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New App Launched to Help People Arrested for Drug Possession Offences

Thousands of people are prosecuted for simple drug possession every year in the UK – with no legal aid available, this app aims to help people navigate the criminal justice system

LONDON (April 5, 2018) – A new app - *Legal Aide* - has been launched to help people who have been arrested for the personal possession of controlled drugs. The app was created by lawyers at Release, the UK's centre of expertise on drugs and drug laws.

Over 23,000 people in England and Wales were prosecuted for the simple possession of drugs in 2016, with 95 per cent of them being found guilty of the offence. Most people charged with these offences are not awarded legal aid because they are unlikely to face imprisonment, meaning they're left to represent themselves – often without any legal advice.

In many cases a prosecution may not have been necessary, with out of court disposals being available to police and prosecutors to dispose of drug possession charges. Yet many people still face prosecution for a first offence instead of being issued a caution or, in the case of cannabis, an on the street warning. The app educates users on the different disposals available and what might work in their case, which may result in a less harsh penalty for simple possession of drugs.

The aim is for the user to get the best possible result hence minimising the harms of criminalisation. The app provides information about getting cannabis warnings, a Penalty Notice for Disorder, and cautions from the police. If prosecution is unavoidable, advice is given about preparing for court, what to say in the hearing, and the consequences of a criminal record.

Kirstie Douse, head of legal services at Release, said:

“The cuts to legal aid have left thousands of people unrepresented in cases involving possession of small quantities of drugs. This has created inequality in the criminal justice system whereby those with resources, who can afford to pay for private legal representation, will often receive less punitive penalties compared to those who go unrepresented. The launch of this app goes some way to address this inequality. It goes beyond providing knowledge of legal process and principles, and helps reduce the harms caused by the criminalisation of drug possession. We hope that this tool empowers people to engage with the law in order to ensure that it is applied accurately and fairly, preventing poor decisions.”

Many people who appear before a court unrepresented are unaware of the sentencing options available to them. A disproportionate sentence may then be imposed if they fail to put forward relevant mitigation. Additionally, if a defendant does not accurately demonstrate their financial circumstances, they may face a financial penalty which they're unable to pay.

The app will provide information on how to navigate this process, which for many people can be extremely distressing, and which - in most cases – results in the person ending up with a criminal record, which can be devastating for their long term future.

The app is available for download on [Apple](#) and [Android](#) devices. For those without a smartphone, guidance is available in a [downloadable PDF](#).

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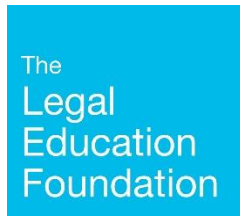
Note to the editor:

[Release](#) is the UK's centre of expertise on drugs and drug laws, providing free and confidential specialist services to professionals, the public, and people who use drugs. Release also campaigns for the reform of UK drug policy, particularly the removal of criminal sanctions for possession offences, in order to bring about a fairer and more compassionate legal framework to managing drug use in our society. We are an independent and registered charity.

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The app is complemented by simple in-app videos from Release's lawyers which summarise the various stages of the legal process, ensuring the information is easily accessible to all. More material, including template letters to help people get an out of court disposal which in some cases will mean no criminal record, is contained within a comprehensive Guide which accompanies the digital resources. All resources are available [on our website](#).

The app was supported with a grant from the [Legal Education Foundation](#).



Contact:

Niamh Eastwood – niamh@release.org.uk - 020 7324 2980 - 07900 002 632

Avinash Tharoor – avinash@release.org.uk - 020 7324 2997 - 07889 515 106