



London Pilot of Free Legal Advice for Sexual Violence Complainants

Executive Summary July 2026

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M O P A C

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Introduction

This report evaluates a Mayor of London funded pilot of free and independent legal advice for sexual violence complainants, delivered by the Centre for Women's Justice and Women & Girls Network. It finds strong evidence that this model fills a significant gap in existing support and supports the Government's move to create a national expansion.

Headline Findings

- Demand was high even when the pilot was deliberately kept small-scale: 247 complainants were supported on 297 matters, and the service sometimes had to close to most referrals because demand exceeded capacity.
 - Clients reported feeling heard, validated, empowered to make informed decisions, suggesting that independent legal advice offers procedural justice.
 - Around 35% of matters involved challenging criminal justice decisions or processes. These challenges often led to reopened cases, apologies, or improved handling of evidence requests.
 - The model's independence, specialist mix of legal expertise, trauma-informed practice, partnership with ISVAs, and salaried roles were important for its perceived value.
 - Police and CPS confidence about the legal service needs improvement, perhaps via a national code of practice and training to provide reassurance.
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Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation used mixed methods data from May 2024 to May 2026, including case management data on 297 legal matters, 84 reflective diaries from the pilot team, surveys from 51 clients, 48 support practitioners and 20 police officers, plus follow-up interviews and focus groups with clients, ISVAs, and police. The findings therefore draw on both service data and the perspectives of complainants, support practitioners, and criminal justice professionals.

The Pilot

The London pilot offered free, independent legal advice to women aged 16 and over living in London who had reported sexual violence to the police. It was funded by MOPAC and delivered by Women & Girls Network, with legal supervision from the Centre for Women's Justice. The pilot began taking referrals in May 2024, and this report evaluates its first two years of operation to May 2026.

The service was designed to address a longstanding gap in support for complainants navigating the criminal justice process. Its scope covered:

1. Requests to access complainants' sensitive personal data
2. The Victims' Right to Review scheme
3. Complaints about the police and/or CPS
4. Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority claims (eligibility & time limits)
5. Other legal issues relating to complainants' rights and interests within the criminal justice system

Although the evaluation period ended in May 2026, the pilot has been extended until December 2026. This extension also represents an expansion of the project, with 2 FTE lawyers and 0.8 FTE paralegal, demonstrating MOPAC's continued commitment to the service.

“I cannot stress enough how brilliant and absolutely vital this pilot has been” (Support Practitioner 35)

Key Findings

There is strong demand for legal advice and support.

The pilot demonstrated clear demand for free, independent legal advice. During the first two years, 247 complainants received support across 297 legal matters. This included 42 complainants who returned for further support on additional issues. This level of demand is significant because the pilot was not advertised publicly and referral routes were deliberately limited to manage capacity. Even with these safeguards, demand sometimes exceeded available resources, and the service had to close to most referral routes for around 24 weeks over the two years.

Complainants sought legal support across a wide range of legal issues, reflecting different needs across multiple stages of the criminal justice process. The most common type was general advice about criminal justice matters (37% of all 297 issues handled), followed by Victims' Right to Review (33%), making complaints about the police, CPS, or trial counsel (12%), third-party material requests (9%), Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority applications (6%), and digital device issues (3%).

The median time per case was just over 3.5 hours in year one and 4.6 hours in year two, with VRRs requiring the most resource (median of 7.7 hours in year 2), demonstrating that type of legal issue substantially changes resourcing needs.

*“This support has been truly invaluable and is irreplaceable”
(Client Survey 36)*

Legal support delivers procedural justice for complainants.

The pilot substantially improved complainants' experiences of the criminal justice process. Clients described feeling heard, validated, and better able to understand what was happening in their case. The legal advice helped complainants distinguish between what was lawful and what could be challenged, allowing them to make informed decisions and focus their energy on what mattered most.

Overall, the outcomes described by clients and support practitioners reflected core principles of procedural justice: complainants felt listened to, treated with dignity, and able to participate meaningfully. The findings therefore speak directly to the aims of Soteria approach to rape and serious sexual offences.



DIGNITY & RESPECT

"It has empowered my clients to know their rights"
(Support Practitioner 9)

Protection of clients' rights at the heart of the work.
Sensitive & empathetic treatment recognises client as a whole person.



SAFETY

"It likely helped to save my client's life"
(Support Practitioner 10)

Trauma-informed approach enables clients to feel safe.
Highlighting legal protections (e.g. bail conditions) advances physical safety.



FAIRNESS

"A gamechanger in ensuring that the police follow due process" (Client 20)

Focus on ensuring only relevant evidence considered by CJS.
Helps challenge inconsistent treatment of clients.



TRUST

"I felt I could trust them"
(Client 17)

Independent & expert so advice can be trusted as being in client best interest.
Contributes to sense of CJS openness & accountability.



VOICE

"She made me feel heard and gave me a voice"
(Client 22)

Providing information so clients understand and can make informed choices.
Helps to express choices in legal terminology.

"I still don't know the outcome, but I felt very heard and supported" (Client Survey 7)

"I was at a loss before meeting the lawyer. They helped me to understand my case and my rights, and made me stronger to make the right decisions... I felt supported and taken seriously at last." (Client Survey 31)

Legal challenges produced tangible outcomes.

Around 35% of cases involved challenging the CJS process or decision-making, mostly through Victims Right to Review [VRR], but also via complaints and pushback on over-reaching evidence requests. Notably, most cases in this pilot therefore involved providing information that was not about challenging the CJS, such as explaining why evidence requests or other decisions were lawful.

Where challenges were made, the outcomes were often significant. Of 12 challenges to requests for digital or third-party material, six resulted in the request being fully withdrawn and four in a reduced scope; only two resulted in no change, both because the client chose to consent to avoid delays to trial. Of 21 completed VRR reviews, 46% led to cases being reopened, including three suspects charged and two further cases referred to CPS for a charging decision.

“I would have just handed over all of this evidence that wasn’t relevant... to the detriment of the case, to the detriment of justice” (Client Interview 1)

Beyond quantified outcomes, the pilot encouraged best practice. Steering group discussions regularly led police leads to address issues within their teams, and direct meetings between lawyers, police, and CPS were described as constructive. In other cases, clients received an apology and felt they might improve responses for others in the future because they had raised their concerns.

“The presence of the lawyer appeared to enhance the victim’s ability to engage with the process, and it was evident that this support provided additional reassurance and advocacy for the victim.” (Police Survey 20)

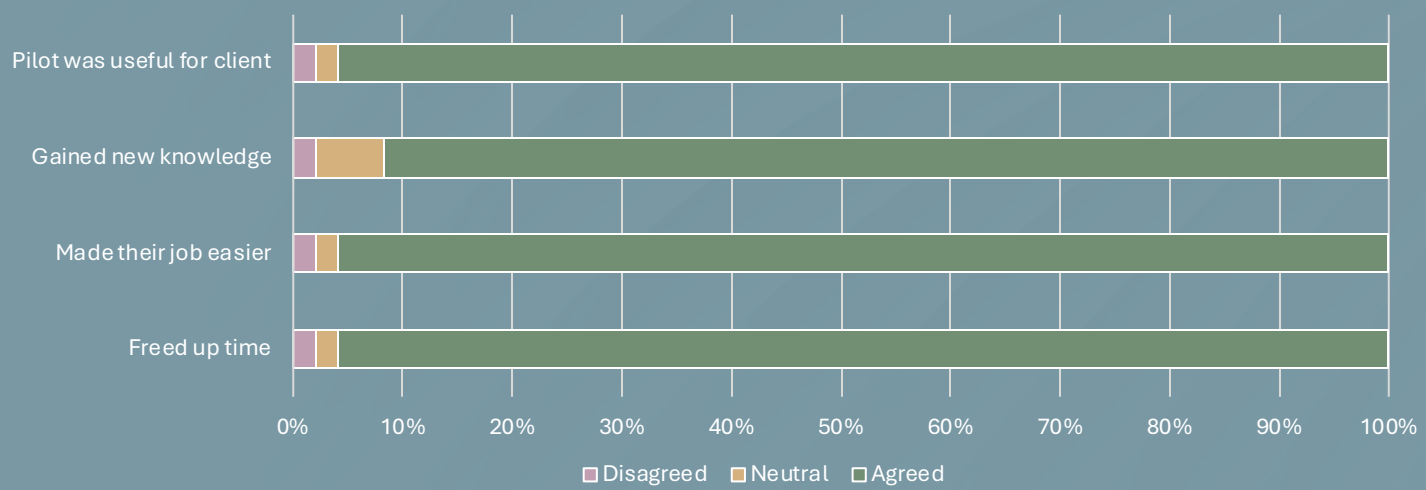
MOPAC’s model brings significant benefits.

The pilot’s benefits were linked to how the service was designed. Clients, support practitioners, and the pilot team valued MOPAC’s model of legal support for being trauma-informed, independent, and specialist. Clients trusted lawyers who understood sexual violence, trauma, safeguarding, and the criminal justice process. Support practitioners valued being able to refer clients to lawyers who were not generalists, but who worked specifically in this area and understood the realities of rape and sexual violence cases.

“I trusted their expertise because they worked entirely on intimate crime [and] they were very compassionate and just human.” (Client Interview 9)

Other strengths included the use of salaried legal roles, because it meant the lawyers could focus on complainants’ rights and interests cost effectively, and the pilot strongly benefited from legal supervision by the Centre for Women’s Justice. Any wider scheme should include properly resourced legal supervision that is independent, trusted by specialist services, and knowledgeable in both criminal and relevant civil law.

Support practitioner perspectives on the pilot (n=48)



CJS practitioners need help to be more confident about engaging.

Police participants in the evaluation raised questions about the potential impact of a legal advice scheme on trust in policing, the risks of witness contamination, and the impact of disclosure obligations. Some police and CPS practitioners were slow to respond to the legal team, and a small number were wary of engaging with the lawyers due to questions about contamination and disclosure. Where police and CPS did engage with the pilot, communication was generally viewed as constructive, but a handful of difficult individual cases created friction.

An initial challenge involved all communication with CPS being routed through police, which turned officers into intermediaries in disputes about decisions they had not made. Police described feeling “caught in the crossfire”, but this was resolved by a clear Memorandum of Understanding between all parties.

Police signposting to the pilot appeared to be concentrated among a small number of individual officers. Interventions by police leads to encourage officer engagement in the referrals process did not produce sustainable results. Embedding signposting into existing police processes may help.

“I do see the benefit in having this scheme [but] I believe the scheme is generally unnecessary and is asking officers to do more with less time” (Police 12)

Key Recommendations for National Scheme

Recommendations are made throughout the report, and are listed here in the order that they arise:

1. Ensure sufficient team sizes to provide resilience during staff turnover and absence, with built-in review points to check resourcing meets demand.
2. Optimise value for money by recruiting both administrative support and paralegals to free up lawyer time.
3. Make legal support accessible for all adult rape complainants.
4. Ensure police clearly understand referral criteria, so ineligible complainants are not told about the support only to be turned away.
5. Lawyers currently advise on a wide range of criminal matters and this is highly valued. A national scheme should maintain this broad scope and also identify how best to effectively signpost clients to support on civil matters.
6. Encourage strong partnership working with support practitioners, e.g., ISVAs, by promoting a shared trauma-informed and client-centred ethos. This should be factored into tendering and recruitment processes.
7. Design of the national scheme should preserve the strengths of MOPAC's model, particularly the lawyers' independence and specialist training on sexual violence (see *Initial Set-Up Report* for further advantages, such as salaried positions).
8. Factor in resources for legal supervision, which should be independent, trusted by specialist services, and knowledgeable in both criminal and civil law (see *Initial Set-Up Report* for the relevant knowledge base).

9. Monitor compliance of whether police provide information about the service at key points, as with the Victims Code, but don't use quotas.
 - Service details should be included in Victim Information Guides, digital data extraction forms, 'NFA' letters, and other relevant paperwork.
 10. Establish a clear escalation route for cases where individual CJS professionals don't respond, or disputes can't easily be resolved.
 - Introduce Single Points of Contact [SPOCs] for each force and their Police & Crime Commissioner (or mayoral equivalent).
 - Ensure centralised monitoring of CJS engagement with the lawyers, mirroring the role of MOPAC and the pilot's steering group.
 11. Use a Memorandum of Understanding, alongside TPM protocols, to encourage CJS practitioner responsiveness, clarify police and prosecutor roles in disputed cases, and streamlining communication where possible.
 12. Build CJS practitioner confidence in engaging with the complainants' lawyers by developing a national Code of Practice for legal support to provide reassurance about service standards and address misled fears about witness coaching.
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Acknowledgements

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- Women & Girls Network
- Centre for Women's Justice
- Victims' Commissioner for London
- Metropolitan Police Service
- Crown Prosecution Service