UNDERSTANDING LOCAL LEGAL NEEDS: EARLY INTERVENTION AND THE ECOSYSTEM OF LEGAL SUPPORT

Executive Summary

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Design by Kate Glaze.

Warwick Law in the Community (LinC) strives to make a meaningful contribution locally, nationally and internationally through innovative clinical education and research. We work collaboratively with various organisations to create opportunities for undergraduate and postgraduate students to gain practical experience in law and actively contribute to advancing social justice. We offer opportunities in more traditional forms of legal advice and practice, but we also look beyond these to expose students to alternative ways of doing and thinking about law. We aim to develop and produce engaged and impactful research on social justice, explore how research can support community-led efforts through critical and participatory methods, and foster collaboration between academics, legal practitioners and activists.

Advicenow (formerly known as Law for Life) is a UK-based charity that helps individuals and communities navigate life's legal problems. We provide clear, practical legal information, self-help tools, education, and training to empower people to understand and use the law effectively. We research what works and collaborate with others to tackle justice issues through policy and campaigns. Our work focuses on creating innovative access to justice solutions, combining online and offline support. We partner with communities and organisations to drive meaningful change and promote excellence in public legal education.

Central England Law Centre provides free specialist legal advice in seven areas of social welfare law to those most in need and uses legal processes to fight inequality. Our mission is to embed rights in our communities to reduce inequalities, challenge unfair systems and advance social justice through specialist legal advice and education. From our offices in Coventry and Birmingham, we advocate for people, challenge unfair decisions, take cases to the highest courts and work in partnerships with other support services to ensure rights are at the heart of their response. By working in close partnership with other organisations and services, we activate and embed rights in communities to change the cultures, systems and behaviours that reinforce unfairness, disadvantage and inequality. By ensuring early and preventative action is taking place we protect the rights of socially and economically-disadvantaged individuals and communities.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report contributes fresh evidence to inform early intervention and public legal education strategies. These focus on how trusted intermediaries can support access to justice for marginalised communities in collaboration with specialist legal and advice services.[1] Legal need is immense, and it far exceeds the capacity of existing services to meet it.[2] Early intervention in the context of legal needs aims to reduce the escalation and the multiplication of law-related problems. Strategies that help people recognise and deal with problems earlier, by fostering legal capability and engaging a wider ecosystem of legal support, are vital to finding solutions to unmet legal need and to mitigating poor outcomes for individuals as well as the knock-on effects on health and other public services.[3]

ABOUT THE STUDY

This report presents the findings of a local, qualitative legal needs study in Coventry, a collaborative project between the University of Warwick School of Law, Central England Law Centre and Advicenow (formerly Law for Life). It focuses on the experiences of marginalised groups and the role of community organisations (trusted intermediaries) in supporting them to access civil and social justice. It explores legal needs emerging from March 2020 to the present, capturing experiences as the country has moved from one crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, to another, the 'cost-of-living' crisis. The study provides new insights into the experiences of people from marginalised communities in this rapidly changing context of heightened legal need and diminishing service provision, amidst the longer-term erosion of social safety nets and digitalisation of services. Findings from this study contribute important policy and practice insights to inform early intervention and public legal education strategies. These focus on how trusted intermediaries can support access to justice for marginalised communities in collaboration with specialist legal and advice services. The study demonstrates how engaging a wider ecosystem of legal support to help people recognise and deal with problems earlier is

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[1] **Early intervention** means assisting "at the earliest point possible in a problem's life course," to prevent it from escalating, or even occurring in the first place. This can mean intervening before a problem "has entered the legal domain." See Pascoe Pleasence et al., Reshaping Legal Assistance Services: Building on the Evidence Base: A Discussion Paper (Sydney: Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales, 2014), 9. It also means looking to the wider context in which a problem might arise; including social trigger points such as transitions in people's lives such as entering and leaving relationships, or bereavement. It also means considering groups that are most likely to experience particular law-related problems and achieve less favourable outcomes.
Public legal education (PLE) describes a broad range of online and offline legal information and education initiatives and services aimed at increased awareness and understanding of legal rights and processes, better understanding and uptake of advice and legal assistance, and increased skills and confidence in taking effective action when problems occur. Increasing PLE aims to empower both individuals and communities, enabling them to take more control over their lives, deal with their problems, participate in the democratic process, and get involved in shaping the decisions that affect them. Sharon Collard et al., Public Legal Education Evaluation Framework (Bristol: Personal Finance Research Centre, University of Bristol, 2011); Lisa Wintersteiger, Legal Needs, Legal Capability and the Role of Public Legal Education (The Legal Education Foundation, 2015).
Trusted intermediaries are "people who are known and trusted […] who can be a bridge [to] legal support or other information or services," and provide a wide variety of support that helps people deal with law-related problems. See Karen Cohl et al., 'Trusted Help: The Role of Community Workers as Trusted Intermediaries Who Help People with Legal Problems' (Toronto: Law Foundation of Ontario, 2018), 8. This often refers to people who work or volunteer in frontline, non-legal community organisations, but it can also include a much wider group including health workers, important community figures and even friends and family.
[2] Pascoe Pleasence, Nigel Balmer and Rebecca Sandefur, *Paths to Justice: A Past, Present and Future Roadmap* (London: UCL Centre for Empirical Legal Studies, 2013).
[3] Using data from the English and Welsh Civil and Social Justice Survey in 2004, the economic cost of this impact on individuals and public services in England and Wales was estimated to exceed £13 billion per year Pascoe Pleasence et al, *Causes of Action: Civil Law and Social Justice* (Norwich: TSO, 2006) i. This figure would be significantly higher now due to inflation.

crucial to addressing unmet legal need and to tackling law-related problems before they escalate and multiply.[4]

The study took a qualitative, participatory approach, drawing on legal consciousness to explore how people "experience, understand, and act in relation to law."[5] Qualitative approaches enable a focus on the lived experiences of people who are marginalised.[6] This approach provides detailed insights into the specific law-related problems that have arisen in people's lives and the barriers to resolving them, reflecting "how legal systems actually work—not just in theory, but in reality."[7] It also offers insight into how people respond to these problems and the factors that influence their responses.

The research has been co-produced with seven trusted intermediary organisations in Coventry.[8] We conducted interviews with a group of staff and stakeholders from each organisation, and we interviewed a sample of thirty-five individuals they have supported and who have struggled to deal with law-related problems. The individual participants in the study reflect groups that the organisations support, many of whom are often absent from large-scale legal needs studies.

Organisation	Main Group Supported
Carriers of Hope	Migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers in poverty
Coventry Foodbank	People accessing foodbanks and reduced cost food
Feeding Coventry	
Foleshill Women's Training	Women subject to social exclusion and poverty
Kairos Women Working Together	Women at risk of and subject to sexual exploitation
Rethink Mental Illness	People affected by severe mental illness
St Basils	Youth experiencing or at risk of homeless/ living in supported accommodation

Within these broad groups, participants' narratives highlight intersecting, marginalised forms of identity and experience, especially poverty, disability and mental ill-health, but also gender, race and ethnicity, age, migrant status and care experience.

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[4] In this report, legal support is taken to include "the totality of support available to people from information, guidance and signposting at one end, of the spectrum to legal advice and representation at the other." Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, *Legal Support: The Way Ahead* (London: Ministry of Justice, 2019), 5.
[5] Lynette J. Chua and David M. Engel, "Legal Consciousness Reconsidered," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 15, no. 1 (2019): 336.
[6] See Alexy Buck and Liz Curran, "Delivery of Advice to Marginalised and Vulnerable Groups: The Need for Innovative Approaches," *Public Space: The Journal of Law and Social Justice* 3, no. 7 (2009). For example, people experiencing homelessness, people with precarious immigration statuses, and people with complex needs. See Pascoe Pleasence et al., *Paths to Justice*.
[7] West Coast Legal Education and Action Fund. 'Re-Envisioning Public Legal Education and Information (PLEI)' (British Columbia, 2021), 25.
[8] See pp 26-27 in the main report for full descriptions of the organisations.

WHAT THIS STUDY TELLS US

The findings show that legal need amongst marginalised groups in Coventry is characterised by the experience of complex clusters of problems. It was common that participants had experienced between four and six interrelated problems within the timeframe of the study. These clusters were linked to underlying financial precarity and poverty, disability and changes in health, and family breakdown. A majority of problems were either unresolved or had poor outcomes. Living on very low incomes and struggling to make ends meet meant that problems quickly led to people being unable to pay for food or heating, deteriorating health and even losing their homes when unresolved. Problem clusters were exacerbated and sometimes triggered by systemic issues, particularly in disability benefits, asylum and housing processes. This included poor first-stage decision-making, misinformation, delays, and dismissive and hostile attitudes. Digital-by-default services that failed to tackle digital exclusion, and processes that largely do not accommodate people's needs, including those related to disabilities and long-term physical and mental health conditions, contributed to problems.

Participants responded to problems with a range of resolution strategies, often deploying multiple strategies within problem clusters. These included elements of inaction, handling things alone as well as seeking different forms of support, ranging from informal help from family and friends to the support of trusted intermediaries, and legal advice and representation. Inaction was common and reflected power imbalances or simply focusing on survival, and along with self-help led to poorer outcomes. When they were able to access legal and advice services, often with the help of trusted intermediaries, this usually led to positive outcomes, highlighting the integral importance and impact of advice. However, they often struggled unnecessarily for a long period of time before they were able to find the help they needed, if they did at all, and problems were compounded by a lack of access to early advice. The difficulty in accessing help experienced by participants, such as inconsistencies in referral pathways and limited capacity, reflects the impact of continued underfunding of services. Legal aid provision in Coventry has decreased by 70% since the implementation of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. While funding from trusts and foundations as well as corporate and contract-based funding in the sector has increased, this has not been able to make up what was lost.

Law and rights held relatively little meaning to participants, or their views on both tended to be negative or abstract, pointing to a pervasive sense of legal alienation. People's understanding of legal rights and processes was very low, which hindered their ability to handle problems and get the help that they needed. While they brought considerable resilience and perseverence to their efforts to deal with problems, they were often frustrated by these difficulties. They struggled with the skills needed to manage bureaucratic and complex systems, often due to disabilities and long-term health conditions,. Most also struggled with the use of digital technology. These experiences underminded their confidence and self-esteem, leading to demoralisation. Many participants described feeling confused, overwhelmed, humiliated or lost, and they were hindered from resolving their problem by fear of reprisals or punitive responses.

Despite these difficulties, the findings show how these complex barriers, challenges and systemic issues can be mitigated, providing some promising insight into what works. In particular, the research highlights the integral role played by trusted intermediaries in collaboration with legal and advice services. While trusted intermediaries are not typically considered part of the ecosystem of access to justice in the UK, this research shows that they already play a significant role in meeting legal needs through a range of activities. These include identifying legal problems where someone may not recognise that they have rights, signposting and referral, practical help, emotional support and advocacy. The support they provide reflects the social and practical dimensions of dealing with law-related problems, including building trust, providing a safe space for people to talk about what is happening in their lives, and developing confidence. Participants' narratives highlight how important this support was to them in enabling them to take action. Those who had been supported by trusted intermediaries to deal with their legal problems had much better outcomes, including better access to advice.

While the organisations had different opportunities and approaches to offering this support, they all recognised the importance of this aspect of their role. They also highlighted some of the challenges they face. While we found many examples of good practice, these efforts are often ad hoc and constrained by resources as well as their own legal capability and there was inconsistency in how organisations make decisions about how best to support someone to deal with a law-related problem. The ability of intermediaries to provide these forms of support is enhanced by close working relationships and partnerships with legal and advice services, particularly when they are readily able to have questions answered and can easily refer people.

Overall, our findings point to a reconceptualisation of the 'early' in 'early intervention' as the identification of law-related problems and provision of legal support at the earliest opportunity, when someone is engaging with help or support in their community. The reality is that people are often already in crisis and experiencing unresolved legal problems as they navigate sources of help and support. This bottom-up, person-centred approach to early intervention can broaden the reach of specialist legal and advice services by engaging a wider ecosystem of legal support to intervene effectively to tackle law-related problems before they escalate and multiply.

The research shows a need to promote much more widespread legal capability, particularly amongst trusted intermediaries, strengthening the capacity of communities to take rights-based approaches targeted at the primary clusters of problems amongst marginalised groups. Strengthening that capacity means investing in specialist legal and advice services while prioritising approaches that can make their funds go further by building networks with intermediaries. Alongside this, findings highlight the need for a collective approach to 'systemic early intervention', targeted at the issues that drive legal need and compound disadvantage in the first place. This includes devising collaborative local strategies with statutory services, voluntary sector services and legal and advice services to target those with the greatest need and reduce barriers.

KEY FINDINGS

1.   The landscape of legal need in Coventry

1.1.   Legal need amongst marginalised groups in Coventry reflects structural forms of poverty and inequality arising from its socio-economic history as a post-industrial city. The prevalence of low-paid and precarious jobs, alongside high levels of unemployment, high numbers of out-of-work benefits claimants, escalating mental health needs, and significant numbers of migrants and asylum seekers, drive heightened legal need in key areas of social welfare and family law, often but not exclusively concentrated in deprived areas. Legal need has been exacerbated by COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis.

1.2.   The landscape of legal and advice services has changed dramatically as a consequence of austerity and the cuts to legal aid. Legal aid provision in the city has declined by 70% since the implementation of LASPO. Coventry City Council has been supportive of the sector, but local authority funding for legal and advice services has decreased considerably in real terms and faced significant cuts. While funding from trusts and foundations as well as corporate and contract-based funding in the sector has grown, it is usually project-based and time-limited, with specific difficulties in funding core costs and caseworkers. Demand for legal and advice services far exceeds their supply in all areas. There are particularly acute shortages in the areas of immigration, employment and private family.

2. The perspective of trusted intermediaries

> "…the frustration that our clients are feeling, they're shared by us to a large extent. I mean we're a bit more […] demanding about it all and we'll keep going, but I can understand why people think, oh just give up" (Carriers of Hope).

2.1   The organisations pointed to intersecting forms of disadvantage amongst the people they support, including poverty, racialised and gendered experiences, disability and mental ill-health, substance abuse, and particular challenges for migrants. They raised concerns about groups including single men, lone parents (particularly women), care leavers and migrants, and pointed to groups in the city they may not be reaching.

2.2   They highlighted the devastating impact of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis in the city, drawing attention to the scale of emergency food provision, as well as the challenges of accessing overstretched local services which have persisted and sometimes worsened since the pandemic. These include long delays and difficulties accessing GPs, as well as stigma and hostile service cultures.

2.3   They see a wide range of legal issues, predominantly welfare benefits, debt, housing and immigration, as well as high levels of unmet needs for social care. For the organisations supporting women, domestic abuse and child protection were also prominent.

2.4   The forms of legal support they offer range from signposting and referral to practical help such as making phone calls, filling out forms and digital support, to emotional support and advocacy. They often felt they needed to stay involved to support someone through a process or to ensure their needs were understood by other services.

2.5   The levels of legal support offered by the organisations varied considerably, reflecting factors including the structure of their services and remit, opportunities to offer support, their capacity (particularly time and resources) and legal capability, and the needs of the communities they support.

2.6   They identified significant limitations, tensions and challenges in this role, in particular gaps in their own legal knowledge and skills and pressure on time and capacity. Collaboration with legal and advice services helped to overcome challenges, particularly where there were established partnerships, but they often struggled to refer due to services being over capacity.

3. The experience of law-related problems for marginalised groups

> "Problems kept happening, coming from nowhere, I don't know why" (S).

3.1   There were more than 130 law-related problems taking place among 35 participants.[9] Most had experienced between four and six interrelated problems. The most common problems were related to welfare benefits and housing. Many of these problems were unidentified (by neither the participant nor the intermediary), including entitlement to disability-related benefits and social care, and employment problems.

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[9] Individual participants were selected on the basis that they had struggled to deal with law-related problems within the timeframe of the study (30-36 months).

3.2   The majority of participants had been involved in legal processes. These included a wide range of predominantly civil processes and pre-proceedings, for instance, workplace disciplinary proceedings, review stages such as mandatory reconsideration in relation to benefits problems, debt relief orders and bankruptcy, asylum applications, separations and divorces. A significant number of participants had also been involved in court and tribunal proceedings or had been threatened with legal action (e.g. eviction).

3.3   Unresolved legal problems led to a range of negative impacts including being unable to pay for food and heating, deteriorating physical and mental health, emotional well-being, and challenges in practical aspects of day-to-day life. They resulted in lost social care assistance, poor or overcrowded housing conditions, and some lost their home altogether.

3.4   There were two primary clusters of problems. The first related broadly to a loss of income and included employment problems, benefits problems, debt, eviction and homelessness, often with underlying social care entitlement. The second related to a broad spectrum of family problems, often involving domestic abuse, and variously included divorce, child arrangements, child maintenance, child protection and linked problems with housing, benefits and immigration. In addition, problems were also related to or stemmed from complications with immigration status, including benefits, debt, housing and social care. These clusters could overlap, and problems were at different stages.

3.5   Problems were only exceptionally caused or 'triggered' by the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, but they were often exacerbated by them. Problems tended to reflect wider circumstances of financial precarity and poverty, as well as triggers including changes in health and family breakdown. Participants' accounts often highlighted much longer histories and antecedents.

3.6   Multiple systemic issues and barriers either exacerbated or triggered legal problems. These included complex and problem-prone processes, particularly in disability benefits, asylum and housing processes including poor first-stage decision-making, misinformation, delays, and dismissive and hostile attitudes. Participants struggled with systems and processes that largely do not accommodate their needs, including those related to disabilities and long-term physical and mental health conditions, or take account of the practical realities of their circumstances.

3.7   Most participants experienced significant barriers related to the use of digital technology. Digital poverty and deficits in digital skills contributed to delays and mistakes in legal and administrative processes. Problems related to submitting evidence and managing online appointments triggered and escalated legal problems including benefit sanctions and child protection proceedings. Some participants pointed to the benefits of doing things online, but more complex processes created substantial barriers. Difficulties in speaking to someone to resolve issues caused additional stress and frustration.

4.   Problem resolution strategies

> **"I spoke to that many people you know, it's a whirlwind" (K).**

4.1   Participants responded to problems with a range of resolution strategies, often deploying multiple strategies within problem clusters. These included elements of inaction, handling things alone and the use or involvement of different forms of support, ranging from informal help from family and friends to the support of trusted intermediaries, and legal advice and representation.

4.2   Inaction was common. Problems were frequently not identified as being actionable, participants described not knowing what to do or thinking that taking action would be too

difficult or not worth it. Power imbalances influenced inaction, and participants accepted decisions by more powerful actors, such as employers, landlords and government agencies. Inaction was linked to the cascade effects of multiple problems and feeling overwhelmed. Participants often focused limited energy on necessities and survival or the most pressing problem in a cluster. Young people and people with mental ill health most commonly did not take action. Inaction resulted in significantly poor outcomes including homelessness, loss of income or employment, or serious health decline.

4.3   Handling things alone was a common resolution strategy, and participants frequently combined self-help with other strategies on a single issue. This involved trying to find information, repeated attempts to negotiate with other actors, making multiple applications (for benefits or housing assistance for example) and making complaints. Participants described how they had been getting on with things or taking practical steps to improve the situation, but usually without taking advantage of available rights. Seriousness did not always preclude people from trying to handle things alone, including tribunal proceedings, child protection proceedings and homelessness processes. Handling problems alone tended to result in unnecessarily protracted struggles and forms of resolution that fell short of potential entitlements.

4.4   Friends, family and the wider community were important resources for participants, providing emotional and material support, as well as information and practical help to deal with law-related processes. However, reliance on informal sources of help in some cases led to delay, misdirected action, or inaction.

4.5   The support of trusted intermediaries was often a key factor in participants taking any form of action. Trusted intermediaries played a significant role in both identifying problems and supporting people to deal with them, particularly benefits and debt problems. Those who most readily accessed advice had done so with the help of intermediaries.

4.6   Most participants had engaged or attempted to engage with legal and advice services in some way. Where people had accessed legal and advice services this usually led to successful outcomes, including access to social care, successful benefits appeals, debt relief orders, immigration and asylum appeals. However, access to legal help was commonly at a late stage when they were already in crisis and dealing with problems that had significantly escalated. Those who 'tried and failed' to access advice had usually ended up helping themselves, or the issue had stalled. Participants' experiences point to inconsistencies in referral pathways, limitations on the capacity of local service providers and the scope of legal aid, as well as very limited awareness of sources of advice.

5.   Legal consciousness

> **"Legal and rights issues, I don't feel like people would even see it as that because they never listened to us beforehand. […] There's no such thing as rights anymore, there's not"** (H1).

5.1   Law and rights held relatively little meaning in relation to participants' immediate experiences, and associations with law and rights tended to be negative or abstract, pointing to a pervasive sense of legal alienation.

5.2   Their perceptions reflected their wider experiences of marginalisation, related to a range of interrelated factors, including disability, mental ill health and prior trauma, as well as more specific experiences with the legal system. More recent encounters with the administrative state, including its digital interfaces, as well as more powerful actors such as landlords and employers,

undermined their integrity, humiliated and depersonalised them, further exacerbating their sense of alienation from law and rights.

5.3   Even when participants had successfully asserted rights, their narratives were not generally framed in terms of empowerment, instead reflecting that what they had experienced was an unnecessary ordeal. However, they emphasised the importance of feeling supported, being heard and having relationships of trust, often related to their engagement with intermediaries as well as more positive encounters with legal and advice services.

6.   Legal capability

"I don't know about legal rights or what to do or where to go" (E).

6.1   Levels of legal knowledge, including preliminary awareness to identify legal issues as well as specific rights and entitlements, were very low. Some people had partial knowledge of their rights, but they didn't know the processes they should use to secure them. When participants did not take any action, this was at least partially a consequence of not recognising the problem. Efforts to handle problems alone and seek help were both frustrated by limited knowledge of rights and processes. This resulted in poor outcomes including lost entitlements, food and housing insecurity, and it had negative impacts in family cases.

6.2   Clusters of legal problems meant that those who had gained sufficient knowledge in some areas and had the wherewithal to find things out described significant problems with other areas they encountered. Levels of legal knowledge shifted according to context and status, particularly if someone experienced declining mental health or language barriers. Participants often attributed a lack of knowledge to being misinformed or having a lack of access to information about their cases, leading to mistrust and suspicion of institutions and contributing to power imbalances.

6.3   Many participants struggled with the skills needed to plan, organise and keep track of events, often due to disabilities and long-term health conditions. Common problems were associated with obtaining and submitting evidence, finding and completing forms and the administration of their benefits and finances. Participants combined a range of tactics and skills to try to tackle their problems, usually without fully understanding their rights. Some people demonstrated ingenuity and perseverance in combining negotiation skills and recording evidence to press for better outcomes. Others struggled significantly with communication due to health or language issues. Participants often combined skills within a household. Problems with skills were compounded by poor administration of public services and lack of service sensitivity to participants' needs.

6.4   Most participants discussed limited digital skills and confidence, often related to disabilities and long-term health conditions. Few were completely without access, but most relied entirely on smartphones. Difficulties included typing, feeling like they weren't able to do things quickly enough, composing documents, and uploading documents. Some felt 'out of practice' or simply unsure about using computers. Very few sought legal information online. Several participants relied entirely on intermediary organisations for online tasks, such as managing benefits, while others depended on children or neighbours for help.

6.5   Overall attitudes toward participants' situations and law-related problems were negative and led to demoralisation, losing faith in their ability to resolve problems or not acting at all. The experience of repeated and multiple problems undermined their confidence and self-esteem, which in turn made it harder for them to tackle the problems they encountered. A significant number of people described feeling anxiety and uncertainty and were hindered in resolving

their problem by fear of reprisals or punitive responses. They struggled to ask for help due to shame and fear.

6.6   Trusted intermediaries helped people to overcome these barriers and bolstered their legal capability by providing information, helping with practical tasks and building confidence to take action.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations focus on tackling the root causes of unmet legal need in marginalised communities, taking a 'whole-systems' approach that builds on the idea of intervening at the *earliest opportunity*. They reflect four overarching themes:

– Reducing systemic drivers of legal need
– Developing the ecosystem of legal support
– Fostering collaborative local rights-based cultures
– Building community legal capability

These approaches reflect values that were important for participants and made a positive difference to their experiences. These include the centrality of trust and feeling supported.

1.   Reducing systemic drivers of legal need

The evidence in this report points to the importance of early intervention to reduce systemic drivers of legal need that disproportionately impact marginalised groups and perpetuate disadvantage. Poor first-instance decision-making, maladministration and delays, and hostile service cultures, particularly in disability benefits, asylum and housing processes are driving legal need, escalating and triggering crises for individuals as well as generating further costs in health and other public services.

1.1   Improve the quality of first-stage decision-making and reduce demand for tribunal and other redress mechanisms with a focus on welfare benefit and immigration decision-making.

1.2   Consider a 'polluter pays' model for the civil justice system to incentivise better practice and meet the financial costs of poor practice.

1.3   Tackle hostile and dismissive service cultures by promoting person-centred services that prioritise the needs and perspectives of people using them.

1.4   Mitigate the impact of 'digital-by-default' services by ensuring digital service interfaces are developed alongside alternative channels for those who need them most.

2.   Building the ecosystem of legal support

This study points to the value of an ecosystem of legal support which traverses local, regional and national levels. It includes trusted intermediaries, generalist and specialist advice, and high-quality digital information resources and guidance. Meeting the legal needs of people who are marginalised means recognising the integral role played by each of these different forms of legal support and reversing investment flows to focus on bottom-up, collaborative community-based solutions.

2.1   Start local to ensure the right mix of legal support to meet local legal needs. This may include devolving national legal support budgets to a local level and/or implementing flexible commissioning arrangements to build on trusted partnerships.

2.2   Develop a local ecosystem of legal support that can adapt to scale and regionalise efforts.

2.3   Support and recognise the integral role of trusted intermediaries in providing legal support, including identifying legal problems, signposting and referral, and providing a variety of forms of practical help, including digital assistance.

2.4   Target and tailor support for marginalised groups with a focus on common, interrelated clusters of problems to prevent escalation and crisis.

2.5   Invest in and support collaborations and partnerships to provide a continuum of legal support. A responsive legal support system should include tailored combinations of legal information, education, assistance from trusted intermediaries and pathways to specialist advice and representation at the earliest opportunity.

2.6   Tackle acute shortages in specialist legal advice. In Coventry, this includes immigration, private family, community care and employment law. This could include expanding the scope of legal help to include early advice for priority groups and clusters of issues (taking as an example models such as the Housing Loss Advice Prevention Scheme).

3.   Developing collaborative local rights-based cultures

Rights-based approaches entail recognising that problems often have a legal dimension, supporting intervention at the earliest opportunity and prevention where possible, and aiming to support long-term sustainable solutions and community cohesion. This means promoting understanding amongst statutory and voluntary services of the value of rights-based approaches and taking action to implement those approaches at a local level.

3.1   Promote local systemic early intervention by engaging decision-makers including local authorities and housing providers to improve the quality of first-stage decision-making, establish 'right first time' principles, and identify and mitigate factors driving people into crisis and destitution.

3.2   Develop person-centred services that prioritise the needs and perspectives of people accessing them, reduce gatekeeping and foster a culture that seeks to uphold people's rights. This should involve regular consultation and needs assessment, ensuring the inclusion of people with lived experience.

3.3   Local stakeholders should work together to identify local legal needs and priority groups using evidence-based approaches. Utilise administrative data, for instance from local authorities and the Department for Work and Pensions, alongside the insight of trusted intermediaries, independent generalist and specialist legal advice to identify and target engagement, advice and support to those facing the greatest inequalities.

3.4   Flexible and responsive local commissioning should focus on 'bottom-up' solutions, fostering local collaborations and partnerships.

4.   Building community legal capability

The findings point to the value of building legal capability both at the individual and community level. Increasing support to help people recognise and deal with problems earlier, lies at the heart of strengthening trusted intermediary capacity to participate in the ecosystem of legal support. Trusted intermediaries are a diverse group and may include community organisations, healthcare workers, and many others. Their diversity is an asset and builds on relations of trust at the community level.

4.1   Equip trusted intermediaries to proactively identify law-related problems and potential clusters, share high-quality legal information, provide practical support and signpost or refer to advice and specialist legal help effectively. Create replicable yet adaptable approaches for trusted intermediaries to provide legal support for the people that they help.

4.2   Strengthen community legal capability with a focus on understanding the causes of inaction among priority groups, including low levels of knowledge of rights and processes and the practical skills needed to progress action at each stage of a justice problem.

4.3   Promote individual legal capability through targeted initiatives as well as practices that enable people to identify legal problems, develop and be supported with relevant skills and attitudes. This includes legal awareness raising, dissemination of high-quality legal information, supported self-help and enhanced referral routes to practical in-person support and guidance, and specialist assistance delivered on and offline.

4.4   Focus on developing and disseminating good practice amongst trusted intermediaries by creating 'communities of practice' supported by public legal education and training. Establish local and regional rights networks that can scale and disseminate good practice (from the legal sector, voluntary sector and statutory sector) to share understanding of the real-life impact of unmet legal need and develop solutions together.