

Minutes: 01 December 2020

- Welcomes – names**
- Victoria Channing, Simmons & Simmons (chair) **(VC)**
 - Miriam Bishop, Bevan Brittan (vice chair) **(MB)**
 - Jeremy Thompson, Support Through Court **(JT)**
 - Evi Econonmou, Avon and Bristol Law Centre **(EE)**
 - Julian Hemming, Osborne Clarke **(JH)**
 - Amanda Crutchley, University of Law **(AJC)**
 - Caroline Loving, Clyde & Co **(CL)**
 - Jonathan Bower, Womble Bond Dickinson **(JB)**
 - Rachel Loble, Simmons & Simmons **(RL)**
 - Rachel Wood, UWE **(RW)**
 - Claire Johnson, Law Works South West **(CJ)**
 - Katie-Jane Rees, Foot Anstey **(KJR)**
 - Michael Hayles, Burges Salmon **(MH)**
 - Ali Cloak, Royds Withy King **(AC)**
 - Omar Madhloom, University of Bristol **(OM)**
 - Jane Emanuel, Avon and Bristol Law Centre **(JE)**
 - Stuart Harrison, White Cap Consulting **(SH)**

Apologies:

Lucy Burrows
Helen Read
Mark Calverley

Minutes:

1. Welcome new members: Omar / Katie-Jane / Caroline

VC welcomed the group's new members:

Katie-Jane Rees, Foot Anstey
Omar Madhloom, University of Bristol
Caroline Loving, Clyde & Co

2. Actions from last meetings: Jane to introduce Victoria to Sue Evans of the CAB

VC updated that Sue Evans has now contacted VC and thanked JE for the update.

3. Talk: Technological solutions for the pro bono sector (Stuart Harrison of White Cap Consulting)

SH introduced himself and explained that the purpose of his presentation is to give an update on legal issues in the sector and how those tech solutions might be applicable to the pro bono sector. He has been involved in a programme of "Legal Tech Ecosystem" research based on similar research and work in the "fintech" (financial technology) sector. SH is happy to meet the group and discuss issues with them, he is interested in an open discussion how legal tech issues relate to (and can be useful in the promotion of / work for) Access to Justice.

SH explained that research they have been undertaking started with discussions with Bristol and Bath Legal Tech and WECA, the FinTech research went down well and highlighted the great work being done in the region. There have been a few hurdles as the research was started at the beginning of the first lockdown

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and so there has been a delay in launching the research (which was initially due to be published in September), but interviews and research are progressing.

The research includes: desk research, one to one interviews supplemented by an online survey (SH can share links to this with the group) and they are aiming to interview 50-100 stakeholders in the region. The report will be freely available and the report is there to spotlight particular activities and provide recommendations to overcome the challenges that have been highlighted. It should be available late-February 2021. SH advised that it is still early in the process but that most of the interview work has been focussed on firms and tech companies, they are still keen to talk to courts, academic institutions etc and he would be very happy to have more people contributing, particularly with a pro bono angle to see the challenges that are faced in this sphere.

SH is working with Chris Bull who provides the legal side to SH's tech knowledge. It is clear that a lot of firms have not had a lot of technical innovation and are mainly still working on the billable hours model, which is at threat from the ASB sector. Firms need to be live to the areas where technology can support and where it can be a threat. In the SW region there is a large and active legal sector and there is a higher density than in other cities (more people working in law per capita) and there are also a lot of HQ functions in the area with a lot of legal and tech firms in the sector. There is a general feeling that technological innovation is key to the progress of the region and the legal sector. However, in the legal sector people tend to be followers of innovations in other sectors rather than innovators and disrupters in their own right.

In relation to Access to Justice and pro bono work, there is a model to be applied which is that it is no longer sufficient to share a law firm's human resources, but also its technology. It will not be possible going forward to provide pro bono support without providing tech support as well. It is key to think about where the sector can automate as much as possible, allowing "customers" to self-service. This could free up valuable pro bono resources. Making this feel like a consumer-led experience rather than a lawyer-led one is key. The fintech sector is a good example of what technology is already there e.g. AI, machine learning, speech recognition, chat bots, tools to allow people to create form-based data.

SH encouraged everyone to get involved in working with legal tech innovators and called for anyone who is interested in contributing to the research either directly via email (Stuart has been copied into all emails).

VC queried the aim of the report – is this to gather data on how firms are working and then to give suggestions as to how they could improve?

SH explained that there are a couple of goals 1) to identify key business in the ecosystem e.g. firms, academic institutions, legal tech companies – that alone has been useful in identifying 15-16 legal tech companies and also 2) to identify the challenges that people are facing, how to connect up different groups and find ideas to solve those challenges.

VC introduced SH to JE and queried whether BLC had been looking more into legal tech recently.

JE advised that there was some initial work with UWE and they have been to a couple of the early events. The issue from ABLC's perspective is applying resources to this. However, any solution that makes things smoother for the client is key. The challenge for this sector is that clients don't always have access to the tech and / or to mobile data in order to engage with legal tech. Clients are in the bottom 5% of the country which is problematic in terms of connectivity and access to justice. Not sure what WECA is doing to address this. JE advised that EE is leading on ABLC's work in this area.

SH noted that this is a real issue in society and there is a real danger that people are left behind when technology strides forward.

JE the problem is that people who are left behind have often been identified e.g. the Age Concern research and research into mental health issues and with disabilities, it is not just older people. There is sometimes a view that this will "right itself" with time. However, that is not the case, there is an emerging underclass who are being left behind.

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SH is keen to ensure that these challenges are put forward in the research. It is notable that this has been missing from the Leeds report.

VC asked that anyone who is interested in being interviewed by SH, then please do contact him directly. VC can circulate these details again and she also asked SH if he is able to circulate the Leeds report.

SH will put something together and send around to the group.

4. Debrief of Pro Bono Week: comments / suggestions

VC noted that the event was very successful – there were over 100 people registered and about 85-95 people on the call at any one time, which showed that there was a high retention rate as well.

JH noted that the whole pro bono week in Bristol had a real lift to it and did a really great job.

MB thanked VC particularly for her work and that of the Simmons comms team as well.

VC wondered if there would be an appetite for more talks in the New Year to keep the agenda going.

5. UWE marketing/pro bono project (Rachel/Victoria/Eve)

VC noted that at the last meeting there was a list of pro bono clinics / programmes that had been put together from the information that people sent to Abi Jones. The group had decided that the purpose for this list was two-fold 1) to promote the group within the legal community and 2) to publicise the activities taking place so that people who needed assistance knew how to contact them. There had been discussion as to how to take this forward as this is a big undertaking (checking and updating details). VC has been contacted by a group at UWE group who are looking for an entrepreneurial project and wondered if they could assist with this. VC passed over to RW to give more detail on the UWE project.

RW updated that the programme is a “Team Entrepreneurship” degree and it is run by third-year students. This is a course on which the students don’t have traditional teaching, but they are put into teams and set up projects and businesses, learning a raft of business skills by experience. The group had been thinking about offering support to BPBG as an extra-curricular activity, but they now think they might be able to include it in a project / module. What they are hoping is that they will be able to offer support on the website: identifying who the users are, how to reach them and how to access volunteers who would be interested.

VC updated that Eve Farnsworth (trainee at Simmons) is hoping to engage with these students further and to design a new webpage to get the message a wider audience. VC asked the group to ensure that if they are currently involved in any pro bono clinics please to share these with VC so that these can be shared and flagged on the website. Also, if there are any ideas from the group about how to get those ideas out there, then let VC know. Eve has volunteered to Project Manage this for the group.

6. Funding for Bristol Law Centre (Jane)

JE updated the group on the funding situation for the law centre. It won’t be news to some people, but might to others, that the pandemic has hit the legal pro bono sector very hard, both from funding projects and legal aid have been cut or are facing cuts. All the usual trusts and foundations, MoJ etc are putting things in place to help with additional funding for this financial year but it all has to be spent by the end of March and cannot be carried forward. This means that there will be serious problems next financial year. JE wants to try and support the law centre’s pro bono operation but this is under threat. At the moment support for this comes from a variety of different sources, but ABLC is hoping to reach out to law firms for funding for the pro bono work for next financial year in order to ensure the future running of the clinics (including the background admin, organisation and everything else involved in keeping these running). JE noted that the main areas of law at the moment are employment and family, these are related and have been hit really hard by Covid.

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JE appealed to the group to consider if their firm can assist with funding. She needs an indication from people about how to approach the firms e.g. whether it is via a charitable foundation, or whether it is better to approach the firm directly. The problem is that there is no possibility that volunteers can help with any of this background work at the moment. This will be completely purposed for the work that the clinics are doing through the pro bono clinics.

JH asked JE to drop her a line.

MH asked JE to send through directly to him and he will route it internally.

7. Litigant in Person project (Jeremy Thompson)

JT gave an update on the Support Through Court LIP scheme. The Bristol Family Law Advice Scheme is very much alive and kicking and not needing to be revived (despite concerns from the judiciary). It re-started on 01 October and runs once a fortnight on a Thursday as before. The only difference to pre-lockdown is that the appointments now take place remotely, usually by phone although they could in theory be by Zooms or Teams if the client and the adviser both had access and were happy with this. Appointments are made by us here at Support Through Court exactly as before. JT to drop HHJ Wildblood a line to confirm this as well.

8. First client via website - Share and Repair (Victoria)

VC updated the group that we have had our first website enquiry – from Share and Repair, which has been forwarded on and assistance found.

9. AOB

None.

Date of next meeting – 26 January 2021