



Bristol  
Law  
Centre

Helping people access justice



## The difference we make Our impact in 2018/19

We are a registered charity  
[www.bristollawcentre.org.uk](http://www.bristollawcentre.org.uk)

# Introduction

2018/19 was a busy year for Bristol Law Centre with significant changes, not least moving to larger offices.

We dropped 'Avon' from our name, and welcomed a new director, Dave Miller. We continued to develop our dedicated and highly skilled team, taking on our first apprentice, our second Justice First Fellow, and increasing in size to 28 staff and 111 volunteers.

Despite this growth, the need for our help far exceeds our capacity. Our plans for the future will need continued and far reaching support. We want everyone to know what their rights are. Alongside casework and consultancy we use a wide range of media, training and other events to share expertise and influence policy.

Access to justice is fundamental to democracy, and law centres are committed to enabling people to challenge the decisions that affect them. Our specialist social welfare legal work\* prevents poverty, keeps people in homes and jobs, and keeps families together.

Lives are transformed and discrimination is challenged – people are heard, believed, involved, informed of their rights and protected, so they can move forward.

We won  
three Bristol  
Law Society  
Awards in  
2018

\*social welfare law includes housing, welfare benefits, human rights (public law), mental health, immigration & asylum, employment and discrimination.

## We change lives by securing justice

Our vision is a society where everyone has access to justice and our mission is to improve the lives of disadvantaged people.

### In their words

*"I thought I had enough information to fill the forms in on my own, that didn't work. I volunteer and they put me in touch with people who could help, and they put me in touch with you.*

*My doctor said to keep my volunteering hours low, I struggled to think how I was going to manage a job. The whole process made me feel sad, I was scared I was going to lose my flat. I felt so supported here, well prepared for court, both the Law Centre and my son came.*

*When I won, I felt elated. I am glad its all out the way for a while, this year I won't have to worry, next year not so much, but by 2021 I will have to worry about it all over again."*



From providing early stage specialist legal advice to ongoing casework and representing clients in court, we are committed to helping people access justice and achieve the outcomes they deserve.

Our work centres around protecting rights but also allowing people to participate in the process. We offer a unique service in Bristol, and indeed in the wider region – often working with other agencies to ensure as many people as possible get the help they need.

***"I really enjoy the work. Regardless of the outcome, the clients are able to participate... and share their experiences."*** Kerry, Mental Health team

## **We worked with over 2400 clients in 2018/19**



94%

success rate at Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) appeals, reinstating people's entitlement to benefit. **That's 26% higher than the national average.**



£1.4m

of welfare benefits reinstated and paid back to clients.



74%

of clients seeking discharge in Mental Health cases, achieved immediate or absolute discharge, or were better able to manage their affairs.



78%

of clients facing homelessness were housed/re-housed or better able to manage their affairs after our help.



## How we helped Kristof

Kristof was a vulnerable adult with autism, in a precarious tenancy. He was experiencing bullying and harassment.

Kristof was declared homeless as the property was not reasonable to occupy and so he was in priority need. B&NES accepted a duty to secure suitable accommodation.

Kristof recently let us know that he is doing well, is drug free and happily living with his girlfriend!

### Kristof's mum said

*"I can't thank you enough, he is safe, off the streets, his voices have quietened down and he's feeling happy again."*





## In their words

*"I live on my own, when I got the letter, I felt awful, so I left it until I made myself go to the library and fill it in, I felt I had written War and Peace by the end.*

*I was called for an assessment the wording made me feel rubbish, it made me feel stigmatised, like a ne'er do well, like a criminal. I attended the assessment on my own, it chipped away at my dignity, I found the whole thing upsetting and intimidating.*

*I didn't hold much hope of it being favourable, it wasn't. Then I came to the Law Centre, here I felt that someone was on my side, as I couldn't talk to my family or friends as they didn't understand.*

*Here I felt supported and helped and prepared – over the last seven years I have been helped and won three appeals.*

*I am working class and have been brought up to stand up for justice, I am not a waster, not a scrounger, I owe you, I couldn't have done this on my own."*

89%

of clients felt that their legal issue was completely resolved thanks to Bristol Law Centre.

75%

of clients said that their levels of stress improved following our work together.

70%

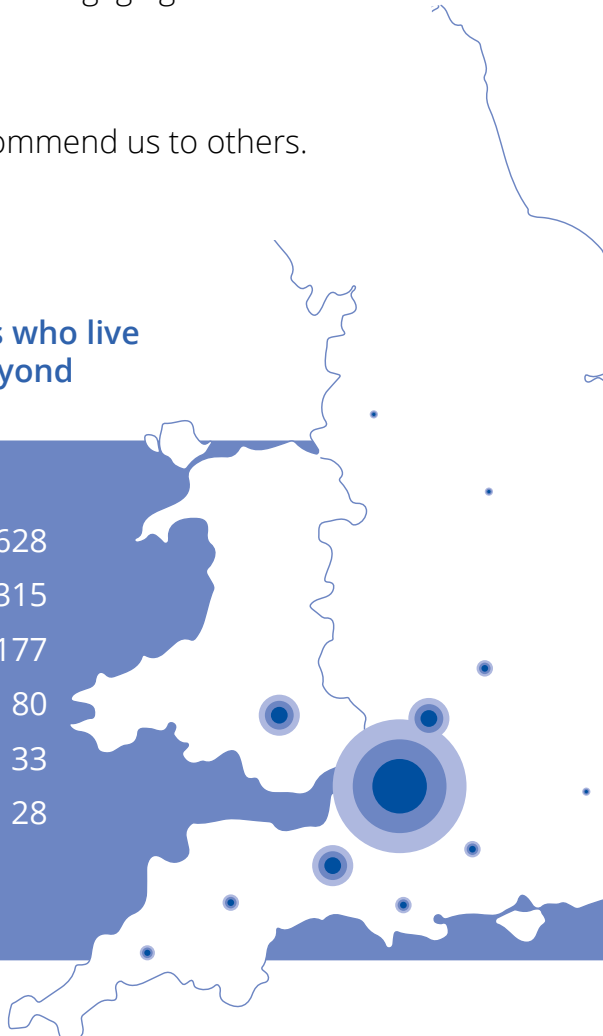
of clients felt they understood their legal rights better after engaging with us.

96%

of clients would recommend us to others.

**We saw a total of 2,415 clients who live across the South West and beyond**

Bristol	1628
Somerset	315
South Gloucestershire	177
Wiltshire & Gloucestershire	80
Cornwall, Devon & Dorset	33
Wales	28



# We innovate and we specialise

We have picked three examples of our work showing different but highly effective ways of delivering access to justice.

## 1 Immigration: the Rights of the Child project

The immigration team has gained a strong reputation for a professional yet compassionate approach in the last few years, and is led by a Children's Immigration Specialist Solicitor.

Our Rights of the Child project has followed a child and young person-centred approach.

*"A highly innovative and ambitious project with the potential not only to help young people transform their lives... but also to spread (best) practice more widely."*



*"Siân is not just my solicitor, she really sorts my head out!"*



Meeting and trusting yet another professional can be overwhelming, but our sessions seek to engage and empower each young person from the start.

We developed our own "Hello, I'm your representative" information sheet (awarded the Crystal Mark by the Plain English Campaign and available in eight languages).

*"I was extremely grateful for you taking these cases. I know how thorough and rigorous you have been.*

*You have treated these young people with respect and kindness – I can see the rapport you have built."*

## What next?

Our ambition is to offer training to other legal professionals and see child and young-person focused practice become commonplace.

**Cases are long and often complex. This year we have helped 11 children to be granted asylum, leave to remain or full British Citizenship.**

## Case study – persecution and safeguarding

***We supported Naseem, who was seeking asylum for persecution due to his sexuality.***

*There were initial difficulties in setting up a legal aid case as well as safeguarding and trafficking concerns regarding his carer. We funded an independent interpreter to establish if there was a conflict of interest in order to exclude the carer's means from the legal aid assessment.*

*This was the first time Naseem had been able to privately discuss his case without his uncle present. It was established he was safe.*

*Naseem was able to discuss his case, including details of his sexuality, with an interpreter he felt comfortable with. He was ultimately granted asylum on appeal.*

**Legal Expenses Insurance (LEI)** is a standard 'add-on' to insurance policies and allows people to fund specialist legal advice and representation in employment rights and discrimination cases.

Over 25 million households have LEI and many don't know how it can help them. It means many people, not eligible for legal aid, can still access justice without incurring costs.

Our 'Take a closer look' campaign aims to raise awareness of this route to accessing legal help. We have a range of marketing materials, including an animation.

### What next?

We are developing new partnerships locally and nationally, to reach as many people as possible.



### Take a closer look!

Alice has a disability causing chronic pain in her hands and arms, and suffers with depression, anxiety and panic disorder.

She asked her employer for a voice recognition package, which they failed to provide. As a result, Alice struggled more, which added to her anxiety and depression.

We advised that she could take a discrimination claim to the employment tribunal. Alice's LEI cover helped to pay for legal help. The employer eventually settled her case and the money has enabled Alice to pay for therapy and to manage her disability and panic disorder.

*"I was scared to go through the process, but my lawyer was so calm and knowledgeable and helped me understand every step. I felt more in control, and stronger."*

## 3

## Welfare benefits: Legal Advocacy Support Project

The Legal Advocacy Support Project (LASP) is an award-winning project and relies on strong collaboration with local universities. Volunteers gain valuable courtroom experience and we increase our capacity to help more people.

Over 40 trained and supervised volunteers provide casework and advocacy each year for clients seeking to appeal DWP (Department for Work & Pensions) decisions made on welfare benefits eligibility.

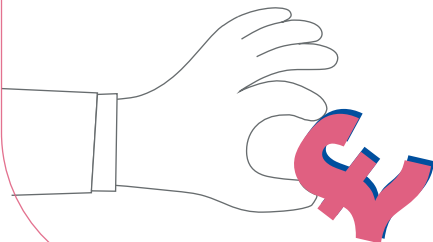
### What next?

We have started a LASP National Development Project to provide resources and support to other advice organisations around the country that want to develop their own student advocacy projects.

*"The LASP is very well organised with tasks very clearly communicated. There's a lot of autonomy granted to volunteers, which is rare for legal work experience.*

*The team's high success rate for appeals shows the quality of the work is not compromised despite the heavy reliance on volunteers. Instead, volunteers are treated as partners and colleagues that can be trusted to produce high-quality work with great results.*

*Here there was no room for micromanagement or nagging – this is very important in instilling a sense of pride in all of us."* LASP volunteer



We represented 175 cases at tribunal, many of which were referrals from other local advice centres

# Volunteering

We could not change clients' lives without the commitment and enthusiasm of our amazing volunteers for which we are very grateful.

Our volunteers provide a range of vital services from strategic management to frontline advice, as well as reception and administrative support. **In 2018/19 volunteers contributed over 10,000 hours of time.**

We are proud of our volunteer management and the difference we make to the lives of volunteers.

*"I learnt a lot, it would have taken years to gain this experience otherwise...these skills are invaluable...and I now have a training contract lined up."*

## Volunteer value



The net\* value in time

\*after staff and building costs





# We respond

We have responded to changing needs in the region during 2018/19, delivering:

**Immigration drop-in** at our offices to support the huge demand for advice.

**Tenant information project** using volunteers to explain rights and responsibilities to tenants.

A **monthly drop-in**, in Weston-Super-Mare (partnership with North Somerset BME Network).

**Civil Litigation and Civil Litigation Appeals pro-bono clinics** (the latter a collaboration with the judiciary from Bristol Civil Justice Centre).

**Specialist training** on homelessness, equalities & discrimination.

Bristol's only **Europe Direct Information Centre** (EDIC) – free information to any EU citizen on their rights, including relating to staying in the UK.

**Bristol Pro Bono**, a new collaboration between the private legal sector, universities and advice charities, to coordinate pro-bono activities across Bristol to better meet identified needs.

*"Bristol is a centre of excellent quality legal services and, within this, there is a great deal of enthusiasm to provide free legal advice and support to those in need."* Abi Jones, Simmons & Simmons LLP

*"I would not have carried on without the professionalism and dedication of the Law Centre."*

Client

*"The training was of excellent quality and the trainer was engaging throughout."*

Trainee

*"I have become a better lawyer as a result of doing this work"*

Pro Bono lawyer

# We influence

We have picked three examples of how we work towards changes in policy to address the issues we see people facing.

## 1 Achieving change at the DWP

**Our welfare benefits team discovered that DWP policy was incentivising claimants to seek more serious and greater quantities of painkillers, against the advice of doctors.**

DWP decision makers were using the prescribed painkillers as an indicator of claimants' pain-levels, despite general medical guidance that most painkillers are not effective after long-term use, and opioid painkillers are also addictive and damaging to patients' health.

People were being penalised for following their doctor's advice. Claimants were not believed about their very real pain and their applications were turned down if dosages weren't high enough to satisfy decision makers. These decisions, with our support, were later overturned at appeal in the vast majority of cases.

We were able to force a change in policy and guidance at the DWP with our study of clients' cases and subsequent work (over two years) with a leading NHS pain specialist and disability groups.

**This campaign achieved national news coverage, wide support and will lead to positive change for thousands of people.**



## 2 Influencing national case law

We successfully challenged a Council Tax exemption decision using the Equality Act 2010 in a landmark case, used as case law since the Judgment.

Jaida was registered as a part-time MSc student, but as she has dyslexia she studied for many more hours, including extra support provided by the University.

The case went to the Court of Appeal who deemed the additional support provided by the University due to her disability to be part of the course requirement, in addition to the prescribed 20 hours. In light of this she was considered a full-time student and so was exempt from Council Tax.

The Court of Appeal has recognised the practical reality of what reasonable adjustments mean for students – a central and inherent part of their course to help them fully participate in education and a requirement to achieving their degree.

## 3 Mapping the legal advice needs of Bristol

Our significant research (funded by the University of Bristol) produced a report showing:

The **profile of Bristol's diversity** and the inequalities in the city; the effect of cuts.

**Need vs provision** (of advice services and expertise) across all types of advice.

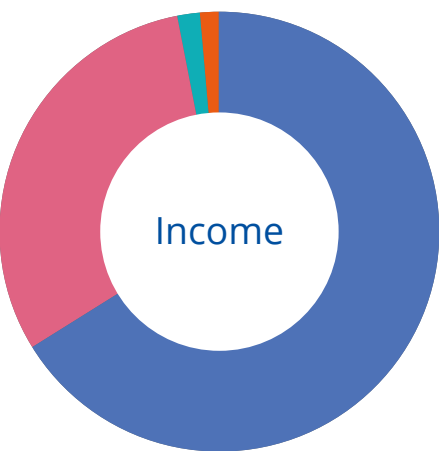
**Issues that must be addressed** for needs to be met.

Where **advice can have the greatest impact** against Bristol's One City Plan.

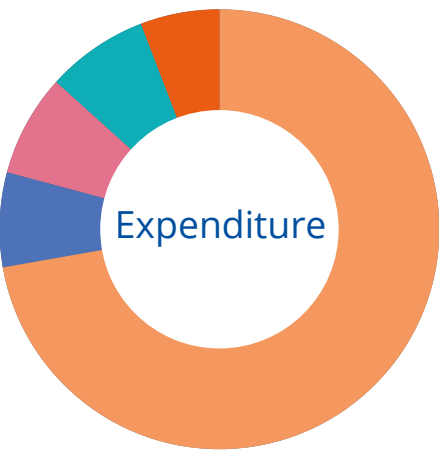
We are now working with partners to ensure the role of advice is included in policy decisions.

# Financial summary 2018/19

We are a registered charity dependent on funders and supporters to help people. We have experienced reductions in our two traditional sources of funding (legal aid and local authorities), but have successfully diversified our funding sources.



Grants	650,689
Legal aid & fees	301,932
Donations	15,908
Other income	12,393
<b>Total</b>	<b>980,922</b>



Staff costs	680,437
Client costs	67,185
Office costs	69,791
Partner costs	69,295
Other	54,563
<b>Total</b>	<b>941,271</b>



## We are grateful to our funders and donors

AB Charitable Trust	Legal Education Foundation
BBC Children In Need	Matrix Causes
Big Lottery (now TNL Community Fund)	Medlock Trust
Bristol City Council	Nisbet Trust
Burges Salmon	Osborne Clarke
Clothworkers Foundation	Peoples Postcode Lottery
EHRC (Equalities and Human Rights Commission)	Quartet Community Foundation
EU Commission	South Gloucestershire Council
Gregg Latchams	South West Legal Support Trust
Irwin Mitchell	St John's Foundation
Law Centres Network	TDS
Legal Aid Agency	Three Guineas Trust
	University of Bristol

And all the individuals who have given generously and the organisations who have given in-kind support

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## Partnerships and memberships

ACFA	Bristol Advice Partnership
Advice UK	
Law Centres Network	Bristol Hate Crime & Discrimination Services*
Bristol Pro Bono	

\*Bristol Council is unique in the UK by funding a law centre for discrimination work

# We are fit for the future

We won Voscur's Fit for the Future award at the start of 2019 in recognition of our strong financial management and strategic planning.

We are widely respected and recognised for our expertise, professionalism, independence and our client care.

We help many people across the region – but we cannot help everyone who comes to us – and increasingly there can be nowhere else for them to go.

And then there are the people who don't come to us – for all sorts of reasons. **We want to help the people that need us most.**

Cuts to legal aid have not only created increasingly large 'deserts' in rural areas, but have also had a similar impact in Bristol, with too few practitioners and contracts to meet the demands of a large city.

There is no doubt the need for free legal advice and support is increasing – as is the need for 'legal education': knowing your rights and knowing you can do something about decisions affecting you is fundamental to people's health, independence, resilience and confidence.

**People think they will never need free legal advice. Then they do.**

*"An invaluable source of expert housing advice and support."*

CAB B&NES

*"Clients get a gold star service"*

Law Society  
audit 2019

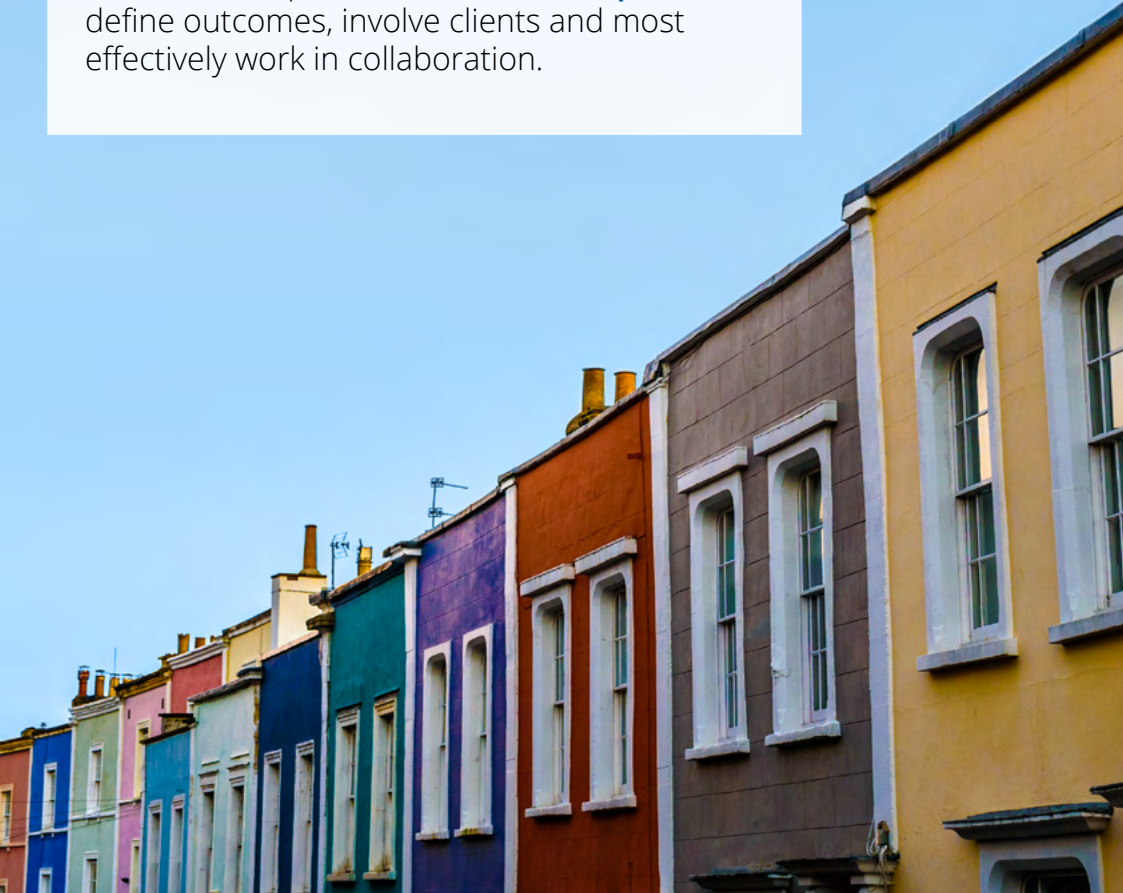
## What next?

We will continue taking a **regional lead** in listening to and responding to the challenges faced by all of our communities, and influencing decision makers.

We **want to grow**, building on our existing expertise, developing skills in the sector, and looking at new legal advice specialisms where the need is evident.

We will start new partnerships, and we need to increase funding – gaining **wider support** across sectors and the region.

We will develop how we **measure impact**, define outcomes, involve clients and most effectively work in collaboration.





**Bristol  
Law  
Centre**

Helping people access justice

We change lives

We innovate and we specialise

We work in partnership

We respond and we influence

We are fit for the future

We make a difference.

**Support us, work with us, get in touch.**

**[www.bristollawcentre.org.uk](http://www.bristollawcentre.org.uk)**

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