



# Data in the advice sector – a case study

Good data can enable organisations to better understand their operations and the impact they’re having on their service users. It can also provide a means to set a baseline and measure progress against objectives. When used well, it can be used to inform decision-making and provide concrete evidence to sway even the most difficult audiences.

Within the advice sector, there are a range of data challenges that make good data practices difficult to establish and maintain. In this two-part series, we’ll explore the data challenges faced by **Law Centres** in part one, and our strategy for addressing these challenges in part two.

## Part 1: The data challenges facing Law Centres

### ‘At the coal face’ Collecting data at Law Centres

Law Centres Network has conducted several workshops with Law Centres to better understand what challenges they were facing. During this period of discovery, we ran several workshops where Law Centre members came together to share what was working and what wasn’t when it came to collecting data. These discussions were framed around the ThinkNPC’s [Five types of data](#) and the stages of the service. This framework enabled those attending to think about data collection systematically and think about data collection as an ongoing process and not a one-off event.

During these sessions, we identified some of the obstacles that Law Centres face when collecting data, including:

<p><b>User data</b> Information on the characteristics of the people you are reaching.</p>	<p>Need to strike balance between asking too much info and not enough Clients get frustrated if they need to provide data but aren’t eligible for help Time consuming Manual process</p>
<p><b>Service data</b> Information on what people think about the service.</p>	<p>Return rate of feedback forms is low Feedback tends to relate directly to the relationship between client-caseworker Difficult to get feedback from certain groups of clients Need better depth and understanding of the individual client journey Funders ask for information about a wide range of data points</p>

<p><b>Outcomes data</b> Information on the short term changes, benefits or assets people have got from the service.</p>	<p>Variety of teams trying to collect outcomes, all managed differently Problem to encapsulate the outcomes as a whole and for specific teams Some Law Centres have no set outcomes that are measured Need to ask for their permission to capture what they have said There is no agreed format for collecting feedback</p>
<p><b>Impact data</b> Information on the long-term difference that has resulted from the service.</p>	<p>People can forget what the impact of the service was if they are contacted several months after their contact with the Law Centre Contact details of clients change frequently Unsure whether there is bias in the results Not enough capacity/resources to collect feedback after the case has closed Data needs to be couched within narratives. Funders cannot assume that winning someone's tribunal last January, for example, is going to result in a positive impact on the client's life because <i>life happens</i></p>

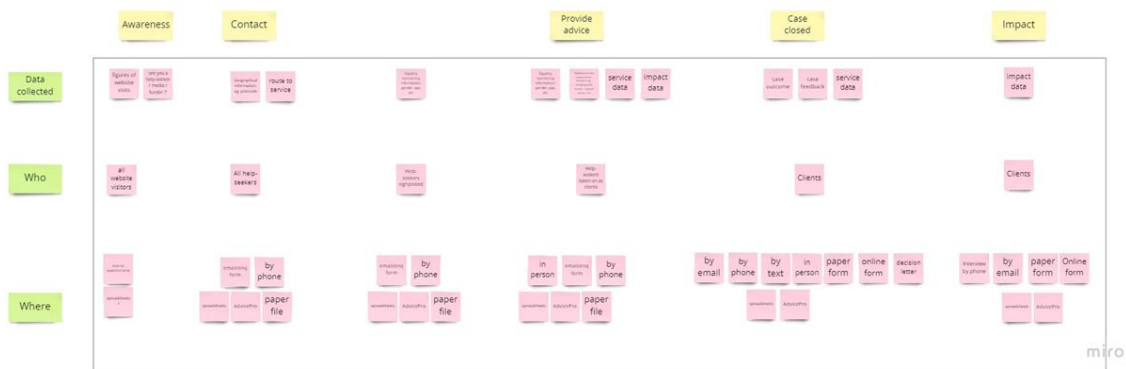


Figure 1 Map of data collected during Law Centre service delivery

### Pressure from funders

At these sessions with Law Centres about collecting advice data, we also heard about the pressures Law Centres are under from their funders. Notably, one Law Centre receptionist was required to ask the same set of demographic questions to each person who contacted the Law Centre, regardless of whether that person was signposted away from the Law Centre or provided with an appointment. Yet, at these sessions other Law Centres shared how they had overcome these issues by proactively engaging their funders and agreeing to a new process, that would involve taking a representative sample at periodic intervals across the year. They noted that this practice had reduced the strain on those who are collecting data and had led to less 'patchy' data.

Funders can also put pressure on Law Centres at the point at which they are requesting data. Recently, we facilitated peer-support session to help Law Centres complete a specific survey that a particular funder had issued. Many Law Centre directors talked about simply not having the data required from the survey, having to collect the data from multiple sources (e.g. budgets in annual accounts), having to write a separate note to explain the quantitative figures that they provided, feeling worried about not knowing how the data would be used or who would see the data, and the fact that the survey meant that funders would miss a lot of the nuance about who and how the Law

Centre helped. There were more serious concerns raised around some of the questions being inappropriate because, for example, legal aid wasn't available for debt cases.

### Skills, Capacity and Culture

Linked to the challenge above, many Law Centres simply do not have the time or expertise to conduct data analysis or draw insights from this analysis once conducted. Moreover, accessing the data and analysing it is a skill that is often learnt 'on the job' and many Law Centre staff are seeking out training and guidance to help them with these skills. The majority of Law Centres do not have a 'Data Lead' or equivalent specialist role with overall responsibility for data collection and analysis, and within the organisation there will be varying levels of general data literacy amongst the staff, with some seeing the value of collecting data and others less convinced.

In a recent survey we conducted about the *IT and Digital Skills* of members across the Network, 65% (12 out of 20) rated their level of IT and digital skills as "Can do most of what I need, but need expert help to fill my knowledge". Notably, respondents talked about wanting extra help when it came to data analysis and evaluation techniques: "I think it would be helpful to be **shown how to collect data to show how our work is having an effect**. I don't know whether that means showing us how to create surveys ( electronic) and then how to collate the data and analyze it. I think that might involve some training on how to measure effectiveness of a project." Other respondents talked about how their lack of skills had serious implications for ongoing funding: "I **struggle with Excel formulas**, which has led to issues with grant submissions."

### Technology and Taxonomy

There are several tools that support feedback collection, data management and data analysis and visualisation, and all Law Centres are using a Client Management System to record data relating to client cases. However, a key concern for Law Centres is the cost associated with keeping these systems going (or developing them further to meet their needs), interoperability between systems and ensuring that there is a single source of data.

Another issue, and generally relating to funding, lies in the inconsistency of how data is collected and recorded, not least across Law Centres, but sometimes across legal departments within a Centre. This includes variation in the interpretation of what is meant by terms like 'enquiry', 'client 'case' etc. This presents a challenge to analyse aggregate data across the centre or network without a clearer understanding of how those terms are interpreted, and an even greater challenge when combining network data with data in the wider advice sector.

In Part Two, we'll share how we plan to address some of these concerns and set out what we have done already.

## Part 2: What we are doing to address the data challenges facing Law Centres

Law Centres Network has been focused on collecting better data for several years. Julie Bishop, the Director of Law Centres Network, recounts arriving in the UK and being surprised that there was no national system for collecting data. As Julie [recounts while speaking with Roger Smith](#), “We tried to develop better data collection for LCN. This was unsuccessful – partly because we relied on manual collection from Law Centres and already published material. We encouraged Law Centres to use a common case management system, AdvicePro, which was developed by the advice sector. But it didn’t happen.” We continue to learn and remain focused on our vision of achieving a reliable, real time understanding about the demand on Law Centres and how Law Centres are meeting this demand.

In pursuit of this vision, we’ve divided the data challenges facing Law Centres (and Law Centres Network) into three buckets:

- 1) **LCN Data:** what is the operational and strategic data we need to evidence if we are meeting our objectives and meeting the needs of our members?
- 2) **Law Centre Data (Covered in part 1):** what operational and strategic data do Law Centres need to evidence if they are meeting their objectives, and meeting the needs of clients? What support do Law Centres need to work more effectively with data?
- 3) **Sector Data:** what data should LCN collect from Law Centres to help advocate for future funding and policy development? What data can / should Law Centres and LCN provide to feed into wider advice sector discussions on legal need, service provision and impact? Law Centres Network (LCN) recently presented about our data journey at *the Justice and Innovation Group*, facilitated by the [Network for Justice](#) (see our [Slide Deck](#)).

Yet, we recognise that these efforts need to be supported with an overarching strategy – a justification for collecting, cleaning, analysing, and reporting on this data. To help us with this, we were lucky to be awarded a grant from the Legal Education Foundation and engaged a group of consultants, to help us tackle these data challenges. Whilst this initially focussed on LCN’s own data challenges, the ambition is to embed the learning from this process to better support Law Centres in their own data journeys.

### LCN’s Data Journey

We first reviewed the data we currently collect against our existing of Theory of Change and undertook a data audit to understand what data we already had and identify that which was missing. Next, the consultants helped us to thoroughly review our key strategic and planning documents that set out LCN’s vision, objectives and workstreams. We then participated in several workshops to refine our outcomes, activities, and the language we use to talk about our work. More about this work at [[link to article from Kerry/Sam/Tracey](#)].

As a result of this activity, we have:

1. Clarity over outcomes, activities and data points needed to evidence if we are meeting our objectives as well as a better way of communicating to anyone about what LCN does.
2. An improved overview of the data available across the whole organisation and how this can be used to evidence our Theory of Change.

3. Data Principles that can guide the collecting and using of data, not only at LCN but across the Network.

Our next steps will involve embedding these data principles through our work, gaining further clarity on data points needed to evidence our Theory of Change, alignment of data architectures across LCN tools and systems, developing our understanding of the support Law Centres need on data and linking into strategic sector wide initiatives on data.

## Law Centre Data

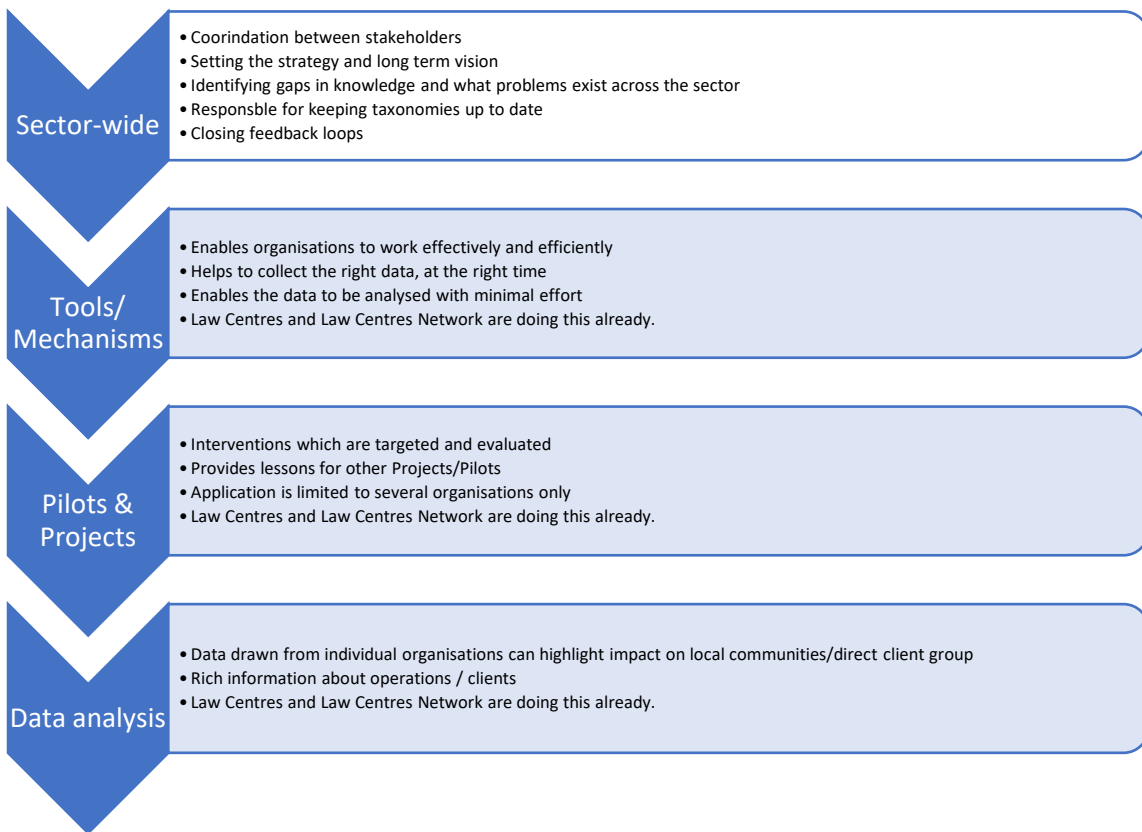
We have already started to develop an understanding of the support Law Centres need around data, some of which has been informed from our own Theory of Change work above, and some from directly working with Law Centre people. So far, we've held over 70 interviews with Law Centre staff, trustees and volunteers to gain a deeper insight into the data challenges they are facing. We've also held a series of workshops with Law Centres to explore some of these issues in more depth, for example, around feedback collection and responding to surveys. We've set up an 'Advice Pro Champions User Group' to help connect those Law Centres struggling to use Advice Pro with members who are more confident and proficient at reporting and can share and impart learning and knowledge across the Network. We're working closely with Advice Pro to advocate on behalf of Law Centres for future technical developments that will make logging and reporting on data easier for all, as well as facilitating regular training sessions for Law Centres on improving their use and understanding of using Advice Pro.

We've started exploring different mechanisms on how to upskill Law Centre staff on collecting and using data, which could include apprenticeships, as well as coaching and mentoring opportunities. But we believe it isn't possible to solely tackle the data challenges faced by Law Centre from within the Law Centres Network alone. We need to approach this more systemically, thinking across the Advice Sector as a whole, and the support voluntary and community organisations will need on data, and the potential role and opportunities that exist to co-design solutions to these problems with other advice sector organisations, funders and policy makers.

## Demonstrating the sector's value

To support our work, we think there is a role for an organisation, with data expertise, to lead the way to demonstrate the sector's value and help each organisation deal with some of the systemic challenges facing the sector. For example:

- Supporting organisations and umbrella bodies to co-design and then respond to surveys and requests for information. Especially when these surveys can generate powerful evidence for making the case for the sector.
- Create and maintain alignment and agreement across the network and the advice sector about the interpretation of data e.g. what is a client, what is an enquiry, legal taxonomies etc.
- Ensure KPI's don't vary too much from funder to funder and identify the few, key pieces of data needed to satisfy the requirements all funding bids.
- Identifying what information is going to be useful to others in the sector, funders and policy makers.
- Increase the skill, capacity and resourcing across the sector, through interventions.



## Contact

If you would like more information about LCN's work on Data, please get in touch with

Alex Charles

IT and Digital Officer

Law Centres Network

[alex@lawcentres.org.uk](mailto:alex@lawcentres.org.uk)