

News release

Domestic abuse legal support app and social care justice chatbot win legal access challenge

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- £100,000 awarded to RCJ Advice and Mencap & Access Social Care for their tech solutions to narrow the legal gap in England and Wales.
- The Legal Access Challenge, run in partnership by the Solicitors Regulation Authority and Nesta Challenges, is broadening access to legal advice for vulnerable people, individuals and small businesses.
- The challenge tackles the "legal gap" in England and Wales with 58% of people believing the legal system does not cater to ordinary people at present.

A technology platform which helps survivors of domestic abuse protect themselves from violence and a chatbot designed to assist people, including those with learning disabilities, understand their social care rights, have been named the two winners of the Legal Access Challenge.

Both have today been awarded an additional £50,000 for developing technological solutions to broaden access to legal services in England and Wales, bringing their prize total to £100,000.

The winners are:

- **CourtNav and FLOWS by RCJ Advice and Rights of Women** – Support to help domestic abuse survivors through innovative platforms that effectively integrate technology with human advice and support. CourtNav (<https://flows.courtnav.org.uk/register> [<https://flows.courtnav.org.uk/register>]) collects evidence for a non-molestation order application and links female and male survivors in England and Wales with an accredited domestic abuse legal aid solicitor. A referral app for frontline workers (such as police officers or refuge staff) refers people at risk to the legal help they need. Meanwhile, FLOWS (Finding Legal Options for Women Survivors) specifically empowers women survivors to easily find clear information and local legal support as well as offering a secure webchat app that women can use quickly and discreetly. The FLOWS Discussion Forum also enables practitioners to share advice with peers via a secure platform.
- **The Chatbot, developed by Mencap and Access Social Care with pro-bono support from IBM** – A legal information service for the hundreds of thousands with social care needs, the chatbot uses IBM Watson technology to provide free, accessible legal information, particularly for those who are experiencing challenges accessing care. The chatbot enables Access and Mencap to more effectively meet demand for advice by using technology to complement the human expertise of their advisors, allowing them to answer more queries and help more people. Using artificial intelligence, it learns from interactions as people use it, including legal caseworkers and care managers who have been involved in the testing. It helps people understand their rights and access justice, as well as allowing lawyers and advisers to allocate more time to the most complex cases. The chatbot can also be hosted on the websites of other advice organisations to reach even more people.

Alison Lamb, Chief Executive of RCJ Advice & Citizens Advice Islington said: "Being

named a Legal Access Challenge winner by the SRA and Nesta Challenges is so motivational and is a credit to all the frontline practitioners we work with. Having digital tools like CourtNav is vital, with technology like it needed more now than ever while people are unable to access face-to-face support and courts are having to move to remote delivery."

Kari Gerstheimer, CEO and Founder, Access Social Care said: "We're delighted to have won the Legal Access Challenge. It is brilliant that the chatbot has been incubated by Mencap and IBM. To increase the impact of the tool we aim to get the chatbot working across other websites so that more people with social care needs can know their rights and other organisations can manage the increased demand for advice, particularly in these challenging times. It would be great to hear from other organisations interested in collaborating with us. I'm so proud of the team and so grateful to Mencap and IBM for having incubated the project and getting it this far."

The winners beat six other finalists developing technology solutions for a range of legal problems facing individuals and small businesses. All the finalists received an initial £50,000 development grant in September 2019, after which the teams were provided with expert support from the Solicitors Regulation Authority and Nesta, as well as a range of partners, including the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS), Hogan Lovells and the Law Society, to develop their solutions. In total £500,000 has been awarded in prizes since September.

Run in partnership by Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) and Nesta Challenges, the Legal Access Challenge aims to use new technology to improve the accessibility and affordability of legal support for individuals and small businesses.

Anna Bradley, Chair of the SRA Board and chair of the Legal Access Challenge judging panel said: "FLOWS from RCJ Advice and the chatbot from Mencap exemplify the innovative spirit we wanted the Legal Access Challenge to support and encourage. Both solutions stood out for so clearly understanding the needs of their users and their potential for broadening access to justice for vulnerable people.

"Too many people struggle to get legal help when they need it and I think there is a huge opportunity for technology to revolutionise the way people use legal services. The events of recent weeks have shown the powerful impact that technology can have in supporting the public in difficult times.

"The benefits of the Challenge are not just about the winners. As well as aiding new collaboration, it is also helping us better understand what is holding technology back in the legal market, and what more we can do as a regulator to encourage innovation while making sure the public is appropriately protected."

Chris Gorst, Director of Challenges, Nesta Challenges said: "All eight of the finalists have demonstrated the game-changing potential that technology offers in improving access to justice for individuals and small businesses across the UK. It has been a pleasure to see first-hand the ingenuity of RCJ Advice and Mencap's teams as their innovations have taken shape. Legal services are in a period of enormous change thanks to new advances in technology, but it's essential that the advantages of those technologies are felt at every level of the legal system and benefit all of us. Whilst we could only choose two winners of the Legal Access Challenge, all of the finalists are set to make a positive impact on the way individuals and small businesses resolve their legal problems."

Previous research commissioned as part of the challenge indicates that six in ten (58%) people in England and Wales think the legal system does not cater to ordinary people. Meanwhile, 43% of small businesses owners and self-employed people believe that legal advice is reserved for big businesses or those that can afford it.

Furthermore, many are hesitant to seek professional advice, with seven in ten (68%) citing high cost as a key barrier, followed by the uncertainty of the cost (56%) and knowing who to trust (37%). Overall, the research revealed a strong demand for easier access to legal advice and a widespread belief that technology could serve as the solution. The Legal Access Challenge was established to explore this further and to identify and address any barriers to help narrow this 'legal gap'.

Later in the spring, we and Nesta Challenges will be publishing a report of findings during the Legal Access Challenge. This will include insights and learnings about the legal market, regulatory barriers and emerging issues around lawtech, and how the Legal Access Challenge has aided collaboration among innovators as well as regulators, policymakers and key stakeholders in our legal system.

For more information about the Legal Access Challenge, visit legalaccesschallenge.org [<http://legalaccesschallenge.org>].