



London Coalition Against Poverty (LCAP) Direct Action Casework Manual

Direct Action Casework is what LCAP calls the actions it takes with people to challenge and overcome unjust treatment. It is a combination of legal work and advocacy with protest and direct action.

Direct Action Casework can be used by anybody and it works!

LCAP have seen people challenge unfair treatment and win real victories like housing from the council or the benefits money they were owed. All it takes is to be well organized and determined.

This guide gives an overview of how LCAP organises DAC and how you can get involved – though DAC is by no means the property of any one organization and we hope it spreads far and wide. If you're interested in finding out more, or coming to one of our regular DAC trainings, get in touch!

Defining what's different about DAC

Dictionary definition of 'advocacy': Speaking in support of, or on behalf of someone. Recommending a policy or course of action.

Dictionary definition of 'help': Serve, aid, improve the condition of.

LCAP definition of 'advocacy': Allowing a person to express their needs confidently, and helping them to realize their potential to fulfill them with others.

LCAP definition of 'direct action': Immediate disruption of the institutions, actors or processes which oppress working class people, by working class people.

LCAP definition of 'solidarity': Having the same interests and aspirations. Aligning your agenda to that of another person or group.

Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) is a organization in Canada.

Check them out at www.ocap.ca

OCAP and its sister organisations have been using direct action casework to win victories since their foundation more than two decades ago. Many other groups,

such as the Philadelphia based Kensington Welfare Rights Union use this approach too. This excerpt from the manual of a group connected to OCAP gives an idea of why LCAP finds Direct Action Casework so inspiring.

In the past we have carried out some cases in defence of non-unionized workers. When one man worked for 5 days at a gas station, only to be told at the end of that time that he was not going to be paid, OCAP set up a picket line to discourage cars from attending this gas station, within hours they had agreed to pay him for his work.

PCAP has also intervened in situations where individuals are facing [electricity] cut-offs. In some instances, PCAP members have formed a picket line to prevent [electricity] workers from disconnecting the power supply.

What LCAP does:

LCAP began using Direct Action Casework (DAC) to challenge council's "gate keeping" tactics whereby they avoid meeting their obligations to house vulnerable people. We have pressured housing offices to stop turning applicants away by taking collective action. A typical action involves writing a letter to the council explaining their obligations followed by a visit to the housing offices with the person affected and a group of supporters who will all refuse to leave until the person has been housed.

LCAP has used DAC successfully on several occasions, often to challenge the unlawful refusal of accommodation to homeless people.

One time LCAP was approached by a woman whose application for housing had been turned down. Because of this her temporary accommodation had been withdrawn and she and her child were facing street homelessness. LCAP brought 10 people to the Housing Office to demand that her accommodation was extended for one month to allow her time to approach social services for help. After LCAP refused to leave, the Housing Office grudgingly backed down stating "That wasn't a request it was a threat"!

Social Services refused to act to keep the family off the streets so LCAP went around to their hostel room and helped them to resist eviction by changing the locks and refusing to leave. This gave the woman's solicitor time to enter a Judicial Review of Social Service's refusal to act and obtain an interim order preventing eviction.

While LCAP has fought with individuals at times, at other points groups of people have been able to join together to demand better circumstances. This has happened in Hackney when residents of council – run emergency accommodation hostels have fought for repairs, decisions on their cases and have supported each other against evictions. Unemployed workers in Hackney are fighting individual

cases to help each other get their benefits paid as part of a wider campaign for better treatment at the job centre.

LCAP's Four Direct Action Casework Principles

Direct Action Advocacy combines the principle of advocacy with the practice of direct action. LCAP's direct action casework is conducted with an understanding of four principles:

1. To combine legal work with disruptive action
2. Not to duplicate the work of advice agencies
3. To forward political goals but never compromise the interests of those you are working with in the process
4. To empower those you are working with, rather than simply provide a service.

1. To combine legal work with disruptive action: This means having an understanding of what people are entitled to under the law, and at the same time realizing that working class people have power in disruptive action. By taking on the cases of people who are not receiving all the benefits they are entitled to under the law you create a legal backing to your demands. By combining law with disruptive action you bring teeth to those demands.

Landlords, bosses and government bureaucrats break the rules all the time at the cost of working class people. They often do this unchallenged. The official channels of appeal that are available are often lengthy, costly and ineffective. Direct action casework is designed to cut through this to get people what they deserve.

Keeping business as usual is very important to the functioning of many institutions; it is often easier for them to make a concession than to function while disruptions are taking place. Our success comes from demanding people receive what they legitimately deserve under the law and backing it up with disruptive action.

2. Not to duplicate the work of advice agencies: There are numerous advice agencies (such as Citizens Advice Bureaus or Law Centres) that are given money (usually from local government) to fight on people's behalf or provide them with services. At the same time there are numerous gaps where these groups can't or aren't providing people with the help they deserve. By doing direct action casework we are able to fill some of these gaps. One example is with the right to housing. If someone is refused the opportunity to make a homelessness application, a formal Judicial Review, if it happened at all, could take weeks – and those weeks could be spent sleeping outside or in unsafe accommodation. By contrast, taking action can get an immediate response.

It is important not to duplicate the work of advice agencies. You could easily get bogged down with work that others are capable of, and funded to do. Sometimes the people who approach us have exhausted all official legal

channels, but we have a referral list available to all casework organizers. Don't end up doing a lawyers job unpaid.

3. To forward political goals but never compromise the interests of those you are working with in the process: Whenever you take on a case, make it political. You are obviously taking on the case to assist the person who approached you. But you are also protesting an unjust system. Forwarding political goals should be done wherever possible. This means challenging larger social and political structures that are oppressive. It may mean highlighting the injustice of a particular law. Or it might mean calling for solidarity and support from other groups and people who are working on related issues. It is important to make connections between individual cases and larger political structures of oppression. But pushing these political goals should never compromise the interest of those you are working with. Any action you take must have the full, informed consent of the person you are working with. And once you take on a case, your first priority is to win.

4. Empower those you are working with rather than just provide a service for them. It is important that the person you are working with attends their actions and that all processes are explained fully. This is so that they can see the power that even a small group of people can have and take that boldness with them into all their dealings with those who regulate their lives.

Case work is extremely effective, but we realize that just doing casework isn't enough. It only benefits a small fraction of those affected by unjust policies. We need to not just fight for those wronged by the system but also fight to change those systems. Campaign work is not as consistently and clearly effective as casework, but with out campaign work we would be little more than a service organisation.

Providing Advocacy Support

Direct Action Casework isn't only about writing letters and causing disruptions in the housing office or job centre; it is also about making connections with people: providing support and building a community of people who are struggling against injustices. Often the people who approach LCAP have been shuffled through social agencies and have been treated as little more than a case number to be processed. Accordingly, many people who come to us for help are feeling frustrated, angry and demoralized. Often what a person wants most from an advocate is simply to be listened to – to know that someone is out there who cares, who believes in them and who will fight by their side. Below are some guidelines to providing this kind of support.

The table below is a useful thing to read through before you meet someone to talk about fighting their case.

What is Advocacy Support?	What Advocacy Support is NOT:
<p><i>Listening</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -being a good listener, a resource -providing encouragement to share experiences -allocating enough time for adequate support -recognition/validation of someone's anger, pain, fatigue, frustration, etc 	<p><i>Judging</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -criticizing someone for their decisions -not creating a space for someone to speak -rushing a person or not providing enough time -only listening to details/circumstances, not paying attention to someone's feelings
<p><i>Empowering</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -identifying options and choices -facilitating problem solving; building analytical skills by weighing consequences of decisions -showing respect -promoting equality & anti-oppression principles -building self-esteem 	<p><i>Dis-empowering or 'Rescuing'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -making decisions for someone -coming up with answers for someone -using quick-fix or 'sticking plaster' solutions -assuming that you are better than the person you are assisting -creating dependency
<p><i>Caring & Encouraging</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -being understanding of difficult situations -giving praise for a person's strength -helping a person develop skills and self-esteem 	<p><i>Being Frustrated or Dismissive</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -making someone's problems seem unimportant -making someone feel guilty/bad about decisions -using your skills instead of sharing your skills
<p><i>Focused & Structured</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -clear boundaries and time-frames -being honest about what support you can offer and what you can't: being reliable 	<p><i>Open Ended/Without Boundaries</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -being available at all times -telling someone you will make everything better -not following through, not meeting deadlines

How LCAP takes action:

Casework can be done in many ways. This manual is an attempt to show some of the ways in which LCAP has worked, although these change and evolve as we go along. One new development has been people fighting their individual cases within a group of people who are in the same or similar circumstances. Some problems lend themselves more easily to this collective approach than others, but where possible groups of people taking action together and offering each other support should be encouraged.

Individual cases can be fought effectively by self organised groups. A meeting of unemployed workers, for instance can decide to immediately go to the Job Centre with someone and ask for their benefits to be paid. A hostel residents meeting can offer support to someone facing eviction and plan how to take action together.

However, sometimes people face problems and there is no local group they can meet. Also, sometimes people face issues that are private and sensitive and they may not feel comfortable bringing up in front of a group. While we hope to build collective struggles, and look for ways to start new groups we carry on offering individual support when necessary.

The casework team

When supporting an individual LCAP organizes in groups of three people we call Casework Teams. A Casework Team can be made up of people with different roles:

1. **The person we are supporting.** This person is at the heart of the team. It is a positive decision to choose to confront the authorities and fight their corner and one which requires a lot of courage. We should never forget that the person we are supporting is engaged in an important personal battle and that our role is to provide solidarity. This means that the person we are supporting makes all the decisions and the other members of the team defer to his or her judgment and wishes in all matters relating to their case.
2. **The Advocate.** The Advocate is the main point of contact between the person we are supporting and the rest of the organization. They may help the person to research their legal rights and come up with a plan to fight back. They will stay with them while, with the support of LCAP, they put the plan into action.
3. **The Action Organiser.** If there is a need for an action, the Action Organizer organizes it! For instance if the plan requires large numbers of people to turn up at a housing office, or other building, the action organiser will arrange for people to come and make sure the action has things it needs like leaflets and a megaphone.

Support:

There should be at least three people in a casework team so that advocates can support each other and work can be shared. The roles outlined above needn't be taken by one person – both supporters can share the advocate role and organize the action together, or a additional person or group of people could organize the action.

A successful action is fantastic but the process can be quite draining. You might find it useful to talk through your experiences with others in LCAP. You might want to take a break before committing to act as an advocate in a new case.

In the past LCAP has held regular casework meetings to discuss current and upcoming cases. As it is sometimes necessary to discuss details of other people's lives these meetings are restricted to LCAP members already involved in casework and those who are serious about getting involved in this work. At other times we have not had meetings of caseworkers, but we generally agree that such meetings are important as a place to share information and give support to caseworkers, as well as reflect on our methods and structure.

Keeping records:

We keep a record of everything that happens during the course of a case. This means that if an advocate is unable to continue with a case for any reason then another person can take on the case and find out easily what has happened so far. It is useful to have a note book to record each thing you do and conversation you have.

Meeting up:

Once a person has contacted LCAP for help and you have been allocated as their advocate you and another person will meet up with them. For less experienced advocates, the second person present should be someone more experienced who can support them in the advocate role. The first meeting can be daunting, but don't worry you won't be alone.

- Start by introducing yourselves and LCAP. Explain clearly what LCAP is and what we can (and can't) do. Explain that we are an activist group, that we are all volunteers and that we are not lawyers or specialist advisors but that we can help find a lawyer or advice agency if this is what they want. Explain we are an organization they can join, they are welcome to get involved if they wish and tell them how they can do so if they are interested.
- Ask them to explain their situation and listen carefully to what they are saying. This may be your first meeting with this person, if so it is unrealistic to expect instant trust and remember it can be uncomfortable to discuss personal issues with a stranger.

It may be useful to use a relevant form with guideline questions to help assess the person's legal situation. These can be found in the LCAP office (for instance a homeless assessment form).

- Discuss in general terms what action the person would like to take. Explain the tactics LCAP have used in the past but make it clear that the choice of tactics is ultimately up to them.

If you are likely to need to send a letter then ask the person to sign an authorization for us to correspond as LCAP with the authorities.

Confidentiality:

Explain that all documents are filed and locked in the LCAP office and all documents are saved on the LCAP computer. Keep personal information confidential and secure.

Research

- In order to work out what tactics are likely to work, you will need to establish what legal rights the person has. Look up the relevant law. If you have not worked with the law before this may seem intimidating. Don't worry. The process is quite straightforward and LCAP members can support you. Just ask.
 - Discuss the legal position with the person you are supporting.
 - Give a record of the legal position to the casework secretary along with the date.

Planning:

Discuss the options with the person you are supporting. Most importantly what do they want to do? What have they tried already?

- Does an official channel exist to sort out the problem? Is it an effective way to sort out the problem or is it too costly, slow or bureaucratic? If the person wants to pursue official channels you can put them in touch with solicitors and advice agencies from the LCAP referral contacts list.
- Would direct action tactics be likely to succeed? Taking action will normally be most effective where a legal right exists but has been denied. Although sometimes you don't know what will work until you've tried it. Discuss all the options with the person you are supporting. Stress to them that they are in charge of the process and the decision is theirs.
- Direct action can be combined with more mainstream approaches. For instance you might be able to secure an extension to someone's accommodation in order to buy time for a solicitor to put in a Judicial Review of a council decision.

- Discuss options with other LCAP members. There is a email list of activists and professionals with knowledge in particular areas which you can use to ask for legal opinions.
- If the person would like to do direct action casework discuss the plan in detail. What are the demands? How many people will be needed? What should we do if the demands are not met? What will we do if police are called? How does the person feel about press?

Writing a letter in support

We generally, but not always, write a letter before taking action. It's a good idea to give the authorities an opportunity to back down before the action. The letter might be faxed, emailed or delivered to an office by a delegation.

Check out the example letter below. A possible form for a letter is to

- *say what the problem is (including what right is being denied to the person concerned)
- * explain what you want done about the problem – and when by
- *explain that LCAP will take failure to solve the problem seriously, and that we will take 'public action' if necessary.

There is a LCAP headed paper template available from the office and model letters available at the office.

Before the action

- Make sure that the person we are supporting is happy with the plan. Make sure you know their boundaries.
- Stress that they are in charge. No one will take any action they are uncomfortable with and they can call the action off at any point. No one will think less of them for doing so.
- Run through the plan once more to make sure everything is clear.

Organising an action:

Once your casework team has planned the action and set a date you'll need supporters, especially if it is an individual rather than a group taking action. Ask the person whose action you are organizing to invite their friends and relatives to come along and support as well. The LCAP office has a contacts list of people who are willing to support actions, and a phone – call around the contacts list until you have a list of people who are able to come to the action. Remember that up to half of those who say yes won't show up so get more yes –es than you think you need. Make a note of who is coming in case the plan changes.

On the day of the action

Everyone involved in planning the action, including supporters who have come to take part will meet before hand and have a briefing. This is a chance for everyone to introduce themselves and for people who have just come along to support to have the situation explained to them. It is also a chance to share information about what tactics you've decided on, and most importantly the briefing should leave everyone feeling comfortable with the plan.

When planning the action it might be a good idea to ask another LCAP member to take on a 'welfare' role for the day. Some actions can end up being day long occupations and having someone plan ahead and bring food, water and kids toys can really make a difference. It is also great to look out for each other and make sure no one is getting too stressed out and if that if they are feeling the strain then they are able to take a break.

Think and talk about what your interactions with staff and other people will be like. It can be useful for action participants to look solemn rather than chat amongst themselves. However, it might also be useful to interact with the other people using the office you are occupying, explain why you are there and be friendly and polite. Some people may resent that they are not being supported this way and think you are jumping the queue. Explain that they too can organize an action, or even join in by demanding their rights. The more support you can gather from the other people around the office, the more disruptive you will be.

At points you might need to increase the pressure. You could do this by standing in the way in a busy office around the front desk (while still letting people through to be seen), or by chanting, or reading out your demands. Be open to ideas from the other people supporting the action.

During the action

Stay with the person you are supporting. Never leave them to face the bastards alone!

Let the person whose issue it is speak for themselves by giving them the space to do so – for instance don't answer for them when the manager asks 'Why are you here?'

You may need to attend an official interview as part of the action. For example if the purpose of the action was to demand a homeless persons assessment. In an interview of this type your role may involve no more than sitting quietly while the person speaks to an official. Again be prepared add anything important but let the person do most of the talking. The person has the right to stop the interview and confer with you at any point. Make sure they know this. You may want to work out some kind of signal to communicate to them during the meeting that they may want to request this.

At a point which feels right- deliver any necessary threats. This might be something along the lines of "There are ten people outside in your waiting room and nobody is leaving until Ms X is housed." Judge the situation you are in, in general try to be assertive but polite.

After the action

Once you've left gather everyone for a discussion. While you may want to schedule long debriefs for another time after a long day at least make sure everyone knows their support is appreciated and give people a chance to state any immediate reflections. Having a go round where everyone gets a chance to speak about the action is one good way of hearing from every one.

The person who initiated the action may also want to meet separately with their advocates to discuss what to do next.

What if the police come?

This has happened a few times. Once the police removed everybody but we still got our demands met. At times the police have acted as intermediaries, which can be quite disempowering.

Discuss the possibility of the police being called before the action with everyone and agree what the groups response will be based on peoples comfort levels. Remember that different people have had different experiences of the police and may be more or less wary of them. Remain calm and explain why you are there.

What if it doesn't work?

The action may or may not have worked, and you will have talked about and prepared for this possibility in the action planning meetings. If it has not been a success then don't give up – sometimes it takes more then one go. The decision to continue to fight needs to be made by the person directly affected by the action; talk to them about it.

What if the person who is taking action changes their mind?

The person who the action is about is in charge of the action. If they decide they don't want to carry on with it then their wishes need to be respected. Help to communicate their wishes to the other participants on the action.

What if someone in the office gets aggressive?

Sometimes people waiting in welfare offices can be very frustrated and stressed. It is possible that the action could cause resentment among the other people in the waiting room. Try to make sure you communicate with as many people as possible what you are doing there and why you are there.

What resources for caseworkers does LCAP have?

LCAP have a **office**, above Freedom Bookshop in Aldgate East. It has computers, internet, a landline phone, filing cabinet and law books. The office is also where we keep our contacts of supporters and organizations. If you would like to be inducted into using the office email londoncoalitionagainstpoverity@gmail.com to find out when there'll be somebody in.

There is a **email list** for caseworkers which is a good place to make legal queries. You can request to join it by emailing: There is also a **forum** where you can make legal queries, which you can join by

LCAP has some **money** so claim back any expenses like travel or printing from petty cash in the office.

LCAP run regular **direct action casework training sessions** and can provide trainers and training materials to other groups interested in using the tactic.

We also have experiences and people, which we can use to support new groups or new caseworkers. Get in touch if you would like to talk about direct action casework.