



Ministry  
of Justice

MINUTES

## LEGAL SUPPORT STRATEGY DELIVERY GROUP

Conference Room 14, 102 Petty France and MS Teams

14:00-17:00 Thursday 29 January 2026

**Members present:** Cathryn Hannah (Deputy Director, Legal Support and Additional Funding, Ministry of Justice—Chair); Amanda Finlay (Legal and Advice Sector Roundtable); Ash Patel (Justice Programme, Nuffield Foundation); Chris Minnoch (Legal Aid Practitioners Group); Clare Carter (Access to Justice Foundation); Claire Driffield (Citizens Advice); Elizabeth Price (Welsh Government); Julie Bishop (Law Centres Network); Lindsey Poole (Advice Services Alliance); Liz Bayram (AdviceUK); Dr Liz Curran (Nottingham Trent University); Mr Justice Robin Knowles (Legal and Advice Sector Roundtable); Dr Sarah Stephens (University of Sussex / Online Procedure Rule Committee); Stephen Mayson (University College London Researcher); David McNeill (The Law Society, deputising for Lucy Dennett—Item 1); Elizabeth Mahoney (Greater London Authority, deputising for Daniel Drillsma-Milgrom); Rose Holmes (Bar Council, deputising for Phil Robertson); Tyrone Steele (JUSTICE, deputising for Fiona Rutherford)

**Additional Attendees:** Sarah Sackman MP KC (Minister of State for Courts and Legal Services—Item 1); Clare MacDonald (Director, Legal Aid and Legal Support, Ministry of Justice—Item 1); Ministry of Justice Legal Support Policy Team; Ministry of Justice Legal Services Policy Team—Item 1; Ellie Cronin (The Law Society)

**Apologies:** Daniel Drillsma-Milgrom (Greater London Authority); Fiona Rutherford (JUSTICE); Professor Dame Hazel Genn (University College London Researcher); Lucy Dennett OBE (The Law Society); Dr Natalie Byrom (Independent Policy Researcher); Phil Robertson (Bar Council)

### 1. Welcome, opening remarks and discussion with the Minister

1.1 The were no declarations of interest.

1.2 The Chair welcomed all attendees to the meeting and introduced Minister Sackman.

- 1.3 The Minister thanked attendees for their continued engagement through the Group and acknowledged the importance of early intervention and early legal support to help people resolve their social welfare issues and improve outcomes.
- 1.4 The Minister recognised that funding was the biggest challenge facing the sector and referred to the announcement in December 2025 of almost £20m of new multi-year funding for legal support.
- 1.5 The Minister said that legal support operates in the wider access to justice context, including access to legal aid. She outlined Ministry of Justice commitments, including: an additional £34 million a year for criminal legal aid advocates; an additional £92 million per year for criminal legal aid solicitor fee schemes; and £20 million per year, once fully implemented, for immigration and housing legal aid fees. She also noted that non-means-tested legal aid is being expanded to bereaved families at all inquests where a public authority is an interested person. The Minister advised that work is underway to rebuild the system following the cyber-attack on the Legal Aid Agency and - over the course of the Parliament - work would be undertaken to transform the delivery of legal aid to make it easier for users both to access it, and for firms to provide legal aid services.
- 1.6 Minister Sackman also advised that she and the Legal Support Policy team are engaging across government to try to improve co-ordination, focusing on areas where the most tangible impact can be made.
- 1.7 In discussion, the following points were made by the Group:
- The quality of initial decision making by public bodies impacted demand for social welfare advice.
  - Access to legal support is partly dependent on the geographical spread of services. Ensuring access through a combination of physical locations and remote provision is key.
  - Fragmented government funding can be difficult to access for advice services. Government contracts are often for large geographic areas which prevents smaller local advice organisations from applying.
  - The link between legal support and legal aid should be better articulated.
  - Some legal aid transformation work was brought forward in tandem with rebuilding following the cyber-attack. The Ministry of Justice would continue to assess remaining contingency measures as outstanding internal processes and systems are restored.
  - Areas of cross-government engagement which may have the most tangible impact may include: co-location of advice services; better understanding of the current spread and desired outcomes of government funding of advice; and better use of data across government to demonstrate the impact of advice services.

## 2. Workplan and forward look workshop

- 2.1 The Chair introduced the workshop, which focused on a series of break out discussions to develop the Group's workplan and forward look for 2026. The breakout discussions focused on the themes of service delivery, data and evidence, and funding.
- 2.2 Service delivery breakout discussion points
- 2.2.1 It would be helpful to have a clearer understanding of existing good practice. The new grant evaluation should contribute to this.
- 2.2.2 Delivering the new legal support grant from October 2026 should be the baseline deliverable. The aims of the grant must be proportionate to the amount of funding available. Distribution of funding should consider the outputs of the Group's Task and Finish Group, areas where funding is most needed, and the reach of the grant.
- 2.2.3 The Group may wish to undertake deep dives on different service delivery models / methods / modes, across the full client journey.
- 2.2.4 The Group should discuss the risks and opportunities associated with emerging technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) in detail, with contributions from the Access to Justice Foundation and Advice Services Alliance who are already working in this area.
- 2.2.5 The Group should consider pathways to accessing advice, including online, co-location of advice in public services and the use of trusted intermediaries or other actors (e.g. banks) that could provide initial support. Work in Scotland on holistic approaches and the 'no wrong door' model, as well as learning from the Welsh model, should be considered.
- 2.2.6 HMCTS signposting could be improved to help people navigate courts and tribunals. HMCTS is hosting a public engagement day at the end of March, which may be useful for some members to attend.
- 2.2.7 The Group should consider how to improve lines of communication with sector-led groups to escalate issues impacting service delivery more effectively.
- 2.2.8 It may be helpful for the Group, or a sub-set of the Group, to hold a meeting focussed on the link between legal support and legal aid, with input from legal aid colleagues.
- 2.2.9 Service delivery is a cross-cutting issue that requires engagement across-government and with local authorities. Engagement with other government departments would need to focus on where it could have the greatest impact, which could include: co-location, NHS 10-year plan, Best Start Family Hubs, Devolution Bill and Renters Rights. JUSTICE are publishing a blueprint paper (based on its JUSTICE North project) on justice system devolution and what success looks like on 30<sup>th</sup> April.

2.2.10 The Ministry of Justice should consider convening spaces for local level initiatives to share best practice and build capacity across the sector. This could include learning from the advice strategy developed in Liverpool.

2.2.11 It was suggested that it could be beneficial to explore improvements to initial public sector decision making, which could focus on improving communications or processes from initial decision through to appeal. However, it was acknowledged that this was outside the remit of this Group.

### 2.3 Data and evidence breakout discussion points

2.3.1 The focus should be on building the evidence base on effective interventions, particularly from the client's perspective.

2.3.2 The independent evaluation of the new legal support grant will examine effective interventions, why they are successful and for whom. A grant advisory group is being set up to assist and the data collected through the outcomes framework would help build the evidence. Consideration will be given to data requirements on funded organisations to ensure they have capacity to engage with the research element of the grant.

2.3.3 In order to build the evidence base, consideration should be given to how to improve data capability across the sector. The Advice Services Alliance is exploring how to ensure small organisations have the right infrastructure to engage with data collection and sharing. An additional consideration is whether more could be done to help the disparate case management systems used across the sector interact more productively.

2.3.4 Mechanising data collection processes would help embed data and evidence in frontline practice. Having mechanised data collection processes would give organisations the space to engage with specific research questions or projects on top of the baseline data collection.

2.3.5 Often, client consent forms do not ask for consent to research. The Advice Quality Standard is being refreshed and will include updates on permissions to share data.

2.3.6 Insights that the Ministry of Justice or funders obtain from the data provided by frontline organisations should be communicated back to the sector to help share best practice.

2.3.7 The majority of members were supportive of the work on outcomes, however there was some concern raised about whether it should be a priority. Those in support of prioritising work on outcomes suggested that the Ministry of Justice should engage with Best Start Family Hubs and the Department of Health and Social Care to align wellbeing metrics. The Group may wish to further discuss specific metrics for inclusion in the outcomes framework.

- 2.3.8 Some members felt that further exploration of legal need should be a priority, whereas others disagreed. Those in favour said data should be collected on the amount of legal need generated by the practices and decision making of other government departments to demonstrate their impact on individuals and the sector. Data on legal need and poverty should be considered in tandem as part of cross government engagement. Nuffield Foundation have commissioned the World Justice Project to examine unmet legal need and the gap between supply and demand. An interim report is due in 2026.
- 2.3.9 Existing data sets should be used to demonstrate how advice can help deliver on the priorities of other government departments and local authorities. There should also be better join up between the Ministry of Justice and its agencies to identify any data and evidence gaps.
- 2.3.10 Building legal capability could help address unexpressed legal need. The Group should be informed of, and, where appropriate aligned with, the work of the Attorney General's Public Legal Education Committee.
- 2.3.11 It would be helpful to understand what data is collected by the Solicitors Regulation Authority and their approach to data sharing.
- 2.3.12 JUSTICE were hosting roundtables as part of the co-design of their work on local provision and the legal support policy team should be invited.
- 2.4 Funding breakout discussion points
- 2.4.1 Funding is decreasing across the sector. Funding is fundamental to achieving any improvements for the sector, so new and alternative funding is required. The merger of local authorities may lead to a further decrease in funding.
- 2.4.2 Work should be undertaken to improve funder co-ordination. Adoption of the co-developed outcomes framework could help with this. Consideration should be given to funding models across government and ways to use or pool funding more strategically. The Ministry of Justice should explore lessons learned from the Single Advice Fund in Wales.
- 2.4.3 Regional contracts, such as those used by the Money and Pensions Service, preclude applications from small local advice organisations as they do not have the regional reach.
- 2.4.4 It would be helpful to understand the legislative framework for Ministry of Justice grants.
- 2.4.5 The value of legal support should be comprehensively demonstrated to HM Treasury.
- 2.4.6 Workforce issues are mostly driven by funding. Some members, therefore, felt workforce should be de-prioritised in the workplan for 2026.

## 2.5 Strategic forward look

- 2.5.1 In order for members to make meaningful contributions to the workplan, it would be helpful to better understand its remit to engage in co-design. Development of a strategy document would help with this and would help to measure progress against deliverables. It would also help to raise awareness of the Group's work and promote collaboration with the sector.
- 2.5.2 A strategy should be based on a problem statement, long term vision and theory of change. This would help to articulate the aims of each strand of the workplan.
- 2.5.3 The primary focus of the group should be on the needs of service users. Therefore, it would be helpful to better understand where legal support fits into the Ministry of Justice's broader plans for access to justice and overall departmental aims. Co-ordination with legal aid is important to ensure quality services and pathways are available to system users.

## 2.6 Next steps

- 2.6.1 The Legal Support Policy team would update the workplan and create a forward look for 2026, which would be circulated to members for agreement. The next meeting would include a session on developing a problem statement and theory of change for the Group.

## 3. **AOB**

- 3.1.1 The Ministry of Justice was consulting on the introduction of an Interest on Lawyers' Client Accounts scheme. Members were encouraged to respond to the consultation and the Chair would meet with members individually if requested.
- 3.1.2 Some members felt there was scope to make better use of the LSSDG to help shape early thinking on issues relating to legal support policy and the wider legal support ecosystem, and to provide a sounding board on how best to present any related consultation proposals to the sector.

**Legal Support Strategy Team  
February 2026**