

LEGAL OUTREACH SERVICES

ABOUT US

Release is the national centre of expertise on drugs and drugs law and is an independent registered charity that was founded in 1967. We can provide free and confidential legal, educational, welfare and expert drugs advice and information in the areas of drug use, civil liberties, human rights and the criminal law. Release campaigns on issues that affect those we represent, including reform of the UK's current drug policy.

The organisation provides *free at the point of delivery* services to individuals/groups, informative educational programmes to young and marginalised people, and a number of free policy & educational publications.

Our unique and specialist services activities include:

- a national drugs and legal helpline; community engagement programmes for young and marginalised groups; and legal welfare outreach (both in-person & virtual); and drugs advocacy and support service.

Release is a member of AdviceUK, Addiction Professionals, and Criminal Justice Alliance (CJA). Our legal services have been awarded 'Centre of Excellence' status by the London Legal Support Trust and holds the Advice Quality Standard in debt, housing and welfare benefits advice. Release is also regulated by the **Financial Conduct Authority** ([618823](#)) to provide debt advice, and is licensed to use the Wiseradviser Standard Financial Statement (SFS).

THE LEGAL WELFARE OUTREACH SERVICE

The legal team delivers the service and is currently comprised of:

- Head of Legal Services who is a solicitor and registered with the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA)
- 2 x Supervising Solicitor registered with the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA)
- 2 x Senior Legal Advisers
- 5 x legal advisers
- 2 x trainee solicitors
- Legal volunteers from universities and law schools

"When it comes to basic rights like benefits service users are struggling, I pick up on their stress. They look to me to have the answer and I have to inform them that I'm not a benefits advisor. Having a service like Release is invaluable because it allows us to build better relationships with service users. It's hard for service users to focus on treatment when their basic needs are not being met and they are frustrated by the system."

ALL Release personnel have an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service check!

Release

Drugs, The Law & Your Rights

The 'virtual' legal welfare outreach service is delivered at your centre by a named and dedicated member of the legal team who delivers your service once a week on a mutually agreed fixed day for 3 hours either in the morning or afternoon. During this time the legal adviser can see up to 6 service users through 30 minute appointments, and can advise on legal issues and take on the casework which is completed back at the office. The follow up work generally generates more than 15 hours, so this work will be conducted at the Release office. All contact details for the legal adviser is provided in the client care letter, which is supplied to every service user. Communication can also be via short message service (text). This facility is to ensure everyone is digitally included.

Our preference is an appointment-based system, as it allows for more preparation and organisation, and also encourages service users to engage with scheduled activities. However, we are happy to deliver a drop-in service, if this would be more suitable to your service users. The service is designed to be flexible, so please discuss with us should an alternative delivery method be desirable.

The benefit of having the legal welfare service delivered within your service is that service users don't have to travel anywhere new, which we know can be a problem for many with physical or mental health conditions. They benefit from having an on-site legal welfare service dedicated solely to assist them, and in an environment they are familiar with. We also know that many service users can find it difficult to get help from external agencies due to the stigma around their drug and alcohol use, which risks legal issues continuing unresolved. In contrast, our staff can participate in service user forums and are trained to understand the difficulties that substance use, trauma and treatment can have on service users lives.

As soon as the service user signs the letter of authorisation, which provides legal adviser/Release the legal authority to act on behalf of the service user in their legal matters then the legal adviser becomes the 'noted point of contact' for the legal matters the service users has presented. **This allows the service user to focus upon their treatment** without being distracted and worried about their legal problems.

Listed below are just some examples areas we can assist the service users with:

- Housing (possession, eviction, transfers, disrepair, complaints to ombudsman etc.)
- Homelessness (initial applications and reviews of local authority decisions etc.)
- Welfare benefits (eligibility, reconsideration and appeals of Department for Work and Pensions decisions, sanctions, deductions etc.)
- Representation in benefit appeals at both First-tier and Upper Tribunals
- Debt management and payment plans (credit, gas, electricity, loans etc.)
- Crime (representations to CPS if no public interest in continuing)
- Family (access to children etc.)
- Complaints against the police
- Criminal injuries compensation claims

**** We are registered with the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC) and are training more of the legal team to provide immigration advice and we should be in a position to offer this provision in early 2024.**

In the previous 3 years we have succeeded in obtaining over **£750,000** for 103 service users in back dated benefit appeals. **Highest award £27,000!**

Unlike other services, we provide **free representation at all social security tribunals**. This service is also free to service users and we can fully represent the service user to challenge benefit award decisions made by the Department of Work and Pensions. This also covers representation at the Upper Tribunal, where a client disagrees with the decision of the First-tier Tribunal on a point of law. Over the previous 7 years Release has been almost 100% successful in winning Tribunal decisions in favour of the service user. The success rate nationally for all benefit appeals is 68% (Source: <https://www.benefitsandwork.co.uk>, 15 March 2022)

In addition to these services our Solicitors can sign statutory declarations, which external solicitor's will charge a fee for. We frequently do this to confirm that someone has no identity documents, and this is then accepted by banks to allow the client to open a bank account without the required paperwork. This can also be used in relation to criminal proceedings for driving offences, including parking penalty charge notices, where someone was unaware of the proceedings.

Our broad range of expertise means we're well placed to help your service users. In our experience clients rarely present with one issue – for example, someone whose benefits have been suspended will often have problems with rent arrears and other debts as a result of this. Your service users will benefit from being able to receive advice on all of these problems from one trusted adviser.

'VIRTUAL' SERVICE DELIVERY

An initial visit to the centres where we would deliver virtually would be undertaken by a senior member of the legal team and Release's Operations Manager, who is responsible for managing and implementing our IT needs. This would be an opportunity to brief the host project staff team on the service, how referrals will work and install the IT system to allow for seamless and confidential communications with Release legal advisers based at the London office. Staff at the host service will be trained on how to use the equipment to assist clients if, and when, they need support.

The on-site equipment supplied by Release will include:

- 27 inch video conferencing monitor with built-in camera, microphone and speakers which connected to the hard drive (next unit of computing (NUC));
- Remote unattended desktop software to create a dedicated uninterrupted connection between the host computer and Release's legal advisers' computers - this software will allow for documents to be moved securely between computers;
- Scanner to allow clients to upload documents to the adviser from the host computer, thereby allowing the adviser to act immediately on behalf of the client without having to wait for postal delivery and eradicating these costs for the clients.

The legal adviser will operate the on-site unattended computer and scanning operation. **The service user will only need to load their paperwork into the scanner.**

COMMUNITY CARE LAW INCLUDING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE (A NEW AREA)

With adult services, we can provide support, advice and referrals to adults who present with a requirement for care needs and support from adult social care, for their day to day living. This includes supporting adults with complex mental health and physical disabilities with;

- Accessing care act assessments and packages of care from adult social care.
- Referrals for occupational therapist reports.
- Assistance with liaising with local authorities for adaptations to make homes more habitual and safer.
- Assistance with obtaining disability facilities grants and equipment for the home.

If providers have a young people's service then this can be of great benefit with assisting in accessing support from children's social services and leaving care team with;

- obtaining accommodation.
- prevention of homelessness.
- obtaining crucial support for them to transition to adulthood including referrals for services that might benefit them in pursuing education, training and employment.

We can also provide support for young individuals who do not yet have status in the UK, including support with sourcing and securing accommodation and challenging refusal of accommodation.

IMMIGRATION LAW (A NEW AREA)

We have noticed a lack of immigration advice available to those engaging at drug and alcohol treatment services. To help address this we will be starting an immigration advice service at OISC Levels 1 & 2, which we will soft launch next year. We anticipate it will be available as an additional service to our current standard provision by Summer 2024. We will be able to assist with matters such as:

- settled and pre settled status applications.
- human rights applications.
- family reunion.
- applications for leave to remain etc.

SERVICE ADMINISTRATION

The only input required from the service is the management of the appointment system, and reminding service users of their appointment the day/morning before. Additionally, keyworker support letters are always helpful to add weight to our representations but these are requested on a case by case basis.

PROMOTING THE LEGAL SERVICE - SERVICE USERS AND STAFF

We work closely with the 'host' centre to promote (see current promotional A5/4/3 poster below) the service to service users and staff alike by attending service user and staff events and this includes the legal adviser attending staff briefing sessions to keep the legal service prevalent and answer questions about the legal areas of work, and how to refer service user to the legal service.

For virtual services the legal adviser will attend the service every 2/3 months to meet with service users and centre staff. This provides an opportunity to identify what works well and what needs to be addressed. Again, this level of responsiveness ensures that the service being delivered is specifically meeting the needs of the service users and staff at the centre.

SERVICE CHARGE

The annual cost for a standard 3 hour weekly service, including all follow up and representation (936 hours per annum), in 2024/25 is **£20,000** (+ £500 one-off capital cost). This is an all-inclusive charge including all quarterly travel costs to and from your centre.

This service is **VAT exempt** as defined by Welfare services and goods (VAT Notice 701/2)

We are more than happy to discuss the charge out rate, and the payment structure.

For the additional community care and immigration legal services please contact us to discuss your requirements.

Release

Est. 1967

Drugs, The Law & Your Rights

Providing 50+ years of free legal help!

A free legal service is available to all service users at this centre, and can help with a range of problems.

See below for more details

ALLOWANCES & BENEFITS

- **Universal Credit**
- Child Benefit and Tax Credits
- Council tax reduction
- **Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)**
- Housing Benefit
- **Jobseeker's Allowance**
- Pension Credit
- **Personal Independence Payment (PIP)**
- Working Tax Credits
- **Sanctions, deductions and over-payments**

We can guide and support you to apply for these benefits, and help challenge decisions if you disagree with them including free representation at the tribunal.

DEBT

- **Loans**
- Hire Purchase
- **Court Fines**
- Catalogue Shopping
- **Credit & Store Card**
- Mobile phone contracts
- TV & Internet
- Gas, **Electricity** & Water
- Rent arrears
- **Council Tax**

If you have a legal issue that is not shown here please contact us to see if we can help!

HOUSING

- Anti-social behaviour
- **Transfers**
- Discrimination,
- **Disrepair**
- Harassment
- **Homeless application**
- Neighbour disputes
- Tenancy advice
- **Notice to quit/possession orders**

PERSONAL MATTERS

- **Employment**
- Statutory Declaration
- **Complaints Against Police**
- Criminal Injuries Compensation

Please Note:

Immigration & community care assistance will be available in some of our services from April 2024

To access your free legal service speak with your keyworker, or ask a member of staff to make an appointment.

Release is regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (618823) to provide debt advice & help.



SERVICE USER – HARD OUTCOMES

Examples of outcomes in each area of assistance include:

General debts – expenditure reduced through:

- Whole or partial write off
- Securing grants from charitable foundations
- Agreement of affordable payment plan (e.g. £1 per month)
- Debt Relief Order (we are currently becoming accredited to complete this in-house)
- IVA – referral
- Bankruptcy – referral

Rent arrears – reduced expenditure/maximised income through:

- Maximised Housing Benefit/Housing Costs Element (Universal Credit)
- Discretionary Housing Payment made by Local Authority
- Write off/reduction of arrears amount
- Affordable payment plan agreed (e.g. Statutory minimum)

Housing – stabilised living environment through:

- Prevention of eviction through resolution of rent arrears (see above) and allegations of anti- social behaviour
- Making representations regarding accommodation needs/suitability of accommodation
- Resolution of disrepair issues

Welfare benefits – income maximised through:

- Benefit reinstatement following suspension/sanction
- Benefit reinstatement following successful mandatory reconsideration/appeal following refusal of claim (e.g. ESA after a medical assessment)
- Securing additional benefits (e.g. Personal Independence Payment)
- Backdated lump sum payment following successful Tribunal hearing
- Write off of alleged overpayments because of DWP/Local Authority official error

SERVICE USER – SOFT OUTCOMES

The resolution of the legal issues is of course the main direct outcome, but there are also indirect benefits too, including self-reported wellbeing from the resolution of legal issues, the increased stability of accommodation, maximised income, and associated health benefits leading to improvements in wellbeing. Release conducted a full service evaluation in 2012 (see attached) and a detailed analysis, including an element of social return on investment, of our surgery in Kensington and Chelsea in 2015/16. The latter showed that for every £1 invested, there was a return value of £11.

Additionally, we have moved towards working closely with service centre's to track the progress of service users who have engaged with our legal service. Recent data from one of our services found that:

- 50% reported improved psychological health
- 64% reported improved quality of life
- 7% saw an improvement in relation to paid work
- 7% saw an improvement in relation to education
- 100% of people accessing for a housing problem saw an improvement in any area
- 100% of people accessing for a criminal law problem saw an improvement in any area
- Reduced drug/alcohol use (75% alcohol, 57% opiates, 75% crack cocaine, 100% powder cocaine, 75% other drugs)

The staff in our current services centre's also report improvements to their working practices and ability to assist their service users. Testimonials we have received include:

"Having a legal service especially for our client group gives our service users who are trying to recover from a life of addiction hope and confidence that they will be able to integrate back into the life that they are striving to reach. We are all aware that legal matters can be daunting and frustrating, so to have a service that is willing and available to represent our service users has been invaluable."

"The impact this has had on my service users is huge. I see a different man in front of me now. He is more confident and relaxed. Winning the tribunal and regaining access to the correct benefits has helped him to feel that he counts, and that he has rights. Importantly for me, he is now able to focus on his recovery. He has been attending groups, he even goes to our service user forum. When his benefits were stopped and he was at risk of homelessness it paralysed his progress. It was as though time stood still for that period."

SERVICE (ACTIVITIES & OUTCOMES) REPORTS

As a service centre you will be provided with quarterly reports, detailing:

- Number of service users seen
- Number of issues dealt with (opened, ongoing, and closed)
- Client demographics (gender, age, ethnicity)
- Breakdown of type of issues dealt with
- Number of social security tribunals (including outcomes)
- Financial outcomes report (including benefits obtained and debts written off)
- Case studies

If you are interested in the legal services we provide please contact either:

Stephen cutter (Head Of Legal Services)

DDI: 020 7324 2991

Email: Stephen@release.org.uk

Keith Edwards (Finance & Operations)

DDI: 020 7324 2979

Email: Keith@release.org.uk