

From the Field.

Sustaining Legal Clinics Through Summer: A Strategic Response to Rural Legal Advice Deserts in the Southwest of England

Kim McDonald

Senior Lecturer in Law at the University of Exeter

Abstract

This From the Field Report, based on a single clinic case study, advances the proposition that strategically placed drop-in clinics at the outset of the summer period can serve as an effective intervention to mitigate the operational challenges faced by university law clinics due to reduced student participation during this time. Such an approach is particularly vital in South West England, where rurality and limited pro bono legal assistance contribute to the region being recognised as a legal advice desert.

A collaboration with Newcastle University, Australia, to adapt their innovative ‘Law on the Beach’ initiative to the coastal communities of Devon led us to think about how to counteract the seasonal decline in student participation and the resulting strain on legal clinic services. In 2024, we piloted a series of drop-in legal advice days at coastal locations, targeting areas where there was high client demand. Seaside towns often face distinct challenges that contribute to a lack of free legal provision in the locality. These communities typically have a more transient population than other areas, with many residents employed in seasonal, low-wage industries such as tourism and hospitality.

During these events many individuals received same-day advice, while those requiring continued support were referred to our summer clinic for ongoing assistance. This model has since been adapted from the beach idea inspired by the Australian model to meet the specific needs of Devon: in 2025, the clinic operated in the city of Exeter, and in 2026, it is scheduled to expand into the rural setting of Mid Devon, further enhancing access to justice in underserved rural areas.

Keywords: University law clinic, access to justice, student participation, South West England, advice desert.

Introduction

The South West region of England has long been identified as an “advice desert” by the Law Society of England and Wales where individuals face significant barriers in accessing pro bono legal support. With only a single legal aid provider offering housing advice in Exeter and other legal aid services

substantially diminished, the Community Law Clinic at the University of Exeter seeks to address this critical gap in legal provision, which at times often feels overwhelming.

A persistent operational challenge for university law clinics is the summer vacation period. As these clinics are predominantly student-led, with legal assistance provided under supervision, the absence of students during the summer months often results in a suspension or significant reduction of services.

Although the Community Law Clinic at Exeter remains partially operational during the summer through the efforts of volunteer students and supervising lawyers, staff holidays combined with limited student availability, contribute to increasing client waitlists. Many individuals face delay until the new academic term begins in late September or are unable to receive assistance altogether, often resorting to self-representation or seeking help elsewhere.

In addition to the summer slowdown, the Easter revision period presents further challenges. Beginning in early April, students typically disengage from clinic activities to focus on exam preparation, resulting in a marked decline in service provision. Consequently, the clinic may operate at a reduced capacity for nearly half the year.

During term time, undergraduate law students at the University of Exeter have the opportunity to enrol in the Access to Justice module as part of their LLB Law degree. Through this module, students actively participate in the work of the Community Law Clinic, gaining practical experience in delivering legal assistance under supervision.

The summer clinic however operates on a voluntary basis and does not contribute to students' academic credit, affecting motivation and slowing case progression. Many students also undertake summer legal placements or other jobs, limiting their availability and capacity to contribute meaningfully to the clinic's operations. These constraints make it difficult for university law clinics to meet the heightened demand for legal services during this period.

In June 2024, the University of Exeter collaborated with the University of Newcastle, Australia, to adapt and implement their innovative and award-winning Law on the Beach initiative on the beaches of Devon. Newcastle, Australia is a small town about 2.5 hours from Sydney meaning it shares some similarities to Exeter, which is an outlying city around 4 hours from London. This project involved hosting drop-in legal advice sessions in Devon coastal communities, specifically targeting underserved populations. While the initiative was designed to improve access to justice in rural and coastal areas, it also proved effective in alleviating the summer backlog. Many attendees were already on the Community Law Clinic's waitlist and received immediate assistance, while others requiring ongoing support were referred to the summer clinic.

Rural and coastal communities such as those in South West England often face compounded barriers to legal access, including long travel distances, high transportation costs, and digital exclusion or limited IT literacy. Urban communities can face some of these barriers but they are difficult in rural areas where the population is more dispersed and there is markedly less access to support and advice than in large cities. These factors significantly hinder their ability to obtain online or remote legal advice, underscoring the importance of innovative outreach initiatives such as Law on the Beach.

The Collaboration

The Law on the Beach initiative, at the time led by Dr. Shaun McCarthy at the University of Newcastle, Australia, was introduced to the UK through a collaborative effort with Professor Sue Prince at the University of Exeter School of Law.

The University of Newcastle Law on the Beach runs drop-in clinics at Merewether Surf Life Saving Club each January and February with Newcastle law students and Legal Centre lawyers providing free advice. The aim is to make legal advice more accessible and approachable, particularly for young people.

Following a series of discussions evaluating the potential benefits and logistical challenges of adapting the Australian model to a UK context the author of this report, Kim McDonald, Director of the University of Exeter Community Law Clinic, managed the implementation. This role involved addressing a range of practical obstacles, most notably the need to obtain official permissions for conducting sessions on UK beaches and the challenges posed by the country's often inclement weather: factors that differ significantly from the Australian setting in which the initiative was first conceived.

Coastal

In June 2024, the Community Law Clinic at the University of Exeter extended its outreach efforts by conducting drop-in legal advice sessions in two coastal towns in Devon being Exmouth and Teignmouth. These events marked the UK adaptation of Law on the Beach. To mitigate the impact of adverse weather conditions and avoid the complexities of securing permissions for beach-based operations, indoor venues adjacent to the beach were hired to host the sessions.

The Exmouth beach session was delivered in partnership with Trowers & Hamlin Solicitors, who provided a team of lawyers to supervise and support the student advisors. This supervision intensive model enabled the provision of on-the-spot legal advice, allowing clients to receive assistance on the same day and thereby avoiding further additions to the clinic's waitlist. A small number of complex cases were referred to the summer clinic for follow-up.

During the Exmouth session, 13 members of the public presented with legal issues. In addition to those who received direct assistance, many others were signposted to more appropriate service providers or charitable organisations. Notably, 78.6% of the clients advised on the day were already on the clinic's waitlist, highlighting the initiative's effectiveness in alleviating the backlog at the start of the summer period. Many of these individuals had been waiting since March, indicating a delay of approximately three months.

The following day, the clinic held a similar event in Teignmouth with assistance from the local law firm Scott Richards Solicitors. The session also saw high levels of public engagement, with many individuals successfully signposted to alternative sources of support. On this occasion, 12 people received legal assistance from the clinic, 25% of whom were existing clients on the clinic's waitlist, while others were walk-ins from the local community.

In both locations, the most common issues related to family, immigration, and employment law. The success and impact of these events were recognised, at the time, in coverage by The Times newspaper and various local media outlets throughout Devon and Cornwall.

Post-event analysis revealed a key insight: a substantial proportion of attendees were already on the clinic's waitlist. What initially began as an innovative community outreach initiative aimed at engaging underserved communities evolved into a strategic mechanism for managing service demand. The sessions not only extended access to legal advice in geographically isolated areas but also effectively reduced the clinic's backlog by front-loading client engagement at the start of the summer period. This allowed for earlier case initiation and resolution, ensuring that clients received timely support who might otherwise have faced prolonged delays due to the reduced summer service capacity at the Community Law Clinic.

From a service delivery perspective, these outreach clinics demonstrated real impact. Measurable reductions in wait times and a smoother intake process were achieved. However, it also exposed a deeper truth that our system is stretched. The drop-in sessions clearly helped, but they also highlighted how dependent the clinic is on student volunteers and how fragile the model becomes when the students are unavailable. It is not just a summer problem it is in fact a capacity problem.

Looking ahead, the initiative prompted reflection on how to better structure the clinic calendar and build more resilient staffing models. The success of the drop-in sessions highlighted areas for organisational growth.

City

In 2025, building on the success of the Law on the Beach coastal sessions, the Community Law Clinic adapted its outreach model to an urban setting with the event Law in the City. This session took place in central Exeter and was again supported by Trowers & Hamlins Solicitors, along with family law solicitors and local barristers.

The Law in the City session provided legal advice, support and information to 16 members of the public who had dropped into the session seeking legal help. As with previous sessions a majority (81.3%) were existing clients on the clinic waitlist. Immediate advice was provided where possible, with a few more complex cases referred to the summer clinic.

The event reaffirmed the value of the drop-in model as a mechanism not only for community outreach but also for managing service demand. By enabling clients to receive immediate assistance, the session significantly reduced the clinic's backlog ahead of the limited capacity summer period. Client feedback from the drop-in session was overwhelmingly positive, with many participants expressing appreciation for the initiative and a desire for more frequent opportunities to access legal support in such a format. Both students and supervising legal professionals received direct comments from attendees highlighting the value of the service and its accessibility. This response underscores the importance of continuing and expanding such outreach efforts to meet the growing demand for free legal advice in underserved communities.

What began as an innovative adaptation of the Australian Law on the Beach model has evolved into a highly effective strategy for addressing the structural challenge faced by the clinic at the University of Exeter during academic breaks. These outreach sessions have proven instrumental in alleviating the pressure caused by the Easter, exam and early summer periods, ensuring that clients who might otherwise face extended delays are able to access timely legal support. In addition to enhancing access to justice for underserved communities, the drop-in clinics have provided invaluable experiential learning opportunities for participating law students. These sessions offered real-world exposure to the social dynamics and barriers individuals face in accessing free legal support, deepening students'

understanding of the intersection between law and social justice. The experience not only enriched their academic development but also strengthened their professional profiles, contributing positively to their CVs and overall employability.

Although overall a success the strain of these events needs to be acknowledged. Organising these sessions during peak academic pressure points was not easy. Recruiting students around exams and coursework deadlines was a constant challenge. In hindsight, this difficulty may be less about student commitment and more a symptom of broader capacity issues and the clinic's reliance on volunteers, limited staffing and the lack of institutional flexibility during term transitions.

Country

In response to ongoing demand and the lessons learned from the 2024 and 2025 events, the Community Law Clinic plans to expand its outreach in 2026 to Mid-Devon. This rural focused session will support farming and isolated communities, who are often underserved by traditional legal service models.

The South West of England comprises numerous remote and rural communities, many of which face significant barriers to accessing legal services. Limited public transport infrastructure, low levels of digital literacy, and ongoing economic pressures, further exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis, have contributed to serious access to justice issues across the region. These challenges are compounded by the scarcity of pro bono legal services available locally.

The session will be promoted to those on the clinic's waitlist and through local media outlets to maximise community engagement. As in the previous sessions the dual aim is to provide timely legal assistance to those facing pressing legal issues while reducing the clinic's waitlist ahead of the summer period, thereby improving service delivery and access to justice for rural populations.

Conclusion

This report has aimed to demonstrate that strategically timed and geographically targeted drop-in clinics can serve as a practical and effective solution to the operational challenges university law clinics face during academic breaks. What began as an international collaboration to adapt the Australian Law on the Beach initiative to the coastal towns of Devon has evolved into a broader strategy for managing the clinic calendar.

These sessions have not only improved access to justice in underserved communities but also helped the clinic manage demand more effectively, reducing waitlists and delivering earlier support. They also offered meaningful experiential learning for students, deepening their understanding of the intersection between law and social justice.

At the same time, the initiative exposed the clinic's reliance on student availability and the fragility of its volunteer dependent structure. To sustain and scale the model, university law clinics must explore more resilient staffing approaches, institutional flexibility, and stronger integration between outreach and core operations.

While the sessions cannot fully meet the region's unmet legal need, they have proven to be a vital mechanism for early client engagement, backlog reduction and accessible legal advice. This outreach

model presents a scalable and transferable approach, offering a blueprint for other university law clinics navigating similar constraints.

Acknowledgements/Funding

No funding.