London Legal Support Trust
London Specialist Advice Forum meeting – Meeting notes

Wednesday 4 June 2025, 3-5pm
Chair: Andrew MacKay, Disability Law Service

This document contains notes from the June 2025 London Specialist Advice Forum meeting.

Contents:

1. Welcome and opening remarks

Andrew MacKay (Disability Law Service) opened the meeting by welcoming all attendees, introducing himself as the chair, and giving a brief overview of the agenda for the day.

Lukia Nomikos (LLST) covered practical venue-related housekeeping points and informed attendees that Nadoya Reid (LLST) would be taking photos during the meeting for LLST's social media channels.

2. **Presentation on the proposed disability benefit cuts - Paula Peters, Disability Rights Activist/Member of the National Steering Group, Disabled People Against Cuts/Trade Unionist, Unite the Union**

- After 15 years of Conservative-led government, austerity measures and welfare cuts have had a catastrophic impact on disabled people's lives.
- In the case of Jodey Whiting, a coroner found that her death eight years ago was directly linked to benefit cuts.
- Research from the University of Glasgow found that austerity policies caused 335,000 additional premature deaths between 2012-2019.
- Disabled people are being forced to constantly prove their need for support, making the basic right to exist in society a struggle.
- The Labour Party is continuing austerity policies.
- Cuts to disability benefits and health services are "cruel and callous" and unlikely to support people into work.
- The proposed cuts are expected to push disabled people further from the job market, not closer.
- According to Citizens Advice, more than 900,000 people could lose the UC payment and the PIP daily living component under the proposed system, resulting in their annual income falling by over £9,000 per year.
- A Freedom of Information request revealed that 87% of disabled people currently receiving PIP are at risk of losing it. This will also impact eligibility for Carer's Allowance.
- An extra 50,000 children could be pushed into poverty by 2030.
- Concerns over rushed timeline and lack of transparency.
- Cuts are expected to increase poverty and deepen exclusion.
- Radical change comes from funding health and social care services, inclusive employment, and the welfare state.
- Labour is also rushing through assisted dying legislation, watering down safeguards.
- It's estimated that only about £100 million net savings will actually materialise from PIP cuts.
- Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) is actively campaigning, organising protests, and encouraging people to contact their MPs.
- MPs are already hearing concerns from constituents about both benefit cuts and the removal of the Winter Fuel Payment.
- Legal options are currently limited – many measures have been passed through primary legislation, so court challenges must wait until the policies are implemented.
- A complaint is being mounted to the United Nations, which has already raised concerns over what the UK government is doing.
- The cuts are not expected to help people into work – many will instead lose their jobs.

Question from a forum member: What alternative do we have to the Labour government?

Answer from Paula: Independent MPs are winning seats. People are tired of cross-party politics. It's important to resist populist policy-making and build grassroots movements to protect and expand services. Labour councillors are worried about next year's local elections. The possible swing from Labour to Reform is worrying. A Reform government by 2029 is possible and very concerning.

Question from a forum member: It's early days for court challenges, but we're laying the groundwork by gathering evidence from our clients who are affected. What more can be done to prepare for legal challenges and contribute to the evidence base?

Answer from Paula: DPAC is already collating evidence. We're collating personal stories that illustrate the real-life impact of policies like PIP loss, cuts to Access to Work support, and long NHS waiting times. MPs need to hear these stories to understand the consequences of these reforms, so we are using them for lobbying efforts and media engagement. We're also documenting the impact of Welfare Rights Centre closures, the pressures on advisers due to underfunding, and the financial threats to local councils.

This evidence will contribute to advocacy at multiple levels, including international submissions, such as to the UN in Geneva. We're working with organisations like the Public Law Project and others. Collaboration and co-production are hugely beneficial. Although the legal challenges have to wait until the changes are formally implemented, we are proactively building an evidence base now.

Question from a forum member about Access to Work.

Answer from Paula: There is a wealth of information we can draw on. The DPAC webpage and the Disability News Service are good resources for stories about Access to Work.

Concerns were also raised over the Department for Work and Pensions' increasing use of AI and automation:

- Increasing use of AI is excluding disabled people from accessing services.
- 16 million disabled people live in the UK; around a third report technology as a barrier.
- 5 million older people also struggle with tech use, and many face digital exclusion.
- DWP is considering using AI tools such as voice recognition to detect fraud in benefit claims.

The discussion was concluded with a reminder that now is a critical window to pressure MPs, especially by sharing real-life stories of how these cuts will impact people, as the Welfare Reform Bill will be introduced in Parliament in mid-June.

3. **Facilitated discussion on the impact of the proposed disability benefit cuts on the free legal advice sector - Andrew MacKay, CEO, Disability Law Service**

Andrew started the session by providing some context for the discussion:

- The changes will have significant impacts not only on clients but also on advisers and the wider free legal advice sector.
- It's essential to capture and share client stories and experiences to engage decision-makers effectively.
- The welfare benefits system is very complex and difficult to navigate.
- The proposed changes include tightening eligibility for PIP, halving the health element of Universal Credit for new claimants and freezing it for both new and existing claimants until 2030 (instead of rising with inflation), and introducing stricter work capability assessments.
- The Disability Law Service is talking to clients and other organisations and many common themes are coming through. The benefit cuts will:
    - Cause disproportionate harm to disabled people
    - Exacerbate poverty among disabled people (who are already more likely to live in poverty)
    - Increase pressure for health and social care services
    - Increase demand for advice services
    - Increase workload for already overworked advisers
    - Cause disproportionate impact across intersecting equality characteristics
    - Have wider impact on carers – if a disabled person loses access to PIP, this can affect access to support for carers.

Questions to forum members: Can you share any examples of the impact you've seen in your work? What kind of impact are you seeing on the clients you work with? How can we raise awareness about the likely impacts on our clients? What more can be done to better resource the sector to respond to these challenges? How can we more effectively engage with key decision-makers? What are the practical, real-life impacts these issues are having on people's lives?

Responses from forum members:

- The minute there's any policy change announcement, anxiety sets in among clients and queries increase. How do we address this? What strategies do others have? How do we link this with campaigning and help clients advocate for themselves?
- Not many clients have spoken to me about the PIP changes yet. Should we mention these to clients in case they're not aware? How do we do this without causing excessive worry?
- It's very quiet at the moment. Either many people aren't yet aware of what's coming, or they believe nothing can be done. We need to publicise the changes and inform clients.

Questions to forum members: How do we inform our clients about the changes while reassuring them and without causing panic?

Responses from forum members:

- Samaritans have been inundated by calls from disabled people who report feeling suicidal.
- Some clients may only become aware of changes when they next try to apply for benefits.

Question from a forum member: When are the changes going to come into effect?

Response from a forum member: The cuts and freezing of the UC health elements are expected to happen in April 2026, while PIP changes are expected to come into effect from November 2026 – but this will depend on the timelines set out in the White Paper.

Question to forum members: What will the impact be on the sector in having to deal with increasing demand? How can we support each other? Are there resources that can help mitigate the impact?

Responses from forum members:

- Advisers face difficult choices between supporting new clients to apply for benefits and assisting existing ones with appeals. When thinking of existing clients, we need to reassure clients that the impact of the cuts will not necessarily be as catastrophic as it may seem. Advisers have been able to mitigate the impact of some previous reforms through legal arguments.
- University House is handling hundreds of appeals a year. Capacity is not unlimited, but other agencies are encouraged to refer cases to them.
- Drawing on archive cases shows similar themes going back decades. Funders are pushing advice services into campaigning work, but this is unsustainable. Services must be funded to offer legal advice and support, not just raise awareness.
- Campaigning and narrative change must go hand-in-hand with legal challenges.
- We need to understand why Labour is adopting these policies - to better pressure and influence them.
- Build strong coalitions, share consistent messaging, and gather impactful case studies.
- Coordination across the sector is essential to:
    o Raise public awareness
    o Provide mutual support
    o Engage decision-makers
    o Submit strong evidence to national and international bodies (e.g. the UN).
- Major demonstration in London on Saturday, organised by unions – attendees were encouraged to join.

Andrew summarised the discussion by saying it has reinforced that these policy changes are not abstract – they have immediate, devastating effects on the lives of clients and the operations of advice organisations. Lots of interconnected issues have emerged from the proposed changes.

4. **Presentation on using AI to strengthen free legal advice services (demo of AccessAva) - Kari Gerstheimer, CEO & Founder, Access Social Care**

- Kari started her presentation by explaining she does not think that AI should replace face to face. Access Social Care have a brilliant legal team who understand how critical it is that people get face to face support, but they work in social care and there are millions of people who need advice and there is a critical shortage of community care lawyers so tech has to be something the organisation engages with and it has a valuable role to play.
- Access Social Care are a tech start up; they have tech and data experts working alongside their legal team.
- They run a data project with big and small organisations, and have evidence that shows:
    - o the number of calls into advice lines for social care have increased significantly.
    - o Legal aid still exists within community care but since 2010 there's been an 80% reduction in community care legal aid cases started.
- AccessAva is a free digital service that helps users to navigate the complexities of health and social care in England.
    - o AccessAva is not just available on the Access Social Care website but hosted on 30 partner organisation websites too –those organisations are trusted within the communities that need to use the product so it's really important that AccessAva is embedded within those organisations to reach those who need it.
    - o AccessAva can help reach more people, but it can also help generalist advisors give more specialist advice.
    - o It helps people know what their legal rights are, answers questions and points to resources including more than 200 legal letters that can be customised. Those letters help people enter and flow through the system more easily.
    - o It's very much about early intervention e.g. asking for assessment in the right way, sometimes it's appealing decisions. It can be used by carers, older people, disabled people and advisers to give accurate and timely advice.
    - o It was developed and tested with diverse communities, adapted to make sure it has suitable information for the communities we want to serve, and we know it helps people get good outcomes faster.
    - o It uses a chat bot decision tree approach – users are asked a series of questions that classify their situation and assess what the issue might be.
    - o The chat bot process also helps us get useful data to learn for the future.
    - o All the information in there has been generated/safely checked by legal team.
    - o It's adaptable – the look or feel can be customised so organisations can have it in their branding. It's available 24/7 which we know from feedback is really important, especially for carers and other groups.
    - o A lot of work has been done to ensure it's accessible, Easy Read is embedded, and there are videos as well. It's also compatible with Recite

Me which translates it into different languages and will speak/read the text as well.

o Data from AccessAva shows that there are some myths about AI – including that disabled people won't use it. In Gloucestershire, 50% of AccessAva users are disabled.

o A significant % of people using it are not yet in receipt of social care.

o 75% satisfaction rating

o It's also being used in the community as part of face-to-face sessions/services.

o Data

♣ In Gloucestershire, the harvested data showed there were problems with policy and practice. Access Social Care started to take that data to the local authority and as a result of that they downgraded their self-assessment from 'good' to 'requires assessment' and are using the data to inform their improvement plan.

♣ The system does not collect sensitive data, just thematic data.

o It's free to use. If any organisation would like to host it, we're trying to make it as affordable as we can.

There was then a short demonstration of AccessAva in action.

Question from a forum member: How does Recite Me work?

Response from Kari: It's a plug in, it's amazing, about £2000 a year and offers loads of languages. It's on our main website so you can see it there.

5. Facilitated discussion on the use of AI in the free legal advice sector - Martha de la Roche, Insights & Engagement Director, The Access to Justice Foundation

Martha started the session by providing some context for the discussion. She explained there was lots of hype and really valid concern over AI which permeates in lots of different ways including social anxieties.

In the legal and advice sectors there's lots of discussion around how to make things more effective. We're wondering how it's going to impact our clients, our organisations and our staff.

We're seeing an increase in trying to coordinate work in this space – a couple of really good initiatives including CAST who are trying to understand more about how AI is being used and responding to AI in the sector. In the legal sector there is the Law Tech UK initiative, more focused on the business initiative. Public Sector has the AI bill which is currently going through scrutiny.

In AI more broadly, a lot of it is aimed at efficiencies and making information more accessible, what processes can we make simpler, how can we get our staff from a-b

quicker. What I notice from advice sector is that a lot of the AI we see is used for service delivery because we have such a huge strain on our frontline services so that's what's driving AI in our sector.

There is potential opportunity but also a really big challenge – it's new, there's a lot of unknown risks but also, we're leading the way in how to make AI accessible to users who are otherwise going without services. Provision of AI is only useful when it enables them to focus their efforts on the face to face – the need isn't going away, if anything it's likely to increase.

You can quickly fall into a trap of talking in non sensical terms, there's something there about retaining a person-centred approach to the work but also that we as a sector, we need to invest in ourselves to keep up but obviously there are budget constraints.

Question to forum members: What are you thinking about, what are your key concerns?

Responses from forum members:

- I just don't understand it; tech is outstripping my knowledge and our policies and we're always on the hop.
- The concern, as with all technology is that it will be used to justify the lack of funding and rather than it being a help, it doesn't replace the advice. In an era of austerity and cuts, is it being used as a justification for more drastic cuts.
- Other sectors are putting a lot of resource in but also a lot of care with things like GDPR, as the nonprofit legal advice sector it's hard as we're playing catch up 1) with the level of investment and 2) where we make sure it's safe while bearing in mind it's still a potentially massive opportunity.
- Some of it is good, some is bad but how many of us are sitting here from organisations that simply can't afford to upgrade their systems never mind invest in AI development.
- A lot of developers in the market offering different products, it's difficult to know whether what they're offering is good/useful or whether you're being ripped off. Not convinced that what some developers are offering the advice sector adds a huge amount of value from what we can do ourselves.

Question to forum members: How much is anyone feeling pressured into this – will there be a point where funders come asking service delivery why they aren't using AI?

Responses from forum members:

- One of the law firms have approached us to ask if we're using it and asking if they need support to use it but there are internal divisions among the staff as to desire/willingness to use it. We've also considered having a chat bot in our website specifically for guiding clients to the right form or signposting as reception team has to triage an additional 4000 to the 8000 we help.
- Very much in favour of tools that can speed up delivery and reduce stress on advisors but not to replace advisors. Is it available free anywhere?

Response from Martha: There are some free initiatives; Scottish Tech Army who place tech volunteers in charity organisations have started doing an open-source

library where they put tools they have developed for other charities in a space where others can take them and implement them. But while the tech is free, you still need the skills and support to implement it as well as the culture change of implementing and supporting staff to use it and resources to engage with it appropriately. Another tool has been developed by one organisation and is now being used by Working Families.

- Don't you have to be careful about where the data is going and how it's being used – orgs need policies to work around e.g. no personal details, a whole range of things that need to be thought of before you go ahead and use it. Need to know what you want to use it for, then develop a policy you can work around it.

Response from Martha: Some interesting feedback heard from the sector is that unless you have a clear problem statement, you know what you're looking at fixing, it doesn't work. It has to be an organisation led approach – you have to know the problem and be able to look at ways to use AI to solve it.

- Have tried ChatGPT and CoPilot to draft things but I never get the information that I want – it's hard to get it tailored to what you're using it for. The whole point is to save time but before you know it, you've wasted time trying to find the right prompts to get what you need.
- There's the case about the law centres, where a barrister used AI and it cited cases that don't exist.
  - Something we underestimate as a sector is the timeline – staff are probably already using AI, irrespective of a policy being in place – and the risk that comes with that.
  - Need to have a policy in place before to make it as robust as possible – we've explored using it for specialist advisors to make things easier/quicker (not replace) but it's been expressed that as a live organisation the costs associated with it are a lot, not just the initial cost to develop a AI model that can help but the ongoing costs of things like licenses, so it's really tricky, even for larger organisations.
  - We're still working through digitisation – as a sector we are so far behind, so we need to have an AI policy in place – one of the reasons being we're not insured to provide advice via AI. The other challenge we have is being a federated charity, our hands are tied by the national charity/systems which can be quite frustrating at times. Easy to feel lost without the knowledge, who do we go to for advice, to know what we're choosing is right/useful/appropriate.
  - Legal Aid already take the funding out for things that are classed as 'form filling' rather than advice. If AI can do it, what does that mean for the pot/resource to support the work?
  - Demonstration of system was great, it helps increase access to the service, but it doesn't increase the services – so more people will make valid appeals/enquiries etc. but no more people will get the services as there is a finite amount of resource to respond leading to an increasing amount of dissatisfied people.

6. **AOB and closing remarks**

The next forum meeting will take place online on **Thursday 25 September at 2-4pm**, with further details to be shared soon.

7. **Useful links and resources**

- Citizens Advice report on the impact of the proposed disability benefit cuts
- NCVO blog on the government's Spring Statement 2025
- DPAC blog on disability benefit facts, stats and figures
- DPAC slides on the proposed disability benefit cuts (from the Hands Off Disability Benefits! meeting on 9 March 2025)
- AccessAva website
- CAST free self-serve AI course
- CAST newsletter sign-up
- Justice and Innovation Group webpage
- City Bridge Foundation blog on useful AI resources