

PRESS RELEASE

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For more information, interviews or case studies of successful PLE projects in action, please contact Kate Beard, Kirsty Kitchen or Louise Morriss at Amazon PR on 020 7700 6952 or email Kate@amazonpr.co.uk.

TWO THIRDS OF PEOPLE DO NOT KNOW THEIR RIGHTS: NEW REPORT HIGHLIGHTS NEED FOR PUBLIC LEGAL EDUCATION

A major new report launched today (21 May 2010) by the Public Legal Education Network (Plenet) shows that around two thirds of people (64.8%) do not know their rights and nearly 70% have no knowledge of basic legal processes.

Called *'Knowledge, Capability and the Experience of Rights Problems'*, the research was commissioned by Plenet and carried out by the Legal Services Research Centre. It is based on a nationally representative survey of over 10,000 respondents and offers new and important insight into effective approaches to deliver public legal education by helping define where it is most needed and most effective.

Public legal education (PLE) refers to a range of information and education activities that aim to help the general public make sense of the legal system. It promotes knowledge about legal rights and the know-how to resolve everyday problems.

Plenet's Development Manager, Lisa Wintersteiger, says:

"These findings are further evidence of widespread legal exclusion. There are significant gaps in people's knowledge, skills and confidence in dealing with legal issues. The results show problems are not spread evenly across the population or across the issues. They disproportionately affect some very vulnerable groups."

The research report shows that while many people do obtain advice or successfully handle problems alone, more than one in 10 (11%) do nothing at all or try but fail to get advice. Knowledge of rights is an important factor in people sorting out their problems. People who lacked legal capability were less likely to get advice and were much more likely to regret their actions. Just under a quarter (21%) of people say they wish they had acted sooner.

People's decisions on seeking advice appear to be dependant on the individual's background. The report shows that some specific groups of people are less likely to know their rights, fail to get help and suffer adverse consequences such as stress-related ill health or loss of earnings. These include people from ethnic minority communities, those with mental health issues, long-term illness or disability. Women are also far more likely to want to act but feel they can't because the situation is 'too stressful to sort out' or they're 'too scared' to act.

The research also shows that awareness and strategies for dealing with problems differ significantly depending on the legal issue. 60% of people handle consumer problems, such as buying goods and services, alone compared to around 40% of people with rented housing or debt and welfare problems. A third (33%) of those facing discrimination issues do nothing, and of those dealing with clinical negligence

or unfair treatment by the police, around a third (27% and 30% respectively) take no action to address their problem.

In addition, the youngest (18-24 years-old) and oldest (75 years plus) age groups are least likely to obtain advice and most likely to do nothing or handle their problems alone.

Lisa Wintersteiger says:

“There is some fantastic work already being done to educate and engage the public on legal issues, but we clearly need to focus on where we’ll have most impact. We can now look at how low levels of legal capability relate to the way different people handle legal issues. This research is the first step in providing an evidence base for successful public legal education interventions where they are most needed.

“That said, we need to do more to shed light on this important area of public policy. We need to focus on how we can reduce the burden of unresolved legal issues, both for individuals and society, through investment in public legal education.”

- Ends -

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Notes to editors:

About Public Legal Education:

- Each year around one million non-criminal legal problems, such as money difficulties, loss of job or housing issues, go unresolved.
- Using survey data from the Legal Services Research Centre, economists at the Ministry of Justice estimate that the problems people experience over the three and a half years covered by the survey cost individuals and the public purse around £13 billion.
- Effective public legal education would help people avoid these problems in the first place, enable them to identify legal issues and take action early before problems escalate.
- PLE initiatives can be a range of activities from campaigns, training courses or leaflets to theatre productions, TV programmes or workshops.

About Plenet:

- The Public Legal Education Network is for organisations and individuals with an interest in public legal education. Members include statutory bodies, not-for-profit organisations, legal professionals, researchers, educators and campaigners.

- It undertakes research and pilots projects to develop the theory and practice of public legal education (PLE) - the name used to sum up a range of activities that aim to improve people's lives and empower communities.
- For more information www.plenet.org.uk
- Plenet is funded by a grant from the Ministry of Justice and is a project run by Advice Services Alliance Advicenow.
- Advicenow campaigns for improved information and education on rights and the law. The website www.advicenow.org.uk provides accessible information on rights and legal issues.

About the report:

- The report uses data from the English and Welsh Civil and Social Justice Survey (CSJS) - a large scale face-to-face survey of over 10,000 people, covering their experience of and response to a broad range of civil justice problems.
- The CSJS is a nationally representative survey of the adult population of England and Wales. It provides detailed information on the nature, pattern and impact of people's experiences of rights problems and the use and success of problem resolution strategies. The data is taken from the CSJS covering the period January 2006 – January 2009. The survey randomly selected 6,234 households totalling 10,537 adult respondents who were interviewed individually by BMRB Social Research.

About Legal Services Research Centre

- The Legal Services Research Centre (LSRC) is the independent Research Division of the Legal Services Commission (LSC). It was set up in 1996 to inform legal aid policy and the implementation of reform. It has a broad remit to conduct strategic research in civil and criminal justice, and related social policy fields.
- For more information see www.lsrc.org.uk/home.html