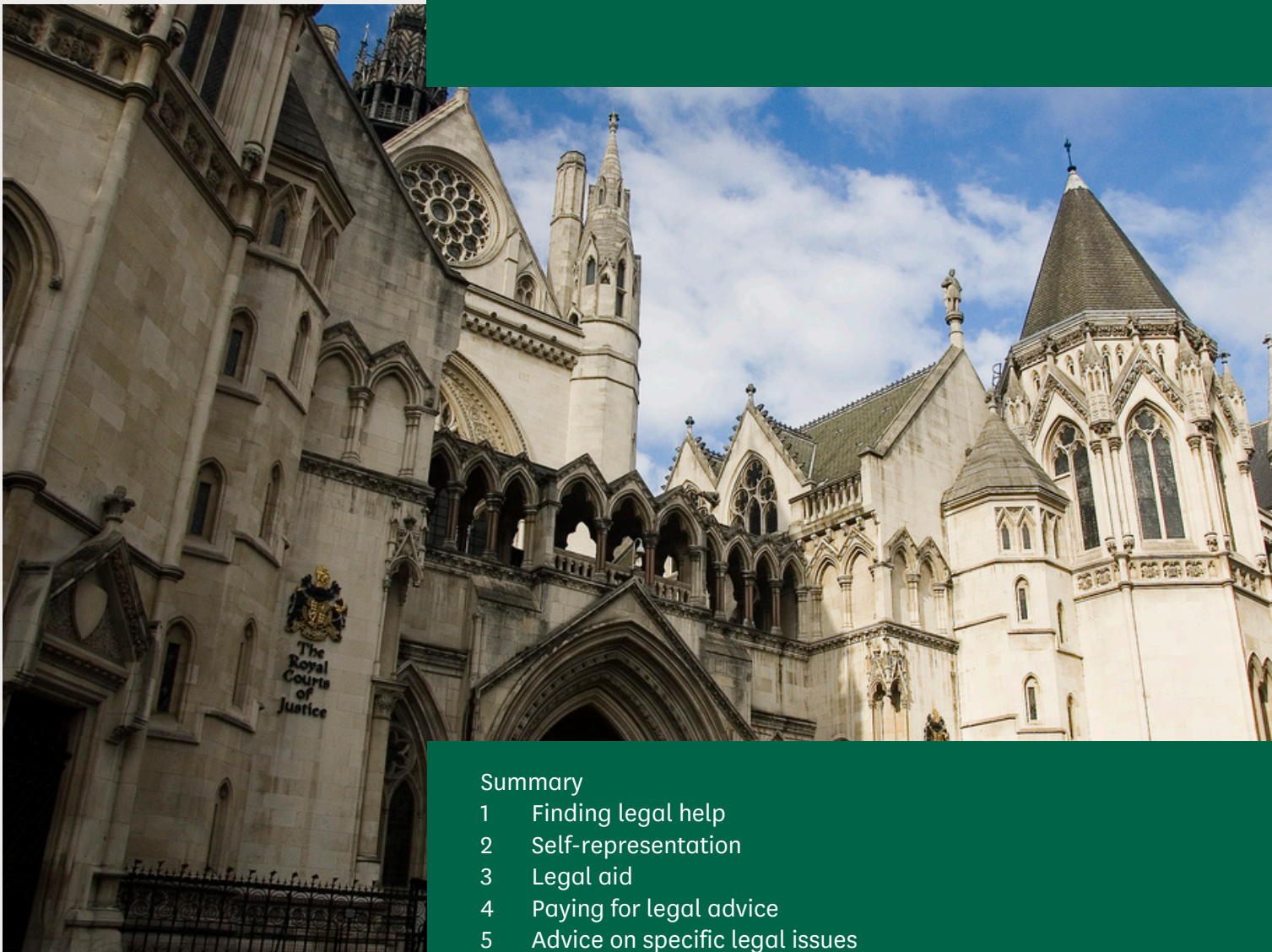


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24 September 2021

Legal help: where to go and how to pay



Summary

- 1 Finding legal help
- 2 Self-representation
- 3 Legal aid
- 4 Paying for legal advice
- 5 Advice on specific legal issues

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Summary

This Commons Library briefing paper provides information about sources of legal help and advice, and how to pay for it, including:

- Finding legal help;
- Self-representation;
- Legal aid;
- Pro bono legal help;
- Other ways of finding legal advice, including organisations which provide help and advice regarding specific legal issues.

Legal help or advice should be given by a suitably qualified person with professional liability insurance.

Related Commons Library briefing papers

- [Legal advice and help in employment matters](#), SN/BT/2830, 9 June 2017
- [No win, no free funding arrangements](#), CBP/HA/7607, 31 May 2016

Hypertext links and URLs in this note are accurate at the date of publication, 24 September 2021.

The Library is unable to endorse or take responsibility for the content of any external website, directory or publication mentioned in this note, or to recommend any specific legal advisers. Many of the organisations listed in this paper were found via a web search only and this list may not be exhaustive.

1 Finding legal help

1.1 Solicitors

[GOV.UK](#) has links to searchable databases of legal advisers¹ provided respectively by the Law Societies of [England and Wales](#),² [Scotland](#)³ and [Northern Ireland](#).⁴

Local libraries will often have hard copy directories of solicitors.

1.2 Direct access barristers

Barristers normally take instruction through solicitors acting on their client's behalf. However, it is sometimes possible for members of the public to go directly to a barrister through the public access scheme. The Bar Council has published [guidance](#) on how to use this scheme, how it might save money, and what type of cases might be suitable for public access.⁵

The Bar Council has further information about [public access](#) on their website,⁶ including a link to the [Direct Access Portal website](#), which has an official register of direct access barristers.⁷

1.3 Citizens Advice

[Citizens Advice](#) provides free, independent and confidential advice about a range of legal issues. Advice can be sought online, by phone and at 3,000 locations across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/find-a-legal-adviser>

² <http://solicitors.lawsociety.org.uk/>

³ <http://www.lawscot.org.uk/find-a-solicitor>

⁴ <http://www.lawsoc-ni.org/solicitors-directory/>

⁵ <https://www.barstandardsboard.org.uk/uploads/assets/20f0db2a-a40c-4af9-95b1b9557ad748e9/Public-Access-Guidance-for-Lay-Clients.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.barcouncil.org.uk/bar-council-services/for-the-public/direct-access-portal.html>

⁷ <https://www.directaccessportal.co.uk/>

There are online search facilities for finding a local bureau:

- [England and Wales](#);⁸
- [Scotland](#);⁹
- [Northern Ireland](#).¹⁰

1.4 Advicenow

[Advicenow](#)¹¹ provides free online guides on a wide range of legal issues, as well as links to other useful information. There is a section on everyday legal problems: [Know-How: Boost your legal knowledge, confidence and skills](#).¹²

1.5 AdviceUK

AdviceUK is a charity that supports a large network of independent advice services. It's [Find Advice](#) tool enables users to search for organisations and helplines offering advice on a range of different topics, based on location.¹³

1.6 Law Centres

Law Centres offer free and independent legal advice within their local communities. Law Centres tend to specialise in social welfare law but may also cover other areas of work. [The Law Centres Network website](#)¹⁴ provides an online search facility:

- [Find your local Law Centre](#)

1.7 Pro bono legal help

Pro bono assistance is legal advice and representation provided voluntarily, generally for those unable to pay and who are ineligible for legal aid. Organisations which provide pro bono legal help include:

⁸ www.citizensadvice.org.uk/

⁹ www.cas.org.uk/bureaux

¹⁰ www.citizensadvice.org.uk/nireland/

¹¹ <http://www.advicenow.org.uk/>

¹² <http://www.advicenow.org.uk/know-how>

¹³ <https://www.adviceuk.org.uk/looking-for-advice/find-advice/>

¹⁴ <http://www.lawcentres.org.uk/>

- [Advocate](#), which matches people needing help with barristers willing to donate their time and expertise in deserving cases;¹⁵
- [LawWorks](#) (the solicitors' pro bono organisation), which connects people in need of legal advice and assistance with volunteer lawyers;¹⁶
- [The Free Representation Unit](#), which works with about 200 referral agencies to deliver pro bono legal services in employment, social security and some criminal injury compensation cases.¹⁷

1.8 Trade unions

Some trade unions may provide free legal help and assistance to their members as part of their membership. Information about the help individual unions provide is often available from their websites.

1.9 University law clinics

Some universities provide free legal advice through law clinics. For information on the type of help being offered, visit the website of the individual university. AdviceUK's search tool (see above) can be used to identify local law clinics.

1.10 Legal help at a police station

Individuals have the right for free independent legal advice, regardless of financial circumstances, when questioned at a police station. The GOV.UK website has an overview of how an individual can access this free advice: [Legal advice at the police station](#).¹⁸

1.11 Finding legal help abroad

There are [lists of English speaking lawyers in other countries](#) on the GOV.UK website. These lists have been compiled by British Embassies, High Commissions and Consulates abroad. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office states that the lists should not be considered 'recommendations' and as such

¹⁵ <https://weareadvocate.org.uk/>

¹⁶ <http://lawworks.org.uk/>

¹⁷ <http://www.thefru.org.uk/>

¹⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/arrested-your-rights/legal-advice-at-the-police-station>

they do not take legal responsibility for individuals who use the lists to find a local lawyer.¹⁹

The Law Society's [Find a solicitor tool](#) allows users to select a country in which to search for a solicitor.²⁰

The charity and human rights organisation [Fair Trails](#) has produced a series of guides on how different legal systems work. These guides are designed to provide information for people who have been arrested abroad.²¹

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/list-of-lawyers>

²⁰ <http://solicitors.lawsociety.org.uk/>

²¹ <https://www.fairtrials.org/need-help?global-resources=>

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Self-representation

Individuals generally have the right to act on their own behalf in legal matters, including representing themselves in court (as “litigant in person”).²² Further information is provided by GOV.UK, [Represent yourself in court](#).

The Ministry of Justice funds the Litigant in Person Support Strategy in partnership with voluntary partners and the pro bono sector. As part of this strategy, a section of Advicenow’s website is dedicated to providing advice [For people going to court, or thinking about it, without the help of a lawyer](#).²³

²² <https://www.gov.uk/represent-yourself-in-court>

²³ <https://www.advicenow.org.uk/lawforlife/law-for-life-projects/litigant-in-person-support-strategy>

3 Legal aid

3.1 Legal aid in England and Wales

An individual who needs help to pay for legal advice or representation in England and Wales may sometimes be eligible for assistance through the legal aid scheme. Legal aid is available for some civil and criminal matters. [The Law Society's website lists matters which may be eligible for legal aid.](#)²⁴

In short, the matter will need to be within scope of the legal aid scheme and considered serious, and the individual must fulfil the financial eligibility criteria. In some cases, those in receipt of legal aid may be required to make a contribution to meeting their legal costs. A legal adviser will usually apply for legal aid on their client's behalf.

Eligible individuals with certain types of case (e.g. debt, under certain circumstances, or discrimination) may be able to access legal aid using the [Civil Legal Advice](#) telephone service (0345 345 4345).²⁵

Further information is available online, including:

- GOV.UK provides further information on civil [Legal aid](#)²⁶ and an online eligibility tool to [Check if you can get legal aid](#) (providing general guidance, but not a decision, on eligibility for civil legal aid).²⁷
- The Legal Aid Agency has published information explaining when someone may be asked to contribute to their legal aid costs: [Paying for your civil legal aid.](#)²⁸

The Legal Aid Agency provides a tool to search for legal advisers and family mediators with legal aid contracts in England and Wales: [Find a legal aid adviser or family mediator.](#)²⁹

²⁴ <http://www.lawsociety.org.uk/for-the-public/paying-for-legal-services/legal-aid/#two>

²⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/civil-legal-advice>

²⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/legal-aid>

²⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/check-legal-aid>

²⁸ <http://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/legal-aid/funding-code/paying-for-your-civil-legal-aid-leaflet.pdf>

²⁹ <http://find-legal-advice.justice.gov.uk/>

3.2 Legal aid in Scotland

The Scottish Legal Aid Board (SLAB) manages the legal aid system in Scotland. To be eligible for funding, matters must relate to Scots law. [SLAB's website](#) provides information and guidance on obtaining legal aid in Scotland.³⁰

3.3 Legal aid in Northern Ireland

The Legal Services Agency Northern Ireland (LSANI) administers the statutory legal aid scheme for Northern Ireland. [The website of the Department of Justice for Northern Ireland](#) provides information about LSANI and obtaining legal aid in Northern Ireland.³¹

3.4 Legal aid abroad

An individual who needs legal help abroad can apply for legal aid in most other countries in Europe. The GOV.UK page [Legal aid: legal problems abroad](#) provides a full list countries in which legal aid is available and explains who to contact for information on how to apply.³² Applicants will need to satisfy the eligibility requirements of the legal aid scheme in the country concerned.

³⁰ <https://www.slab.org.uk/new-to-legal-aid/>

³¹ <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/topics/legal-aid>

³² <https://www.gov.uk/legal-aid/legal-problems-abroad>

4 Paying for legal advice

4.1 Fixed fee initial interview

Some solicitors offer initial legal advice for free or at a fixed rate. Your local Citizens Advice may have details of local solicitors who offer this service.

4.2 “No win, no fee” agreements

In some civil cases a solicitor may be prepared to act on a “no win, no fee” basis. There are two types of no win no fee agreements: conditional fee agreements (CFAs) and damages-based agreements (DBAs, sometimes called contingency fee agreements). In both types of no win no fee cases, the lawyer shares with the client the risk of losing the case.

No win no fee agreements cannot be used in family cases or in criminal cases.

A solicitor is not obliged to accept a case on a no win no fee basis and will weigh-up the merits of the case and its prospects of success when deciding whether to act.

It is important to note that there may be an expectation of some form of payment whatever the outcome of the case.

If the case is successful, then the solicitor is paid – generally their fee plus an uplift or success fee (on CFAs) or a percentage of the damages recovered (on DBAs). Although the losing party may pay the successful party’s lawyer’s basic fees, the client will generally have to pay their own lawyer’s success fee (often from any compensation awarded).

If the case is unsuccessful, the client does not have to pay their own solicitor’s fees but may sometimes have to pay the opponent’s costs, and both sides’ disbursements (other expenses or charges, such as fees for expert witnesses if they are needed).

A lawyer should be able to explain all available funding options and possible costs.

To cover the risk of having to pay the other side’s costs if the case is unsuccessful, the client may be advised to take out an “after-the event” (ATE) insurance policy. Although, it is worth noting that in most circumstances it is

no longer possible to recover any premium payable in taking out ATE insurance from the losing party if the case is successful.

Further information about no win no fee agreements is provided by the Solicitors Regulation Authority's [Understanding costs](#) webpage.³³

4.3

Legal expenses insurance

Legal expenses insurance (sometimes called before the event insurance) can cover the cost of some legal advice and proceedings. Motor insurance policies and household contents insurance policies sometimes have legal expenses insurance attached to them. Individuals should check the terms of their own policies to see the extent of their insurance cover.

³³ <https://www.sra.org.uk/consumers/using-solicitor/costs-legal-aid>

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Advice on specific legal issues

A number of organisations provide help and advice in connection with specific legal issues. Some examples are provided below. This list of suggested sources is not meant to be exhaustive.

Action against Medical Accidents

[Action against Medical Accidents](#) provides free and impartial advice for people affected by medical accidents (0845 123 2352).³⁴

Advicelocal

[Advicelocal](#) is a service run by the charity [rightsnet](#) which provides information on social welfare problems tailored by locality.³⁵

Age UK

The charity [Age UK](#) provides advice and information on its website and through its advice line (0800 678 1602) about a range of issues relevant to older people.³⁶

Asylum Support Appeals Project

[Asylum Support Appeals Project](#) (ASAP) offers free legal representation and advice to asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers appealing against Home Office decisions to refuse or withdraw their housing, financial subsistence, or both (0203 716 0283).³⁷

³⁴ <https://www.avma.org.uk/>

³⁵ <https://advicelocal.uk/about>

³⁶ <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/services/age-uk-advice-line/>

³⁷ <http://www.asaproject.org/>

Bail for Immigration Detainees

[Bail for Immigration Detainees](#) (BID) is an independent charity that represents some detainees at bail hearings for free and provides free legal advice and representation to people who are challenging their deportation (020 7456 9750).³⁸

Coram Children's Legal Centre

[Coram Children's Legal Centre](#) (CLC) is a charity that provides free legal information, advice and representation to children, young people, their families, carers and professionals, as well as training and consultancy on child law and children's rights.³⁹

Disability Law Service

The [Disability Law Service](#) is a charity which provides free information and advice, as well as free full legal representation in some cases, in areas such as community care and employment law (020 7791 9800).⁴⁰

Equality Advisory Support Service

The [Equality Advisory Support Service](#) (EASS) advises and assists individuals on issues relating to equality and human rights (0808 800 0082).⁴¹

Family Rights Group

[Family Rights Group](#) is a charity that provides free advice to parents, and wider family members and friends who are raising children, when they are involved with children's services or need their help (0808 801 0366).⁴²

³⁸ <http://www.biduk.org/pages/6-information-for-detainees>

³⁹ <https://www.childrenslegalcentre.com/about-us/>

⁴⁰ <https://dls.org.uk/free-advice/>

⁴¹ <https://www.equalityadvisoryservice.com/app/about>

⁴² <https://frg.org.uk/get-help-and-advice/>

INQUEST

INQUEST provides specialist advice to bereaved families on cases involving a death in state care or detention in England and Wales, and in some other cases where the conduct of the state or corporate bodies are in question (020 7263 1111).⁴³

Mind

Mind, a mental health charity, provides a helpline for legal information and general advice on mental health related law (0300 466 6463).⁴⁴

Moneyhelper

MoneyHelper brings together the support and services of three government-backed financial guidance providers: Money Advice Service, The Pensions Advisory Service and Pension Wise. Support can be accessed online, over the phone or face-to-face.⁴⁵

National Debtline

The National Debtline is a free and confidential helpline offering independent advice on how to deal with debt problems in England, Wales and Scotland (0808 808 4000).⁴⁶

Prisoners' Advice Service

The Prisoners' Advice Service is a charity offering free legal advice and support to adult prisoners in England and Wales (020 7253 3323).⁴⁷

⁴³ <https://www.inquest.org.uk/our-services>

⁴⁴ <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/helplines/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.moneyhelper.org.uk/en/about-us/who-we-are>

⁴⁶ <https://www.nationaldebtline.org/>

⁴⁷ <http://www.prisonersadvice.org.uk/>

Refugee Action

The charity [Refugee Action](#) provides help and advice about claiming asylum, the asylum process and asylum support and assisted voluntary return. Refugee Action do not have an advice helpline, but provide advice and information through their [available services](#).⁴⁸

Rights of Women

The charity [Rights of Women](#) provides free and confidential legal advice to women on issues such as family law (020 7251 6577), criminal law (020 7251 8887), immigration (020 7490 7689) and sexual harassment at work (020 7490 0152).⁴⁹

Shelter

The charity [Shelter](#) provides information and advice on their website and through their helpline (0808 800 4444) about housing issues, including evictions, repossessions and homelessness.⁵⁰

Shelter has a [separate website for Scotland](#), where housing law is different.

⁴⁸ <http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/our-services/help-and-advice/>

⁴⁹ <http://rightsofwomen.org.uk/get-advice/>

⁵⁰ https://england.shelter.org.uk/housing_advice

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