



LONDON YOUTH ADVICE FORUM

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The Case for Investment in Legal Advice Services for Young People in London

1. Young people's needs for advice

Young people are more likely to experience legal problems but far less likely to obtain appropriate professional advice than other age groups.¹ For example, Legal Services Research Centre data indicates that young people are 7 times more likely to experience a homelessness problem, but 11 times less likely to obtain advice than the rest of the population.

- Needs are more diverse than those of adults. Breadth of need covers emotional (e.g. stress, self esteem, self harm), practical (e.g. managing money, finding accommodation, careers), personal (e.g. sex & sexuality, abuse), health (e.g. sexual health, mental health, drugs & alcohol) and legal issues (e.g. benefits, housing, debt, crime).²
- Issues tend to be inextricably linked, requiring holistic early intervention response to prevent 'cascade effect' leading to social exclusion.³
- Particularly high unmet need for legal advice.⁴
- YP are prone to experiencing clusters of problems, e.g. housing problem + problems with police + unfair treatment by police.⁵
- Those with highest needs and least likely to get advice include: looked after YP, care leavers, BMER YP, young mothers, homeless YP & runaways, YP in or leaving custody, unaccompanied asylum-seekers, YP with mental health problems or disabilities.⁶
- YP require advice services that are:
 - Young person-centred and targeted only at young people

¹ Unpublished data on 18-24 year olds supplied by Legal Services Research Centre from research conducted with National Centre for Social Research for English & Welsh Social & Civil Justice Survey in 2001, and analysed further by Youth Access shows that this age group was far more likely than other age groups to report problems relating to: homelessness (in which category young people accounted for around a half of all problems); rented housing; domestic violence; and unfair police treatment. The data also shows that younger young people are far less likely to take action and to obtain advice than other age groups, e.g. amongst 18 year olds 34% took no action and less than 19% obtained advice.

² See *Rights To Access: meeting young people's needs for advice*, Youth Access (2002a) and *Breaking Down The Barriers: A strategy in development*, Youth Access (2002b)

³ See Youth Access (2002a), op. cit. For an analysis of the 'cascade effect' caused by multiple problems, see *Paths To Justice: what people do and think about going to law*, H. Genn with National Centre for Social Research (1999)

⁴ Youth Access (2002a), op. cit.

⁵ Unpublished data from LSRC survey, op. cit.

⁶ Ibid

- Flexible (in terms of opening hours and modes of access)
- Informal
- Confidential
- Independent (from government)
- Committed to user involvement
- Professional (with skilled staff trained in working with young people)
- Accessible physically & psychologically⁷

2. Key reasons for lack of access for young people to quality legal advice

- YP have v. low awareness of their rights and of services that can help them⁸
- YP are reluctant to use 'mainstream' and 'adult' services, e.g. CABx, solicitors, local authority advice services.⁹
- Mainstream advice services tend to be inaccessible 'psychologically'
- Youth services (including Connexions, youth workers etc.) lack competence in legal advice provision
- Referral relationships between youth and legal advice services tend to be poor
- There is a severe shortage of specialist legal advice services targeting YP
- There is no joined-up Government strategy to address the issue

3. Successful models of legal advice provision for young people

- Youth information, advice, counselling and support services (YIACS) tend to provide good quality, but relatively low level legal advice to young people. Their strength is their accessibility and their broad range of early intervention & prevention responses provided under one roof.
- 'Youth Access Law Centres' provide specialist legal advice, assistance and representation to YP alongside more generalist YIACS services. They can also
 - raise YP's awareness of rights and services through Community Legal Education work
 - provide training and work placements for young advisers and lawyers
 - provide 2nd tier casework support, referral and training services for youth services
 - build the capacity of youth services to provide good quality advice to YP
- Examples of existing Youth Access Law Centre services include
 - Streetwise Community Law Centre in South London: This law centre for 13-25 year olds is based in a youth centre building that is welcoming to young people. Youth services, Connexions services, training and counselling are all delivered under one roof. Their four full time qualified solicitors provide advice, casework and representation to young people facing a range of serious legal problems including homelessness, benefit refusal, eviction, exclusion from school, employment problems. Streetwise works very closely with front line youth agencies including Connexions and offers training, phone advice, supervision and support to youth agencies in their area.
 - Streetlegal – This is a specialist legal advice service for 8-19 year olds managed by Enfield Law Centre. It operates on an almost entirely outreach basis in

⁷ See Youth Access (2002a), Youth Access (2002b) and *Who's really listening?* Youth Access (1994)

⁸ Youth Access (2002a) op. cit.

⁹ Ibid

venues young people are already accessing, including Connexions centres and youth information, advice and counselling drop-in services.

4. Impact of targeted legal advice services for young people

Youth Access Law Centre-type services get results for vulnerable young people by resolving their social welfare problems, leading to positive long-term outcomes for individuals and the wider community and contributing to the five Every Child Matters outcomes.

- Advice services work predominantly with people at risk of social exclusion and are ideally placed to deliver the Every Child Matters outcomes and a range of cross-cutting targets set for Youth Services, Connexions, Local Strategic Partnerships and Children's Trusts.
- Legal problems, such as the refusal of a welfare benefit, discrimination at work, the threat of eviction or overwhelming debt often constitute the most significant barriers of all to young people achieving their full potential. Rights-based advice work can help young people to
 - gain secure incomes and housing;
 - resolve problems at work, in training or at school, thus breaking down barriers to learning and work;
 - exercise their rights as citizens, consumers and service users;
 - avoid and combat discrimination and injustice.
- Conversely, a lack of access to advice serves to reinforce barriers to social inclusion amongst 'at risk' groups of young people. There is growing evidence, for example, linking the provision of housing and benefits advice to better health and reductions in rates of re-offending and young runaways. Similarly, there are links between the provision of advice on debt and benefits and the relieving of depression, anxiety and other mental and physical illnesses.
- Legal advice can enhance the work of Children's Trusts by making a vital contribution to the 5 Every Child Matters outcomes:
 - Being Healthy – e.g. dealing with debt and low income is known to improve mental and physical health;
 - Staying Safe – e.g. legal services can give young people at risk a voice and force social services to fulfil their legal obligations;
 - Enjoying & Achieving – e.g. legal advice can help young people overcome the barriers to participation in education by helping them overcome serious social welfare problems like homelessness;
 - Making a Positive Contribution – e.g. tackling housing, benefit and debt problems is known to reduce re-offending rates;
 - Economic Well-being – e.g. legal advice can help young people maximise their income, retain suitable employment and have access to decent homes
- Long-term outcomes from advice work include reductions in the levels of youth homelessness, youth offending, teenage pregnancy, drug misuse, unemployment and child poverty, and increases in financial literacy and the number of young people in education, training or employment.

5. Policy drivers behind need to expand legal advice services for young people

• Youth Matters

Local authorities, through children's trusts, will be responsible for leading a collaborative approach to meeting young people needs for 'information, advice and guidance' services.

• Legal Aid

The Community Legal Service Strategy and the DCA's advice strategy provide an emphasis on targeting funding on the vulnerable and socially excluded. Priority should be given to proceedings concerning the welfare of children. The DCA's 2004-05 Action Plan for involving children and young people states that: "It is clear that DCA has a crucial responsibility to work in partnership with children and young people, voluntary organisations, academic experts and legal professionals to protect children and young people from violence, abuse or neglect and to provide legal information, advice and support."¹⁰

- **Social Exclusion Unit's 'Young Adults with Complex Lives' report**

This report, published in November 2005, contains a strong focus on the need for holistic multi-disciplinary services targeting this age group, identifying 'under one roof' provision as a key delivery model for disadvantaged young people. Youth Access is profiled along with seven youth information, advice and counselling services, five of which are Youth Access members. Streetwise Community Law Centre is highlighted as a "particularly innovative" model.

- **Mayor's Children & Young People Strategy**

The strategy's action plan states that the "*The Mayor will work in partnership with the Association of London Government, the boroughs, the Regional Legal Services Committee and advocacy providers to support the development of improved access to advice and advocacy services for children and young people in London and explore the potential scope and funding for a London-wide children and young person's advocacy unit.*" (Action Point 3.3.1)

- **London Housing Advice Strategy**

"Young people...account for around half of all people with problems relating to homelessness that require advice.....they have significantly higher levels of need than other age groups....Young people's needs for advice are best tackled holistically."

- **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**

The UNCRC requires the Government to consider the best interests of the child in all relevant legislation and policy. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its concluding observations on the UK Government's compliance with the convention in October 2002, recommended that access to "*confidential and adolescent-sensitive advice, information and support*" be improved.¹¹

6. The London Youth Advice Forum

The LYAF was established by Youth Access and LCF to improve young people's access to quality rights-based advice services in London. It currently comprises 30 agencies. The forum acts:

- i) To co-ordinate the development of rights-based advice services targeting young people across the London region.
- ii) To share information, experiences and good practice.
- iii) To facilitate networking and collaborative working
 - a) within and between boroughs;
 - b) within and between advice networks;
 - c) within and between sectors.
- iv) To stimulate new youth advice projects in response to identified needs.
- v) To identify and influence policy impacting on young people's access to advice and on youth advice services.
- vi) To improve the collation and dissemination of evidence on young people's rights-based advice needs.

¹⁰ *Involving Children & Young People: Action Plan 2004-05*, DCA, September 2004.

¹¹ *Concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child: United Kingdom of Great Britain & Northern Ireland*, October 2002.