



IMPACT REPORT 2020-21



WELCOME

This Impact Report contains the stories of Daniel, Charlie, Sara, Helene, Ellie and Gabriela.* They are illustrative of the huge problems that the current structure of legal services in England & Wales confronts. Their stories are just six out of 5,802 clients assisted by our Law Centre during the pandemic year. Similar stories can be observed in all other Law Centres.

These clients didn't need help and advice on commercial issues, tax, or even crime. Their legal needs were, however, just as complex, sometimes more so, with inter-related issues of housing, debt, immigration and social security. Finding solutions to their needs certainly had a profound affect on their lives and those of their families – and the whole community benefits if people are able to lead positive lives.

Finding a lawyer to assist them in these areas of law isn't easy, however: South West London Law Centres and another 38 like us, can help. But it's getting very difficult. Funding is drying up. The number of Law Centres has fallen from a high of 63 to 39 (43 if you count our merged operations as four). Lawyers are not being trained in these critical areas of law, so the skills to cover the areas where our clients face problems are evaporating.

As a sector we need help: from the legal profession, legal trainers and, quite frankly, anywhere! How about a £10 levy on all civil claims which would generate c.£42m for Law Centres? How about making social welfare law subjects compulsory legal training? – that's right, it isn't at present. How about mandatory secondments for all legal trainees into Law Centres, or a cash equivalent, from legal firms? And how about proper government funding for legal advice? Although the Ministry of Justice will raise the rates of criminal legal aid, there is no sign of a rise in civil legal aid rates.

Something has to give – and somebody has to give – or our 5,802 clients and the thousands of others supported by our colleagues in other parts of the country will have nowhere to go... They could of course pop in to see their local tax lawyer! Or end up without their issues resolved and eventually cost everyone more.

Of course SWLLC couldn't provide the help illustrated in this Impact Report without the support of the legal firms and pro-bono lawyers who assist us with both cash and their services, as well as donations from some private individuals. Their contributions are essential to the delivery of our services and the Trustees are deeply grateful for their commitment to us



Allan Blake,
Chair of Trustees



**Clients' names have been changed in all case studies included and the images used are of models and not the individuals concerned.*

A NEW NORMAL

As for so many, March 2020 forced a complete change in the way we deliver our services. The restrictions of lockdown meant we could no longer offer face-to-face advice; our existing paper-based systems had to be replaced with updated IT; the closure of courts and stay on evictions, whilst keeping people in their homes in the short-term, severely impacted our housing team's ability to deliver much-needed advice and representation; a number of clients were digitally excluded; and we lost many of our volunteers who were unable to work remotely. All this against a backdrop of rising numbers – and a changing demographic – of people in need of urgent debt, employment and housing advice.

We responded by:



Introducing a new appointment system for telephone advice in our legal advice clinics



Launching a new website with a clear triage system, available in multiple languages



Updating our ageing IT infrastructure



Delivering an on-going series of live money advice webinars



Launching a new crisis navigation service for people at risk of losing their homes



Launching weekly housing advice helplines



Expanding our employment team with a new discrimination caseworker



Recruiting a full-time community engagement manager



Surveying clients about how they would like to see services delivered

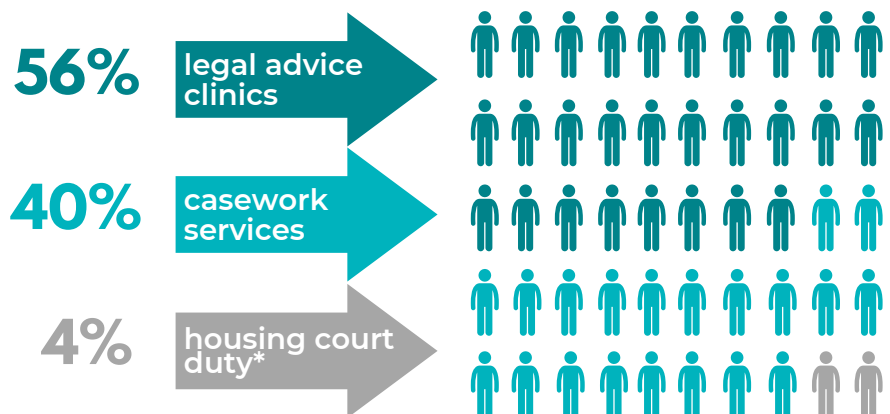


Establishing an Advisory Board to develop stronger working relationships with local organisations

As a result...

...in 2020-21, we were able to help a total of **5,802** members of our community with our free legal services.

Sadly, legal aid eligibility meant we were unable to represent many others in need of support.



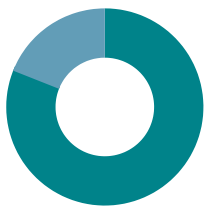
*Due to the pandemic, the courts were closed for much of the year



Our team of expert money advisers work alongside people to help them [reduce debt](#), [find affordable and manageable debt solutions](#), [apply for grants](#) and [create realistic, affordable budgets](#) to get their finances [back on track](#).

Thanks to funding from [Debt Free London](#), our money advice team supported **1,400** people in 2020-21, many of whom were experiencing debt for the first time as a result of the pandemic.

In response to Covid restrictions, our team devised a series of live webinars offering support and advice on variety of topics. These have been attended by existing clients, members of the public and other advice agencies.



Over eight out of ten people surveyed said they felt more confident managing their money as a result of attending one of our webinars.



Daniel's story



Daniel is a single father of young children. He came to the Law Centre with a number of debts and was struggling to meet the repayments.

I was getting by, but my situation escalated when I moved house. Everything took its toll on me. I was trying to catch up but I had old bills to pay and new bills kept coming in. One day I got a big council tax bill even though I'd only just moved in. I couldn't understand it. The property was falling apart and I had to do all the repairs myself.

Our money adviser helped Daniel identify his priority debts so he could pay off his

council tax and helped arrange a pre-payment meter for gas and electricity.

Everything worked out perfectly. I feel so reassured: they motivated me and built up my confidence. My financial situation is much better. I have money to feed my family. I can move on with my life. I'm so happy.

As a result of our intervention Daniel's anxiety has greatly reduced and he has a clear path ahead for repaying his debts.

Going to the Law Centre was the best choice I ever made.



In 2020-21 we expanded our money advice service to bridge the gap with our housing team, introducing a new **Crisis Navigation** service. Our two Crisis Navigators work with people unable to afford their essential payments and at risk of losing their home. Through urgent intervention they apply for discounts and grants on a client's behalf and advise on benefit claims to help people stay in their homes and improve their long-term financial position.

Our **Stepping Stones** project, run in partnership with Z2K, has been supporting members of the community with their immediate needs through social welfare and housing advice, legal representation, wraparound care (including help with benefit checks, benefit claims, grant applications, claiming discounts and supporting clients with their paperwork while they received casework and representation from our housing and debt teams. The wraparound care proved to be as important as the legal casework in getting a positive outcome for the client. This is what the project achieved:

5 years → **504 clients helped** → **£5.5m recovered in financial gains**

Sadly due to lack of funding, the Stepping Stones project came to an end in 2021.

Charlie's story

Charlie first came to the Law Centre because his Personal Independence Payment (PIP) had stopped and he needed help to write a mandatory letter of reconsideration.

I was not getting any Personal Independence Payment and I did not understand why it had stopped because I have a long-term health condition.

Our crisis navigator helped him write the letter and showed that he was unable to do a lot of the different activities in the

daily living and mobility component of the PIP.

The letter was successful and Charlie started receiving his PIP again. It was backdated from the date it stopped and the award runs until 2024. Charlie was awarded the enhanced rate for mobility and enhanced rate for daily living

If it were not for the services of South West London Law Centres, I would not be able to get my Personal Independence Payment back.





Our housing team fights to ensure people have a safe and secure home in which to live. We do this by:

- ➔ defending eviction proceedings
- ➔ ensuring local authorities accept their statutory duties to provide housing for the homeless
- ➔ ensuring repairs are carried out
- ➔ acting as duty solicitors for on-the-day hearings at three county courts

In 2020/21...



The number of people we were able to help through the housing court duty scheme was a reduction on previous years due to the closure of courts, stay on evictions and the fact that not all cases reached a court hearing. We were able to prevent the eviction in over half the cases, and secure more time for people to sort out their affairs.

Sara's story

Sara was working a zero hours contract. When her son was diagnosed with a rare brain disorder, she had to spend a lot of time with him in hospital meaning her income reduced. She got behind on her rent and struggled with her mental health.

I felt really alone. I had to visit the hospital, look after my younger son and manage my work all at the same time. I was trying my best but I just couldn't do everything.

Some days I felt suicidal. Eventually I had to stop working altogether and rely on universal credit.

Her landlord tried to evict her due to her rent arrears but our housing solicitor raised:

- ➔ The landlord's failure to take into account the impact of her son's illness and her

ability to pay the rent and deal with her benefits

- ➔ That the property was in a state of disrepair

L-- looked into my housing benefit and discovered I was owed £4,200. This not only covered the rent arrears but left my account in credit of about £1,000.

The matter concluded with both parties signing a consent order agreeing that the eviction warrant was suspended, the earlier claim for possession dismissed (making it difficult for the council to evict her in future) and that the landlord would inspect and carry out repairs to the property.

I was so relieved - paying the rent had always been a struggle but now I knew my children would have a roof over their heads. I felt like crying.





The work of our immigration and asylum team is focused on obtaining Leave to Remain. With this 'gateway' status, members of our community can:

- ➔ Work and earn an income legally
- ➔ Re-unite with family left behind
- ➔ Maximise their life chances.

Many of our clients have been previously represented by other legal practitioners who have failed to deal with their cases fully. Our team specialises in representing:

Those who meet the definitions of human trafficking and/or modern slavery

Unaccompanied minors

Minority groups such as LGBTQ+ clients

Those who've experienced torture or domestic violence

In 2020/21, we worked on **299** cases and helped **436** more people through our pro bono immigration clinic. And...



...through our joint project with Wandsworth Citizen Advice and Wandsworth Council we helped rough sleepers to get EUSS status.

Helene's story



Helene is a political activist but had to flee her home country having been tortured and gang raped. She was also suffering from mental health difficulties as a result of her experience and has since received more than five years of therapy and counselling in the UK from Freedom from Torture.

Helene made an initial asylum claim in the UK, which failed, and having exhausted her appeal process she then came to the Law Centre in 2017. Our

immigration solicitor then took on her case.

After a very long process, Helene finally won her fresh asylum claim appeal.

I would just like to express my sincere thanks to you for all the help you have provided me throughout what has been quite a stressful period in my life. That period goes from the day I came to the UK to the day I received your call informing me that my asylum case was sorted out.



The pandemic led to a surge in enquiries from people needing advice about their employment, particularly surrounding the furlough scheme.

This year we worked on **34** cases and, supported by our caseworkers, volunteers and pro bono clinics, advised **805** people. We also recruited a new caseworker to represent clients facing discrimination in the workplace.

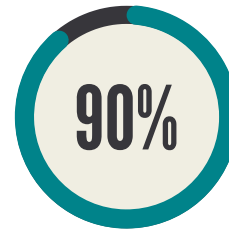


of people facing an issue with their employment also reported experiencing poorer health and well-being.

Timely and accurate legal advice



gives people the way forwards and helps reduce that stress.



said that as a result of our employment advice, they knew the next steps to take to resolve their issue.

Ellie's story



Ellie came to the Law Centre having been dismissed from her job because she refused the sexual advances of her employer.

He started making comments, showing off in front of his colleague. It got really inappropriate, especially when he started asking me questions about my sexuality. I was 18 at the time and he was about twice my age.

We were able to represent Ellie and take her former employer to an employment tribunal for sexual harassment and victimisation.

Knowing S-- believed me and was willing to fight for me made a huge difference.

I was so nervous on the court day. I'd never had to face anything like that before.

We won the tribunal as the employer declined to give any evidence on the day. There were difficulties enforcing the award which in the end was secured by bailiffs and amounted to a little over £10,000.

When I got the news that the money had been paid, I sat on my living room floor and cried with relief.

I can now close that chapter of my life. It's done. I've been through it and come out on top.

COMMUNITY LEGAL ADVICE

One of the biggest challenges of Covid-19 for us was moving our community-based legal advice clinics from drop-in services to being delivered remotely. We are grateful to the 400 pro bono volunteer lawyers for their flexibility and support as we navigated this process. Through their contribution, in 2020-21 we were able to help **3,283** clients in the areas of:



Altogether our pro bono lawyers gave in excess of

£1.5m

of free legal advice.



This personalised and timely intervention in people's lives empowered individuals with the knowledge to take their next steps and prevented their problems escalating out of control.

The view from our lawyers



"Access to justice is one of the foundations of our society; without it, in my view, the system simply cannot work. A major barrier to accessing justice is a lack of knowledge and understanding of the law among the population in general. With the legal system in the shape it is in currently, it will not work without ongoing support from the pro bono advice sector." Jonathan, pro bono lawyer

The view from our clients

I was very impressed with the professionalism and the way my issues were handled.

SWLLC gives an amazing service, even during the pandemic they have advised us promptly.

Thank you for giving me an appointment yesterday with such a great solicitor! He was really helpful and lifted a huge weight off my shoulders.

THANK YOU

Thank you to everyone who has so generously supported our work this year. Your volunteering, grants and donations enable people to access life-changing legal advice and bring justice to our community:

11 Kings Bench Walk
AB Charitable Trust
Allen & Overy
Aquilla Family Charitable Trust
Battersea Power Station Foundation
BDP Pitmans
Big Local SW11
Broadway Solicitors
Brown Rudnick
Capsticks
City Bridge Trust
Clifford Chance
Community Justice Fund & Funder Plus
Debt Free London
Eversheds Sutherland
K&L Gates
Law Centres Network
Legal Aid Agency
London Borough of Croydon
London Borough of Merton
London Borough of Wandsworth
London Community Fund
Norton Rose Fulbright
Russell-Cooke
Signature Law
Simmons & Simmons
The Access to Justice Foundation
The London Legal Support Trust
The Legal Education Foundation
The National Lottery Community Fund
The Tides Foundation (BlackRock)
Therium Access
Trust for London
Winston & Strawn

FACING AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

The pandemic has left more people in our community in precarious situations, facing uncertainties over their housing, employment and finances. Very often these problems are complex and interlinked, and negatively impact a person's mental well-being and physical health. The government measures introduced to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 were short-term and we are anticipating an additional rise in the numbers of people in need of our services.

One-off legal advice can often be the key that unlocks a legal problem. However, we know that this is not always the case. From our Crisis Navigation and Stepping Stones projects, we know that wrap-around support that takes the time to understand the tackle the root of the problem – often an error over a benefits decision – is needed to bring about a long-term solution. We want to expand our crisis navigation and social welfare services, making sure more people stay in their homes, are supported to get back on their feet, and are fairly treated in their workplace.

Legal aid is no longer sufficient to cover the costs of the work we do, so we rely on grant funding to deliver our services. Our impact in 2020-21 was only possible due to a number of generous short-term and Covid-related grants. Not all of these have been renewed so as we look ahead, some of our services are facing an uncertain future, even though they continue to be over-subscribed.

As a Law Centre we remain committed to supporting members of our community to uphold and defend their legal rights and we will do everything we can to deliver the same high-quality advice, casework and representation, whatever the future holds.

Gabriela's story

Gabriela had become addicted to alcohol, lost her job, got into debt and was struggling with her mental health. She was being supported by Stepping Stones who also referred her to our debt team.

Our money advisor worked with her creditors to agree affordable payment plans so she could pay off her debts and regain control of her finances.

That was eight years ago. I am now debt free and I have the highest credit rating with no record of my past history. I managed to keep my home and am now buying a cottage with my partner. I have been sober for five years and no longer have a mental health diagnosis. I have a fabulous job where I am respected. I am extremely grateful.



DONATE

Your gift will enable more people in our communities to uphold and defend their legal rights and find hope for their future:



helps someone take their first steps to finding life-changing advice



provides 30 minutes' expert advice from a volunteer lawyer



helps someone challenge a wrong disability benefits decision

Give online at: www.swllc.org/donate

Give by phone, by texting 'GIVEJUSTICE 5' to 70085 to give £5.
Or you can choose to donate any whole amount up to £20 (eg 'GIVEJUSTICE 20')

If you'd like talk to us about giving in another way, please contact our CEO Patrick at patrick.marples@swllc.org

Croydon office
5th Floor, Davis House
Robert Street
Croydon CR0 1QQ

Wandsworth office
76 Falcon Road
Wandsworth
SW11 2LR

Merton office
112 London Road,
Morden
SM4 5AX

Kingston office
Ground Floor, Neville House
55 Eden Street
Kingston Upon Thames
KT1 1BW

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www.swllc.org
enquiries@swllc.org
020 8767 2777