

Law Centre (NI) Business Plan



20092010

Law Centre Director Les Allamby with Sandara Kelso Robb of Lloyds TSB Foundation at the launch of the Law Centre's human trafficking leaflet. Photo: Kevin Cooper

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. We support the work of advice agencies through advice, casework, training, information, publications and policy work.

- informed policy comment on changes to public policy and legislation;
- 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 where advisers discuss legal issues and practitioner developments;

achievements in 2008-2009

- settling a test case with the Home Office before the House of Lords allowing a family at grave risk to rejoin a refugee family member in the UK;
- winning a test case judicial review establishing that a mental health review tribunal's decision to discharge from hospital detention cannot be deferred by the tribunal itself;
- settling a case for a cross border worker who had been wrongly charged for hospital costs after an operation;
- settling two judicial reviews about lack of age appropriate respite care by agreeing appropriate care support;
- winning tribunals and settling employment cases covering unlawful deductions from wages, breach of contract, failure to apply statutory dispute resolution, unfair selection for redundancy, and unfair dismissal;
- setting up mental health legal clinics at Knockbracken, the Mater and Belfast City Hospitals;
- getting positive guidance on legal requirements for tribunals when removing entitlement following a Social Security Commissioner's decision;
- hosting the launch of the Immigration Asylum Commission reports with the junior ministers at OFMDFM as key speakers;
- organising a seminar with the Senior President of Tribunals and new chair of the Administrative Justice Tribunal's Council;
- persuading (in partnership with the Mental Health Learning Disability Alliance) the Northern Ireland Executive to put more money into mental health services;
- succeeding in obtaining changes to the administrative arrangements for certain lone parents having to actively seek work;
- lobbying successfully for the Northern Ireland Executive to address the lack of child care in Northern Ireland. An inter-departmental working group has been set up to address this issue;
- winning the Law Centre Federation award for Innovation for policy work on migrant worker issues;
- delivering new courses on Employment Support Allowance, Rights of Foreign National Prisoners, Assisting Women Immigrants, Mental Health Law and Offender Patients, Social Services Duties to People from Abroad, Safeguarding Victims of Trafficking, Immigration (EEA) Regulations 2006 and the new Northern Ireland Constitution;
- getting over 250,000 visits to the Law Centre's website;

achievements in 2008-2009 (continued)

- producing and distributing a leaflet in twelve languages for people who have been trafficked;
- producing a second edition of the migrant worker guides for the website and producing new guides for Romanian and Bulgarian workers (in partnership with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission);
- 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;
- running seminars on 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.

introduction

This is the Law Centre's Business Plan for 2009/2010. The Business Plan outlines the Law Centre's strategic objectives for this year alongside service delivery targets for casework, training, publications and policy development work.

The economic downturn is having an impact on the Law Centre as well as other voluntary sector advice organisations. Employment and social security enquiries are on the increase as more people find themselves either working reduced hours or out of work altogether. This coincides with a new Welfare Reform Bill designed to further the government's desire to get more lone parents and people with disabilities actively engaged in finding work.

Within government, there is also a commitment to develop new mental health and capacity legislation, to progress tribunal reform, the implementation of the new Borders Citizenship and Immigration Act and changes to statutory dispute resolution in the work place. These changes and others pose significant challenges for our work. We have actively engaged with the local Assembly to ensure that our practitioner experience feeds into our policy and lobbying work. Last year we received the Law Centre Federation's Innovation Award for the work of the policy unit, a testimony to the impact our policy work is making on the ground.

Our response to these challenges is reflected in the targets we have set for delivering services.

key strategic objectives

The main strategic objectives for 2009/2010 include to have:

- achieved at least ten changes in law, policy and practice as a result of our work;
- entered into at least ten initiatives in partnership with other agencies to enhance the rights of improve services to disadvantaged people;
- achieved a positive outcome in external evaluations commissioned by the Department for Social Development and Atlantic Philanthropies;
- implemented the changes to management structures;
- implemented a management competency framework;
- designed and delivered a 360° appraisal system for managers;
- implemented an action plan to become a more environmentally friendly organisation;
- achieved an improved score in an organisational stress audit;
- achieved Investors in People and Lexcel re-accreditation;

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 published in a training programme sent to all members. Qualitative targets are set and measured by satisfaction rates obtained through written evaluations completed by participants. A framework to measure outcomes from training on a structured basis will be introduced during 2009/2010.

A programme of publications and policy work is also set out for the year.

Progress in meeting organisational and other objectives in monitored through a half yearly report provided to the Management Committee which reflects on how the previous year's targets were met alongside progress with this year's organisational objectives.

service delivery

casework

The Law Centre will achieve Lexcel reaccreditation for its casework services to provide an external benchmark of the quality of casework systems and services. In addition, by 31 March 2010 we will have:

- undertaken at least 6,000 pieces of advice;
- opened 360 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:

social security commissioners	55%
social security appeal tribunals	60%
industrial tribunals	70%
immigration appeals	60%
mental health review tribunals	40%
court hearings	50%
- organised at least twenty subject based practitioner fora bringing advisers together to discuss key policy and legislative developments;
- to have maintained at least three hospital based legal services for mental health users.

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.

policy

By 31 March 2010 the Law Centre will have delivered:

- two North/South immigration forum events;
- seminar on immigration and devolution;
- a conference on the new Mental Health and Capacity Bill;
- an opinion paper on financing personal care with Age Concern / Help the Aged and UNISON;
- a research paper on tribunal reform in Northern Ireland;
- a conference on tribunal reform and the needs of users and others;
- at least twelve policy submissions;
- at least four briefing papers for Assembly political parties and members;
- three thematic policy fora meetings;
- three policy bulletins.

In addition, the policy unit will continue to work on other key reform priorities including a new Welfare Reform Act, an Employment Bill, migrant workers issues and the treatment of asylum seekers and others with immigration issues. The Unit will also play an active role in the work of the Mental Health and Learning Disability Alliance to ensure strong and progressive mental health legislation is enacted for Northern Ireland.

training

By 31 March 2010, the Law Centre will deliver 70 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:

- three eight day Welfare Rights Adviser Programme courses - accredited at NVQ Level 3;
- two courses on redundancy, lay off and insolvency;
- two half day courses on Jobseeker's Allowance: the new work seeing arrangements;
- two courses on legal research skills for advisers;
- two courses on an introduction to mental health law;
- two courses on mental incapacity;
- two courses on mental health and criminal justice;
- two courses on an introduction to immigration law;
- two courses on an introduction to employment law;
- two courses on challenging social services decisions;
- two courses on benefits for carers;
- two courses on foreign national prisoners;
- two half day courses on social security update for lawyers;
- two half day courses on assisting women immigrants;
- one course on children and young people in the immigration system;
- 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 benefits during and after pregnancy;
- one course on Employment and Support Allowance (ESA): one year on;
- one course in DLA appeals: tribunal tactics;
- one course on challenging overpayment decisions;
- one course on Immigration (EEA) Regulations 2006 case law analysis;
- one course on European law and immigration (an update);
- one course on the new Northern Ireland Constitution.

In addition, the Law Centre will meet its agreed commitment within the Community Care Legal Advice Service to provide at least eight training days for social services staff and also deliver community care training as part of a partnership with Advice NI and the age sector.

publications

By 31 March 2010, the Law Centre will produce:

- a guide to employment rights (through SLS Legal Publications NI);
- the Encyclopedia of Rights (nineteen chapters including 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;
- a briefing for student and self employed Romanian and Bulgarian nationals;
- an online migrant worker guide for Romanian and Bulgarian nationals, with translations;
- six community care information briefings;
- an annual report;
- three policy bulletins for members;
- three casework bulletins for member agencies;
- a updated multi lingual leaflet signposting immigration advice;
- a policy unit briefing on domestic violence and migrant women;
- a mental health legal advice briefing for patients;
- a business plan for 2010/2011;
- 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 continued 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.

further information

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