 in 2021 and 176,006 in 2020. However, the number of COEx agencies responding to the survey increased from 38 in 2020-2022 to 42 in 2023 and 43 in 2024. The average number of enquiries dealt with per COEx agency has remained consistent over all survey years.
- 3.6. The **main topics advised on** by COEx agencies were, Welfare Benefits (including In-Work/means-tested benefits), Housing, and Immigration.

Cases or matter starts numbers by subject	%	n.
Immigration - statelessness only	0.02%	33
Trafficking compensation claims	0.02%	37
Windrush compensation scheme	0.03%	38
Prison law	0.03%	45
Private hire licensing	0.07%	105
Mental Health	0.10%	156
Public Law when connected to immigration or ho	0.13%	194
Claims against public authorities	0.16%	238
Discrimination and hate crimes	0.18%	268
Crime	0.22%	320
Public Law	0.27%	407
Community Care	0.41%	607
Education	0.64%	948
Asylum support appeals	0.74%	1,106
Emergency hardship support	1.02%	1,524
Utilities & communications	1.23%	1,836
Consumer	1.25%	1,857
Bail from immigration detention	1.41%	2,096
Crisis navigation	1.80%	2,671
Asylum	2.20%	3,275
Family	3.62%	5,391
General information and signposting	4.99%	7,420
General advice	6.20%	9,228
Employment (including discrimination)	6.24%	9,278
Other	6.58%	9,785
Debt / Money Management	6.59%	9,807
Immigration	8.65%	12,872
Housing	22.56%	33,563
Welfare Rights/Benefits	22.63%	33,676
		<u>148,781</u>

- 3.7. The overall number of cases or matters started fell from 156,527 in 2022 and 165,685 in 2023 to 148,781 despite there being one more respondent COEx agency.

- 3.8. The fall in case numbers was largely accounted for by a big fall in the number of family cases from 29,160 in 2023 to 5,391 in 2024. This is due to one agency reporting 31,709 family cases in 2022, 24,756 in 2023 and 988 in 2024. We have established that the 2022 and 2023 figures included matters dealt with via the agency's online system. 2024 figures relate solely to pro bono family advice at court and under a Legal Aid contract.
- 3.9. There were substantial increases in Housing, 'Other' cases, Asylum and Crisis Navigation. Housing cases rose by 23%.
- 3.10. The fall in cases is partly attributed to agencies being unable to recruit to specialist advice posts and therefore having reduced capacity. It is also linked to the complexity and length of cases. Some agencies reported that they tend to cherry-pick longer and more complex certificated legal aid cases over Legal Help cases as the former attract higher fees.
- 3.11. Clients presented more complex, interlinked issues, requiring longer engagement and additional support. Longer engagement relates to delays and lengthy processes in the systems that advice agencies must work with – such as the welfare benefit systems and its mandatory reconsideration and appeals processes. Complexity is also related to the strain on many public services and their increasing digitisation.
- 3.12. Cases involving Emergency Hardship were down 65%, and General Advice was down 38%. Public Law also fell by 64% and Trafficking compensation fell by 72%.

Percentages of cases by subject



3.13. As noted in previous reports, the number of subject cases/matters will differ from individual client numbers. Most clients will present several often-linked issues or matters, which are recorded as separate cases or issues. However, the COEx cohort includes a variety of advice agencies working in different ways, scales, and settings. Their recording practices vary, as do their definitions of a 'case'. **Some caution should therefore be observed in using the figures reported above for both 'cases' under subjects and individuals under channels.**

Delivery channels

3.14. Delivery channels showed a significant shift in 2023, and this was continued in 2024, with the percentage of people helped by telephone falling, face-to-face delivery increasing and use of other channels more than doubling. In 2024, the percentage of clients helped face-to-face rising from 16% to 25% and telephone falling from 59% to 56% - almost back to 2020 survey levels, which incorporated pre-pandemic service delivery periods.

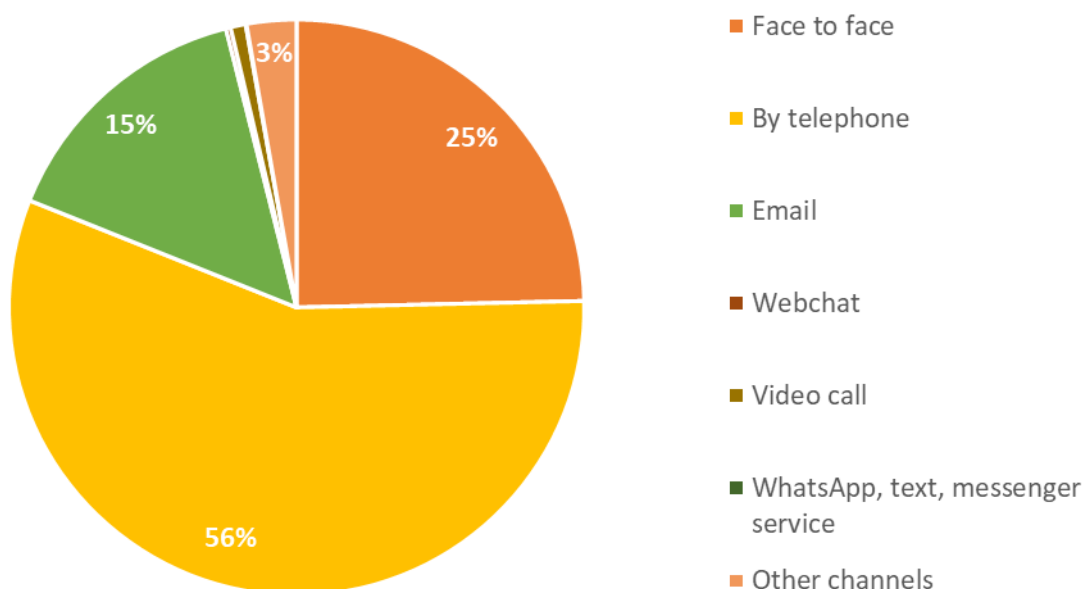
3.15. Webchat, video calls, WhatsApp, text, and messenger service delivery channels are growing very slowly but still account for just 1.2% of clients helped. However, it's possible that some delivery by these methods is subsumed within the 'other' channel figures provided by respondents. Other channels include (in the words of respondents):

- **Events and fairs** offering one-off advice and signposting.
- **Written communication:** Advice letters sent via email or post.
- **Telephone services:** Providing support to individuals and professionals assisting survivors of trafficking. Second-tier advice through telephone on case-related issues.
- **Digital communication:** WhatsApp: Popular among existing clients but less so for new ones. Webforms: Used for client inquiries. Social Media.
- **Face-to-face and remote meetings:** Combination Models: Includes face-to-face, phone, and remote interactions (e.g., Teams and Zoom are counted as face-to-face interactions). Example: 263 interactions reported through mixed delivery modes.
- **Workshops and training:** Immigration legal workshops and professional training sessions offered regularly.
- **Outreach services:** Outreach immigration legal sessions helping clients understand their rights and options.
- **Casework and miscellaneous channels:** Casework by letter (1,070 cases reported) and direct legal support (88 cases).

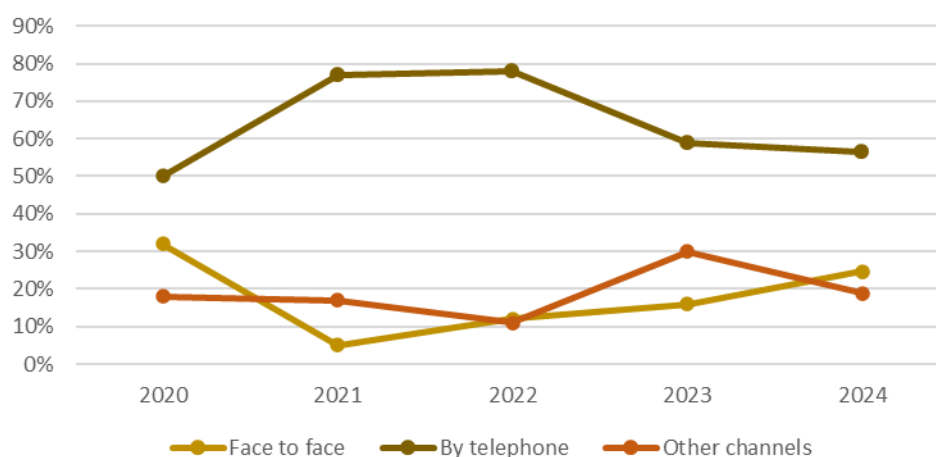
3.16. We have noted in previous reviews how the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions altered delivery channels. In the first survey we reported on, in 2020, 50% of individuals were helped by telephone and 31% face-to-face. Pandemic lockdown meant this changed to 77% of clients by telephone and just 5% face-to-face in 2021. Telephone remained the primary delivery channel in 2022, but face-to-face delivery rose as restrictions were eased and fully lifted. Despite many agencies not returning fully to levels of in-person service they provided pre-pandemic, face-to-face delivery rose in 2023 and in 2024 it came close to pre-pandemic levels.

Channels	%	n.
Face to face	25%	43781
By telephone	56%	100248
Email	15%	26621
Webchat	0.3%	478
Video call	0.8%	1504
WhatsApp, text, messenger service	0.0%	88
Other channels	3%	4959
Channel not recorded	9%	18339
Total		196018

Channels by which clients were assisted



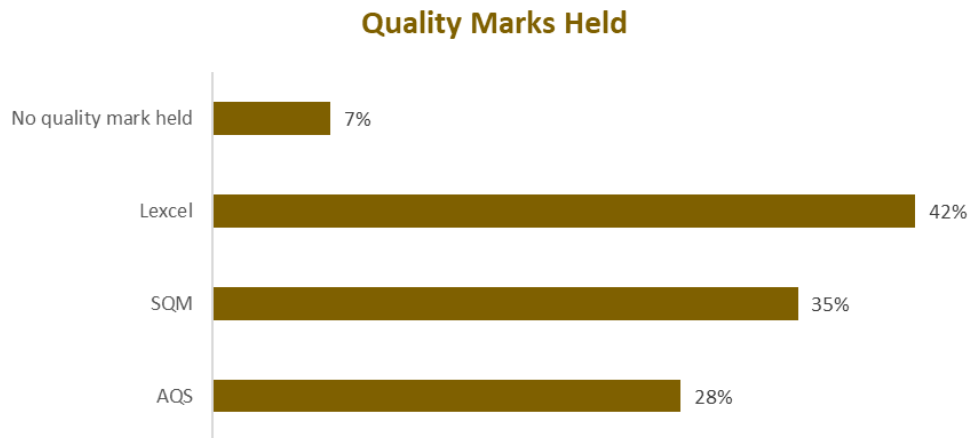
Channel Trends 2020 - 2024



3.17. Three respondent COEx agencies do not record the channel of advice at all, and others reported the numbers of clients where a channel was not recorded, so for 9% of people advised we have no channel information. We excluded 'channel not recorded' figures when calculating percentages of clients by channel.

Quality standards

3.18. Lexcel remains the most popular quality mark for COEx members. All but three respondent COEx agencies hold at least one quality mark.



3.19. Just one agency reported that a serious concern had been raised at their last quality audit. This, they said, had been resolved.

Case studies

3.20. The case studies submitted by COEx agencies highlight recurring themes and critical issues faced by their clients. These include:

- **Housing and homelessness:** Clients often face eviction, unsuitable housing, or homelessness due to council errors, lack of understanding, or systemic failures. Examples include disputes over succession rights, unsuitable accommodations, and discriminatory council decisions.
- **Immigration and residency:** Vulnerable individuals frequently face challenges with visa statuses, EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) applications, and deportation risks, exacerbated by gaps in legal aid and systemic barriers.
- **Social welfare and benefits:** Issues around benefit caps, disability assessments, and arrears, causing financial hardship. Legal advocacy often secures backdated benefits, reducing debt and alleviating poverty.
- **Domestic abuse and safety:** Many cases involve survivors of domestic abuse seeking safety and legal recourse to protect their rights and their children's welfare.
- **Mental health and vulnerability:** Many COEx agency clients are severely impacted by mental health challenges or physical disabilities, which councils and statutory agencies fail to adequately account for, often requiring significant legal intervention.
- **Discrimination and equality:** Cases highlight racial, disability, and gender discrimination in housing, employment, and social services.
- **Complex family dynamics:** Families often face intersecting issues like homelessness, domestic abuse, and immigration barriers, compounded by childcare responsibilities.

“Without legal help, I wouldn’t have had the courage or resources to fight for my rights.”

Selected Case Studies

- 3.21. **Case Study 1: Housing and disability** A severely disabled man was placed in unsuitable permanent accommodation where he couldn’t use basic facilities due to mobility impairments. Despite repeated emails for a review, the council ignored him until legal representation intervened. Advocacy led to a formal review decision, and he was relocated to suitable housing. The client expressed profound gratitude for regaining dignity and stability.
- 3.22. **Case Study 2: Immigration and domestic abuse** A woman subjected to domestic abuse and exploitation was homeless and undocumented. Working with Refuge and legal advisers, she successfully applied for the EUSS and gained settled status. Safeguarding measures ensured she also received accommodation and support under the Care Act, transforming her circumstances.
- 3.23. **Case Study 3: Social welfare and benefits** A single parent of six children accrued rent arrears due to a benefit cap, risking eviction. Advocacy helped her secure Carer’s Allowance, lifting the cap, reinstating full housing benefit, and reducing arrears. The council agreed to a suspended possession order, keeping the family housed.
- 3.24. **Case Study 4: Mental health and advocacy** An elderly pensioner with severe mental health issues struggled to secure Personal Independence Payment (PIP). COEx support emphasised her condition and lack of medical evidence, leading to a successful tribunal appeal, backdated payments, and long-term financial stability.
- 3.25. **Case Study 5: Equality and Employment** A nurse facing racial discrimination in her workplace approached a COEx. Advocacy resolved her dispute, dropped spurious allegations against her, and highlighted systemic racism within the care home, offering her closure and justice.

“The council ignored me until I had a solicitor involved. I finally feel heard and respected.”

“Thanks to them, my life has turned around. I’m working again and no longer live in fear of being deported.”

4. The Strategic Environment, Challenges and Risks

Political, economic, sociological and technological factors and issues

- 4.1. In previous surveys we asked specific questions about the impact of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. In the 2024 survey, with those matters being ‘the new normal’ we asked more general questions about the political, economic, sociological and technological factors affecting COEx clients, services, staff, volunteers, the organisation and its finances and operations. We also asked COEx agencies what action they would like to see taken to address these issues.
- 4.2. **Overall themes:** The responses we received highlight a confluence of political, economic, social, and technological challenges affecting COEx agencies, their clients, and operations. Notable themes include the on-going cost-of-living crisis, housing insecurity, legal aid underfunding, and political hostility, particularly towards migrants. Many responses also stress the difficulty of recruiting and retaining staff due to low wages and high stress levels, exacerbated by rising operational costs and funding competition. Digital exclusion remains a critical issue, as more services move online without adequate client access or skills. Ability to keep up with and realise the benefits of new technology, including AI, also presents a challenge to COEx. Agencies also find the lack of availability and coherence of training provision and offers for staff a big issue.

“The cost-of-living crisis has left clients unable to afford food and shelter, pushing more families into homelessness.”

PEST factors affecting clients and demand

- 4.3. **Political:** Ongoing hostile government policies, such as the Illegal Migration Act, and local council decisions created barriers for migrants, asylum seekers, and low-income residents. Far-right activity and anti-migrant rhetoric have exacerbated fears.
- 4.4. **Economic:** Inflation, high rents, and insufficient benefits leave clients unable to meet basic needs. Delayed asylum decisions and benefit processing further entrench poverty.
- 4.5. **Social:** Rising mental health issues among clients due to systemic inequalities and economic pressures. Vulnerable groups face increased marginalisation and limited access to support services.
- 4.6. **Technological:** Clients struggle with digital exclusion, including lack of access to devices, data, or skills, especially for accessing vital services like benefits and immigration applications.

“Digital exclusion remains a massive barrier; clients can’t access essential services because they lack internet or devices.”

PEST factors affecting staff and volunteers

- 4.7. **Political:** Political hostility has created safety concerns, with far-right threats targeting staff. Legislative uncertainty adds pressure.
- 4.8. **Economic:** Rising living costs disproportionately affect junior staff and volunteers, leading to turnover. Limited resources prevent competitive salaries or additional benefits.
- 4.9. **Social:** Staff report burnout and mental health challenges from high caseloads and client crises. Volunteers face barriers to participation due to financial and time constraints.
- 4.10. **Technological:** Staff adoption of new digital tools varies, with inadequate training leading to inefficiencies and stress for some workers.
- 4.11. A cross-cutting theme is **access to training** for staff. Some COEx agencies commented on the lack of coherency and coordination of current staff training offers across the advice sector.

“Our staff face relentless stress, with many leaving for better-paid jobs or because they simply can’t cope anymore.”

PEST factors affecting organisations

- 4.12. **Political:** Hostile rhetoric and restrictive policies increase demand while complicating service delivery. Local council funding cuts exacerbate resource constraints.
- 4.13. **Economic:** Competition for funding is intense, with many funders closing or shifting priorities. Rising costs strain budgets, with legal aid often failing to cover service costs.
- 4.14. **Social:** Growing client needs stretch organisational capacity; particularly as complex cases require more time and expertise. Staff retention challenges persist due to underfunding.
- 4.15. **Technological:** Organisations struggle to invest in IT infrastructure, limiting their ability to modernise operations or meet client needs effectively. Ability to manage the risks and opportunities offered by AI and other new technology is a challenge for many COEx.

“Government rhetoric has fostered fear among vulnerable groups, while policies like the Illegal Migration Act worsen their insecurity.”

Actions called for

- 4.16. **Legal Aid reform:** Substantially increase legal aid rates and simplify its administration to ensure agencies can cover service costs and retain skilled staff. **Who:** Ministry of Justice (MoJ), Government.
- 4.17. **Housing solutions:** Implement rent controls, invest in building more affordable housing, and regulate the private rental market to protect tenants. **Who:** Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, local councils.

- 4.18. **Digital inclusion:** Fund initiatives to provide devices, internet access, and digital literacy training for vulnerable groups. **Who:** Central Government, local councils, technology corporations, charitable funders.
- 4.19. **Flexible and long-term funding:** Shift to long-term, unrestricted funding models that support organisational sustainability and allow for strategic planning. **Who:** Trusts, foundations, major grant-making bodies.
- 4.20. **Inclusivity and anti-discrimination policies:** Launch national campaigns promoting inclusivity, combatting far-right rhetoric, and supporting vulnerable communities. **Who:** Government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), advocacy groups.
- 4.21. **Workforce support:** Provide mental health support, fair wages, and professional development opportunities to retain staff and volunteers. **Who:** Employers, funders, sector leadership bodies.
- 4.22. **Improved Service Coordination:** Foster collaboration between local councils, statutory bodies, and voluntary organisations to streamline support for clients. **Who:** Local authorities, sector networks and umbrella bodies, Government.

“We need funders to move away from short-term grants and provide the flexibility to cover core operational costs.”

Strategic objectives and achievements

“With your support, we have delivered high-quality legal representation to 251 clients, up from 130 clients in 2022. Over 50% were survivors of trafficking, torture, and gender-based violence.”

- 4.23. We asked COEx agencies to tell us about their strategic objectives and the extent to which they have been achieved. Clearly objectives will be specific to the agency concerned, but some general observations are as follows.
- 4.24. **Expansion of services:** Many agencies reported successfully broadening their reach, often through new service launches. For example, several organisations secured legal aid contracts for additional practice areas such as public law and community care.
- 4.25. **Increased casework impact:** Agencies achieved measurable outcomes, including successful representation in tribunals and influencing policy changes, such as reversing Home Office decisions and improving asylum support rates.
- 4.26. **Collaboration and training initiatives:** Organisations engaged in sector-wide partnerships, providing training and supervision for immigration advisers in under-served regions.
- 4.27. **Sustainability and financial achievements:** Some agencies maintained financial stability through successful fundraising efforts and developing mixed funding streams.

“Our objectives to provide free legal representation and advice were exceeded. We represented 286 people appealing to the Asylum Support Tribunal, with 73% entitled to support as a result of our work.”

Emerging priorities

- 4.28. **Data-driven decision-making:** Agencies are focusing on improving data collection and analysis to strengthen impact measurement and inform funding applications.
- 4.29. **Digital transformation:** Efforts to modernise through digital tools and paperless systems remain a priority but face practical barriers, including funding and staff capacity.
- 4.30. **Equity and inclusion:** Organisations are integrating equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) principles into their strategic plans, aiming to reflect the diverse communities they serve.

“Collaboration with other organisations has allowed us to amplify our impact, as seen in our successful joint advocacy campaigns.”

Risks

- 4.31. We asked COEx agencies to tell us about the risks they face and about new risks that have emerged/developed during the past year. The table below shows the risks mentioned by respondent agencies. All face financial and funding risks and most face staffing, demand and political/policy risks.
- 4.32. Risks that have increased across the COEx cohort in 2024 are:
- **IT infrastructure** - up from 38%/16 agencies in 2023 to 67%/29 agencies in 2024, possibly reflecting the pace of digital change with the growth of AI.
 - **Premises** – up from 33%/14 agencies in 2023 to 67%/29 agencies in 2024. One agency commented on the rising cost of maintaining premises.
 - **Governance and compliance** – up from 21%/9 agencies in 2023 to 33%/14 agencies in 2024. One agency commented on the complexity of the Citizens Advice compliance environment exceeding the requirements of the Specialist Quality Mark. Another referred to the risk of recruiting trustees – especially a treasurer.
- 4.33. Staff wellbeing and burn out is now the second highest risk, having risen from 29% in the 2024 survey. One agency commented on safeguarding risks for clients and staff. Recruitment and retention remain big risks – see more on workforce challenges in a separate section below.

“Recruitment has been a nightmare; we simply can’t compete with private sector salaries.”

“Staff are burning out faster than we can replace them. This isn’t sustainable.”

- 4.34. It will be interesting to see how the risk posed by political reform, hostility and policy change is affected by the change of Government in 2025 returns.

4.35. Covid-19 infections have now slipped off COEx agency risk registers.

Risk	%	n.
Financial and funding: loss/reduction in funding/contracts, cashflow	100%	43
Staff wellbeing and burnout	93%	40
Loss of (key) staff and volunteers, difficulty recruiting and retaining	91%	39
Inability to meet demand - expected increases	79%	34
Political reform, hostility and policy change	67%	29
IT infrastructure and keeping up with pace of digital change	67%	29
Premises: unsuitability, loss of	37%	16
Governance and compliance	33%	14
Not meeting funding/contract targets/requirements	21%	9
Reduction in outreach and reach to most vulnerable people	21%	9
Remote working: loss of learning, reduced quality	16%	7
Change of CMS	9%	4
New risks (arising during past year)	%	n.
Loss of (key) staff and volunteers, difficulty recruiting and retaining	21%	9
Financial and funding: loss/reduction in funding/contracts, cashflow	19%	8
IT infrastructure and keeping up with pace of digital change	16%	7
Staff wellbeing and burnout	14%	6
Premises: unsuitability, loss of	12%	5
Political reform, hostility and policy change	5%	2
Remote working: loss of learning, reduced quality	2%	1
Not meeting funding/contract targets/requirements	2%	1
Reduction in outreach and reach to most vulnerable people	2%	1

"Our cash reserves are dangerously low, and any funding gap could push us into insolvency."

"Recruitment of more senior and experienced solicitors is always a challenge, partly due to the salaries we are able to offer but also due to a reducing pool of solicitors willing to work on legal aid."

Centres of Excellence Annual Review 2024

Risks in 2024



New risks arising during 2024



Risks in the year ahead

4.36. We asked agencies to state their top five risks in the year ahead. The most identified risks, looking ahead were.

- **Financial sustainability:**
 - Cashflow issues and reliance on short-term grant funding.
 - Inadequate legal aid rates that fail to cover operational costs.
 - Risk of insolvency for agencies with limited reserves.
- **Staff recruitment and retention:**
 - Challenges in hiring and retaining skilled staff.
 - Burnout among staff due to high workloads and low wages.
 - Increasing difficulties attracting volunteers.
- **Increased demand and capacity constraints:**
 - Rising demand for services due to cost-of-living pressures.
 - Limited resources preventing agencies from meeting client needs.
- **Wellbeing and burnout:**
 - Significant risks to staff and volunteer mental health.
 - Stressful working conditions leading to high turnover.
- **Digital infrastructure:**
 - Outdated IT systems hindering efficiency.
 - Lack of resources to adopt new technologies or maintain cybersecurity.

“Our IT systems are outdated, but we lack the funds to upgrade them.”

4.37. Outliers or unique risks faced by one or two agencies were:

- **Political hostility:**
 - Agencies targeted by far-right groups, creating safety concerns for staff and clients.
 - Legislative changes reducing protections for vulnerable groups.
- **Premises issues:**
 - End-of-lease uncertainties.
 - Unsuitable office spaces and costs associated with relocation.
- **Specialist risks:**
 - Immigration policy reforms impacting asylum seekers.
 - Increasing complexity of legal cases, such as trafficking and modern slavery.

“We are overwhelmed by demand and cannot keep up with the volume of cases.”

Workforce challenges

- 4.38. In the 2024 survey we introduced a new question, specifically about workforce issues, knowing that many COEx agencies are finding recruitment, retention and development are big challenges – as the risk section above illustrates. Some COEx agencies are involved in the [Advice Workforce Development Fund Programme](#) and are exploring solutions.
- 4.39. We asked agencies to describe the workforce challenges they face, if any, and describe any initiatives they have taken to address them.
- 4.40. Key themes to emerge from the survey responses and discussions with CEOx agencies were:
- **Recruitment challenges:**
 - Difficulty hiring experienced solicitors and caseworkers, particularly in specialised areas like asylum support, housing, and legal aid.
 - Challenges in offering competitive salaries compared to the private sector or local authorities.
 - A shrinking pool of professionals willing to work in the legal aid sector.
 - Ageing workforce and difficulties in replacing experienced staff.
 - **Retention and workforce development:**
 - High turnover among junior and senior staff, with many leaving for higher salaries or less stressful roles.
 - Limited career progression opportunities, causing staff to move on after training.
 - Lack of coherency and coordination of training offers for the advice sector.
 - Limited resources for external training and digital skills development.
 - A common strategy is the "grow your own" approach, where organisations train existing staff, volunteers, or apprentices to fill gaps.
 - **Workforce wellbeing:**
 - High demand for services causing strain on existing staff.
 - Burnout and vicarious trauma among staff due to demanding caseloads and complex client needs.
 - Measures like clinical supervision, wellbeing programmes, and flexible working conditions to mitigate stress and improve morale.
 - **Funding and resource constraints:**
 - Insufficient funding to increase staff pay or hire additional workers.
 - Impact of financial restraints on meeting service demand and maintaining staff levels.
 - **Demand vs. capacity:**
 - Increased demand for advice services, particularly in housing and welfare, leading to unmet client needs.
 - Rising complexity of cases, with clients often presenting severe challenges such as safeguarding concerns.
 - **Diversity and inclusion:**
 - Struggles to recruit staff with lived experience of issues like asylum support.
 - Efforts to adapt recruitment processes and provide mentoring to increase workforce diversity.

"We have had to use recruiters to try and find candidates, after multiple unsuccessful rounds."

"Continued financial restraints and reduced legal aid have made it difficult to recruit suitably qualified staff."

"We are fundraising to pay for an additional worker to meet the existing demands on our service, but this has not been successful."

"Clients are increasingly taking out their frustrations on staff and volunteers because there are often no easy solutions for their problems."

"Staff are unhappy about pay not keeping up with inflation. There is little that we can do about pay because we have to stay within budget. We have offered a salary sacrifice scheme. Staff are also under too much pressure due to increasing workload. We have given staff access to employee assistance line."

4.41. Initiatives being taken to address workforce challenges include:

- **"Grow your own" strategies, including:**
 - Training volunteers and junior staff to transition into qualified roles.
 - Partnering with educational institutions to create talent pipelines.
 - **Wellbeing support:**
 - Group clinical supervision, reflective practices, and wellbeing hubs.
 - Innovative initiatives like pre-work yoga and "wellbeing hours."
 - **Recruitment adaptations:**
 - Revising job adverts, using professional networks, and employing recruiters.
 - Introducing flexible working arrangements and benchmarking pay scales.
 - **Training and Development:**
 - Offering in-house training and structured induction programmes for new staff.
 - Supporting staff in gaining professional qualifications and managerial skills.
-

"We have adopted a 'grow your own' approach to developing casework staff, recruiting staff to administrative positions and supporting them to develop and train as caseworkers."

"We partnered with Queen Mary University to offer work experience placements, which has fostered a pipeline of talent for the future."

"We provide monthly group clinical supervision for all client-facing staff; close the office for two weeks at Christmas; and hold regular social events to support wellbeing."

"A supervisor who is also a trained yoga teacher has introduced pre-work yoga sessions to promote wellbeing."

Problems and successes

4.42. In the 2024 survey we invited COEx agencies to tell us more about the challenges and problems they have faced and successes they have had. Respondents' comments are consistent with the risks and workforce challenges identified above.

Notable problems

- 4.43. **Financial strain:** Respondents noted continued issues with legal aid underfunding, delayed payments, and difficulty maintaining financial viability. Reliance on short-term funding streams exacerbated challenges.
- 4.44. **Recruitment and retention challenges:** Many agencies struggled to recruit and retain skilled staff due to low salaries, burnout, and workload pressures.
- 4.45. **Increased demand:** Rising client needs outpaced resources, particularly in areas such as housing, immigration, and welfare benefits.
- 4.46. **External pressures:** Agencies highlighted the impact of hostile political and social environments, such as far-right protests and rapid legislative changes.
- 4.47. **Core funding gaps:** Many funders remain reluctant to support core or administrative costs, creating significant barriers to operational stability.

"The past year has gone reasonably well despite the environment we are working in. Our biggest challenges are around the health of the legal aid sector and the hostility towards our clients."

"Rising demand and burnout among staff are our greatest challenges. Yet, we've managed to deliver exceptional services, with 74.4% successful or partially successful case outcomes."

Notable successes

- 4.48. **Positive outcomes for clients:** Agencies shared numerous casework successes, including high rates of successful legal outcomes and impactful systemic challenges. Examples included challenging Home Office policies and securing rights for vulnerable clients.
- 4.49. **Strategic growth:** Several agencies expanded their services, obtained multi-year grants, and developed partnerships with other organisations.
- 4.50. **Innovation in service delivery:** Some agencies implemented new digital tools, opened new service hubs, and piloted innovative approaches to address gaps in access to justice.
- 4.51. **Sector-wide collaboration:** Agencies emphasised the benefits of partnerships and collaborative initiatives, which enhanced service reach and amplified advocacy efforts.
- 4.52. **Celebrations of milestones:** Many agencies celebrated achievements, such as anniversaries, awards, and strategic shifts informed by lived experience.

“We successfully challenged the Home Office’s refusal to allow a refugee client to reunite with their family. This was a landmark case, saving lives and upholding human rights.”

“Far-right riots targeting asylum centres created fear and distress. Despite this, we opened the UK’s first major trauma centre for survivors of trafficking and torture.”

“Collaboration with other organisations has allowed us to amplify our impact, reaching more people with the support they need.”

Emerging issues and opportunities

- 4.53. **Hostile environment impact:** Continued hostility towards migrants and asylum seekers was cited as a growing concern, both for client welfare and staff wellbeing.
- 4.54. **Technological adaptation:** While some agencies made strides in integrating technology, others noted difficulties in keeping pace with digital transformation.
- 4.55. **Sustainability focus:** Agencies identified opportunities to secure long-term stability through strategic planning, diversifying income streams, and focusing on staff wellbeing.
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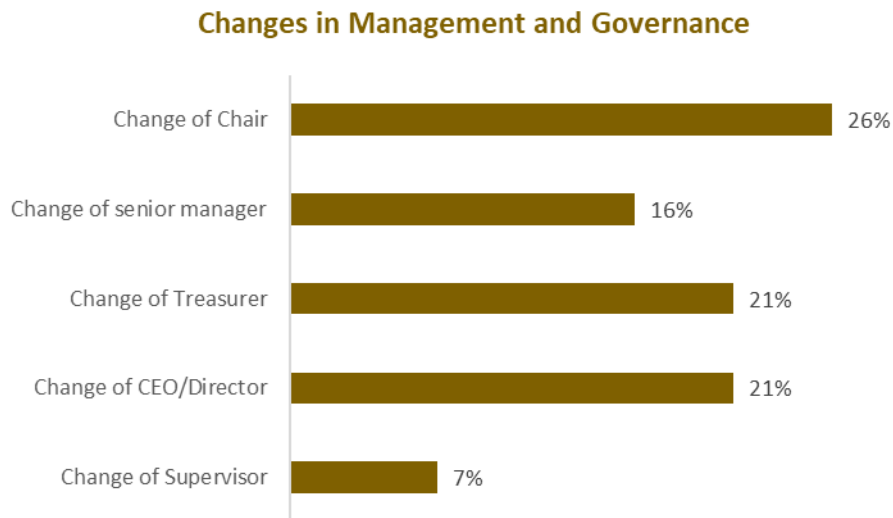
“Multi-year funding has given us the clarity and stability to plan strategically and serve our clients better.”

“Our new five-year strategy is co-produced with staff, trustees, and experts by experience, ensuring we stay focused on the real needs of our communities.”

5. Leadership, staffing and governance

Changes in management and governance

- 5.1. Respondents were asked about any significant management or governance changes in the last 12 months. 65% of respondents (28 agencies) had seen changes. This was consistent with 2022 and 2023 findings.
- 5.2. The following changes were reported:



- 5.3. 2024 was another year of change at senior leadership level for some COEx. Nine (21%) of COEx agencies had a change of CEO and eleven (26%) had a change of Chair. Seven (16%) changed senior managers. Just over one third, or fifteen respondent agencies had no leadership changes.
- 5.4. 72% of COEx agencies had some churn on their trustee boards. Most (87%) had fully or partially replaced trustees who had left.

Staff and volunteer roles and levels

- 5.5. We amended the survey in 2024 to separate paid and volunteer roles and differentiate between fully trained solicitors, caseworkers and advisers and trainees.

Paid staff

- 5.6. COEx agencies employed an average of 19.3 FTE paid staff in the following roles:

Paid Staff	Total number	Average	Range
Fully Trained Solicitors / Caseworkers / Advisors	483.4	11.2	2 to 40.5
Trainee Advisers	21.5	0.5	0 to 3
Apprentice Solicitors	33.6	0.8	0 to 6
Other frontline / service delivery staff	77.5	1.8	0 to 12
Admin and support Staff	87.5	2.0	0.5 to 6.6
Management staff	98.4	2.3	0.25 to 8
Other (please specify)	28.0	0.7	0 to 8
	829.8	19.3	3 to 54

Other' types of paid staff roles listed by agencies:

Policy Manager, Activism & Engagement Manager, Fundraising Manager (3 roles)
 Policy & Comms (2 roles)
 Trainee Solicitor (1 role)
 Paralegal (1 role), Policy Advisor (0.8 FTE)
 Fundraising, Communications, and Project Management (2.8 roles)
 Fundraising Staff (1.6 FTE)
 Business Development Manager (1 FTE)
 Policy & Campaigns Team (4 roles) and Operations Team including Fundraising (4

Volunteers

5.7. 40 (93%) of respondent COEx agencies engage volunteers. The Covid-19 related reduction in volunteer numbers, which had been experienced by 62% of respondents in 2020 and 53% in 2021 slowed in 2022 to 21% reporting a decrease, dropped to 12% in 2023 and rose slightly to 14% in 2024. 21% of agencies increased volunteer numbers in 2024 and 65% maintained volunteer levels at previous levels.

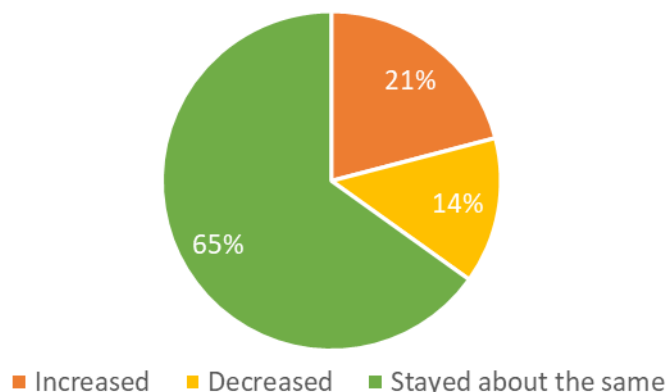
5.8. Volunteer roles were:

Volunteers	Total number	Average	Range
Fully Trained Solicitors / Caseworkers / Advisors	59.9	1.4	0 to 22
Trainee Advisers	85.2	2.0	0 to 49
Other frontline / service delivery staff	27.4	0.6	0 to 70
Admin and support Staff	27.4	0.6	0 to 15
Management staff	0.2	0.0	0 to 0.2
Other (please specify)	117.9	2.7	0 to 68
	318.1	7.4	3 to 54

Other' types of voluntary roles listed by agencies:

2 (Trustees), 0.4 (Research & Campaigns)
 IT Specialist and HR Volunteer
 School Placement
 9.5 FTE (not recorded by role)
 Pro bono work, not quantified in FTE
 21 estimated, 400 pro bono volunteers
 500+ commercial lawyers trained in pro bono partnerships

Has the number of volunteers you engage increased or decreased over the past year?



Staff turnover

- 5.9. Staff turnover averaged 15% across the respondent cohort (a slight fall from 20% in 2022 and 18% in 2023). Five respondent agencies reported no staff departures during the year. The range was 1-37%.
- 5.10. Staff recruitment and retention remains a big issue within the advice sector. We have looked at this earlier in this report (see 4.37).
- 5.11. The most common reason for turnover, as previous surveys have found, was people simply finding new jobs. There were fewer staff losses due to redundancy in 2024 – four compared to eight in 2023.

Reasons for staff leaving	%	n.
Redundancy (loss of funding)	10%	4
Redundancy (restructuring)	0%	0
End of fixed-term contract	18%	7
Found new job	74%	29
Retirement	18%	7
Dismissal other than redundancy	23%	9
Ill-health/passed-away	8%	3

Governance

- 5.12. 33 respondent COEx agencies (79%) have formal role profiles for Trustees. Role profiles mainly relate to Chair, Vice-Chair, Treasurer and Company Secretary roles.
- 5.13. 16 (38%) of respondents had carried out a Board skills audit in 2023. Others had completed an audit in 2022 and were planning to conduct one in 2024.

Performance monitoring

- 5.14. 33 respondent agencies (79%) monitor staff performance against targets. Performance is monitored via billing and casework targets, time recording, calls answered data, supervision, and appraisal. Three agencies who do not monitor staff performance against targets felt there was no need to do this. No other reasons were given.

6. Finance and funding

Reserves, cashflows, debts, surpluses and deficits

- 6.1. COEx agencies were asked to set out their **reserves** policies and state how much money they are currently holding in unrestricted reserves. Answers are useful when working with individual agencies but have not been analysed in detail or aggregated for this report. However, it is noted that ten respondent agencies (23%) of the cohort have free reserves levels below their policy requirement at the time of the survey. This is an increase on the seven agencies that had insufficient reserves in 2023. They were all taking action to build up reserves, but several acknowledged the difficult financial environment.

"It is difficult as grants do not provide money for reserves. But we try to use money generated through legal aid and costs to do so."

- 6.2. Reserves held ranged from £40,745 to £2.49m, with an average of £574,700 per agency.
- 6.3. All but two (95%) of COEx agencies use **cashflow** projections to manage their finances. This year, four agencies were having cashflow problems, compared to three in the previous year. Cashflow difficulties are, as in all previous surveys, associated with agencies with legal aid contracts in particular. Many COEx agencies are having to pay close attention to cash levels.

"Legal Aid income was down over 70% April - Sept this year, and that has created a short-term cashflow issue."

"It's always on a knife edge. We keep a close eye on it and ensure that invoicing is regular and timely."

"We are predicting that we will run out of cash in the early summer next year unless further funds can be found."

- 6.4. Eleven COEx agencies said they owed money other than normal trading debts. This is an increase from six in 2023. Debts mentioned by respondents include:

- Debts to HMRC
- Legal Aid Agency (LAA) Payments: Recoupments of payments made on account:
- Loans
- Mortgage
- Pension deficits
- Central Service Recharges
- Rent and Lease Agreements
- Other Potential Liabilities: VAT and historical debts.

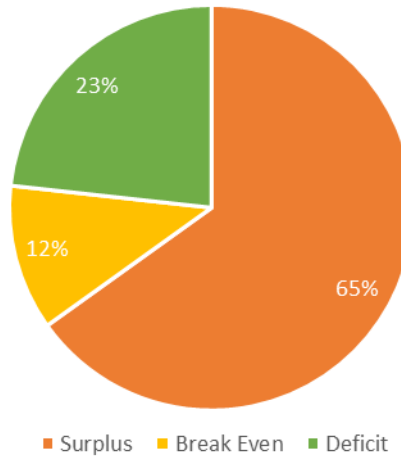
"We are expecting the LAA to recoup some payments made on account in the next financial year."

"We had £6k clawed back by Legal Aid due to poor eligibility evidence for CW1s."

Financial positions

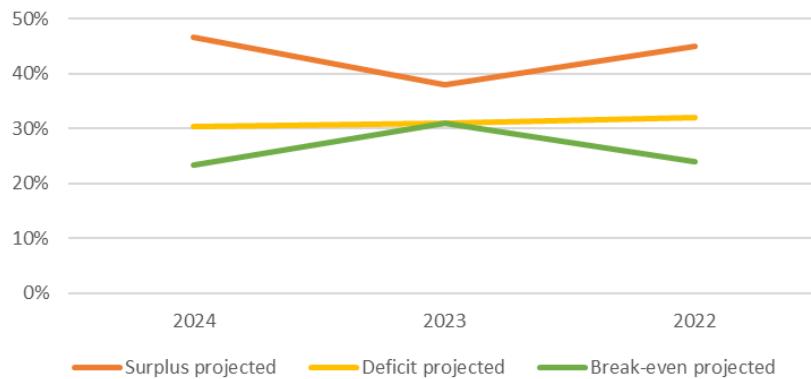
- 6.5. We asked agencies about their **end of year financial positions**. This revealed an improvement in COEx financial positions. 28 (65%) of respondent agencies had a surplus compared with 55% in 2023. However, this compares less favourably with 89% in 2021 and 79% in 2020. 23% of respondent agencies ended the last financial year with a deficit (down from 36% in 2023) and 12% broke even. Deficits ranged from £500 to £132,700.

Financial position, last financial year (2024)

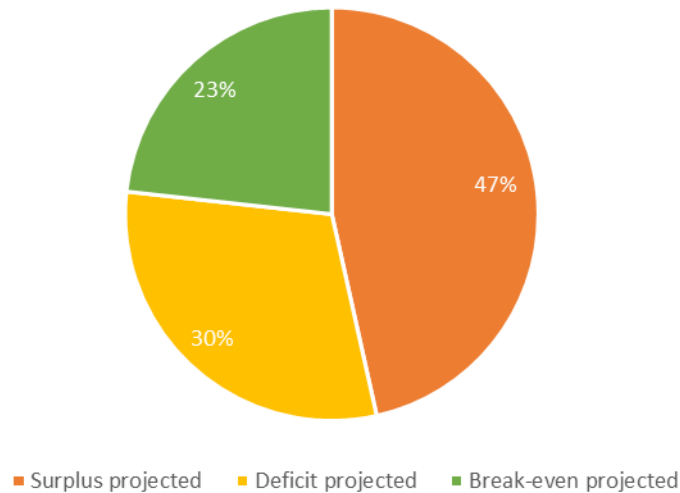


- 6.6. The outlook for agencies at the end of the 2024/25 year was also better than that presented in 2023. Projections for the end of the current financial year show that 20 agencies (47%) are projecting a surplus, 13 (30%) to break even and 10 (23%) a deficit.

End of year financial projections



**Financial out-turn projection, current year,
2024 survey**



Financial planning and management skills

- 6.7. Seven (16%) respondent COEx agencies felt they lacked the financial planning and management skills they need – up from 5 agencies in 2023.
- 6.8. Training and other needs mentioned were:
- Financial awareness and skills for non-finance staff.
 - Budgeting and forecasting
 - Finance director or specialist support: Occasional access to finance director-level skills and experience to guide financial planning.
 - VAT and Legal Aid billing expertise
 - Fundraising expertise
 - Transitioning financial systems
 - Better cost analysis and apportionment

"The problem is not skills or expertise within the organisation. We have a strong management team including a very experienced finance manager. We have several board members with expertise in financial planning. The problem is that in order to minimise financial losses, we have reduced the management capacity, and the finance manager is now working part time."

"It would be helpful to have access to finance director-level skills and experience (i.e. qualified), even if only on an occasional basis to help with financial planning and management."

"We have reduced the management capacity, and the finance manager is now working part-time. Specialist finance staff are proving difficult to retain."

"We don't really have the fundraising skills for a public ask or for speculative one-off fundraising campaigns, and those skills and expertise would be helpful right now."

COEx agencies' income

- 6.9. The total income in the last full financial year reported by COEx agencies was **£49,165,188**. This is a **£8,044,695 growth in funding** for COEx agencies compared to 2023. One more agency responded to the survey in 2024, but the growth in funding still exceeded £7 million.
- 6.10. However, seven (17%) of COEx agencies reported a fall in funding. The income range was from £138,000 to £4.47 million. Average income per respondent COEx agency was £1.14 million. COEx agencies also stressed, in discussions about the survey findings, that funding increases do not necessarily mean that the full cost of service delivery is being recovered.
- 6.11. Agencies also report increasing expectations of funders regarding outputs, outcomes, impacts and methods of working funders. COEx agencies are increasingly asked to deliver more and deliver 'fashionable' approaches, involving co-production, 'lived experience' and system change, for example. COEx are spending more and more time on funding applications to balance the books and end of funding reports are taking longer.
- 6.12. All income sources in 2024 are shown in the charts and table below.
- 6.13. 31 respondent agencies (72%) hold a contract with the Legal Aid Agency. The second chart below consolidates all income from this source. Contract types held by respondent agencies (as stated in survey returns) are as follows:
- Housing: 21
 - Public Law: 14
 - Immigration: 12
 - Welfare Benefits: 6
 - Community Care: 5
 - Discrimination: 5
 - Family: 3
 - Asylum: 3
 - HLPAS (Housing Loss Prevention Advice Service): 3
 - Crime: 2
 - Education: 2
 - Claims Against Public Authorities: 1
 - Standard Crime Contract: 1
 - Civil: 1

Funding sources	% of all funding	Total	Average	Range from	Range to	Number and % of respondents with this funding	
Grants (from Trusts or Foundations)	46.1%	£22,658,293	£526,937	£19,750	£2,340,020	43	100%
Contracts and commissioned services (e.g. Debt Free Advice, contract with the CCG etc)	14.4%	£7,069,842	£372,097	£1,288	£1,726,725	19	44%
Local Authority Funding	13.1%	£6,438,360	£268,265	£10,000	£895,603	24	56%
Legal Aid (Legal Help/Controlled Work)	10.7%	£5,276,954	£211,078	£23,000	£1,156,787	25	58%
Legal Aid (Certificated)	5.2%	£2,542,322	£121,063	£13,121	£585,399	21	49%
Corporate donations	3.3%	£1,601,393	£76,257	£3,000	£264,532	21	49%
Services generating income (i.e., DBAs, CFAs, fixed fees)	2.7%	£1,302,921	£72,385	£1,917	£525,582	18	42%
Other	2.5%	£1,223,537	£39,469	£199	£1,134,116	31	72%
Fundraising from individuals	1.5%	£753,764	£25,992	£120	£1,292,682	29	67%
Fundraising from events	0.3%	£169,052	£14,088	£991	£95,501	12	28%
Legal Aid (HCDPS)	0.3%	£128,750	£25,750	£4,732	£68,870	5	12%
		£49,165,188					

6.14. Other income sources include:

- Bank Interest, Investment and Savings Income
- Donations and Legacies
- Rental or Sub-rental Income
- Miscellaneous, including gifts, client donations, recharges and hardship claims
- Membership and Subscriptions
- One-off or Project-Specific Funding
- In-Kind Contributions
- Training and Workshop Fees

6.15. There was a similar spread of funding sources to those reported in previous years, with trusts and foundations being the single biggest sources of funds. However, in 2024:

- Contract and commissioned services income grew from c.£6.3 million in 2023 to just over £7 million in 2024, after falling in 2023.
- Local authority income fell from c.£7.5million in 2023 to £6.4 million in 2024.
- Total Legal Aid Agency income increased from c.£6.2m in 2023, to over £7.8 million in 2024

6.16. A significant portion of new funding in 2024 came from grants provided by trusts and foundations. Notable funders included:

- Access to Justice Foundation: Multiple grants, including IOTLS funding.
- Samworth Foundation
- BBC Children in Need
- Legal Education Foundation
- Porticus, Stewarts Foundation, Allen & Overy Foundation, Oak Foundation

- Smaller local or specific-purpose grants like John Lyon's Charity, EF Bulmer Trust, and DMF Ellis Charitable Trust.
- Renewed multi-year grants from Lloyds Bank Foundation, John Ellerman Foundation, and Charles Russell Speechlys Foundation.

6.17. Local authorities have been a source of new funding for specific services or projects, despite an overall fall in funding from this source. Lambeth, Westminster, Brent, Camden and the Royal Borough of Greenwich were all mentioned. New funding streams for advice services, included Violence Against Women and Girls, and cost-of-living initiatives.

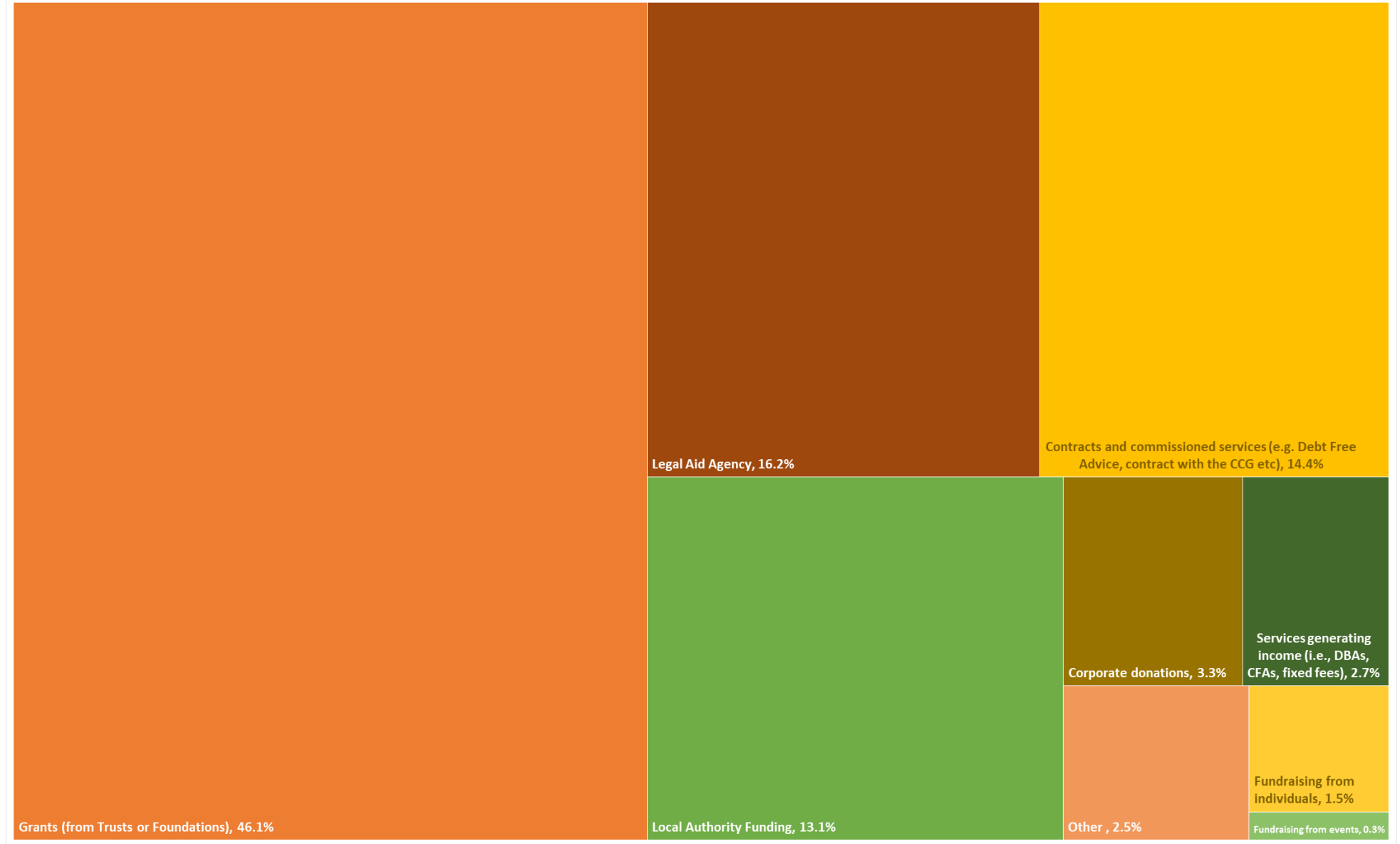
6.18. A growth in corporate income was reported, with new partnerships established. Corporate income increased from 12% to 15% in one organisation.

6.19. New health and social care-related grants were received.

6.20. Foodbank funding and partnerships with GP surgeries also supported new streams.

22 respondents (51%) expected income streams to stay the same in the next financial year. 15 (35%) did not expect this. Four (9%) did not know. This is fairly consistent with previous survey results.

Funding sources 2024 (Legal Aid consolidated)



7. Training and support needs

“Support from LLST has been excellent, particularly in offering free training and consultancy. These have strengthened both our staff and organisational capacity.”

- 7.1. We again asked COEx agencies what training would be helpful for staff, caseworkers, managers and trustees. We also asked if there is anything else LLST could provide support with, such as mentoring, policy support, adopting an environmental policy, or other sourcing of in-kind support. Requests are consistent with the feedback given in previous surveys and with the challenges and issues described elsewhere in this report.

“We have seen the value of safeguarding and EDI training in creating a safer and more inclusive environment.”

Training needs

- 7.2. Common training needs expressed by respondents were:

- **Legal aid and billing:**
 - Support with maximising legal aid income and addressing billing challenges.
 - Practical training on legal aid administrative requirements and compliance.
- **Management and leadership:**
 - Leadership and performance management training for new and existing managers.
 - Mentoring opportunities for managers to navigate complex situations.
- **Safeguarding and equality:**
 - Safeguarding training tailored to the legal advice sector.
 - Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) training for staff and trustees.
- **Mental health and wellbeing:**
 - Training on managing vicarious trauma and emotional resilience.
 - Wellbeing workshops for staff and volunteers.

“Training on billing has been immensely helpful, but more tailored sessions would ensure we maximise our legal aid income.”

- 7.3. Other identified needs:

- **Technology and digital skills:**
 - Training on Microsoft Office basics, cyber security, and digital safety.

- Integration of AI tools into operations and strategies, including ethical considerations.
- **Trustee and governance development:**
 - Governance training for trustees, including safeguarding and compliance.
 - Recruitment strategies for trustees, especially treasurers.
- **Specialist legal training:**
 - Public law and civil litigation basics for caseworkers.
 - Training on housing law and post-Brexit EU rules.
 - Briefings on forthcoming legislation such as the Renters Reform Bill and the Employment Rights Bill
- **Soft skills and conflict management:**
 - Workshops on conflict resolution, stress management, and workplace communication.

“Workshops on emotional resilience have provided essential tools for staff handling complex cases.”

“We would benefit from a collaborative training programme for trainees and paralegals, pooling resources to strengthen sector-wide skills.”

Support needs

7.4. Common support needs identified by respondents:

- **Consultancy and mentoring:**
 - Support with developing strategies such as Theory of Change or data strategies.
 - Mentoring for managers and caseworkers, particularly in niche areas.
- **Policy development:**
 - Assistance with creating or refining policies, including environmental and supervision frameworks.
- **Technology and resources:**
 - Advice on selecting case management systems and leveraging collective purchasing for legal resources.
- **Wellbeing frameworks:**
 - Support with integrating reflective practice and improving staff resilience.

“Ongoing access to coaching and mentoring has been invaluable, particularly during strategic planning processes.”

“Mentoring and peer-to-peer support are critical for helping our new managers navigate their roles.”

8. Conclusions and recommendations

- 8.1. The findings of this year's review highlight the resilience and adaptability of COEx agencies in navigating growing demand, financial strain, and operational challenges. However, the pressures of increased case complexity, staff burnout, and persistent funding gaps pose significant risks to the sustainability of vital services. Collective action is essential to ensure agencies can continue meeting the needs of vulnerable individuals and communities.
- 8.2. The findings will be particularly instructive for the Ministry of Justice, which is embarking on the development of a Legal Support Strategy. They should also inform the development of a London-wide advice strategy, a workstream of the [Advice Workforce Development Fund programme](#).

Recommendations for funders

- 8.3. **Increase multi-year core funding:** Agencies urgently need more stable, unrestricted funding to cover core costs and reduce their reliance on short-term grants.
- 8.4. **Support capacity-building initiatives:** Funders should invest in training and resources to strengthen agency capacity in areas such as IT infrastructure, financial planning, and staff recruitment, training, development and retention.
- 8.5. **Expand funding for specialist services:** Services addressing housing, welfare benefits, and community care, as well as immigration and asylum support, require targeted funding to meet rising demand.

Recommendations for policymakers

- 8.6. **Address legal aid funding shortfalls:** Current legal aid rates do not reflect the true cost of service delivery. Legal Help in particular does not pay. Policymakers should urgently review legal aid funding to ensure it adequately supports agencies' operations.
- 8.7. **Support the voluntary advice sector:** Introduce funding mechanisms and partnerships to stabilise the sector, including incentives for local authorities to provide sustained funding for advice services.
- 8.8. **Recognise and address political and operational barriers:** For immigration and asylum-focused services, policymakers must tackle the challenges created by political hostility and ensure agencies can operate without fear of targeting or bias.

Recommendations for agencies

- 8.9. **Diversify funding streams:** Agencies should explore new funding opportunities, including corporate sponsorships, social enterprises, and partnerships with health and social care organisations.
- 8.10. **Invest in staff wellbeing and retention:** Agencies must prioritise staff support through measures such as wellbeing programmes, flexible working options, and competitive pay structures.

- 8.11. **Enhance collaboration and shared resources:** Greater collaboration between agencies could help maximise efficiency, reduce costs, and strengthen advocacy efforts to influence funding and policy decisions.

Appendix One: Survey Questions

New or amended questions for the 2024 survey appear in bold.

Part 1 - Services, Staffing & Governance

1. What advice services does your organisation provide? We would like to know which subjects you cover.
2. How many unique individuals did you help during the latest full year for which you have data? (By the following channels: Face to face, By telephone, Email, Webchat, Video call, WhatsApp, text, message service, Channel not recorded, Other channels (specify).
3. Please specify the reporting period this data relates to.
4. How many cases did you deal with in each subject you cover?
5. Please provide us with an anonymous case study that demonstrates the services, outcomes and impact that you are able to deliver with the help of LLST COEx funding. You may paste this case study into the box below or upload a document. Please try to keep the case study to under 250 words. We may use this case study in publications about the COEx programme, so please ensure that you have necessary consent and are happy for the case study to be used by us.
6. What quality marks do you hold?
7. Were any serious concerns raised on your last audit?
8. Have there been any significant management or governance changes in the last 12 months? This includes changes to key staff (supervisors, managers, finance officers, staff on which certain areas of work are reliant) or changes at trustee board level, including Chair and Treasurer.
9. Approximately what percentage, if any, of your trustees have left the organisation over the past year?
10. Have you replaced the trustees that have left the organisation over the past year?
11. Have you replaced the trustees that have left?
12. Do you have clear trustee role profiles and undertake trustee regular skills audits? If not, why not?
13. How many full time equivalent (FTE) PAID STAFF do you have?
 - Fully Trained Solicitors / Caseworkers / Advisors
 - Trainee Advisers
 - Apprentice Solicitors
 - Other frontline / service delivery staff

- Admin and support Staff
- Management staff
- Other (please specify)

14. How many full time equivalent (FTE) VOLUNTEERS do you have?

- Fully Trained Solicitors / Caseworkers / Advisors
- Trainee Advisers
- Apprentice Solicitors
- Other frontline / service delivery staff
- Admin and support Staff
- Management staff
- Other (please specify)

15. If available, please upload a copy of your organisational structure chart / organogram.

16. Approximately what percentage of your staff have left the organisation over the past year?

17. What factors caused the loss of staff? Tick all that apply and let us know below if there were any particular factors.

- Redundancy (loss of funding)
- Redundancy (restructuring)
- End of fixed-term contract
- Found new job
- Retirement
- Dismissal other than redundancy
- Ill-health/passed-away
- Other reasons or other comments

18. Do you engage volunteers in your organisation/service?

19. Has the number of volunteers you engage increased or decreased over the past year (or stayed about the same)?

20. Many advice agencies are facing workforce challenges. Please describe the challenges you face, if any, and describe any initiatives you have taken to address them.

21. Do you monitor staff performance as against targets? If you do, please tell us how. Please be as specific as possible. In particular what are your lawyers' legal aid billing targets, or measurable KPIs for certain projects and how these are tracked?

22. If you do not monitor performance, please explain why.

Part 2 - Planning, Risk, Strategy and Support Requests

What political, economic, social and technological (PEST) issues and factors have had an impact on your service this year? We would like to hear about the things that have had an impact on your clients and have driven demand. We would also like to know about the things that have impacted your staff, volunteers and organisation (including finances). These may include the on-going effects of the high cost-of-living, Covid-19, political hostility, the growth of Artificial Intelligence etc. **Brief answers are fine!**

23. What PEST factors and issues have affected your clients and demand for your advice service this year?

24. What PEST factors and issues have affected your clients and demand for your advice service this year?

25. What PEST factors and issues have affected your organisation generally, its operations and finances this year?

26. What actions would you like to see taken to address the issues you have raised above? Please give us the top five changes you would like to see and who you think should make the change (e.g., Government, Mayor, Local Council, Funders).

27. We have outlined the most common risk themes facing advice agencies below. Please tick all that apply to your organisation.

- Financial and funding: loss/reduction in funding/contracts, cashflow
- Financial and funding: loss/reduction in funding/contracts, cashflow
- Loss of (key) staff and volunteers, difficulty recruiting and retaining
- Political reform, hostility and policy change Inability to meeting demand - expected increases
- Staff wellbeing and burnout
- Governance and compliance
- IT infrastructure and keeping up with pace of digital change
- Reduction in outreach and reach to most vulnerable people
- Premises: unsuitability, loss of
- Covid-19 infections
- Remote working: loss of learning, reduced quality
- Not meeting funding/contract targets/requirements
- Change of CMS
- Other (please specify)

28. Are any of the risks you have identified new (having arisen over the past year)? If so, please specify which ones.

29. What are the top 5 risks facing your organisation in the coming year? Please list in order of importance or rating (likelihood x impact).

30. What were your top three strategic objectives for the past year, and to what extent do you feel they have been achieved (achieved, partially, or not at all)? If there were particular challenges in pursuing your objectives, please tell us here.
31. Do you have a plan for the next 12 months, including strategic priorities, desired outcomes and measures that will show if these have been achieved?
32. Please upload your current Business Plan / Strategic Plan.
33. If available, please upload your latest Annual Report.
34. Is there anything else that you'd like to tell us about your successes or problems over the past 12 months? As you are one of our Centres of Excellence, we are committed to providing you with a grant in this round already. We would just like to get a better idea of how your year has gone and what challenges and opportunities are coming up in the future.
35. What training would be helpful for your organisation over the next year (for staff, caseworkers, managers, trustees)?
36. Is there anything else you think LLST could support you with such as mentoring, policy support such as adopting an environmental policy, or other sourcing of in-kind support?

Part 3 - Finance & Funding

37. What is your reserves policy? What does this equate to in monetary terms? If this has not changed from previous COEx surveys, please feel free to write 'same as last year'.
38. How much money are you holding as unrestricted reserves? (Please write the number only, do not include £ signs)
39. If your reserves are less than your policy, what steps are being taken to correct the position?
40. Do you use cashflow projections?
41. Are you having regular cashflow difficulties? If so, what are you doing about it?
42. Other than normal trading debts, do you owe any money (i.e. loans, mortgages, money owed to the LAA etc.)?
43. At your last financial year end, did you achieve a financial surplus, deficit, or break even? If you had a deficit, how much was it?
44. Are you projecting a surplus or deficit for the current financial year-end?
45. When does your current financial year end?
46. Do you think that your organisation has the financial planning and management skills that it needs? If not, what additional skills and expertise would be helpful?

47. Please upload your latest set of signed accounts.

48. Please upload your budget for the current financial year.

49. Do you have a legal aid contract?

50. What type of legal aid contract(s) do you hold?

51. We would like to know about your income during the last full year for which you have figures. Please give us a breakdown of the monetary value of your funding and income sources in the past year, including a total income figure (numbers only please - no £ signs, commas or decimal points).

- Grants (from Trusts or Foundations)
- Legal Aid (Legal Help/Controlled Work)
- Legal Aid (Certificated)
- Legal Aid (HCDPS)
- Local Authority Funding
- European Funding
- Contracts and commissioned services (e.g. Debt Free Advice, contract with the a public body)
- Services generating income (i.e. DBAs, CFAs, fixed fees)
- Fundraising from events
- Fundraising from individuals
- Corporate donations
- Other (we'll ask you to tell us what this includes below)
- Total income (this should be the sum of all the above)

52. Please specify the reporting period this data relates to

53. If applicable, please provide more information about any contracts and commissioned services, including the name of the commissioner and contract value.

54. If you said you had 'Other' income/funding under Q18 above, please tell us what this includes - source/funder and value.

55. Was any of the above funding new income during the last year? If so, which ones?

56. Are the income streams you listed above likely to stay the same in the next financial year?

57. Is any of your current funding (grant or contractual) coming to an end over the next 12 months?

58. Which funding is coming to an end?

Appendix Two: Respondent COEX agencies

1. Advice for Renters
2. Advice on Individual Rights in Europe (The AIRE Centre)
3. Anti Trafficking and Labour Exploitation Unit (ATLEU)
4. Asylum Aid
5. Asylum Support Appeals Project
6. Bail for Immigration Detainees
7. Barking & Dagenham CAB
8. BHT Sussex
9. Cambridge House Law Centre
10. Camden Community Law Centre
11. Canterbury Housing Advice Centre
12. Cardinal Hume Centre
13. Citizens Advice Barnet
14. Citizens Advice in North and West Kent
15. Coram Children's Legal Centre
16. Disability Law Service
17. Ealing Law Centre
18. Greenwich Housing Rights
19. Hackney Community Law Centre
20. Hammersmith & Fulham Law Centre
21. Harrow Law Centre
22. Independent Workers Union of Great Britain Legal Department
23. Island Advice Centre
24. Islington Law Centre
25. Just for Kids Law
26. Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network
27. Mary Ward Legal Centre
28. North Kensington Law Centre
29. Nucleus
30. Praxis Community Projects
31. Prisoners' Advice Service
32. Public Law Project
33. RCJ Advice
34. Release
35. South West London Law Centres
36. Southwark Law Centre
37. Sutton Borough Citizens Advice Bureaux (Citizens Advice Sutton)
38. Tamil Welfare Association (Newham) UK
39. Tower Hamlets Law Centre
40. University House - Legal Advice Centre
41. Working Families
42. Youth Legal
43. Zacchaeus 2000 Trust (Z2K)