

Advice Workforce Development Programme: Participant case studies

Apprentices

Shifa [name changed to preserve anonymity], took up her apprenticeship, funded under the Advice Workforce Development Programme, in summer 2023.

She had been working in local authority legal teams: she had a one-year placement as part of her law degree and after university worked for two other London authorities. However, Shifa was dissatisfied with acting for the Council and really wanted to be working on behalf of the community in a charitable legal advice service.

Shifa also wanted to do her training and to qualify as a solicitor. Local authorities could offer to pay course fees for qualification via CILEX but would not fund a traineeship or the SQE route to qualification. Shifa thought she would have to pay her own SQE fees if she wanted to work in a charity and in social welfare law. She was also resigned to having to accept much lower pay in the charitable sector – she was seeing trainee jobs paying £28-34K+ in the local authority sector compared to £21-24K with charities.

Shifa registered for alerts on Charity Jobs and eventually saw the post she is now in advertised. It ticked all the boxes: it offered qualification via SQE with fees paid and work in a community-focused agency that undertook a variety of social welfare law, including housing and family (allowing Shifa to get more varied experience). Shifa applied, had an interview – which was a lot less daunting than previous assessment centre approaches she had been through – and got the job!

Shifa said her work in the charity was noticeably different: the charity was less formal; she was given more responsibility and flexibility and had more opportunities to suggest and to implement system improvements. She has been involved in the running of a pro bono housing clinic and has started to manage her own cases. Her client interviewing and interaction skills have improved, and she has developed empathy and satisfaction in providing a safe place and making a difference for people in very difficult circumstances. This can be stressful at times but is rewarding.

Alongside her work at the charity, Shifa gets one day a week of study leave to undertake her BPP course work and to attend an on-line workshop. She found managing her studies challenging at first as they inevitably take up time outside of her one day of study leave, but she has become better and more disciplined. Her studies are quite focused on commercial law, which is a slight frustration for Shifa. She feels it would be good if BPP offered some social welfare law modules. Shifa will take her SQE1 exam after two years of study and practice and, if she passes, will take her SQE2 exam within one more year. So hopefully by summer 2026 she will be a qualified solicitor.

As to the future, Shifa hopes that she will be able to continue to work in the charitable social welfare law sector. Job flexibility and good work-life balance will be a factor in this. She hopes charity sector pay can be improved but she also values not being expected to work very long hours. And of course, her commitment to legal work for the community is fundamental. It's a bit early for Shifa to have firm ideas about longer-term development, but she sees herself moving into team leadership or project/service management roles in future and after gaining qualification and experience as a solicitor.

Ogechi [name changed to preserve anonymity], took up her apprenticeship, funded under the Advice Workforce Development Programme, in August 2023.

When she completed her law degree in 2022, she started applying for trainee and paralegal jobs at law firms, with no luck. Her focus had been on becoming a qualified lawyer and she thought that the most likely route to this was in a private law firm. Ogechi had, however, volunteered at a local Citizens Advice in the latter stages of her law degree on the advice of an uncle who is a lawyer and had himself started out as a CAB volunteer. Her volunteer role was on the telephone advice line, and she continued to do this alongside a job she obtained in retail.

Then, in late 2022, Ogechi obtained a temporary job as a debt adviser at Limehouse Project. When the funding for this role ended in March 2023, Ogechi was retained as a part-time trainee benefits adviser. Then in the summer, the opportunity to become an apprentice solicitor arose and Ogechi took it. Until then, Ogechi had still thought that if she wanted to qualify, she would have to join a private practice.

Ogechi's apprenticeship involves her working one day a week at University House Legal Advice Centre and she has one day a week of study leave to undertake her BPP course work. The BPP course and the amount of reading required was a challenge at first and does require study in Ogechi's own time, but she is now well-organised and is managing it well. Like other apprentices we have spoken to, Ogechi feels it would be good if BPP offered some social welfare law modules.

Working across two organisations as an apprentice has been interesting. Ogechi has learnt from the specialist casework approach at Legal Advice Centre and has taken this learning back to case discussions at Limehouse Project. Equally, she has been able to let Legal Advice Centre colleagues know more about how Limehouse Project works. Ogechi has developed her skills in dealing with clients in a professional way and in capturing data. She has also gained confidence in interactions with colleagues, improved her time management and is doing a range of benefits, social housing, and general debt advice. She may have opportunities to work on family and housing cases in future.

Ogechi wasn't sure she would stay in the charitable sector at first but has really enjoyed being able to help people and make a difference. She deals with many clients with mental health, physical health and safeguarding issues and she says that helping them is a big motivation. She will of course complete her apprenticeship and may then choose to stay, depending on opportunities at the time, but pay and conditions will inevitably be a factor. Ogechi is aware that pay is lower in the charitable advice sector. If she does stay, she sees herself in hand-on casework roles in future but wouldn't rule out a management position in the longer-term.

Noah [name changed to preserve anonymity], took up his apprenticeship, funded under the Advice Workforce Development Programme, in August 2023. He had been volunteering with the charity that now employs him for a few months. Noah graduated the day before his apprenticeship started.

He had been introduced to not-for-profit legal advice while at Queen Mary University. As part of his course, he worked with the University's Legal Advice Centre, delivering legal education sessions for schools and charities. These included presentation and information sessions on how courts work, local council services, stop and search and image based sexual abuse. So, Noah knew that when he finished his degree his preference was to go into community legal advice work. He started volunteering at his local advice centre after finishing his law exams in spring 2023 to get work experience in the sector.

Luckily, while volunteering, Noah heard about the apprenticeship. Like other apprentices, he found it difficult at first to manage his studies at BPP and his advice centre work but is now on top of it and has made good progress. He is taking on welfare benefits and family law work. His welfare benefits work has progress well. He has successfully taken cases to appeal, including two PIP cases and a complex Universal Credit case where he got the original decision overturned on procedural grounds.

Noah would like to stay in the social welfare advice sector: *"It feels like meaningful work"*. He is aware that pay could be better in the commercial sector, but he does appreciate that charities have limited funds.

Trainee Solicitor

Yusuf is a trainee solicitor, employed by Women's Inclusive Team (WIT) in Tower Hamlets. He has a law degree, a Masters, and has completed a Legal Practice Course. He is now in his period of training, which is required before he can apply for a practicing certificate.

This has all been made possible by the partnership of WIT with University House Legal Advice Centre (UHLAC). UHLAC provides the qualified supervision that Yusuf needs to gain his certificate. Yusuf spends two days a week at UHLAC, where he provides housing advice, and the other three days at WIT as part of the community agency's small advice team.

Yusuf had always wanted to provide advice for the community but thought he would probably have to do this as a pro bono service while working as a commercial lawyer. However, a series of knock-backs from commercial law firms meant he never got to such a position. Yusuf thinks his age, being a mature candidate, was a barrier to him being taken on in trainee lawyer roles. But one day he thought 'why not volunteer?' and contacted WIT. After an interview he was taken on as a volunteer in September 2022. Two months later he was offered a paid role. He worked in the multi-functional community agency's advice team.

That was great, but he was still hoping to become a fully qualified lawyer. So, when the opportunity created by WIT and UHLAC under the Workforce Programme arose to apply for the trainee solicitor role, he jumped at it and started the post in September 2023. The role has given him the opportunity to develop with supervision. He is now drafting pre-action and review letters with success and is hoping that when he qualifies in 2025, he will be able to develop WIT's advice service.

Yusuf would like to stay in the charitable social welfare advice sector. He accepts that this work will not be paid as well as the commercial sector, but he says the hours are better. As a parent this is important to him. He also says that the satisfaction that his work provides is valuable.

Debt Advice Trainee

Amy [name changed to preserve anonymity], has volunteered at her local Foodbank for several years. She noticed that Rooted Finance was offering free training in debt advice for volunteers and decided to sign-up. Amy regularly sees Foodbank users who have debt problems and the shame, stress and mental health issues that result.

Amy started the training in early 2024 and has now completed the 'theory' bits of the course, include three tests. She is now starting to practice what she has learned by shadowing the Rooted Finance Debt Adviser at the Foodbank and working through case-studies. She's not yet a confident debt adviser but understands the theory, and the importance of gaining the client's trust in order

that they disclose financial difficulties. Amy says the course has highlighted how little people understand about debt and personal finance and how they lack money management skills.

After a career that has so far included work in the care and retail sectors and in management, Amy is now open to the idea of working in a debt advice role. It wasn't something she had considered before but would now go for a job if it came up. It was quite by chance that the Rooted Finance course came up at the right time and place and she enjoys dealing with the complexities of each different case.

Debt Advice Trainee

Amina [name changed to preserve anonymity], is a volunteer and paid teacher at her local Islamic Community Centre. She also works part-time as a financial administrator for a private company, having obtained an BA in Finance and Accounting. During her community work, Amina regularly comes across people who are struggling financially. So, when a colleague told her about the free debt advice course that was being offered by Rooted Finance she signed up. She has since completed the theory parts of the course and has started to shadow debt advisers in face-to-face and telephone appointments.

Amina was aware of advice agencies but didn't know that they provide money advice and dealt with things like Debt Relief Orders. Now she knows, she has amended her CV and is keeping an eye open for debt advice jobs, alongside finance jobs. Even if she doesn't end up in a debt advice job, Amina will continue to do voluntary community work. She understands that pay in the voluntary sector can be lower than the private sector, but other terms and conditions can be better.

Amina is hoping that she gets some more practical experience of face-to-face debt advice now she has completed the initial training and she would like to attend foodbank advice sessions. The availability of the free debt advice training was a very important factor in Amina's decision to sign-up. She feels many people would benefit from the course, for basic life skills as much as starting a career as an adviser. Having completed the training Amina would like some guidance on where debt advice jobs are likely to come up and feels that some central guidance on working in the advice sector would be helpful.

The trainee and apprentice case studies illustrate the importance for the charitable advice sector of:

- Generally raising awareness of the advice sector, what it does, the roles and training that it offers.
- Creating opportunities for people to access free training on advice topics.
- Letting law students and graduates know that there are routes to qualify as a lawyer in the sector – private practice or the public sector is not the only route.
- Obtaining funding (apprenticeship levy) to fund apprenticeship course fees.
- Promoting its community-focused, 'stand-up for people's rights' ethos that means workers can make a real difference for clients.
- Demonstrating the flexible, empowering, and good work-life balance experience that working in a charity can be.
- Improving the pay offer.
- Working with law schools like BPP to develop social welfare law modules.
- Creating opportunities for people to work across agencies – and particularly specialist legal advice and generalist community advice agencies.