



UCL

UCL Integrated Legal Advice Clinic:

2020/21 Annual Report



UCL

CENTRE FOR
ACCESS TO JUSTICE



UCL iLAC in 2020/21

Community demand is higher than in previous years as we continue to deal with both the short- and long-term impacts of the pandemic. This increased demand is matched by our ambition to provide outstanding service to our clients and to use this time to promote our vision of access to justice and equality for all.

We are grateful to our supporters whose contributions have enabled us to grow and make meaningful improvements to the health and well-being of our clients and the local community. Without their generosity, we would not be able to provide the services that we do to the community or enable our students to access such an amazing learning opportunity.

This past year has been a year of recovery; we are pleased to share with you details of our response and highlights from the year in the report that follows.

Responding to challenges of the pandemic

This year, we had to master new technologies in order to continue to run our clinic and allow students to undertake their clinical legal education. Though we had originally hoped to be able to run clinic placements in person in the second term, unfortunately the advent of another lockdown meant that this wasn't possible.

Whilst finding a way for students to remotely volunteer at the clinic from locations across the world posed some regulatory and technical challenges, we are pleased that all our clinical students were able to engage in casework and meet clients virtually.

In July 2020, following the lifting of the first lockdown, UCL iLAC re-opened its physical office for face-to-face advice. Since then, we have remained opened on an appointment-only basis, ensuring strict adherence to social distancing rules.



Enquiries

Continued demand

Over the past year, the demand for UCL iLAC's legal services has continued to grow. This year we received 701 new enquiries, a 14.5% increase from last year's total of 612. This increase continues to show the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on disadvantaged groups who form the majority of our client base. During the second lockdown between November and December 2020, we received 83 new enquiries. During the third lockdown between January and April 2021, we received an additional 200 enquiries.

Housing enquiries

The most common enquiries across all lockdowns related to housing. Though housing and welfare benefits continued to account for the majority of our enquiries, we also saw an increase in miscellaneous enquiries such as parking tickets, civil litigation, and wills and probate. Unfortunately, the clinic did not have the capacity or specific expertise to take many of these cases on. We are committed to pursuing opportunities that will allow our team to expand and to increase our ability to support these type of client cases in the future.

Increasing and varied enquiry types

Over the last year, most clients heard about our services through other advice agencies (either by being signposted or referred). As clinic operations are now taking place partly online and by phone, we have continued to see an increase in the number of email enquiries. This speaks to the direct shift in the types of clients that were contacting us, indicating a greater level of digital literacy.

The number of enquiries we received rapidly changed from month to month. For example, in October 2020, we saw a 43% decrease in the number of enquiries compared to September 2020. While in March 2021, we saw a 66% increase in the number of enquiries compared to February 2021. We believe there are a number of reasons for this variation: the lifting of the government-implemented eviction ban, the various lockdowns and restrictions, and children being in and out of school.

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, given that many people are facing continued financial difficulty as a result of the pandemic. Furthermore, with the eviction ban being lifted and courts opening back up, we anticipate that the number of housing enquiries we receive will continue to escalate.

Image: Stratford in east London, where UCL iLAC is based.

Case studies: housing

- We assisted a single client with four children, two of whom have autism, who were residing in unsuitable private rented accommodation. We helped her to increase her priority on the council's housing register. As a result of UCL iLAC representing her case, she was placed in the emergency category on the housing waiting list and subsequently obtained a four-bed council house with a garden, therefore meeting the needs of the children.
- We assisted a client regarding disrepair to her property. The planned works were delayed due to contractors not being made aware of the full schedule of works and therefore not having the correct equipment. The prolonged disrepair had caused considerable anxiety and distress given the repeated failed attempts to remedy the disrepair and the impact on her already impaired mobility. Our client was unable to bathe for several months in the property and had to do so at a friend's house instead, which required additional spending on travel fares as she was unable to use public transport. Following UCL iLAC support, the works have been completed and the landlord agreed to pay our client damages as well as payment of her legal costs.

Casework and clients

We understand the complexities faced by many of our clients in obtaining access to justice, and we continue to utilise our resources in the most effective way to ensure their rights are upheld. We do this by focusing our efforts on full casework, equating to almost 85% of our total cases this year, alongside one-off advice and referrals in circumstances we deem appropriate.

Demand and capacity

Demand continues to outstrip our capacity. Ensuring the quality of our service to clients and students is of utmost significance. Our limited resources meant that this year, when demand increased due to the unforeseen hardships faced by our local community during the pandemic, we were only able to take on 17% of enquiries. Additionally, some cases progressed at a slower pace due to pandemic-related complications and due to having less support from students with casework.

We have continued to build our reputation in the community, however, and are delighted to report that 100% of our surveyed clients would use our service again and would recommend us to their friends.

“You are providing an excellent service, helping vulnerable people. I’ll never forget your help. Thank you.”

UCL iLAC client

Casework in context

- 123 new cases for 107 clients, in addition to the clinic's existing caseload
- 91% of our clients had an income of less than £9,999, an 11% increase from last year in clients from this income bracket
- 43% of clients had no income and 42% had an income of less than £10,000
- Clients aged 50-64 made up the largest group seeking support, representing 32% of our client base
- 701 enquiries for legal advice; 89 more enquires than last year. Lacking capacity still accounts for the main reason we are unable to take on enquiries, accounting for nearly 67% of all enquiries
- The largest source of enquiries has become other advice agencies, who now make up nearly one third of all our enquiries.
- Welfare benefits (52%) and housing (29%) made up the majority of casework
- 59% of the clients we supported this year were from BAME backgrounds, and we also saw a significant increase in clients from a White British background compared to last year
- During the second and third lockdowns, we took on 41 new clients
- 31 student placements at the clinic (working remotely)

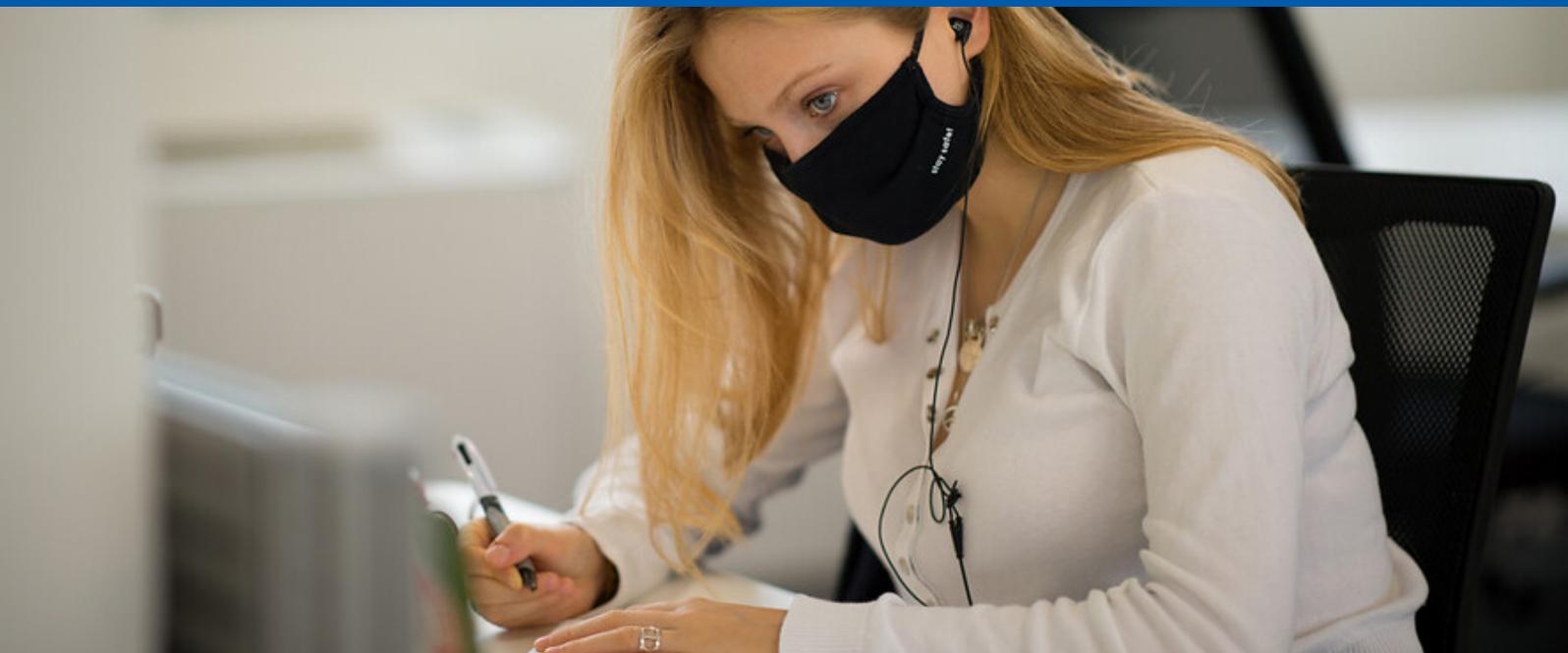
Action on Health Justice

Having received support with their legal issues, clients reported an improvement in the following:

- Emotional well-being – 85.2% of clients
- Anxiety/stress levels – 68% of clients
- Financial difficulties – 66% of clients
- Relationships with their friends – 55% of clients
- Sleeping patterns – 50% of clients
- Performance at work or study – 41% of clients
- Physical well-being – 41% of clients

In addition:

- 93% of clients said they found the assistance very helpful
- 100% of clients said they would seek our advice again in the future and that they would recommend us to a friend
- 17% of clients found out about our service through their GP



Students and education at UCL iLAC

This year, we had 35 students volunteering at UCL iLAC. Of the 35 students, 21 were final year LLB students on our clinical legal education course, Access to Justice and Community Engagement (AJCE). A further 10 took part in UCL iLAC research projects, whilst the remaining four supported us over the summer as Summer Fellows. Due to the pandemic, we unfortunately were unable to increase the number of places available for students.

The impact of the pandemic

Due to the suspension of face-to-face teaching, we delivered all student training online via both pre-recorded and live sessions. All AJCE students completed their placements remotely while being supervised by clinic staff. UCL iLAC Assistants completed a remote research project addressing a local policy issue instead of coming into the clinic to support with reception and administrative duties. Despite the ongoing uncertainty, staff worked hard to ensure that students were not disadvantaged and that their assessments were not affected. We were also grateful for our students' understanding and flexibility.

Summer Fellowship Programme

This year we ran our Summer Fellowship Programme in person at the clinic. Four students – two undergraduate and two graduate Laws students – worked part-time in person at the clinic between July and September 2021 on 76 cases. Students assisted advisers to carry out advice work, which included attending meetings, drafting letters, following up with casework and general clinic administration. In addition, we were able to host two UCL Connected Learning* student interns who helped to update UCL iLAC training materials and the UCL Laws Connections* induction materials. These interns have helped to improve our provision of online training. Their energy and enthusiasm brought the clinic back to life and had a huge impact on our ability to maintain capacity over the summer months when other university legal advice clinics were closed.

* UCL Connected Learning helps students navigate distance learning. UCL Laws Connections is a two-week induction programme in the Faculty of Laws for all first year LLB students.

Case study: community care law

Ms Q was a 17-year-old who was referred to us by her youth advocate. She was homeless and sofa-surfing with friends, having fled her family home due to being subjected to emotional abuse and neglect. She had approached the local authority's children's services team several times to ask them for help and accommodation, but they did not provide her with emergency accommodation as a looked after child.

We challenged the local authority through pre-action correspondence, threatening judicial review proceedings if they did not accept a duty to support her. After several exchanges, it became apparent that the local authority would not concede this matter, so we issued proceedings. Within an hour of receiving our claim, the local authority conceded the matter and agreed to support Ms Q as a looked after child.

“I really enjoyed how varied the work has been. As we are working in four very different areas of the law, and our tasks vary from day to day, I have learnt something new every day. The atmosphere at the clinic is very friendly so we all looked forward to coming in to work!”

UCL iLAC Summer Fellow

Achievements

The clinic has enjoyed a number of significant achievements this past year, including passing our specialist quality mark audit. The audit enables us to maintain our legal aid contract, which we gained three years ago. We were also delighted to be shortlisted for the LawWorks and Attorney General Student Pro Bono Awards 2021 under the category of 'Best Contribution by a Law School'.

Perhaps our stand-out highlight of the year was our successful application to become an approved training provider with the Solicitors Regulation Authority. We were also able to offer a training contract to our very first trainee, Michael Marshall. Already a Welfare Benefits Adviser at the clinic, as well as being a UCL graduate who undertook our clinical legal education module, we are now able to support him in progressing towards qualification as a solicitor.

Case study: welfare benefits

Mr V suffered a brain injury as a child. As a result, he has a learning disability and personality disorder. In 1994, Mr V was awarded the middle rate care component and lower rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) on an indefinite basis. In August 2019, Mr V was told that his DLA would be coming to an end and he was asked to claim Personal Independence Payment (PIP) instead. Following an assessment, his claim was refused, and he was awarded 0 points for all activities. His DLA ended on 24 March 2020, at which point he and his family lost their primary source of income.

The removal of Mr V's disability benefit not only substantially reduced his household income, it also had a knock-on effect on other benefits. His housing benefit claim became subject to non-dependent deductions, massively reducing the amount of benefit he received. His council tax reduction also stopped. The outgoings of the family home increased significantly at the same time that their income was cut. Mr V became subject to court proceedings due to his inability to meet his council tax liability. His landlord brought possession proceedings against him as he was unable to pay rent.

We appealed the decision to refuse Mr V PIP and he was awarded the enhanced rates of both components at his hearing – the highest possible award. We kept in touch with his landlord to ensure that the possession proceedings were suspended pending the outcome of the PIP appeal. We ensured that his local authority paid backdated housing benefit and council tax support, clearing his arrears and resulting in Mr V's accounts going into credit. Finally, we supported Mr V and his family to increase their household income by helping them claim Universal Credit. In total, we helped Mr V and his wife claim £22,500 in benefits in the last year.

UCL Centre for Access to Justice: 2020/21 in review

Outside of UCL iLAC, CAJ has had a busy year. Our Head of Projects, Shiva Riahi, went on secondment to the Ministry of Justice for a year in November 2020. Head of Legal Practice, Rachel Knowles, has therefore stepped in to supervise the activities of the CAJ more broadly, with support from other team members. We have also welcomed a new projects coordinator to assist with running all our pro bono activities for the year ahead.

The pandemic has made it more challenging to plan pro bono projects for students to work on this year, as not all organisations were able to supervise students remotely and many were simply forced to shut down their services. Nevertheless, our students were impressive in their commitment to and interest in pro bono work; in total, we had 414 applications and were able to offer placements to 209 students. These included placements with the following partners:

- Pro Bono Community
- Safe Space Network (representing children excluded or at risk of exclusion from school)
- University of London Refugee Law Clinic
- Haringey Migrant Support Centre
- Somers Town Legal Advice Corner
- Money A&E
- Roma Support Group
- Assisting the APPG on Legal Aid Inquiry
- City and Islington College

We also offered a number of projects run through CAJ:

- Rare Dementia Support Project (in partnership with UCL's Dementia Research Centre)
- Creating Public Legal Education videos for our YouTube Channel
- Grassroots Human Rights Education

Our student-led projects with Amicus, Lawyers without Borders and Junior Lawyers Against Poverty remained as active as they could whilst working remotely. We also worked together with our Student Pro Bono Committee to set up a mentorship scheme for those interested in pursuing careers in legal aid and pro bono.

In the forthcoming year we are looking forward to setting up even more student projects. We also have exciting plans in place with new partners, aimed at increasing the number of pro bono placements on offer to students.

“Thank you so much for this opportunity. This was by far the most useful extra-curricular activity I have done this year and it was extremely enjoyable as well.”

UCL iLAC student volunteer



Plans for the future

The future remains unpredictable as we await to see how the pandemic continues to develop. However, our plans for this year are to return to normal as much as possible, and to return to the office more frequently. We hope very much that government rules will continue to allow us to host students in person in the clinic this year.

The demand for our services continues to grow as we become an established and trusted resource in the local area. We are passionate about our commitment to help the local community and are keen to increase our services, particularly in the area of housing law advice, for which there is huge need. Of course, to manage this increase in services would require an expansion of our current team. This in turn would also allow us to supervise more students undertaking the case work. **The generosity and vision of our donor community is essential to the realisation of this goal, and we are calling on our supporters to help in any way possible.**

In a time where resources are scarce and all advice agencies are stretched, we are looking at ways to work more closely with other organisations in the borough. To this end, we have joined local networks of advice agencies and charities such as OneNewham and the Newham Youth Partnership. We are hoping to make more use of our space for community events and perhaps set up some additional services.

It is anticipated that the legal aid agency may re-tender for civil legal aid contracts in 2022. If this happens, we will be required to reapply for our current contracts. It also represents an opportunity to apply for other contracts, where we are able to secure the necessary funding to employ a supervisor and find someone to recruit. Ideally, we would be able to expand our services into offering immigration advice, which is desperately needed in the local area.

“Many thanks for all your support over the past three years. I have been assisted on many occasions and my adviser has never given up despite a lot of difficulties.”

UCL iLAC client

For more information, please visit:

www.ucl.ac.uk/access-to-justice

