



Supporting small advice organisations working with London's ethnically diverse communities

**A short investigation into organisations' challenges
and support needs**

April 2021

advice services alliance

The umbrella body for independent advice services in the UK

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While the Advice Services Alliance led on this project, the research has been undertaken by two independent researchers, Tessa Awe and Anita Sangha. They have worked extremely hard and in very challenging circumstances to complete it within a tight timetable.

The research has been guided and overseen by an advisory group made up of leaders within advice organisations that work with diverse communities:

- Jacqueline Carr – Citizens Advice Brent
- Nezahat Cihan – London Legal Support Trust
- Barbara Drozdowicz – East European Resource Centre
- Misak Ohanian – Centre for Armenian Information and Advice
- Enrique Saenz – Latin American House
- Taylan Sahbaz – Day-Mer Turkish and Kurdish Community Centre

The group's insights and guidance have been invaluable, enabling us to produce a fuller and more genuine reflection of the experiences of those within the sector whose voices are so often unheard. We recognise that their involvement in this work has required taking time away from frontline delivery which, as the report shows, is particularly difficult for such organisations.

Of course, none of this report would have been possible without those people, whose contributions are anonymous here, who took time out of their busy day jobs to answer our survey and/or take part in interviews. We thank you and sincerely hope that this report will support you in your essential work with some of the most excluded communities in London.

The report is published by the Advice Services Alliance and the responsibility for any errors or omissions is ours and ours alone.

Lindsey Poole, Director
Advice Services Alliance

Summary of main findings and recommendations

This report examines the position of advice services working with diverse communities in London in early 2021. Through a survey of advice organisations and a series of interviews with practitioners from Black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds,¹ we provide a snapshot of the challenges facing such services as we move into the post-Covid-19 world.

The key challenges include:

- practical matters relating to managing demand from communities hit hardest by the health and socio-economic impacts of Covid-19
- the difficulties of providing advice through digital media and by telephone
- lack of opportunity to tap into support networks
- a need for greater capacity to develop staff to match advice need and/or funder requirements.

The report indicates that the gap in resources between mainstream advice organisations and those working with diverse communities has widened. Over three-quarters of organisations targeting diverse communities in our survey had an annual turnover of less than £300,000, compared to less than one-third of mainstream organisations. These challenges compound, serving to further widen the gap.

The fundamental questions raised by this research regard ongoing sustainability. These are linked closely to a lack of long-term funding opportunities. The main challenges identified in relation to workforce development were difficulties with digital skills training, developing areas of specialist knowledge on a range of advice and policy issues, recruiting skilled staff and improving team working across organisations.

Within this context, advice services working with diverse communities have minimal capacity to engage in strategic planning and fundraising, let alone participate in platforms that would enable them to influence policy or to share best practice. There was support for more networking opportunities providing it is democratically run, well-funded and is useful by filling the gaps identified by the organisations themselves.

Our respondents felt strongly that the skills, abilities and knowledge they brought to the sector were undervalued and their work was rarely judged on its own terms. The work undertaken is often very complex, requiring good language skills and understanding of cultural issues. Quality assurance and standards assessment do not measure such criteria, and the lack of a recognised standard can marginalise organisations from funding opportunities and networks.

¹ Please see page 11 for a discussion of the terminology used in this report.

Recommendations

The advice sector

- All advice organisations should reassess their relationship to groups working with diverse communities, recognising the critical role the latter play in providing access to justice for people facing the greatest impacts from austerity and Covid-19. Relationships must extend beyond ‘sub-contractor’ or ‘trusted intermediary’ to one of mutual respect and understanding for different approaches and complementary skills.
- Consider examining referral routes and local networks that provide a mutual exchange of knowledge and information between local advice providers; larger organisations should share expertise in areas such as digital skills or raising funding, while organisations working with diverse communities should share knowledge of language and cultural issues.
- The Advice Services Alliance should examine the role of the Advice Quality Standard in excluding some advice services, and investigate whether the development of a ‘scaffold’ quality assurance mechanism will enable more organisations working with diverse communities to access recognised standards.

Trusts, foundations and other key funders

- Trusts, foundations and other key funders should examine the criteria and application processes for allocating funding to the advice sector to ensure that organisations working with diverse communities are not systematically excluded or overlooked.
- Funders, local government and other stakeholders should consider allocating additional funding and other resources to respond to the needs of organisations that have been left behind through previous funding arrangements. This could, for example, include a ‘management capacity’ supplement or consultancy support for diverse communities along the lines of ‘funding plus’.
- Trust for London should consider funding a network for advice services working with diverse communities. In the short term, it should be well-funded, responsive to need, and democratically designed and delivered. It should be tasked with improving the capacity of advice organisations working with diverse communities, raising their profile across the wider sector and increasing their participation in strategic debates.

Research

- Future research should explore beneficiary needs and challenges in more depth to gain an enhanced understanding of the role of the organisations supporting them, and what these organisations may need in order to operate sustainably. Future research could also explore the issues raised in this report outside of London.

1. Introduction

Challenges facing the advice sector in 2021

The past year has been an extraordinary and difficult time for everyone, putting pressure on those organisations that normally support communities. The coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic hit Londoners particularly hard, and the lockdowns have had a massive impact on people in poor housing and low paid or insecure work, many of whom are from diverse Black, Asian or ethnic minority communities. The measures put in place by the government to support people through the worst of the pandemic have provided some relief, but many are still experiencing changes in their circumstances that mean they need to seek advice from social welfare advice organisations.

A report by the Advice Services Alliance in 2020² highlighted how many small voluntary organisations offering advice services were working with people from diverse communities. Evidence is also emerging that smaller organisations that provide advice and essential support to people from ethnically diverse, refugee and migrant communities have been hit hardest by both the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and historic funding cuts to the advice sector over the last two decades.³

Research by the Small Charities Coalition demonstrates this clearly,⁴ showing that:

- 43% of small charities project they will lose more than half of their annual income as a result of the Covid-19 crisis
- only 18% of small charities say their finances will not be affected.

Further research by the Ubele Initiative found that, based on NCVO standards, nine out of 10 micro and small Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) organisations did not have enough reserves to sustain activities for their beneficiaries for more than three months during the first lockdown of 2020.⁵ Based on the organisations surveyed, this would mean 20,000 people losing access to support.

Racial inequality in the charity sector as a whole is evident. The *Pay and Equalities Survey 2018* published by the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) found that just 3%

² Advice Services Alliance. (2020). *Advising Londoners: An evaluation of the provision of social welfare advice across London*. Available at: <https://asauk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Advising-Londoners-Report-30072020-1.pdf> (Accessed: 23/03/21)

³ Refugee Action. (2017/18). *Tipping the scales: Access to Justice in the Asylum System*. Available at: <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Access-to-Justice-July-18-1.pdf> (Accessed: 19/01/21)

⁴ Small Charities Coalition. *The impact of Covid-19 on small charities* Available at: <https://smallcharitiesdata.org/insight/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-small-charities/> (Accessed: 15/03/21)

⁵ Ubele Initiative. (2020). *Impact of Covid-19 on the BAME community and voluntary sector*. Available at: <https://www.ubele.org/news/2020/4/30/9-out-of-10-bame-micro-and-small-organisations-set-to-close-if-the-crisis-continues-beyond-3-months-following-the-lockdown> (Accessed: 01/04 2021)

of charity sector chief executives belonged to a group facing racial discrimination. At the board level, just 8% of all charity sector trustees came from such backgrounds in 2017.^{6,7,8}

Context for this study

Within the advice sector, the lack of diversity at a strategic level is fundamentally detrimental to the sector as a whole and to people seeking support. The Advice Services Alliance's own report in 2020⁹ found that many small and micro-organisations such as faith groups, and cultural and community centres, are based in diverse communities and are giving advice, but are not formally networked into the wider advice sector. As a result, their experiences, challenges and expertise are not reflected in wider strategies and they are unable to influence decision-making within the sector.

Opportunities for these smaller and diverse groups to influence decision-making, challenge policy and advocate on behalf of the people they support are limited. Without these organisations' involvement, strategic level discussions cannot reflect their experiences or address any concerns they may have, nor can they incorporate these groups' expertise and cultural sensitivity into decision-making or service provision at the front lines. This ultimately perpetuates the exclusion, isolation and challenges facing smaller advice organisations and the communities they serve.

Following the revelations around the #CharitySoWhite movement in 2019, and an increased emphasis on tackling racial inequality – both internally within organisations and across the sector as a whole – the advice sector has yet to explore this issue specifically, or to examine how it manifests in terms of the challenges faced by smaller organisations working with diverse communities. Where efforts to have this conversation do occur, they can often be tokenistic and lack genuine impact in addressing racial equality in the sector.

In addition, the smaller and diverse organisations that equality, diversity and inclusion strategies seek to empower can often be relegated to the role of 'victim', rather than treated as skilled practitioners. As a result, they are not recognised for their valuable ability to provide people with targeted, culturally sensitive and responsive support. It is assumed they need help identifying best practice, rather than having a role in shaping and *sharing* best practice within the wider social welfare advice sector.

⁶ ACEVO. (2018). *Pay and Equalities Survey 2018*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.acevo.org.uk/2018/02/pay-and-equalities-survey-2018/>

⁷ Charity Commission. (2017). *Taken on trust: The awareness and effectiveness of charity trustees in England and Wales*. [Online]. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/658766/20171113_Taken_on_Trust_awareness_and_effectiveness_of_charity_trustees.pdf (Accessed: 15/03/21)

⁸ ACEVO. (2020). *Trustee racial diversity*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.acevo.org.uk/2020/03/trustee-racial-diversity/> (Accessed: 26/04/21)

⁹ Advice Services Alliance. (2020). *Advising Londoners: An evaluation of the provision of social welfare advice across London*. [Online]. Available at: <https://asauk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Advising-Londoners-Report-30072020-1.pdf> (Accessed: 15/03/21)

This investigation comes at a time when the advice sector is under an unprecedented level of strain. The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a rise in demand for advice, and this demand is now substantially more complex, as the following data shows.

- 2.2 million people are expected to be unemployed by the end of the year according to the government's spending watchdog, the Office for Budget Responsibility.¹⁰
- Changes in the housing system and increased reliance on benefits saw the number of people on Universal Credit rise from three million in March 2020 to 5.8 million by November 2020.¹¹
- Domestic abuse has increased during the pandemic, with the UK's National Domestic Abuse Helpline receiving 49% more calls by the third week of the first lockdown.¹²

In response to this increase in demand, advice services have had to quickly learn, adapt and move online to support clients. However, not all communities have been affected in the same way. Across the country, the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on Black and Asian communities, who are more likely to contract the virus and have the poorest outcomes when infected. In London, the Covid-19 crisis has exposed and exacerbated longstanding structural inequalities, as the city's diverse communities have been worst affected by the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic.¹³ It is therefore a crucial time to ensure that those providing advice to these communities are supported and equipped to do so sustainably.

Research aims and objectives

This research has been funded by Trust for London, working with the London Legal Support Trust. The project has been guided by an advisory group formed of members of London's now defunct Black and Minority Ethnic Advice Network (BAN). The researchers were Tessa Awe and Anita Sangha.

The project was carried out between January and March 2021.

Research was guided by the following objectives:

1. Identify the key challenges faced by smaller organisations in London that provide advice and support to diverse communities experiencing racial inequality.

¹⁰ Office for Budget Responsibility. (2021). *Overview of the March 2021 Economic and fiscal outlook*. [Online]. Available at: <https://obr.uk/overview-of-the-march-2021-economic-and-fiscal-outlook/> (Accessed: 27/04/21)

¹¹ Department for Work and Pensions. (2021). *Universal Credit statistics, 29 April 2013 to 14 January 2021*. GOV.UK. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/universal-credit-statistics-29-april-2013-to-14-january-2021/universal-credit-statistics-29-april-2013-to-14-january-2021#people-on-uc-header> (Accessed: 27/04/21)

¹² BBC News. (2020). *UK lockdown: Calls to domestic abuse helpline jump by half*. BBC News, 27 April. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52433520> (Accessed: 26/04/21)

¹³ Public Health England. (2020). *Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19*. PHE Publications. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908434/Disparities_in_the_risk_and_outcomes_of_COVID_August_2020_update.pdf (Accessed 26/04/21)

2. Identify the support needs of these organisations.
3. Consider what is the most effective way of meeting these needs and developing the sustainability of these organisations.
4. Produce clear recommendations for stakeholders on how to meet these needs, including the actions required by funders, networks and statutory bodies.

This research also served as a vital opportunity to amplify the voices of smaller organisations working with diverse communities that have provided critical support to Londoners both prior to and throughout the pandemic. By listening to their perspectives on these issues, this research aims to authentically reflect their views on what changes need to occur in the advice sector and produce recommendations based on their input.

This project has taken place within a short timeframe. Our sample is small, so we have not attempted to analyse the specific issues facing different beneficiary communities or look at the work of organisations outside the 32 London boroughs. Nevertheless, we hope these findings resonate in other localities.

Methodology

To ascertain the challenges facing smaller organisations providing advice and support to London's diverse communities, two independent researchers undertook the following approach:

1. An advisory group of leaders from organisations supporting diverse communities was brought together to guide and influence this project, ensuring the research was shaped by the voices and organisations it seeks to empower and serve.
2. An online survey was circulated through the Advice Services Alliance's main communication channels and widely disseminated through key stakeholder networks. We received 72 responses in total over a two-week period.
3. 14 interviews were carried out with people from 15 organisations that provide advice to specific communities. Interviewees and survey respondents came from a wide range of organisations, from those within established advice networks, to independent and locally-based grassroots charities, spanning across the different London boroughs.
4. Additional interviews were held and presentations given to gather information on wider stakeholder perspectives. Presentations were given to participants of the National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers (NAWRA) and VCS (Voluntary and Community Sector) Kensington and Chelsea Advice Forum.
5. Desk research was conducted to review relevant policies and related reports.

Survey participants and interviewees were asked a range of questions about challenges surrounding:

- methods of advice provision
- workforce retention and recruitment
- training needs
- funding and sustainability
- policy and advocacy
- networking and quality.

Participants were also asked to identify any barriers to accessing available support and invited to make any further comments regarding the challenges they faced, as well as what they believed would be the most effective ways of addressing these going forward. Interview questions can be found in the appendices at the end of this report.

Terminology

Diverse communities, BAMER organisations and mainstream organisations

At the time of writing, the public discourse has increasingly questioned the use of acronyms such as BAME, BAMER and other variations of these terms when referring to such characteristically different, culturally rich and diverse communities. In consultation with the advisory group, we agreed that the term ‘diverse communities’ would be used as the general descriptor and the acronym ‘BAMER’ would be used only when necessary to convey the generally widely understood meaning: communities that experience disadvantage or exclusion on the basis of race, colour, ethnicity, religion or cultural origin and/or immigration, refugee or asylum status. The term BAMER reflects the fact that the daily experiences of people from these communities are measurably different to those of the white population.

We are aware of the continuing debate around how language plays a role in capturing the experiences of different diverse communities, individually or collectively. We recognise the limits of our knowledge and the impact of our own prejudices and opinions. Through this work, we hope to learn how to better engage in the conversation about racial equity in a way that is respectful and authentic.

This report makes a distinction between advice organisations whose work targets specific diverse communities, such as those mentioned above, and mainstream organisations. We delineate the two groups as follows:

- **BAMER (Black, Asian minority ethnic and refugee) organisations** are those that specifically support ethnically and culturally diverse groups of beneficiaries, as well as refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants.
- **Mainstream organisations** are those that provide support to the general population and a wider range of communities, including members of BAMER communities.

Advice

In this report we use the term ‘advice’ to refer to legal advice given in the areas of law sometimes referred to as ‘social welfare law’. This includes the law in relation to housing, welfare benefits, employment, debt, family law and immigration. Most advice service users (also sometimes known as ‘beneficiaries’ or ‘clients’) would not necessarily identify their issue as having a legal component, and most people approach advice services with a particular problem that may cover several areas of social welfare law.

Generalist versus specialist service

Social welfare advice services may offer either a generalist service (that is, provide initial advice on any problem covering any area of law), or a specialist service (that is, provide detailed legal advice in a particular area of law). As a rule of thumb, specialist services will be able to undertake casework (for example, arranging multiple appointments for a single client and helping them by writing letters, appearing at tribunal, and so on).

Small organisations

When referring to small advice organisations we reference the Small Charities Coalition’s definition of organisations with an annual income of under £1 million.¹⁴ We have chosen to go with this model because it is broad enough to encapsulate the challenges facing organisations that would otherwise be classified as ‘medium’ or ‘large’, but still struggle with financial sustainability nonetheless.¹⁵ The vast majority of organisations within our group of interest have incomes that are substantially less than this.

¹⁴ Small Charities Coalition. *Annual Reports*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.smallcharities.org.uk/annual-reports> (Accessed: 26/04/21)

¹⁵ NCVO. (2019). *Small Charities: Key Findings From Our Data*. Available at: <https://blogs.ncvo.org.uk/2019/01/21/small-charities-key-findings-from-our-data> (Accessed: 23/03/21)

2. Findings

This section provides an overview of the respondents who engaged in the research through interviews or surveys and the key findings that emerged. We explore the various roles respondents held within the advice sector, the beneficiary groups they served and where their organisations were based. The research was specifically aimed at organisations working with diverse communities, although some respondents worked in mainstream organisations. We then move on to examine the key challenges that respondents said were particularly difficult for organisations working with diverse communities and which influenced the ability of such organisations to play an active role in the wider advice sector.

Profile of respondent organisations

Together, the organisations that responded provided support to beneficiaries across London and were spread across inner London boroughs such as Islington and Camden, as well as outer London boroughs such as Newham, Brent and Croydon. The organisations served a range of beneficiary groups, including Black African and Caribbean communities, Middle Eastern and Asian women, refugees and asylum seekers, Latin communities and Irish communities. Some interviewees reported that their organisations served all communities but were based in boroughs with a high proportion of ethnically diverse communities.

In terms of areas of advice provision, interviewees offered support on housing, welfare and benefits, employment, legal representation and domestic violence, as well as practical help in the form of food and other essentials. Annual turnover for these organisations ranged from less than £50,000 to over £1 million. Main sources of income varied between organisations, but they were largely funded by legal aid contracts, donations or grants from trusts and foundations.

Interviewees held various levels of seniority and areas of expertise within their respective organisations, from clinic coordinators to solicitors, CEOs and advisors.

We received a total of 72 responses to the survey. The organisations that responded were predominantly registered charities (83%) or community interest companies (9%). They supported a range of beneficiary groups:

- 64% said they supported 'Black, Asian and minority ethnic' communities as a main beneficiary group.
- Most (71%) identified women as one of their main beneficiary groups, compared to just over half (57%) who selected men.
- Over two-thirds (37%) of respondents worked with young people.
- A similar proportion (35%) worked with refugees and asylum seekers.
- Just over a fifth of respondents identified the LGBTQ+ community as a main beneficiary group.
- Nearly two-thirds supported people with mental health and physical health conditions.

When asked to identify which ethnic, migrant, or refugee and asylum seeker groups they provided targeted support to, just over half (54%) of respondents reported beneficiaries belonging to specific BAMER communities. A number of responses to this category included those who said they worked with diverse groups within the ‘all communities’ categories, particularly those based in boroughs with a highly diverse population.

This is an important distinction to make: we took the view that we should delineate between those organisations that worked with diverse communities *specifically* (thus providing culturally sensitive and valuable support to these groups), compared to those organisations that provided advice to people from these groups because they offered services *generally* to the public or are based in diverse areas of London.

Examining the organisations that specifically provided advice to BAMER communities, we found that:

- over a third supported migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, including people from African and Caribbean, Middle Eastern, and European backgrounds
- 10% supported people from Black African and Caribbean, European, and multiple diverse communities
- 5% supported Asian communities, including people from Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Chinese backgrounds.

Areas of advice and methods of provision

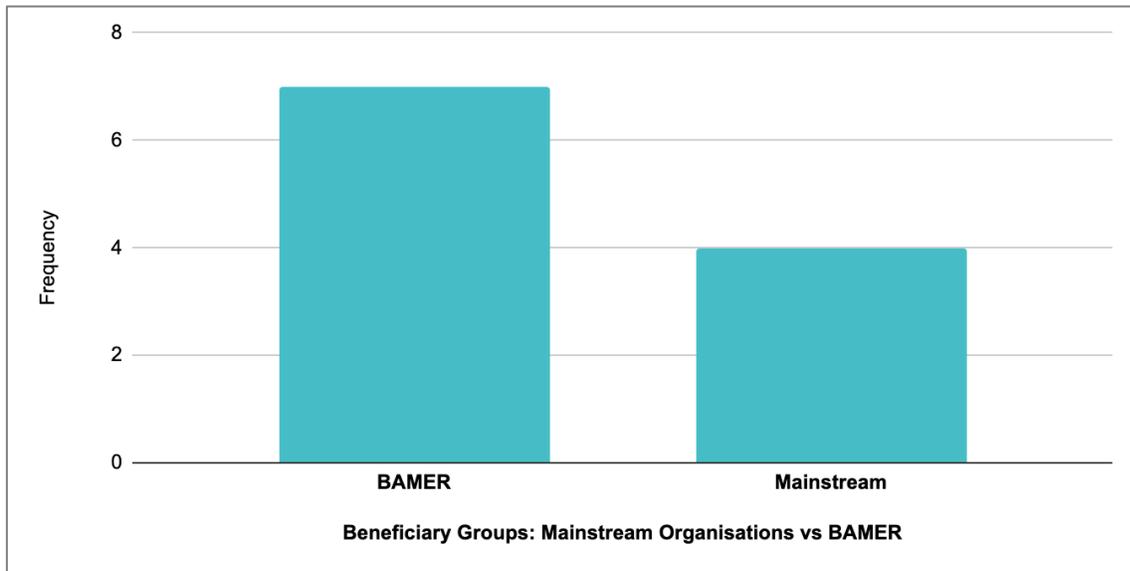
While most respondents reflected the largely generalist advice sector found in London, over two-thirds reported providing specialist advice on welfare and benefits, while 60% provided specialist advice on housing. A smaller proportion, around one third, offered advice on employment, health and social care. Other areas of advice, each provided by around a quarter of respondents, included education, legal advice and representation, and community care.

Interestingly, despite a high percentage of organisations working with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, only 25% actually specialised in this area of advice.

Participants were also asked to identify any areas of advice they covered but did not specialise in specifically. We can note similar trends: while 50% said they only provided advice on areas in which they specialised, 15% offered advice on all of the following areas: housing, welfare benefits, employment and debt. Given the economic impact of the pandemic, the demand for advice in these areas is not surprising.

We looked at the proportion of organisations that reported providing specialist advice on housing and debt. Comparing those that served diverse communities with those offering advice to the general public as a whole, a higher proportion offered housing advice to diverse communities. The same was true for organisations that provided advice on welfare and benefits, employment and debt.

Figure 1: Comparison of BAMER and mainstream organisations providing housing advice as a non-specialist service



Methods of advice provision

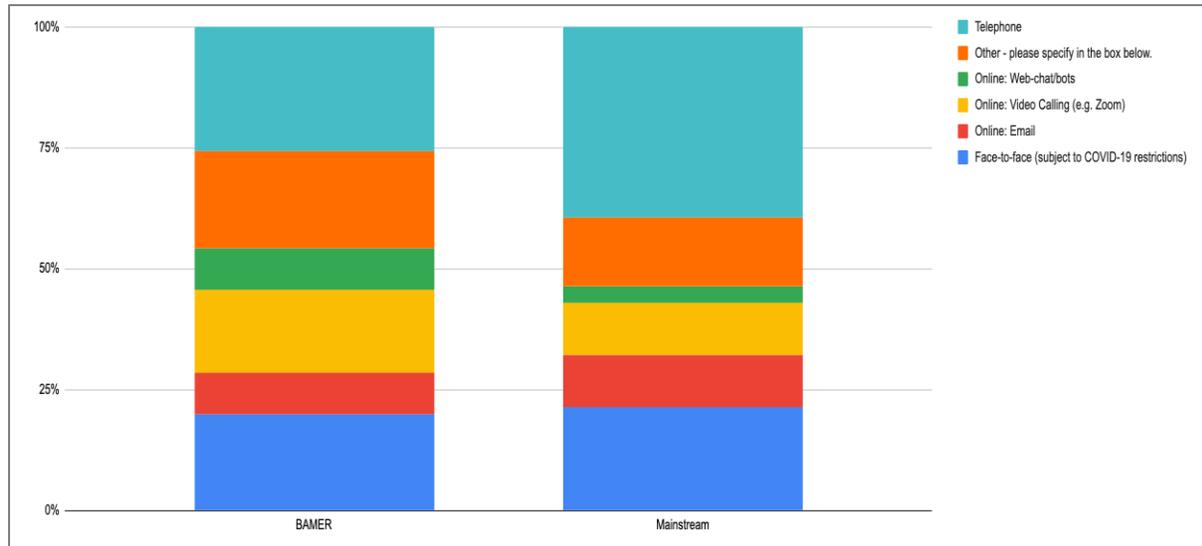
Previous research by the Advice Services Alliance found that most advice provision in London was delivered face-to-face, and that this was seen as appropriate for clients from diverse communities, for example, where English was not someone’s first language.¹⁶

We asked how organisations were providing advice to London’s diverse communities following the huge upheaval caused by the pandemic. Respondents reported that the telephone was now their most commonly used channel for providing advice. A third said they primarily provided advice in this way, while 10% used email, 15% used video calling and 6% used web chat or bots as their main means of advice delivery.

Interestingly, despite the lockdown restrictions that were in place at the time of the survey, a fifth of all respondents were still providing face-to-face support to beneficiaries within the government guidance as an ‘essential service’. This was consistent across organisations working with both BAMER groups and other beneficiaries.

¹⁶ Advice Services Alliance. (2020). *Advising Londoners: An evaluation of the provision of social welfare advice across London*. Available at: <https://asauk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Advising-Londoners-Report-30072020-1.pdf> (Accessed: 26/04/21)

Figure 2. Comparison of main methods of advice delivery between BAMER and mainstream organisations



Challenges facing the respondent organisations

Meeting demand

Respondents reported that the main challenges to meeting an increase in demand over the last year involved difficulties in doing so remotely. Organisations may lack digital skills and resources, and be unable to access funding for them without extra support and capacity. At the same time, respondents reported that digital exclusion among beneficiaries further complicated service delivery. Efforts to tackle digital skills and exclusion in the community are therefore equally critical to effective service delivery. Managing complex beneficiary needs was also raised as a key challenge in the face of limited capacity and funding to cover the additional time, resources and overall support these clients require.

Transitioning to remote services

Of those surveyed, over 80% said they agreed or strongly agreed that their service had experienced an increase in demand over the last year. While the majority of respondents were confident in their ability to provide quality advice and support to their beneficiaries, some reported concerns and lower levels of confidence in their capacity to do so.

When asked to self-report levels of confidence around different areas of service delivery, respondents were the least confident in their organisation’s capacity to manage a demanding caseload and apply for funding. On the other hand, participants were most confident in their organisation’s capacity to identify client needs where these may have become more complex. This suggests that smaller organisations

working with diverse communities have confidence in their ability to deliver advice and other services, but confidence in their ability to sustain the service is a far less.

In combination with the increase in demand, respondents in both the interviews and the surveys reported difficulties meeting this demand through remote methods. More than half of survey respondents reported that clients did not find it easier to access services through remote methods, disagreeing with the statement: “We have found it easier to use remote methods of service provision compared to offering face-to-face support”.

This sentiment was shared across interviewees, with almost a fifth noting how the shift to remote services had made managing demand for advice more difficult. It must also be recognised that remote methods of delivering services are not always viable, particularly for services that rely on face-to-face provision.

Difficulties in remote service provision were often linked to a lack of digital skills internally and a lack of funding to address this skills gap. When asked how to meet support needs in managing demand and providing advice, organisations frequently cited a lack of financial capacity to engage in digital skills training opportunities. Several cited a need for support with this specifically in order to continue to meet demand.

For example, one survey respondent said that it would help *“to increase funding to support the new use of digital media and IT technology required to offer services as well as training users how to use digital media and IT technology”*.

Digital exclusion among beneficiaries

“The biggest challenge of our remote support is the digital literacy and IT equipment shortages among the clients from the BME.” – Survey respondent

Respondents reported that digital exclusion among beneficiaries posed a substantial barrier to organisations’ ability to provide advice. They said that as organisations struggled to get to grips with or access the digital platforms and resources required to provide support remotely, the same struggle was mirrored on the part of beneficiaries.

When asked about barriers to providing advice and managing demand, 20% of survey respondents cited digital exclusion explicitly, and another 10% mentioned a lack of digital skills among their beneficiaries. Respondents also made reference to financial struggles faced by many clients that perpetuated their digital exclusion and reinforced intersectional inequality in society as a whole.

“Our clients cannot access phone or online support” – Survey respondent

“[Y]oung people within their homes who are financially struggling may not always have sufficient data on their devices to access our service digitally.” – Survey respondent

Survey respondents mentioned other key factors that exacerbated digital exclusion as a barrier to accessing advice. For example, for some people with disabilities, accessing advice via telephone or computer may be impractical.

This was reflected in interviews, with over a fifth of interviewees identifying the existence of a digital skills gap within their organisation, and 16% identifying digital exclusion among clients as a significant barrier to their ability to manage demand.

Complex needs and wellbeing support for staff

Almost three-quarters of survey respondents said they had seen demand for services from new client groups in the last year, such as:

- refugees and asylum seekers (15%)
- those unemployed or furloughed during the pandemic (8%)
- people suffering from domestic violence (8%)
- people from diverse communities (13%).

Alongside this increase in demand from new and established beneficiary groups, respondents reported that the needs of service users had become more complex, and addressing them required higher levels of expertise, capacity, funding and emotional resilience from staff.

A clear example of this is organisations working to support people experiencing domestic violence. Interviewees outlined the extent of the support they provided to callers who were trapped at home with their abusers during lockdown. This often involved multiple phone calls to walk vulnerable clients through the process of potentially leaving their abusers and who they could turn to for help, followed by further conversations going through the process again as clients struggled to leave and continued to suffer.

Interviewees who had personally taken these calls made it clear that beneficiaries who are experiencing severe emotional distress, facing a multiplicity of complex needs, or dealing with experiences of trauma require a great deal of support from the organisations that they turn to for help. They said they often spoke to women with abusive partners and who had English as a second language, young children and limited social networks, and were facing financial instability and digital exclusion.

“We can’t just look away” – Interviewee

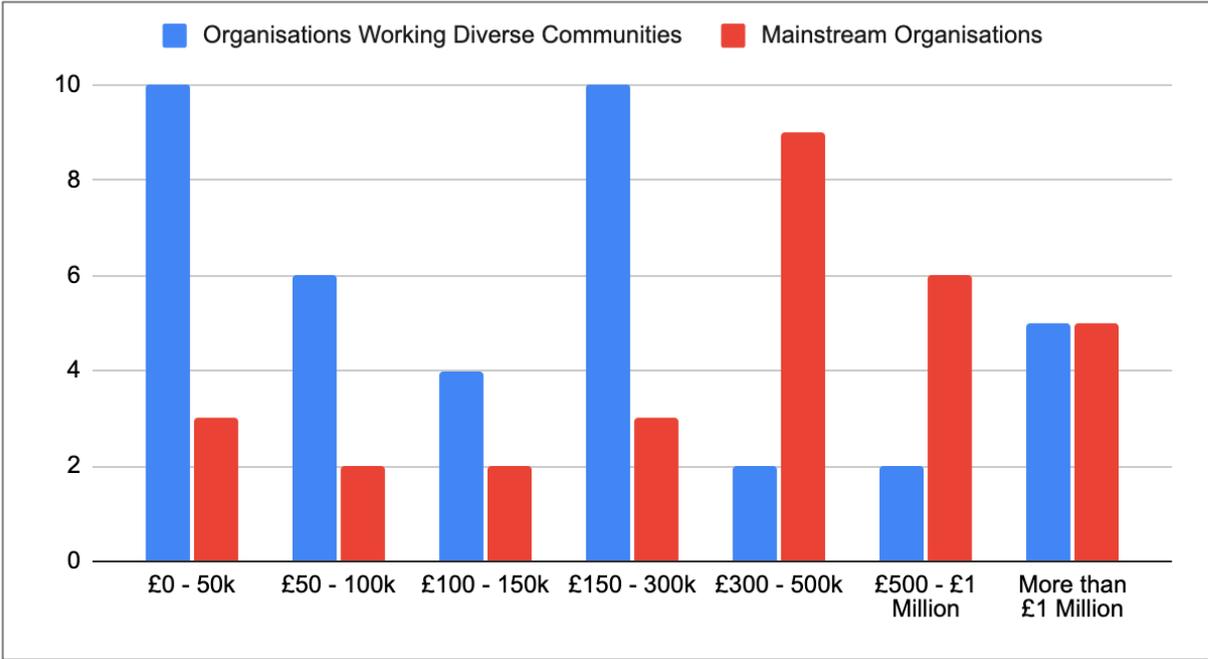
Advice organisations cannot simply turn their backs on these women and their suffering: they are committed to serving and supporting their communities, no matter the cost to themselves. Yet it begs the question: how can organisations continue to meet this very real, painful need if they struggle to obtain long-term funding to cover these and other core activities, and how do we ensure that the barriers to funding are removed?

Access to funding

The annual income among respondents' organisations varied from less than £50,000 to over £1 million. Based on the Small Charities Coalition's definition of 'small' (organisations with an annual turnover of less than £1million), 82% of survey respondents fall into this category.

However, even those with a higher income also expressed concerns relating to funding and sustainability, with over 80% of all respondents identifying support needs in this area.

Figure 3: Comparison of reported annual turnover for organisations working with diverse communities and mainstream organisations



Comparing organisations targeting diverse communities with those offering mainstream support, BAMER organisations are far more likely to have a lower annual turnover than their mainstream counterparts. The difference is particularly striking among those that report income of less than £50,000 per year. In fact, over three-quarters of organisations working with diverse communities had an annual turnover of less than £300,000, compared to less than one-third of mainstream organisations.

In interviews, respondents reported that they saw a need for funders to engage more directly with smaller, diverse organisations. It was reported that funders did not understand the realities of crisis management or the difficulties organisations faced in meeting demand. Half of interviewees said that while the value of their work was recognised by beneficiaries, they felt it was not recognised by funders. Almost a quarter thought their value was overlooked in favour of larger organisations.

“[There needs to be] Recognition that small organisations can provide high quality services targeted at marginalised, hard to reach vulnerable people. We get to know our clients and they trust us and the way we work. Many have English as a second language, our advisors are bilingual.” – Survey respondent

Funders were also perceived to have less trust in smaller organisations working with diverse communities. This reinforced the undervaluing of their expertise and their ability to take on contracts given to larger organisations, which were tasked with reaching out to the same groups that smaller organisations already had strong relationships with.

“More trust in funding smaller, less known organisations... More willingness to understand small grass root organisations close up and not from afar” – Survey respondent

Across both interviews and survey responses, it became clear that:

- the value of smaller organisations providing targeted support to diverse communities was not always recognised
- perceptions of these organisations did not include their immense value as organisations in their own right.

Instead, there was a sense of smaller organisations working with diverse communities being both undervalued and overlooked for funding opportunities, and taking a ‘second tier’ position within the advice sector as a whole.

There was agreement across the interviews and the survey responses regarding the challenges to sustainability which present at the very first stage of the funding process, excluding small organisations. These challenges were identified as: the strict, narrow criteria for accessing funding, the time needed to make an application, and the level of detailed information required in the application process.

Respondents also described a sense of frustration with funders who did not appear to understand their particular issues and problems. Respondents were sensitive to the remoteness of funders towards organisations outside of their usual funding streams, which they felt resulted in the perpetuation of unrealistic expectations, setting the bar far higher than they had the capacity to meet. Without access to new funding streams, small diverse organisations struggle to find ways to increase their capacity to meet client need.

Criteria for gaining funding

Respondents pointed out that the **criteria** for funding were often too specific, making it difficult for applicants to determine whether they were actually 'suited' to the **limited number of pots available**. Given the scarcity of available funds, applicants then felt forced to apply for opportunities they would not normally apply for in the hope of accessing some funding so they could continue to provide services at all. As a result, numerous interviewees mentioned they felt pressured to 'pivot' to the criteria of available funding opportunities.

Because of the specificity of the funding opportunities available, smaller organisations frequently cited that they needed support identifying those they were actually suited to. Over 10% of survey respondents mentioned this explicitly as a funding support need.

"It would be helpful to have someone identify funds that specialist [sic] in our area of work" – Survey respondent

"[It would help to have support] Mainly around fitting the criteria for grants, which isn't always easy or straightforward" – Survey respondent

Given that almost a third of survey respondents rely on multiple sources of income, having to navigate several applications with very specific criteria that they may or may not meet eats further into already limited management time and subsequent ability to complete funding bids.

Time required to make applications

"Meeting the criteria and the time it takes. We are all volunteers." – Survey respondent

Once they have identified funds to apply for, organisations face a huge barrier due to the amount of time an application takes to complete. When asked about specific support needs relating to funding, **one-third of respondents** mentioned a lack of capacity and the time required to apply.

Again, given that a third of our survey respondents are applying for funding from multiple sources, in particular those supporting diverse communities, the time taken to apply can make a significant demand on management time, creating additional workload for the BAMER organisations compared with the mainstream sector. Where workforces are small and under-resourced, this has negative implications for advice provision, since their limited time needs to be allocated to time-intensive applications.

One interviewee mentioned this explicitly, saying that she felt bad for devoting time to researching potential funding opportunities because she knew this meant taking time away from frontline work. In a small team, there is no other way to secure financial sustainability: someone, namely frontline staff, has

to take time out from supporting their communities in order to devote time to ensuring their organisation's survival.

"I'm mindful that I'm making someone wait" – Interviewee

Evidence of client need

The time needed to apply for funding is exacerbated by the fact that the applications themselves are complex. Two respondents mentioned concerns around proving the client need and collecting evidence of impact, and a third stated that they needed to either hire a full-time fundraiser or have volunteer support in this capacity.

This was reinforced by interview feedback. One participant mentioned applications that were 20 pages long, another recalled being asked to calculate the social return on investment for her proposed project, and another mentioned needing to get business English language support classes for her adviser to support the management team to complete funding bids. Small teams do not have the capacity to do everything from strategic planning to service delivery.

"I am working 60 hours a week at least but I'm only paid for 25 of those... if I don't do it, who will?" – Interviewee

Making the process **more accessible** is therefore a priority if we are to empower small organisations to secure more sustainable sources of income and continue to provide advice to those who need it most.

Sustainability

The advice sector has suffered considerable cuts over the past ten years,¹⁷ and its response has been to try to find new sources of income and move away from reliance on single sources. A certain mantra has built up that sustainability is delivered through multiple funding sources. While this has been true to a certain extent, it has been challenged by the Covid-19 crisis, during which formerly reliable income sources (for example, individual fundraising events) have been completely cut off.

However, it still holds true that multiple income sources give advice organisations more options in financially difficult times. Examining the survey respondents' sources of income, we found that:

- nearly half of respondents were funded exclusively by grants
- one third relied on multiple sources of funding

¹⁷ Low Commission. (2014). *Tackling the advice deficit: A strategy for access to advice and legal support on social welfare law in England and Wales*. [Online]. LAG Education and Service Trust Ltd. Available at: <https://www.lag.org.uk/about-us/policy/the-low-commission-200551> (Accessed: 24/04/21)

- 60% of the group with multiple funding sources belonged to organisations that targeted diverse communities specifically.

Very few organisations reported relying on funding from statutory bodies as their sole source of income. Among both mainstream organisations and those working specifically with diverse groups, this was more often one of multiple sources of income.

While respondents across both surveys and interviews discussed a range of unique challenges facing their organisations, a very clear and consistent theme emerged: organisations' ability to continue to provide advice and support to their communities is limited by a lack of financial sustainability, both among mainstream services and those targeted towards specific communities.

This near widespread absence of financial sustainability strongly impacts participants' ability to engage with the strategic planning needed to carry out capacity building activities – such as workforce training, recruiting more paid staff and taking on new projects – while keeping up with core areas of provision. On the practical side, where organisations struggle with financial sustainability, this has clear repercussions for their ability to cover core activities and meet increased demand from the communities they serve.

Clearly, all of the challenges facing smaller organisations relate back to a lack of sustainable funding: eight in 10 survey respondents had support needs relating to funding and sustainability. This was mirrored across interviews: every single organisation reported having issues with funding and over three-quarters stated that they needed longer-term funding opportunities to maintain their core services.

Organisations reported that a lack of financial security impacted their ability to:

- meet the demand for advice and support from the communities they serve
- develop and maintain a skilled workforce of both paid staff and volunteers
- work collaboratively with other organisations, networks and relevant stakeholders, such as local authorities and health and social care services
- challenge policies that negatively impact their work and the lives of beneficiaries
- gain the quality accreditation standards that are increasingly required from funders in the application process.

A second key barrier to sustainable funding is the nature of the opportunities available. Interviewees frequently cited having to rely on short-term grants of one to two years, and survey respondents overwhelmingly agreed. One response to the survey question regarding changes needed to help organisations access the support they need summarises nicely the problems with funding opportunities:

“Larger funding grants. Longer term funding (3–10 years). Support services that come with funding. Less convoluted application forms. More funding towards core running costs (projects cannot run without the core)... Allow for a proportion of grant to build towards reserves for sustainability.”

Smaller organisations can see that they are not sustainable financially, and how this will impact their ability to deliver support to their communities. Take workforce retention, for example: a fifth of survey respondents need support with recruitment specifically.

In interviews, participants mentioned how short-term funding opportunities limited their ability to recruit staff for longer periods to oversee projects and core services. As a result, this led organisations to rely in large part on volunteer hours, rather than a combination of volunteers and specialist staff, to provide core services. Half of survey respondents said they relied on volunteers to meet demand, and 70% saw a need to recruit more volunteers to continue to meet demand in the future.

However, working with volunteers poses a unique challenge in itself: volunteers, like paid staff, require a significant investment in terms of onboarding, training and management. While volunteers should be recognised for their tremendous role in supporting smaller organisations, they are not a sustainable replacement for more full or part-time paid staff.

Short-term opportunities pose a second set of challenges. Organisations with already limited capacity then have to go through the lengthy and complicated process of applying for funding again and again, instead of having longer-term opportunities that allow them to build capacity and engage in critical strategic planning in other key areas of service delivery. As one survey respondent noted:

“[Our] sustainability strategy was affected by Covid-19. We were effective at securing short-term emergency funds but it limited our capacity to apply for multi-year grants as was planned for 2020. Also, many funders focused on supporting current grantees – which was welcomed but again limited our ability to attract new funders.”

Networking and support

Membership of voluntary sector umbrella bodies is a good source of support and information. Given that the London network for BAMER advice organisations, the Black and Minority Ethnic Advice Network, was defunded and then disbanded some years ago, it was important to find out whether organisations working with diverse communities had joined other network memberships which may serve a similar function.

When asked to report any memberships, the majority of respondents were engaged in **at least one network**, with just 15% not involved in any at all. 30% of respondents were members of local advice forums and a similar number were linked with their local voluntary service council.

Interestingly, those that were not networked at all were evenly split between groups targeting diverse communities and those offering mainstream support. However, 40% of this group had an annual turnover of less than £50,000 per annum and 70% had an annual turnover of £500,000 or less, suggesting that smaller and medium-sized organisations still face substantial barriers in engaging with networks and partnerships.

A lack of sustainable funding has substantial implications for organisations' ability to engage with further networking opportunities. When asked about barriers to accessing available support in the sector, a third of survey respondents mentioned constraints surrounding funding as a significant challenge to their ability to engage with networks, partnerships and other sources of support. Almost 50% of survey respondents identified a lack of capacity as a barrier to accessing support. A lack of funding for smaller organisations means they cannot afford memberships to existing networks, and again are devoting the majority of the limited staff capacity they have to day-to-day management, rather than having time to explore even fully available opportunities that could be of benefit.

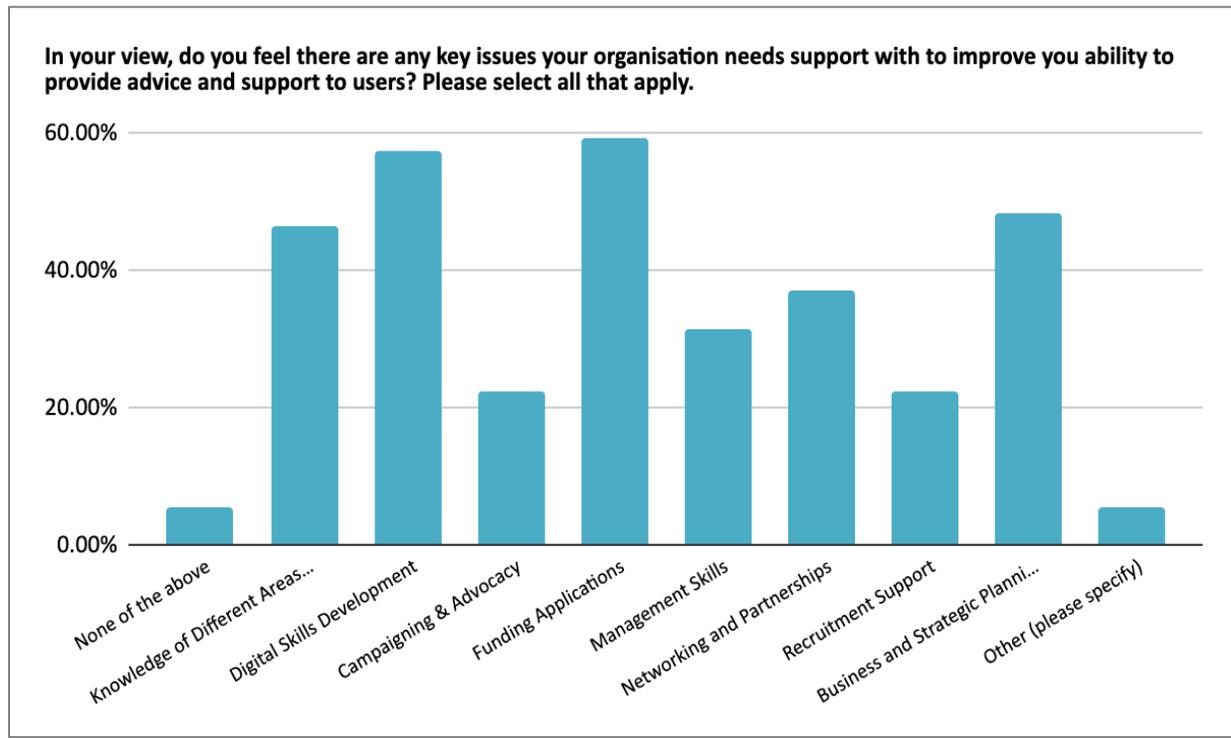
One interviewee mentioned this specifically. Despite being a member of a local network, they were not able to engage with the opportunities that were regularly sent to them because they needed to focus on core activities and finding further funding. Organisations are aware of the opportunities available, but lack the capacity and funding required to make the most of them.

Survey respondents were asked to identify which areas they would like support with in order to continue to meet beneficiary need. Key areas they identified included:

- funding applications (60%)
- digital skills (57%)
- developing their knowledge of different areas of the law (46%)
- recruitment (22%)
- business and strategic planning (48%).

While there are numerous networks, online forums, training workshops and resources that aim to fill potential skills gaps and support capacity building activities in the areas outlined above, are these genuinely accessible to smaller organisations with limited staff and high demand for their services? This section will review current methods of accessing support and make recommendations for making these more accessible and effective for smaller organisations that would benefit.

Figure 4: Areas survey respondents said their organisations need support with to improve their ability to support clients



The benefits of network membership and engaging with partnerships were widely recognised with reference to their ability to facilitate the sharing of best practice and connecting with colleagues in the sector. They were mentioned explicitly by 20% of interviewees, and 72% of survey respondents wanted a potential future network to facilitate this specifically. Survey respondents largely favoured one-to-one support (60%), online resources and workshops (58%) and joining specific networks that focus on similar areas of provision (52%). Making sure that any of these methods are truly accessible thus requires us to ensure they meet organisations’ real needs, and that barriers to use – such as cost, lack of capacity, and a lack of clear or real value – are addressed.

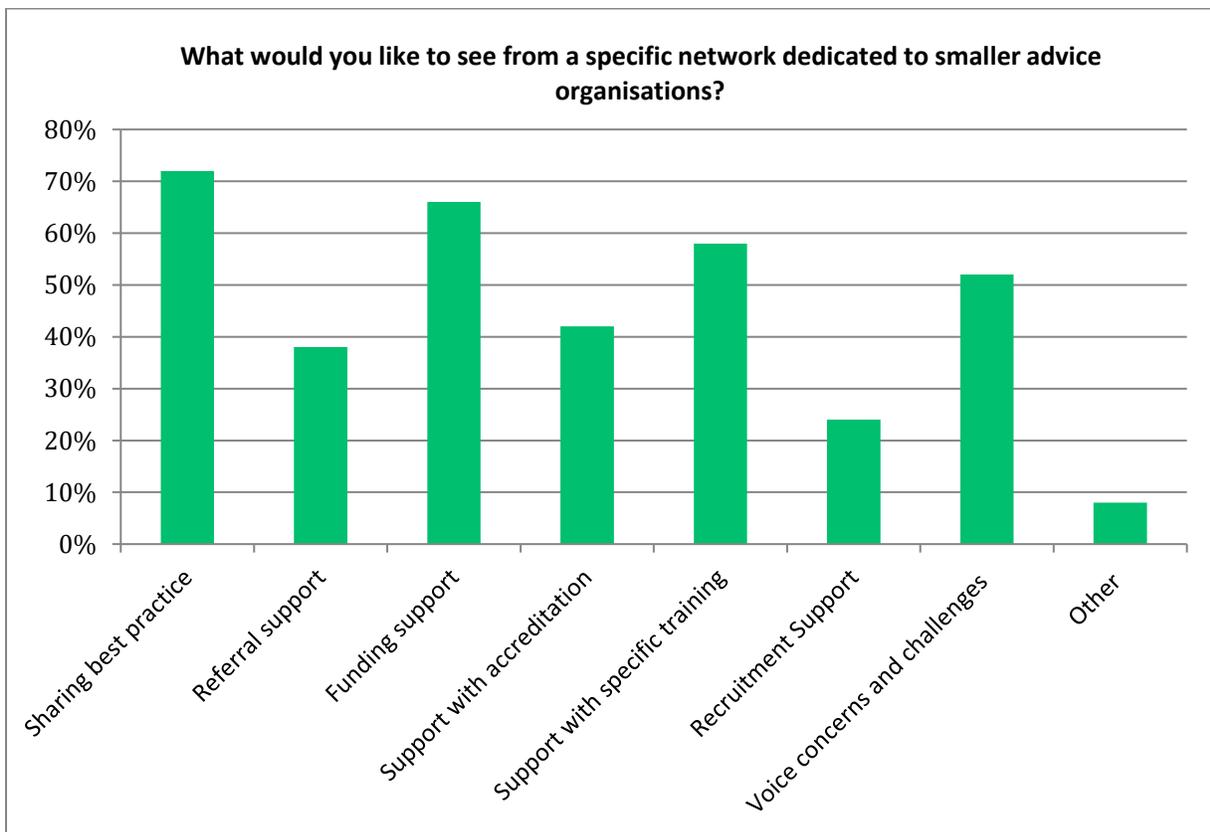
Networks were highlighted as a potential route for accessing training and developing specialist skills and knowledge, namely through free or low-cost access to workshops and resources. Platforms such as LawWorks and Wiseradviser were mentioned in particular for these specific benefits.

Networks were reported to offer benefits to users as platforms around which members could coalesce as a collective, with a stronger voice to challenge policies that negatively impact their work and beneficiaries. One respondent recalled the benefits of the Local Advice Forum meetings, which brought organisations into contact with policymakers. As a collective, they were in a stronger position to argue against policy decisions.

“Networking – Identifying the best networks/partnerships to focus limited resources on and introductions/access to those partnerships” – Survey respondent

Furthermore, networks and partnerships are not always necessarily the best use of limited capacity unless they will definitely deliver value to members. For example, one participant said they had joined a food aid network at the start of the pandemic, along with several other organisations. The network had a very high membership, but it was not effectively run and thus had low value for members: sharing best practice cannot occur if you are never meaningfully brought together.

Figure 5: What survey respondents would like to see from a specific network for smaller advice organisations



Online and one-to-one support

Nearly a quarter of respondents expressed a need for one-to-one support with funding applications, as well as in relation to gaining quality accreditation. However, such support is not free or easily accessed by smaller organisations with limited financial capacity to take on a paid consultant to address their support needs.

Online resources such as guides and workshops can be effective. Where digital skills are stronger and internet access is not an issue, going online can be a useful way of getting support: it is quick and respondents can look for guidance that directly addresses their specific needs.

However, as respondents made clear, lower levels of digital skills, time, workforce capacity and funding limit their ability to engage with such opportunities. Further, access to online resources is often dependent on being a member of a network. Thus, if there are already difficulties with capacity and funding, then online and one-to-one support can only be accessed by a minority of smaller, diverse organisations and mainstream groups with more funding, reinforcing structural inequalities within the sector.

Quality assurance and quality standards

Respondents were asked about quality standards, since holding a standard can be a requirement of some funders or favoured by others. The most commonly held accreditation was the Advice Quality Standard (AQS) with over 40% saying they held the AQS. (It should also be noted here that the survey was circulated via the AQS network newsletter, which may have skewed this result.) Other forms of accreditation held included the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner's OISC Level 1, NCVO's Trusted Charity Mark, and the London Legal Support Trust's Centre of Excellence scheme. However, almost a quarter of respondents held no form of quality assurance or recognised standard.

The level of quality accreditation among participants reinforces this point: of the 15% of respondents who were **not members of any networks**, none held any quality accreditation marks and 70% said they had support needs relating to funding and sustainability.

It was also reported that funders increasingly want to see applicants with quality accreditation as evidence of their ability to deliver effective and efficient services to their communities, but a lack of funding is a key barrier to this at present.

“Get the necessary funding to be able to buy a quality accreditation audit.” – Survey respondent

For example, the London Community Response Fund, set up by the London Funders group, asked applicants specifically whether they had the AQS mark. However, this is not a realistic expectation for smaller organisations given the difficulties in accessing the initial funding required to even *begin* undertaking the process of gaining such accreditation. With limited staff and capacity, it is a lengthy procedure and may require substantial revisions to current methods of governance and organisation.

Even if beneficial, pursuing accreditation would take time away from delivering advice and engaging with the funding applications organisations need to complete in order to fund this process at all. When asked about support needs around gaining quality accreditation, almost a quarter of respondents mentioned needing help to cover the cost – and yet they are expected to have this already when completing applications.

Workforce development and training needs

As discussed previously as a barrier to respondents' ability to meet demand, it was frequently reported that across all organisations there is a substantial digital skills gap that needs to be addressed. Supporting organisations to expand their workforces and team working capabilities was also a key issue identified across participants, as was recruiting staff with specialist knowledge or developing this knowledge among existing staff.

There are already well-known concerns regarding the digital skills gap in the sector: recent research found that over 75% of charities did not have enough digitally skilled staff and 40% of charities identified a need for strategic planning to tackle this skills gap.¹⁸ Given both the overall transition to online delivery, as well as the impact of the pandemic and transition to homeworking, ensuring the advice sector workforce can get online confidently and with the proper resources is essential to organisations' ability to continue to advise and support beneficiaries.

However, both interviewees and survey respondents reported that funding is required to address difficulties with 'upskilling' in general, but in particular with digital skills requiring training, equipment, and potentially customer relationship management (CRM) or other systems. As outlined previously, there are clear constraints surrounding access to sustainable funding and it should be no surprise that this has a clear impact on workforce development efforts.

“Digital safety and cost of software and other core costs.” – *Survey respondent on workforce development needs*

Due to a lack of funding, respondents reported being unable to:

- engage with digital training opportunities that are available, whether found independently or via networks
- apply for funding to procure the resources needed to get online, e.g. computers, phones, laptops, etc
- develop confidence and widespread uptake of digital platforms across workforces.

As a result of these difficulties, smaller organisations are essentially stuck in a cycle of providing advice as best they can, but without the tools to do so more efficiently – in the face of unprecedented, complex demand. This impact will be felt more by smaller organisations working with BAMER groups given that they reported lower annual turnovers compared to the mainstream organisations, ultimately reinforcing structural inequality within the advice sector between mainstream and BAMER services.

¹⁸ Charity Digital Code. (2019). *Charity Digital Code Benchmark Report 2019*. [Online]. Available at: <https://digitalcollective.org.uk/2019/01/29/a-clear-way-forward-for-charities-on-digital/> (Accessed: March 2021)

Expanding teams and strengthening communication

The transition to remote working has had a substantial negative effect on team working and communication within organisations. One interviewee mentioned specifically that since the pandemic started, there had been substantial difficulties communicating with the rest of the team and coordinating activities, saying that:

- no team meetings had occurred since the start of the pandemic
- communication occurred more on a one-to-one basis.

This interviewee is not alone: survey respondents mentioned that working with their colleagues was 'more difficult' through remote methods, and that staff needed to meet together more frequently.

Team working is made all the more difficult given that organisations working with diverse communities tend to have small numbers of paid staff or be run by volunteers. With limited funding to hire more staff, whether part-time or full-time, even recruiting more volunteers requires a substantial time investment to allow for recruitment, onboarding and management.

Areas of specialist knowledge and policy change

A key challenge pertaining to workforce development surrounds the nature of advice itself: respondents reported having substantial support needs in relation to developing areas of specialist knowledge and staying on top of frequent policy changes across a range of issues, particularly with reference to uncertainties surrounding the pandemic and Brexit.

- Over 45% of respondents stated they had specific training needs in relation to knowledge of different areas of law.
- Over 50% of respondents provided advice in areas they did not specialise in specifically.
- At least 15% provided advice on each of housing, welfare and benefits, employment and debt.
- Almost 20% of respondents reported that Brexit policies were negatively impacting their work, while 50% reported Covid-19 as a negative influence.

3. Discussion

The research presented in this report is fairly modest in size and gives only a small snapshot of insight into the experiences of organisations providing advice to some of the most disadvantaged and excluded communities in London. It features services that give dedicated support and advice to specific communities from BAMER groups, as well as organisations that provide advice to all members of the public, although by virtue of locality most of their clients are from BAMER communities. From this modest project, a picture is starting to emerge of disparities between smaller organisations working with diverse communities, and the more mainstream advice providers. These differences are recognised and well-articulated by BAMER organisations themselves, but less so by the wider advice sector.

Across both the interviews and the survey, it became clear respondents strongly felt that the value of smaller organisations in providing targeted support to diverse communities was not recognised by funders or by other parts of the voluntary sector. The experience of these organisations is that they are not valued on their own terms as bringing additional and different benefits to the community in their own right. Instead, our results indicate a strong perception that they are both undervalued and overlooked, particularly for funding opportunities, and occupy a ‘second tier’ position within the advice sector as a whole.

The picture emerging is of the interplay of different disadvantages facing organisations working with diverse communities that compound each other, resulting in an increasingly tilted playing field and an overworked team. The common approach to allocating limited funding with increasing need is to deploy competitive tendering type approaches in order to create the illusion of rational choice and a level playing field for applicants. A playing field can look pretty level from the higher end of the pitch with the wind behind you, while any small existing disadvantages are simply magnified in these conditions.

On the one hand, it should not come as a surprise to the advice sector and its stakeholders that this disparity exists, given the recent findings of other reports on the charitable and voluntary sector. On the other hand, it is surprising that relatively little has been done to understand or to address these issues. This aspect of advice provision for beneficiaries who are most in need has been little explored or recorded across the sector. The question is how far the challenges of racism, assumptions and cognitive bias that perpetuate the disadvantage experienced by beneficiaries are also experienced by the organisations that are seeking to help and support them.

In this section, we take the findings from the interviews and the survey to explore these perceptions further, look at the possible sources of any differences in experience, and consider what can be done to address them. The key issues are:

- funding catch-up and sustainable funding streams
- meeting client demand and complexity of issues

- deficits in digital skills and technology
- access to specialist services and support for case work
- networking and developing a voice in the sector.

Funding catch-up and sustainable funding streams

The participants in this research from BAMER advice services reported that they had suffered a greater proportion of the funding cuts as a result of the past decade of austerity measures than other advice services. Unfortunately, the sector lacks the data to either support or refute this claim, although within our respondent groups, it does appear that the more mainstream advice services have higher levels of income than those working directly with diverse communities.

Respondents from the diverse advice organisations reported that they did not feel understood or valued by some of the mainstream funders. In particular, some funders were perceived as not fully understanding the stress that smaller organisations were under on a day-to-day basis, even though funders' expressed aim is to support and empower Londoners from all communities. Many respondents reported difficulties they had experienced accessing funding even where funders wanted to target diverse communities; smaller organisations felt they were overlooked even when they brought cultural sensitivity and awareness to beneficiaries that other organisations could not offer. There is a perception that it is only the larger advice organisations that are able to access legal aid contracts, for example, or engage other commissioning opportunities such as the Money and Pensions Service partnerships.

Three aspects of the funding process were highlighted as problematic for small organisations working with diverse communities:

- the management time required to write applications when client demand is high
- a lack of recognised quality marks and the difficulty of obtaining these for small organisations
- the need to devote ongoing management time to meeting the data and information requirements of funding contracts.

The relationship at present between funders and smaller organisations is seen to perpetuate structural inequality in the sector and to prevent the latter from developing their funding sustainability, capacity and workforces. This undermines organisations' overall ability to provide advice to Londoners from diverse communities. Active engagement between funders and smaller advice services needs to occur in order to foster more meaningful and impactful communication between both groups that will, over time and with consistent effort, allow funders to understand better the value of smaller organisations in their ability to work with and support diverse communities across London.

To promote more constructive engagement between funders and smaller advice services working with diverse communities, funders should aim to reach out and speak to leaders and frontline staff in these organisations. This would allow for greater communication between these groups and bridge the gap

between perceptions of either side. Through this dialogue, organisations could show funders the nature of the challenges they face in terms of funding and sustainability, meeting demand, workforce development and any other issues.

Critically, greater communication would allow funders to observe smaller organisations' skills and strengths, and enable these groups to demonstrate their expertise in working with vulnerable and diverse communities outside of the funding application process. This is important because they may not have the time or management capacity, or the levels of quality accreditation that are increasingly required, to complete applications to current expected standards.

Funders would also be able to observe the impact that current processes of obtaining funding have on these organisations, and develop an understanding of how the application process could be redesigned and reimagined to make it more accessible to applicants, and better able to reflect the added value of small organisations.

While it is understood that funders, like advice organisations, have limited staff and time to engage in such opportunities, there are multiple options that could be explored for facilitating this communication, such as:

- online or telephone calls
- direct visits to facilities
- reaching out through local networks or partnerships.

The challenges associated with a lack of sustainable funding are present throughout the funding cycle – from the application process all the way through to use and reapplication. Overall, the culture and current processes and requirements associated with applying for funding exacerbate inequality within the sector between BAMER and mainstream organisations in their ability to access funds and thus support the diverse communities they serve. Funders are encouraged to engage more directly with applicants to learn about the nature of the challenges they face in terms of both service provision and financial sustainability. With this in mind, reducing the complexities and requirements of funding applications (without compromising due diligence processes), offers great potential to increase the impact of their funding on organisations and thereby communities who have become increasingly marginalised.

To promote the sustainability of organisations that provide advice and support, we need to therefore tackle barriers to financial stability by:

- **reducing the complexities and demands** associated with applications
- **providing longer-term funding opportunities** that allow organisations to carry out core activities
- **working with organisations** to consider how to make funding more accessible to them for the long term.

In doing so, we will be better able to ensure that those who need help in London are well able to access the quality, culturally sensitive and consistent support they need to thrive.

To **reduce the complexities associated with applying for funding**, funders – whether statutory bodies, trusts and foundations, or capacity-building organisations – should consider a number of actions.

Firstly, applicants could be supported by various funding bodies to **develop fundraising and strategic plans to promote their sustainability**. This could take the form of one-to-one support, webinars or specific guidance produced by the relevant funder which demonstrates what they need organisations to convey in their applications and how to do so effectively. Such support could also be provided by a network or partnership that works specifically with smaller organisations, or those providing specific types of advice. The recruitment and training of volunteer fundraisers could also help to tackle this issue over a longer-term period.

Secondly, given that workforces are small and tend to be focused on service delivery due to a lack of management time and funding, **the application processes themselves could be streamlined**. Engaging with smaller organisations to understand and design a more accessible funding application which does not compromise the need for due diligence, but equally allows applicants to produce more effective applications, would be an excellent start.

Third, **reducing the criteria expected of organisations upon application** is necessary to make funding more accessible. Specifically, it is not feasible to expect advice services with limited funds to have funding available to undergo the quality accreditation processes that are increasingly required to access funds or undertake contracts. Organisations must be supported in this process, either through partial funding for this by funding bodies, reduced fees, or more tailored support through consultancy, volunteer support, or via networks or partnerships.

Another key issue identified with regard to challenges with funding and sustainability is the nature of the funding available. Funders are encouraged to **make the following changes to the structuring of funding and available opportunities** in order to allow smaller organisations to continue to work with diverse communities who need their advice, counsel and support more than ever.

The nature of funding opportunities should be **reflective of the nature of the work that smaller organisations carry out for the beneficiaries they work with**, and their support needs. Rather than offering funding for more specific and newer projects, funding pots should be available that would allow advice services to continue to provide core services that beneficiaries need. Engaging more directly with organisations would support the potential design of new funding opportunities to cover core services.

This would reduce the complexity of funding applications for both sides: applicants would not need to spend time on applications they may not actually be suitable for in the hope of gaining some financial

support, and funders could be more confident that their funds were being allocated to projects that would meet beneficiary needs.

Furthermore, funding opportunities themselves should be long-term. Rather than funding short-term, new projects, after which applicants then have to undergo the process of reapplication more frequently, longer-term funding opportunities that extend for at least three to five years are needed. Organisations could then be more confident in their financial sustainability, engage in longer-term strategic planning, improve job security for staff, and sustainably and effectively offer services to their beneficiaries.

While funding is not unlimited, it could be possible to explore increasing the number of opportunities available for tender. Although this may mean a reduction in the size of each award, this would allow more organisations to access more funding to support coverage of core costs, at least in the short term.

Support to meet client demand

To support smaller organisations to meet demand for advice services and ensure that the quality of services does not decline or cease, they need to be funded adequately to cover core costs over a longer-term period than current short-term funding opportunities allow. Funders should consider that organisations' survival depends on having the financial capacity to continue, and so engaging in direct communication with organisations to understand their specific support needs in terms of funding their activities, and subsequent ability to meet demand, is imperative.

In addition, organisations require support with strategic planning, so funding bodies, networks and other relevant bodies could explore how to develop this skillset, alongside enhancing financial sustainability. This would support organisations to plan for the long term and cope with a higher caseload, while embedding monitoring processes and quality assurance procedures as required.

Organisations require more capacity and support in devising and executing strategic and business plans to be able to manage their clients' complex needs. This can be offered in the form of capacity building support from umbrella bodies or funding to recruit development support or consultants. Included in these plans should be strategies for avoiding staff and volunteer burnout given the emotionally, mentally, and sometimes physically demanding nature of frontline service delivery. Staff wellbeing must therefore be included in future strategic plans to promote sustainable service delivery and workforces.

The deficit in digital skills and technology

The move to using technology in advice services has accelerated during Covid-19 and is unlikely to ever revert to pre-pandemic levels. Smaller organisations working with diverse communities have two key obstacles to overcome in relation to online service provision: the skills deficit within their organisation itself, and the skills deficit and digital exclusion experienced by their client groups. Both need to be addressed to enable smaller organisations to manage and thrive in a remote working context.

Such organisations are the gateway to their client group and so they **should be supported to access digital skills training and procure resources, and then to pass these skills on to their clients**. The need for this support is relevant both throughout the pandemic and beyond, given the wider movement towards online service provision and would prevent such organisations finding themselves further left behind.

Digital training could be provided by networks or partnerships at low to no-cost rates, through webinars and platforms such as Wiseradviser. It should cover basic computer skills, how to navigate key digital platforms and relevant CRM systems, and how to communicate effectively with colleagues remotely. Additionally, funders could potentially allocate funds to this specific need, supporting applicants to fund digital skills training internally or at the network level. Digital skills training could also be an attractive area for collaboration with larger, non-charity sector organisations, statutory bodies or social enterprises to get involved with and offer support in either training design and/or delivery.

It is clear that digital skills and digital exclusion are a larger problem among beneficiaries. For those needing help, it will not make a difference if smaller organisations can get online when they – the client – cannot. Supporting organisations to develop their own digital skills could open up the possibility of training clients to get online, or support with resource procurement. Funders should also work with organisations to tackle digital poverty at the policy level, engaging with a variety of stakeholders both within London and nationally to ensure that the most vulnerable communities are equipped with the devices and internet access required to meet their basic needs.

Access to specialist services and support

To support with **knowledge on areas of specialist advice and policy change**, statutory bodies in particular, along with networks and partnerships, can work with smaller and larger advice organisations to establish clear, effective referral routes they can use to refer clients where they may not have the skills or knowledge required, or the capacity to take on new cases.

This could also highlight the value and expertise of smaller organisations that have knowledge and experience of working with specific communities, which larger organisations may not have – while also preventing them from being overwhelmed with cases they may not be able to help with.

Funders, networks and statutory bodies can provide support and training in areas of specific social welfare law and policy as needed alongside expanded referral routes, supporting workforce development and reducing the need to refer in the first instance.

In addition, to support with **workforce development**, funding bodies can offer longer-term funding to cover longer staff contracts or the hiring of additional specialist staff. Funding opportunities could be designed in consultation with organisations to identify whether new pots or contracts are required that address specific workforce needs, e.g. immigration advisers.

Networking and developing a voice within the sector

Existing networks should consider reducing membership fees or offering free membership to smaller organisations. This would allow them to, at least initially, incorporate smaller organisations, giving them the opportunity to engage with the benefits of membership, such as online training, webinars and sharing best practice with colleagues in the sector.

The online training and webinars provided should reflect the real needs and gaps that exist in organisations' workforces. Opportunities for organisations to actively shape networks or other training providers' content and activities is essential to ensure both that they meet the genuine needs of users, and that they encourage other groups to engage with them in the future.

When it comes to creating resources and networks, and establishing partnerships, it is clear that there are three key criteria to address in their design if they are to genuinely be valuable for members that have limited funding and capacity to take time away from service delivery.¹⁹ These criteria can also be applied to the design of resources and activities offered by networks, partnerships or other bodies offering support to smaller organisations.

1. Networks should be democratic:

- a. Smaller organisations should be able to have their voices heard and be involved in decision-making, advocacy and strategic planning.
- b. Leaders should be democratically selected to ensure fair representation within the network and externally.

2. Networks should be responsive:

- a. Networks should be flexible and adaptable, tailoring activities to the needs of members as necessary.
- b. Survey respondents want to be able to share best practice, receive support with referrals, and access funding support via networks, so this should be reflected in the design of future networks or the activities of pre-existing projects.

3. Networks have to be well-funded:

- a. Without the necessary level of sustained resources, networks cannot grow and provide meaningful support to members. Given that smaller organisations struggle with financial sustainability, networks will need to offer support at a minimum or no cost, and thus at scale this will require substantial funding in order to be valuable to intended beneficiaries.

¹⁹ These three distinct criteria for a 'good' network were contributed by Farrah Rainfly, Director of Life After Hummus, Camden.

Now, more than ever, we must do what we can to champion racial equity in the sector and ensure smaller organisations working with diverse communities are recognised for their work, able to access support when and where they need it, and ultimately empowered to continue to serve people who will undoubtedly need their support for years to come.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Finalised interview questions

Current challenges to provision and sustainability

1. Do you feel your current methods of providing advice and support and funding these activities are sustainable?
2. What challenges is your organisation facing in **managing the demand** for advice and support in the last year?
3. What challenges does your organisation currently face in regards to **funding and sustainability**?

Networks and strategic representation

4. Are you currently a member of any **sector networks/partnerships**? What is the added value if any?
5. Do you face any barriers in engaging with or joining networks?
6. Do you feel your organisation has a clear platform from which they can voice their concerns to the relevant audience, e.g. other organisations, networks, funders, or statutory bodies?
7. Do you feel that the value of your work is recognised? If so, by whom?

Quality assurance

8. Do you have any quality accreditation?
9. What are your experiences with obtaining or trying to obtain **quality** accreditation?
10. How are you currently managing quality across service provision at present?

Workforce development

11. How has your organisation coped with workforce retention and recruitment ? Do you have any support needs in relation to developing your workforce?
12. Does your organisation have any specific training needs? E.g. digital skills, funding support, or developing areas of specialist knowledge?

Policy change

13. Drawing on your experiences working in the sector in the last year, how have any **specific policy changes** impacted your work positively or negatively? *These could be in relation to key events such as Brexit, COVID-19, the sector, or any other events relevant to your organisation and/or client base.*
14. Do you have **any final remarks** for any of the following actors regarding what your organisation needs in order to continue to support London's diverse communities?
 - Funders/statutory bodies
 - Networks
 - Organisations

Appendix 2: Support needs survey

We have included questions from 12 onwards here, because questions 1-11 concerned the respondent organisation, the respondent and contact details.

Providing advice and support

12. Please select the main method(s) used to give advice and support to your clients.
 - Telephone
 - Online: Email
 - Online: Video Calling (e.g. Zoom)
 - Online: Web-chat/bots
 - Face-to-face (subject to COVID-19 restrictions)
13. Next, we would like to ask you about the challenges your organisation has faced in meeting the demand for advice and support during the last year. Please select the extent to which you agree with the following statements. *(Strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, N/A)*
 - My service has experienced an increase in demand in the last year.
 - It is challenging to meet demand for advice using remote methods, e.g. online or telephone.
 - The increase in demand for support has meant the quality of our advice has declined over the last year.
 - We have received more demand for services from new groups of clients in the last year.

14. Have you received greater demand for advice and support from any groups you would not typically work with? If so, which groups?

- No, we have been working with largely the same client base across the last year.
- Unsure
- Under 18's
- Young People (18-24)
- Parents and Carers
- Homeless People
- Refugees and/ or Asylum Seekers
- Men
- Women
- LGBTQ+ Community
- Older People (65+)
- Specific Ethnic Groups (please specify using 'Other')

15. Please select the extent to which you agree with the following statements about how your organisation and clients have found transitioning to new methods of provision over the last year. (*Strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, N/A*)

- We have supported clients using telephone methods easily
- We have supported clients using emails/web-chat
- We have found it easier to use remote methods of service provision compared to offering face-to-face support
- Clients have found it easier to use remote methods of service provision compared to accessing face-to-face support

16. Is your organisation currently facing any other challenges not covered above that limit your ability to provide advice and support to your clients? Please feel free to discuss any challenges you face as an organisation in providing advice and support in more detail here.

Funding and sustainability

17. Do you have any support needs surrounding funding and sustainability?

18. Have you been able to successfully apply for and receive any grants or additional funding during the last year?

- We have applied for funding, but were unsuccessful
- We have applied for funding and were successful

- We have applied for funding, but are waiting to find out the outcome
 - We did not apply for any funding
19. What support needs do you have in relation to successfully applying for funding?
20. In your view, what would be the best way of meeting your support needs in regards to accessing funding?

Workforce development and training

21. Has your organisation had any issues with staff/ volunteer retention and recruitment over the last year? Please select the extent to which you agree with the following statements. (*Strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, N/A*)
- We have been able to retain staff.
 - We have been able to recruit new staff members easily.
 - We are looking to expand in the next year to keep up with demand for our services.
 - We have had to furlough paid staff during the pandemic.
 - We rely on volunteers to manage our workload.
 - We have struggled to retain volunteers during the last year.
 - We are able to recruit volunteers fairly easily.
 - We will need to recruit more volunteers to meet the demand for services over the next year.
22. How have you coped with remote-working in the last year? (*Strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, N/A*)
- I did not find it different to transition to remote-working.
 - I did not have any substantial problems with using online video-conferencing platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams to communicate with my co-workers.
23. Drawing on your experiences of providing advice during the last year, please select how confident you feel with the following tasks on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 – least confident, 5 – very confident).
- Identifying specific client needs where these may have become more complex
 - Identifying relevant legal frameworks or policies that impact clients
 - Managing a demanding case load
 - Reviewing cases and keeping up to date records
 - Making referrals
 - Receiving referrals

- Applying for funding
- Confidentiality and data protection issues

24. In your view, do you feel there are any key issues your organisation needs support with to improve you ability to provide advice and support to users? Please select all that apply.

- Knowledge of Different Areas of Law
- Digital Skills Development
- Campaigning & Advocacy
- Funding Applications
- Management Skills
- Networking and Partnerships
- Recruitment Support
- Business and Strategic Planning

25. Please tell us more about the nature of any specific training needs your organisation has at present.

E.g. if you've identified that you need support with increasing knowledge of different areas of the law, which areas do you need help with?

Please give as much detail as possible so we can understand in more depth how to best meet your training support needs.

26. What would be the best way of meeting these needs? Please check all that apply.

- Joining a specific network/partnership dedicated to these issues
- Joining a network/partnership for organisations similar to your own
- Online training webinars or resources
- Tailored support and coaching
- Other (please specify)

27. In order to address the challenges facing your organisations, we need to understand more clearly what barriers may exist that prevent you from accessing any available support.

28. Do you feel there are any barriers in place currently that are limiting your organisation's ability to access support, e.g. accessing funding or training, or joining networks/partnerships?

If so, please explain how these barriers prevent you from accessing the support you need.

29. What do you think needs to change in the sector to make sure that all organisations, are able to access the support they need?
30. What would you like to see from a specific network dedicated to smaller advice organisations? Please select all that apply.
- Sharing best practice
 - Referral support
 - Funding support
 - Support with gaining quality accreditation
 - Support with specific training, e.g. digital skills, specialist knowledge
 - Recruitment Support
 - Providing a platform to voice concerns or any challenges faced by your organisation
 - Other (please specify)
31. Drawing on your experiences working in the sector in the last year, how have any specific policy changes impacted your work positively or negatively? These could be in relation to key events such as Brexit, COVID-19, the sector as a whole, or any other events relevant to your organisation and/or client base.
32. To what extent do you feel you can voice your concerns effectively to challenge any policies that have negatively impacted your work?
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - None of the above
33. Does your organisation currently hold any quality accreditation marks? If so, which one(s)?
34. Do you have any support needs in ensuring quality across your areas of service provision?
35. In your view, what would be the most effective way of helping your organisation obtain any relevant quality accreditation standards?
36. Do you have any further comments you would like to make about any key challenges facing your organisation or any support needs you may have now or in the near future?

37. Do you have any further comments you would like to make about how to best meet your needs as an organisation providing advice and support to Londoners from diverse communities?

Appendix 3: National Association of Welfare Rights poll questions

1. One idea is to create a network for smaller, ethnically diverse advice organisations to collaborate and share best practice e.g. funding, meeting demand, managing quality, workforce development, campaigning and advocacy? Would this be effective? (Yes, No, I don't know)
2. Would such a network be duplicating similar initiatives in your local authority? (Yes, No, I don't know)

Appendix 4: Kensington and Chelsea VCS questions

1. Currently, what is the biggest challenge facing your organisation?
2. Would you find a network useful? What other networks do you use?

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