



Our future in data storage and reporting – August 2023

This paper updates the sector on the future of CLASS and Community Legal Centres Australia's ongoing role in information, communications, and data technology (ICDT). It summarises [a longer paper](#), which you can read for more detail.

Current CLASS landscape

The community legal sector uses CLASS:

1. **For data storage and reporting.** CLASS is powerful because it holds the national data set. Good data supports the sector's funding asks and advocacy.
2. **As a basic Client Management System (CMS).** Centres use CLASS for basic legal practice management functions like managing client files, conflict checks etc.

CLASS has delivered its baseline function for six years – an achievement for a tool that was underfunded from the start. But we acknowledge we promised more than CLASS has delivered and there is quite a bit wrong with it. **CLASS will not continue in its current form beyond June 2025.**

Issues and risks

CLASS is funded to June 2025.

CLASS is funded through agreements between Community Legal Centres Australia and state and territory justice departments to June 2025 (with Commonwealth NLAP funds). We don't yet know what funding for the sector's data collection and reporting will look like in the next NLAP. However, we expect the Commonwealth will fund our future data work, given the value they place on good data.

CLASS can't match modern CMS tools.

CLASS was designed as a reporting tool and will never match the functionality of a modern CMS tool. In fact, the gap between CLASS and modern CMS tools will keep growing. In response to CLASS's limitations, community legal services are adopting modern CMS tools rapidly. CLASS is struggling to keep pace or integrate with this.

Maintenance costs are high and increasing.

CLASS is bespoke, ageing and operation and maintenance costs are increasing. We receive about \$1.3 million a year for CLASS. For the first time, in 2023-24, Community Legal Centres Australia will spend more on maintaining CLASS than we receive to run it. To manage costs, we will maintain CLASS's current functions but won't spend any more on improvements or customisation.

Relying on a single IT provider is too risky.

CLASS was built, and is maintained, by a private company, which owns the CLASS code. This means we can't fix problems with or make improvements to CLASS ourselves but must rely on the company/vendor. We believe the risk of relying on a single IT provider is too high for the sector. However, we have a complex relationship with the vendor, which makes planning an orderly transition to new IT developers challenging.

The way forward

Community Legal Centres Australia is committed to being able to utilise data stored in multiple systems for reporting to government and others on the sector's work. It is critical the national peak continues to use and report on the community legal sector's data to support our funding asks and advocacy. We should not give ownership of this data to government or any other party. However, we don't have the skills, expertise, or resources to deliver a modern CMS tool for the sector.

We think the best way forward is to separate the core data functions modern centres need, with centres (that can) adopting off-the-shelf CMS tools for case/client management functions and Community Legal Centres Australia delivering data reporting services on behalf of the sector. This would mean the national peak would no longer provide a tool for centres to record client and service information – centres will need a CMS for this function. We are committed to doing what we can to help centres that haven't or can't reasonably acquire a CMS so that they are not stranded when CLASS is decommissioned. To achieve this (and ensure no centre is left behind) we need to:

- **Build a National Data Repository** that can receive data from multiple modern CMS tools, particularly ones that many centres have adopted already, like Actionstep. Building a new National Data Repository is the peak's most vital role going forward. We will contract professional developers to build it, and do some high-level maintenance, but we will own it.
- **Develop agreed standards for customisation**, to make sure the CMS tools centres adopt, and any changes they make to them, are compatible with our National Data Repository.
- **Explore support options for centres that are happy with CLASS** or can't for whatever reason adopt a modern CMS tool.

We know adopting new CMS tools will cost centres in time, effort, and money. We are committed to supporting the sector through the transition. Centres know their technology and service needs. We won't dictate which CMS tools centres should choose. However, any tool used must be able to send data to the National Data Repository. The more work it takes to import data from a CMS tool to the repository, the less capacity our ICDT team will have to develop the repository's data reporting and visualisation functions.

In 2021, we evaluated four CMS tools. We're updating this work with new products and information on how compatible available CMS tools are with the National Data Repository to assist in centres' decision-making.