

Law Centre (NI) Business Plan



20082009

Dublin's Northside Law Centre visit to Law Centre (NI). Photo: Catherine Couvert

about us

The Law Centre's purpose is to promote social justice and provide specialist legal support to advice giving organisations and disadvantaged individuals.

We provide specialist legal services to members in community care, employment, immigration, mental health and social security law, and support the work of advice agencies through advice, casework, training, information, publications and policy work.

- the production of informed policy comment on changes to public policy and legislation;
- the holding of seminars and other events which promote the advancement of legal and policy issues.

main activities

- an advice line open to members Monday to Friday from 9.30am to 1.00pm in Belfast and Derry;
- a casework and representation service including strategic court work provided on referral from members;
- accredited and other training courses aimed at both experienced and new advisers;
- the publication of Frontline magazine four times a year, an annual encyclopaedia of social welfare law, regular bulletins on changes to law and policy and a casework bulletin detailing progress with Law Centre cases;
- quarterly practitioner fora in community care, immigration, social security, and mental health and a forum on migrant workers issues to bring together advisers to discuss legal issues and practitioner developments;

achievements in 2007-2008

- taking the first case to the House of Lords on the rights of Accession State migrant workers to means-tested social security benefits. Case to be heard in July 2008;
- taking a test case to the House of Lords on the right to family life under the ECHR for children at grave risk to rejoin a refugee family member in the UK. Case to be heard in July 2008;
- obtaining through judicial review the release of a young man from Muckamore Abbey hospital with an adequate community support package after five years in detention;
- winning the right to remain in the UK for Albanian, American, Canadian, Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Iranian, Iraqi, Kosovan, Nigerian, South African, Sierra Leonian, Sudanese, Sri Lankan, Thai, Trinidadian, Turkish and Zimbabwean nationals;
- establishing at an Industrial Tribunal that fixed term employees have the right to be considered for internal vacancies as part of Review of Public Administration changes;
- achieving at the Social Security Commissioners very positive guidance on how tribunals should deal with existing awards of DLA at social security appeals;
- setting up a mental health legal advice clinic at Gransha Hospital;
- establishing a Mental Health Learning Disability Alliance to campaign for effective implementation of the Bamford reforms;
- influencing the Legal Services Commission to postpone a housing equity test for civil legal aid;
- persuading the Department for Work and Pensions to amend legislation to make it easier for people on incapacity benefit/ESA to act as panel members on social security appeal tribunals;
- organising and hosting the Immigration Asylum Commission hearings in Northern Ireland;
- running seminars on tribunal reform, mental health legislation, financing residential care, unaccompanied asylum seeking children, migrant worker policy and new immigration legislation across the island of Ireland;
- reaching agreement with the United Kingdom Borders Agency to release regular statistics on asylum/immigration applications in Northern Ireland;
- publishing the third edition of Rights in Progress - a guide to the Human Rights Act;
- getting 230,000 visits on the Law Centre website;
- training 408 advisers;
- producing an updated migrant worker guides with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

introduction

This is the Law Centre's Business Plan for 2008/2009. The Business Plan needs to be read in conjunction with the Law Centre's recently published Development Plan for 2008-2013. The Business Plan sets out the Law Centre's strategic objectives for this year alongside our service delivery targets for casework, training, publications and policy development work.

The backdrop for the work of the Law Centre continues to evolve at a significant pace. Reports on quality, IT and training have been submitted to Margaret Ritchie by the Advice Services Alliance as part of its contribution to the Department for Social Development's Advice and Information Strategy. The DSD and Legal Services Commission will also publish shortly the outcome of a mapping exercise on legal advice services. Following consultation, these initiatives and moves towards a Community Legal Service by the Legal Services Commission will chart a course for the way ahead for advice services.

Major welfare reform affecting lone parents and people with disabilities is due later this year alongside a new Welfare Reform Bill. These initiatives will place considerable demands on Law Centre resources. The consolidation of the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly and likely devolution of justice presents further welcome challenges.

This Business Plan aims to ensure that the Law Centre can meet the challenges we face and continue to thrive and work effectively with our member agencies.

key strategic objectives

The main strategic objectives for 2008/2009 include to have:

- secured funding for a pilot solicitor apprenticeship scheme;
- examined management structures within the Law Centre;
- developed a management competency framework;
- implemented recommendations following a review of training services;
- developed a media relations, marketing and communications strategy;
- produced a plan to become a more environmentally friendly organisation;
- implemented recommendations following a review of well being and stress within the organisation;
- achieved Lexcel re-accreditation;
- secured the financial resources to implement the Western Area office accommodation strategy;
- achieved at least ten changes in law, policy or practice as a result of our work;
- entered into at least ten initiatives in partnership with other agencies to enhance the rights or improve services to disadvantaged people.

Service delivery targets are set for successful outcomes at all forms of tribunals and courts in which the Law Centre provides representation. Training objectives are set and included in a published training plan which is sent to Law Centre members. Qualitative targets are set and measured by satisfaction rates obtained through written evaluations completed by participants. A tracking exercise following the progress of participants in the Welfare Rights Adviser Programme is planned as part of the training review. A programme of work for publications and policy is also set out for this year.

Progress in meeting organisational objectives is monitored through a half yearly report provided to the management committee.

service delivery

casework

The Law Centre will achieve Lexcel re-accreditation for its casework services to provide an external benchmark of the quality of casework systems and services. In addition, by 31 March 2009 we will have:

- undertaken at least 6,000 pieces of advice;
- opened 400 new cases;
- taken at least 25 strategic cases (ie cases involving court action or representation which deal with a legal precedent or cover a point of public interest or importance);
- provided representation on at least 305 occasions;
- achieved a success rate as follows:

<i>social security commissioners</i>	55%
<i>social security appeal tribunals</i>	60%
<i>industrial tribunals</i>	70%
<i>immigration appeals</i>	40%
<i>mental health review tribunals</i>	50%
<i>court hearings</i>	50%
- organised at least twelve subject based practitioner fora bringing advisers together to discuss key policy and legislative developments.

The casework team will also be involved in delivering training, producing casework briefings and other publications, as well as material for the website and to support policy work. This is reflected in objectives contained elsewhere in the business plan.

training

By 31 March 2009, the Law Centre will deliver 55 training days from our two offices. Our aim is to achieve at least 90 per cent outcome satisfaction in evaluation of overall satisfaction and 90 per cent satisfaction that course objectives are met. The training will include:

- two eight day Welfare Rights Adviser Programme courses - accredited at NVQ Level 3;
- two courses on mental health law and restricted patients;
- two courses on Employment and Support Allowance;
- two courses on the rights of migrant workers;
- two courses on carers and their rights;
- two courses on an introduction to mental health law;
- two courses on rights to social services support for people from abroad;
- two courses on migrant workers and employment rights;
- two courses on an introduction to employment law;
- two courses on social security update for lawyers.
- one six day course on tribunal representation accredited at NVQ Level 4;
- one course on European law and social security (an update);
- one course on European law and immigration (an update);
- one course on the Immigration (EEA) Regulations 2006 - analysis of case law;
- one course on community care law;
- one course on direct payments for care services;
- one course on the new Northern Ireland Constitution;
- one course on current trends in judicial review;
- one course on advising women and immigration law.

In addition, the Law Centre will meet its agreed commitment within the Community Care Legal Advice Service to provide eight training days for social services staff.

publications

By 31 March 2009, the Law Centre will produce:

- a guide to employment rights (through SLS Legal Publications NI);
- the Encyclopedia of Rights (information on social security, tax credits, community care, employment rights and immigration & marriage) in CD ROM format. The material will also be regularly updated on the Law Centre's website;
- Students and Benefits, a rights guide published in collaboration with the Adult Learners Finance Project, a joint initiative between NUS/USI and the Educational Guidance Service for Adults;
- four editions of Frontline;
- updated migrant workers guides for the website translated in Portuguese, Polish, Latvian, Lithuanian, Tetum, Slovakian, Simplified Chinese and Russian;
- a migrant workers guide on the web for Romanian and Bulgarian nationals;
- six information briefings;
- four updated tax credit briefings;
- four community care briefings;
- an annual report;
- two policy bulletins for members;
- two casework bulletins for member agencies;
- a leaflet on protection from human trafficking;
- a development plan for 2008/2013;
- a business plan for 2008/2009;
- a training programme;
- an updated strategic casework referral policy;
- ten articles for publication in the Writ;
- regular updates of material on the Law Centre's website including a new design for the website and development of the intranet.

In addition, the Law Centre will publicise its work, organise public events including launches, an AGM and other appropriate initiatives, issue press releases and liaise with the media as appropriate.

policy

By 31 March 2009 the Law Centre will have delivered:

- two North/South immigration forum events;
- a roundtable on tribunal reform with the chairperson of the new Administrative Justice Tribunals Council;
- a conference on World Mental Health Day on mental health legal reform;
- a seminar on free personal care with Rights in Community Care;
- at least twelve policy submissions;
- at least three briefing papers for Assembly political parties and members;
- three thematic policy fora meetings;
- two policy bulletins.

further information

Central Office

124 Donegall Street

Belfast

BT1 2GY

Tel: 028 9024 4401

Fax: 028 9023 6340

Textphone: 028 9023 9938

Email: admin.belfast@lawcentreni.org

Western Area Office

9 Clarendon Street

Derry

BT48 7EP

Tel: 028 7126 2433

Fax: 028 7126 2343

Email: admin.derry@lawcentreniwest.org

Web: www.lawcentreni.org



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