



SOUTH WEST LONDON
LAW CENTRES

IMPACT REPORT

2021-2022

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WELCOME



Welcome to our 2021-22 Impact Report

The extent of the legal services provided by South West London Law Centres is summarised in this *Impact Report for 2021-22*. The scope and scale of the work undertaken by the Law Centre staff and volunteers is staggering:

- money advice provided to **1,745** people
- **806** people represented in housing courts
- immigration support given to **590** individuals and **82** supported for settled immigration status
- **400** volunteer lawyers assisted **3,200** people with an array of legal problems
- **625** employees given employment advice.

Behind each case is a worried and concerned individual or family who needed our support. Our new **Community Engagement Manager** is out there working with groups to ensure that our services are reaching the right people in need and are relevant to the community we operate in. Our new team of **Crisis Navigators** ensures that we assess all the clients' issues and provide relevant expert legal support. Demand for our services has never been higher.

But... the legal advice sector itself is in a crisis. In 2012 legislation significantly reduced access to legal help funded by legal aid. The instability of funding has led to a legal recruitment crisis in social welfare law. Despite this, South West London Law Centres, one of the oldest and largest law centres in the country, has managed to maintain a high level of legal expertise in areas of law that impact ordinary people. We've adapted but survival is hard. It is telling – and deeply concerning – that the number of law centres across the country has fallen from a high of 63 to just 40.

We need a robust system of funding that offers long-term stability to the legal advice sector so that more services such as crisis navigation can help people work their way through legal problems. Otherwise people like those supported and mentioned in this Impact Report will be denied access to justice.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all the staff and volunteers who work at South West London Law Centres. You are an amazing team working in complex areas of law supporting people who are desperate for your help and support. I would also like to thank the many organisations and individuals who have contributed to the funding of the Law Centre, without whom there would be no 'Impact' to write about.

Allan Blake, Chair of Trustees

ABOUT US

South West London Law Centres is a community law centre helping people across South West London to understand and defend their legal rights in areas of social justice. In 2021-22 we:

helped **6,664**
people access
justice
and
gave **£1.5m** of free
legal advice in our
clinics.





The past few years have been characterised by crisis. Barely have we emerged from one crisis (Covid), than we have entered another (the cost of living). As with all crises, it is the most vulnerable in our community who are worst affected. That's why it's vital everyone's legal rights are protected - our rights to a safe and decent home, to be treated fairly in the workplace, to a just and fair immigration system - and we can all access the help we're entitled to.

As a Law Centre, we have had to adapt our services both to secure our own survival, and to ensure we continue to meet the needs of our community. A key initiative in 2021/22 was the **crisis navigation** service we piloted in Croydon and Wandsworth.



In the first year of the project, we helped

250
people with a financial
outcome of
£300K.

One of those 250 people is Jasmine, who was unable to work due to ill health and so built up rent arrears and a number of other debts, including credit card debt.



“The Crisis Navigators were ideally suited to this task, offering patient and empathic support whilst also imparting knowledge about rights that clients could use in any similar situation in the future. The feedback from clients showed that not only were their cases resolved by the solicitors and caseworkers but they also felt encouraged by the Crisis Navigators to carry on against the odds, which developed their confidence and reduced anxiety and stress.

Independent evaluation of Crisis Navigation Pilot Project

“I was working throughout the pandemic, but when the pandemic lifted I went down in a spiral and got into deep depression. It was so bad I couldn't go to work, and I also had really bad back pain. I got behind on my rent and was sent a letter about rent arrears and then I received an eviction order. I think I was close to having a breakdown and I had suicidal thoughts. I was on universal credit so I only had a low income and I wasn't getting any help. Things really picked up when I went to the Law Centre. I got a grant to help with my rent arrears and outstanding debts. Shanice helped me get a reduction on my council tax and helped me fill out the PIP form too. It's not easy but I got through it with her support. There was also help with my heating bills and shopping for my food. Eunice picked up on the debt side of things and helped me deal with my outstanding debts. She got in contact with my credit card company to put a freezing motion in place. Eventually we reached an agreement with them and they agreed to write off the debt. When I heard they'd written off the debt, it was like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I had literally been at rock bottom but this makes life a lot easier. It's put me in a much more positive place. I'm making sure I manage my payments better, check my spending and manage my income. If it wasn't for the Law Centre I wouldn't be in the situation I'm in today.



Thanks to funding from Debt Free London, in 2021-22 our team of five money advice caseworkers helped



1,745 people
(up from 1,400 on 2020-21)

to reduce their debts and find affordable and manageable debt solutions.

Through our funder the team has an average Trust Pilot score of **4.7 out of 5** from feedback from our clients.



As restrictions lifted, the team was out and about in the community again at outreach locations, as well as continuing with our online webinars.

Thanks to the high quality of the advice and our strong Trust Pilot score, the team was named **Debt Team of the Year** at Debt Free London's inaugural Debt Free Awards in December 2021.

★★★★★ Inverted

27 Oct 2021

Very valuable advice and help!

So far I have received fantastic and useful advice. As someone who is chronically ill, they have been patient with me and have not only help me with my debts but also with my life in general. I'm very grateful for their work.

★★★★★

Jun 18, 2021

This is a best place to go for any...

This is a best place to go for any legal issue and advice. Friendly and very helpful staff. They don't take time to get back to you. Thank you so much

Date of experience: June 18, 2021

★★★★★

Jun 25, 2021

Extremely efficient

Extremely efficient, friendly and patient. They are very considerate with your situation, they go through all available options best suited for you. Absolutely recommend.

Date of experience: June 25, 2021

Joanna is a single mother with a teenage son. She suffers from mental health issues and turned to drugs and alcohol as a way of coping. She lost her job and ended up with numerous debts, both priority and non-priority.

Our money advice caseworkers have been helping her with getting her debts written off so she can get her life back on track. Over £23,600 in non-priority debts has been written off.



I'd been addicted to drugs and alcohol for four years. I'd been dismissed from my job on health grounds due to my depression and anxiety. I'm a single parent but I wasn't claiming any benefits so there was no money coming in. I started claiming the next year but I wasn't in the right head space to deal with things so my debts started to pile up.

The minute I made the phone call and spoke to Eva, she was so helpful. She did a breakdown of all my payments – there were some loans I couldn't even remember taking out. I found it stressful but I did it with her help. We went from there and she explained everything step by step. Because she broke it all down for me, I could understand the plan ahead.

Her help changed my life completely. I had a massive weight on my shoulders, but I don't have to worry anymore. My debts have been written off.

I still suffer from depression but I have never gone back to addiction. I used to use substances as a way of coping but because I don't have to worry about my debts any more, my mood is much better. My son has really noticed the difference too so by helping me, he was helped as well. I felt like I was drowning before I got the support from you. Things are so much better.



Our team of six housing solicitors and two housing paralegals helps people **STAY** in their homes by defending possession hearings, live in **DECENT** homes by getting repairs carried out, and **FIND** a home by ensuring local authorities accept their statutory duties to provide housing for the homeless.

In 2021/22 they:



represented
806 people
in possession cases/
evictions,



took on
117
new cases
and



ran weekly
advice lines
in two London
boroughs

You were brilliant.
You were there when we
needed help. We would
certainly have lost our
home without you.

The help we received
in the last hour is worth
more than the £700 we
had to pay to someone
to represent us in
the past.

Housing team recognised



Also this year, our Croydon Housing Team Leader Jeinsen Lam was a finalist in the Legal Aid Lawyer of the Year (Housing) Award.

Housing solicitor Claudia Estephane won one of only two Law Centres Outstanding Contribution Awards.

My situation became bad when my husband started taking drugs. He would shout at me in front of the kids to give him money and throw things in the kitchen, telling me the dealer was coming to collect money for drugs. He made me give him money and then he accessed my online banking and transferred out the money I'd been saving for the landlord. We didn't have enough left for the rent so we got behind. There wasn't even enough money left for food. I wanted to apply to separate from my husband, but because he wasn't beating me, the Council said it wasn't a case of domestic abuse.

At the Law Centre, Claudia told the Council I was entitled to emergency accommodation and so I was given a new place to live. It wasn't safe to tell my husband we were going so we had to leave everything behind. We didn't have any furniture and there was no washing machine. Claudia got in touch with the Council again and helped us move to a better place in a different area. She helped me apply for a grant to get a fridge and helped with grants for gas and electricity. It was a big help.

Tanya was referred to the Law Centre from Victim Support. Our housing solicitor identified that she was suffering from emotional and financial abuse and made representation to the council on her behalf for them to accept her homeless application on the basis that, despite her having a home, it was not safe for her to remain there. The council accepted they owed her the duty to provide temporary accommodation and she was moved out of the borough, away from her husband. Our solicitor continued to make representations to the council to demonstrate she was owed the main housing duty and she was rehoused in suitable accommodation.

ASYLUM AND IMMIGRATION



Our team of three immigration solicitors and three OISC registered caseworkers specialises in dealing with unaccompanied minors, and those who have experienced trafficking, modern slavery, domestic violence and torture. They also assist people who are navigating complex asylum claims on the basis of their fear of persecution due to their sexuality and/or gender identity. Many of these clients have been previously represented by other legal practitioners who have failed to deal with their cases fully.

In 2021/22, we started 70 new cases, helped 82 vulnerable people with complex applications to get settled status under the EUSS scheme, and advised a further 590 people on their immigration issue through pro bono immigration clinic.



Thanks to funding from Merton Council, in early 2022 we started a new project offering free support with EUSS applications for anyone who lives, works or studies in the borough of Merton. This was in addition to our work with Wandsworth Council and Citizens Advice under Home Office EUSS funding.



Our Immigration team again received an excellence rating in the Legal Aid Agency audit in January 2022.

This is the highest rating possible, only achieved by a small number of providers.

Sami is a former translator who worked with American and Allied forces in Afghanistan. He was granted refugee status in 2019 and applied for family reunion visas for his wife and teenage son at the beginning of 2021; however, the Home Office did not believe the relationship and refused the initial application. Our immigration solicitor lodged an appeal and obtained DNA evidence, but due to the additional time this took, the visas were not granted until August 2021, only a few days before the deadline for the evacuation of Afghanistan.

As a result, Sami's wife and son were forced to flee to Pakistan. They were badly treated on route, all their money and medication was stolen and Sami's wife who – like him – is disabled, ended up needing treatment in hospital. He sent all the money he had to them but that still wasn't enough to cover their food, accommodation and hospital fees, not to mention the expense of their travel to the UK.

We ran an emergency appeal and after a number of generous donations, and at great personal financial cost to the family, they were reunited in the UK.

“ I am very very pleased. I am thankful of God that they are here. Rajitha [pictured below] helped me a lot. I really appreciate her help and her hard work from the bottom of my heart. It was very nice and kind of her and of the whole organisation.”



Also in 2021/22, we launched a six-month immigration internship allowing individuals with an interest in immigration and asylum law to learn from our award-winning team.



Our dedicated employment team focuses on helping people stay in their jobs and get redress for bad employment practices. We can assist with a wide range of workplace-related issues including:

- dismissal
- suspension
- holiday pay
- breach of contract
- grievances
- appeals
- unpaid wages
- failure to pay the minimum wage
- notice or redundancy pay

We also specialise in **discrimination** and since January 2021 have had a dedicated discrimination caseworker.

This year we took on **41** new cases and gave employment advice to a further **625** people.



Natalie was dismissed from her role having been diagnosed with an incurable illness. She set out a complaint against her employer's decision, who responded with a final offer of a small goodwill payment. Our discrimination caseworker was able to take on her case under legal aid and assist in her discrimination claim. She eventually agreed to a final five-figure settlement in compensation for the hurt and injury to feelings caused.



When the case settled a feeling of both joy and relief invaded me. During the last few months, I felt like I was fighting two battles at once: a battle with my illness and fighting for my rights. I feel that from now I will be able to move forward.

The end of this story means no more stress, more time to focus on my physical recovery and to improve my mental well-being, (I hope that there will be fewer sleepless nights) and it gives me a temporary resolution of my financial worries.

Without the Law Centre, I wouldn't have had the knowledge to be able to deal with the question of settlement negotiations. If the Law Centre hadn't acted for me under the Legal Aid scheme, I wouldn't have been able to pay my legal expenses and I couldn't have managed this alone.

In January 2022, we launched a series of free lunchtime Public Legal Education Workshops in association with the Streetlaw Project at BPP University Law School.





We run one of the largest legal advice clinics in the country and our services are free for all members of the community, regardless of income. By giving personalised initial legal advice, we equip people with the knowledge and skills to take the next steps to resolve their issue, preventing it from escalating out of control, and allowing them to move on with their lives.

In our telephone advice clinics in 2021/22:

- 400** volunteer lawyers gave
- £1.5m** of free legal advice helping
- 3,200** people resolve their legal issue.



“It is a simple fact that many of the people helped would have been denied their rights and had no access to justice had it not been for this voluntary effort.

The clinics have been running since 1977 and it's clear that their need is now more important than ever as solicitors' fees become further out of reach for more and more people.

This was Andrea Dawkins, then chair of SWLLC, speaking at the 25th Anniversary of the clinics in 2002.

Sophie had been in a relationship with a man with a history of mental health issues and drug abuse. One night he assaulted her and the police were called. Despite her obvious injuries, they took her word against his; she was arrested and given a caution.

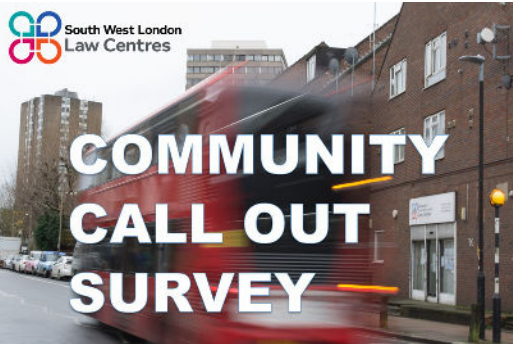
“*I didn't realise at the time the negative impact this was going to have on my life. I've had job offers withdrawn because of having a caution on my record. I studied Law ten years ago and I've put off pursuing a career in Law because of it. When I finally decided I had to do something about it, I approached a solicitor who told me it would cost between £4K and £6K to sort it out.*

Sophie was given an appointment in our free legal advice clinic. The volunteer solicitor explained about the AROC Records Deletion and how she could apply to have her caution removed.

“*I explained what had happened and within five minutes he told me how to apply to have my record removed, saying the facts should stand for themselves. He also said it was something I could do myself without needing to pay for a solicitor. I was totally unaware of this, so when I heard it, it wasn't just legal advice, it was life-changing advice. It means I can now pursue being a barrister and I can finally let go of what I've been carrying round with me for 15 years.*

ENGAGING OUR COMMUNITY

The lockdown demonstrated the need for the Law Centre to be firmly rooted in the community and so in July 2021 we appointed our first **Community Engagement Manager** and also established an **Advisory Board** to seek the views of key stakeholders in our local community. The insights gained from these initiatives have informed a number of new projects and priorities as we adapt our services for the future.



As a result of the feedback from our Community Call-Out, in 2021 we:

- ✓ launched a series of free public legal education workshops
- ✓ established a social justice network
- ✓ campaigned on key issues such as disrepair in social housing.

This enabled us to make successful grant applications to run a **Cost of Living** Project and a **Temporary Accommodation** Project in 2022.

We are increasingly having to rely on grant funding to deliver our services as legal aid is no longer sufficient to cover the work that we do. Because this type of funding is project-based it does not cover our core costs, leaving the future of some of our key services, including those that are routinely over-subscribed, in a precarious position.

This year we spent just over **£1.5 million** helping people in our communities to access justice and uphold their rights.

Sadly we know there are many others in our community in need of our help.



This meant we could help **6,664** members of our community to access justice.

Notes: At the end of the year our funds stood at £615,555 a decrease of £65,116 from the previous year.

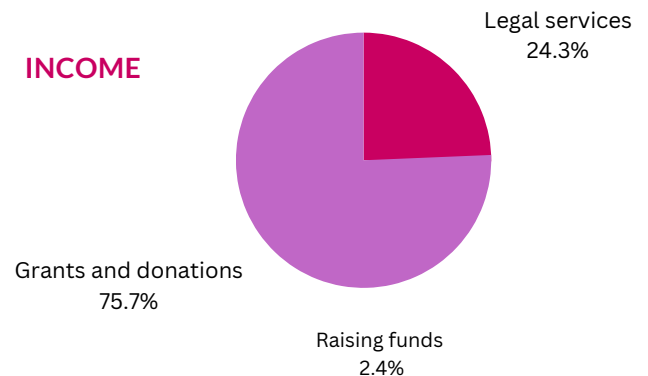
Unrestricted funds - £495,708 - 80%

Restricted funds - £119,847 - 20%

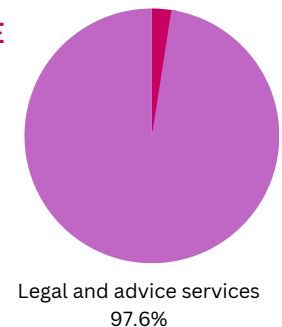
The Trustees of South West London Law Centres would like to thank all our funders, sponsors, volunteers and staff for the huge contribution you are making to protect the most vulnerable members of our community. We will continue to challenge injustice.

Full copies of our audited accounts are available on request

INCOME



EXPENDITURE



THANK YOU

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

OUR FUNDERS

11 Kings Bench Walk, AB Charitable Trust, Access to Justice Foundation, Allen & Overy, Aquilla Family Trust, Battersea Power Station Foundation, BDP Pitmans, Blackrock - Tides Foundation, Brown Rudnick, City Bridge Trust, Clifford Chance, Croydon Advice Providers - Citizens Advice Croydon, Debt Free London, Eversheds Sutherland, Law Centres Network, Legal Aid Agency, Legal Education Foundation, Locality (GLA), London Borough of Croydon, London Borough of Merton, London Borough of Wandsworth, London Community Foundation, London Legal Support Trust, Lottery - Community Fund, Norton Rose Fulbright, Simmons & Simmons, Therium Access, Trust for London

PRO BONO FIRMS

Allen & Overy, BDP Pitmans, Broadway Solicitors, Brown Rudnick, Capsticks, Clifford Chance, Eversheds Sutherland, K&L Gates, Norton Rose Fulbright, Russell-Cooke, Signature Law, Simmons & Simmons, Winston & Strawn

INDIVIDUAL SOLICITORS




They are too many to list here but we're very grateful to the many individual lawyers who also volunteer in our weekly legal advice clinics.

Thanks to everyone who has been walking, running and cycling for justice. Special mention to Heather Matthews (right) who took on the Captain Tom 100 Challenge to fundraise for us.



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