



## Bespoke law services increasing access to justice for autistic clients

Law centres and firms aim to make complex legal matters more easily understandable

2 August 2017



Add comment

Student volunteers in Nottingham and London are on a mission: to develop law services that address the legal needs of people with autism spectrum disorder. Providing a sensory environment and making their advice more easily understandable are just two ways they're doing this.

There are around 700,000 people on the autism spectrum in the UK – more than one in 100. Common symptoms include persistent difficulties with social communication and interaction, which can make the process of accessing and understanding legal advice more difficult.

At Nottingham Law School's Legal Advice Centre, students and assistants are in the early stages of developing a specialist autism law service (ALS).

Malvika Jaganmohan, a BPTC student and ALS development assistant, and Callum Scott, a legal assistant at the centre, say their project has three key aims: to make the premises more accessible to the autistic community; to develop specialist legal provision for autistic people; and to contribute to policy conversations about access to justice for people with autism.

"ALS arose from an increasing awareness among the centre's staff that we need further training to enable us to best support autistic clients," they told Solicitors Journal. Examples include adapting advisers' interviewing approach, redrafting documents to make them more easily understandable, and providing a sensory environment to help clients feel at ease.

Jaganmohan and Scott see the new service as having an immediate impact on issues involving social welfare benefit payments. They say the current system "inherently disadvantages autistic people" due to the face-to-face assessment process with a health professional, who decides whether a set of "quite arbitrary and narrow descriptors" is satisfied. The model prevents some autistic people from fully engaging and understanding what's being asked of them.

The advice centre is collaborating with the Free Representation Unit to provide social security and employment tribunal representation. This relationship would allow ALS to support autistic people through the welfare benefits process all the way up to a tribunal hearing.

### Star students

Take a trip down the M1 from Nottinghamshire to Essex and you'll find a similar offering is already underway at Romford Autism Hub Legal Advice Clinic – a collaboration between the University of East London's (UEL) Legal Advice Clinic and the Sycamore Trust UK, a charity that supports individuals affected by autism or learning difficulties.

The hub launched in February and offers free legal advice and information to adults and young people with autism and their families, and provides an extra layer of help through a supportive environment and assistance with effective coping strategies.

After UEL's students received training on how to deal with autistic people, they began offering legal advice in three sessions, twice a month, under the supervision of the clinic's in-house solicitor, Eleanor Scarlett. Advice is offered on employment, landlord and tenant, welfare benefits, and family law. Legal information is also offered on the special education needs framework.

When the clinic has been unable to assist, it has signposted clients to a local law firm, Law Lane Solicitors. Clients can also be referred back to the clinic so the student advisers can carry out further research on matters.

The offering has not been without its challenges, however, according to the director of UEL's clinic, Nicola Antoniou, who says a lack of resources has been "the greatest obstacle so far".

The clinic is now collaborating with Duncan Lewis Solicitors. From October this year, the firm will attend the Romford Autism Hub, along with the clinic's students, to provide free legal advice once a week in a three-hour drop-in sessions.

To keep the project sustainable, the service is also being integrated within the curriculum as part of a new clinical legal education module, which will enable UEL's law students give back to the community and also gain practical legal experience under the supervision of qualified lawyers.

### Flexible approach

Law firms are also doing their bit to help autistic clients. Simpson Millar is one of several practices in the National Autistic Society's service directory. Samantha Hale, education and community care solicitor at the firm, told Solicitors Journal how the public law team meets the needs of clients who are either autistic or require assistance in matters relating to an autistic family member.

"We are flexible in the way that we work and communicate with our clients and, in particular, how we explain complex legal matters is tailored to that individual's needs.

"We ascertain whether any adjustments may be required in order to help prepare them for a visit to the office, such as carefully explaining in advance what will happen at the meeting, or providing photos of the office and who they will meet."

The team also provides specialist training to new staff to ensure they have the relevant knowledge to understand the needs of all clients, including those with autism.

At a time when there is a [regulatory push](#) for greater access to justice for vulnerable consumers, the efforts of law centres and firms that are addressing the needs of autistic clients should be lauded. If they're not already providing a similar service, others may now be inspired to follow suit.

**Matthew Rogers, reporter**

[@lex\\_progress](#) | [matthew.rogers@solicitorsjournal.co.uk](mailto:matthew.rogers@solicitorsjournal.co.uk)

Categorised in:

EDUCATION & TRAINING

PUBLIC



OFFICIAL CORPORATE  
SUPPORTER  
LexisNexis®

You must be logged in to comment

## Free premium trial

Take a two week trial of our premium subscription and receive:

- Two digital copies of Solicitors Journal
- Weekly Email alert with latest legal news
- Access to premium content
- Access to 13 years of searchable archives