

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

Thursday 25 September 2025, 2-4pm

Chair: Franck Kiangala, Director & Solicitor, North Kensington Law Centre

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

**Contents:**

1. [Welcome and opening remarks](#)
2. [Update on the proposed social welfare reforms](#) - Carri Swann, Training Officer (Welfare Rights), Child Poverty Action Group
3. [Update on the proposed changes to the immigration system](#) - Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz, Head of Advocacy, Praxis
4. [Impact of ongoing far-right protests and rising hostility towards advice agencies supporting refugees and migrants](#) - Rose Bernstein, Interim Executive Director, The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI) & Sairah Javed, Solicitor, JCWI
5. [AOB and closing remarks](#)
6. [Useful links and resources](#)

## 1. Welcome and opening remarks

Franck Kiangala (Director & Solicitor, North Kensington Law Centre) opened the meeting by welcoming all attendees, introducing himself as the Chair, and giving a brief overview of the agenda for the day. Attendees were also informed that the meeting would be recorded.

## 2. Update on the proposed social welfare reforms - Carri Swann, Training Officer (Welfare Rights), Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG)

Carri explained she was standing in for CPAG's Head of Advice and Rights, Dan Norris.

- CPAG's focus is on Social Security.
- The presentation will focus on the reforms laid out in the Department for Work and Pensions Green Paper on welfare ('Pathways to Work'), which was published in March 2025.

- The reforms were discussed at the previous Forum meeting in June 2025, but now we are a few months on - so where do things currently stand?

### **Personal Independence Payment (PIP):**

- PIP is a crucial source of income for many of the individuals and families advice services support.
- Planned changes for November 2026 that would have restricted entitlement to part of PIP have been postponed and may not go ahead.
- Review of PIP by Sir Stephen Timms due to conclude in autumn 2026:
  - The review is broad in scope.
  - Terms of Reference were drawn up early in the summer but are now being rewritten to clarify what the review will and won't cover.
  - The government has stated this is not intended as a "cuts exercise".
  - Making PIP means-tested or voucher-based has been ruled out.
- "Wait and see" pending the review.

### **Universal Credit:**

- Two sets of major changes to take effect in April 2026 when the Universal Credit Act 2025 comes into force. These will mainly impact Disabled people and those with a long-term illness where that affects their ability to work.
  - The UC standard allowance will be uprated above inflation every year from 2026 to 2029 inclusive.
  - The UC LCWRA ('health') element will be effectively frozen for existing claimants (at £423.27pm) until 2030 and halved for new claimants (to £217.26pm) and frozen until 2030, with exceptions for some new claimants (those who meet Severe Conditions Criteria and those who are terminally ill).
  - Essentially new claimants (or newly Disabled claimants) after April will have lower income compared to existing claimants, creating a two-tier system.
- Two consequences for advice services:
  - Advisors will be trying to squeeze clients through certain loopholes to try and get them access to the pre-April 2026 rules, putting extra demand on welfare rights teams.
  - Clients who cannot qualify face lower benefit income, increasing financial strain. This will likely have knock-on effects for debt and housing advice services.
- Proposed further change to the UC health element could see its removal for under-22s.
  - Consultation held over summer 2024; awaiting DWP response and White Paper (planned for late 2024).
  - If approved, the change may take effect as early as 2027.
- The Green Paper also proposed to scrap the Work Capability Assessment.
  - Not formally consulted on over the summer.
  - Likely to go ahead in future, but still a few years away.

### **Contributory benefits**

- Proposed 2028-29 overhaul of contributory benefits (JSA and ESA) (for working-aged people with sufficient NI contributions).
  - Consultation held over summer 2024; awaiting confirmation in White Paper.

## Resources and updates

- CPAG has launched a new [webpage](#) dedicated to welfare reforms.
  - The page will be kept updated and attendees are encouraged to bookmark it.
- CPAG provides [training](#) for advice teams on new rules (including April 2026 changes).
- CPAG [welfare rights conference](#) in London on Thursday 23 October.
  - Guest speaker: Sir Stephen Timms; opportunity to ask questions about the PIP review.

## Q&A summary

- Clarification on the UC health element:
  - The halving of the health-related element of UC will apply only to new claimants from April 2026.
  - Existing claimants will keep their current rate, unless their entitlement ends and later resumes – in which case the lower rate would apply.
- Advice for advisors/mitigating effects:
  - Advisors should help clients establish entitlement to the health element before April 2026 to secure the higher rate.
  - Due to the 3-month waiting period for assessments, applications should ideally be started by end of 2025.
  - Key actions:
    - Identify clients currently missing out on the health element and encourage applications.
    - Encourage those not on UC but potentially eligible to apply sooner rather than later.
    - Explore other ways of maximising income for clients ahead of the changes.
- Concerns about delays in assessment:
  - If DWP delays mean payment is not made before April 2026 but entitlement is later backdated, claimants should still qualify as part of the protected group.
  - Advisors may need to advocate to ensure this interpretation is applied.
  - To minimise risk, starting the process early (ideally by the end of 2025) is strongly advised.
- Severe conditions criteria:
  - The most severely Disabled claimants may still qualify for the higher UC rate post-2026.
  - Criteria are set out in the Act and summarised on CPAG's new webpage.
  - It will not always be straightforward to secure this status, so it may create extra work for advisors.
- Impact on ESA/JSA claimants migrating to UC:
  - Question raised about how ESA or JSA claimants with disability premiums would be affected when moving to UC.

- Most income-related JSA claimants have already migrated to UC, so disability premiums are no longer in payment.
- Income-related ESA is planned to be fully closed before the UC changes take effect.
- Therefore, the impact on this group should be minimal.

### **3. Update on the proposed changes to the immigration system - Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz, Head of Advocacy, Praxis**

- The Immigration White Paper was published in May 2025.
  - Proposes far-reaching changes to the immigration and asylum systems, aimed at reducing net migration.
  - The paper is broad but lacks detail, covering multiple areas of immigration policy.
- The presentation will focus mainly on settlement and citizenship changes, which are key focuses of Praxis' work.

#### **Key proposed changes**

- Skilled worker visa:
  - Increases to skill and salary thresholds (some of which have already come into force).
- Social care visa:
  - Closure of the visa route for new applicants.
  - Transitional period until 2028 for current holders to extend their visas or switch employers.
  - Uncertainty beyond 2028.
- Student visas:
  - Graduate visa length reduced from 2 years to 18 months.
  - New levy for universities enrolling international students.
- Settlement and citizenship

#### **Settlement and citizenship**

- Proposed changes:
  - Qualifying period for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) increased from 5 years to 10 years.
  - Introduction of an “earned model”, where contributions may shorten the qualifying period.
  - Higher English language requirements for settlement and citizenship.
- Many aspects of these proposed changes remain unclear.
  - Affected groups: unclear which visa holders will be impacted.
  - Retrospective application: it is likely (but not certain) that current visa holders will face new rules, potentially doubling their settlement period.
  - Timeline: consultation promised before the end of 2025, but no date set.
  - Definition of contribution: unclear whether this will be limited to earnings/National Insurance or broader community involvement.
- Scale of impact:
  - IPPR estimates 1.7 million people could be pushed onto a 10-year route.
  - Currently, about 218,000 people are already on a 10-year route (largely on human rights grounds).

## Concerns

- Longer settlement routes cause harm due to complexity, high cost, and lack of access to the social security system.
- Risk of more children growing up without access to benefits, increasing child poverty, contrary to government commitments.

## Response and strategy

- Alliance-building: engaging with trade unions and other organisations newly affected by extended routes.
- Joint lobbying: pushing back against proposals with evidence from affected groups.
- Narrative change: focusing on public awareness and broader messaging, given the toxic political climate.
- Political context: concern that even small mitigations could be undone by a future government.
  - Example: Reform UK recently proposed abolishing ILR entirely, highlighting risk of further hardline shifts.

## Q&A summary

- Groups most affected by proposed changes:
  - Groups likely to be most impacted include women, people of colour, Disabled people, and those with caring responsibilities.
  - This is because contribution is expected to be defined narrowly in terms of income and National Insurance contributions.
  - Those in higher-paid work would continue to qualify for the 5-year route, while part-time and low-income workers would be pushed onto the 10-year route.
  - The irony is that it is the people who are earning low wages or who are not earning at all, who are more likely to need access to the social security system and who also struggle to afford the fees for the 10-year route (which according to slightly outdated figures costs £70,000 for a family of four).
  - The policy appears to be deliberately aimed at those who came to the UK on social care visas after Brexit, who are low-paid and nearing eligibility for settlement.
- Risk of loss of status:
  - Increasing the number of people on 10-year routes will increase the risk of people losing lawful status due to high fees and complex requirements.
  - Research has shown two-thirds of people on the 10-year route have at some point been unable to renew visas due to costs.
  - This raises the risk of creating a subclass of individuals and a repeat of the Windrush scandal.
  - The White Paper states its aim is to reduce net migration to the UK, but these changes will not do that – they will make the lives of people already living in the country much worse.
- Definition of contribution:

- Unpaid care and volunteering are unlikely to be recognised as valid contributions.
- Contribution is expected to be measured by salary levels.
- Advocacy efforts are focused on pressing for a broader definition to include caring and community involvement, but prospects are limited.
- Narrative change:
  - The migration sector currently lacks influence and power in policy debates.
  - Building alliances with more influential stakeholders (faith groups, trade unions, migrant communities such as Hong Kongers) is seen as a priority.
  - Work with communications experts may be required to reshape the narrative.
- Retrospective application:
  - Making the rules apply retrospectively would undermine trust and be very difficult to administer.
  - Current processing times for 10-year route applications are already around 12 months, with fee waiver decisions taking more than 6 months until recently.
  - Adding millions more cases risks collapsing the system.
- Fee waivers:
  - No government clarification has been given on whether fee waivers would be available to new groups.
  - It appears unlikely they will be extended, given the policy direction.
  - Without waivers, families would face unmanageable costs – currently estimated at around £70,000 for a family of four over the 10-year route.

#### **4. Impact of ongoing far-right protests and rising hostility on advice agencies supporting refugees and migrants - Rose Bernstein, Interim Executive Director, The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI) & Sairah Javed, Solicitor, JCWI**

##### **Far-right mobilisation and hostility**

- Current far-right protests described as coordinated far-right mobilisation rather than a local concern.
- Tactics include exploiting individual cases, small boats narratives, and failures of public services in order to stoke fear, spread hatred, and target people who have fled war, violence, and persecution.
- People seeking sanctuary deserve safety and dignity, not to be used as “political footballs” by extremists or politicians chasing headlines.
- Violence and racism linked directly to government and media rhetoric on migration.
- Rhetoric is seen as a continuation from the previous Conservative government into the current Labour government.

##### **Impact on clients**

- The impact of all the issues and concerns that Josephine highlighted in the White Paper (see above) is already being seen on the ground.

- Home Office's sudden closure of family reunion schemes created a surge in emergency applications.
- Large families were particularly affected, with some children's applications left incomplete due to time limits.
- No response from Home Office on whether incomplete family cohorts will be accepted.
- Clients in NASS accommodation are especially vulnerable: multiple physical and mental health needs, high anxiety, some avoiding accommodation due to safety fears.
- The system is archaic and inflexible, preventing clients from staying outside allocated accommodation.
- Toxic rhetoric, including high-profile statements from political figures, creates distress for clients.
  - Example: client considering whether it is safe to reunite with teenage son in the UK due to hostile environment.

### **Policy and casework context**

- UK-France "one in, one out" deal described as a continuation of cruel asylum policies and another attempt by the government to appease the racist far-right.
- The vast majority of people crossing the Channel claim asylum and are ultimately accepted, highlighting the hostile asylum system and the lack of safe routes as the real issues.
- Casework teams continue to manage notices of intent, removal directions, and detention representation.

### **Campaigns and public advocacy**

- Ongoing campaign targeting Air France over complicity in removals under UK–France deal.
- Strong engagement through calls, emails, and social media action.
- Significant media coverage across UK and French outlets, including both supportive and hostile press.

### **Impact on advice agencies**

- Increasing online abuse and threats directed at migrant support organisations.
- Some organisations named on GB News list of those blocking deportations.
- Social media accounts facing rising abusive comments; staff wellbeing impacted.
- Organisations taking precautions: panic alarms, removal of staff names from websites, email filters, remote working options, ongoing risk assessments.
- Great resources are available from, for example, [Migration Exchange](#), [Hope Not Hate](#), and [Right to Remain](#) – attendees encouraged to make use of these.
- Staff support measures include reflective practice spaces, wellbeing checks, and access to employee assistance support lines.

### **Sector response**

- Silence seen as emboldening far-right actors; importance of continuing visible work highlighted.

- Statements of solidarity and support for affected organisations are considered crucial.
- Celebrating sector successes reinforces resilience (e.g. recent successful asylum appeal with support from Medical Justice).
- Shared sector statements of solidarity have already been issued.
- Emphasis placed on pride and joy in work supporting asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants, and commitment to mutual care within the sector.

## **Q&A summary**

- Safe routes and asylum rights:
  - Observation that the only formal safe route for asylum seekers, the refugee family reunion pathway, has now been closed.
  - Response emphasised restoring the universal right to seek asylum as a starting point, including repealing laws undermining that right and providing legal entry routes.
- Impact on staff:
  - Increasing external pressure has a significant impact on staff wellbeing, particularly legal advice teams.
  - Staff feel compelled to do more than is humanly possible in the current climate.
  - Campaigns staff are also increasingly exposed to online attacks and abusive rhetoric, requiring wellbeing support.
  - Reflective practice spaces, initially for legal staff, have been extended to campaigns staff.
- Motivation and resilience:
  - Despite the hostile environment, small victories in casework provide motivation and sustain morale.
  - Examples include successful asylum appeals and securing family reunions before policy changes.
  - These successes are seen as transformational for clients and affirming for staff, reinforcing the value of ongoing work.
  - Emphasis on the importance of celebrating these wins collectively across organisations to maintain resilience.
- Role of funders and sector support:
  - Question about what funders and convener organisations, like LLST, can do to best support advice agencies during these difficult times.
  - Key request: visible and ongoing solidarity from funders, even when agencies face public or political hostility.
  - Messages of support and collective statements from the sector are highly valued and have meaningful impact.
  - Assurance that funding will not be withdrawn.

## **5. AOB and closing remarks**

The meeting concluded with thanks to the Chair, speakers, and attendees, and a summary of the discussions. It was emphasised that these conversations highlight the purpose of the Forum: to share knowledge, support one another, and work collectively towards fairness, dignity, and resilience in the sector. The importance of continuing to



stand together in the face of external pressures was underlined, with recognition of the significance of the work being carried out across organisations.

The next forum meeting will take place **in person** on **Wednesday 3 December**, with further details to be shared soon.

## 6. Useful links and resources

- Child Poverty Action Group [webpage](#) that tracks the main changes included in the Pathways to Work Green Paper, the Universal Credit Bill and the Employment Rights Bill
- Government [white paper](#) that sets out the plans to reform the immigration system
- IPPR [article](#) on the government's new policy on indefinite leave to remain
- Praxis and Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit [briefing](#) on the Immigration White Paper
- Hope Not Hate [package of resources](#) (free to download) to help respond to the far-right threat
- Migration Exchange [guides](#) to help organisations strengthen their security, resilience, and wellbeing
- Right to Remain [guidance](#) on solidarity and safety against far-right violence