

The Ministry of Defence has announced that for the first time, free, independent legal advice will be available to victim-survivors of rape and sexual offences (allegedly) committed by Service personnel or a civilian subject to Service Discipline that are being investigated by the Service Justice System.

The Independent Legal Advocacy (ILA) support programme pilot will, from Spring 2026, provide impartial legal support to any such victim-survivors aged 18 or over, irrespective of whether they themselves are Service personnel or civilians.

Veterans & People Minister Louise Sandher-Jones said that anyone who reports a sexual offence or rape allegedly committed by a service person, or civilians subject to Service Law, and is being investigated by the Service Justice System, will qualify for support.

She told BFBS Forces News: "At the moment as a victim the kind of support that you will access through the military will be mostly that which focuses on pastoral. So, for example, our Victims and Witnesses Care Unit is mostly focused on pastoral support to you as a victim.

"What this independent legal advocacy system will do is provide you with free legal advice so you're able to understand the process that is in front of you, what decisions to make and have the confidence to know that what you're doing is the right thing for you."

The MOD is in the process of choosing a law firm to provide the legal advisers. The programme is set to begin in the spring and will initially run as a 12-month pilot.

Comment: The announcement follows huge concern over cases such as Gunner Jaysley-Louise Beck, the 19-year-old British Army soldier whose death by suicide in 2021 has triggered major scrutiny into the handling of sexual assault and harassment complaints within the military. It will be interesting to know what areas of expert legal advice would be covered by the scheme, but no doubt it will include help to navigate a victim's journey through the service justice system as a complainant and witness.

The need remains for any service personnel suspected of, or charged with, serious crimes to have access to expert legal advice and representation from the earliest stage of their case.