

Young people need advice too!

Youth Access seeks partners to pilot new models of legal advice for young people

INTRO: New research evidence indicates that the gap between young people's social welfare legal needs and their ability to obtain appropriate professional advice is even greater than previously feared. James Kenrick, Advice Services Development Manager at Youth Access, outlines a new project aimed at improving young people's access to legal advice and invites expressions of interest from local services in participating in pilots of new models of specialist provision.

Five years ago Youth Access, the national membership organisation for young people's information, advice and counselling services, embarked upon a programme of work aimed at addressing the perceived unmet legal advice needs of young people. Whilst we knew there was a problem that was being ignored by policy makers, planners and providers alike, we were not prepared for the scale of the gap between need and supply that we have subsequently uncovered.

In 2002 we published the most comprehensive report ever written on the subject of young people's access to advice. The report¹ set out the available evidence on young people's needs, advice-seeking behaviour and barriers to access to advice. It highlighted young people's relatively high levels of legal need and their typical inability to obtain advice. Young people's low awareness of rights and services, and the psychological inaccessibility of mainstream advice services, such as solicitors and Citizens Advice Bureaux, were key factors in limiting their demands and had obscured the fact they needed advice.

We were optimistic at the time that a plethora of new initiatives in the youth and legal sectors might start to make inroads into the problem of young people's marginalisation from access to advice. However, this required a coherence in the Government's approach that remains elusive. Even a belated attempt to join up the Community Legal Service and Connexions² was half-hearted and ineffective.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most interesting work in the youth advice field over the last few years has been carried out by local voluntary organisations. Streetwise Community Law Centre in South London is probably the most developed example of a specialist legal advice service established specifically for young people. It has demonstrated that if services are developed with the appropriate characteristics, they can be both accessible and effective, translating need into demand and making a real impact on young people's lives.³ Streetwise employs young people's lawyers and advice workers alongside youth workers, Connexions Personal Advisers and others in settings that young people already feel comfortable accessing. Aside from its front-line role, Streetwise has sought to address the absence of second tier support for other local youth advice and information

¹ *Rights To Access: Meeting young people's needs for advice*, Youth Access, 2002

² *The Community Legal Service and Connexions: Joint Initiatives*, Department for Constitutional Affairs and Department for Education, 2003

³ See *Impact Report: A young people's Law Centre in action*, Streetwise Community Law Centre, 2003.

services. Its casework has demonstrated the unique pattern of young people's needs that has been confirmed by recent research findings.

The 540 18-24 year olds surveyed as part of the *First Legal Services Research Centre Survey of Justiciable Problems*⁴ reported more problems, proportionately, than the population as a whole in 10 of the 18 problem types examined, including many of the key areas of social welfare law in which the Legal Services Commission lets contracts. The findings on homelessness are particularly striking: young people emerge as seven times more likely to have reported a problem. Moreover, only 7% of those young people managed to obtain advice, compared to 77% of people aged 25 and over with similar problems. What's more, their failure to obtain advice was not due to apathy: 73% had tried to obtain advice, failed and ended up having to handle their homelessness problems alone.

The LSRC data also shows that this age group experienced significantly more problems, proportionately, relating to rented housing, domestic violence, employment and welfare benefits than the population as a whole. They were also more prone to experiencing multiple problems, a key indicator of social exclusion.⁵ A very significant problem cluster involving housing, homelessness, unfair treatment by the police and action being taken against the young person was identified, indicating scope to reduce crime, anti-social behaviour and litigation through early intervention and prevention youth advice work. (It should be noted here that the Legal Services Commission currently has no clear policy to ensure legal aid contracts meet the needs of vulnerable client groups. Consequently, very few agencies with contracts in housing and other social welfare categories target young people.)

Youth Access has now secured funding from the Big Lottery Fund for a new Rights to Access Project (RAP), which will enable us to extend our work in this area. We will be working with advice agencies, youth services, policy makers and planners to address young people's lack of access to high quality social welfare legal advice. Among other activities, RAP will support the development of new advice services, develop the first ever national youth advice training programme to enhance the skills of practitioners and campaign for a more coherent policy approach from government. We will also pilot the 'Youth Access Law Centre' service model, which we have developed with the Law Centres Federation. This is a model that has been informed, and followed, by Streetwise and others.

We are currently mapping existing services and training. During the summer, we will be identifying potential partners to participate in our pilots, to which we will provide development support. The pilots will be independently evaluated to assess their impact and to identify the key factors that will enable further services to be developed and sustained over time. We are looking for partners in the youth, advice and legal sectors with a strong commitment to improving young people's access to advice.

⁴ The main findings from the research are set out in *Causes of Action: civil law and social justice*, Legal Services Research Centre, 2004. The LSRC data on young people referred to in this article remains unpublished – contact Youth Access or the LSRC for further details.

⁵ Interim analysis by the Social Exclusion Unit of their *Young Adults Questionnaire*, referred to in *Transitions*, SEU, 2005, has found that 98% of young adults accessing services had more than one problem or need.

If your agency would be interested in participating in the pilots, or is already providing legal services to young people or to professionals who work with them, please contact the RAP project on 020 8772 9900 or email james@youthaccess.org.uk