

Pro bono Clinics - still going strong and as vital as ever!



The Bristol Law Centre is a founding member of Bristol Pro Bono Group. Below, the Bristol Law Centre reflects on the changes their clinics have undergone over the last couple of years and what the future may hold.

Demand and Capacity

Bristol Law Centre continues to run weekly pro-bono clinics to support people with employment and family law issues, as well as civil disputes. We run these clinics alongside our own teams' specialist legal casework and representation service for social welfare law issues, [working as a charity with the overarching aim of increasing access to justice](#).

Clinic volunteers advise on a range of issues including legal problems induced or exacerbated by the pandemic; enquiries relating to redundancy, discrimination, child arrangements and domestic abuse. Though demand fluctuates for specific types of enquiries, overall it remains consistently beyond the available capacity (particularly in family law), so the call for additional volunteers is of ongoing relevance for our clinics, as well as other clinics within the city and across the region. We're committed to harnessing the enthusiasm for pro bono shown by Bristol's firms, working in partnership and providing valuable legal support on key issues affecting our communities.

Accessibility and Technology

Accessibility has always been a key consideration for clinic work as we strive to reach those who face challenges in obtaining the advice that they need. In 2017, we explored running virtual clinics as a way of increasing access, ease and efficiency, both for volunteers and clients. So even before the pandemic hit, we were seeing the benefits of using technology to widen the geographical scope of our support by eliminating the need to physically attend, matching familiar and easy-to-use technology that was fit for purpose and led to efficiencies, and increasing capacity by making volunteering something that could be squeezed into a lunchbreak. This flexibility with timetabling has meant we've been able to engage more volunteers during the pandemic and help more people.

However, after being forced to operate exclusively within remote parameters, it has not gone unnoticed just how valuable face-to-face interactions are for those who may find it easier to participate, express themselves and ultimately get the most out of the relatively short session by seeing someone in person. As we start to see glimmers of hope to prompt a shift away from current practices and we begin to reimagine how we deliver clinics, these are exactly the issues we will look to balance to ensure people's needs are best accommodated. We've ensured as much as we can that the absence of the usual face-to-face contact has not compromised the quality of advice provided, and we're now keen to evaluate how and to what extent we move

back to our previous hybrid delivery of clinics, giving clients choice to engage in the way that feels most comfortable for them.

Impact of pro-bono advice

We know pro-bono is not always enough and there are systemic and wider issues that need to be challenged, but we see real change and impact for [people supported through clinics](#) - even through just initial advice provision.

Many of our volunteers go above and beyond to make these one-off interactions as meaningful as possible, resulting in increased confidence and awareness of rights for those seeking help. Amidst all of the stress, people feel listened to! It is of huge value for those in deeply personal and challenging circumstances to have the opportunity to share and be guided through a legal problem by an expert, where they have no alternative support available. Receiving advice in this way helps guide people through legal processes and ultimately achieve fairer outcomes.



Helped me make an informed decision regarding a complaint I was planning to raise at court

Helped with giving me perspective on what to do next

She was amazingly supportive and informative

This has made all the difference to me as I'm now able to hopefully resolve my problems which would have been impossible otherwise



Volunteer wellbeing

Just as the legal problems and circumstances of some of the people seeking help are complicated, the challenge for volunteers to unpack this complexity and present the client with useful guidance on how to move forward increases. We are looking at how we structure our clinics and what training and support can be offered within the pro-bono community to ensure that everyone participating in clinic work feels motivated and supported. We're so grateful for our volunteers and their ongoing commitment to provide legal advice to those who are otherwise left to go it alone without legal support.

For anyone interested in volunteering with Bristol Law Centre or supporting our work otherwise, we'd love for you to [get in touch](#). [LawWorks](#) also regularly post various clinic opportunities.