

**SISTREN**  
LEGAL COLLECTIVE

# COMMUNITY *Lawyering*



*Building an Ecosystem of Legal Support  
for Grassroots-Led Social Justice*



**A Report by  
Sistren Legal Collective**

With Special Thanks to:  
Centric Community Research



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# About the Authors



## Keya Advani

Keya is the Co-Founder of Sistren Legal Collective. She is also the Director of Programmes and Policy at the Global Alliance of Impact Lawyers (GAIL), a community of legal leaders who are using their careers to have a positive impact on people and the planet, and to accelerate a just transition. Keya has a BA in Comparative Literature from Hamilton College (USA), an LLB from the University of Cambridge (UK) and a Post Graduate Diploma in Human Rights Law from the National Law School (India). She was born and raised in India and started her career at the intersection of law, feminism and human rights. She came to the UK to study law and qualified as a lawyer at a Magic Circle law firm in London, before moving on to work as part of the Impact Economy practice at a leading charity law firm. Keya has worked and seconded with a range of organisations, including in India, Jamaica, the United States and the UK. She's worked on a range of issues, from violence against women to social housing, using a variety of legal strategies from legal advocacy to public interest litigation. She is committed to using the law as a tool to create positive change and is interested in collaborative, transnational ways to address global, systemic problems



### **Samara Lawrence**

Samara is the Co-Founder of Sistren Legal Collective. She is a non-profit lawyer with a passion for supporting organisations that advocate for social and racial justice. She is also Deputy General Counsel at Oxfam, supporting the organisation globally on its legal, campaigning, and regulatory matters. Samara has a BA in Politics from SOAS, University of London, and following her conversion to law, she trained and qualified at a Magic Circle law firm in London. Samara then followed her passion for the non-profit sector and worked at a leading charity law firm for four years, where she supported a wide range of non-profit organisations, including charities, social enterprises and community benefit societies. She worked closely with Black Lives Matter UK, the Baobab Foundation and Mission 44 on their setup and legal structuring. Samara has worked across the non-profit sector from large NGOs such as Unicef, to helping set up a community organisation which made access to yoga and healthy eating accessible to Southwark residents typically excluded from community spaces.



### **Daniel Ampaw**

Dan is a project manager with a passion for supporting vulnerable people and marginalised communities. As the Project Manager for Sistren he supports on strategic planning, daily operations, communication, design and marketing. Dan worked for ten years in Local Government in fostering, adults with learning disabilities, children with complex needs and transformation services. His last role in Local Government was working in the Grenfell Partnerships Team at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBCK), designing a service which directly supports the bereaved and survivors of the Grenfell Tower Tragedy. Dan is also an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Consultant and has delivered anti-racism coaching to organisations.



## Acknowledgements

We're immensely grateful to the **Lankelly Chase Foundation** for their support – both financial and emotional – of this project. Sistren Legal Collective would not exist without the space you provided for us to experiment, learn and grow. In particular, we're so grateful to Marai Larasi, Jenny Oppenheimer, Ali Torabi and Jo Ram for their encouragement and trust throughout the research project during 2023. Thanks also to Derek Bardowell for all his support and encouragement in the early days of this project.

A huge thank you to **Centric Community Research** – Dr Shaun Danquah, Paul Addae, Muhammed Rauf and their team of community researchers – for helping us frame our research for this project and for training us in community research methodologies. Thanks also for introducing us to the team at Impact Brixton, who have since provided a home for Sistren Legal Collective.

Our friends at the **Civic Power Fund** were amazing allies from day one. To Mohammed Afridi in particular: thank you for your billion emails introducing us to incredible community activists around the UK, many of whom were interviewed as part of this research.

We're grateful to Lucas Farthing and The **Entrepreneurial Refugee Network (TERN)** for their support of our work and the space TERN provided for us to (nervously) deliver our first sets of community legal workshops. And, in particular, we want to thank the TERN entrepreneurs from London and Manchester

who attended our first workshop and participated in a virtual roundtable that helped us to be better lawyers. Your observations and feedback were a critical component to this report.

Fidelis Chebe at **Migrant Action** and Roger Nyantou at **RETAS Leeds** – our very first conversation with you made us feel like we were in the company of friends and allies. Thanks for your support, input and for facilitating our second community legal workshop and roundtable feedback sessions in Leeds. To the Migrant Action and RETAS community in Leeds: thank you for showing up and for all your generous feedback and ideas, which have informed the writing of this report.

A big thank you to the **Centre for Innovation in Voluntary Action (CIVA)**, for being our fiscal host for this project and for providing both the umbrella and the safety net we needed to get this project off the ground – in particular, Michael Norton, Nicola Pollock, Ben Metz and Colin Winner.

Finally, this report could not have been researched or written without the organisations, activists and leaders from communities around the UK who gave up their time to speak with us and share their experiences through interviews, focus groups informal conversations. Your words and ideas run all the way through this report. Your generosity in sharing your expertise has shaped this report and helped us articulate concepts we were only grasping at. Thank you for being inspirational forces for change in your communities, and in our own lives.



## PROLOGUE – SISTREN LEGAL COLLECTIVE

**Sistren Legal Collective began, as many ideas do, as a chat between friends. A late afternoon phone call in January 2022 between Samara and Keya, talking through our frustrations with our legal careers and the desire to bring more of ourselves into the work we do.**

We both had almost identical career trajectories before becoming friends – like many UK lawyers, we trained and qualified with a large commercial law firm, before moving on to a charity and impact-focused law firm. In our personal experience, it's fairly common for law students to be funnelled into commercial practice straight from university, enticed by a combination of factors: a job that might pay for the costs of mandatory legal 'practical training', job security, the ability to pay off debts and to save for a different future, and perhaps most crucially for students who are also migrants, the right to work in the UK by having your visa 'sponsored' – which is offered by very few, and almost exclusively large, commercial entities.

Our journeys into law are in many ways wholly unremarkable. It is quite typical for bright-eyed law students to have their passion, drive and desire to change the world slowly crushed by the practicalities of paying for legal studies, getting sponsored employment, and the strictures of the billable hour. In our

experience, this – the entirely typical trajectory of a career in law – is itself a barrier to a creative, social justice-centric, community-focused approach to being a lawyer.

In that initial conversation between us, we also asked each other how we could support colleagues and peers who need our expertise without overstressing ourselves to the point of exhaustion. How we could balance supporting clients who can afford to pay our fees, with finding time to work with community groups that share our values but could never afford our fees. And how could those of us who work in large, lucrative practices that often represent clients and industries that are built on the legacies of colonialism, racism and extractive capitalism then reconcile our 'paid' work with the 'pro bono' work (or work for the public good) that is in part symptomatic of the problems we're helping to create?

Finally, there were identity-related questions that also presented a challenge. What did it mean to be a Black woman practicing law?

How could we carve out a space within legal practice that reflected our values and was work that we felt passionate about supporting? How had the experience of being an immigrant shaped the kinds of law we'd like to practice and the language in which we could deliver our legal advice? Could or should our lived experiences shape the way we engaged and practiced, taking the place of the staid professionalism that's often celebrated as the paradigm in 'big law'?

These were some of the questions that we talked through in that initial conversation. We eventually summed it up into one key question:

*“Is there another way for us to be lawyers?”*

Sistren Legal Collective is our attempt to answer that question with a yes.

We wanted to begin this report with our personal journeys, because who we are informs why we're here and what we're doing. We hope that by sharing our learnings, and unlearnings, and the knowledge we've gained through this research, we'll start finding ways for us – many of us – to lawyer differently.

## Executive Summary

This report explores the experiences of <sup>(i)</sup> people from minoritised communities <sup>(ii)</sup> working at grassroots level in England and Wales <sup>(iii)</sup> on issues of racial and social justice in accessing legal advice and support. For ease, we refer to these as '**community organisations**' throughout this report.

It focuses on the use of the law and lawyers in community, within the context of seeing the provision of legal support as a component in building power, resilience and confidence within community organisations.

The research for this report has been executed using a community-centred research methodology, with support from Centric Community Research. Community-centred research methodologies specifically critique traditional, extractive models of research which tend to set research objectives on behalf of communities, develop research insights without community involvement and monopolise the outcomes of the research. Community-centred research focuses instead on disrupting traditional models by ensuring research is being supported or led by community researchers, and that the results of the research are of value to the communities that are the 'subjects' of it.

The research for this report is based on the participation of <sup>(i)</sup> 18+ survey respondents; <sup>(ii)</sup> 37 one-to-one conversations and interviews; and <sup>(iii)</sup> 30+ roundtable participants from three roundtable sessions, in each case with

individuals from minoritised communities in the UK involved in community organisations.

The research report highlights several key themes regarding the experiences of community organisations accessing legal support. There is a pressing need for flexible, affordable legal assistance tailored to grassroots groups, enabling them to organise effectively. Early and ongoing access to information about available legal support is crucial for community organisations' growth and confidence. Frustration with existing legal structures, particularly charitable structures in social and racial justice contexts, underscores a demand for alternative models and the need for funders to recognise and support organisations that are not structured as charities. Finally, an investment in building resilient organisations, including through legal support, from inception is essential, requiring lawyers to better understand and address systemic barriers faced by community organisations.

The report concludes with a set of observations and resulting principles for **community lawyering** – which posit the need for a different model of legal support for grassroots community organisations working for racial and social justice. We have focused in particular in this report on the roles that lawyers within the UK's charity, non-profit and social enterprise sector could play as community lawyers. This could include lawyers practicing across various specialisms including charity law, corporate law, contract

and commercial law, fundraising, employment law, trademarks law and other affiliated legal disciplines. These legal actors are crucial for providing infrastructural support necessary for the setup, growth, and success of community organisations within this sector.

While community lawyering approaches are common across the world, including in India, Latin America, the United States and Canada, and have been deployed in a variety of legal contexts, including housing law, immigration law and criminal law, they are much less common in the UK context and have not generally been applied to the building of organisational and infrastructural capacity for community organisations.

Our report is intended to provide a starting point for the further development of community lawyering approaches in the UK.



ONE

*Research  
methodology*

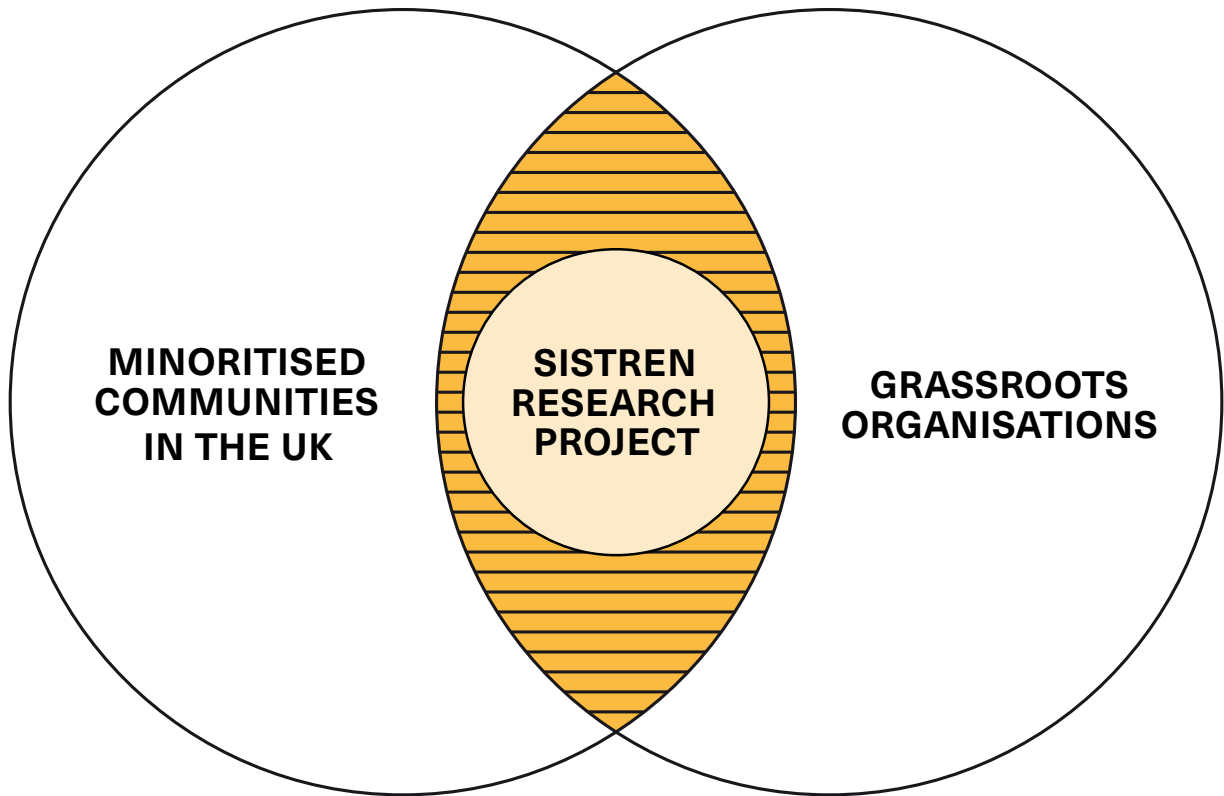
## THE FOCUS OF THIS REPORT

**This report explores the experiences of <sup>(i)</sup> people from minoritised communities <sup>(ii)</sup> working at grassroots level in England & Wales <sup>(iii)</sup> on issues of racial and social justice in accessing legal advice and support. For ease, we refer to these as ‘**COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS**’ throughout this report.**

By ‘**MINORITISED COMMUNITIES**’, we mean groups of people that have been seen or defined as minorities in the context of the UK, whether or not they are in fact majority communities in a broader global context. The term ‘minoritised’ indicates a power dynamic that involves making those in the minority feel as though they are ‘other’: outside of the norm or mainstream and often somehow ‘less than’. This ‘minoritisation’ and resulting experience of structural inequalities and discrimination is often historical, structural and institutional – and does not necessarily relate to one person’s or a handful of people’s bigotry or prejudice. The minoritised communities that we focused on for the purposes of our work are minoritised ethnic communities including Black and Brown people, disabled people, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Within this demographic, we focused on small, **GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS**, by which we mean organisations that draw their members and staff predominantly or entirely from the communities they aim to serve. These organisations are closely linked with their local communities and local concerns, are often formed or informed by activists in movements for social or environmental justice, and that are working largely on a not-for-profit basis. The majority of grassroots organisations we spoke with were either unincorporated or in an early stage of development (generally they had been operating for less than three years).

Grassroots organisations led by and for minoritised communities often struggle to access institutional support and funding, and usually have no or very limited means to access legal support. They are often subject to multiple disadvantages, e.g. a lack of access and resource, structural barriers including uncertain visa statuses, language barriers,



ableism and structural racism among others. Yet these are the groups on the frontlines of a multitude of our current crises, who are driving forward work in their communities because they are living the same reality. These are the groups that are vital to a vision for long-term systems change that is led by the grassroots up – and not by policymakers or funders-down.

## Why Law?

Firstly and most obviously, we're lawyers, and are ourselves from minoritised communities in the UK and are interested in the use of the law as a tool for social justice.

Secondly, we see **the provision of legal support as a component in building**

**power, resilience and confidence within community organisations.** For example, the impenetrability of legal processes and documents often acts as a deterrent to groups 'constituting' or 'incorporating' in a way that protects them from personal risk and gives them the possibility of accessing funding pools or scaling their work.

The difficulty in accessing any legal support at the very early stages of organisation-building itself often becomes a barrier to the possibility of future funding (e.g. incorporating as a legal structure that funders see as 'un-fundable', or hitting up against governance requirements that makes it much more difficult to access funds). And the positionality of lawyers as remote, intimidating, expensive custodians

of inaccessible knowledge often creates an inherent distance and distrust of lawyers themselves as bottlenecks, rather than enablers, in building movements for social change. As one research participant put it: ‘the two words “lawyers” and “communities” don’t go together’.

Thirdly, there is a need for lawyers to reflect on what their role truly is in supporting racial and social justice work, and to understand the limitations of the structures that currently exist to support this work. We hope this report helps asks questions such as ‘How can and should the support that lawyers provide change when they are working on issues of social and racial justice? How can lawyers work differently with grassroots activists and organisations, or within marginalised communities in the UK? Can lawyers play an effective role in building the ecosystem of support that organisations need to establish and thrive? And are the legal support structures that currently exist – through community advice clinics and law centres; law firms and pro bono hours and sometimes

‘funder plus’ models of support – sufficient? If not, in what ways do they fall short?

Finally, we note that ‘law’ is a vast and disparate field, with many different specialisms. Our work and the focus of this report, in particular, is on the role of lawyers operating broadly in the ‘non-profit and social enterprise ecosystem’ or the ‘third sector’ in the UK. This could include charity lawyers, those advising social enterprises and social businesses, general corporate, commercial and contract lawyers who advise third sector organisations through their practice or pro bono hours, lawyers supporting organisational functions including employment and HR lawyers, trademark lawyers, data privacy lawyers and in some cases immigration lawyers (e.g. where they’re supporting organisations engaging migrants, refugees and asylum seekers). We focus on these types of lawyers as legal actors who are key to building the infrastructural support that organisations need to set up, grow and thrive.



# Adopting a Community-Centric Research Approach

**Our stated aims at the outset of our research project were as follows:**

**1.**

Identify the structural barriers to accessing legal advice for grassroots and minoritised communities and build a way of practicing law that overcomes them.

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**2.**

Create a legal ecosystem to facilitate the setup and development of Black and POC<sup>1</sup>, immigrant-, refugee- and grassroots-led organisations.

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**3.**

Provide affordable and accessible legal and strategic support for organisations, where lawyers play a supporting and enabling role for catalysing social change.

**4.**

Redistribute legal power and knowledge beyond law firms and into the hands of communities, change-makers and activists.

**5.**

Situate legal advice in the heart of public and community spaces.

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**6.**

Research and develop local solutions to systemic problems, informed by global debates and practices.

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**7.**

Create a working environment which is grounded in practices of community, self-love and care.

**To help us to execute our research, we turned to our friends at Centric Community Research.**

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<sup>1</sup> People of Colour



*This section of the report has been authored by Centric – with special thanks to Dr. Shaun Danquah, Paul Addae and Muhammed Rauf*

## **A Community-Centred Research Methodology – by Centric**

Traditional research models have reflected and compounded socio-economic and cultural inequalities in urban areas, particularly for BAME groups. These models exhibit inequitable and harmful characteristics, including research objectives set on behalf of communities, work carried out by outsiders, developing insights without community involvement, and the monopolisation of the value by outsiders.

This contributes to growing levels of mistrust, antagonism and disengagement amongst BAME communities towards these processes and their outputs and, more widely, towards the institutions and systems that they represent. It also limits the academic validity of this research and undermines its capacity to inform relevant and impactful policy and services.

Read more on extractive models of research at, [centric.org.uk](http://centric.org.uk)

“We are sick and tired of being researched; we want to get involved in the researching.”

– Community member

Centric Community Research – ‘Delivered to you, by people like you’

In response to these experiences and outcomes, Centric, founded by Dr. Shaun Danquah (learn more about his journey, [tinyurl.com/mryy3wd6](http://tinyurl.com/mryy3wd6)) has worked with our community to design the Community Researcher model. This innovation sought to establish a unique and disruptive approach, with four main components:

- 1** The recruitment and training of members of seldom-heard communities that can utilise accessibility, credibility and positionality to shape and lead research within their areas.
- 2** Collaboration with partners planning research to embed community-led principles and roles.
- 3** Creative research and production methods that can gather and share richer layers of cultural nuance whilst meeting the highest academic standards.
- 4** Ongoing investment of Community Researchers, to both foster ongoing involvement of the community in projects, and to support community-led innovation and entrepreneurship.

“If we own our innovation that comes from our cultural nuance, then we could empower ourselves.”

- Community member

These underserved and underrepresented communities are well-versed in the shortcomings of many existing institutions. Therefore, Centric utilises researchers from these communities with the cultural competence to converse clearly and effectively with sub-groups within their own communities. Centric's community researchers also have the inside track on complex narratives and cultural trends on a street level, which is a nuance that could take traditional researchers years to unearth, if ever. The combined shared experiences of unequal and exclusive socio-economic opportunities enable us to connect instantly to fellow community members, helping overcome the deep distrust of established institutions in these urban areas. We call this 'Social Brokerage'.

**This has delivered three layers of impact:**

- 1 Opportunities:** a stream of new training, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities within communities affected by exclusion and inequality.
- 2 Knowledge:** deeper and richer research data and insights that reflect critical cultural nuance, improving academic validity and increasing the relevance and impact of policy and services.

- 3 Engagement and trust:** improving trust and engagement amongst excluded communities.

Ethnic, underserved, and underrepresented communities are experts when it comes to the struggles, expectations and aspirations of their own people.

Through Centric's journey, we have learned that the continuum model (that is, the involvement of community at each stage of the research process) was not only necessary in the design and delivery phase of research, but it continued into the delivery of initiatives and solutions. Through this, Centric has established a training programme to support organisations engaging with seldom-heard communities.

“Coming to these forums [is] giving me hope. Where I am dealing with a lot [...] I am asking where the organisation is. It feels like it is here.”

- Research participant

In October 2022 Centric partnered with **Sistren Legal Collective**, co-founded by **Keya Advani** and **Samara Lawrence**. Two brilliant minds who want to transfer their skills – providing expert legal advice – to advise community organisations looking to make an impact within their communities.

To support Sistren, Centric provided ongoing training and support regarding:

- ▶ Historical context of traditional research approaches
- ▶ Features and implementation of the Community Research Model
- ▶ Skills and equitable approaches to engagement
- ▶ Mapping and recruitment of research participants
- ▶ Design and implementation of research methods

Traditionally, legal advice has been inaccessible for small, aspiring organisations due to a lack of resources, know-how, historical grievances of negative experiences with those in the legal profession, and marginalised communities potentially being victimised by legal processes. Sistren Legal Collective was developed to change this narrative, providing accessible legal support to those who need it most. We were happy to meet them at the start of their journey, as they began to conduct research to better



understand the problems that community organisations face – informed by a community-centric research model – in order to propose Sistren Legal Collective as a community-centred solution.

## **Sistren’s Experience of Community-Centred Research<sup>2</sup>**

The training and support provided to us by Centric was critical for developing a community-centric research methodology for this report. Our work with them included thinking about **what** questions we should be asking (e.g. open-ended questions that build trust and create a safe space for genuine responses and survey questions that did not themselves exclude or marginalise); **how** we should ask the questions (e.g. one-on-one direct interview? Focus groups? A survey?); and **who** should ask the questions (us or a third party)?

We also worked on things like **interrogating the notion of ‘community’** (what and who do we mean by ‘the community’?) and being aware of our own positionality within that context; understanding and interpreting local knowledge in research; taking on board the

**importance of relational introductions** to our interviews, methods for getting to and interpreting nuanced **experiences and responses**; being mindful of the **accessibility** of interview spaces and settings and the language we used in our questions; finding ways to **redistribute power** in our conversations so we don’t replicate a lawyer/client dynamic in interviews; and thinking about **how we resource people’s time for their participation in interviews**.

Finally, we also talked through things like **managing interviewee expectations fairly**, so we’re not setting up expectations we can’t meet; being clear about **next steps in our research**; and thinking about community involvement in **what the end product should look like** so that it centres the communities we’ve spoken to and so that the research product is **of use to those communities**; **co-production** approaches along with individuals or organisations we have spoken to through the course of our research; and **distribution of the final research product** fairly and transparently.

And overall, we tried really hard – despite ourselves – not to ‘over-lawyer’ the whole thing!

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<sup>2</sup> You can read more about community research approaches and methodology in Centric’s community research literature review: Daniel Morris and others, ‘History and Methods of Community Research: A literature Review’ <<https://centric.org.uk/resources-and-documentation>>



# TWO

## *Research sources*

## Research Sources<sup>3</sup>

Our research was informed by the following sources:

37

One-to-one conversations and interviews with individuals engaged in grassroots and/or movement building work in the racial and social justice ecosystem in the UK

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30+

Roundtable participants, from three roundtable sessions supported by partner organisations, [The Entrepreneurial Refugee Network](#), [Migrant Action](#) and [RETAS Leeds](#).

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18+

Survey respondents, one-to-one conversations and interviews with individuals engaged in grassroots and/or movement building work in the racial and social justice ecosystem in the UK.

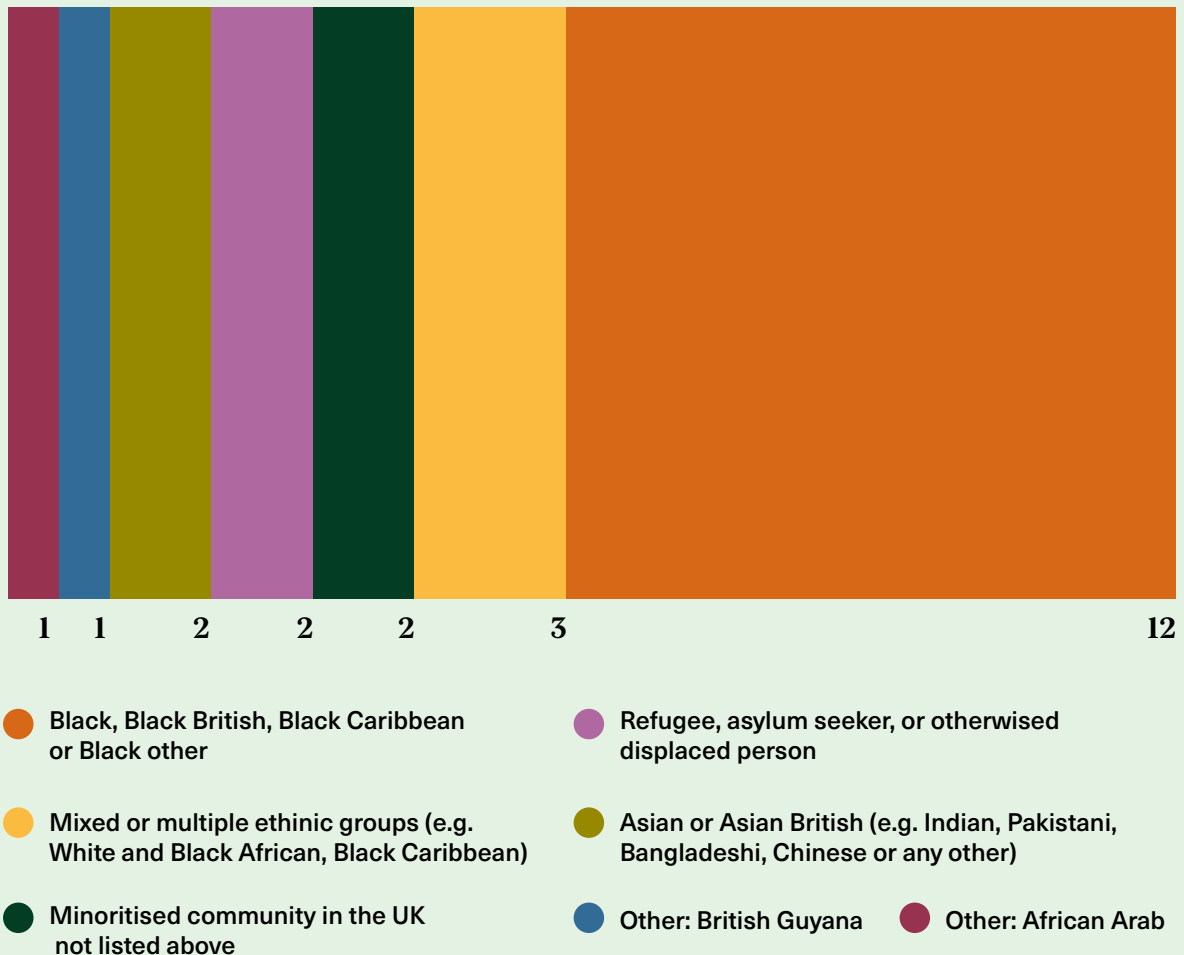
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<sup>3</sup> Based on data where completed or made available by research participants



## Self-identified community

Do you personally identify as any of the following?

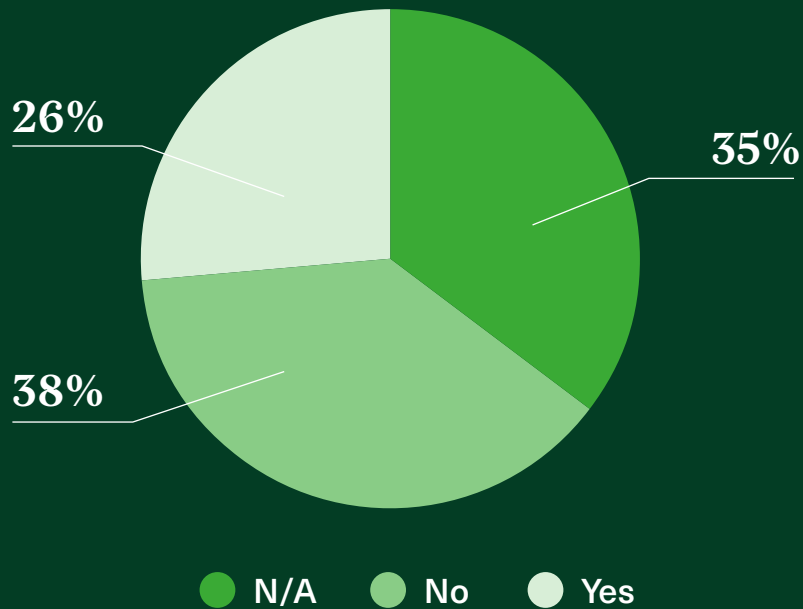


**Participants were able to make multiple selections from the following:**

- ▶ Asian or Asian British (e.g. Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese or any other Asian)
- ▶ Refugee, asylum seeker, or otherwise displaced person
- ▶ Minoritised community in the UK not listed above
- ▶ Mixed or multiple ethnic groups (e.g. White and Black African, Black Caribbean and Asian)
- ▶ Black, Black British, Black Caribbean or Black African or Black other
- ▶ Other

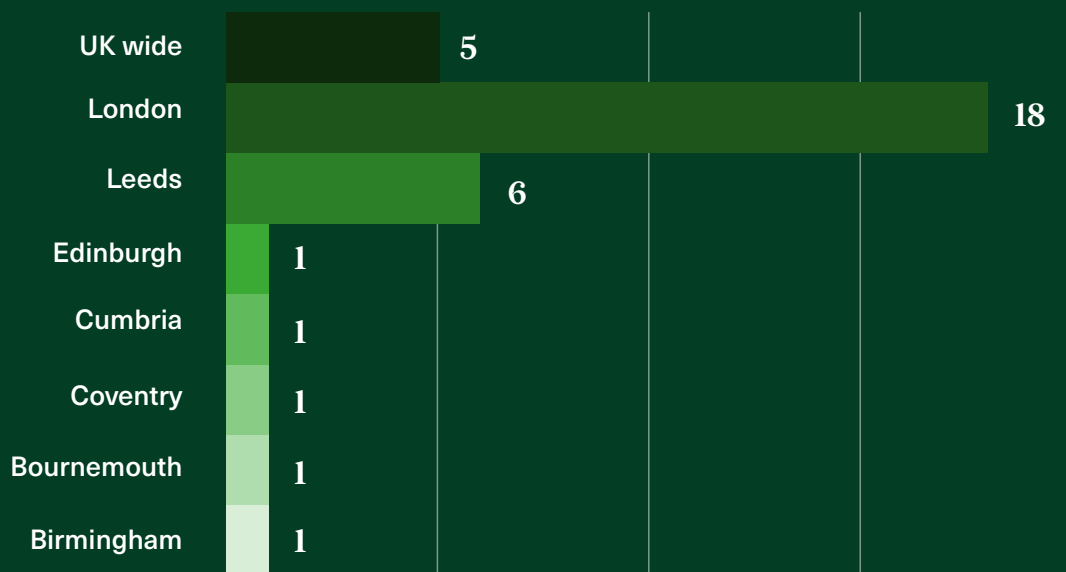
## Breakdown of charitable vs non-charitable structures

Are the organisations a charity?



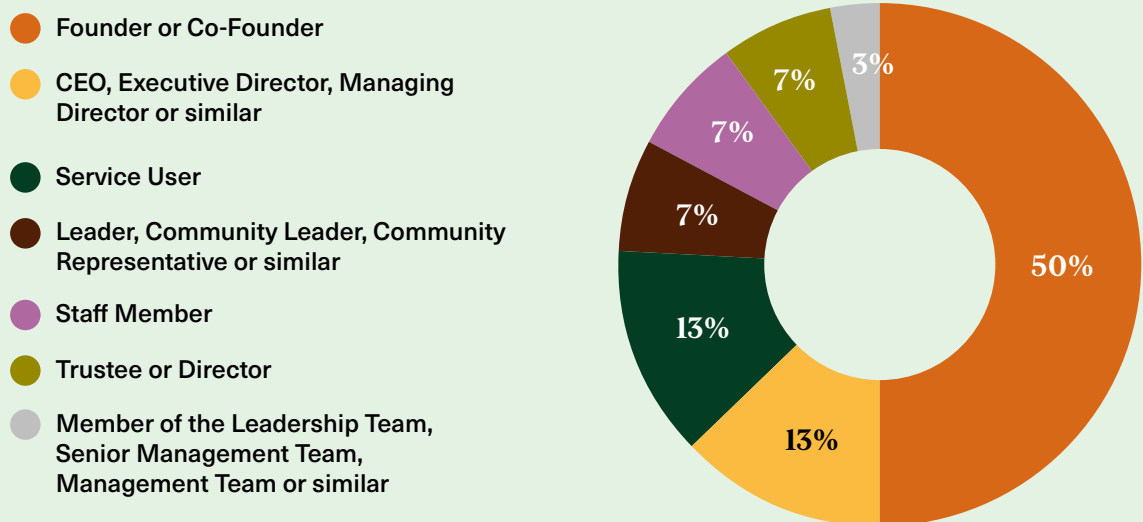
## Where organisations work UK-wide

Where organisations we spoke to operate



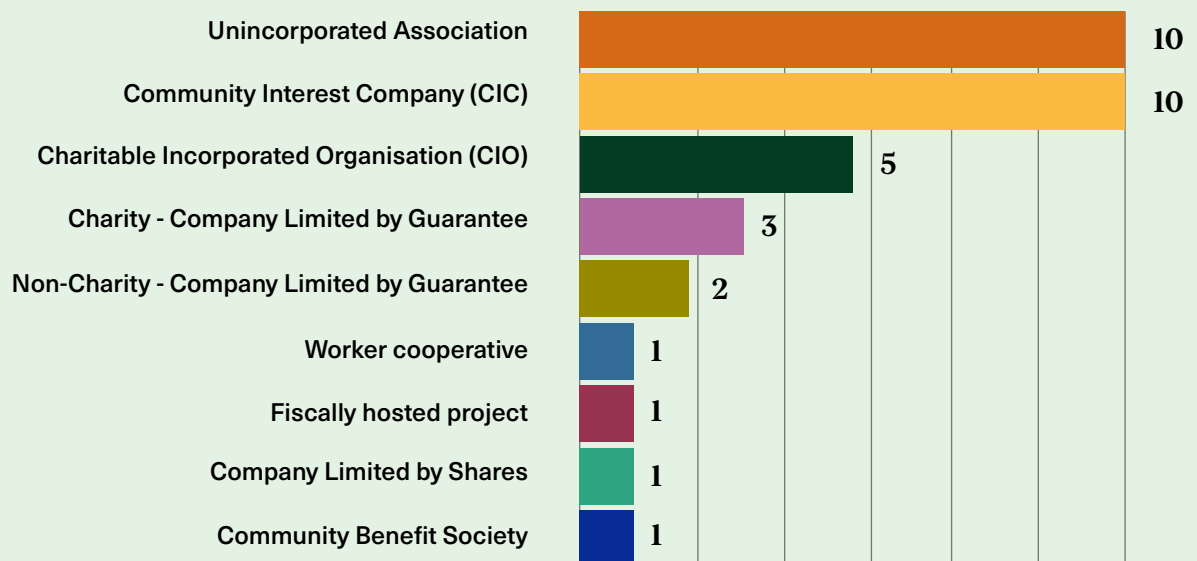
## Who we spoke to (interviewee role)

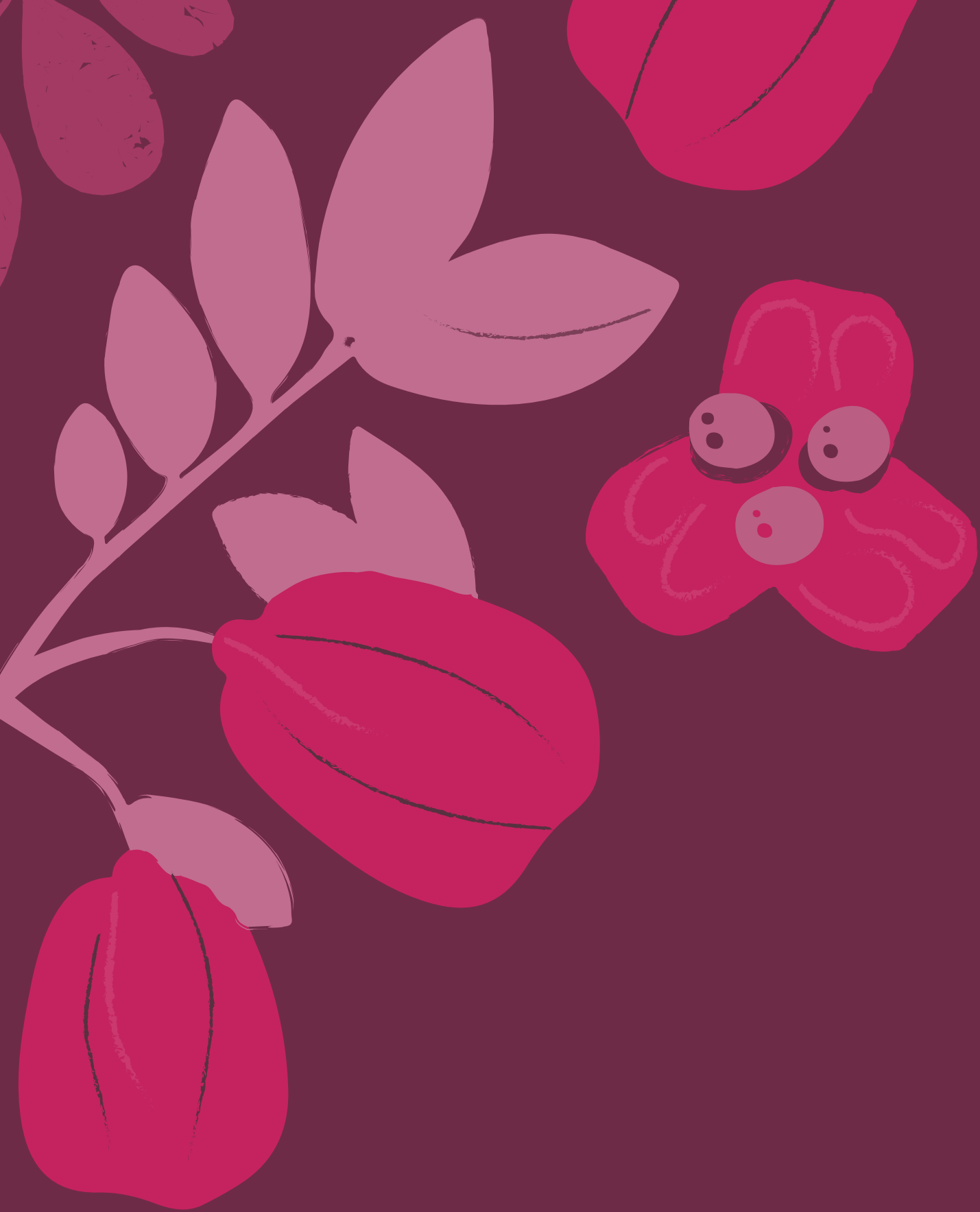
### Who we spoke to



## Research Participant Demographics

### Legal forms of organisations surveyed





# THREE

## *Research findings*

## KEY THEMES EMERGING

### The key themes emerging from our conversations with grassroots community groups are:

- 1 There is a need for flexible, responsive and **AFFORDABLE/SUBSIDISED LEGAL SUPPORT** for grassroots community groups to be able to organise, start-up and scale confidently and effectively.
- 2 Community organisations would benefit from understanding what **LEGAL SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE TO THEM** at the early stages of setup and as they grow, as well as how and where they can access this support.
- 3 There is a need for **ACCESSIBLE AND UNDERSTANDABLE** legal information that is catered for grassroots community groups to enable them to access enough information to 'DIY' more effectively.
- 4 There is a **DEEP FRUSTRATION WITH THE EXISTING LEGAL STRUCTURES** available for non-profit organisations engaged with social and racial justice work, in particular with charitable structures and regulation. Community organisations, particularly those led by and for minoritised communities, are actively seeking alternatives. Funders need to understand and engage with why organisations seeking grant funding may not be set up as charities.
- 5 Funding for the third sector needs to invest in building better, more resilient and confident organisations from their inception. This includes investing in **PROVIDING AN ECOSYSTEM OF SUPPORT** – including legal support – for these organisations as they build and grow.
- 6 Lawyers need to better **UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEMIC BARRIERS** facing grassroots community organisations and proactively engage with them to be able to provide more responsive and relevant legal support.

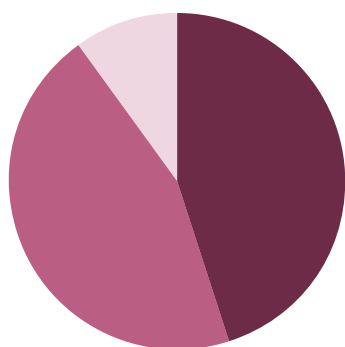
## QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

**The information in this section of the report is based on a combination of quantitative data (survey results as percentages), supported by qualitative data (one-on-one conversations with individuals and community organisations).**

**A minority of the organisations we interacted with had successfully accessed legal support**

**QUESTION:**

*Have you previously successfully accessed legal support for your organisation/collective/movement?*



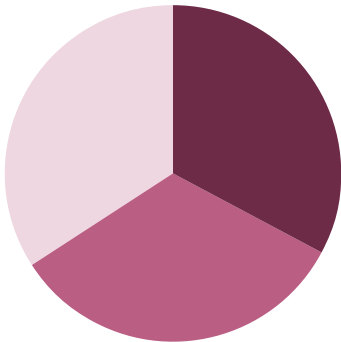
- 45% Yes
- 45% No
- 10% Haven't needed any legal support

For those organisations who had previously accessed some legal support, there was a wide range of methods used. Some had accessed support through services like [Advocates for International Development \(A4ID\)](#), [TrustLaw](#) and [East London Business Alliance \(ELBA\)](#), or via pro bono clinics run by law firms. Others said they had sought support on an ad-hoc basis through their local law centres, while others had leveraged their personal and organisational networks to get support – for example through one of their trustees or through colleagues or acquaintances who had been lawyers and had helped connect them to a legal advisor. A number of interviewees said they had ‘figured it out themselves’ including through a combination of online research, ad-hoc support and friendly conversations. A small number of respondents said they had accessed a law firm.

**Respondents had a mix of positive and negative experiences with legal support**

**QUESTION:**

*If you've worked with lawyers before, how would you describe your experience?*



- 33% Had negative experiences
- 33% Had a positive experience
- 34% Did not have a view on this issue.

**Community organisations said they primarily want legal support with policy and contracts, followed by employment law and governance**

*Respondents were able to select multiple options when responding to this question.*

**QUESTION:**

*Which of the following areas do you think it would be most useful for you to have legal advice or support?*

- 50% Policies or contracts for my organisation
- 45% Employment law advice
- 40% Governance
- 35% Data privacy

- 30% Strategic planning, finances and fundraising, tax, disputes
- 25% Benefits advice
- 15% Trademarks advice, legal signposting
- 5% Writing legal blogs or thought pieces
- 5% Other: negotiations with landlords, domestic abuse, divorce, children's arrangements, financial abuse, court hearings, Equality Act 2010

**Community organisations want to receive legal support in a variety of spaces**

*Respondents were able to select multiple options when responding to this question.*

**QUESTION:**

*In an ideal world, where would you like to receive legal advice?*

- 55% Online (e.g. Zoom or MS Teams)
- 50% In-person in a law firm or legal offices
- 35% In writing (by email)
- 30% In person in my office or a shared working environment of my choosing
- 20% In person in a community or public space
- 20% In writing via a letter
- 15% In a workshop setting with other people in attendance
- 10% By text or short messages (e.g. via Whatsapp or voice message)
- 10% by video (e.g. a recorded video with explanations)

“I’m loving digital, but not everyone can access IT when getting home.”



“It’s always difficult for women to take the time to make the space because of childcare – think of timing, flexible care, supported spaces for kids. Something super easy where I can rock in and pick up my information pack. Something that’s vibrant. Getting legal advice is really scary – so any type of energy you can bring into the space is important.”

“If we need lawyers to come down to the ground. If it’s the organisation that needs the support, we’d like the lawyers to come in to them. It’s important for them [the lawyers] to visualise the space so they can have a feel. [For example,] If I’m talking about gentrification and issues with my landlord you need to see that, you can’t do that over email.”

“There’s a saying in my country that the only people you don’t lie to is your doctor and lawyer. I want to be honest, so I want to meet face to face and finish talking, doing it on Zoom or sending email is not going to be confidential for me. So, meeting the lawyer face to face is important. I don’t really want to tell my lawyer anything confidential on Zoom or email.”

**Most community organisations don’t access legal support due to cost barriers, but there are also other significant barriers to access**

*Respondents were able to select multiple options when responding to this question.*

**QUESTION:**

*What are the main reasons that you, or your organisation/collective/movement might not access the legal support you’d like to have?*

- 80%** Price/cost
- 25%** I don’t know any lawyers and don’t know who I could approach for legal advice
- 20%** I don’t know what services are available or what a lawyer could help me with
- 10%** Legal support isn’t available to me in my language
- 5%** The lawyers I know of don’t represent my values or my community
- 5%** Lawyers and law firms are intimidating and I don’t feel comfortable approaching them

“I don’t know what kind of legal support I’d need for my business – I don’t even know what a business or social enterprise is.”

**No community organisation would be able to spend over £3,000 on legal support in a year**

**QUESTION:**

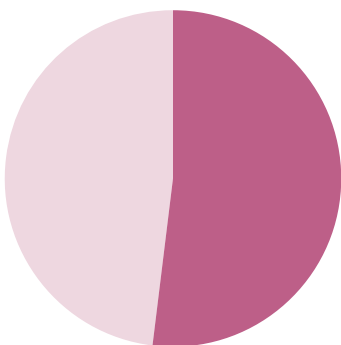
*Roughly how much per year would you realistically be able and willing to spend on legal advice or support, for it to be accessible to you?*

- 35%** It depends on the issue
- 35%** Between £100–£500
- 20%** £0
- 10%** £500–£3000
- 0%** £3000 or above

**There are things specific to grassroots organisations, or the communities they work with, that lawyers should be aware of when giving legal advice.**

**QUESTION:**

*Is there anything specific to your organisation, or the people that you work with, that you think lawyers should be aware of when giving advice?*



- 58%** Yes
- 42%** No

**These were some of the responses we received:**

“The language used by the professional should be translated in plain/everyday English.”

“We are small charity, community organisation so our funds are restricted ... obtaining legal advice would be a last resort.”

“The emotion that’s attached when you want to see a legal person – when you’re coming metaphorically with two suitcases of baggage already!”

“I know many lawyers do pro bono work if the case or issue is of importance, but I would also encourage them to support issues and cases that may have smaller benefit (i.e. only to the organisation).”

“We communicate in BSL.”



We at the Sistren Legal Collective found the research results to be informative and helpful for homing in more precisely on the specific needs and pain points for community organisations, particularly those centring racial and social justice work.

We have used the research to draw out **eight key observations** that demonstrate a different model of legal support for community organisations, particularly those from marginalised communities, in the UK. These

observations have formed the basis on which we have developed a set of **eight principles for community lawyering in the UK.**

“Racial injustices are very real. They lead to racial trauma. See people as people, meet them where they are at and bear in mind that racial trauma is like any other trauma and needs to be treated accordingly.”

## Community Lawyering

The idea of community lawyering is not new and is well-established in other country contexts, including in the United States, India and Latin America, for instance. The notion of community lawyering (or 'revolutionary lawyering', 'rebellious lawyering', 'alternative lawyering' 'social justice lawyering' or 'movement lawyering') has been effectively deployed in a variety of legal contexts, including housing law, land law, immigration law and criminal law, to name a few. However, community lawyering approaches are much less common in the UK context and have not generally been applied to the building of organisational and infrastructural capacity for community organisations.

To provide a very high-level overview of some of the existing extensive research and writing on community lawyering in other jurisdictions, Harvard Law School defines community lawyering as:

an umbrella term for collaborative, community-based approaches to legal services. While there are different variations on 'community lawyering,' the core elements are the integration of the lawyer into the community the lawyer serves, the use of multifaceted approaches to problem solving, and the investment and empowerment of community members in the lawyering process.<sup>4</sup>

A paper from the Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law & Policy on Community Lawyering: Introductory Thoughts on Theory and Practice states that

the community lawyer engages in expansive lawyering, with a non-hierarchical and collaborative relationship with clients, and with a coherent social and political theory that guides his or her practice. The practice may be circumscribed by geographical or conceptual boundaries, but within those boundaries, the engagement is conscious, continual, and deep.<sup>4</sup>

An article on Community Lawyering – The Role of Lawyers in the Social Justice Movement notes that the term community lawyering

has come to be used very broadly with a myriad of individual descriptions, strains and tendencies, each with their own pedigree. The most unifying feature seems to be a deep unease with the degree to which the representation of poor and working people has been individualized, atomized, depoliticized and divorced from any leadership by real organized constituencies with their own substantive and political goals. It is accompanied by a realization that meaningful systemic change cannot result from this depoliticized and atomized approach. This has resulted in the search for a law

4 Harvard Law School, 'Community Lawyering/Grassroots' <<https://hls.harvard.edu/bernard-koteen-office-of-public-interest-advising/about-opia/what-is-public-interest-law/public-interest-work-types/community-lawyering-grassroots>>

5 Michael R. Diamond, 'Community Lawyering: Introductory Thoughts on Theory and Practice' [2015] 22(2) Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law & Policy <<https://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2660&context=facpub>>

practice that recognizes the centrality and leadership of the organized constituency in achieving meaningful change.<sup>6</sup>

A conference report on alternative lawyering in India noted the ‘importance of rooting [lawyering] in a political economy approach, in practising insurgent lawyering in every forum and in paying a close heed to the subaltern voice and how it resists law.’<sup>7</sup> It defines a ‘movement lawyer’ as ‘a lawyer who was fundamentally accountable to the movement and not to the legal profession’.<sup>8</sup>

A paper on Community Lawyering in Indigenous Communities looks at community lawyering in the context of ‘lawyering for, and within distinct communities and at the responsibility lawyers have to understand how culture, both their own and their clients’, impacts their lawyering.<sup>9</sup>

And finally, Gerald P. López’s *Rebellious Lawyering: One Chicano’s Vision of Progressive Law Practice* conceptualised

rebellious lawyering as a way of empowering poor clients through grassroots, community-based advocacy facilitated by lawyers. Others have sought to import those teachings to immigration and related fields. The fundamental idea is for lawyers to attempt to pursue meaningful social change while at the same time employing community activism to empower the subordinated who can serve as their own advocates in future struggles when the lawyers are long gone.<sup>10</sup>

The work of community lawyers in other jurisdictions helps to provide a framework for the development of models of community lawyering that could work in the UK context.

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6 Charles Elesser, ‘Community Lawyering – The Role of Lawyers in the Social Justice Movement’ [2013] 14(2) *Loyola Journal of Public Interest Law* <<https://rswlaw.edu/sites/default/files/2021-02/Ospina%2C%20Natalia%20-%20Community%20Lawyering%20The%20Role%20of%20Lawyers%20in%20the%20Social%20Justice%20Movement%20%28Elesser%29.pdf>>

7 Arvind Narrain and others, Conference Report: Alternative Lawyering in India (Alternative Law Forum (ALF), Bangalore, India, September 2001) <[https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/elj/lgd/2001\\_2/alf](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/elj/lgd/2001_2/alf)>

8 *ibid*

9 Christine Zuni Cruz, ‘[On the] Road Back in: Community Lawyering in Indigenous Communities’ [1999] *Clinical Law Review* 5(1)

10 Gerald P. López, ‘Rebellious Lawyering: One Chicano’s Vision of Progressive Law Practice’ [1992] ‘What is “Rebellious Lawyering”?’ <<https://rebelliouslawyeringinstitute.org/what-is-rebellious-lawyering>>

# Reacting to the Research: Observations to Inform the Development of Principles for Community Lawyering in the UK

This section of our report synthesises our research findings into eight key observations, supported by our research with community organisations. Based on these observations, we posit eight corresponding principles for community lawyering in the UK. We hope that our work through this report helps provide an evidence-based starting point to articulate a broader framework for what ‘community lawyering’ could mean in the UK context.

## Observation 1

**Corporate and law-firm pro bono legal support models are inadequate for effectively advising community organisations**

Noting that a large proportion of respondents to our survey (35%) could realistically afford £100–£500 a year for legal support and none

said they’d be able to pay more than £3000 for legal support, low bono or pro bono support is often the only available option for community organisations.

While low bono or pro bono support can be helpful – and has in fact been crucial for some of the community organisations we spoke with – it is by no means an adequate solution.

A number of interviewees spoke about the difficulties of finding lawyers who understood them and their community context. This is one of the reasons that corporate pro bono support is often simply inadequate for community organisations, as pro bono lawyers feel distant and disconnected from their community clients.

“We work a lot with corporate pro bono. I know they’re not used to being in communities or speaking to hijabi women – they come from another class. I did find them to be a bit patronising. When we work with community lawyers, they are like me and you – they come from an immigrant background ... the corporate lawyers who are white and middle-class, we don’t really want to engage with them, they make us feel even worse.”

“Some of them [lawyers] don’t really understand what you’re doing and what you’re there for. They don’t actually know or have the first-hand experience of what we are coming to them for. So an understanding of what I’m going through is really important. I think lawyers should be aware of people’s stories – the bad ones too. At least know the background; know there are some

things you should not say to the person. Be aware that you are speaking to a refugee, there are words that might trigger things. My last lawyer asked me that kind of [triggering] question. I know they’re doing their job but be aware of trigger words.”

“What are the issues that get lost in that interaction with a lawyer? If you don’t understand my experiences and my reality, then how can you advise me properly?”

There was a scepticism of lawyers who advise purely on the law, without a deeper understanding of the context of their advice and how it translates for the specific circumstances of community work.

“Lawyers need to understand policies which regulate our work with them. Policy needs to reflect how the community works as well.”

There were a number of conversations in particular about community organisations requiring input into developing policies that worked within the context of the specific issues community members grappled with.

One specific example was in the context of safeguarding policies:

“We need advice around safeguarding processes and we’re grappling with this at the moment. My colleague works in [redacted] and she has a high level of nervousness around what she’s capturing. Legally we keep being told that if we hadn’t recorded every single conversation we’d be in trouble, but I’m not sure that’s right. So, we need information on the legal basics. Also, if you’re leading something more community-minded it can’t be that your every interaction is considered “company to service user”. So how do you have a safeguarding policy that actually works in a community support context?”

Finally there were observations on the dearth of lawyers who share the lived experiences of community activists and organisers.

“I think there is a lack of understanding, which is not helpful. They’re corporate lawyers and they have no clue about the communities we work with, so there is a mismatch.

There is a need for lawyers to spend time with the community organisations they’re working with, to understand the context of the advice they’re giving.”

This also came up in particular for organisations engaging in racial justice work.

“We have zero infrastructure when it comes to Black or Brown legal work. My preference is to work with a lawyer who is Black. My ideal working environment would be working with female lawyers who are Black. It would have made a huge difference to our work to have this space and to have our experiences validated. Black lawyers would understand racism better and have lived experiences that match our own. They would view hate crimes in the way that they should.”

### **Principle 1**

**Community lawyers share lived experiences with, or develop a deep shared understanding of, their clients’ community contexts**





## Observation 2

### **Arms-length and neutral advisory approaches generally adopted by lawyers don't work in community contexts**

Grassroots community organisations are fundamentally different from large NGOs and corporate clients. Therefore, lawyers need to develop different skills and techniques to be able to effectively advise in grassroots community contexts, including empathy, patience, and an understanding that the personal is deeply political.

“It is important for lawyers to understand that there is something deeply personal about the work that gets done. Emotional connection with the work is really important for advisors.”

One of our clearest observations was the deeply personal nature of the work of community organisations. A community organiser who saved her benefits payments for weeks to pay the requisite fee to register a company limited by guarantee. A founder who set up a charity in the wake of her daughter's death. A daughter who started her community interest company to provide support to others in her community because of the transformative experiences of mentorship in her own life.

It is imperative for community lawyers to take the time to understand the deeply personal, sometimes traumatic drivers behind the work of community organisations to be able to engage meaningfully and in a way that inspires trust and confidence.

“The mission of my organisation is empowering Black women in London. Having a safe space to meet up and try new activities. Black girls are silenced in mainstream discussions. Black women deserve to be heard and have support. The work comes out of a deeply felt need in our communities. It is deeply personal and from experience, and what you want to achieve for the world around you.”

## Principle 2

**Community lawyers stand in solidarity with their clients' work**



### Observation 3

#### **Community organisations face a range of systemic barriers when accessing legal support**

“As Black women and girls, our access to legal aid is diminished. Our community does not have as much legal advice and information or the financial resources to access lawyers and rights.”

#### **Price**

Price is by far the biggest barrier for community organisations accessing legal support. This is obviously symptomatic of, and exacerbated by, broader systemic issues including the legacies of racism and colonialism, which have withheld economic power from marginalised communities in the UK.

“Post-Covid and post-BLM, a lot of Black and minoritised groups are wanting to shift power and challenge white privilege, which is inherent in philanthropy, and there’s a question of how do you activate legal privilege and how do we activate our own power? The more we have groups like yours who are speaking the language of sisterhood and solidarity, that’s the only way we can have access to resources which have been –

colonialised and restricted. This is important for us for transformational change because this change has to be grassroots-led.”

Historic and continuing barriers to accessing funding and resources for community organisations means that the traditional ‘advice for fees’ and ‘billable hour’ model typically offered by law firms to most clients is completely untenable for community organisation clients and shuts out their ability to access legal advice through paid legal support.

“Lots of us, including myself, are suffering. We can’t go to a solicitor due to cost. People are struggling [with setting up their organisations] and need to sort it out, but you can’t do it by yourself.”

Providing space and time which is free from pressure (often driven by billable hour models) ‘to get to the point’ allows people to feel heard and convey their motivations, and their history is fundamental for building a trusting relationship and supporting organisations in a way that meets their needs.

“To me the first thing is the money because lawyers charge too much – they don’t care what’s going on in your life they just charge the legal fee. Also some of them don’t really understand what you’re doing and what you’re there for.”

“The number one challenge our users have is a language barrier. The fact we have to have an interpreter for every session means it takes ages – it’s not viable [for us to get legal support].”

“A lot of South American communities need a lot of support for making the constitution for their organisation. They cannot speak English. Many people from South America avoid [getting legal support] because they can’t write. For example, my friend came here from Paraguay – she set up a group called [redacted] to preserve indigenous language – but she can’t write a constitution for her organisation because they don’t speak English, so she needs help. She also needs help with setting up a business community account. This is very difficult for them because they don’t speak English and they feel it’s too much, but it’s easy to do it if you speak English.”

For lawyers working with community organisations, it is vital to offer deeply discounted rates (that go beyond traditional discounts offered to charitable organisations) and to offer fixed fee or project-based support to provide upfront transparency and certainty on price where legal fees must be charged.

But there is a more fundamental need to both resource community organisations for the legal support that they need, and to develop alternative models of solidarity-based legal support that enable community organisations to access the support they need.

### **Language**

While only 10% of respondents to our legal survey responded that language was a barrier for them accessing legal support (‘legal support isn’t available to me in my language’), a large proportion of our interviewees in our interviews and qualitative data gathering exercises identified language as one of the key barriers they faced.

Language barriers manifest in multiple ways. Most obviously, organisations led by migrants or refugees who sometimes speak no or very limited English face enormous barriers to accessing legal support.

A related set of issues arose for those who did speak some English but struggled to navigate legal documents in their second or third language.

“The first issue we face is the language issue. When it comes to writing something down and articulating, people need help. We need guidance and someone sitting down with us to do everything. It takes a long time to do things especially if people are migrants or they cannot write.”

A third issue is the newness of the legal system in the UK for many migrant communities, which makes navigating legal concepts, terms and jargon difficult even for those who are proficient in English.

“Being a visitor in London the laws are different from where I come from. I do business back home too, but the laws there are different. So it would be good to have the laws simplified for other people. Those who have language barriers, people who can't read very well, if it's simplified it would be very helpful.”

Language barriers also came up in the context of organisations led by deaf communities. Interviewees highlighted the difficulty of translating legal concepts into British Sign Language (BSL) and the dearth of BSL translators who could accurately translate legal concepts for members of the deaf community needing to access legal support.

“BSL translators need to educate themselves on legal terms. It's not easy with sign language, there is a difference between sign language and spoken language. So usually we'd need to have both a BSL translation and written advice for people in our community, so they can understand the full concept.”

Interviewees emphasised the need to have more translated legal resources available. ‘This is an important part of empowering our communities to support themselves and to understand our legal rights.’

Simplifying concepts without relying on jargon is a key aspect of accessibility. Practically, this will often mean abandoning lengthy advice notes and adopting less formalised forms of advice – including Zoom/Teams calls to advise and advising by email.

“Reduce the big words that lawyers say – we don't even understand what they mean.”

### **Accessibility**

Legal support remains systematically inaccessible to most community organisations. As one interviewee noted:

“Access to justice has been inaccessible to minoritised people – some of this is because it is constructed in whiteness and colonialism and so our people are recipients of knowledge rather than holders of knowledge. So, most minoritised communities make a choice not to access [legal support].”

The lack of accessibility stems, in part, from how lawyers advise, and also from how they position and place themselves. Lawyers are often seen as intimidating, unapproachable and part of a problematic and hostile legal system. A key observation through our research is that understanding the barriers to access involves acknowledging the harmful role that ‘the law’ and lawyers have played, particularly in the experience of communities that have navigated a hostile immigration system or a racist criminal justice system. Therefore, it is important to understand that the law and lawyers are very often part of the problem, and not part of the solution.

“For refugees, legal processes can be a source of fear and we may have had negative experiences of ‘the law’ in this country.” ... “The emotion that’s attached when you want to see a legal person – when you’re coming metaphorically with 2 suitcases of baggage already!”

## Location

Interviewees noted the importance of lawyers locating their advice in the heart of community spaces, in environments that feel comfortable and familiar for community organisations and creating a sense of proximity that reduces the distance – both literal and metaphorical – between lawyers and the communities they work with.

“From my experience when the lawyer is in the community centre, people are more happy to go, they are more relaxed. Sometimes when you go to meet a lawyer you have to take an appointment or the lawyer is not there or are very busy. But when the lawyer comes to the community centre it’s a feeling that the lawyer is in the community. Lawyers always are expensive, we know it, people are scared. They’re expensive and they’re far away from you.”

## Principle 3

**Community lawyers understand the systemic barriers that communities face when accessing legal support.**

## Observation 4

### **Lawyers are typically reactive and do not proactively work to dismantle barriers to accessing legal advice**

Corporate and commercial legal practice often place a huge emphasis on client recruitment and retention – often by pumping out publications, knowledge, free seminars and investing in vast ‘business development’ budgets to showcase their expertise and attract clients to access their services. However, support of grassroots and community organisations generally provides no business incentives to engage in similar ways. While support for Black-led organisations noticeably increased following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, such that support for Black-led organisations counted towards bolstering law firms’ ‘DEI’ credentials and work, there are generally no or few systematic business incentives within law firms to support the work of community organisations more broadly.

As a result, lawyers working within law firm structures often have no incentives to proactively work to dismantle barriers for the most marginalised and often poorest to access legal support or advice. This is a function of law being understood as a business, rather than the law being routinely seen as a means to accessing justice and limited resources.

“The language and discourse around how legal support is placed is crucial. Once people come knowing you're coming from a place of knowledge sharing, resilience, people will come from that space. Access to justice will now not be viewed in that very legalistic sense which historically serves white communities – what we think justice means is structures and infrastructures around how minoritised people access our rights, get resources whether its welfare – that's what justice means.”

Adopting an ‘access to justice’ approach in legal practice means that the impetus must be on lawyers to make the law and legal advice accessible to those who would not normally be able to access it.

“There is an expectation on refugees and migrants to know and ask. But actually, they don't know where services are. They don't know the legal structure. They need people to spend good amounts of time with people [to understand what services and support is available].”

This could include lawyers procuring or allocating specific pots of funding or support to community organisations<sup>11</sup>, travelling to remote community locations to make their services more accessible, hiring translators or interpreters where their clients are unable to access their advice without it, pricing their advice responsively, and taking proactive approaches to educate and inform communities in legal concepts.

“For migrants especially, there is a huge gap in terms of awareness of rights and access to justice. If people know they can identify legal pathways to resolving their issues by working with lawyers who are partners, this would be really helpful.”

#### Principle 4

**Community lawyers try to proactively dismantle barriers to legal support by adopting an ‘access to justice’ approach in their legal practices**

#### Observation 5

**Legal practice is hierarchical, and lawyers tend to position themselves as the experts in the room**

A traditional lawyer-client relationship often involves knowledge (or advice) being imparted by the lawyer to their client, in return for fees. This model of legal advisory work is typically a fairly transactional relationship: knowledge for money. While the lawyer may feel a moral alignment or affinity with their client’s work, particularly when advising in social justice contexts, it often sets up a one-way dynamic, with the lawyer holding a more powerful position as the source and provider of knowledge. This sets up a power dynamic between lawyer and client: often the client is in subordinate position and rarely able to exercise any agency over that relationship.



<sup>11</sup> A couple of examples we’re aware of include Hogan Lovells’ BaSE Catalyst Programme (<https://www.hoganlovellsbase.com/form/pro-bono>), which includes free legal support for social enterprises for organisational setup and growth, and The Stephen Lloyd Awards by Bates Wells, which provides funding and legal and other forms of support to early-stage projects that are forward-thinking and inspiring (<https://www.stephenlloydawards.org/>).



They can of course choose not to follow the advice that has been given. However, the ability to influence the advice, ask questions and provide alternative options is limited at best.

“When I’ve ever rocked up into a local lawyer or solicitor’s office, first of all just the look of it! That golden sign on the door ... it’s very intimidating. I don’t find them to be friendly, open, comfortable or easy. To be that open with someone and share really important, intimate stuff – you have to be able to be yourself. I’ve got my cockney accent on today because I really want to put that across, but [usually] I have to put on that professionalism to be taken seriously.”

Creating a space where there is a two-way engagement and space for the lawyer to learn just as much as the client in the relationship can help to disrupt this power dynamic. Learning from the community is fundamental to ensure that the advice we give as lawyers is relevant and responsive to community needs and individuals lived experience.

The concept of community solicitors, deeply immersed in the experiences of communities, fosters trust and empowerment. This model encourages a mutual partnership where legal tools are provided without overshadowing community voices.

“The concept of community solicitors are people who live and breathe the experiences of communities and are capable of immersing themselves in the issues they’re facing, that helps to build trust. They bring legal tools to that conversation but they don’t take that conversation away. The conversation stays with the groups or organisations, so there’s a mutual partnership in which solicitors work with communities in a very empowering way. Legal support is often an extractive process, usually as people parachute in. But the benefit of legal tools is needed to solve community problems.”

## Principle 5

**Community lawyers embrace collaborative and reciprocal approaches to exchanging knowledge**





## 🕒 Observation 6

### **Legal knowledge is centralised and inaccessible**

In confronting the challenge of restructuring legal practice to better serve community organisations, it is essential to recognise the significant role played by the legal profession itself in erecting and perpetuating barriers to accessible legal support. While some obstacles stem from broader systemic issues, the business of law itself relies on lawyers acting as gatekeepers of legal knowledge and skills. This not only contributes to, but often ensures the centralisation and inaccessibility of legal knowledge.

In acknowledging the pivotal role of legal knowledge in the empowerment of community organisations, it becomes imperative to ensure its equitable dissemination throughout the community. This could be done in a variety of ways, including providing resources in various languages and formats, running community legal training sessions, encouraging 'legal DIY' approaches, signposting effectively, generating accessible publications and

resources, and ensuring that communities can access the legal knowledge necessary for their development and sustainability.

In this context, the words of community leaders echo the need for a transformative approach.

“When I even think of lawyers it’s like we ain’t got the money for that. We didn’t need a lot of legal support anyway. We relied heavily on accountants who’d helped set up these structures and worked with [allied organisation] so that was really helpful. It’s just looking for resources online – that’s what we need.”

This sentiment underscores the importance of alternative models of knowledge-exchange, that recognise that the knowledge and skills held by community organisations and allow us to develop different models that facilitate a collaborative exchange of services and knowledge.

Another community advocate emphasised the need to challenge the top-down nature of racialised learning, stating:

“We are trying to empower people, why should all the learning come from top-down from the white people?”

This highlights the urgency of reimagining legal education and support as a two-directional process, where the legal profession finds ways to engage in a reciprocal exchange of knowledge that aligns with the principles of empowerment and community-driven learning.

 **Principle 6**

**Community lawyers actively democratise and distribute access to legal knowledge**

Community Interest Company

Company Limited by Shares  
Charity



## Observation 7

### **Lawyers often work in silos and aren't equipped to advise on multiple and intersecting needs**

The tendency for lawyers to specialise in particular areas of law often results in a lack of broader, inter-disciplinary understanding of the multiple and intersecting needs of community organisations.

Community members often navigate complex identities and circumstances, leading to legal needs that intersect in intricate ways. For instance, a community organiser who is setting up a charity or a CIC while also being disabled must consider how their position on the board or as a paid staff member may impact their disability benefits, requiring a lawyer to advise both on corporate structuring and benefits law. Similarly, individuals seeking asylum while volunteering with a charity must navigate the implications of receiving stipends or expense payments on their working restrictions, requiring a working legal understanding of both charity compliance requirements and immigration and asylum law restrictions.

“We want to work with young people in the asylum system. What kind of agreements do we need to have in place with the young people we work with, to ensure we’re complying but also creating an enriching and safe space?”

It becomes evident that lawyers who possess an understanding of, and can advise on, these intersecting needs are better equipped to provide supportive and community-centred advice that effectively prevents harm. By acknowledging and addressing the multifaceted nature of legal needs within community organisations, lawyers can play a pivotal role in protecting vulnerable individuals and collaborating with organised communities to confront new and complex injustices.

### Principle 7

**Community lawyers advise on intersecting community and individual needs**



## Observation 8

### **Lawyers position themselves as advisors, not changemakers**

In traditional legal practice, lawyers often position themselves solely as advisors, offering legal assistance in a reactive and atomised manner. However, community organisations are looking for lawyers who operate as allies in broader movements for social justice.

“We don’t have the expertise to know where the leverage points are around legal structures, but we need lawyers who do. How do you convert where the blockers are into a case for change, or developing a new legal form? How do you develop a new legal model that has a level of compliance but also a level of freedom? The legal structures we have aren’t fit for purpose; the issues around fiscal hosting are desperately problematic because the vehicles are not working for communities. There are a raft of legal issues blocking community groups from innovating. That stuff needs lots of time and visioning and lawyers creating the new.”

The concept of community lawyering challenges this status quo by advocating for lawyers to actively engage in social change as

changemakers alongside social movements. Community lawyers work hand-in-hand with movement actors, utilising different legal avenues to try and address root causes of injustice and to amplify the voices of marginalised communities.

“Creating new legal structures needs to be done by women of colour in this country – finding a model that gives us time and space to do that, including time to think, research, spending time with communities. Some of it won’t be tangible immediately, but we’ll get there.”

Community lawyers seek to empower communities to become leaders in their own struggles for systemic change. This approach recognises that social change requires not just legal change, but a fundamental shift in power dynamics, cultural norms, and broader systems.

“There is something different about being in a legal workshop and eating food with folk and talking – being in community with people. Access to the law does not usually look like that. We need solidarity and folk who get us and who will listen to our concerns and fears.”

In this paradigm, law and lawyers play a crucial role in advancing social justice goals, but within the understanding that law alone cannot solve all community challenges. Lawyers need to navigate a balance between engaging the tools of the legal system, while also recognising the inherent limitations of the legal system. By embracing the principles of community lawyering, lawyers can transcend their traditional roles as advisors and become

active agents of change in pursuit of a more just and equitable society.

### **Principle 8**

**Community lawyers situate their work within wider movements for social justice.**



## Epilogue – Eight Principles for Community Lawyering in the UK

### **Principle 1.**

We share lived experiences with, or will develop a deep shared understanding of, our clients' community contexts.

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### **Principle 2.**

We stand in solidarity with our clients' work.

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### **Principle 3.**

We understand the systemic barriers that communities face in accessing legal support

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### **Principle 4.**

We try to proactively dismantle barriers to legal support by adopting an 'access to justice' approach in our legal practice.

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### **Principle 5.**

We embrace collaborative and reciprocal approaches to exchanging knowledge.

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### **Principle 6.**

We actively democratise and distribute access to legal knowledge.

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### **Principle 7.**

We advise on intersecting community and individual needs.

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### **Principle 8.**

We situate our work within wider movements for social justice.

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# ANNEX

## *List of community organisations consulted for this report*

<b>Baobab Women's Project</b>	<a href="http://baobabwomensproject.net">baobabwomensproject.net</a>	Baobab Women's Project advocates for refugee and migrant women in the West Midlands.
<b>Black Farmer's Market</b>	<a href="http://bfmarket.co.uk/about">bfmarket.co.uk/about</a>	Important for ensuring community members can be paid for their work and contributions.
<b>Deaf Ethnic Women's Association, DEWA</b>	<a href="http://dewa.org.uk">dewa.org.uk</a>	The DEWA offers support to Deaf women with different ethnic backgrounds to increase rights awareness and empower their own decision making.
<b>Dipped in Creativity</b>	<a href="http://dicecic.org">dicecic.org</a>	Dipped in Creativity is a social enterprise, working primarily with 14 to 30-year-olds in East London to increase mental health awareness and community well-being. They use creativity in skill-based workshops, social events and programmes to build on skills and connect young people to employment opportunities.
<b>**Dominicanos en acción Londres</b>	<a href="http://dominicanosenaccion.com">dominicanosenaccion.com</a>	Dominicans in Action encourage integration and participation of the Dominican community in the UK by developing free events, book club meetups and yearly charitable causes.
<b>**Edinburgh Young Carers</b>	<a href="http://youngcarers.org.uk">youngcarers.org.uk</a>	Edinburgh Young Carers is one of the most well-established and largest organisations in Scotland dedicated to working with and supporting young carers.
<b>Ella Roberta Family Foundation</b>	<a href="http://ellaroberta.org">ellaroberta.org</a>	Ella Roberta Family Foundation campaigns to improve air quality for everyone, everywhere. They believe in a world where everyone can breathe air that is free from toxic pollution, regardless of where they live, their economic status or their ethnic background.

<b>Experts by Experience Employment Initiative</b>	<a href="http://ebeemployment.org.uk">ebeemployment.org.uk</a>	Experts by Experience Employment Initiative has a vision of a migration and asylum sector that is led by experts by experience of the asylum and immigration system. Their mission is to create representation of people with lived experience of asylum/migration at all levels of organisations and across different roles and departments.
<b>Hackney Caribbean Elderly Organisation</b>	<a href="http://hceo.org.uk">hceo.org.uk</a>	HCEO is a community organisation that promotes the interests of elders, primarily but not exclusively of Caribbean descent. HCEO's vision is to work together to build stronger, closer and inclusive communities where every day is to be eagerly anticipated by the older person.
<b>Highgate Black Women's Wellness Group</b>	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/bdde-h6b4">tinyurl.com/bdde-h6b4</a>	Highgate Black Women's Wellness Group is a safe space for Black women to meet three times a month around different topics which are dedicated to their wellbeing.
<b>+Latin American House</b>	<a href="http://casalatina.org.uk">casalatina.org.uk</a>	Latin American House serves as a community centre for both Latin Americans in London and for the local people of Kilburn. Latin America House aims to be a source of support and information for the Latin American population throughout the UK.
<b>Make Your Mark – Barking &amp; Dagenham</b>	<a href="http://makeyourmarkbd.org.uk">makeyourmarkbd.org.uk</a>	Make your Mark B&D formed to provide innovative solutions and encourage collaboration and co-design in order to dismantle racism and develop growth within children and young people in Barking & Dagenham.
<b>Migrant Action</b>	<a href="http://migrantaction.org.uk">migrantaction.org.uk</a>	Migrant Action is an advocacy and rights-based organisation supporting migrants to feel welcome, access their rights and justice, and to effectively integrate in the UK.

<b>Multitudes Co-op</b>	<a href="https://multitudes.coop/about">multitudes.coop/ about</a>	Multitudes Co-op is a design and technology co-operative that researches, designs and builds digital and material infrastructure for present movements and liberatory futures.
<b>Naglaa's World</b>	<a href="https://naglaasworld.com">naglaasworld.com</a>	Naglaa's World offers interpreting and translation services tailored to London's Arabic and Amharic-speaking communities.
<b>**Nijjor Manush and the Nejma Collective</b>	<a href="https://nejmacollective.wordpress.com">nejmacollective. wordpress.com</a>	The Nejma Collective is a UK-based collective of Muslim volunteers who work in solidarity with people in prisons by sharing resources (financial grants and books) and mutual support.
<b>Project Tallawah</b>	<a href="https://projecttallawah.org/sharing">projecttallawah.org/ sharing</a>	Project Tallawah is an emerging Black Feminist re-sourcing and community initiative based in the UK.
<b>RETAS Leeds</b>	<a href="https://retasleeds.org.uk">retasleeds.org.uk</a>	RETAS delivers comprehensive services and education to assist refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants to feel welcomed and fully supported to integrate into society.
<b>Revoke</b>	<a href="https://migrantaction.org.uk">migrantaction.org.uk</a>	Revoke is a grassroots organisation advocating for the rights and welfare of displaced young people, and those in the care system, living without advocates, families, power, or a voice.
<b>Rimanakuy Community Cultural Association</b>	<a href="https://comunidadrimanakuy.org/about-4">comuni- dadrimanakuy.org/ about-4</a>	The Rimanakuy Community Cultural Association is a non-profit community group with a number of cultural aims including preservation of Latin American ancestral languages, supporting the literacy of native communities and providing international solidarity and aid to native community members in need.

<b>Ten Years' Time</b>	<a href="http://tenyearstime.com">tenyearstime.com</a>	Ten Years' Time helps ambitious donors and foundations to repair harm and rebalance power by resourcing racial and economic justice with care and confidence.
<b>The Introvert Space CIC (formerly Black Intro-vert Week UK)</b>	<a href="http://blackintrovertweek.uk">blackintrovertweek.uk</a>	Black Introvert Week runs in the last week of October every year. The campaign focuses on empowering organisations and educational institutions to think in greater depth about the personality diversity and intersectionality of Black employees and students through panel discussions, thought leadership and social campaigns.
<b>Frames</b>	N/A	Frames provides advocacy services for children and their families in Southeast and Southwest London.

\*\* Organisations that contributed through their participation in a survey questionnaire (not an interview).

+ The individual we interviewed does not work for Latin American House on the date of this publication.

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Note: The names of additional individual interviewees who had not yet incorporated organisations have been redacted to preserve anonymity.

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