community law service northampton & county

advice UK MEMBER

Accredited LEXCEL The Law Society

Immigration Advice Authority

Annual Report 2025-2026

Contents

Page 3	Mission and Values
Page 4	Chief Executive's Report
Page 5	Outreach Locations
Pages 6-8	Our Performance and Client Data
Page 9	Our Work - a Summary by Department
Pages 10-14	Case Studies
Pages 15-16	Financial Summary
Page 17	Client Feedback

Our Mission

"To improve access to justice, particularly for those in our local community who are disadvantaged or facing hardship."

We seek to deliver this by:

- ***Being accessible to all***
- ***Providing high quality advice***
- ***Educating people on their rights, to build future resilience***
- ***Upholding our independence***
- ***Directing people to self help where appropriate and providing end to end casework for those who need it.***

Our Values

Collaborate

- working in partnership with community focused groups improves services for our communities by them being more connected and reaching more people. It also improves efficiency and gives better value for money. We seek out and take up opportunities to collaborate.

Agile

- we know the needs of our community can change. We listen to our clients and colleagues to ensure we understand local need and strive to deliver services that meets that need.

Respectful

– we treat everyone with whom we engage with respect and without judgment.

Empowering

– we want people to be in control of their lives and be able to make informed decisions. We work to ensure people have the information to enable them to make the right decisions for them, to give them knowledge and resilience and to ensure they can live their best life.

Chief Executive's Report

This year has once again demonstrated the vital role our charity plays in helping people access the advice and information they need. At a time when household finances remain under significant pressure and the 'cost of living crisis' becomes almost the norm for many, demand for our Service has remained high. We have responded by providing high-quality, specialist advice and representation to thousands of local people, helping them to resolve problems, avoid crisis and improve their financial resilience and wellbeing. A remarkable 77% of clients reported getting advice from CLS improved or protected their health.

A key priority this year has been making advice as accessible as possible, bringing our services into communities. Our advisers now work across 21 community locations, including foodbanks, community larders, Family Hubs and other local venues. By bringing advice closer to where people live and access other services, we are reaching people who may otherwise not access help, or access help only after problems have escalated.

New partnerships with local organisations strengthened referral pathways and enabled us to provide more joined-up support, this year we were pleased to receive referrals from 110 separate sources.

We have continued to invest in the future of advice services, including developing trainee advisers and a trainee solicitor, strengthening our capacity and working closely with partners across the voluntary, community and public sectors. We continue to work as efficiently as possible whilst maintaining high quality standards and a positive working environment.

A full LEXCEL audit this year identified 10 new areas of good practice, including strong collaborations amongst advice teams to best resolve client matters, and a "positive workplace culture".

The challenges facing our clients are still complex, with one case bringing an average of 3.7 separate issues to resolve this year. Our "Sort It Sooner" campaign launched in September has a prevention aim: to encourage people to seek advice earlier, reducing escalation of issues and reducing the stress and hardship experienced by individuals and families.

This year has seen the worrying trend of more clients with dependent children facing financial hardship, now at 50%. We have delivered training and presentations to Northamptonshire Childrens' Trust and continue to work in some Family Hubs. We will continue to develop this focus in the coming year.

None of this would be possible without our committed staff team. Their knowledge, professionalism and dedication make a real difference every day. I am very grateful to our funders, volunteers, partners and colleagues. Their confidence, investment and collaboration enable us to deliver our much needed services.

Looking ahead, we will continue to build capacity, strengthen partnerships and networks, and improve access to early advice, whilst continuing our core advice services. Our mission remains clear: To improve access to justice, particularly for those in our local community who are disadvantaged or facing hardship.

I hope you find this report an interesting read.

Sarah Hayle Chief Executive

Outreach Locations

Brixworth Community Larder

Our Offices, Hazelwood Road
One Angel Square
Northampton Combined Court
Hope Centre
St Mary's Church, Towcester Road
Bangaldeshi Centre, Mill Road
Emmanual Church, Weston Favell
McCathy Dixon Foundation, Grove Road
Liberty House, Wellingborough Road
Leicester Street Hub
Foodkind, Headlands
Restore (Sheep Street)

Daventry Children's Centre
Daventry Community Larder

Long Buckby Larder

Peterborough Combined Court

Corby Citizens Advice Services

Rothwell Foodbank

Kettering Citizens Advice Services
Kettering Foodbank - Salvation Army
Kettering Foodbank - Avondale

Our Offices, Midland Road

Encompass

Towcester Foodbank

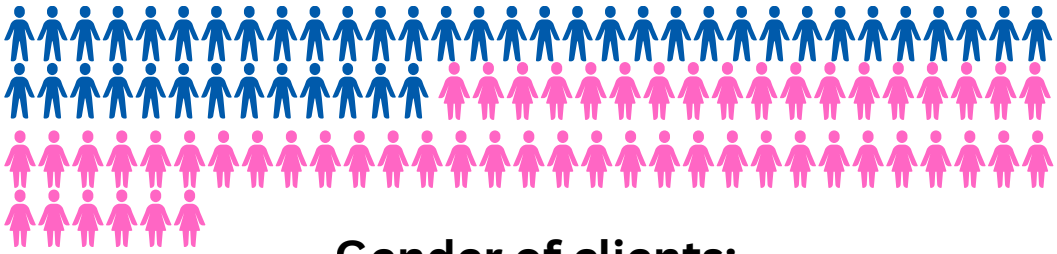
Milton Keynes County Court

For a live calendar of outreach services please visit our website www.communitylawservice.org.uk

Our Performance

16530	People provided with advice and information
£8,121,431	Welfare benefit income claimed for local residents
£33,077,330	Debt managed on behalf of clients
1054	Court hearings attended in respect of housing repossession and eviction
124	Social Security Appeal Tribunals supported

I have never asked for help before.
When my bolier broke my house was below zero.
I am grateful to your service for getting my new boiler installed



Gender of clients:
45% Male
55% Female

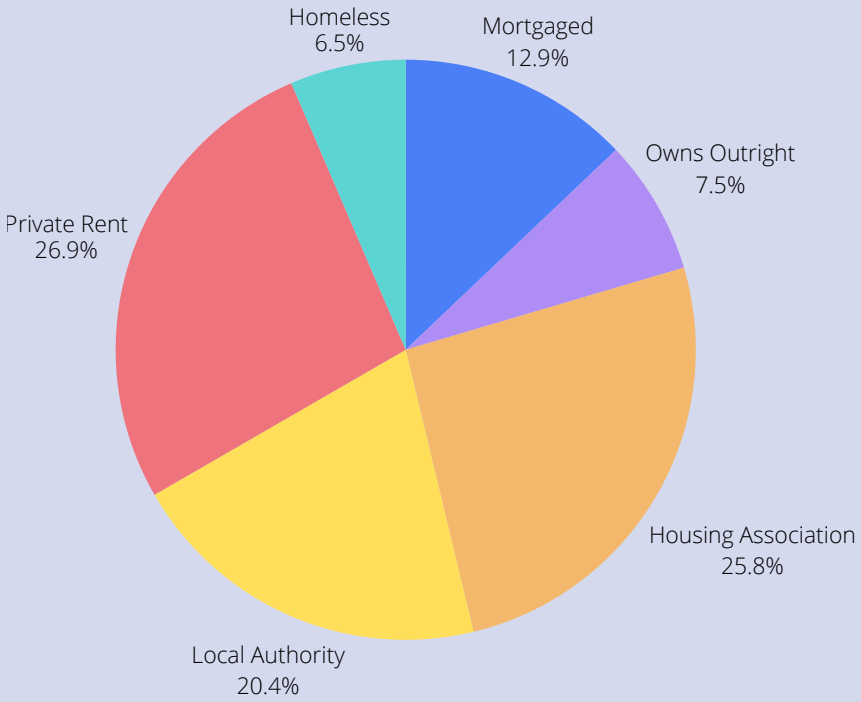
72% of clients have a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long term adverse effect on their ability to carry out their normal day to day activities

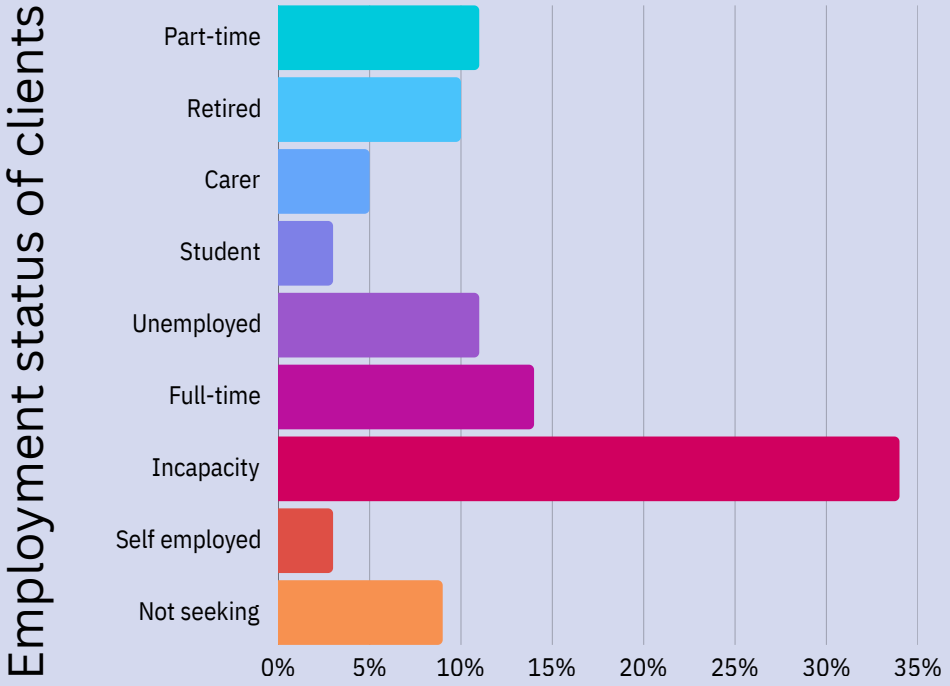
I can't express how truly thankful I am for your support, care and guidance. CLS have changed my life in a powerful way

Our Performance

You gave me clarity and reassurance
at a time I truly needed it

Client's Housing Tenure





Clients were referred / signposted to us from 110 separate organisations

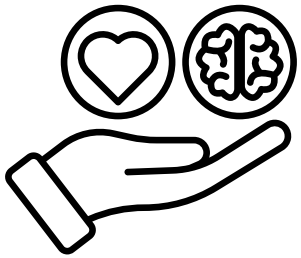
Our Performance

£325,057	Debt written off
£104,521	Grants obtained for clients
1226	Energy savings devices provided to clients
£16,759,410	Housing debt managed
125	Clients obtained secure immigration status

You made me feel seen and I feel you will help me not become homeless, you are the first person in a long time that has given me hope

We assisted people from 65 different nationalities

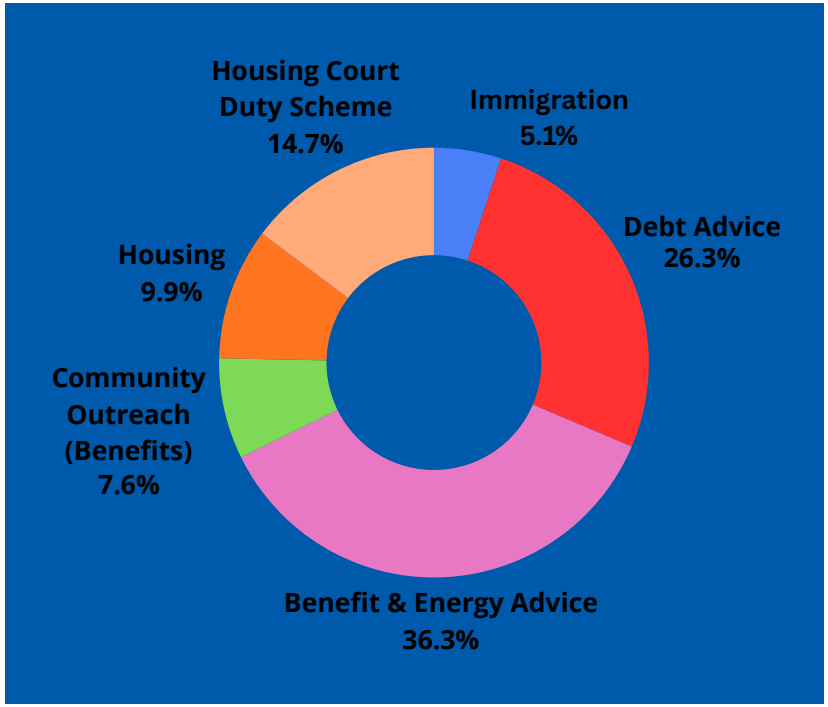
Without your help I would not have challenged the various negative decisions from the benefit authorities. Your organisation has been invaluable



77% of clients said the assistance had helped improve their health or prevented it from deteriorating

Our Work

The demand for our **Housing Service** continues to be high.
Ahead of the Renters Rights Act we have seen many landlords coming out of the market and serving section 21 notices at a late stage, to get possession orders under the old rules. There is also a rise in enquiries relating to HMO accommodation as landlords convert properties to make more money.
Homelessness continues to be on the rise as councils are not accepting homeless applications from single people due to them having no priority need.
We are also seeing increasing demand for challenges to decisions where clients have no legal merit in their case leading to clients feeling dissatisfied.
Due to cost of living, rent payments can be an issue and become unaffordable and so when applying as homeless client's risk being found intentionally homeless.
Our Court Duty service is consistently busy and we are seeing ever more complex cases in court.
The ever-increasing demand for our specialist **Benefits & Energy Service** has continued throughout 2025/26, resulting in significant Welfare Benefit income of £8,121,431 claimed for 2126 residents across Northamptonshire, following specialist advice and representation provided by our highly experienced team.
Despite stable funding provisions during this period, demand for advice has remained high leading to increased wait times for appointments along with continued need to be transparent and manage expectations of clients and referral partners.
We have seen a rise in poor administrative decisions by statutory services requiring lengthy legal challenges. In particular automated Council Tax and Housing Benefit systems are generating frequent errors that escape human oversight, failing to track changes in circumstances correctly. In addition the erroneous removal of the Work Capability Assessment element, alongside frequent system miscalculations, is driving overpayment disputes and missing awards, all requiring lengthy, complex casework and representation.



The **Immigration Service** remains in high demand with a total of 665 enquiries throughout the year. Of those, we were able to assist 296 clients, with a majority of them residing in Northamptonshire with only 6% out of the county.
We are continuing to assist returning clients for extension applications but are also seeing an increase in advice relating to domestic violence, change of conditions for individuals/families who are struggling in the current economic environment and skilled workers who have lost their sponsor but want to remain in the UK to work. Further, with the rising cost of fees to the Home Office we have assisted many clients in successful fee waiver applications to save them thousands of pounds.
Throughout the last year we were able to assist a majority of these clients to a successful conclusion for free, using funding gratefully received from West Northants Council or our Justice Together funding. We have also been able to assist clients on a fee paying basis where they have funds available, reserving the free advice for those who cannot pay.

This year the **Debt Service** has managed £33m of outstanding debt. Clients regularly present with a combination of priority and non-priority debt, which often includes debts like rent arrears and council tax arrears. If these debts are not addressed, they can lead to eviction or bailiff enforcement.
We also continue to see a significant number of clients in deficit budgets. This makes it challenging to enter them into a debt solution, as they are at risk of falling back into debt straight away.

The debt team assisted clients to process a total of 160 Debt Relief Orders (DROs). This form of insolvency is free to the client and ensures that their debts are written off. Clients can then move forward free from the stress and anxiety caused by enforcement. Debt management plans are the other significant debt solution we assist with, where clients can repay their debts at an affordable rate.

Client Situation:

Client attended a Community Larder in Northampton to seek advice on disputing a negative Universal Credit and for wider money advice due to experiencing financial hardship since their relationship ended.
Client has pre-settled status, living in council rented accommodation under a tenancy in the ex-partner's name. There were rent arrears of £2,900. 00.
Client's eldest child is disabled and has an award of Disability Living Allowance and Carers Allowance was in payment to client. Child Benefit was also in payment. Following the relationship ending, client made an application for Universal Credit as a single parent to two children, aged 6 & 4. The Universal Credit decision noted that client was not eligible due to their immigration status.

An assessment of the situation concluded no eligibility to Universal Credit presently, but an application for Settled Status would change that. Client's application for settled status was successful within a matter of weeks and client was assisted with a new application to Universal Credit, which was successful. Unfortunately, no help with rent was awarded as the landlord would not allow the client to be placed on the tenancy due to rent arrears. This was challenged. The landlord issued a S21 Notice to client's ex-partner and the client obtained advice from CLS Housing Team in respect of potential homelessness. They were supported through the possession process, which resulted in a possession order being granted to the landlord with client's ex-partner being liable for rent arrears. The client was assisted with emergency food via the food larder over a number of weeks and also issued a fuel voucher.

Following further representations, the landlord worked with the council's homelessness service which enabled the client to remain in the property as temporary accommodation and she could now bid for permanent accommodation. The client was assisted with an application for Housing Benefit which was successful. The client was assisted with an application for Council Tax Reduction which was successful. A council tax hardship payment was also awarded for the period of time when client's relationship ended and they were not eligible to claim Universal Credit.
The client was assisted with the eldest's child's DLA review resulting in an increased award.
The client was also assisted with ensuring energy accounts were in their name now the tenancy was changed to temporary accommodation in their name.
An internal referral made to CLS Debt team for assistance with Council Tax debts from 2024.

Outcomes

UC awarded at £1346.20 per month.

Disability Living Allowance Lower Rate Mobility awarded at £29.20 per week / £126.53 per month.

Council Tax Reduction awarded at £20.79 per week / £90.09 per month.

Housing Benefit awarded at £211.92 per week / £918.32 per month.

Total Benefit gains following assistance from Community Law Service are £2,481.14 per month which equates to £29,773.68 per year.

Local assistance provided to client includes:
Emergency Fuel Voucher issued for £100.
Council Tax Hardship Payment awarded at £253.28.
Access to food larder free of charge during the period when client had pre-settled status.
Most importantly with assistance from CLS the client and her children avoided an unnecessary house move which would have been extremely unsettling and disruptive.
The client's financial situation has improved significantly since she first sought advice from our Service.

Client approached our service for assistance with priority debts of rent, council tax and energy along with numerous non-priority debts. Client worked part time supplemented by universal credit and lived with a non-dependent disabled child. Client was a carer for her child and also had health problems herself so was unable to work full time.

We initially assisted the client to make affordable payment arrangements on her debts. However, her circumstances then changed leading to a drop in income and her defaulting on the arrangement. Client re-approached the Debt Advisor as she was now being chased by Enforcement Agents for her council tax. The client was immediately placed into Breathing Space to pause all enforcement action and allow time to reassess her situation and the options available to her.

The Debt Advisor re-evaluated her income and expenditure and identified ways of maximising income and reducing expenditure. They identified that she was now eligible to apply for a Debt Relief Order, which would write off the debts. Due to the rent arrears the Debt Advisor liaised with the landlord to ensure that the tenancy would remain secure.

It was identified that over the previous 18 months, payments had been made to a family member to repay a loan, which could potentially mean that the DRO was not approved by The Insolvency Service. The Debt Advisor fully investigated these payments and obtained supporting evidence surrounding these payments and this was provided to The Insolvency Service with the application.

The DRO was approved with over £20,000 of debt written off and the client was now in a position to meet all expenses going forward.

Client sought immigration advice following domestic violence from her partner. She was living in the country on a spouse visa and had to leave her home because of the violence, both physical and mental, and was living in a refuge. CLS represented her and helped her to apply for permanent settlement. Extensive research and evidence gathering was necessary to ensure the best outcome. Evidence from various sources was gathered: the police, family lawyers, medical reports, the Refuge. CLS also corresponded with MARAC and social services, preparing statements from independent witnesses and a full and detailed statement from the client. The evidence gathering was a crucial part of the application's success.

The Advisor made detailed and lengthy representations to support the application under the Domestic Violence rules to include evidence from the above agencies. All of these documents were to prove the sustained abuse that the client had endured. This had to be set out in detail for consideration by the Home Office.

The Home Office considered the application and decided to issue the client with Indefinite Leave to Remain. They are now settled and able to continue with their life free of violence.

Before concluding the case, CLS ensured the client was supported within the community and able to deal with and accessing vital online documents including their eVisa account.

The client was assisted via the Housing Loss Prevention Advice Service, with a Section 21 possession hearing at Peterborough County Court in November 2025.

A hearing had been listed as the Defendant indicated on the papers that they wanted to make an exceptional hardship application under Section 89 Housing Act 1980. This was because they wanted additional time at the property due to their self-employed business being in its infancy and their current low income. The client needed time to grow the business, and to save up for a deposit and rent in advance.

Both the Defendant and their partner had been living in the property for 28 years, at £600pcm. The landlord was originally the client's (late) uncle but relations had broken down with the Defendant's extended family who own multiple properties in Cambridgeshire. The Defendant's cousin had informally took over the management of the property.

In conference, ten minutes before the hearing, having just met the Defendant and while piecing together the client's account, the court papers and facts were carefully reviewed. This identified a discrepancy with the court papers. The tenancy agreement stated the late uncle as the landlord, whilst the claim form and particulars of claim stated the landlord as the cousin.

The discrepancy was subtle: a difference of one letter. Both the late uncle and cousin had the same initials apart from the middle name, and the reason the Judge looking at the papers may have missed the discrepancy.

The issues were two fold. First, there had been no formal notice to the tenant of a change in landlord. Second, the oversight in the papers meant that the claim to possession was improperly constituted. With client's agreement, this was submitted to the Judge who dismissed the claim.

The Claimant then applied to set aside the dismissed claim, and a hearing was listed for one hour. At the set aside hearing in March 2026, CLS represented the client, and made submissions that the application should be dismissed as abuse of process.

The Judge agreed and dismissed the Claimant's set aside application on the grounds of 'abuse of process' and the client and partner were able to remain in their home and save up for their move, removing the risk of homelessness.

Financial Summary

The Charity continued to grow during 2025/26, with total income increasing by 15% to £1,568,155, while expenditure rose by just over 11% to £1,404,024; some of this income has been deferred into the next financial year hence the apparent suplus. At year-end, unrestricted reserves stood at £442,484, providing a sound foundation for the Charity's future work and investment in developments to support our existing staff and services.

A key achievement was the successful migration of our financial records to Xero, improving financial oversight, flexibility and efficiency while reducing costs.

Our financial position was strengthened by significant and diverse funding, including £340,891 from the Money and Pensions Service for specialist, community based debt advice and £196,196 from the British Gas Energy Trust to support money and energy advice across Northamptonshire. Both of these funding sources are longstanding and provide consistent income to deliver services which are in great demand.

Housing Legal Aid generated £179,325 in unrestricted income, including £78,517 from our three court duty services. This money for the most part funds the salaries of the advisers delivering the advice, but any surplus is spent on our charitable aims.

A new funder, the Legal Education Foundation (now LEF), provided a 2 year grant enabling the Charity to become a training provider to aspiring solicitors; a new development which supports our strategic aim of building capacity in the sector.

Strategic Community Grants secured from West and North Northamptonshire Councils provide essential seed funding, providing a sound financial foundation on which we can draw in further grant funding for the benefit of our local residents.

Multi-year funding and strong partnerships with local authorities and advice organisations provide a secure platform from which the Charity can continue to develop sustainable, accessible services for local communities.

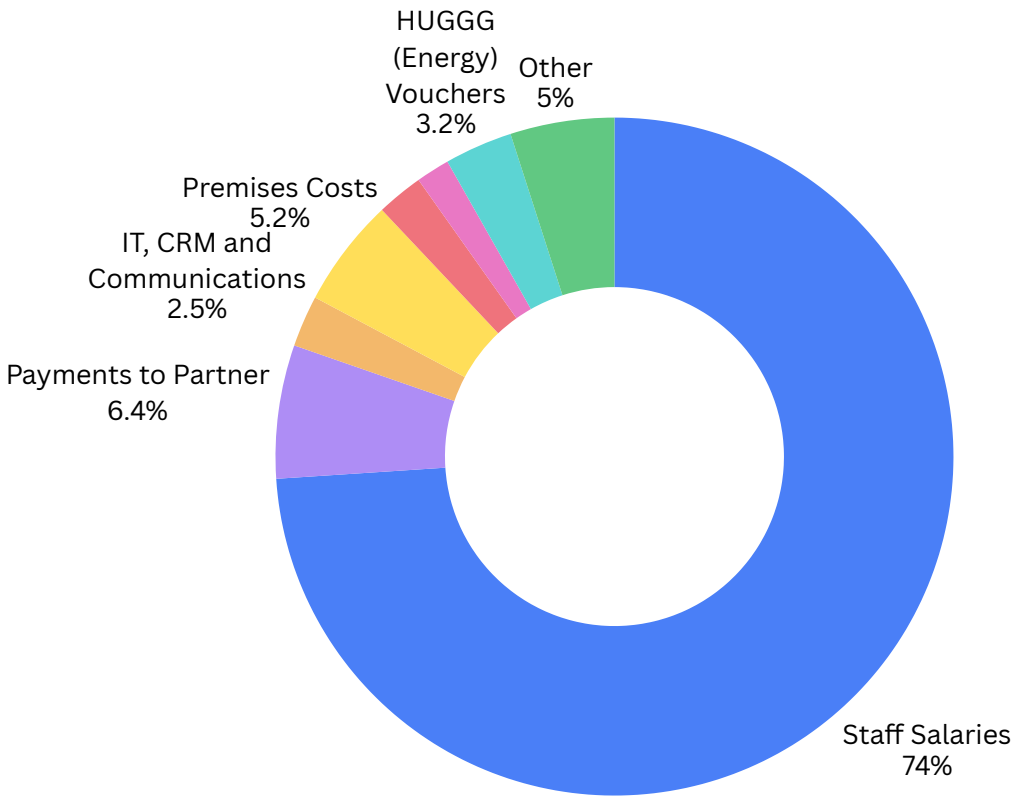
Special thanks to our funders and partners:

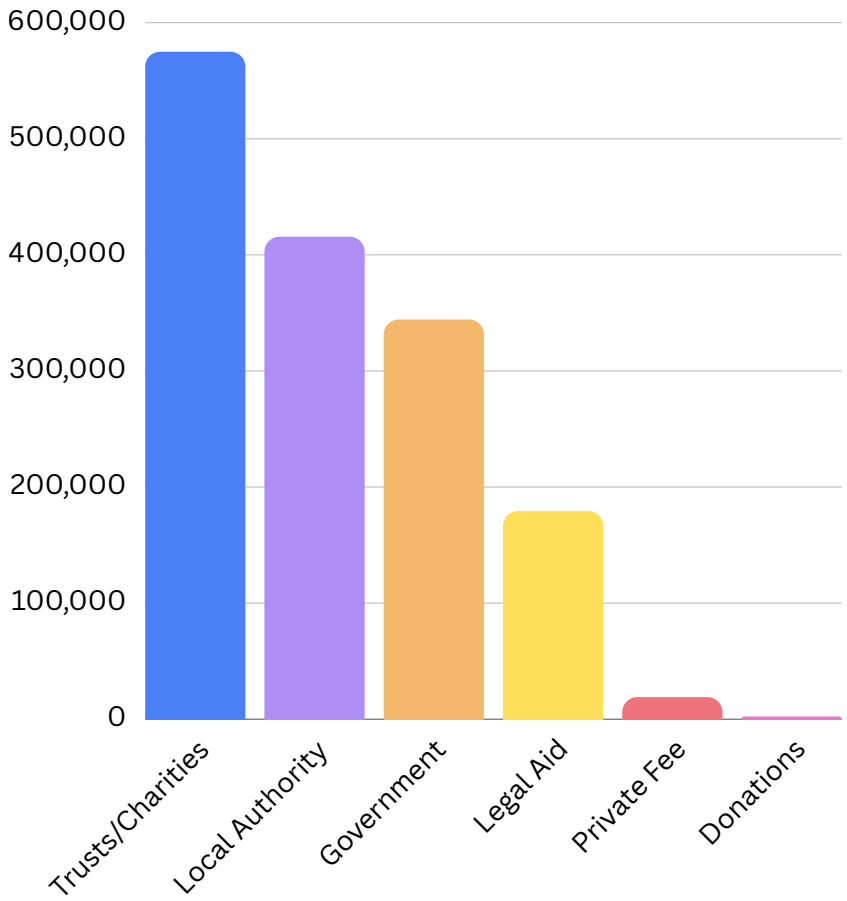
AB Charitable Trust
British Gas Energy Trust
Care and Repair Northamptonshire
Feeding Britain
Justice Together Initiative
Kettering Community Unit
Money and Pensions Service
Northants Rights and Equality Council
North Northamptonshire Council
Northampton Town Council
Northamptonshire Carers Association
Northamptonshire Community Foundation
Re:store
The Access to Justice Foundation
The Henry Smith Charity
The Hope Centre
The Legal Aid Agency
The Legal Education Foundation
The Trussell Trust
Towcester Foodbank
UKSPF
West Northamptonshire Council
Weston Favell Foodbank

Community Law Service is grateful to have ongoing support from many funders. Our sincere thanks go to all of our funders, partners and suporters.

We are also very grateful for the £2,372 received in donations this year.
Donations are accepted through our Justigiving page via our website. Gift-Aiding increases the value of donations.
https://www.communitylawservice.org.uk/

How we spent our funds





Total Income 2025/2026 £1,568,155

Client Feedback

Feedback

All clients receive a client feedback form at the outset. This year we have also introduced a method for capturing feedback during a case to give more insight. Feedback is an important part of our reports to funders and a sample of clients are contacted directly each quarter. We have also have an electronic form which clients receive a link to in their closing letter.
100% of clients who gave feedback said they were listened to and provided with clear and helpful advice. 100% rated their adviser's knowledge as excellent.

Complaints

We have received 5 complaints this year. All have been resolved via our internal complaints system: 1 was upheld in part around a delay in progressing their case; 4 were investigated and responded to, but not upheld. 3 related to CLS not accepting the instruction due to lack of legal merit, 1 was about a court outcome, which was mandatory and beyond our control.

Google Reviews

This year we received 15 reviews - reviews highlighted our friendly staff and accuracy of advice.

Gift and donations

A huge thank you to all that have donated to Community Law Service over the last year. We once again received a big number of 'Thank You' cards and gifts, including chocolates, biscuits and flowers. Thank you to all that have donated financially, sent cards or simply thanked our team, it is really appreciated by all the staff, volunteers and trustees.

'My adviser listened patiently and calmly and demonstrated empathy.'

'Thank you for guiding me through this process and helping me to understand what steps to take'

' There when I need it most. Clear and reassuring advice.'

'I really appreciate all the help you have given me with my benefits, debts and housing - it has actually prevented me from becoming homeless. The help with my energy bill has meant that I can now put my heating on again this winter.'

'Without you I would have been unhappy and stranded.'

community law service
northampton & county

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