

Norfolk Community Law Service

Everybody Benefits – Long Term Award

Describe the work of the charity organisation being nominated

Norfolk Community Law Service (NCLS) is a registered charity and limited company that has been delivering services since 1980. We identify unmet legal need across the County of Norfolk working with partners and provide free services to meet that need. We aim to provide access to justice and equality, and target our services at disadvantaged and vulnerable groups e.g. offenders, migrant workers and people with learning difficulties, mental health issues and physical disabilities. Services include:

- two weekly free, legal advice drop-in service in Norwich
- weekly services at Cromer & Great Yarmouth (one planned for King's Lynn)
- specialist debt advice for vulnerable clients, particularly offenders and ex-offenders
- specialist welfare benefits appeals advice and representation at Tribunal
- advice for victims of domestic abuse
- advice on residency status and entitlement for EEA National
- discrimination advice or representation
- rent arrears mediation for City Council housing tenants
- family court support for those without legal representation

We uniquely use a volunteer led model for the delivery of our services. We have 63 solicitors and a Barrister who provide pro bono advice. Additionally, 50 law students from the University of East Anglia and 20 Community volunteers, drawn from a range of specialist backgrounds. We worked with the County Council to develop an advice led social prescribing model. NCLS is the lead agency for the Norfolk Community Advice Network (NCAN). NCAN is an alliance of over 50 social welfare advice agencies. It aims to ensure Norfolk residents can access good quality social welfare information, advice, assistance and representation at a time or place when they need it most. We hold an Advice Quality Standard for Debt & Welfare Benefits, our Immigration Adviser is regulated by the OISC and our debt service is regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority.

Give examples of the projects or work the organisation has done

Free legal advice: in 2018-19, 1,533 clients received free legal advice across Norwich, Cromer & Great Yarmouth. The services include specialist family and employment advice, welfare rights, immigration and family advice.

Discrimination: we work in partnership with Suffolk Law Centre to provide monthly advice sessions. This service has seen an increase of 23% this year.

Migrant Worker Advice: this service advised 290 new clients in 2018-19 – an increase of 68% on the previous year. Clients are provided with specialist immigration advice, support with challenging refusal of benefits linked to a person's right to reside in the UK and representation at tribunal hearings where necessary. This service works in partnership with a local domestic abuse charity.

Debt: this specialist service is particularly aimed at vulnerable people or those with complex needs – for example, offenders or ex-offenders or people with mental health problems. In 2018-19, the

service advised 373 new clients and the demand for the service is high. The service works in partnership with the Shaw Trust to provide advice to clients at Bure Prison and people on probation.

Welfare Rights and Representation: in 2018-19, 265 new clients were assisted with 286 cases (some clients have more than one issue). Clients were represented at 338 social security tribunal hearings in 2018-19 – an increase of 13% on the previous year.

Domestic abuse project: a rota of experienced solicitors who provide their time pro bono supported 96 clients in 2018-19. This service uses Skype to reach out to clients across a very rural county.

Family court support service based at the court desk: clients are supported to make arrangements for their children following a separation. In 2018-19, this service worked with 188 clients – an increase of 33% and in addition to providing one-off support to another 52 people and attending 347 hearings.

Housing mediation: in partnership with the local City Council, this service assists council tenants who are in rent arrears with the aim of preventing them from being brought before the court in formal possession proceedings. In 2018-19, the service supported 58 clients.

Norfolk Community Advice Network (NCAN): NCLS are the lead agency for this alliance of more than 50 social welfare advice agencies. Its aims include improving client's journey sector and supporting the sector to be cost effective, collaborative and strategic.

What has been the impact of the organisation's projects or work?

Quoted in the Bach Commission report (September 2017), Lord Bach states *Unless everyone can get some access to the legal system when they need it, trust in our institutions and the rule of law breaks down*. Our work enables our clients to access justice and equality. The evidence nationally shows that early legal advice or helping people to access benefits they are entitled to, can help problems from escalating and prevent longer term crises such as rent arrears, fuel poverty, homelessness and mental health issues. The majority of our clients suffer from some degree of mental health problems. These range from reactive depression linked to poor physical health, to standalone depression, anxiety, personality disorders, psychosis, learning disabilities, ADHD, Asperger's, autistic spectrum, behavioural and anger related mental health problems, addiction and dependency upon alcohol, drugs, gambling, bereavement related issues, PTSD and other trauma-related impact. Additionally, mental health illnesses as a result of abuse, being victims of violence, sexual assault, and sometimes ex-soldiers with combat related trauma, poor mental health linked to head injuries or other organic physical causes.

We use the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing scale to evaluate impact on our clients:

- 60% of clients said their sense of feeling relaxed had improved as a direct result of accessing our service
- the general health of 67% of clients was improved or sustained following our advice
- 74% said their knowledge of how things work (understanding the system) had improved
- 21% of clients were struggling to repay debts when they sought advice and 50% stated *I've been feeling more relaxed* after accessing our services
- 37% of clients who sought welfare benefits advice stated there had been an improvement in their wellbeing

In 2018-19 the welfare rights representation service won 83% of appeals compared to the national average of 68%. In practice, this translates to awards for clients totalling £2,160,000. Since its

inception, the service has secured a total of £6,992,311 for our clients. Given the demographic of our client group, this means people are less likely to have to struggle with debt and reduces costs on local authorities and services. Being in debt is typified by feeling out of control so setting out options is an important step in enabling clients to regain control. The average indebtedness of Debt Service clients is £7,597 and in 2018-19, the total debt we succeeded in having written off or renegotiated on behalf of clients was £2,968,229.

Follow Norfolk Community Law Service

Website www.ncls.co.uk

Twitter @NCLawService