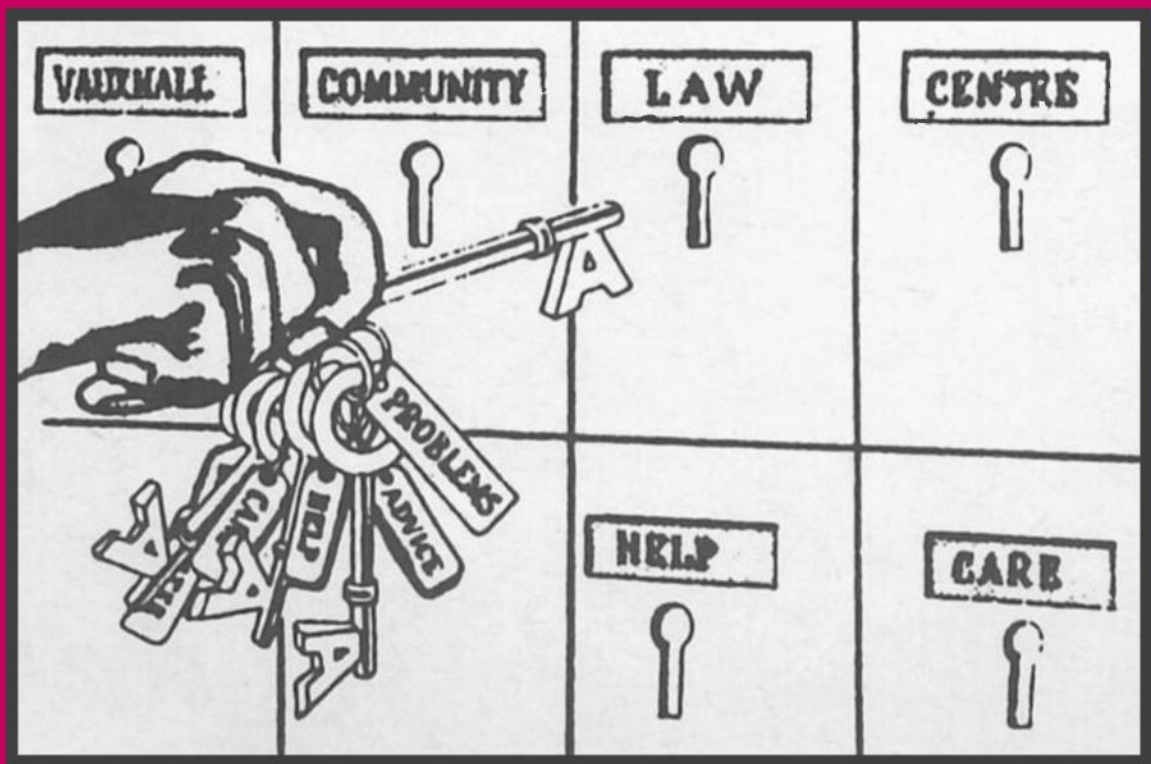




Vauxhall
Community
Law &
Information
Centre

Impact Report 2024 - 2025



Developing Community-Led
Access to Justice

To Our Funders, Thank You

We would like to take this opportunity to thank our incredible funders and supporters, who not only help make our work possible, but have also guided us along the way. We truly appreciate your trust and faith in supporting access to justice.

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LIVERPOOL
CITY REGION
COMBINED AUTHORITY



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Who We Are

Vauxhall Community Law & Information Centre (VCLIC) is a community led advice centre set up in 1973 and founded by community activists, Liverpool City Council, Liverpool Law Society and the John Moore's Foundation.

For over 50 years, Vauxhall Law Centre has been tirelessly working to tackle the inequality and disadvantage faced by so many in our community.

Our office is based in an area in the top 1% of indices of multiple deprivation, with surrounding wards also sitting in the top 1 – 10%.

We work with and advocate for members of the community that face injustice, irrespective of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, disability, or immigration status.

Your INFORMATION centre

THE INFORMATION CENTRE IS RUN ENTIRELY FOR THE RESIDENTS OF THIS AREA BY THE RESIDENTS OF THIS AREA. Its main object is to give information on any problems (including housing) that it is in our power to give.

We are open every day, and if there is anything you would like to discuss in private, you can always come along and we will do our best for you. If you would like to know more about the Information Centre, why not come along and give an hour of your free time, as we are always looking for volunteers.

Mrs Susan Clarke
Information Centre
Grapes Hotel
Hornby Street

The Information Centre is open Monday to Friday.
Times: 10-12 in the morning and 2-4 in the afternoon.
Also 6-8 p.m. on the evenings of



Our Principles

• **Compassion:** We prioritise understanding each client's unique circumstances, not just their legal issue. To us, compassion means listening without judgment, being patient, and recognising the emotional and social stresses that clients may be facing. It also applies internally.

Staff and volunteers are encouraged to support one another, recognising that emotional care and teamwork are vital to sustaining the difficult work of social justice.

• **Integrity:** For us, this means that we always strive to act ethically and with principle, even when faced with challenges or pressure.

It means standing up for what's right, even when it's not easy, and ensuring decisions are always rooted in justice, fairness, and respect for the law. It also means that we hold ourselves to high standards

of accountability, owning our mistakes, learning from them, and continuously working to improve. Integrity means being reliable, consistent, and professional in all dealings, whether with clients, partners, or each other.

• **Champion diversity:** Our Law Centre is rooted in one of the most diverse areas in the UK. Championing diversity means making sure that our team, culture, and services reflect and respect that diversity, ensuring that people feel seen, heard, and valued.

We know that not everyone starts from the same place, so the Law Centre works to level the playing field. This includes tailored support, accessible services, and challenging discriminatory policies through legal action and advocacy.

• **Fighting injustice:** We use the law as a tool to protect, empower, and create lasting change for those most at risk of being silenced or left behind. Many of the people who come to our Law Centre are already facing hardship, poverty, discrimination, housing issues, immigration struggles, or hostile systems.

Fighting injustice means being on their side, pushing back against systems that fail or exploit them, and ensuring their rights are upheld and respected. However, fighting injustice isn't just about speaking for people, it's about amplifying their voices. We help individuals understand their rights, navigate complex legal systems, and gain the confidence to stand up for themselves and others.

• **Community-based:** Our Law Centre isn't a remote institution, it's a part of the local fabric. Being community-based means serving real people with real issues, building long-standing relationships, and being a trusted place where people know they'll be treated with dignity and respect.

We can only do this by staying rooted in the everyday lives, needs, and struggles of the people we serve and making sure that our work is shaped by, accountable to, and for the local community.

We work closely with local organisations, grassroots groups, schools, and campaigners. Being community-based means collaborating, not working in isolation, and recognising that lasting change happens when communities work together.



Impact Figures

A summary of our key figures from the last 12 months.

Key Figures



469,906 case minutes (7,831.76 Hours) spent upholding our clients rights.

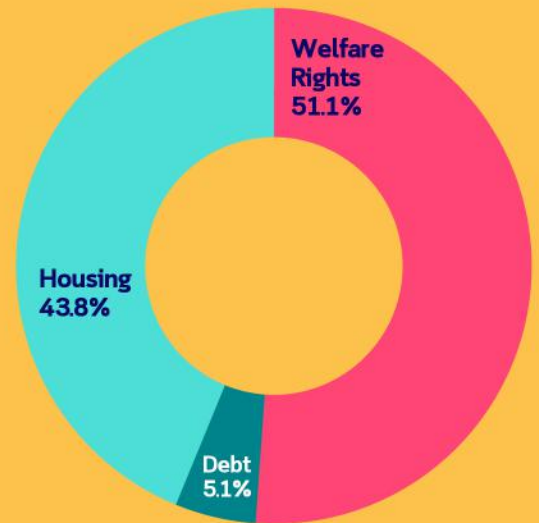


£4,620,867.42 in Financial Gains and debt managed for our clients.

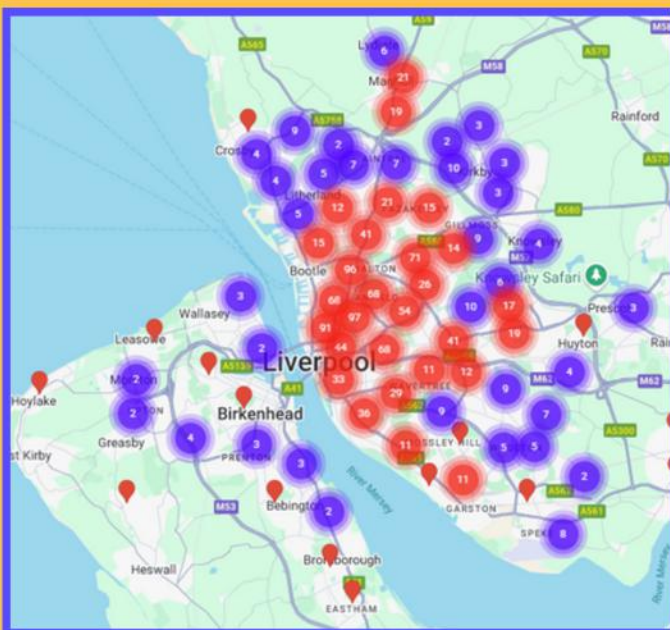


2413 Cases and enquiries opened, and **2363** closed.

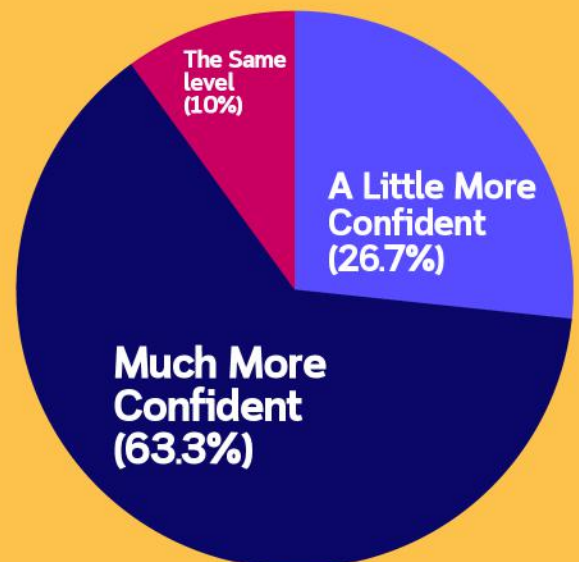
Clients by Department



Client Locations



“If you experienced a similar problem in the future, would you feel more or less confident about knowing what to do?”



Access To Justice

Over the past year, one of the most significant and persistent systemic issues we have observed in our casework across the Liverpool City Region is the increasing failure of statutory systems to meet their legal obligations to vulnerable individuals and families, particularly in housing, welfare benefits, and asylum support. These failures are rarely isolated; rather, they reflect a pattern of under-resourcing, poor decision-making, and delays that place individuals at significant risk of harm.

Housing remains a critical concern. In Merseyside, we are consistently seeing clients placed in unsuitable or unsafe temporary accommodation—often for extended periods—due to the severe shortage of social housing and the use of unlawful gatekeeping practices by some local authorities.

The cost-of-living crisis has further exacerbated this, with rising levels of rent arrears and homelessness disproportionately affecting already marginalised communities. In welfare benefits, we have seen a sharp increase in cases where clients are left without income due to flawed or delayed DWP assessments, leaving them reliant on food banks or emergency hardship funds. This is compounded in asylum and immigration support work, where delays in decision-making and difficulties accessing the right to appeal continue to leave many in limbo, unable to move forward with their lives.

Looking ahead, the most impactful change would be a renewed focus on early intervention, accountability, and joined-up support across all levels:

- At government level, we urgently need the restoration of accessible legal aid and the introduction of sustainable funding models for advice services, which are the first line of defence for many.
- At the local authority level, a commitment to embedding legal rights into decision-making processes, addressing gatekeeping practices, and investing in preventative services would make a meaningful difference.
- At service level, deeper collaboration between legal advice providers, community organisations, and statutory bodies across the Liverpool City Region is key to creating a more coordinated and client-centred approach

Preventing escalation and crisis should not be a luxury—it should be a core principle of public service delivery. As a Law Centre rooted in the community, we remain committed to pushing for a rights-based, preventative model that delivers justice and dignity for all.

*Ngaryan Li -
CEO & Senior
Solicitor*



Outreach & Community Lawyering

Since the COVID pandemic, the law centre has been reviewing the accessibility of advice in the Liverpool City Region. Following the findings of this work, we began to develop outreach locations to improve the provision of our face-to-face advice across the City Region. The beginning of the Law Centres movement involved the developing of community Lawyers who were trusted members of the community with legal backgrounds, who would help and support those around them to overcome their legal issues.



We have continued the legacy of this model of work through embedding our caseworkers and solicitors within communities, enabling us to have a greater understanding of the issues people experiencing poverty face. A key outcome of this work is to

proactively engage with communities across our city, to improve the accessibility of legal advice and its relevance to members of the community facing disadvantage.

“ You don’t know how much you guys have helped. Without people like you I don’t think I’d be here today. I’d be lost. ”

We aspire to encompass the following Eight Principles for Community Lawyering in the UK as developed by Sistren Legal Collective;

Principle 1. We share lived experiences with, or will develop a deep shared understanding of, our clients’ community contexts.

Principle 2. We stand in solidarity with our clients’ work.

Principle 3. We understand the systemic barriers that communities face in accessing legal support.

Principle 4. We try to proactively dismantle barriers to legal support by adopting an ‘access to justice’ approach in our legal practice.

Principle 5. We embrace collaborative and reciprocal approaches to exchanging knowledge.

Principle 6. We actively democratise and distribute access to legal knowledge.

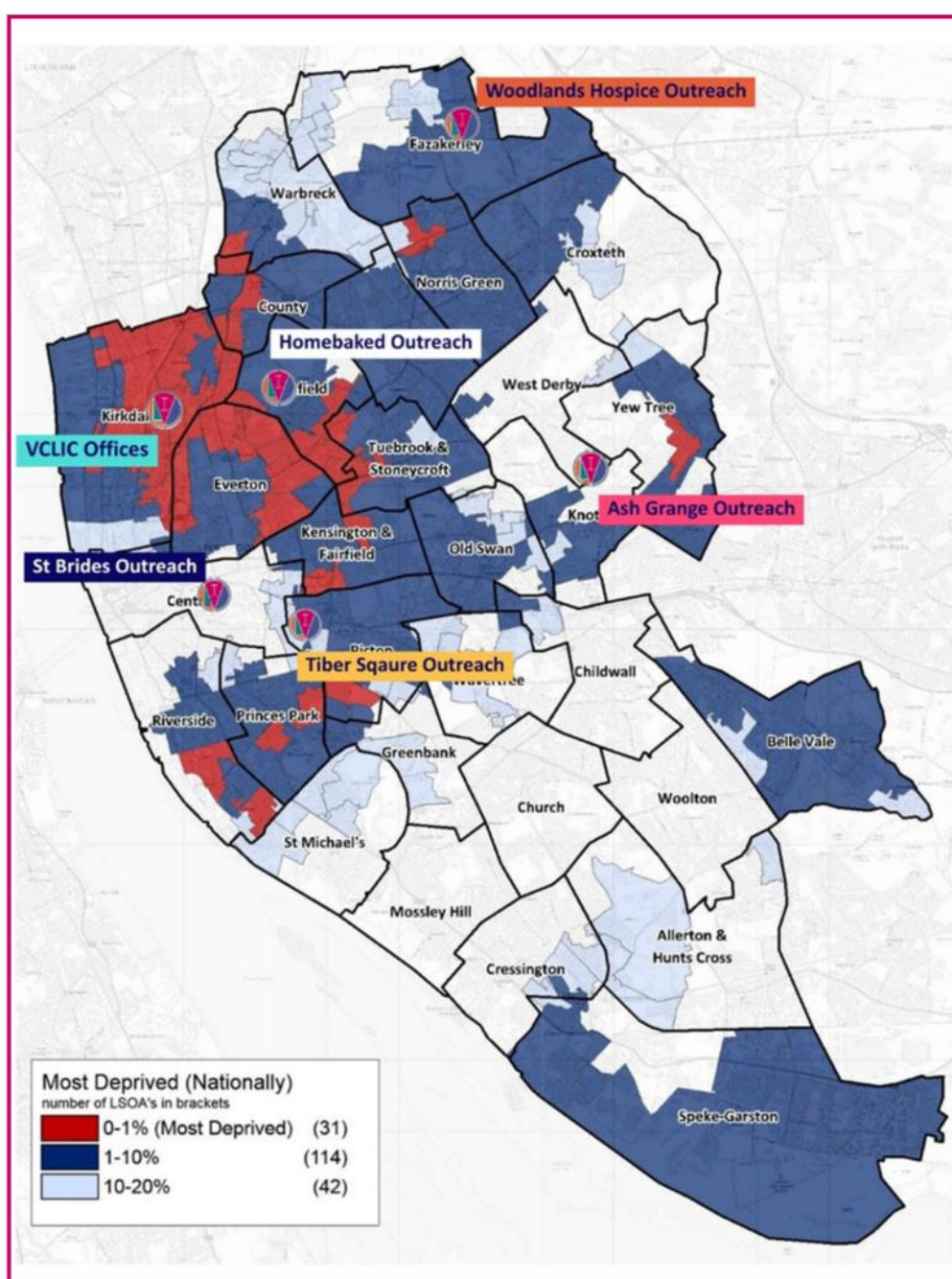
Principle 7. We advise on intersecting community and individual needs.

Principle 8. We situate our work within wider movements for social justice.

We are proud to operate six outreach locations across the City Region, offering our services to different communities. Each of our outreach locations operates with a community partner, enabling our work to help better meet the needs of the local community.

“We have seen unwillingness to access Citizens Advice by our service users; solely phone or internet-based provision, creates greater demand on the law centre, since we offer face-to-face contact; therefore greater footfall demand is evident.”

- Simon Petty, Triage & Volunteer Coordinator



Left: a map of current outreach locations with map of wards and their percentages in Indices of Multiple Deprivation

HOMEBAKED ANFIELD - Nov 2021



**HOMEBAKED
BAKERY**

Our outreach at Homebaked Bakery, which runs every Monday, is our longest running outreach service, and is ran in close partnership with Spirit of Shankly - Liverpool Supporters Union, who have helped support this work since it began. Homebaked Bakery is a social enterprise, and associated with a separate community land trust, both of which are community led.

The project originally started as a 3-hour morning service for Welfare Rights advice, however in April 2024, we extended this to a full working day, and also began providing debt advice on the last Monday of every month.

ASH GRANGE - July 2024

Through funding from Independent Age, early in 2024 we began our outreach in Ash Grange, a retirement community in Dovecot. The project is in partnership with the resident tenant's association, the majority of whom are elderly residents and cannot access advice agencies due to general low mobility and ill health.

We've helped support tenants with completing their benefit forms, assessing what they may be entitled to, as well as advocating for them through the complex appeals process. Emanuele Sanna, who has been our Older Age Benefit Advisor has worked incredibly hard to support the resident of Ash Grange, and other elderly people in the area.



TIBER SQUARE - Nov 2024

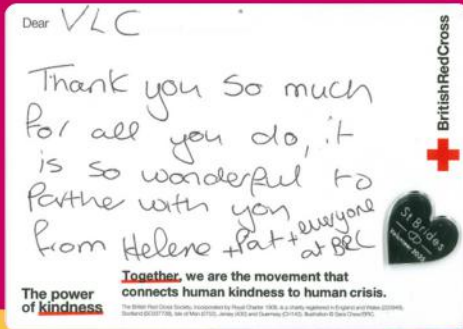
**The
GREENHOUSE
PROJECT**

At Tiber Square on Lodge Lane, South Liverpool, we have provided an outreach location in partnership with Fans Supporting Foodbanks (FSF) and the Greenhouse Project, a Multi-Cultural Play and Arts Project. Accessible to everyone, this project takes place alongside the FSF mobile food pantry, where families and individuals can access both food and advice in the same location.



Clients visiting this location have shown significant mental health issues, and have told us that they feel much more at ease attending this outreach than attending a busy office. The Arabic Centre is also located within the same building, for whom we provide help with Benefit form filling, and general referrals. We also receive many housing matter enquiries, mostly regarding living conditions (damp, mould, landlord issues) which has become a concerning common occurrence in this area.

ST BRIDES x BRC - August 2024



In collaboration with the British Red Cross at their hub in St Brides Church, located next to asylum accommodation, our housing team provides a drop-in advice service for refugees, migrants and those seeking asylum. This outreach is extremely busy with many families attending who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness. Most commonly, the clients we see at this location are new refugees who have been granted asylum, and are struggling to access their rights. Our caseworkers assess and support clients to access temporary accommodation from the Local Authority, putting an end to their rough sleeping.

WEB Merseyside - January 2025

Over on the Wirral, we are working in partnership with WEB Merseyside - an organisation providing emotional and wellbeing support to vulnerable women - to deliver advice and advocacy for anyone trying to access social welfare.

A large percentage of the people who access this service are single mothers with young children, who need help understanding their welfare rights and entitlements, and may also require help completing complex forms like Disability Living Allowance for Children (DLA). This service runs every Friday, alongside another group who provide support for mothers with children living with additional needs.



WOODLANDS HOSPICE - March 2025

Woodlands Hospice, based next to Aintree Hospital, is for patients with a terminal illness, the majority of whom are cancer patients. Here we provide advice to patients and their families, including carers, with most of the advice focusing on accessing benefits, and assessing what they may be entitled to considering their recent illness.

The stress of a terminal diagnosis often leaves clients that understanding the impact on your finances and trying to understand what benefits you may be entitled to can be overwhelming. We offer a friendly and supportive service guiding families through this process. After a year's break due to loss of funding, we are proud to have secured additional funds that allowed us to restart the service again in April 2025.



VNC Food Pantry - April 2022

Working in partnership with Vauxhall Neighbourhood Council and Fans Supporting Foodbanks, we have offered a drop-in time during VNC's food pantry, to provide Welfare Rights advice, and benefit checks for anyone attending who may be struggling.

Similarly to our Tiber Square service, we aligning the timing with the food pantry allows people to both get affordable healthy meals in the same destination as somewhere they can receive advice for any challenges they may be struggling with.

Homelessness in the Liverpool City Region

Like many local authorities around the country, Liverpool has shifted to a major reliance on tourist accommodation and the private-rented sector to safely house the increasing numbers of individuals and families made homeless, largely through no-fault evictions by private landlords.

The cost-of-living crisis, including average rent costs growing by 50% in 5 years have also made renting in the private sector unaffordable for a large percentage of those on a low income, and with limited available social housing, the problem only grows. If vulnerable people are unable to find a place to live, they must present to their local authority as homeless, where they may have a legal right to be housed by the local authority.

However, this is not always the case, and we have seen growing issues with extremely vulnerable people left with no choice but to sleep rough, due to falling through the gaps in the council's service.

“Mary Heery, also a specialist housing solicitor, says those pre-action letters sent to the city council have a 100% success rate. Each represents six or seven hours’ work and, VLC’s ‘triage’ team notes, there are five housing or homelessness cases coming to the centre each day. ‘It’s all-consuming,’ Heery says. ‘We have so little capacity.’”
- ‘Left in the lurch’ in Liverpool, The Law Society Gazette, Jan 2024

This problem has become severe for many of Liverpool’s refugees. the North West is the largest dispersal area for those seeking asylum outside of London. This also includes the largest numbers of people from the Afghan Resettlement Scheme and Homes for Ukraine Scheme, increasing overall the number of people seeking asylum.

Both an increase in decision-making by the Home Office, as well as changes to Home Office Policy around notice to quit (from 28 days to 7 last year) resulted in a huge influx of people with either positive or negative decisions. The short turnaround time for successful asylum claimants to find housing once they are asked to leave their asylum accommodation, coupled with the extremely limited available housing to them, leaves many with no option but to rough sleep.

The external factors mentioned above resulted in a hyper-localised homelessness crisis, especially for the refugee and asylum-seeking population in Liverpool.

Our Housing team have been working hard on this issue over the last year. However with the declining numbers of Housing Legal Aid providers in the city from nine in 2019; eight in 2022; five in 2023; four in 2024 and now three in 2025 has left our Housing team on the front line of combating injustices faced by the homelessness population, as local authorities tried to get a grip on the worsening crisis.

Joe Bowly: Housing Caseworker and Trainee Solicitor

The issue that we come up against consistently is the lack of affordable housing. This is due to successive governments who have failed to prioritise the building of truly affordable housing to replace all the Council housing lost under right to buy (40% of which are currently being rented out privately), and is exacerbated by a lack of regulation in private rented sector, which has seen rents in Liverpool up 10% in the past 12 months ([Private rent and house prices, UK - Office for National Statistics](#)). Eviction from the private rented sector is also the biggest cause of homelessness in the UK.

For our clients, this means that when they are evicted from a property, they are priced out of the market. They're then eventually placed on Property Pool Plus, where there is a waiting list of 15,000+ households waiting for social rented properties, meaning they spend a long time in temporary accommodation.

For the local authority, this means millions of pounds spent on temporary accommodation. This often leads to the gate keeping practices we so often see, as local authorities try to save

“Without Joe helping me, I would have been trapped in my old property and possibly faced further domestic abuse.”

money by evading their duties to accommodate, often leading the most vulnerable of our client base street homeless, as they are unable to advocate for themselves. This in turn



means that a majority of our work is shifted to focus on challenging local authority decisions on homelessness, as opposed to challenging evictions and trying to prevent homelessness in the first place.

Rather than regulating rent, the Government attempts to increase affordability in the private rented sector by raising Local Housing Allowance rates. However, this merely incentivises private landlords to push rent higher, and costs the government more money.

The government should be building more council housing, not deregulation for developers as proposed by the current government. Instead we need a genuine and intentional program for building council-owned housing en masse.

Finally, we need to see regulation of the private rented sector - including rent controls. The Renters Reform Bill doesn't go far enough in securing tenants rights, and opens just as many doors as it closes in terms of eviction.

Jacob's Story: A Case Study

Jacob, a male refugee from Sudan, fled the Sudanese Civil War and endured trafficking through Libya, where he was imprisoned and subjected to torture and forced labour for six months. These experiences severely impacted his physical and mental health, leading to a diagnosis of PTSD and sciatica, which causes knee and lower back pain.

He arrived in the UK in April 2021 and was initially placed in Serco Accommodation in Liverpool while his asylum claim was processed. After being granted Refugee Status in December 2023, he received a Notice to Quit in January 2024. From January to April 2024, he was street homeless after being refused interim accommodation by both Southwark and Liverpool City Councils. Southwark rejected him due to a lack of local connection, while Liverpool determined he was not in priority need. His non-priority decision was contested by his GP and a homelessness worker, but the council refused to review it.



In May 2024, his case was referred to Vauxhall Law Centre. We initiated legal action by issuing a Letter Before Action, requesting immediate accommodation and a review of the decision.

The authority then placed him in accommodation and agreed to review his case. However, the review was delayed beyond the 8-week limit, leading us to issue another Letter Before Action in August 2024. At this point, the authority agreed to conduct the review, but in September 2024, they upheld the non-priority need decision despite medical evidence. We issued a further Letter Before Action, threatening a s204 appeal, which led the authority to withdraw their decision and grant priority need status, obligating them to provide interim accommodation.

After 5 months of delays, the authority agreed to backdate their decisions, ensuring that our client's case began from his original presentation. He is now housed and likely to secure long-term accommodation through the social housing register.

(Note: Client's name has been changed)

Shannon Donnelly: Asylum Support and Housing Caseworker / Trainee Solicitor

Over the past year I have primarily worked with asylum-seekers, failed asylum seekers, refugees and migrants who face homelessness, with cases typically coming from our outreach with the British Red Cross at St. Bride's. The most significant issue I have observed is the difficulty vulnerable migrants have in accessing homelessness support from the local authority.

Asylum seekers are entitled to Asylum Support whilst awaiting the processing of their asylum claim. Most often, they are placed in Home Office accommodation, however, once they have received a decision, they are no longer entitled to Asylum Support and are evicted from Home Office accommodation. The majority face imminent street homelessness as a result. Those who receive protection status are entitled to homelessness support from the local authority.



One of the main reasons that people struggle to access homelessness support is because local authorities are largely inaccessible. Clients often report a lack of face-to-face provision, a lack of interpretation used in interactions with clients, and long delays in responses from the local authority. This can lead to miscommunication, a failure to take into account relevant information, and erroneous decision-making, resulting in uncertainty and increased stress for clients who are already highly vulnerable.

Often, those assessing homelessness applications have a general lack of knowledge around the rights of newly granted refugees, leading to incorrect and unlawful decision making on Homelessness duties. The assessment is centred around the concept of 'priority need' – a vulnerability criteria. When a decision is issued which finds an applicant not to be in 'priority need',

temporary accommodation can be withdrawn with little notice.

Access to legal advice is vital in order to challenge such decisions. In response to the local authority's failure to correctly follow the legal process and fulfil their legal obligations, we regularly challenge inaction or decisions made.

The predominant change called for is the removal of the concept of 'priority need' in homelessness legislation, which acts as a barrier for support. Other changes include:

- Earlier intervention – through better coordination between the Home Office and local authorities. If the Home Office shared data on those receiving Notices to Quit in a timely manner, local authorities could respond quicker in assessing applicants and making arrangements for emergency accommodation so as to minimise the risk of rough sleeping.

Local authorities:

- Increase in funding and capacity of local authorities in relation to homelessness provision.
- Ensure trauma-informed training and training on legislative duties for assessment officers, which in turn should increase the quality of decision-making.

Home Office:

- Regulate the pace of decision making so as to not overburden local authorities with a wave of applicants in the name of 'clearing the backlog'.
- Increase the 'move on' period for those granted protection so that they have more time to access support.

Challenging the DWP in the Liverpool City Region: Delays and Flawed Assessments

Welfare Rights advice and representation has always been a core service at Vauxhall Law Centre. We have long-standing knowledge and experience of challenging decisions made against disabled people and carers under current social security frameworks. With a strong commitment to social justice, we have continued to empower local residents by helping them understand their legal rights, and navigate complex legal systems, ensuring that everyone—regardless of income or background—can seek and obtain fair treatment under the law.

Over the past year we have seen our determinants of clients' health worsening, and have continued to challenge the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Their inadequate and inherently flawed system - for awarding benefits for disabled people, people with long term physical and mental health issues, and their carers - has continued to be an issue. Our Welfare Rights Advisors and Solicitors have helped provide insight on the recurring themes and issues they have seen in recent times.

David Kenny: Welfare Rights Solicitor

The biggest problem we see is still the massive delays for decision making on Mandatory Reconsiderations (MR). We are seeing some MRs taking over a year, just to give us appeal rights.

It can then be up to another year to have tribunal listed. For disability benefits - while backdated awards are good outcomes - it still means clients are going without rightful entitlements for two years. The knock-on impact this has on premiums, Carer Benefits, Housing Benefit and Council Tax entitlements are potentially more damaging.

The DWP currently prioritise new claims over reviews. This is both whether introduced by them, or because client's have either been under-assessed to begin with and so exhausted that they have accepted a lesser award, or their health has deteriorated drastically. The delays then mean that by the time clients attend a successful tribunal, they are sent for re-assessment extremely quickly and find themselves back in the same cycle.



At Government level, decisions must be made in a realistic time frame. There's no legislation on time frame for decision making, and instead they aim to bring in stricter eligibility criteria. At service level, we should be considering more complaints about

the delays - especially where there are safeguarding risks, or possible Human Right grounds. We also can, in theory, try and bring Judicial Review for delays, but this is a remedy of last resort.

However, most Pre Action Letters can achieve a decision issued, and we can manage these under our Public Law contract. The difficulty comes when having to consider what amounts to “excessive” delay when we see it happening across most cases.

Emanuele Sanna: Welfare Rights Advisor

Many of our clients are not awarded their disability benefit - mainly PIP - that they are entitled to in the first instance, when they make their claim, despite clearly reporting the difficulties they face in their day-to-day life. This often results in the benefit only being awarded by the social security first-tier tribunal, usually after a stressful long process of more than one year from claim to tribunal decision.

One of the major concerns in welfare rights law is the way in which medical assessments are carried out to determine clients’ entitlement to disability or sickness benefits.

Our clients’ feedback on medical assessments consistently is that they feel they have not been listened to by the healthcare professional examining their health conditions. The Government’s latest consultation paper ‘Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper’ (April 2025) states at paragraph 163: ‘Disability stakeholder feedback and departmental disability-focused research has found that

some disabled people who claim health and disability benefits lack trust in the health assessment process.’

It is therefore not surprising that claims may be underassessed, with the DWP not awarding any or insufficient points to be entitled to PIP in these cases. As it is statistically unlikely that their decision will be changed at the Mandatory Reconsideration stage, the direct consequence of a poor medical assessment may thus be a year-long wait finally to have one’s case properly heard at tribunal, with the added and avoidable personal cost of stress (and for some clients, anxiety) involved in attending tribunal.



The public-private medical assessment system the DWP relies on to assess clients’ entitlement to PIP should be reformed to be more attentive to clients’ needs. The Government’s intention to launch a future process to review the PIP assessment, and take more immediate action in the meantime to improve the experience for people who use the system of health and disability benefits, is welcome in this regard (Green Paper, para 157), the effectiveness of these plans of course subject to the impact of any changes that will be proposed and ultimately made.

Caroline's Story:

A Case Study

Caroline is a widow in receipt of limited income through a Widow's Pension, and has one of her Children, 18, living with her. She suffers from a health condition that majorly affects her mobility, and is also a survivor of breast cancer.

For a long period, she had built up a Housing Benefit overpayment, and a Council tax bill due to her youngest child leaving education and becoming a non-dependant. Her physical pain coupled with her financial worries had caused her to suffer from both depression and anxiety.

She first made a claim for Personal Independence Payment in July 2023, which was refused. However, with our assistance, she has now successfully appealed that decision, and has been awarded the Enhanced Rate of the Daily Living component and the Standard Rate of the Mobility component. Our Advisors also helped her with her worries about debts and with her Limited Capability for Work medical assessment once she moved to Universal Credit.

As it took so long for the case to be heard, she is due approximately £8000 in backdated PIP. Additionally, as claimants receiving Personal Independence Payment do not have non-dependant deductions in their Housing Benefit or Council tax support, because the benefit recalculation will go back to July 2023, she now has no overpayments due to the Council. She was found to have Limited Capability for Work and Work-related Activity, further increasing her income.

"Thank you for listening and for not judging. It's so hard to find someone like you who listens and understands me and what I'm going through... It's been so hard the past few months. Thank you for your support and advice."

The PIP award and the increased rate of her Universal Credit leave her in a much more secure position financially and in addition will be able to clear any remaining debt.

We currently have 25 clients, who since the 1st April 2024, are still waiting on a decision in relation to the Personal Independence Payment. A further 44 clients have had to wait over 6 months to achieve a positive decision on their PIP award with the longest client waiting 12 months and 2 days.

RESIDENTS OF VAUXHALL
Are there sufficient facilities for young children in Vauxhall ?
Do we need more playgroups and nursery provision ?
Come along and discuss these questions at two meetings both at :
Community Service Centre, Silvester Street.
On: Wednesday, December 12th,
At: 2 p.m. and 8 p.m.
For further details contact Dave Godman,
Vauxhall Project. Tel. 207 4461.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS
Learn more about your rights and how to claim them.
Topics will include - Social Security, Supplementary Benefit, Unemployment Benefit et
To be held at : Community Service Centre, Silvester Street.
First meeting : November 29th, Thursday at 7.30 p.m.
Everyone is welcome and the course is free.

Trainee Solicitors:

Recruitment and Retention Crisis for Social Welfare Solicitors

It is widely understood that the advisors and solicitors who make access to justice possible are part of a recruitment and retention crisis. The range of the crisis spans advisors providing benefit advice and form filling, to supervising solicitors who provide supervision and training, and the very few aspiring social welfare trainee solicitors.

One of our funders, *The Baring Foundation*, wrote a report in 2023 which covers most bases as to why the sector is in crisis.

In summary, the most common reasons why individuals leave the sector are:

- Poor rates of pay and progression.
- Well-being and increasing rates of burnout in the profession.

Young Legal Aid Lawyers (YLAL) rightly point out that the crumbling Legal Aid sector is another contribution to the decade-long problem of recruiting and retaining Legal Aid lawyers. They argue that with fewer lawyers joining the sector, this continues to contribute to *The Law Society's* Legal Aid deserts, and as a result of this, fewer people can assert their rights and, most importantly get access to justice.

As a community Law Centre, we see this as an existential issue. There can be no Vauxhall Law Centre without the dedicated staff who provide advice every single day. Ultimately, this means that our already disadvantaged community could find itself in a much more severe position.

Because of this concern, we recognised it as a fundamental risk within our strategic plan.

Thankfully, however, there have been efforts to tackle this crisis. In 2021 YLAL helped to launch the Social Welfare Solicitors Qualification Fund (SWSQF) to help directly solve the crisis, whilst also increasing social mobility within the sector. Additionally, the Justice First Fellowship Scheme (JFF), founded by the Legal Education Foundation, is another long-standing funding stream that enables trainee solicitors to enter the sector. Since 2015, 125 fellows have qualified under the JFF. As well as one recent graduate and one current fellow, both our current and previous heads of our Housing Team qualified through this route.

We have sought to overcome the recruitment crisis in other ways, and where possible have utilised funding streams and scholarships that specifically focus on tackling the issue at hand. Over the past year and a half the law centre has had five trainee solicitors, with some already qualified and more on the way. Two of those five have already qualified, and we are pleased to say that they have remained within the sector.

Trainee Solicitors at Vauxhall Law Centre

Alex Feery - Qualified under the The Legal Education Foundation's Justice First Fellowship Scheme, is now a housing solicitor at North Yorkshire Citizen Advice and Law Centre.

David Kenny - Qualified under the Social Welfare Solicitors Qualification Fund in September 2024, David is now a supervising Solicitor for our welfare team whilst also providing advice and representation on asylum support matters.

Esther Sills - Esther has recently passed her SQE 2 and is now completing her qualifying work experience. Esther is due to qualify in March/April 2026.

Joe Bowly - is currently a trainee solicitor at the centre under the Social Welfare Qualification Fund, having completed SQE 1 already he is now studying for SQE 2 exams. Joe works in the housing department supporting homeless clients and those who are facing possession proceedings.

Shannon Donnelly - is currently a trainee solicitor at the centre under the Social Welfare Qualification Fund, she is currently studying to sit her SQE 1 exams. Shannon also works in the housing department providing advice and representation to asylum seekers, refugees and vulnerable migrants facing housing and asylum support issues.

This result of this success would not have been possible without the supervising solicitors themselves who are also a product of the Justice First Fellowship.



Esther Sills: Justice First Fellow & Trainee Solicitor

Under the Justice First Fellowship scheme, Esther has been in post first within our Welfare Rights team, then within Development, and is currently working within our Housing team, allowing a wider view of the function of the law centre and a clear insight into our strengths and weaknesses.

Many of our clients approach us with numerous intersecting issues and very few have the support infrastructure in place that they need. For example, a client may approach us when they are facing a PIP Review, but they may also have not accessed UC50 and need to, or they may be a housing client who has not made a PIP claim and may be entitled. I have noticed that it is unusual for clients to come in for support on isolated matters.

I have found many clients have come into their appointment quite overwhelmed from the engagement with external services (DWP/Housing Options, sometimes Citizens Advice and The Whitechapel Centre) due to long wait times, no responses, and being given information in a way that is not accessible to them. I find we are a vital bridge in helping people understand and access information, such as their entitlements. Particularly in housing some clients have strongly self-advocated or had third sector involvement but have been ignored by the Local Authority. I have seen cases where clients from our British Red Cross drop-in, or Merseyside Refugee Support Network have contacted their local council and have had no response or action.

Then, when it has come to our desk and we have been involved (even if the same points are being raised) the Local Authority take action. They have a habit of being silent until legal professionals are involved, even if the same points are being raised by the previous organisation.



The biggest changes that would improve the lives of our clients would be:

1. Funding improvement, and more resources.
2. Strengthening the web of collaborative working. Brownlow health GPs have been amazing, and their engagement with supporting letters makes things so much more straight forward in securing outcomes for clients.
3. Ensuring referring partners are clear on our remit, and their role in referring clients, and that we are aware of what support they can offer too.
4. Proactive prevention via education and early intervention.
5. Accountability and reflective practice. Specifically, with DWP's accountability when a decision is overturned on appeal to improve practice for future, and Local Authority accountability of unlawful housing practices.

Volunteer Support

Our volunteer programme is the cornerstone of our office triage service. Helpful and dedicated volunteers have been helping Simon, our Volunteer and Triage Coordinator, to deliver advice, guidance, and appointments to our clients who approach us by phone, email, and in person at our door.

Recently, we were joined by a cohort of volunteers from John Moores University who spent time working with Simon to understand our triage process, and to gain experience working on the front-line social welfare law.

Volunteers have also joined our advisors at outpost locations like the British Red Cross to understand the needs of those accessing this service. Additionally, they have helped our Housing Team in their pursuit of complaints for clients who have been mistreated when trying to access their statutory housing rights.

We would be remiss not to mention the valued contribution of our board of Trustees, who donate their time and expertise to our cause. Their guidance over this period has been invaluable, and we're so grateful that they're part of our mission.



In Conclusion: Looking Ahead

While this is the end of this report, it is not the end of the conversation. Rather than end on summarising the work that we have done, we wish to end on a message of solidarity, hope and action.

Earlier in the year we were proud to contribute to a piece of research on 'Place-based solidarity' written by academics Coco Huggins and Mia Gray at the University of Cambridge. The report highlighted the work that small organisations like ourselves play in being at the 'forefront of placed based solidarity movements... constituting a form of resistance to, and working withing contemporary austerity'.

We will continue to resist austerity and everything that punishes those facing the most severe disadvantage in our society.



You can provide a lifeline to people who cannot challenge injustice alone. Funding keeps our work alive, and you can be a part of this. To fund our work, get in contact with us at:
Development@vauxhalllawcentre.org.uk

Together, let's end inequality in Merseyside.

**In solidarity,
Vauxhall Law Centre**



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