



# Voices of Deaf and Disabled people

The importance of advice services  
for Deaf and Disabled people







# Foreword

Deaf and Disabled people in the UK constantly face an uphill battle to get the support they need. According to the Campaign for Disability Justice, two million disabled people in the UK are trapped in deep poverty. Free, independent advice organisations offer a vital lifeline providing information and advocacy to people in crisis.

Across our network of 700 member organisations, 58 are Deaf and Disabled people's organisations (DDPOs). Led by Deaf and Disabled people, they not only provide specialist welfare benefits advice but also ensure Deaf and Disabled people play a central role in shaping their services; ensuring their lived experiences drive the support provided to address the discrimination and debt their clients can face.

Yet our latest research reveals that DDPOs are at breaking point. Demand for their services is rising sharply: almost all (93%) of the DDPOs we surveyed reported an increase in demand over the past year. Yet many are struggling to keep pace. Almost two-thirds (62%) of respondents said they were not confident they can meet this demand.

The funding landscape for all independent advice services is precarious. More than a third (35%) of all respondents responding to our survey said they weren't confident they had funds to continue operating beyond the next year. Alarming, this concern is even greater among DDPOs with more than 41% saying they are not confident they can continue.

Worryingly 6 out of 10 (59%) of DDPOs anticipate having to cut services within the year. These cuts would directly impact some

of the most vulnerable members of our communities, leaving individuals without essential support for navigating welfare systems, accessing benefits or challenging unfair decisions.

Our research also reveals the heavy burden on staff, many of whom are Deaf or Disabled themselves. More than half (52%) of respondents identified significant challenges with staff recruitment and retention, while employee wellbeing remains a critical concern, with one in five (21%) respondents rating it as poor.

These findings underline the urgent need for government action. The recent Get Britain Working white paper commits to an independent review of how employers can be better supported to employ Disabled people, and to help them stay in the workplace. However, our members have expressed concern about how this will be done and highlighted that it is essential to also focus on those unable to work, ensuring they receive the welfare support they need to maintain their dignity and independence.

This report shares the stories of people who have often battled for years to get support and only secured this with the help of a Deaf and Disabled people's organisation. And in our Advice Saves film you will hear first-hand



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“Independent advice services can change lives, stop discrimination and reduce costs for overstretched public services. Yet without urgent, sustainable funding, many are at risk of closing their doors.”

from clients and advisers about the positive impact of Deaf and Disabled people’s organisations.

Through the Advice Saves campaign, we are calling for sustainable funding solutions, including ensuring local authorities are mandated to provide social welfare advice. Funding for DDPOs must recognise the time and flexibility they need to meet the specific needs of Deaf and Disabled people using these services. We also need national advice and workforce development strategies to support this vital sector. In addition, we are asking government to work alongside Deaf and Disabled people and DDPOs to co-produce recommendations for employment support reform as part of the independent review.

Independent advice services can change lives, stop discrimination and reduce costs for overstretched public services. Yet without urgent, sustainable funding, many are at risk of closing their doors.

We must act now to secure the future of these vital organisations. We will continue to call for action to safeguard their work and ensure that every individual has access to the advice and assistance they need to live independent and fulfilling lives.



Liz Bayram  
Chief Executive  
AdviceUK

# Deaf and Disabled people’s organisations in crisis: Key facts

In a survey of 265 independent advice-giving organisations across the UK, including 29 DDPOs, we found that:

**Almost all** (93%) of DDPOs faced an **increase in demand** in the past year, with a significant majority (76%) reporting that demand for their services has increased significantly.

**Almost two-thirds** (62%) of DDPOs stated they were **not confident in their ability to handle the demand** with their current staff and resources.

**6 out of 10** (59%) said they are **likely to have to cut services** in the next year, potentially leaving the most vulnerable in our society without help.

**More than half** (52%) said they find it ‘extremely’ or ‘very challenging’ **to recruit and retain staff**.

**1 in 5** (21%) rate their **wellbeing as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’**, highlighting the strain on those delivering support



AdviceUK has 700 member organisations. **58 are Deaf and Disabled people’s organisations (DDPOs).**

More than **1.7 million clients** are offered **free advice** by AdviceUK members annually.

A survey of all AdviceUK members shows that the **top benefits issue** they support people with is **Personal Independence Payment claims/appeals.**

Research from Disability Rights UK shows that **90 DDPOs received just 2.7% of the total value of government contracts** awarded to just 9 non-disabled people-led disability charities between April 2022 and March 2023 – a stark disparity in funding allocation.\*

\*This finding was pre-released from Disability Rights UK’s forthcoming 2025 report, ‘The Funding Gap: The Financial Disparity Between Disabled People-Led and Non-Disabled People-Led Charities in the UK’





## Matthew's story

Earlier this year, I was struggling to manage with the little money I had coming in. I have several long-term health conditions, including a hearing impairment and constant dizziness, which affects my balance. Then I reached out to my local Deaf and Disabled people's organisation, not really knowing what support was out there. Lisa, one of their team members, was very patient and took time to listen.

I explained my health problems and Lisa thought that I should be eligible for a disability benefit I didn't know about. She helped me fill out the form step-by-step. I was awarded the benefit a few months later, which has made such a huge difference.

With the extra income, I'm no longer scrimping and saving. I can afford healthier food and don't have to worry about cutting corners. Lisa was incredible. She went beyond just giving advice – she helped me take action and change my situation. I'm much happier and more secure now, and I can't thank them enough. Lisa deserves a gold medal.

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## Charlotte's story

As a criminal barrister, I spent 15 years helping vulnerable clients, never imagining that I would one day need similar support.

But after a breakdown caused by work stress and the weight of undiagnosed PTSD, ADHD, and probable Autism Spectrum Disorder, I found myself unable to work. By 2019, I was unable to claim the appropriate Universal Credit and PIP resulting in mounting debt and rent arrears.

My PTSD symptoms – such as a fear of being disbelieved, vocal and motor tics, and over-explaining – made it difficult for me to navigate systems and impossible to complete forms. At complete crisis point, I was referred to the Disability Law Service, where Jo became my lifeline.

Jo's empathy and expertise helped me achieve more in three sessions than I had in years. She listened without judgment, tailored her approach to my needs, and even made calls and dealt with my landlord on my behalf. With her support, I resolved my Universal Credit and PIP issues and made progress with my Council Tax.

Jo provided the practical help I needed and helped restore my confidence. I now feel hopeful about the future and ready to rebuild my career while creating stability for my daughter. I'll forever be grateful for the Disability Law Service's life-changing support.

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## George's story

When I moved to Norfolk from Kent to be with my partner, I was looking for a fresh start, but this proved to be more challenging than I anticipated.

I was struggling with my mental health and wasn't eating or drinking properly. Eventually, everything became too much and I had a complete mental breakdown that left me unable to work for three months.

I was put in touch with Jennie at Equal Lives, who provided practical support and guidance. Thanks to Equal Lives, I'm no longer constantly stressed about money, and my day-to-day life feels much more relaxed. This has had a huge positive impact on my relationship with my partner, and now that we're better at budgeting, we even have some extra money to enjoy life together.

I'm now enjoying my work as a self-employed guitar teacher and I have a newfound confidence. Their support made a lasting difference in my life. It is so important that people with any form of disability – whether mental or physical – can have access to the kind of life-changing support that Equal Lives offers. Without it I don't know how I would have coped.

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## Sarah Little

Advice and Membership Team Manager, Equal Lives



I joined Equal Lives as a 19-year-old Office Assistant in 2005 and over the past two decades, I've seen the life-changing impact of our work for Disabled people across Norfolk and Suffolk.

Equal Lives is a user-led organisation working to empower Disabled people, removing barriers and promoting independence. Last year our advice team supported over 880 issues, from welfare benefits and social care to workplace accessibility and discrimination.

Despite our impact, securing sustainable funding is a constant challenge. Reduced local authority funding is forcing us to cut key services like welfare benefit form filling and appeal representation.

The uncertainty of our funding with short-term contracts makes it difficult to plan ahead and doesn't provide the stability we need to grow and innovate. Without reliable funding, our advice service faces a precarious future – potentially leading to staff restructuring or even closure.

We know that our services have an enormously positive impact. Equal Lives works to the Social Model of Disability, which focuses on removing barriers in society that disable people. Importantly, we allow people to self-refer to our services without requiring 'proof' of disability, ensuring accessibility for everyone who needs help.

Working at Equal Lives I've seen first-hand the power of advice and advocacy in transforming lives. Knowing that we are making a difference, whether it's helping someone access the financial support they need, navigate accessibility challenges, or feel heard and understood, motivates me every day and I'm proud to be part of this.

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# Femi

Trainee Adviser

A south London Deaf and Disabled people's organisation



Since I became a trainee adviser, I have been so inspired by our transformational work to enable Deaf and Disabled people access the support they need and look forward to a brighter future.

As a Disabled person myself, I struggled to get the support I needed so I am eager to make the process easier for others. Through my trainee programme I am learning a wide range of skills and knowledge so that I can help people navigate a complex system.

It is so important that Deaf and Disabled people can access free advice from an organisation that understands their needs and can help them with compassion.

Advisers play a vital role – being able to talk to someone who understands the struggles they are going through, and who has a detailed knowledge of disability rights and what's available makes all the difference. People feel heard and understood – and that can open up a whole world of possibilities.

It's really important to me that I am working in an organisation where Deaf and Disabled people take centre stage. Society can make Deaf and Disabled people feel shut out – but I want to see a world in which everybody can contribute and are welcomed.

That's why advice work matters so much to me, because society is all of us – and every single man, woman, person and child, regardless of their condition or how they're struggling, deserves to be a part of it; deserves to be seen, held, loved, and contribute.



People feel heard and understood – and that can open up a whole world of possibilities.

# Lisa Clark

Advice Team Leader

A south London Deaf and Disabled people's organisation



Working for a user-led organisation dedicated to supporting Deaf and Disabled people is such a rewarding experience. We provide free, high-quality, accessible services, including welfare benefits advice, advocacy, or support with direct payments.

Our advice service is a lifeline for many local Deaf and Disabled people. We assist with everything from making claims, challenging unfair decisions, representing clients at benefits tribunals and helping people access grants for essential household items and apply for concessionary transport.

One of the aspects of my role I'm most passionate about is training and mentoring new advisers. We are part of a unique and dynamic programme funded by Propel with Inclusion Barnet as lead partner, and supported by Inclusion London, working alongside four other Deaf and Disabled people's organisations. This programme is designed to develop and support Deaf and Disabled people to become skilled advisers, while also retaining and enhancing the skills of experienced staff.

This training opportunity brings benefits to our clients too as lived experience can really help them bring empathy and a deeper understanding of the challenges our clients face.

It is vital that Deaf and Disabled people have access to a free, accessible advice service that really understands their needs. If our advice service did not exist there would be a huge gap in provision for Deaf and Disabled people. This would result in people losing out on their benefit entitlement and putting them at risk of financial hardship and poverty. I am proud to be part of an organisation that provides an essential service but also empowers Deaf and Disabled individuals to lead more independent and fulfilling lives.



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# Andrew MacKay

Chief Executive, Disability Law Service



As someone who has navigated life with a unseen disability, I know the daily challenges Deaf and Disabled people face. I'm proud to be part of Disability Law Service (DLS), a charity dedicated to providing free legal advice for Deaf and Disabled people and their carers.

Every year, DLS supports over 5,000 people, offering help in areas like community care, housing and employment. Many of these individuals are in crisis, facing eviction, discrimination, or loss of care. As well as securing millions of pounds for clients annually, we also help reduce stress and improve wellbeing, enabling them to access their entitlements and live more independently.

Our impact extends beyond individual support. Through our disability law training programme, we are equipping more organisations with the skills to advocate for Deaf and Disabled people. We also campaign for changes in laws that disadvantage individuals.

At DLS we are not only advocates for the Disabled community – we are part of it. Over 75% of our Board of Trustees and more than half of our staff are Deaf or Disabled, so fully understand the challenges of living with a disability and can provide tailored and empathetic support.

However, our services are under threat. The lack of long-term funding is a constant strain on our resources and staff. Unfunded programmes like our Community Care and Housing Helpline risk closure without new support. The legal advice we provide is a lifeline – without it, many individuals would be left without the vital legal assistance they need.

Our work is truly life-changing. We will continue to fight for justice and ensure that Deaf and Disabled people can live with dignity, independence and hope.



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## Advice Saves: action for change

Through our Advice Saves campaign we are advocating for change to ensure that advice services can continue their life-changing work.

Our key calls for action are:

### Sustainable funding solutions

- Expanding statutory provisions for care and housing advice by local authorities, as outlined in the Care Act (2014) and the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017), to ensure sustainable funding for broader social welfare advice

### A cross-departmental advice sector strategy

- Developing a cross-departmental advice sector strategy, modelled on the Welsh Government's Information and Advice Action Plan, to integrate social welfare advice across health, housing, justice and social care sectors, ensuring accessible advice throughout the UK

### A workforce development strategy

- Implementing a workforce development strategy, including apprenticeships and improved career pathways, to support the recruitment, development and retention of qualified advisers in the sector.

We are also calling on government to work alongside Deaf and Disabled people and DDPOs to co-produce recommendations for employment support reform as part of the independent review announced in their Get Britain Working white paper.



Deaf and Disabled people's organisations (DDPOs) offer a lifeline, providing essential advice, support and advocacy that enable people to live independent and fulfilling lives. Yet our research shows they are at breaking point.

With a government review underway on supporting Disabled people in work, it is vital that its recommendations genuinely meet the needs of Deaf and Disabled people and ensures that those who may be unable to work are not forgotten.

At a time of rising demand and shrinking resources, DDPOs are the last line of support for many. We cannot afford to let these lifelines disappear.”

Liz Bayram  
Chief Executive  
AdviceUK

Through Advice Saves we are calling for action to support free, independent advice services so that they can continue their life-transforming work.

Find out more at  
[www.adviceuk.org.uk/advicesaves](http://www.adviceuk.org.uk/advicesaves)

