advice UK

STATE OF THE ADVICE SECTOR:

Insights from AdviceUK's 2025 Annual Member Survey

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK's advice sector plays a vital and often invisible role in upholding social welfare, economic stability, and access to justice. AdviceUK's 2025 Annual Member Survey highlights the support provided to an estimated 2.8 million people each year, alongside the mounting pressures on frontline services. Members report rising client needs, complex casework, and increasing strain on limited resources. While some government recognition and partnership has emerged, it remains piecemeal and insufficient to secure the sector's long-term sustainability.

This report brings together frontline insights from over 230 organisations to assess the state of the sector, spotlight critical challenges, and propose solutions.

KEY FINDINGS

1. **Growing demand, limited capacity**: Demand for advice, particularly in welfare, housing, and debt, continues to rise, with organisations reporting more complex, overlapping client needs and cases.

2. **Funding insecurity:** The sector remains heavily reliant on short-term grants and charitable funding. Public funding is inconsistent and vulnerable to political and local authority budget shifts.

3. **Workforce fragility:** Just 27% of advisers across respondent organisations are formally qualified. While voluntary support is proven effective, heavy reliance and limited training investment undermines long-term sustainability of advice delivery.

4. **Policy engagement gap:** Most organisations want to influence policy but lack capacity. Engagement tends to be reactive, issue-specific, and under-resourced.

5. **Emerging collaboration:** Promising developments include increased government funding in Scotland, civil legal aid fee uplift, and new platforms for engagement (e.g. Ministry of Justice Legal Support Strategy Group). However, these are early steps that require scaling.

RECOMMENDATIONS SUMMARY

To secure the future of the advice sector and maximise its public value, we recommend:

Stabilise core funding: Shift from short-term, competitive grants to long-term, outcome-based public funding.

Invest in workforce development: Create national training pathways, apprenticeships, and clear career progression routes.

Strengthen collaboration: Embed formal co-design between government, funders, and advice bodies on issues such as welfare and digital access.

INTRODUCTION

AdviceUK is the largest support network for independent advice services in the UK, with over 650 member organisations. Our diverse membership includes local advice centres, community projects, and specialist agencies delivering free, independent advice to millions of people each year.

Recent data from members using our case management system, AdvicePro, shows that 498,239 clients were assisted between 2024 and 2025. This includes welfare rights and benefits (190,963 cases), debt (67,640 cases), and housing (69,798 cases). Drawing on broader data provided by our members, it is estimated that approximately 2.8 million people are supported by advice services annually. This highlights the true scale and impact of the advice sector across the UK.

AdviceUK supports members to be effective, resilient, and sustainable through practical tools, training, and opportunities for collaboration. We campaign for a policy environment that enables advice agencies and the people who rely on them to continue delivering vital support.

The advice sector plays a vital and often under-recognised role in promoting social welfare and access to justice.

Operating in every UK community, advice organisations help individuals and families navigate issues such as welfare rights, housing, debt, immigration, and employment, preventing problems from escalating into crises that may strain public services like healthcare and local authorities.

Despite this essential contribution, the sector is under increasing pressure, facing rising demand, funding instability, workforce challenges, and the need to adapt to new technologies.

Our **2025 Annual Member Survey** provides further evidence of the current realities faced by advice providers in the UK. It highlights both the strengths of the sector and the systemic risks that could undermine the future availability of free and affordable advice services.

AdvicePro, shows
498,239
clients were assisted between 2024-2025

Welfare rights/benefits
190,963 cases

Debt
67,640 cases

Housing
69,798 cases

This report highlights a proactive sector which wants to work collaboratively with governments across the UK to shape solutions. Since 2023, there is evidence of government and arms-length bodies moving towards more formal partnerships with the advice sector (notable examples are listed below). While these steps are welcome, they remain limited, and further action is needed to build lasting, meaningful collaboration that supports the sector's sustainability and impact.

- The establishment of the Ministry of Justice's Legal Support Strategy Group, creating a formal platform for advice sector representatives to have a seat in shaping national access-to-justice policy and spending priorities.
- Formation of the cross-government Financial Inclusion Committee, bringing DWP, HMT and regulators together with advice bodies to co-ordinate debt and money support policy for the first time.
- The Money and Pensions Service (MaPS) funding recommissioning (2025-2027 contracts), which signals an opportunity to embed longer, outcome-based funding cycles and fairer regional coverage.
- Uplift to civil legal aid fees (April 2025), although marginal, marks the first real-terms increase in a decade and serves as an explicit acknowledgement of the cost pressures faced by providers.
- The Scottish Government has increased funding for the Advice in Accessible Settings, managed by AdviceUK since 2023. In 2025–26, the fund has grown to £1,525,000 to provide small grants to members offering advice on money, debt, welfare benefits, housing, and energy across Scotland.
- The Welsh Government is building on their 'Information and Advice Action Plan' (published February 2025), setting a five-year framework for coordinated commissioning, digital infrastructure and workforce support across Wales.

Despite progress, the sector remains at a crossroads. With growing client needs, limited resources, and a rapidly changing policy landscape, the sustainability of advice provision demands urgent and strategic action. This report presents key insights from the survey, alongside recommendations aimed at securing a sustainable future for advice services, and the communities that rely on them.

KEY ISSUES FACING THE ADVICE SECTOR

1. FUNDING PRESSURES

Advice agencies are under mounting financial strain, driven by growing demand for their services and inconsistent funding streams. Although many organisations report diversified income sources, a significant dependence on charitable trusts continues to define sector funding, alongside lower levels of statutory funding. Compounding these pressures, civil legal aid fees have seen a decade long freeze in real terms, effectively cutting funding for legal advice providers and limiting their capacity to meet rising needs. The modest uplift scheduled for April 2025 marks the first real-terms increase in over ten years and acknowledges cost pressures, but it is insufficient to ensure the sector's long term viability.

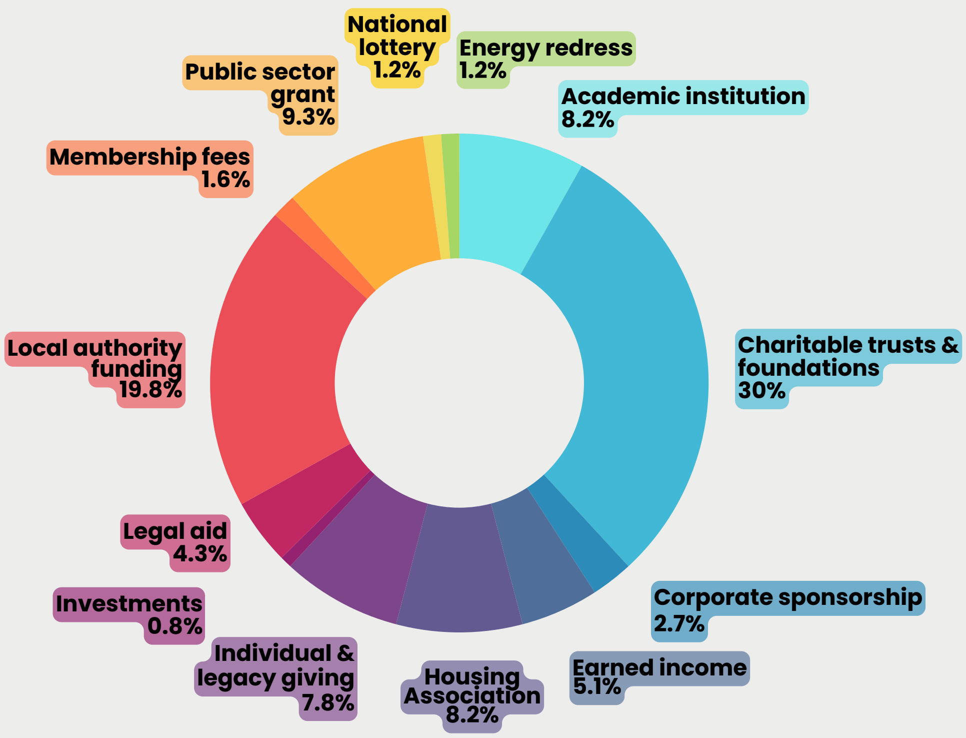


Chart 1.0 which illustrates the percentage breakdown of funding sources, confirms this reliance—charitable trusts constitute the largest portion, followed by local authority contributions. Public sector grants remain comparatively limited, and other sources are often small or ad hoc.

Chart 1.2: "What are the top three issues currently affecting advice delivery?"

Chart 1.2, a word cloud of responses to the question "What are the top three issues currently affecting advice delivery?", reinforces the sector's concerns. Common themes include "lacking funding," "policy complexity," "lacking advisers," and "shortage of staff" – each pointing to the systemic fragility of the current funding model.

Organisations combining grant funding with earned income reported greater financial stability. Some larger AdviceUK members, such as housing associations, are better able to sustain advice services due to their size, diversified income streams, or integration within broader service delivery models. However, this level of stability remains out of reach for most agencies in the network, such as small community-based organisations or specialist providers operating on tight, short-term budgets. Sector-wide vulnerability is further highlighted by the fact that some agencies provide free advice without any regular income, relying entirely on unpredictable donations or one-off grants.

Additional factors compound these challenges:

- Instability of major funders: Local authorities, the sector's second-largest funding source, are themselves under significant financial pressure. Their support is vulnerable to political shifts and increasingly constrained budgets. While grants often include full staffing costs, members with longer-term contracts may struggle to absorb recent increases to National Insurance contributions, further tightening already stretched budgets.
- Competitive grant-seeking environment: The scramble for short-term funding creates instability, requiring organisations to invest significant time and resources into bidding processes. This often pits providers against one another and discourages collaboration. Smaller organisations are especially disadvantaged, with limited capacity to compete effectively.
- Need for consistent government support: While charitable sources remain a vital part of the funding landscape, relying on them alone is not sustainable. A more balanced and diverse funding model is needed, wherein the government significantly increases contributions to ensure more consistent and long-term support.

2. WORKFORCE & STAFFING

The advice sector relies significantly on volunteers and unqualified staff, who make an immense contribution to service delivery. Survey data reveals that 64% of advisers are paid staff members, while around 38% are volunteers. However, only 27% of all advisers are formally qualified, highlighting a widespread lack of accredited expertise across both paid and volunteer roles.

While this mix of staffing keeps many services running, the sector's reliance on a largely unqualified workforce is a systemic challenge. As clients' needs become more complex due to intersecting issues such as cost-of-living pressures, housing insecurity, digital exclusion, and increasingly fluctuating welfare and immigration systems, the demand for qualified, experienced advisers continues to grow. Many are now supporting clients facing overlapping issues such as benefits appeals, eviction, and unresolved immigration status, cases that require not only specialist knowledge but also time and continuity. Addressing this complexity requires a stronger pipeline of trained professionals and investment in paid roles to build and sustain organisational capacity over the long-term.

"Insufficient funding and major policy challenges means we can't plan more than 12 months ahead. Like Universal Credit, rising refugee homelessness and the digitalisation of essential services, and particularly the Home Office's eVisa scheme for BRP holders"

- 2025 Member Survey respondent

Despite the dedication of staff and volunteers, the sector faces a structural workforce crisis. Ongoing funding insecurity prevents organisations from planning or investing in long-term staff development. At the same time, there are still limited routes to becoming a qualified adviser and progressing in an advice career. These systemic failures not only limit the sector's capacity, but also risk burnout and high turnover, putting frontline services at risk just as demand is surging. By investing in structured, affordable training and sustainable employment, funders and policymakers can help build a skilled workforce that reflects the scale and complexity of need.

"Recruiting suitable volunteers and specialist advisers or qualified caseworkers is a constant challenge — and the lack of responsiveness from government only adds to the pressure."

"Our biggest challenges are finances, staff and volunteers lacking the necessary skills, and having to work unpaid hours every week just to keep things going."

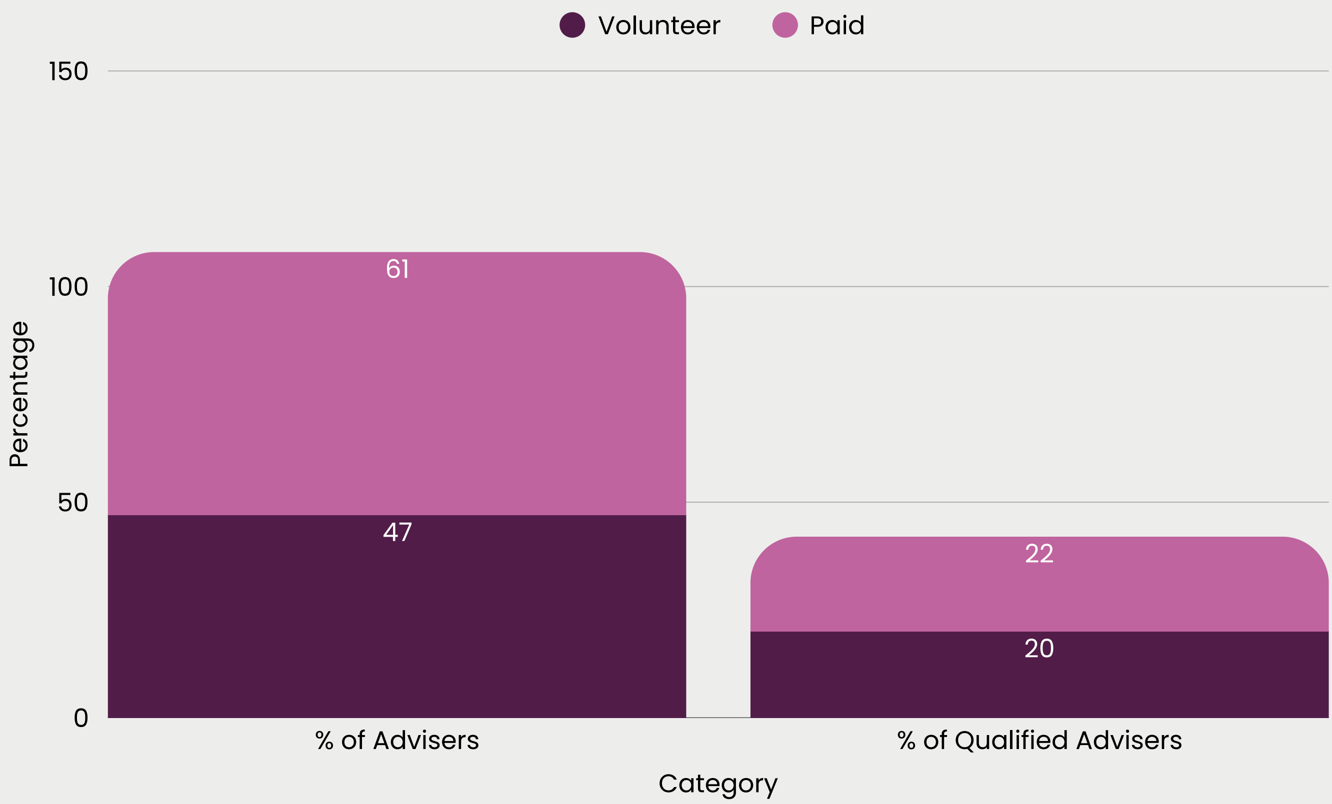


Chart 2.0, illustrates the composition of the advice workforce by volunteer vs. paid status and qualification levels as reported in the survey.

3. POLICY ENGAGEMENT: APPETITE WITHOUT CAPACITY

While advice organisations bring critical frontline insight to policy debates, many lack the capacity to engage strategically or consistently in this space. Survey data reveals a strong appetite to influence change — particularly in welfare reform and local service delivery — but this is often constrained by staffing shortages, lack of dedicated policy roles, and operational pressures (as described in Chart 1.2).

Chart 3.0, displays responses from 60 out of 220 organisations, showing that only a minority have had contact with elected representatives over the past year.

Chart 3.0: Contact with representatives in the last year

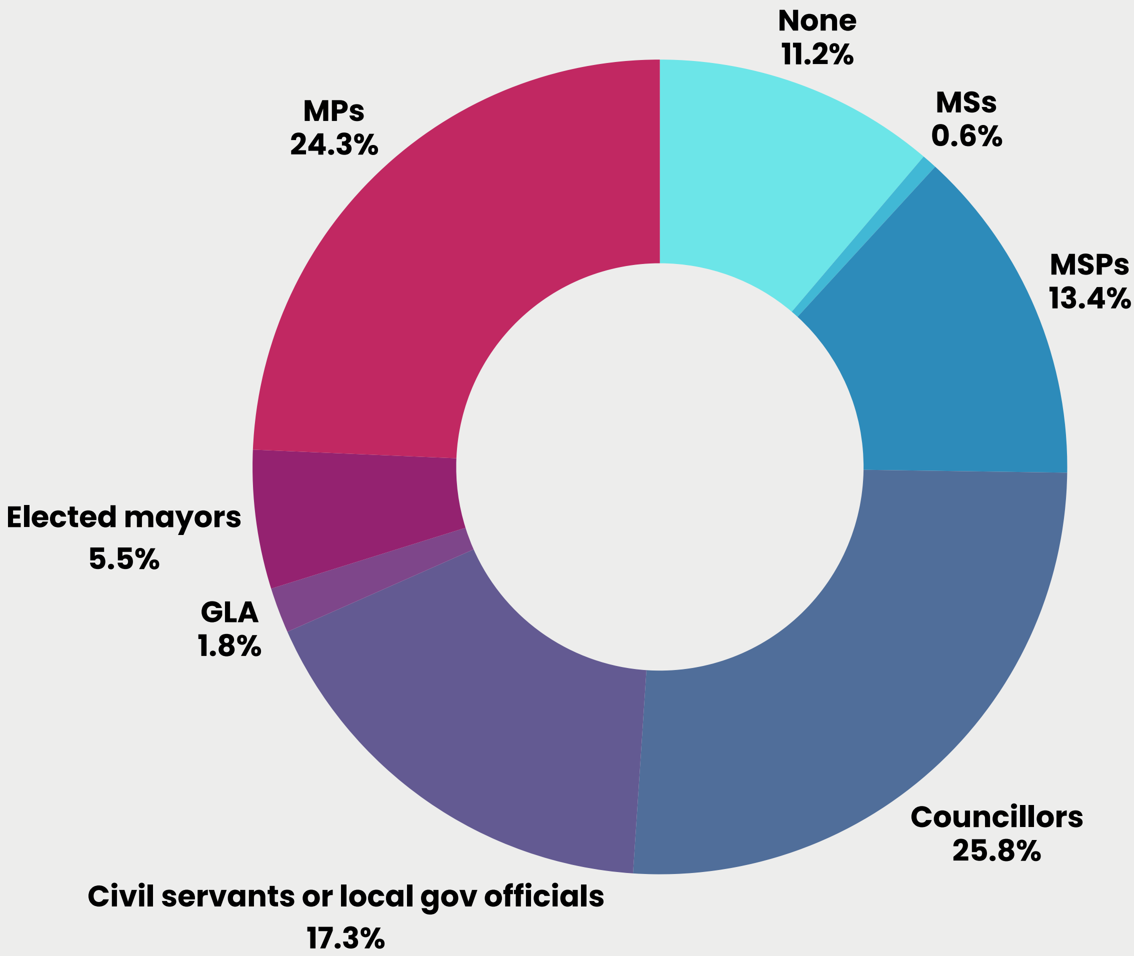
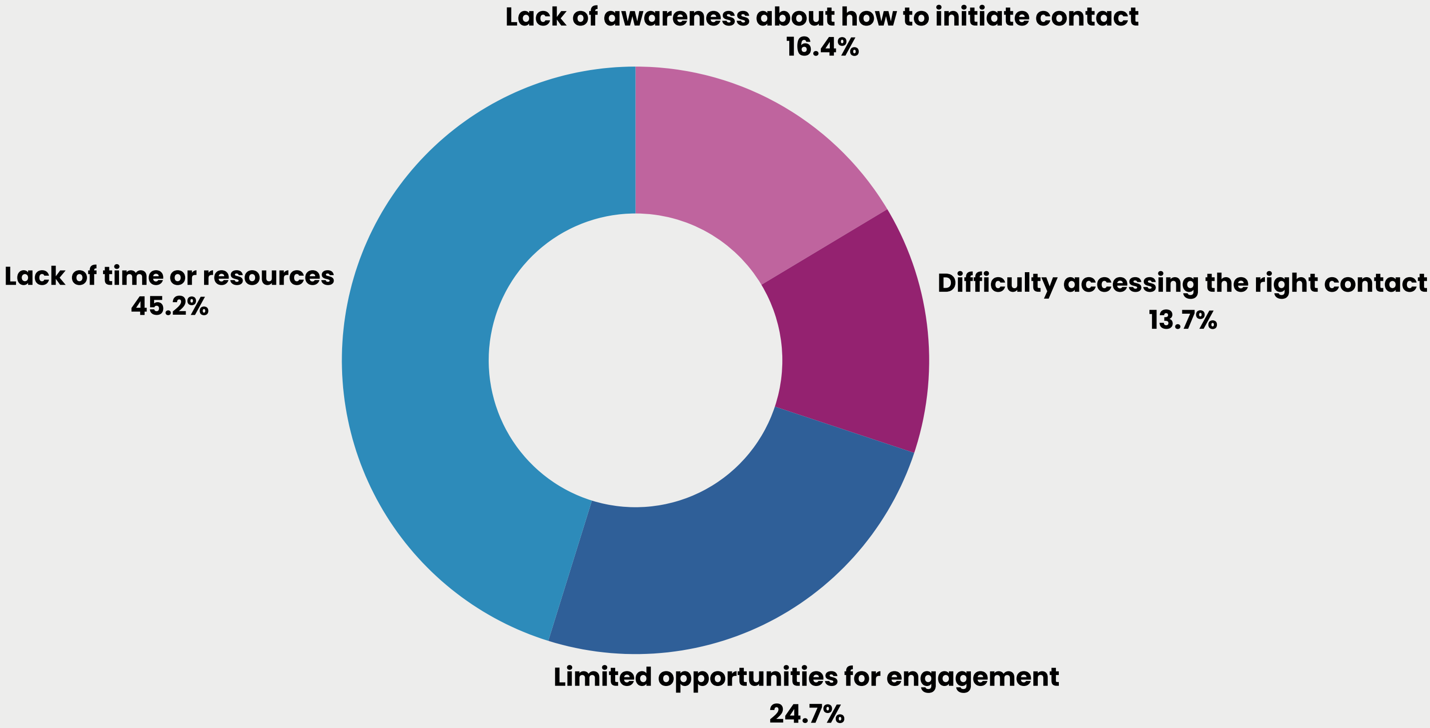


Chart 3.1: Main barriers to engagement (in %)



Why engagement doesn't happen

The most common challenges include lack of time or resources (45.2%) and limited opportunities to engage (24.7%).

While councillors (25.8%) and MPs (24.3%) were the most frequently contacted, survey comments suggest this engagement tends to be narrow in focus, such as "contact is regarding specific cases, not advocacy for or advice service," and "engagement is reactive, not part of a wider influencing strategy." This points to a significant gap between case-specific interactions and meaningful policy advocacy, and highlights the tension many organisations face between the desire to engage more strategically and the need to prioritise frontline service delivery.

Operational constraints, particularly limited time, resources, and underinvestment in advocacy skills, consistently outweigh the appetite to influence. Comments also reflect external barriers, including a lack of proactive outreach from policymakers and the destabilising effect of constant policy change, such as "Frequent welfare reforms require constant staff retraining." As one respondent put it, "MP responses have been tokenistic, we don't see the value in reaching out." Bridging this gap will require stronger infrastructure and more consistent support for building relationships between the advice sector and decision-makers.

Chart 3.2: Common policy-related activities

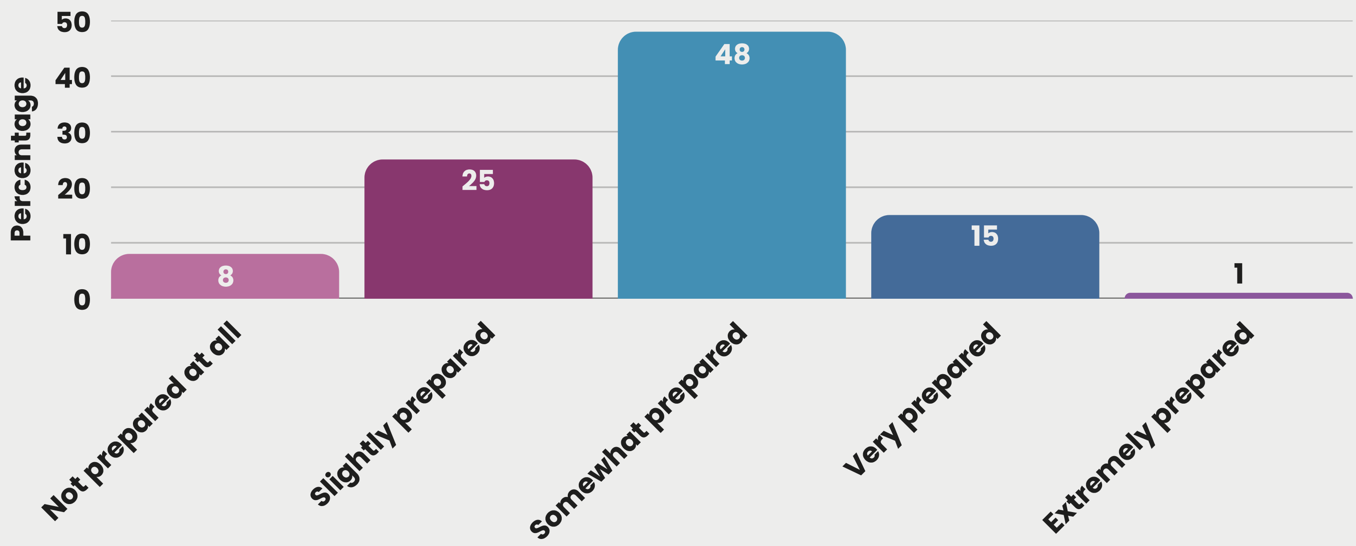
Many organisations engage in networking, community events, and data gathering to stay informed.

Despite considerable operational constraints, many organisations remain actively engaged in policy-related activities such as networking with sector peers, participating in community events, and collecting service data (Chart 3.2). These actions demonstrate a sector deeply motivated and closely connected to the communities it serves.

However, as earlier findings highlight, much of this engagement happens outside formal policy channels, limited by capacity challenges, lack of strategic infrastructure, and insufficient access to decision-makers. As a result, critical frontline insights are not consistently communicated to policymakers, leading to missed opportunities for meaningful influence.

Chart 3.2: Common policy-related activities

Chart 3.3: Preparedness for policy changes



A significant number of respondents feel underprepared for future government policy shifts.

Chart 3.4: Top 7 Policy areas for AdviceUK to prioritise over the next year

"Funding for Advice Services" was the most frequently mentioned priority, with 82 mentions. Together, these findings point to a sector that is engaged and insightful but stretched beyond its capacity. Without structural investment and more accessible policy pathways, its ability to influence or adapt to a rapidly changing landscape will remain limited.

4. ADVICEUK'S ROLE: BRIDGING THE GAP, BUT NOT ALONE

The gap between the sector's appetite for policy engagement and its limited capacity is clear. AdviceUK helps bridge this by amplifying member voices, connecting frontline insight to national discussions, and sharing timely policy information.

Chart 4.0: How informed members feel about policy changes

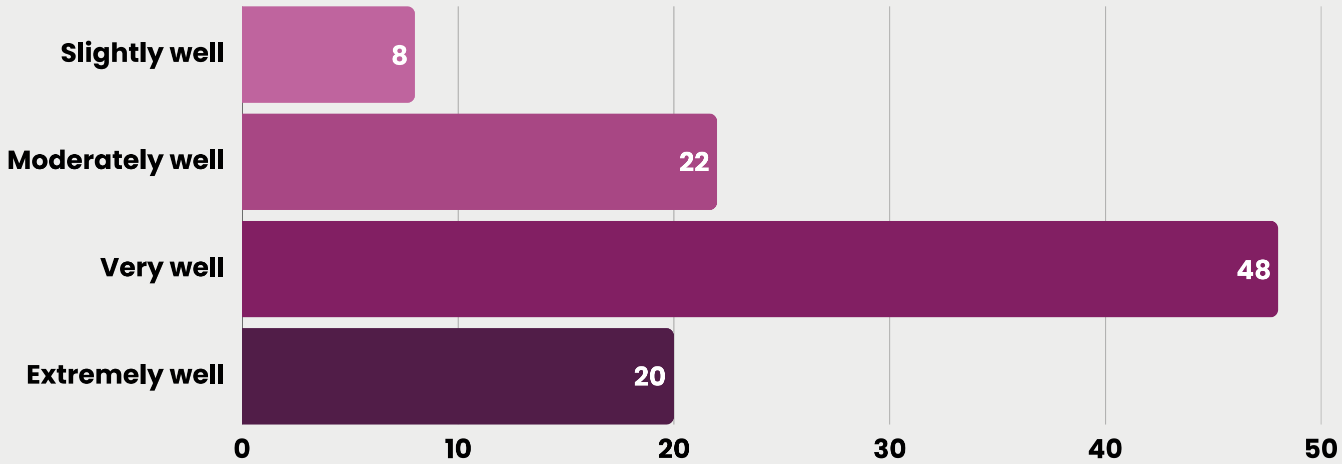


Chart 4.0, shows most members feel well-informed about policy changes, and Chart 4.1 reflects recognition of our role in raising the sector's profile.

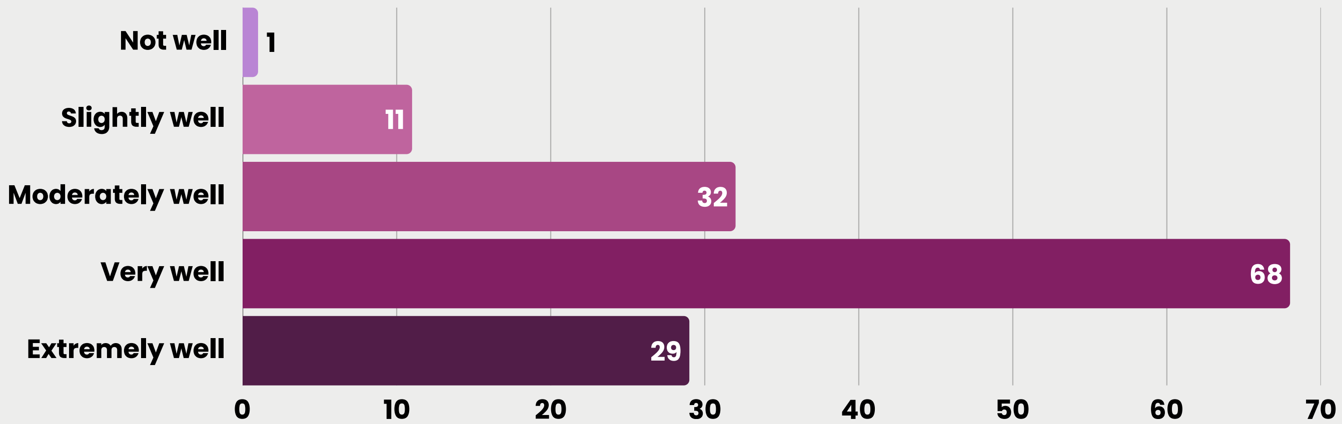


Chart 4.1: How well AdviceUK advocates on behalf of the sector

RECOMMENDATIONS TO POLICYMAKERS

1 We were pleased that the Treasury demonstrated commitment to tackling poverty in June's Spending Review. However, we were disappointed that the opportunity to create stable, long-term funding streams for the advice sector was not taken. In the next budget, investment must be made to reflect both the sector's essential role and the mounting pressures from the cost-of-living crisis. Government should step up, shifting from short-term, competitive funding cycles to a model that guarantees security, sustainability, and continuity of advice provision.

2 To build a more resilient and capable workforce, a comprehensive workforce development strategy is needed, led jointly by DofE, DWP and MoJ, to bring together government, funders and the sector. This should include:

- Apprenticeship schemes tailored to the advice sector
- Funded training and accreditation pathways to improve professional standards
- Clear career progression routes to attract and retain qualified staff

AdviceUK will develop more detailed policy recommendations on these issues to launch later in the year.

3 To strengthen the sector's policy voice, national and local governments, along with arms-length bodies, should commit to ongoing, structured co-design with the advice sector —particularly on fast-moving reforms such as welfare changes, where frontline insight is essential. AdviceUK is well positioned to facilitate this engagement, ensuring that member voices are represented early and consistently throughout the policy process.

See Methodology - Page 22

CASE STUDY 1:

Oxford Community Work Agency (OCWA)

Overview

Oxford Community Work Agency (OCWA) is an independent advice organisation made up of two key services: Oxfordshire Welfare Rights and the Barton Advice Centre. The agency specialises in welfare benefits advice, offering expert casework and representation in social security law. It also runs a specialist debt service with an authorised intermediary for Debt Relief Orders (DROs), and provides generalist advice in housing, employment, family, and consumer issues, signposting to partners for more complex cases.

Challenges

OCWA faces growing demand amidst tightening resources. Funding remains a significant concern:

- Core funding hasn't kept pace with inflation since 2011.
- Much of the agency's income comes through trickle-down models from national bodies, leaving little for front-line delivery.
- Funder requirements are increasingly data-driven, with heavy demands for client numbers and statistical reporting—placing pressure on already stretched staff.

With just seven employees — six of whom are qualified advisers — OCWA's ability to operate is highly sensitive to staff absence. Recruiting qualified caseworkers is difficult due to required expertise, and long-term staffing is hampered by funding insecurity. The wider policy landscape adds complexity. Welfare reforms, such as changes to Personal Independence Payment (PIP), are expected to increase demand for debt advice. However, planning for such shifts is nearly impossible under current funding and capacity constraints.

Staff Wellbeing

The weight of high caseloads and emotionally complex work has impacted staff wellbeing, raising concerns about burnout. Recognising this, OCWA has taken proactive steps to protect its team. With a strong understanding of mental health, the leadership has created space for staff to speak openly and ensures that workloads focus on the most vulnerable clients.

"I've got a really good team who are ready to jump in and help with varied work," says Sarah Darby, who leads the organisation.

Strategic Response

OCWA has adapted with pragmatic, people-focused strategies:

- Internal restructuring: A debt officer was promoted to team leader to help share management responsibilities.
- Client prioritisation: The team now triages more carefully, focusing on vulnerable individuals.
- Collaborative influence: OCWA contributes to policy discussions via CPAC and works constructively with supportive MPs. While collaboration with other agencies is encouraged by funders, it is only effective when all partners contribute equally — something that remains a challenge.

CASE STUDY 2:
Coventry Independent Advice Service

Overview

Coventry Independent Advice Service (CIAS), led by CEO Alan Markey, has long served some of the most disadvantaged communities in Coventry. Specialising in welfare benefits and debt advice, including support with Personal Independence Payment (PIP) applications, the organisation has built deep-rooted trust through consistent, community-centred support. CIAS operates a flexible service model offering drop-in sessions, telephone advice, and WhatsApp support every weekday morning, adapting to client needs in real time.

Challenges

In 2024, CIAS faced a sudden and severe funding crisis. Coventry City Council ended its core grant funding with only four weeks' notice, after previously inviting the service to apply for continued support. This decision wiped out 90% of CIAS's income overnight, with no transition funding offered. Although CIAS had some financial reserves, the immediate loss of funding was a major operational shock.

The consequences were stark:

- The team was reduced from eight to just five, including the redundancy of three full-time advisers. Of the five remaining, three now work part-time.
- The service area, previously covering Coventry's ten most disadvantaged wards, was drastically scaled back. CIAS can now support clients from only a few select parts of the city.
- Many clients needing complex support, especially around PIP claims, are left without help. Local Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABs) are overwhelmed, creating long waits and unmet need.

Despite this, CIAS has maintained its commitment to existing clients and even expanded outreach into Stratford to sustain some of its impact.

Strategic Response

CIAS responded with resilience and creativity:

- **Targeted Funding:** The team secured small grants (£5–10k) from alternative sources and managed to obtain interim support from Cadent Gas to keep critical support going. However, securing long-term, sustainable funding remains a major hurdle.

- **Volunteer Engagement**: Thanks to National Lottery funding, CIAS had launched a volunteer programme. Volunteers now assist with lower-level tasks, such as preparing clients for adviser interviews and supporting digital inclusion efforts across the community. This helps free up advisers' time for more complex cases. However, this funding is due to end in December 2025, putting future volunteer support at risk.
- **Operational Flexibility**: The organisation gave up its main office, now operating through hot-desking and outreach locations. This shift, while logistically challenging, has enabled CIAS to remain active within the community.
- **Staff and Community Wellbeing**: In the face of emotional and practical strain, the team has prioritised wellbeing. Regular informal activities, like picnic lunches, community walks, and social gatherings, help staff decompress and stay connected. Advisers are encouraged to take care of their own mental health, and team members frequently support each other to manage stress.

Ongoing Gaps

The need for benefits advice, especially for complex applications like PIP, remains high, yet the capacity to meet that need is limited. CIAS continues to signpost clients to other services but long wait times and capacity issues mean many people still fall through the cracks. The council-commissioned community advice service has yet to begin, despite funding being allocated, leaving a gap in provision that CIAS had previously filled.

Looking Forward

CIAS is determined to rebuild and evolve. The organisation remains committed to creative, community-focused service delivery. But without a more stable funding environment, its ability to plan and grow is constrained. The crisis has revealed both the fragility and resilience of local advice services, dependent on short-term funding, but powered by dedicated teams who refuse to walk away from those who need them most.

"We've built a huge amount of trust in the community," says Alan Markey. "We've been here for years—we know families, we've supported them through tough times. That's not something you rebuild overnight."

Methodology:

The survey was open for 50 days (20 January–10 March 2025) and distributed online to maximise reach and accessibility. Using a mixed-methods approach, it combined quantitative data, such as income levels, and staff and client numbers, with qualitative insights on member experiences and policy priorities. Participation was voluntary, with 230 responses received, representing about one-third of AdviceUK's membership. Around 15% of responses were submitted anonymously, allowing for open and honest feedback.

While the response rate reflects strong engagement, it's important to interpret the findings in context. Some members, particularly smaller or volunteer-run services, may have been less able to participate due to limited time, capacity, or digital access. As a result, the data offers valuable insight into sector-wide trends but may under-represent the experiences of certain types of organisations.

Contact us

Suite 610, 150 Minories, London, EC3N 1LS

influencing@adviceuk.org.uk

www.adviceuk.org.uk