

# The Digital Dividend



**Can innovation and technology save legal aid  
and access to justice?**

A roundtable in association with



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When writing about legal aid and access to justice, it is hard to look beyond funding. The declining legal aid budget, the reduction in eligibility, and the impact of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2013 make for a tale of woe that even the Ministry of Justice seems to have realised has gone too far, to judge by its agreement to pump an extra £135m into the criminal legal aid budget.

But the aim of the roundtable this report summarises was to look past funding and instead focus on how the type of innovation and technology we are seeing in the legal market can support law firms and not-for-profit providers to deliver their services.

Sir Christopher Bellamy QC's criminal legal aid review highlighted "new possible ways of working", such as through not-for-profit community interest companies and firms specialising in particular kinds of work, supported by block grants from the government.



There are also examples of technology pushing the boundaries, such as the winners of the Solicitors Regulation Authority's Legal Access Challenge in 2020: one a technology platform which supports survivors of domestic abuse and the other a chatbot helping people with learning disabilities understand their social care rights.

In the 12 years of writing about innovation on *Legal Futures*, much of the big news has been made by big firms, which have the ability to invest or are attractive to outside investors. But I confess to often being more excited by those finding ways to open up access to justice or overcome barriers vulnerable consumers face to accessing legal services.

There has been a surprising number of these over the years – not all successful but to try and fail is an integral part of the process. We have seen firms become alternative business structures (ABSs) to bring in external input and not-for-profits set up for-profit ABSs to help fund their core work, as well as law firms create platforms that allow either lawyers individually or whole firms to focus on their legal work while leaving the back-office to others.

As the roundtable shows, what may now be thought of as relatively minor developments in privately funded practice areas, such as practice management systems, are delivering major benefits to firms where piles of files on chairs were once the norm.

That an IT company with the heft of Clio has developed a dedicated offering for the sometimes-impooverished legal aid sector is of huge credit to them. Before law firms can improve what they do for their clients, they have to get their own houses in order, and a practice management system must be an integral part of that in the 2020s.

This is a debate and story that has a long way to go. But I hope you find our contribution to it a stimulating one.

**Neil Rose**  
Editor, *Legal Futures*



*Legal Futures* is an award-winning news resource tracking the fast-evolving legal landscape. Written by professional journalists, it provides cutting-edge daily news coverage on alternative business structures, new market entrants, regulatory change and innovation in all its forms. Its unique blend of hard-hitting journalism, market intelligence and expert analysis makes it the first port of call for anyone interested in keeping pace with the transformation of the legal market.



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# Justice for all

**Colin Bohanna**, UK and Ireland General Manager of legal software provider Clio, discusses the potential impact technology can have for ensuring fairness and equity of representation in the legal sector



*Colin Bohanna*

What is the role of technology in ensuring access to justice for all, particularly access for the most vulnerable in our society? That is no small question and one that is incumbent on all of us operating in the legal space to consider.

As a global legal technology provider, it is a question that we at Clio have concerned ourselves with for more than a decade. Since our beginnings, we have been focused on closing the gaps in the provision of legal services to those who most need legal assistance. We have enabled lawyers and other legal professionals to work more effectively and to reduce some of the biggest constraints on their time, such as inefficient administrative processes, so they can do what they would prefer: helping their clients.

## **The impact of technology on access to justice**

As we have seen in the 14 years since Clio was founded, using technology to minimise the disruption of inefficient administrative and onboarding processes can have an outsized impact on the ability of legal firms to deliver exceptional client services. It means lawyers and other legal professionals have the time to research, meet with clients, and serve more clients than they otherwise could.

Legal technology usage also has other benefits that increase access to justice. For example, the increased adoption of video-conferencing technology seen during the pandemic has had a positive impact on those who have traditionally struggled to access legal services. That includes those living in rural areas, who may not live in proximity to a lawyer qualified to deal with their specific matter; those working in precarious situations that may not enable them to travel to meet a lawyer or who may have family or elder-care responsibilities; and people with disabilities who may have mobility issues that make travel difficult.

Those, and other direct and tangible benefits of using technology, can help to close the access to justice gap. However, it's not enough for those positive results to be incidental to technology adoption. To really close the access to justice gap, those working throughout the legal system – including law firms, technology companies, government agencies, NGOs and charities – must take deliberate action.

That requires close collaboration between the wide range of stakeholders working in the legal sector, including significant time and investment. Without consistent collaboration and technological innovation, those who most need legal assistance in society will be left behind.

## **The legal aid crisis**

In England and Wales right now, there are few areas where deliberate action is needed more than in the legal aid sector.

Anyone who has been paying even the slightest attention to the current state of legal aid

in England and Wales will be well aware that it is in serious crisis, with legal aid 'deserts' widespread. The figures and statistics paint a bleak picture: literally millions of people who need legal aid assistance cannot access it, as well as legal aid practitioners who are often struggling to keep up with growing demand and limited resources.

In the face of this crisis, the deliberate action Clio took was to investigate what we could do to make things easier and relieve what stress we could from those offering legal aid. We spoke to countless legal aid practitioners about the difficulties they were facing and what practical impediments legal practice management software could help to solve.

One of the biggest challenges practitioners reported was how long it was taking to complete end-of-month invoicing to the Legal Aid Agency. We created a feature that, among other things, cuts that process time significantly. Legal aid providers we worked with to develop the feature reported that the invoicing cycle has been reduced from days to a matter of hours when using the feature.

The development of this feature is part of Clio's overall mission to transform the legal experience for all. As such, we made this feature available as standard and at no additional cost across all our plans in England and Wales. Outside of the legal aid functionality, our plans also incorporate a range of time-saving solutions, including unlimited document storage, e-signatures, a secure client portal via a downloadable app, time recording, and the ability to work on a mobile phone.

Combined, those features all help to make the work of a legal aid practitioner more efficient so they can concentrate on their clients and caseloads. We recognise that we cannot solve all of the issues facing legal aid. That has to be done at a governmental, societal and advocacy level, through collaboration with all those involved in the legal aid sector.

In the meantime, our aim is to make it as easy as possible for lawyers to continue to offer legal aid services. By making it simpler and quicker for legal aid providers to create and submit invoices to the Legal Aid Agency, we're working to ease some of the incredible financial strain that many have found themselves under. Ensuring legal aid provision can remain a financially viable part of a firm's legal offerings could help to stem the tide of law firms turning away from offering it as a service.

## The future for technology and access to justice

There is one more important question for us all to consider: what is the future of legal technology and how can we build that future to include those at risk of exclusion from legal representation?

While there are great benefits to utilising technology in legal service provision, we must also remain aware of the potential for it to exclude in ways that might be unintended. We must be careful not to prevent those who may not be computer literate or native English speakers from seeking help. We have to design technological solutions with disabilities in mind. In our efforts to reach as many people as we can online, we must remember those who cannot afford or are unable to have a presence online.

We need to design solutions while considering all of those people who are outside of the status quo and ensure that we include them and cater to their needs.

That's not an easy task, but it's an essential one. It's also one that can only be achieved when the legal sector works together. Too often, great innovation is missed because creators work in silos. By sharing knowledge and advances, as the practitioners who so graciously contributed to this roundtable have, we can help to spread awareness of the tools and technology that can change the legal sector for the better and for the greater good.



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“Using technology to minimise the disruption of inefficient administrative and onboarding processes can have an outsized impact on the ability of legal firms to deliver exceptional client services”

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# In conversation with...

We would like to thank the following for taking part in the discussion:



**Alan Larkin**  
Head of Innovation &  
Technology, Family Law Partners



**Colin Bohanna**  
General Manager, UK &  
Ireland, Clio



**Dean Kingham**  
Prison and Public Law Solicitor,  
Reece Thomas Watson Solicitors



**Jason Bruce**  
Practice Director,  
Duncan Lewis



**Julie Bishop**  
Director, Law Centres Network



**Laura Janes**  
Chair, Legal Action Group



**Martha de la Roche**  
Network Director  
The Network for Justice



**Rhona Friedman**  
Co-founder, Commons Legal



**Professor Roger Smith**  
Author of the Law, Technology and  
Access to Justice blog



**Sanjay Hora**  
The Jeanie Project  
Officer, LawWorks



**Sarah Rogers**  
Senior Legal Adviser,  
Immigration Advice Centre

# Drag reduction

Parts of the legal aid system stifle innovation and technology but this *Legal Futures* roundtable hears how many lawyers are straining at the leash to use it to improve access to justice



It is easy to forget that, even a decade ago, the kind of technology that is now routine at many law firms was a pipe dream. Dean Kingham says: "Ten years ago, we were entirely reliant on paper, had no case management system and instead numerous drives on the server. Over time that has changed dramatically, to the extent that I could be sitting anywhere in the world representing prisoners. I am fully remote and we are entirely paperless." The bottom line, he says, is a better service for clients.

It has also made starting new law firms much easier. Sarah Rogers took a leap when setting up her immigration law firm but in addition to the efficiencies created by a case management system (she is a Clio customer), technology that helps her communicate with clients for whom English is not their first language has been a particular benefit. She has her eye on a photocopier that will copy into several different languages.

"Then we can not only access our clients but also give them resources in their languages and we do not have to spend a fortune on translating every individual thing. The accuracy of those translations is the issue we have now, because technology does not necessarily provide the same level of accuracy as a human translator, but hopefully that will change in the future."

Commons Legal was set up in 2016 by Rhona Friedman and two colleagues. "We could not afford staff, so we have no IT department, no bookkeeping in-house, no

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"We have used new cloud-based products to allow us to have our back-office support done remotely, absolutely driving down on costs, so that we could focus on our key activities: providing legal advice."

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accountants in-house. We have used new cloud-based products to allow us to have our back-office support done remotely, absolutely driving down on costs, so that we could focus on our key activities: providing legal advice.

“Obviously we were going to be paper-free. I worked in a very large and well-established firm, which had lots of legacy overheads, because it had not yet really innovated and some people were resistant to proper digital innovation. The only paper we had from the start was the boxes and boxes of stuff that I took on from existing cases.”

Jason Bruce stresses the importance of firms getting their own houses in order first. “The whole notion of the case management system, whether it is bespoke or whether it is third party provided, is the framework of how a company and all its operations will work. The technology has to be flexible to suit all client’s needs. We have the innovation for those that are able to take it and receive it, but certainly through the pandemic we noticed that a lot of our most vulnerable clients were either quite distrustful of video conferencing or simply did not have the means to access it, and we made allowances for that. For many, because of the sensitivity of their instructions, they still required that face-to-face instruction in the office.”

### What about the client?

Everyone around the table stresses that technology is just a means to an end. Alan Larkin says: “If you are in a room of lawyers and you say, ‘Right, what are we selling?’ I am sorry, but everyone who puts their hand up and says ‘We are selling legal services’ can go and sit on the naughty step. That is a given. It is what else you bring on top of that to really service the genuine needs of the clients.”

Of course, being digital is not so brilliant if your client is not. Rhona Friedman says: “Many of our clients are digitally excluded through vulnerabilities and/or their economic situation. They do not have laptops or credit on their phone. Also, many of our clients just benefit from being physically with somebody.”

Laura Janes agrees: “I work with clients both in custody and in the community, and lots of my clients have been subject to a digital freeze. They are now just introducing laptops into certain prisons, but they are very limited. Many of my clients in the community cannot get it together to do their benefits claims or even keep the same mobile phone for more than a few weeks.

“If I go into my phone now and try to contact each client that I want to contact, I have four or five numbers for them because they are living chaotic lives. They are not keeping one number. They will need handholding. It is the same with housing applications; quite often websites crash, people get frustrated and so you often just have to hand-hold.”

And then there’s the Legal Aid Agency (LAA), whose requirements have to remain a primary consideration. Around 70% of Duncan Lewis’s clients are publicly funded through legal aid and so the LAA is its largest stakeholder. Jason Bruce says that, in relation to the innovation it plans, the firm has to be in step with the agency’s demands. “For example, if you were to work with a stakeholder who requires physical files to be maintained for audit purposes then regardless of your own innovation capacities, going paperless would be very difficult. A significant moment for us innovation-wise was when the LAA implemented

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the Client and Cost Management System (CCMS) system in 2013, enabling a more online way of working for so many of our cases. Essentially, we were able to start putting steps into place that enabled us, from early 2019, to become fully paperless."

Laura Janes observes: "We have to acknowledge that the LAA is not in tune with these developments and it is still requiring elements of face-to-face contact. It is still requiring office presence. It has shown that it can be flexible through Covid but at the moment the new contracts that are coming through are not sufficiently flexible to keep in step with technological advances."

A major frustration for Rhona Friedman is that "quite a lot of our unpaid administrative time is spent furnishing the LAA with data that it actually holds and that we have already provided to it" in another format.

She also speaks about how she has been influenced by the models of "holistic defence" in Australia, Canada and America. But it is not possible here "because the LAA and its predecessor organisations make us all work in silos". She continues: "We cannot share expertise, so if you have somebody with a clustered injustice problem – immigration, housing, mental health and an entry into the criminal justice system – we cannot, under one umbrella, help that person." There is a "huge opportunity" here, if the funding and regulatory situation was radically transformed, to help such a person address all of their problems together.

Essentially, the LAA can act as a drag on progress and innovation, which is precisely the last thing it should be doing.

### Understanding the client

Alan Larkin is extremely unusual among smaller law firms in having the title of head of innovation and technology; he also runs its innovation platform, called the Family Law Lab, which shares the firm's software with other law firms for free.

He explains: "The change has been utterly profound for us as family lawyers in the last decade. We knew that we wanted to try and keep people out of court, because that is

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"The new legal aid contracts that are coming through are not sufficiently flexible to keep in step with technological advances."

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just a horrible experience. We wanted to have lots of alternatives for our clients to be able to pursue more constructive and positive outcomes. We realised that we could use technology to try and give them softer landings when they came in to see us for a really important first consultation."

This led to the creation in 2014 of a "virtual lawyer with lots of emotional intelligence". A "rules-based AI, using conditional logic", it provides for a personalised experience. It all started, he said, "from a wish to try to build out services that were focused on the clients rather than us as lawyers".

He says the real turning point was the realisation that there were "some skillsets we did not have". So it set up a knowledge transfer partnership with the University of Brighton through Innovate UK in 2016. "We embedded a knowledge systems expert, an AI guy in other words, in our family team for two years and it was so brilliant we kept him on. We employ him now. I work alongside him in our internal innovation team."

Mr Larkin adds that technology has to reflect "the values you have as a group of people and what you want to achieve" – that means creating systems "that will give the same brilliant experience for the person of the most modest means as the billionaires who might want to access it. There has to be zero distinction in the experience, and we think the only way to do that is to make most of it free, which is why we do what we do".

For Julie Bishop, the restrictions on legal aid and impact of other government policies on clients' lives has "made us focus on how we best spend our money". While clients were hugely appreciative of the service they received, this was often simply because someone spoke to them. "Someone gave them two minutes and it was the end of going from pillar to post. The fact that they got a cup of tea was everything."

But when they drilled down further, they discovered frustrations along the client journey. "It has led us to really look at that from first contact right up to six months after the client leaves us and maybe even longer. That is the holy grail, because we make a lot of assertions about the effectiveness of our work and we know whether it worked on the day, but we do not actually know in the distance. We are really trying to look at this big piece."

This means building a body of evidence to justify changes. "We are really trying hard to understand client behaviour. Why do people arrive with the proverbial shopping bag of unopened mail? What does that tell us about the point at which we can make an intervention, and what sort of intervention? Would an SMS just saying, 'You forgot your appointment' be enough or do we need something else? We are really trying things out. We are experimenting."

This has been the most important change in the Law Centres Federation's approach, Ms Bishop says. "We have actually adapted a digital approach to how we work across the organisation, how we design services, how we develop new projects. Clearly, we have spent money on actual applications, but the biggest influence and the biggest change has been this discipline of using evidence, doing research, experimentation and, if we do not like it, going back again, starting small and building up."

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Alan Larkin adds that the 'minimum viable product' approach his firm takes to prototyping has influenced the way it builds out non-technical processes too. "We actually have a 'succeed or fail quickly' approach. Do not try to make it perfect, which is what lawyers do."

### Data, data everywhere

Julie Bishop also highlights how she has a "huge focus" on data. "We are really thinking about what data we need. How can we collect it passively? How can we grab it along the way? We need data to evidence, to understand, and to address systemic change."

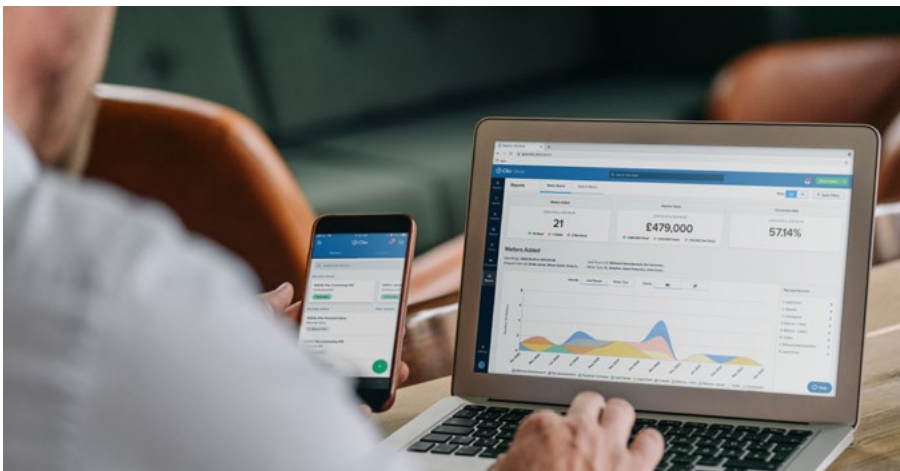
Laura Janes says that at the Howard League - where she was the legal director between 2016 and 2022 - "we were able to collect data and use our case management system to look at outcomes as well as to progress our own legal work, which helped us to feed into much broader policy pictures. I do not think that is widespread across the legal sector. Case management systems could be used much more effectively."

Rhona Friedman observes how the criminal justice system gathers and stores, but does not externally apply, vast reams of data. It is a source of considerable frustration: "I have just had the annual review with the contract manager from the LAA. I just said to him, 'Why are you asking for me to furnish you with this information that we literally sent to the LAA six months ago in a different format? It is your information and you want us to provide it to you again.'

"There is a lot of replication. In terms of innovating, planning, engaging and creating the opportunities for change, we cannot get at the data that others are collating. They hold onto this stuff and you have no idea why because they do not apply it in any meaningful way."

But Roger Smith cautions against the "fetishism" of data. He explains: "If you are a government that does not believe that the immigration and asylum system should work, piling up data showing that the system does not work is not going to really help much.

"On the other hand, the most impressive use of data that I have seen in the system comes from the Citizens Advice service. They have pivoted to digital delivery, although they do



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not quite admit it, and through Covid they were able to give you in-time charts of how problems were changing over time, how employment was coming in and benefits were going down."

As an example of the benefit of data, Sanjay Hora recounts how he was working in Australia for Justice Connect, a specialist legal service for vulnerable communities, when Covid hit. Suddenly they needed to develop a Covid iteration of a tool called Dear Landlord, which helps people at risk of homelessness, because temporary Covid measures were introduced. "It was fantastic work, because it was all data-driven, so we knew what the legal need was. We knew exactly what needs we were trying to address. Because of the pandemic, that work entirely went remote very easily in terms of user testing and user research.

"Three months into the new iteration of the tool you could see how much more it was reaching. There were new cohorts of people accessing the service who were never normally at risk of homelessness. Needs spiked in terms of hard-to-reach communities that ordinarily were not digitally literate but, because it was the only way for them to access services during the pandemic, we were able to capitalise on their digital upskilling."

### **Building the structure**

Another major change in the last decade has been the introduction of alternative business structures (ABSs) and other new ways of working. They have not made a huge impact in the legal aid world – investors are not generally lining up, although firms do at least have the benefit of a guaranteed income stream. We have seen a few not-for-profit organisations set up for-profit ABSs to help fund their work, while the Bellamy report picked out Commons Legal for being a non-profit community interest company (CIC), a structure that allows it to access grant funding.

Rhona Friedman says that the way they envisaged the three funding streams complementing each other has "absolutely borne fruit". She explains: "We would not have been able to survive solely on legal aid contracts. The margins are too small and a lot of the work is not profitable. We have the private client stream, we have the legal

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aid contract stream, and we have grant funding to do projects around the criminal justice system.

"We could have been a charity, and we are thinking about potentially setting up a charitable arm to do specific things, but on start up we just did not want another layer of regulation through the Charity Commission. The CIC was the middle ground. We have attracted grant funding, because many grant funders will view CICs in more or less the same way as they view charities: that this is a not-for-profit, there are no shareholders and the assets are locked."

The growth of platform law firms, offering solicitors the flexibility to work as they want with all the back-office support they need, has been a boon across the profession. Laura Janes works as a freelance solicitor through both Scott-Moncrieff & Associates and GT Stewart Solicitors & Advocates. "It is a collegiate environment; it mirrors a chambers-type model, where you knock your heads together with colleagues for support and intellectual discussion, but you can do what you need to do, and you have the infrastructure and technology to support you."

Alan Larkin says key to his and his colleagues' "liberation" was the decision to change from a partnership to a company structure: "I am never going in a partnership again. It stifles everything."

### Let's get ready to unbundle

One recent trend that is likely to have more traction in the access to justice world is unbundling. Alan Larkin says his firm is taking part in the Solicitors Regulation Authority's current unbundling pilot. "We have offered our software for the firms to try to get an experience of how a digital soft landing can really transform your practice."

The phrase 'soft landings' really struck Laura Janes, given how frightening many clients find a letter or call from a lawyer. "If we can find innovative ways to roll out those soft landings, speak to people in ways that are not intrusive and frightening, that is important."

Sarah Rogers says many clients still want to meet face-to-face but she has also to confront the cost of legal advice to clients who are facing "ridiculously high fees" charged by the Home Office as part of the immigration process. "You feel almost guilty for then adding to that burden by then telling them how much the advice and assistance that we provide is going to cost them."

This is where unbundling comes in: "How much advice do they want? Where do they want that advice? Are they confident enough to try to do their visa applications themselves? Do they just want some oversight? Do they just want to come in and sit down with a human being and go through it, just to confirm they are on the right track?"

"We do not hard sell them a full package. If you want an hour, you can have an hour. If you want 15 minutes on a telephone call, you can have that. We provide them with flexibility to choose exactly what they want. That is what our clients want."

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"If you want an hour, you can have an hour. If you want 15 minutes on a telephone call, you can have that. We provide them with flexibility to choose exactly what they want."

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### **Pulling in the same direction**

A key theme throughout the discussion was the importance and growth of collaboration, both in discussing ideas and actually on the frontline.

Martha de la Roche recalls how, 10 years ago, “there was a different website for every different thing”. Now, in complete contrast, “we are trying to collate resources, collate websites, and really cut down on that noise and overload of information that a lot of our vulnerable users really have to fight their way through in order to get to the resources and services that are really useful for them”.

In recent times, charities and the not-for-profit sector have stopped “chasing the tails” of private law firms and “started taking charge of their own destiny in terms of how they are developing and delivering services, including how they are using technology, but also alternative service delivery methods”.

Alongside this has been the creation of a community “much more willing to share learning and to operate together”. Ms de la Roche says the Network for Justice facilitates the Justice and Innovation Group, which has grown from “around 40 people who are interested generally in what innovation and technology has to offer in the access to justice space, to now over 200 subscribers, all of whom feed back into the group their opportunities and their learnings”.

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“Charities and the not-for-profit sector have stopped “chasing the tails” of private law firms and started taking charge of their own destiny.”

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She continues: “This has not only helped in cutting down on some of the duplication that we have seen before in these areas, but also helps us provide a more holistic offering to our vulnerable users. The more we know about what else is out there, and what other opportunities our colleagues are developing and using, and what is working well, the more able we are to cut down on those additional steps for our most vulnerable users, not signpost them into another grey area where they will have to do their own digging and find the service that works for them.”

Julie Bishop agrees. “There is a whole lot around collaboration across law centres, sharing better working together, ideas, casework, evidence. Collaboration is a big piece, alongside work on back office and making things more efficient.”

She has also benefited from the ease of international communication: “We can now



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collaborate with our colleagues around the world who are trying to solve the same problems, on a daily basis if we feel like it. We are having different sorts of conversations with more people. We are not just reading their papers; we are actually saying, 'Oh, can we have a quick call to discuss that?'"

But Roger Smith reckons there is still a long way to go. In the United States, he says, there is a lead body, the Legal Services Corporation, spending 1% of its budget on technological innovation. "As I look at my screen, we are all in little boxes on my iPad and that just about sums up where we are. We have to revive something like the Legal Services Commission, or whatever, because it is not going to work without leadership, ambition and integration from government."

### How far should technology go?

For all that technology and innovation has a clear role in the way law firms and not-for-profit organisations run themselves, there are questions about how far-reaching its impact will, or should, be in the wider justice system.

The reality, says Jason Bruce, is that without increased funding, technology is "very, very important internally to drive down your expenditure" and enabling the lawyers to focus on what they do best. "There are instances where technology will not be suitable for a client but behind the scenes tech is there to ensure that, from a business point of view, our services are being dealt with as efficiently as possible, so the front-end service to the client can be met as efficiently as we can."

For Laura Janes, "there is a huge place for technological innovation, but it has to be about actually enhancing and meeting clients' needs". She worries about more and more cases, particularly in criminal justice, being handled completely online "in ways that undermine access to justice".

To avoid this, says Julie Bishop, "[the government] simply have to talk to us. They completely ignore the expertise that you are listening to here. It is as simple as that. It will not work until they genuinely co-produce and co-design".

The positive is that technology is the one area where more resources might be available, suggests Roger Smith. "It would be bizarre if the whole of our society goes down a tech road that revolutionises itself, and the provision of legal services does not." Ultimately, for him the problem is not technology – it's services.

The next wave of innovation, he says, needs to be what might be called B2C. "I think we should call it P2C: practice to consumer. You can look to the US for much more of that. They probably will not come from all-singing, all-dancing, high-end robots. They will probably come from simple applications of Zoom, bog-standard things like that already in the market, which can revolutionise and extend what can be done with some parts of the access to justice market."

Alan Larkin says he is "a little more optimistic" than some others because he has seen how technology can scale. He explains: "We have 28 lawyers now. We were five lawyers when we started our knowledge transfer partnership through Innovate UK. Economically, it works if you build yourself around client-facing solutions. Technology is part of the answer."

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"It would be bizarre if the whole of our society goes down a tech road that revolutionises itself, and the provision of legal services does not."

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“We are working on other prototypes where we think we can build a model, but it has to be free. You cannot stick it behind a paywall. Even putting a fiver on it will disenfranchise enough people who really need the help.”

Sanjay Hora has been working at LawWorks on a new iteration of a tool called the Jeanie Project, which aims to act as a digital triage tool for people seeking pro bono help, and for lawyers or referral agencies trying to triage these matters from help-seekers directly.

“We have just launched this iteration, which will provide help for people with immigration and employment issues. We are looking to increase that to new areas of law and also do what Justice Connect do, which is start assisting and creating bespoke outputs, areas of law that, because there is no legal aid, would ordinarily want to go to lawyers, but lawyers cannot really deal with it because it is fairly low-level. Digital technology can definitely bridge that gap, we have found.”

Martha de la Roche stresses the importance of focusing on “supporting the organisations that are developing and delivering technology, to improve their capacity and their capability of being involved in the design and the development process, and to build their confidence”.

Colin Bohanna concludes by observing how much development work is going on in all the various organisations represented around the virtual table. “Ultimately, technology can enable firms to provide the right solution for a particular client, rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach.

“We believe that having a client-centric experience allows technology to enable this, based on specific needs and requirements, and meeting clients where they are. While, yes, technology can exclude if it is used wrong, it can also include many people as well and provide them with access to services that maybe they could not get otherwise, for example if you cannot take time off work, or if you have family commitments and responsibilities, mobility issues or disabilities.

“Technology can enable access to services for those individuals, but we also recognise that innovation needs to continue to support changing needs and expectations.”

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