

LAW CENTRES' CALLS TO THE NEXT GOVERNMENT



A Framework for
Community-Led
Legal Services

Who we are

Law Centres are not-for-profit legal practices which help vulnerable and disadvantaged people transform their lives.



There are **56 Law Centres in England, Wales and Northern Ireland**, staffed by solicitors, barristers and community workers who specialise in the areas of law most relevant to disadvantaged people including **housing, employment, discrimination, welfare rights, debt, community care, mental health, education, immigration and asylum**.

We are effective because we are **expert lawyers**, rooted in our **communities** and accountable to them.

We are the **UK's oldest free, expert, community-run legal services provider**, operating for over 40 years.

Why people come to us

We help people to stay in their homes, keep their families together and get into employment and education.

Law Centres help people to transform their lives
We offer free, expert, independent legal advice, casework and representation through to the European courts if necessary.

We believe in giving our clients the time they need to solve their problems.

We focus on securing the right outcome for our clients in all the areas where they need legal help, tailoring our services to their individual needs.

Law Centres help to transform communities

We spot trends in our communities' needs and respond by doing public legal education, influencing social policy and organising collective action.

We are accountable to committees of community representatives.

Law Centres help to transform society

We identify test cases and pursue them all the way to the European courts if necessary.

We tackle the root causes of poverty and disadvantage through a strategic mix of public legal education, influencing social policy and campaigning for social change.

Law Centres provide value for money by meeting outcomes set by clients and communities

Every housing eviction avoided by Law Centres is estimated to save the taxpayer £34,000.

For every £1 spent by Law Centres on a typical housing case, £10 of 'social value' is created through benefits to the local community and savings to the government.

Law Centres meet outcomes that are set by community members for their community.

We help Local Authorities meet their obligations.

What our clients need

Defending the legal rights of the most vulnerable is essential in a fair, democratic and vibrant society.



However, recent reforms to the legal aid system and budget cuts at national and local level have made it harder for the poorest and most disadvantaged in our society to get the time they need with a legal expert to solve their problems.

Law Centres, and providers like us, are people's last line of defence against eviction, unfair dismissal and discrimination. Without Law Centre services some of the most vulnerable people in the UK would be at risk of greater harm and neglect. We also play a vital role in identifying and tackling the root causes of poverty and injustice in the UK, preventing the escalation of problems. The provision of independent legal advice and representation is not a statutory duty yet demand for our services alarmingly outstrips supply.

We achieve the best outcomes for our clients when we can respond early to their problems and when they are aware of their rights and the avenues available to them to manage their problems. We work best when we can plan for the future, develop our specialists and support and advise other community groups.

We need a policy framework which supports rather than hinders this vital work.

A framework for community-led legal services

Law Centres believe that a national debate is necessary about the best ways to ensure that legal aid and advice are supported at local level. We call on the next government to uphold the policy principles we propose below.



Principle 1

Policies and budgets need to be developed across government departments, with input from providers

We call on the next government to:

- ensure provision for community legal service needs across government departments by carrying out comprehensive legal aid impact assessments of all their policies, and allocating adequate resources accordingly;
- introduce a coherent measurement of the social impact of legal aid across government departments;
- invest in dedicated and independent services meeting the comprehensive legal advice needs of children and young people in each Children's Trust or Local Authority area. This is one of the ways the Child Poverty Act 2010 can be implemented.

Principle 2

The best in local and national policy and practice should be aligned

We call on the next government to:

- conduct a national debate about the best local practices to inform Local Area Agreements and their budgets;
- review the measures used for National Indicators so that they reflect local legal services need;
- help strengthen Local Strategic Partnerships which support innovation and agile response to emerging needs;
- support the replication of innovative ways of assessing needs and outcomes at local level.

Principle 3

The legal aid system must be redesigned with providers so that it is client-focused, meets all community needs, and therefore avoids waste

We call on the next government to:

- review the fixed fee system so that it is client-driven, allowing adequate time to be spent with the most vulnerable who have the most complex clusters of problems;
- ensure an independent legal aid agency whose purpose is to both guarantee robust funding decisions and champion the importance of a legal aid programme in a democratic society.

Principle 4

Intelligent partnerships between providers and government are needed

We call on the next government to:

- ensure legal aid and advice contracts allow adequate time to tailor services to clients' needs;
- factor flexibility into contracts so that providers can adjust services to emerging trends;
- invest in partnering with providers to track, measure and develop systemic responses to problems which clients face.

Principle 5

Investment in the sustainability of community-led legal services is needed to ensure the quality of services

We call on the next government to:

- resurrect the Partnership Innovation Budget, support investment in infrastructure and accredited training programmes, and resource Peer Review adequately;
- ensure that contract length is a minimum of five years to give providers the stability to deliver the best outcomes.

Principle 6

Community-led public legal education needs dedicated investment if rights are to be accessible

We call on the next government to:

- support public legal education led by communities so that people have more confidence to use the legal tools and information available when problems arise;
- carry out a public awareness campaign about the application of human rights and the Equality Act 2010;
- strengthen provisions for access to legal advice and representation in UK law, and make the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child part of UK law.

'Law Centres... offer professional help of high calibre to the neediest people.' Lord Justice Sedley

'I am now going to university in September – all thanks to the advice I received.'

'I don't like to think about where I would be without the advice – I would be homeless, stressed and wouldn't be sorted.'

www.lawcentres.org.uk

Law Centres Federation
PO Box 65836
London EC4P 4FX
Telephone: 020 7842 0720
Fax: 020 7842 0721
Email: info@lawcentres.org.uk

Law Centres Federation is a company limited by guarantee
Company registered in England and Wales. Number: 2433492
Registered charity number: 1088588
Registered office address: 22 Tudor Street, London, EC4Y 0AY
Law Centre® is a registered trademark
Design: www.playmedesign.co.uk