

Centre of Excellence (COEx) Annual Review 2025



London Legal Support Trust

A snapshot of a sector under pressure, and the support that makes a difference

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Executive Summary

The Centres of Excellence (COEx) Annual Review 2025 provides a snapshot of a free legal advice sector under sustained and intensifying pressure, while continuing to deliver vital, high-quality support to some of the most marginalised communities in London and the South East. Drawing on survey responses from 42 partner organisations, the findings highlight both the fragility and resilience of the sector, and the critical role that long-term, flexible support plays in enabling organisations to survive and adapt.

Funding instability remains a defining challenge. Every COEx organisation identified funding as a major organisational risk. While headline income figures suggest relative stability overall, this masks significant volatility at individual organisational level. Short-term funding, shifts in funder priorities and pressures within legal aid systems continue to drive income fluctuation, cashflow risk and uncertainty about sustainability.

Workforce pressures are embedded and intensifying. Recruitment and retention difficulties, high workloads and burnout continue to shape organisational capacity. Although staffing levels appear broadly stable, the cumulative impact of financial insecurity, emotional labour and concerns about safety and wellbeing is placing the workforce under significant strain.

External pressures are reshaping the operating environment. Policy instability, delays and failures in statutory decision-making, hostile political narratives, and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis are contributing to rising demand and case complexity. Many of these pressures sit beyond the control of individual organisations but have a direct and profound impact on service delivery and effectiveness.

Demand continues to rise while complexity deepens. Case volumes are increasing, while the number of individuals supported has fallen slightly, indicating that clients are presenting with more complex, multi-issue problems requiring longer and more intensive interventions.

Digital infrastructure and AI present both opportunities and risks. Organisations recognise the potential benefits of improved systems and emerging AI tools, but face limited capacity to invest, skills gaps, concerns about data quality/safety and rising levels of digital exclusion among clients. Technology is increasingly a core operational issue rather than a peripheral one.

LLST support remains a stabilising force. In this challenging context, partners consistently highlight the value of the COEx programme's unrestricted funding, long-term relationships, tailored consultancy and opportunities for peer learning. This support provides stability, flexibility and space for reflection, enabling organisations to navigate uncertainty more effectively.

Recommendations:

Addressing the challenges set out in this report will require coordinated action across the system:

- **Funders** should prioritise unrestricted and longer-term funding for frontline agencies, explicitly resource workforce development, support digital infrastructure upgrades, and invest in collaborative reporting, learning and evaluation approaches.
- **Policymakers** must address systemic barriers, delays in decision-making and the continued erosion of advice service commissioning and funding at local and national levels.
- **Sector bodies** have a critical role in developing shared support structures, strengthening workforce pipelines, coordinating sector-wide advocacy and improving collective data capability.
- **Advice organisations** should continue to prioritise staff wellbeing, strengthen shared approaches to monitoring and evaluation, and collaborate wherever possible to reduce duplication of effort and risk.

Reflections from five years of the COEx survey

Having been involved in the COEx survey over the past five years, what is striking is not how much has changed, but the core challenges that have become more deeply entrenched. Funding insecurity, workforce strain and rising demand were already evident in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic: five years on the survey results show they are not episodic issues but defining characteristics of the sector.

What has changed is the context in which these pressures are experienced. External systems feel less predictable; political and social hostility is more explicit; AI use is developing rapidly; and the emotional load carried by staff and volunteers is heavier. At the same time, there is a noticeable shift in how organisations talk about resilience: less as a virtue to be celebrated, and more as a finite resource that requires deliberate investment and protection.

Across successive surveys, one constant has been the value of sustained, trust-based support. LLST support increasingly stands out as an exception in a funding landscape that often amplifies instability. Sustained, trust-based support cannot remove these challenges, but it enables organisations to face them with greater confidence, coherence and care.



Phil Jew
Consultant

Message from the CEO

For more than a decade, the Centre of Excellence (COEx) programme has been rooted in a simple but powerful belief: that access to free, specialist legal advice is essential to a fair and functioning society, and that the organisations providing this advice must be properly supported if they are to survive and thrive.

Since the programme's launch in 2014, we have seen both extraordinary commitment from our partners and relentless pressure on the sector as a whole. The findings of this year's annual partner survey make clear that 2025 was no exception. Our partners are operating in an environment shaped by forces largely beyond their control. Policy change, the cost of living crisis, instability in public funding, delays and failures in legal aid systems, and increasingly hostile political and social narratives, which drive rising demand and complexity while undermining organisational sustainability. These pressures are compounded by workforce challenges, from recruitment and retention to burnout and concerns around safety and wellbeing.

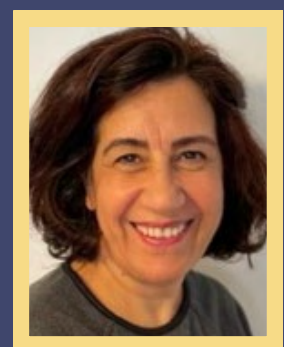
And yet, what comes through just as strongly is the resilience, creativity and determination of our partners. Despite stretched capacity and constant uncertainty, organisations are investing in their people, strengthening frontline services, improving systems, and finding new ways to support communities and individuals experiencing acute hardship. The data and stories in this report demonstrate that free legal advice is not a marginal or optional service; it is vital social infrastructure that prevents crisis, protects rights and reduces pressure on public services.

Addressing the challenges laid out here will require funders, policymakers, sector bodies and advice organisations to work together – not only to improve systems and funding, but to change the narrative around the advice sector itself. If we are serious about access to justice, then free legal advice must be recognised, valued and invested in accordingly.

At London Legal Support Trust, we are proud that the COEx programme continues to be a stabilising force. Unrestricted funding, long-term relationships, tailored development support and space for peer learning remain central to our approach and as we prepare to take the next step in the evolution of the COEx programme, this report will play a critical role in shaping our support and advocacy in the year ahead.

I want to thank every partner who contributed their time, insight and honesty to the survey, and every organisation that continues to deliver life-changing advice under incredibly difficult circumstances. Your work matters, and we remain committed to standing alongside you.

Warm regards,
Nezahat Cihan
Chief Executive Officer
London Legal Support Trust

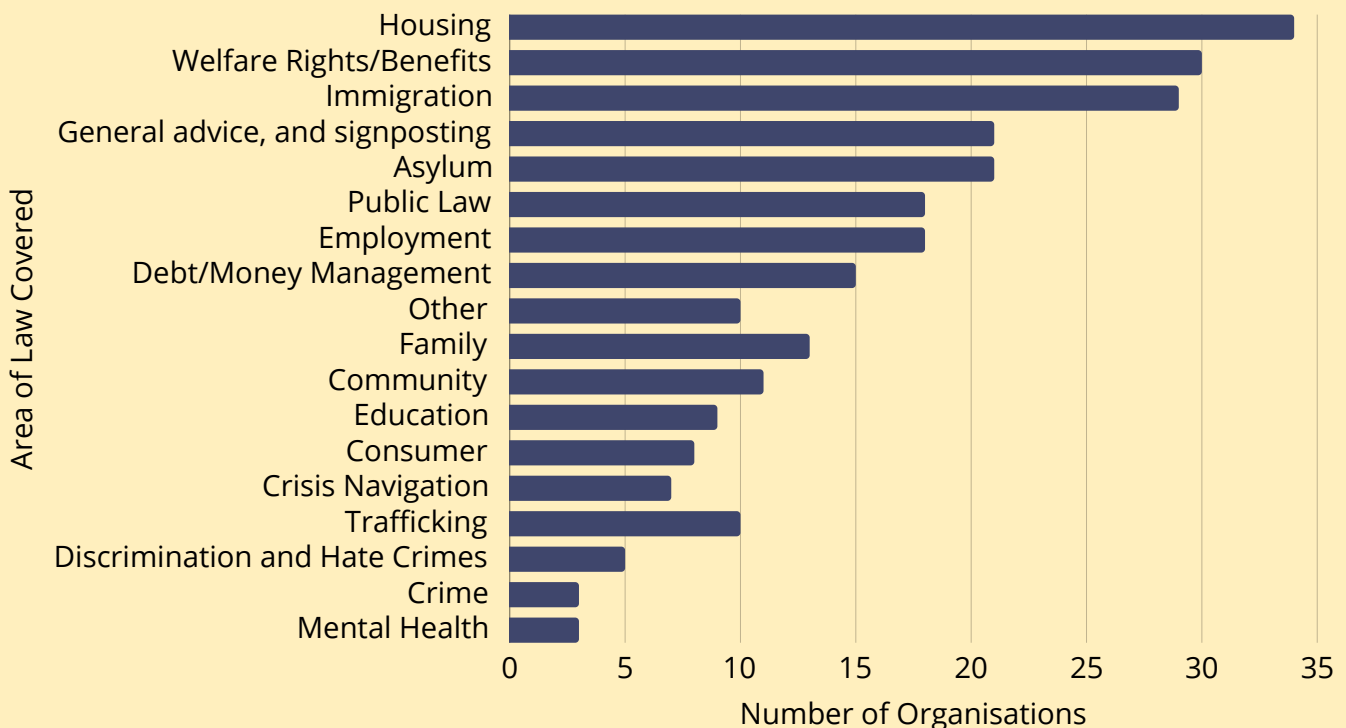
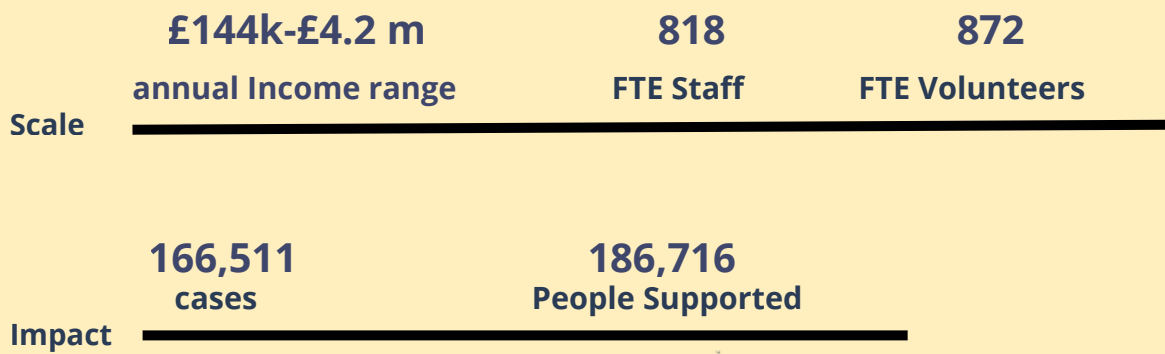


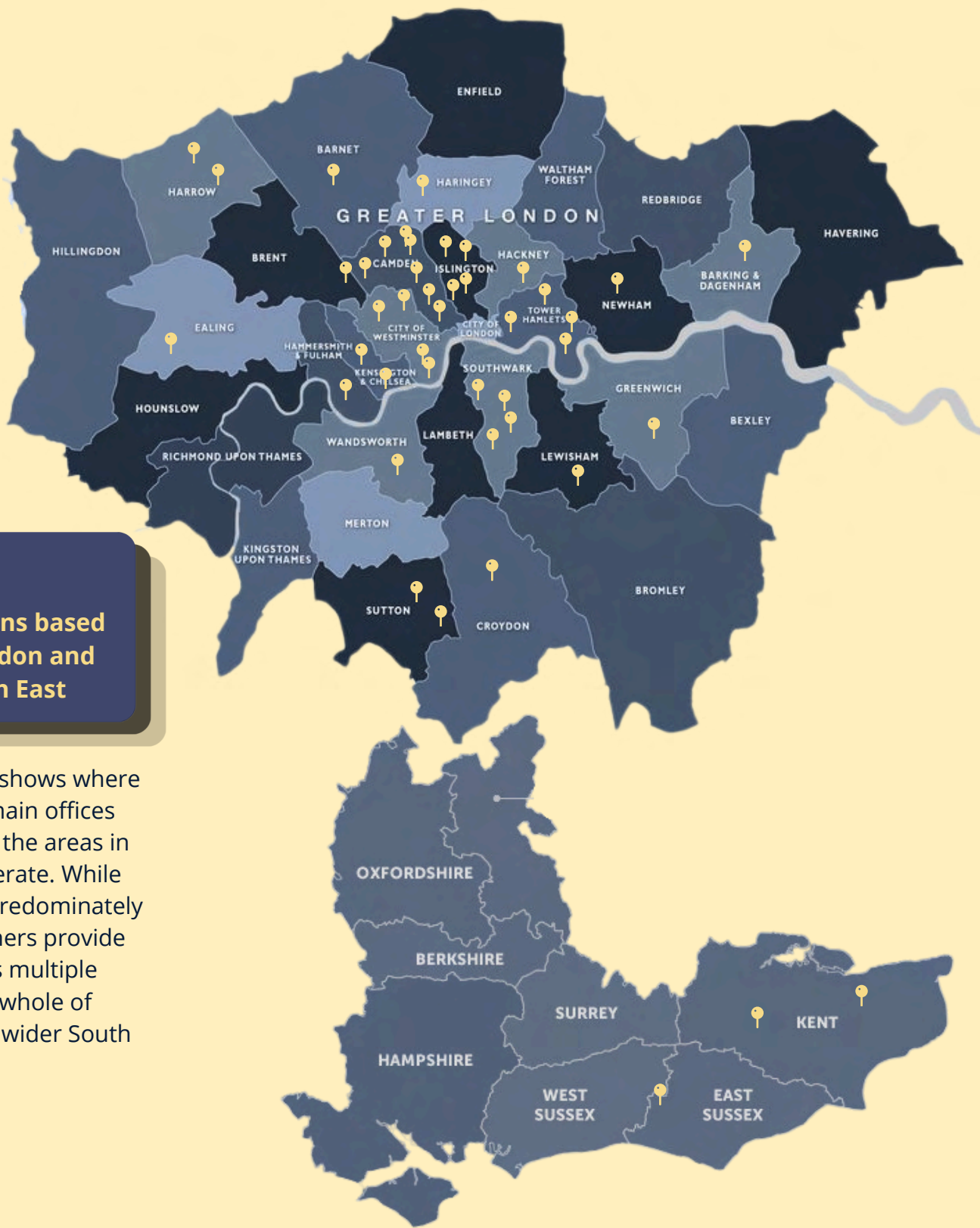
About Our Partners

Since the programme was first developed in 2014, we have been able to welcome 43 organisations into the programme. While one of our partners sadly had to close in 2025, we are proud that the remaining 42 are still working with us to this day.

The organisations range widely, from their size, to where they are based and the areas of law they work in, but they all share a common vision – that free legal advice is an essential part of ensuring access to justice and should be available to all of those who need it.

They are full of dedicated staff and volunteers, who work tirelessly, often in incredibly challenging circumstances, to try and ensure that vision becomes a reality for as many people as possible.





42
Organisations based
across London and
the South East

This map only shows where our partners main offices are based, not the areas in which they operate. While many have a predominately local focus, others provide support across multiple boroughs, the whole of London or the wider South East region.

Type of Organisation	No of Organisations
Independent Charities	26
Law Centres	11
Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)	3
Combined CAB and Law Centres	2

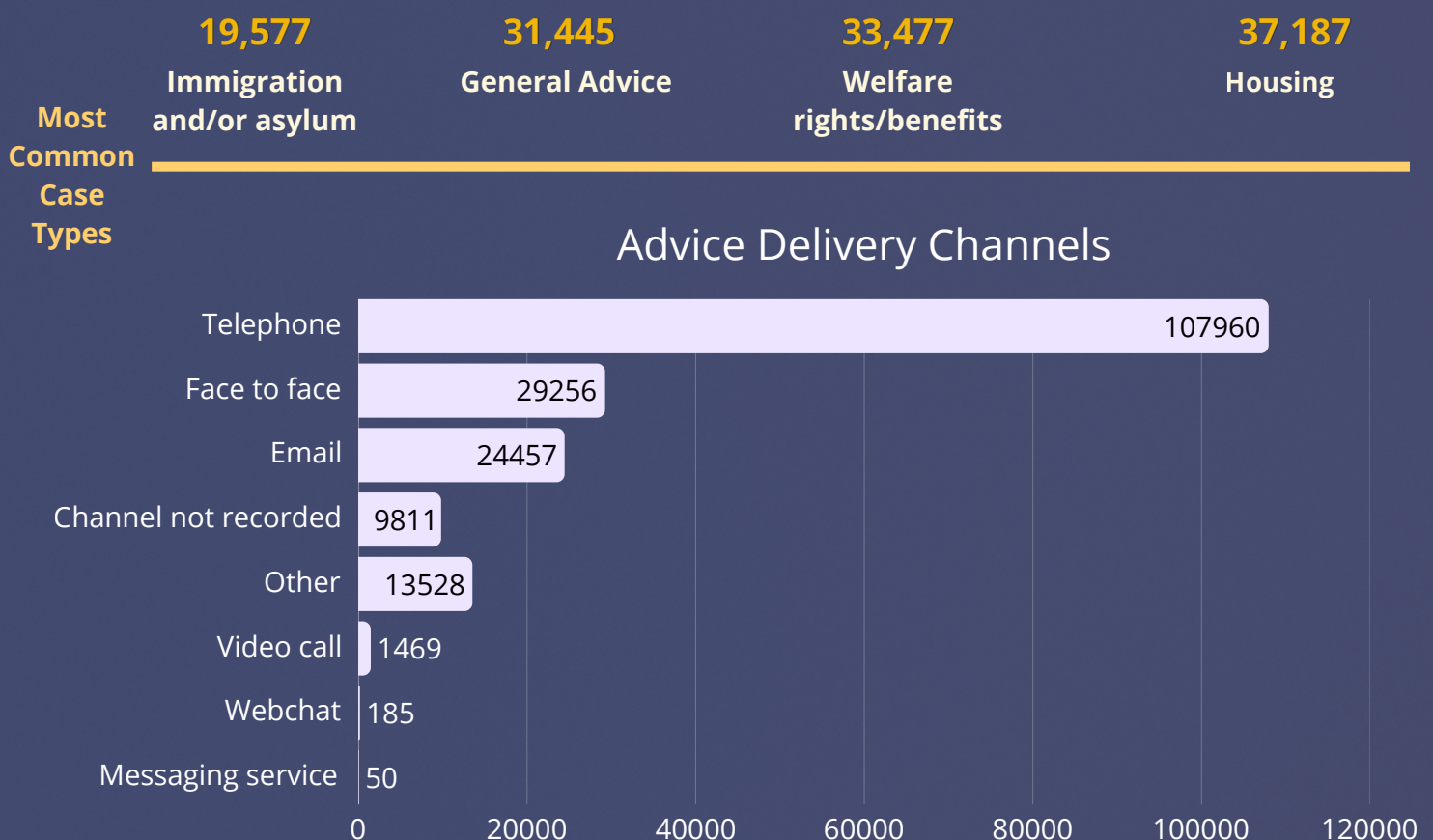
166,511 cases
in total

Demand and Service Delivery

Gathering data on demand and service delivery in the free legal advice sector comes with a range of challenges, from differences in what systems are used to what data is gathered, how it is classified and what period of time it covers. So, while the data we have from this survey should not be relied on as a completely accurate picture, it does still provide valuable insight and an indication of trends.

The 2025 survey suggests demand is increasing. Case numbers are still on the rise (166,511, up from 147,556 in 2024), but the number of individuals supported appears to be going down slightly (186,716, down from 205,146 in 2024), which may be linked to the increasing complexity of need. Trafficking, public law and community care saw some of the biggest % increases, while housing, welfare rights/benefits and general advice remain the biggest areas in terms of volume. The largest decrease was in crisis navigation cases, which went from 2671 cases in 2024 to 1816 cases in 2025, but this could be due to the way cases are being classified.

The way in which support is provided has remained fairly consistent over the last few years, with telephone support being the most common and used by over 50% of clients. Face to face support remains the second most common channel but dropped by just over 30%. There are likely to be multiple reasons for that, ranging from the rising cost of office space, clients' ability to get to a physical office and/or the rising concerns for staff safety with frequent mentions of clients presenting with more challenging behaviour and challenges created by the rise of the far right. Channels like video calls, webchats, and messaging are being used by less than 1% of clients.



Meet Sonia

Sonia, a single mother caring for her neurodivergent daughter, thought she was agreeing to full-time hours so she could secure a mortgage for their rented home, but discovered she had unknowingly signed a zero-hours contract after being pressured by her employer. With no income security and no support from her union, she felt trapped. A specialist employment solicitor from one of our COEx partners reviewed her case, identified potential discrimination, and helped her appeal. They drafted her full grievance pack and guided her through every step.

Sonia won exactly what she asked for: a guaranteed full-time contract, stability for her daughter, and the chance to finally buy their home. She described the support as “life-changing.”

Workforce

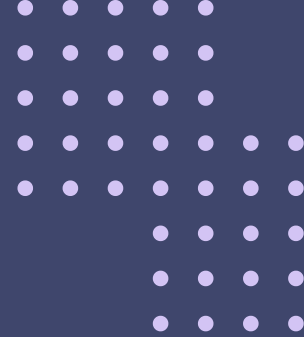


Workforce challenges in the free legal advice sector are well documented, so many of the key challenges raised in this year’s survey will not come as a surprise.

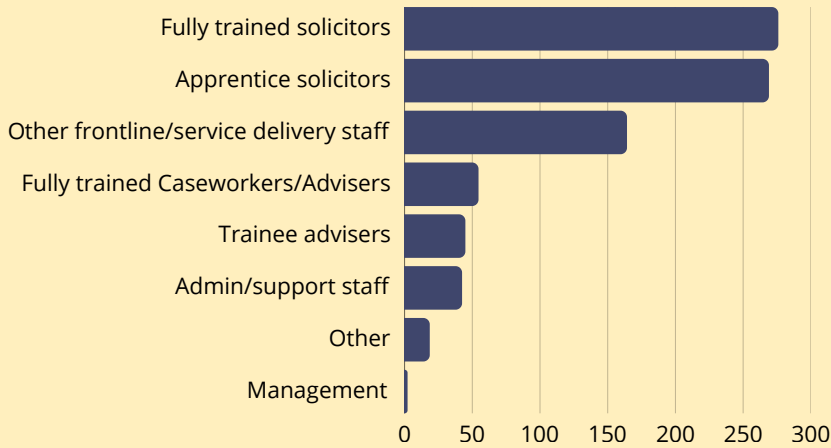
The survey data indicates that staffing levels have remained relatively stable overall, with slight decreases in total FTE staff numbers, but feedback from partners shows that recruitment and retention continue to be difficult as funding cuts and instability make it almost impossible to compete with private sector wages. The highest staff attrition rates were found amongst fully trained solicitors and trainee advisers. On a more positive note, there was a reported increase in the number of FTE volunteers, especially in the number of apprentice solicitors volunteering with our partners but this also brings the risk of them often moving on once fully qualified.

The combination of reduced resources, high caseloads and increasingly complex cases is creating unsustainable emotional and professional workloads for staff who are already at capacity, and the risk of burnout is high. And now organisations are also having to deal with the increasingly difficult political and economic environment, which is adding concerns over staff’s physical safety to those about their mental health and wellbeing.

Which makes it all the more impressive that our partners are tackling those challenges head on. Despite stretched resources, they are investing in additional security measures, improving wellbeing support for their teams and developing ‘grow your own’ programmes to help develop the next generation of social welfare solicitors and advisers.

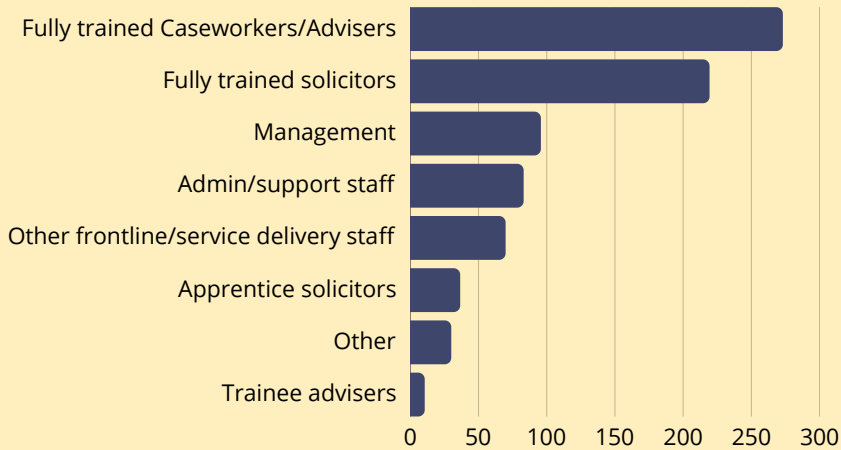


Volunteer Roles 872 FTE Volunteers



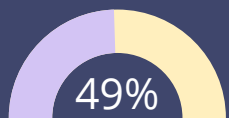
Staff Roles

818 Total FTE Staff

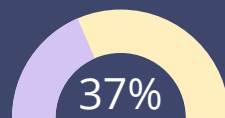


71% of organisations listed staffing as one of their top three organisational risks.

Main Challenges identified:

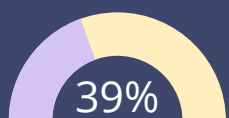


mentioned recruitment and retention



mentioned wellbeing

Main Solutions/actions taken by our COEx partners:



investing in training and support



flexible working



investing in training their own



Our staff and volunteers have been subjected to a wave of online abuse and personal threats. It was deeply unsettling for everyone involved, and for the first time in our organisation's history we had to close our offices and pause frontline services for a few days. Making that call was enormously difficult, but it showed just how volatile and hostile the environment has become for organisations working in this area. Despite all of this, our team responded with remarkable calm, courage and commitment. Their resilience during such uncertainty has been extraordinary. In the midst of all this, we moved quickly to put stronger protections in place... upgrading our infrastructure, improving online and physical security, and strengthening safeguarding for clients, staff and volunteers. We are investing in additional wellbeing and resilience, knowing how much pressure the team had been under and how essential it is to create space for people to feel supported and safe. These steps were vital, not just to protect everyone involved, but to ensure we can keep delivering high-quality, compassionate support in an increasingly challenging climate.

One of our COEx Partners

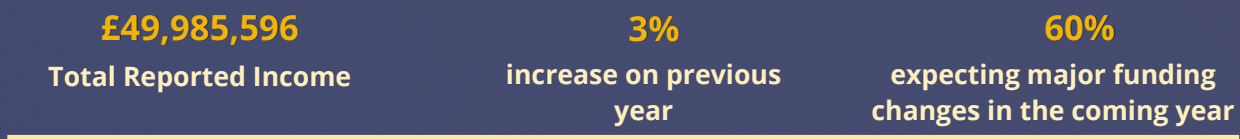
Funding and Financial Resilience

There is no doubt that funding is the stand out issue from this year’s survey with every single one of our 42 partners listing it as one of their top three organisational risks.

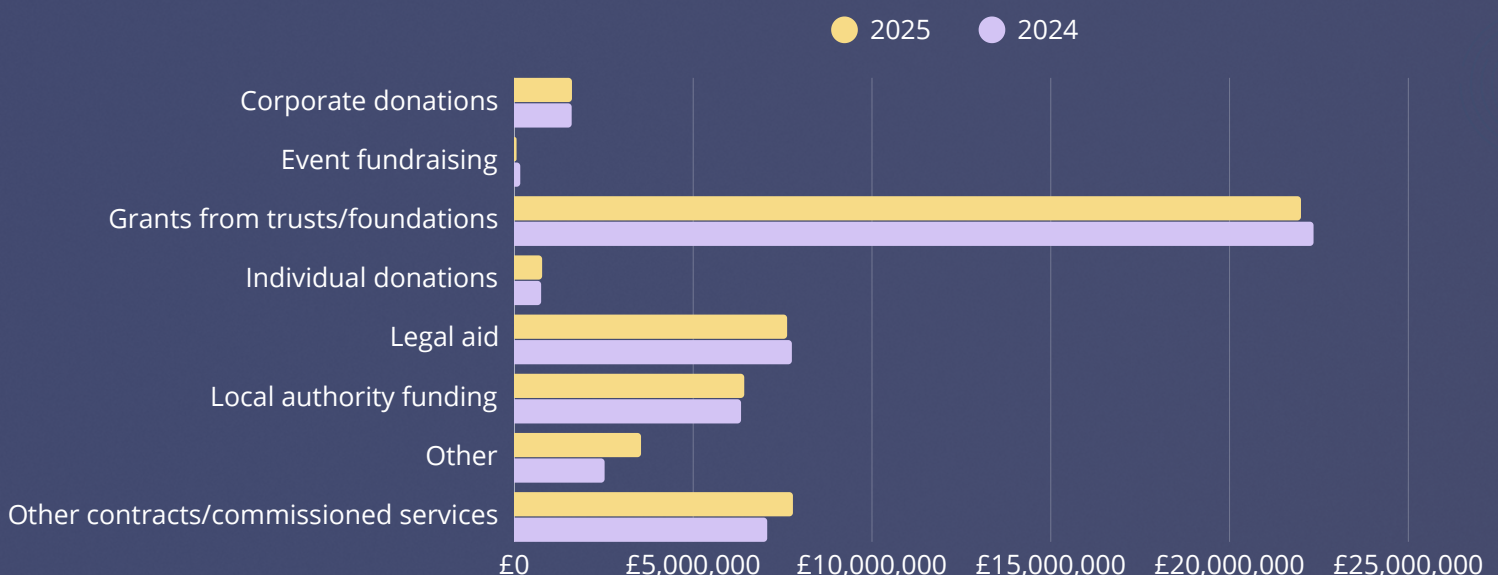
While the total income figures appear to show a relatively stable, even slightly positive picture, a total income of just under £50 million, a small 3% increase on 2024, they mask a much more concerning and unstable reality.

Around half of our partners saw their income fluctuate by less than 10% on the previous year, but the other half saw more significant changes ranging from an increase of almost 49% to a decrease of 60%. For many that was the direct result of securing new grant funding or contracts, or those same things coming to an end and demonstrates the impact that time-limited funding can have.

Grant funding remains the most significant source of funding for the sector contributing almost £22m (44%) to the total income figure with the next highest source being Legal Aid at £7.6m (15%) but both showed slight decreases on 2024.



Breakdown of income sources/comparison by year



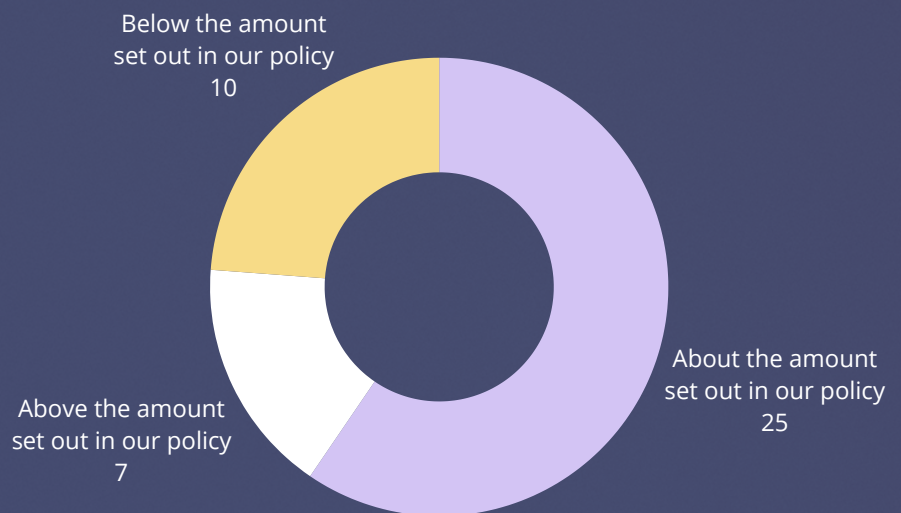
Changes in the trust and foundation landscape - shifting funder priorities, a perceived move away from funding front line delivery and intense competition for funding – mean many agencies are looking to diversify their income but individual, event and even corporate funding may struggle to generate the same levels of income, especially in the short term.

Legal Aid presented it's own challenges during the year after the Legal Aid Agency suffered a cyber breach. All of our partners who hold Legal Aid contracts were affected, primarily by the inability to bill for their time, causing cashflow and funding shortfalls but also by the additional time and resource required to deal with the administrative challenges it created. Given the different timeframes for the data we received, it's likely that the full impact of the breach has not been reflected in this year's data.

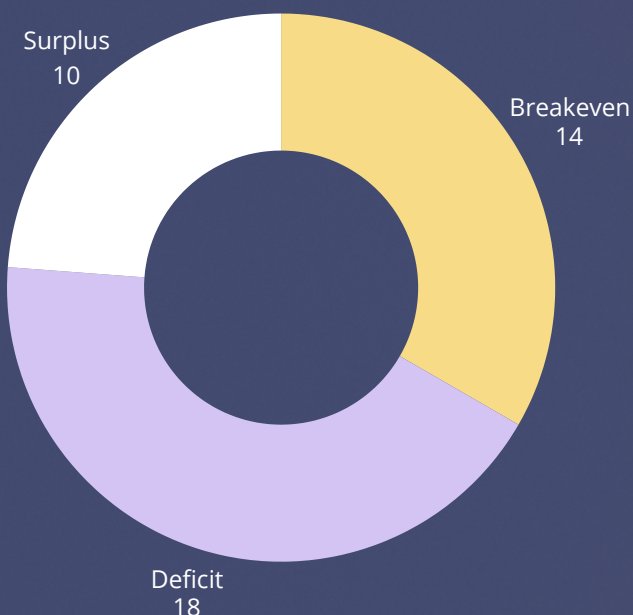
While it is reassuring in the short term that 32 out of the 42 partners report having reserves either at or above the level stated in their reserves policy, the reality is that around **60% of partners are expecting major funding changes over the next year.**

The figures on this chart show that 10 of our partners have reserves below the level set out in their policy, making them particularly susceptible to any major funding changes.

Reserve Levels



Forecast for the Next Financial Year



The figures on this chart show the majority of our partners are expecting to either breakeven or operate at a deficit in their next financial year, potentially putting extra pressure on those limited reserves.

COEx partners rated LLST an average of 9.4 out of 10 for approachability

COEx Programme Support

“COEx’s flexible core funding has played an important role in strengthening our capacity to embed lived experience across our organisation. Over the past year, this support helped us take a major step forward by co-producing our new five-year strategy with Experts by Experience, ensuring that people directly affected by poverty now shape our priorities, our advice services, and the campaigns we run.”

£420k distributed in unrestricted partnership payments

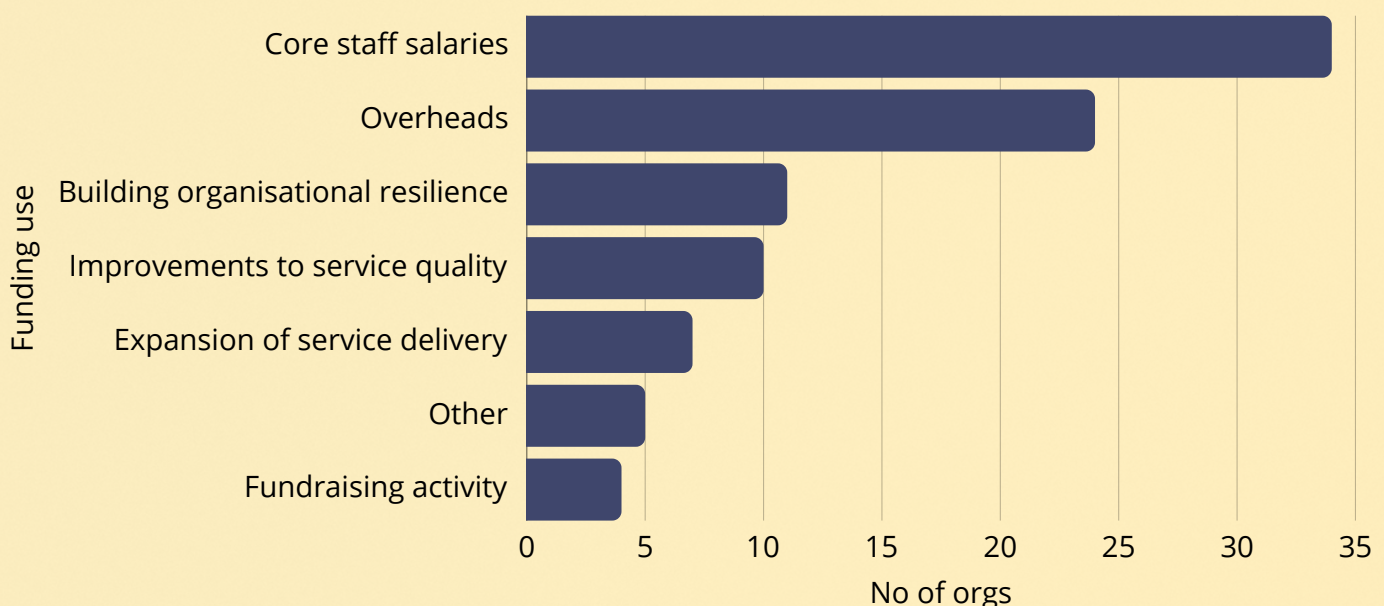
Amongst all the challenges presented during the year, LLST was proud to stand with the sector, continuing to provide unrestricted funding and offer further training, development and consultancy support.

The feedback from our partners this year confirms the benefits of providing unrestricted funding, allowing organisations to direct it where it’s needed most, whether that’s helping to expand their service delivery, improve conditions for staff or, as is that case with many, simply to cover those vital core costs that can be difficult to cover from other sources.

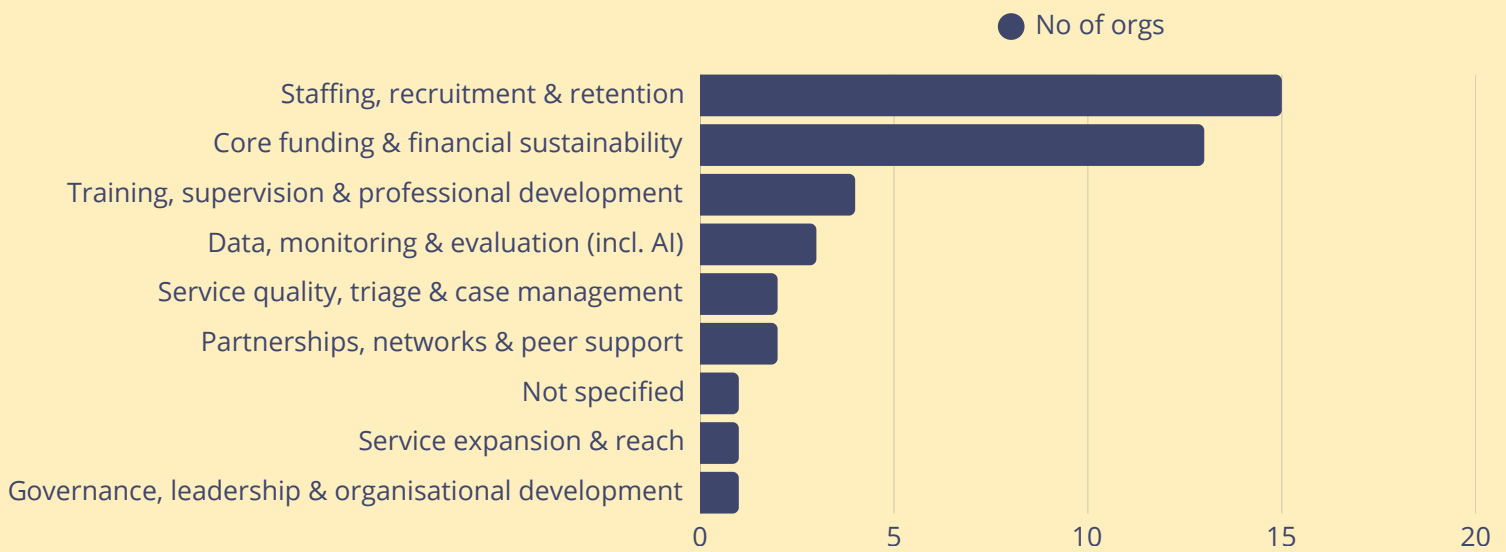
We were also delighted to see so many of our partners access additional training and consultancy support, something we know can be difficult to make time for when workloads are high and capacity is under such significant pressure. A particular highlight this year was some safeguarding training, designed specifically for our partners, allowing them to go beyond the theory into practical scenario-based discussions to build both knowledge and confidence.

While there are changes coming for the programme’s delivery model in 2026 and beyond, LLST remain committed to ensuring the core elements of our support remain – unrestricted funding, tailored training and consultancy and long-term partnerships.

How Funding was Used



Area where LLST support enabled the most significant change



125+ places have been provided on training courses, with topics ranging from project and people management to safeguarding, workforce culture, resilience and lived experience.

7 individuals have been provided with **1:1** coaching to support them in their roles and leadership responsibilities

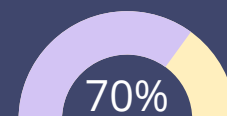
3 organisations have received organisation level consultancy support to help strengthen systems, plan for sustainability and respond to current pressures

“The training and support provided through LLST has been invaluable. Equally significant is the ongoing access that the senior team has to LLST for advice and clarification. Being able to seek guidance during periods of transition has helped us move through challenges more smoothly and maintain continuity during organisational change.”

168 individuals from 72 different organisations attended meetings of the London Specialist Advice Forum and/or Forum subgroups based around Community Care, Legal Aid Billing and Apprentices & Trainees

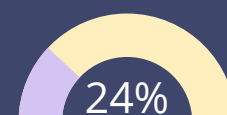
70% of partners accessed training through LLST

- Of those who did 93% found the training helpful or very helpful



24% of partners access some bespoke consultancy support

- 100% said it was helpful or very helpful

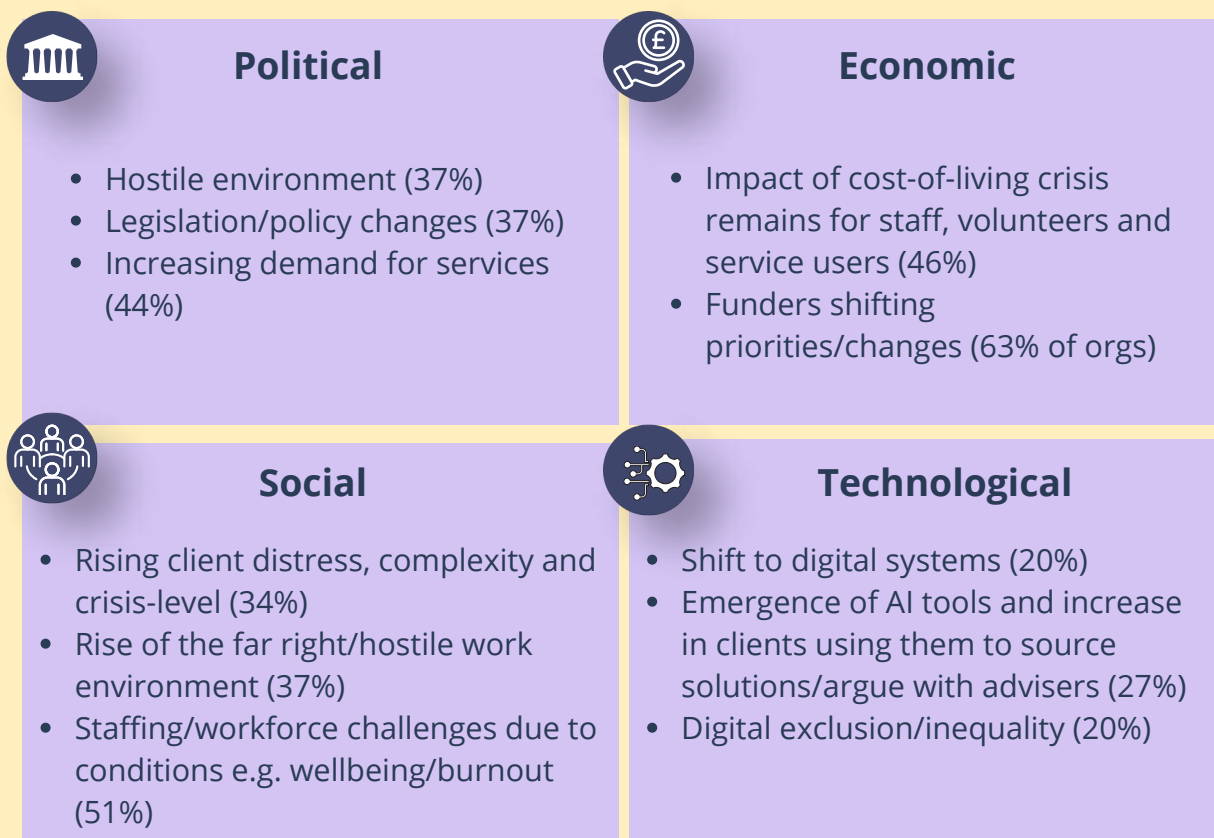


Looking ahead: Future Challenges and Opportunities

As part of the 2025 survey, we once again asked our partners about the challenges and opportunities facing their organisations. Many of the pressures identified, including funding uncertainty, policy change, rising demand and system instability, are largely beyond the direct control of individual organisations. Political decisions, commissioning models, legal aid systems and wider economic conditions shape the context in which advice is delivered, often creating additional risk and complexity for already stretched services.

But responses also showed a group of organisations with clear priorities and a commitment to tackle those challenges head on. Organisations are focused on strengthening their frontline services to better meet the demands of their clients, improving financial stability by diversifying income streams and continuing to invest in their people, systems and cultures to improve the working environment for the current and future advice workforce.

Organisational resilience alone cannot counter structural pressures. Without stable policy, funding that reflects the true cost of delivery, and systems that support access to justice, internal efforts will continue to be undermined. Sustainable change requires funders, policymakers and the sector to work together to reshape both the operating environment and the narrative around free legal advice. Advice services are an essential social infrastructure, preventing crisis, protecting rights and easing pressure on public systems, and need recognition, investment and policy support to remain effective.



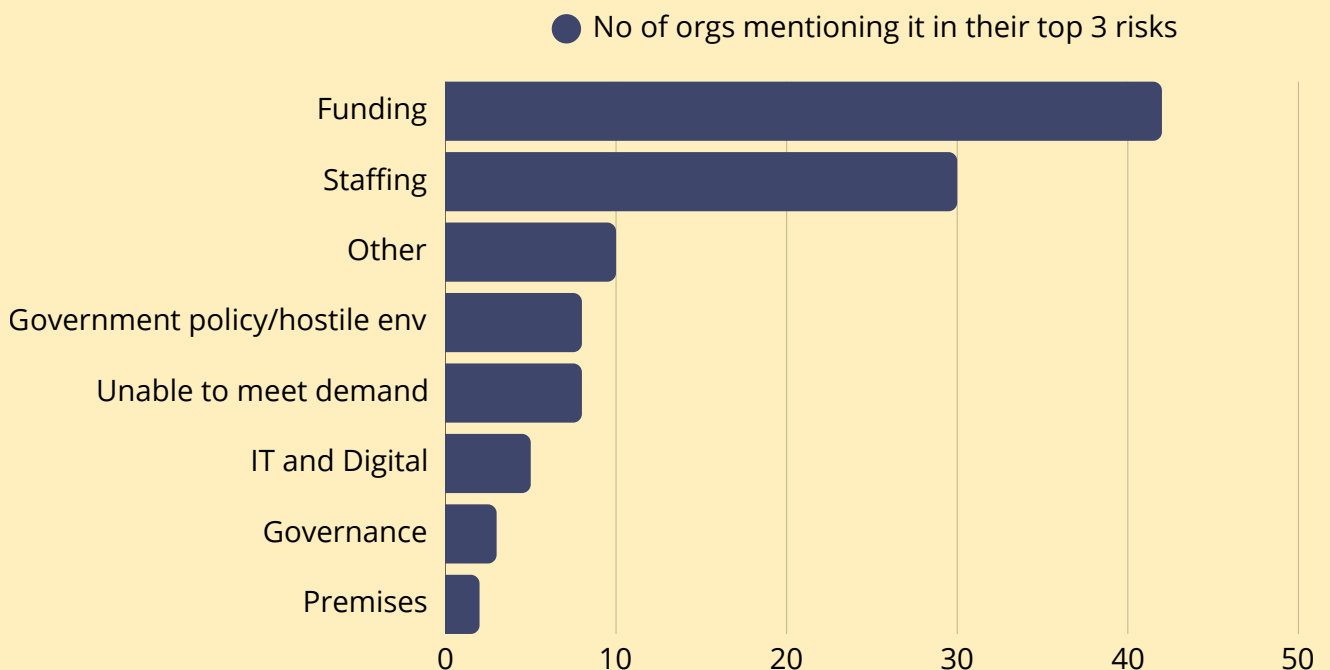
“The hostile environment continues to shape every aspect of our clients’ lives. Proposed immigration restrictions and benefit cuts, coupled with the slow rollout of renters and employment reforms, have entrenched insecurity for the people we support and increased demand for specialist legal advice. The lack of political urgency in enforcing rights means our clients face greater risk and fewer protections.”

“Staff face heightened hostility, fuelled by polarising political narratives that undermine the sector’s legitimacy. Immigration advisers are receiving safety alerts from peers due to far-right targeting. The absence of strong counter-narratives places additional emotional and professional burdens on our workforce.”

What Our Partners Would Like To See:

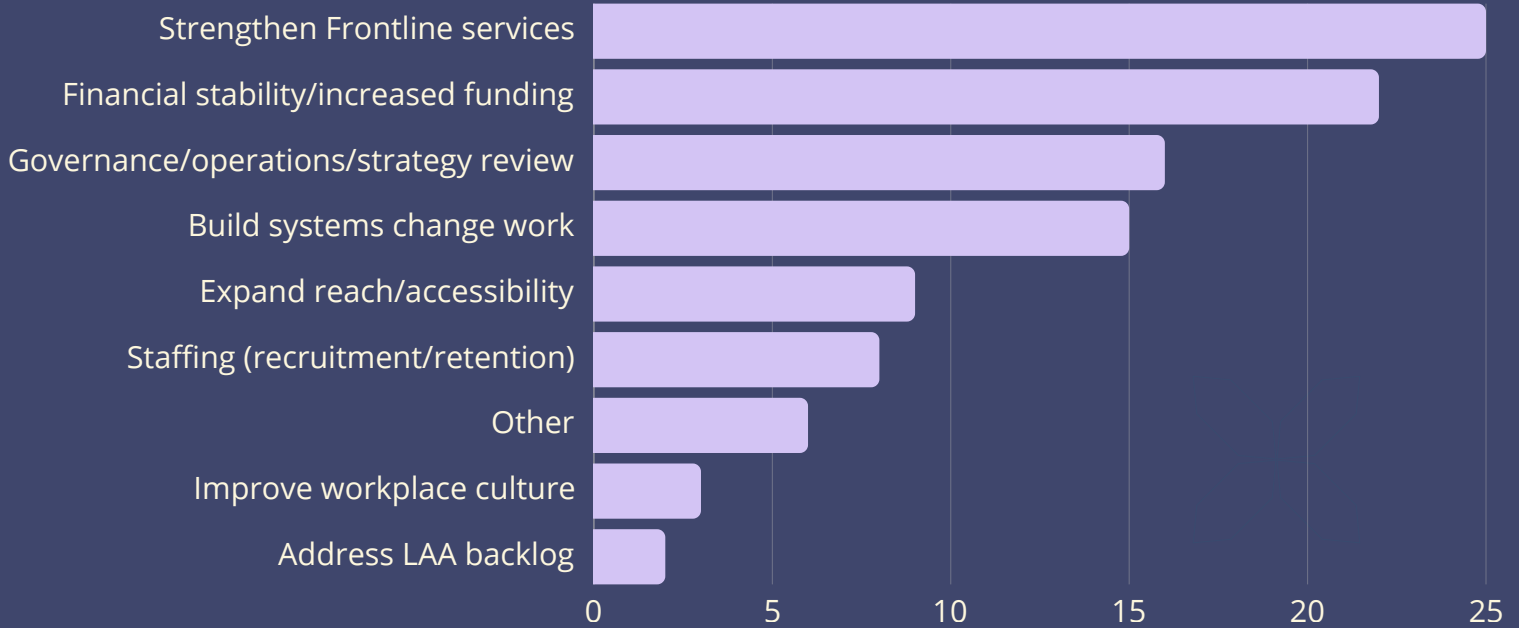


Identified Organisational Risks



Strategic Priorities for the Year Ahead

● No of orgs mentioning



Despite the pressures facing the wider sector, we achieved significant impact over the past year: Provided vital support to more than 5,500 people, expanding our work across employment, housing and immigration, and reducing reliance on pro bono support by strengthening in-house expertise; Secured and moved into long-term, sustainable premises, ensuring financial efficiency and improved accessibility for clients; Gained national and regional recognition for excellence, including two immigration caseworkers shortlisted for the LALYs, strong LEXCEL results, an award for our economic justice work and new funding from the Home Office and through community engagement.

- One of our COEx Partners

Introducing the Legal Advice Sustainability Scheme

2026 marks a pivotal transition point for the Centres of Excellence programme.

Following an independent review in 2024 and more than a decade of learning from working closely with partners, London Legal Support Trust has been preparing the next phase of long-term support for the free legal advice sector. This work will culminate in the refresh and relaunch of the programme as the Legal Advice Sustainability Scheme (LASS) — a name chosen by partners to better reflect its aims.

LASS builds on the elements of COEx that partners consistently tell us work best, unrestricted funding, trust-based relationships and tailored organisational support, while introducing a clearer, more structured and sustainable framework. The approach is intended to balance depth with reach: enabling intensive support where it is most needed while fostering collaboration, shared responsibility and collective learning across the wider network.

We recognise that this is not a moment for a sudden change in a sector already under significant strain. Our guiding principle for the transition is stability. Existing COEx partners will receive two to three years of transition funding, alongside continued access to training, consultancy and peer learning, to support their move into the new programme model. This phased approach is designed to provide breathing space, enable forward planning and avoid destabilisation as LASS is introduced.

New partners will be welcomed through focused cohort-based rounds, offering five year funding and consultancy support packages, the first of which will open later in 2026. Existing partners will join a more structured LASS Alumni Network, with access to unrestricted funding, ongoing development support and opportunities to shape shared priorities and collective responses to emerging challenges.

As this report shows, the challenges facing advice organisations cannot be addressed by individual programmes acting alone. LASS is therefore designed not only as a funding and support programme, but as part of a broader effort to strengthen the sector's collective voice, resilience and capacity.

For updates and further details, please visit LLST's website or sign up to our newsletter.



Notes and Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to...

- All 42 of our COEx partners for their time and care in submitting the data. A full list of our partner agencies can be found [here](#)
- Our consultant, Phil Jew, who has been part of the COEx Annual Survey since it started in 2020 and provided valuable ongoing support, expertise and insight.
- City Bridge Foundation and the National Lottery who have provided funding for the COEx Programme. Their support is hugely appreciated.

About The Data

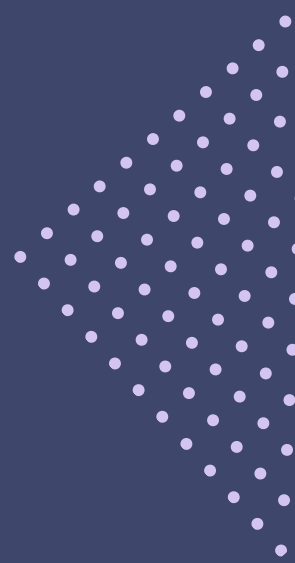
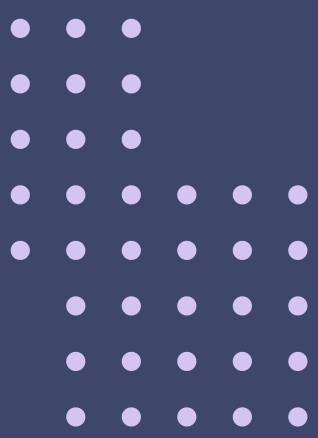
The survey was carried out using Survey Monkey and was split into 4 parts covering Services, Staffing and Governance; Planning, Risk and Strategic Objectives; Finance and Funding; LLST Support.

The format of the survey has been kept relatively consistent since it started in 2020 but has been subject to adaptations in an attempt to make it easier for respondents to complete, and for us to analyse the data.

While the survey is primarily used to inform LLST's own support offer, this report draws out key insights from the findings that we believe are of broader interest. It does not present the full dataset, but a selection of themes and observations relevant to the wider sector.

Caveats

- Obtaining consistent data from advice services is a major challenge. We work with a broad range of organisations, many of whom use different databases, case management systems, taxonomy and definitions.
- While the figures provided by each partner are for a full year, the actual start and end of each statistical and financial year agencies have reported on does vary.
- The data requested for this report, on people advised, channels used, and cases opened under different areas of law has been aggregated to produce overall figures but we know that there are differences in how agencies define and record their advice work, that different people interpret questions differently and that cases often cover a complex mix of areas.
- We trust that our partners will, to the best of their ability, submit accurate data. Where there were obvious outliers, these have been checked where possible and we have worked with external consultants to sense check the analysis, but it is possible that unidentified errors may have been made in both survey returns and analysis.
- It would therefore be unwise to rely on the figures presented as completely accurate and robust. They do, however, provide a good insight into the sector and a reasonable indication of trends.



1 Lady Hale Gate, London, WC1X 8BS

020 7092 3974

info@llst.org.uk

londonlegalsupporttrust.org.uk