

Working Families' Legal Advice Service at 25

Empowering working parents and carers
for a quarter of a century



Starting life before there was even a right to request flexible working, the Working Families Legal Advice Service has been empowering struggling parents and carers so they can participate in, and thrive at work for the last 25 years.

Over this time, the service has evolved to respond to the changing legal landscape, and hearing the everyday real struggles of families has added significant weight to the policy change that Working Families has driven.

The story of the Legal Advice Service, how it came to be, and what has made it an enduring success that supports over 1,500 families every year, is all thanks to the tenacity of a small group of women, who were determined to change the way we live and work.

Grassroots beginnings

Working Families was founded from the merger of two parent-led groups, originating in Clapham and Sheffield, dating back to 1979. The organisation sprung from the grassroots because work-life balance was seen as a 'mothers' issue, for women to resolve themselves. But from the outset, those involved could see the value of working with both families and employers, at the same time as campaigning for change. Twenty years later in 1999, we employed our first legal adviser and our helpline was born

During this time, a helpline, which was actually just an telephone in someone's house, would take calls from mothers across the country who were concerned about finding childcare so they could return to work. There were no trained specialists answering calls, partly because the legal framework did not yet exist to support and protect women who wanted to return to work but work flexibly. Instead, it was practical, informed advice and signposting.

Policy progression

1970 Equal Pay Act

Prohibits less favourable treatment between men and women in terms of pay and conditions

1975 Sexual Discrimination Act

Protection from discrimination on the grounds of sex or marital status

1975 Employment Protection Act

Limited rights to maternity leave and pay. Right to return to work after maternity leave. Dismissal unfair if on grounds of pregnancy or maternity

1975 Race Relations Act

Protection from discrimination on the grounds of race

More rights, more advice

The shift toward needing formal advice came as women returning to work after having children stopped being an anomaly in the late 1990s, and the lack of affordable, good quality childcare led to more and more enquiries about how women could use flexible work to manage work and caring commitments. Initially The Department of Health funded the helpline based on the welfare of children of working parents, and were persuaded to do so thanks to the founding Director Lucy Daniels presenting a briefcase full of letters sent to the organisation asking for help.

With the change of government in the late 1990s, there was a shift in attitude toward employment rights. The introduction of parental leave and enhanced maternity leave in 1999, and paternity leave and the right to request flexible working coming into effect in 2003, all necessitated access to legal advice. And so, it was in 1999 that the first legal adviser was appointed, funded by the National Lottery.

Leaps forward

It's hard to comprehend for those of us that have always had access to a right to request flexible working, but every step to get to where we are was hard fought. When it was introduced, the legislation had minimal reach and had no teeth. Only those with young or disabled children had the right to request to work flexibly. Over the next decade negotiations took place which gradually extended the rights, firstly to those caring for dependents over 18, then to all children under 18, and finally, to all employees.

1995 Disability Discrimination Act

Protection from discrimination in
employment on grounds of
disability

1996 Employment Rights Act

Paid time off for antenatal care.
Protection for those made redundant
whilst on maternity leave

1999 Employment Relations Act

Equal rights for part-time workers.
Time off for dependents.
Unpaid parental leave.
Maternity leave extended to
18 weeks

Working Families set up the Legal
Advice Service

2002 Employment Act

Recommendations by Working
Families to the Government led to the
Right to Request flexible working.
Two weeks paid paternity leave.
Adoption leave.

Breakthroughs and challenges

The helpline has proved a lifeline for families over the years, and never was this more apparent than in the pandemic, when the nation shifted the way they work overnight. The helpline rose to the challenge, answering double the amount of queries, and our information and guidance pages coming to the aid of 1.6 million parents and carers.

In policy terms, a breakthrough was made this year when requesting flexible working became a day-one right. Although hugely significant, Working Families are committed to continue campaigning until flexible working is made the default in the UK.

With every advancement, the Legal Advice Service has been alongside parents and carers to help navigate the changes in law, guide them to reach solutions with their employers, and empower them to pursue what they need for their families.

As technology and the way we communicate has evolved, so has the way we inform and empower parents and carers. Our website now has over 200 legally up-to-date information and guidance pages, which are accessed by over a million people a year.

Not only do these pages enable more parents and carers than ever before to get the help they need, whenever they need it, they help the advice line concentrate on the knottier situations causing parents and carers to struggle.

2006 Work and Families Act

Maternity leave extended to a year.
Flexible working extended to carers.
Additional paternity leave

2010 Equality Act

Consolidated and strengthened equality legislation.
Made provision for gender pay reporting

2014 Children and Families Act

Working Families instrumental in bringing about the introduction of Shared Parental Leave.

Rights to unpaid parental leave extended.

Rights to adoption leave and pay extended.

Right to request flexible working extended to all employees

2023 Employer Relations Act

Working Families' proposals for reform resulted in the Right to request flexible working becoming a day one right

Our impact in 2023-2024



Nearly 1 million
working parents and
carers accessed our
online rights information
and guidance pages

We provided personalised
legal advice to over 1,500
parents and carers via
phone and e-mail



A third of helpline users were living in
relative poverty, rising to over three quarters
of single parents

Over 8 in 10 helpline users were women, and
22% were single parents

98% of the parents and carers we advised on
our helpline felt better informed

96% felt empowered to act on the advice given

88% acted on the advice given

80% said our advice had helped them resolve
their issue(s)



Our advisers supported our helpline users to
access over £150,000 in unclaimed benefits

1 in 2 people who completed our outcomes
survey and who had contacted us for benefits
advice increased their household income

The difference we've made

Working Families

I received prompt, concise legal advice about my case. It was written in a way that enabled me to understand the position I was in and how to present the best case I could. I was even provided with quotes to use. All the advice was clear. Your help was second to none.

“

With parents and carers having to navigate extraordinary challenges in the past few years, our helpline is as important as ever.

Despite the progress made in policies, the situation is still dire for those who cannot access the flexibility they need to manage day-to-day caring, are denied the opportunity to take time off with their new baby, or are discriminated against because they're pregnant.

Not only does the helpline empower parents to understand and use their rights, it continues to inform and strengthen our campaigning for better rights in the future.

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Without this service I would be completely lost. I have had advice from both Katy and Julie and both have been invaluable in helping me build confidence and know I have the relevant support to move forwards in a difficult situation.

I feel confident in challenging my employer regarding changing my contract.

“

I understood my rights and was able to go to tribunal.

“



Working Families

Get in touch

We would love to hear from you!

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If you require this information in a different format, please get in touch.



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For more information on our work and mission, please visit

workingfamilies.org.uk

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