



**UCL**

# UCL Integrated Legal Advice Clinic

2019-20 impact report



**CENTRE FOR  
ACCESS TO JUSTICE**

## A message from Rachel Knowles, UCL iLAC Head of Legal Practice

It has been an unusual and challenging year for everyone around the world, and this has certainly been true for UCL iLAC. More than ever, I am extremely grateful for our wonderful team of staff and students who have been flexible and adaptable under these difficult circumstances. We are so proud to be part of the UCL community, which includes alumni and supporters who have demonstrated their commitment to our work in these challenging times. This generosity has enabled us to continue providing valuable services that benefit our students, clients and the wider community we serve.

Summer 2019 seems to be a very distant memory, a much simpler time where students, staff and clients were all able to come to the Clinic and meet without concern. We welcomed a new intake of students in the autumn term of 2019, and we were able to welcome more students than previous years, as we steadily expand the project. I returned to the clinic from a period of maternity leave in November 2019 and was delighted to see how well it had progressed in my absence. Our office had become a stable fixture in the local community, and clients (new and current) would drop in most days for support. As Christmas drew closer, we were overwhelmed by our clients' generosity, as they dropped off far more tins of biscuits than our waistlines could handle! It was very pleasing to see how we have managed to integrate ourselves into the community and become a resource people trust.

It became clear fairly early on in 2020 that at some point, a lockdown would be inevitable, so we started trying to prepare the clinic, staff and students for this as early as possible. When lockdown began, we were then prepared to switch to remote provision. As we figured out the mechanics of remote working and the UK got used to a new way of living, our thoughts turned to the wellbeing of our clients and to those who relied on our service being face to face. Whilst we are able to communicate with our clients with a whole range of technology including Zoom, WhatsApp, email and, of course, the telephone, all of us worry for those clients who rely on face-to-face communication.

I firmly believe those that are less digitally able, or who struggle to communicate by phone or in writing, have been significantly disadvantaged by lockdown and that many may be struggling to access the advice they need. Sadly, they are often the most vulnerable and most in need of support. For some, the ability to drop in, enjoy face-to-face communication and a human connection is an essential part of receiving advice. That is what makes our services so important in both remote and face-to-face circumstances, UCL has recognised and prioritised our re-opening.

This forthcoming year may be filled with uncertainty due to COVID-19, but I am confident that our team will remain strong and that we will continue to overcome the obstacles thrown at us by the pandemic together, as we have done these past months.

Sincerely,



Rachel Knowles  
Head of Legal Practice  
UCL Integrated Legal Advice Clinic



The UCL iLAC has a strong track record of helping clients secure the vital help and benefits they need across many areas, including housing, welfare and community care. When the pandemic struck, the Clinic mobilised quickly to ensure the continuation of its critical services to those hardest hit and new challenges that have emerged during lockdown.

In response to government and UCL guidance surrounding COVID-19, UCL iLAC closed its physical office in Stratford on 20th March 2020. This closure coincided with the UK national lockdown. During this time, clinic advisers and UCL support staff worked to transform the Clinic into a remote service, offering online and telephone appointments for those in need. The Clinic re-opened its physical office for face-to-face advice on 16th July 2020 on an appointment only basis, with strict adherence to social distancing rules.

### **Providing a lifeline to vulnerable communities**

Over the past year, demand for UCL iLAC's legal services has continued to grow. This year we received 612 new enquiries, a 24% increase from last year's number of 492. This notable increase is perhaps unsurprising given the pandemic's disproportionate impact on the disadvantaged groups who form the majority of our client basis.

During the four months when the pandemic was at its height and our offices were closed, we received 201 enquires, a 20% increase on the same period last year with community care and employment accounting for the most significant increases. In particular, we received increased enquiries from informal carers of people who are vulnerable and self-isolating.

To keep up with this demand, Clinic staff created a digital information resource guide to help clients understand their rights and navigate the complex and evolving guidance from local and national government.

As the Clinic's established presence in Stratford and the wider East London community continues to serve as a first point of call for many disadvantaged groups, we anticipate that we will see an increase in the number of employment, housing and welfare benefits enquiries as many are facing continued financial difficulty during this unprecedented time.

### **Newham and the impact of COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on socio-economically disadvantaged communities around the country. Nowhere is this more acute than in Newham, which has had the highest proportion of deaths from coronavirus in England and Wales. Data from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) shows that between 1 March and 17 April 2020, Newham had the highest age-standardised rate with 144.3 deaths per 100,000 population, more than twice the rate of more affluent districts such as Kensington and Chelsea (67 deaths per 100,000).

Several factors explain this disparity. One major factor is a high prevalence of underlying health conditions in Newham's population, such as cardiovascular disease and asthma. This means that a greater number of those infected require serious medical assistance, and are more likely to die at higher rates. Another key factor is the high level of overcrowding, homelessness and a chronic lack of social housing. While the government's temporary ban on evictions and possessions brought respite to some, it did not address the needs of homeless individuals or families residing in temporary or unsuitable accommodation, leaving them at greater risk of contracting the coronavirus. Moreover, overcrowded living conditions made it extremely challenging for people with symptoms to self-isolate, increasing the risk of infecting others.

### **2019-20 casework in context**

- 172 cases for 154 clients
- During lockdown, we took on 45 new clients
- 73% of our clients had no income at all, an increase in the average across the year
- Clients aging 35-49 made up the largest group seeking support
- 612 enquiries for legal advice; 120 more enquires than last year
- 46% of clients we assisted during lockdown were from BAME backgrounds
- 43 student placements; 8 more than in 2019-20

### **Action on health justice**

- 91% of clients reported an improvement in their emotional well-being
- 78% of clients felt that their stress anxiety improved
- 64% of clients reported that their financial difficulties got better as a result of the Clinic's support
- 56% of clients found that relationships with friends had improved
- 82% of clients stated that being part of UCL Faculty of Laws increased their confidence in the Clinic services

**“I am really pleased with the service and support I have received from the Clinic. You have been supportive and made a big impact in my life. I am happy that the citizens of Newham have this platform available to ask for help. Thank you very much to all the team.”**

UCL iLAC client

## Spotlight:

### Trends in legal needs and access to justice during the pandemic

Following the lockdown, courts and tribunals were forced to close and adapt quickly to offering remote hearings. However, while remote hearings were appropriate for some areas of law, for many others, such as family, welfare benefits, and others where vulnerable individuals were involved, serious concerns have been raised over their fairness. Remote hearings also presented practical challenges for many clients who did not have access to internet and video conferencing tools. Despite the greater use of remote hearings, many cases were still postponed creating significant backlog of cases.

While the pandemic has affected everyone, it has created significant challenges for those who were already vulnerable, including disabled people, children and adults in care, and the homeless. Policy makers and legislators had to make rapid decisions to respond to this emergency. This resulted in many cases of guidance and regulations intended to protect public health which were confusing, unclear, and put many vulnerable groups at risk. Several challenges and judicial reviews, including some submitted by UCL iLAC, challenged the lawfulness of this guidance, forcing the government to uphold its duties to vulnerable individuals.

## Client case study:

### Mrs P:

Mrs P has multiple health problems including chronic, degenerative pain in her spine and feet, and incontinence. She has ongoing difficulty managing her pain and has severe side effects from the regular injections and pain medication she takes. She experiences chronic dizziness, fatigue, and nausea which affect her ability to function and to feel safe without help and assistance.

Mrs P came to the Clinic for help after her Personal Independence Payment (PIP) was reassessed and the daily living component was removed. Her appeal hearing was scheduled for 3 weeks' time and she was very anxious and distressed. We gathered medical evidence, prepared her submissions and attended the hearing as her representatives on the day. Her appeal was successful. The Tribunal awarded her the daily living component at the enhanced rate.

In addition, we noticed that Mrs P had not been getting the correct amount of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) since the beginning of her claim, over 3 years ago. She had never been referred for a work capability assessment and she was struggling to liaise with the DWP. The DWP overturned their decision and Mrs P was paid the correct amount of ESA. The money was backdated to the start of her claim in 2016 when she had to stop working due to ill-health.

## Defending access to justice and social provisions

In addition to individual casework, the Clinic has also been monitoring the Government's emergency measures, to ensure that they are lawful and legitimate.

Firstly, we challenged government guidance published in the wake of the COVID-19 lockdown. This guidance was to social services departments, suggesting they did not have to comply with all of their statutory duties under the Children Act 1989. This could have serious consequences for disabled children and care leavers. The Government amended the guidance following a pre-action letter UCL iLAC staff sent to Government.

Secondly, we supported clients in challenging an East London boroughs' discriminatory eligibility criteria for accessing disability services. Whilst local authorities are allowed to have eligibility criteria, this authority's policy was inherently discriminatory against children with invisible disabilities, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Thanks to several challenges by our clients, the local authority has confirmed that the informal document has been removed from circulation and social workers have been clearly instructed not to use it. As to the more formal, published criteria, the local authority have confirmed that they will consider revising these. We are now awaiting detailed confirmation as to whether this will be sufficient to render them lawful.

**“Not only did I gain a deeper understanding of social justice: the Clinic made me think about how I could make a difference and why it was important that I should”**

UCL Laws student, iLAC volunteer

## Supporting students and education at iLAC

This year, we had 43 students volunteering at UCL iLAC, an increase of 8 students from last year thanks to the introduction of the new iLAC Student Supervisor role. These students, who had previous experience volunteering at the Clinic, increased our capacity, providing support and guidance to new students alongside our Clinic Coordinator.

Despite the ongoing uncertainty with COVID-19, staff worked hard to ensure that students were not disadvantaged by this and that their assessments were not affected. This summer, Clinic staff created new training materials to be delivered remotely to ensure students can continue to take part in volunteering at the Clinic in these new circumstances.

Student feedback shows that 96% of our volunteers helped students understand social welfare law issues better, and increased their interest in doing more public interest or pro bono work in their future career.

## Looking forward to the future

This year has been unprecedented by all accounts and has made our services more vital than ever. Our resilience in the face of these challenges has been demonstrable as we continue to act as a pillar of support for our community in need.

As we look toward the coming year, a lot remains unknown. What can be certain is that our resounding passion and ambition for transforming access to justice at the local and national level will continue at pace. Supporting more clients, challenging policy and training the next generation of lawyers is crucial to meeting the pressing needs of people impacted by socio-economic disadvantage and the effects of the pandemic.

**“COVID-19 does not respect social boundaries and the measures to control its spread have already had a profound impact on people’s income, social security, and health. Our free social welfare legal advice clinic remains open, so that we can provide a vital lifeline to many of those people, helping them navigate the devastating impact of COVID-19.”**

Professor Dame Hazel Genn,  
Executive Director, UCL Centre for  
Access to Justice