

## SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES IN CRISIS

In 2022 we entered our 45th year of working for social justice in Northern Ireland, with the impact of the pandemic continuing to impact across communities.

After 45 years, Law Centre NI continues to work tirelessly to tackle inequality and injustice. Our legal work spans three specialist areas: social security, employment and immigration & asylum law.

*"Thank you to everybody for fighting beside me for a better future."*  
**Our client "Celeste"**

### Legal Aid Lawyer of the Year Award



This year we were thrilled to win the Legal Aid Lawyer of the Year (LALY) award in the Not-For-Profit Agency category. The award recognises the vital role of law centres across the UK and our role in ensuring access to justice.

*"It is a mark of their vocation, drive and dedication to their clients and their clear belief in providing access to justice to those who would otherwise lose out, that Law Centre NI is often held out as a shining example of a small organisation that does make a big difference."*

**Labour Relations Agency**

### Honouring our friend and colleague, Ronnie Vellem

Sadly, we lost our dear friend and colleague, Ronnie, earlier this year. Ronnie made a huge difference to people's lives.

This was summed up beautifully in a 'Lives Remembered' article, which described Ronnie perfectly as a "big man with a huge heart and a passion for helping others". Ronnie had experienced persecution in his own life and so was dedicated to helping others.

Ronnie's loss is felt immensely by everyone at the Law Centre and wider community. We were delighted that Ronnie's contribution was honoured posthumously in his Lifetime Achievement Award at the Advancing Race Equality Awards earlier this year.



*"Ronnie was an absolute stand for justice. He could spot an injustice at a hundred paces and in his quiet and unassuming way would get on with what he needed to do to make change happen."*

**Ursula O'Hare,  
Director, Law Centre NI**

### CO3 Leadership Awards

Our fantastic Head of Finance and Business Services, Julie Wilkinson, was nominated in the 'One to Watch' category at the CO3 Leadership Awards. We are so proud of Julie and delighted that her hard work, energy and commitment to the Law Centre was recognised through her nomination.

# KEY HIGHLIGHTS

*"Invaluable, life-giving, enabling, empowering and free. Very powerful advice and representation. Unbelievable service and very much needed. Essential in all ways."*

**Law Centre NI client**



## Supporting advisers and the public with quality legal services:

- Our **test cases** in the public interest changed the law for many across the UK
- Worked on **712 legal cases** on complex areas of law.
- We achieved full **Lexcel quality re-accreditation** with 22 areas of good practice.
- Secured **£1.5m** in financial outcomes for our clients.
- Our **Social Security Law and Practice Bulletin** was sent to over 800 frontline staff and stakeholders each quarter.
- We gave over **25,000 pieces of legal advice** on social security, employment and immigration issues.
- We produced **26 legal information resources** for the advice network.
- We provided **39 professional learning courses**, attended by over 900 delegates.
- There were over **29,000 new users** on our website this year.
- We reached over **5,500** followers on Twitter and over **700,000** tweet impressions. We increased our Facebook reach by **74%**.
- We welcomed our **third Justice First Fellow** supported by The Legal Education Foundation.

## Advocating for social security rights

- Our legal work resulted in a **landmark ruling by the CJEU** (VI case) who determined a long-running debate about Comprehensive Sickness Insurance and the rights of EU citizens in the UK.
- As a result of our legal work (Cox case) we saw a positive change in the law when legislation passed in the Northern Ireland Assembly on **access to benefits for people with a terminal illness**.
- We successfully appealed unfair social security decisions giving **many of our clients financial security and much-needed peace of mind**.
- We provided **bespoke support to deaf clients** to successfully appeal unfair PIP decisions, drawing attention to the shortcomings in the system for the deaf community.
- We advocated for **improvements to the system of overpayments caused by official error** and the Department for Communities implemented changes to its information resources so people understand better how to get help.

## A tribute to Lorraine Cox

Our brave and inspirational client Lorraine Cox passed away this year.

Lorraine fought selflessly for change to the terminal illness rules after her own experience. Her determination to fight for change means that many others who are living with a terminal illness will not have to go through what she did.

What a legacy.

## Advocating immigration rights

- Our Migration Justice Team ensured that all asylum seekers and survivors of human trafficking benefitted from the £100 **High Street Voucher Scheme, putting £140k into the asylum seeker community in NI.**
- We persuaded the Department of Infrastructure to **extend free transport asylum seekers over 60** so they can benefit from free public transport on the same terms as others.
- We tackled the destitution and homelessness faced by **families and children subject to immigration control**, securing immediate access to support and durable solutions for their future.
- We **rapidly responded to the Ukrainian humanitarian** crisis by providing legal help to Ukrainians arriving in NI, securing their status and entitlements to support.
- We provided **430 pieces of advice** to Syrian families through the **Syrian Vulnerable Persons' Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS).**
- We secured philanthropic support for a new project that will provide fully funded **immigration apprenticeships within the refugee community in NI.**

*"A much needed resource for local communities in Belfast and Northern Ireland as this is one of the only free legal support groups that I could find after an internet search. They are vital to helping people who cannot afford legal advice. I am on low income and would not have wanted to or been able to take further action without the information and support provided. Thank you to all the staff members within Law Centre NI for all your assistance and support. I am truly grateful."*

**Law Centre NI client**



**Migration  
Justice  
Project**



[www.lawcentreni.org](http://www.lawcentreni.org)

## Upholding employment rights

- Our legal help supported people to uphold their employment law rights. We successfully **challenged an unfair dismissal** that secured a settlement of over £11k.
- We challenged **unlawful deductions from wages** in a constructive dismissal case,.
- We challenged the **unfair passing of immigration charges** by an employer to a migrant worker.
- We provided tailored legal advice that secured a successful resolution for a long term employee, **helping them stay in employment after period of illness.**
- Produced **3 legal information resources and 1 legal seminar** that helped people understand their employment law rights.
- Ensured the **impact of low pay and insecure employment featured in our policy contributions at the employment sub - group at the Anti - Poverty Strategy meetings.**

*"We cannot thank the Law Centre enough for all its help. It has been a very difficult time for us. But you have been so compassionate, caring, and knowledgeable, guiding us through the process step by step."*

**Law Centre NI client**

*"It is only now that I feel I can begin to lift my head from the stress and anxiety. Whenever I expressed my situation to others, it fell on deaf ears until I came across you...You were able to listen to my situation, give me specific and relevant advice and help me to see my case through in an unbiased manner."*

**Law Centre NI client**

## Influencing policy

This year, we continued to make sure that the voices of vulnerable people throughout Northern Ireland were heard. We achieved some significant successes, which will make a true difference to people in Northern Ireland.

- After years of tireless campaigning by the Cliff Edge Coalition, which we co-convene with Housing Rights, **the Welfare Supplementary Payments Bill** cleared its final hurdle in Stormont, extending existing welfare reform mitigations for three years and extending the bedroom tax indefinitely. This will help people from slipping further into poverty and safeguard vital protections for over 40,000 households in Northern Ireland.
- Law Centre NI Director, Ursula O'Hare, was appointed by Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey, to an expert panel established to review the **Discretionary Support scheme**, which provides financial support to individuals in extreme, exceptional or crisis situations.
- We worked with Housing Rights to ensure that the migrant sector was aware of an **'Everyone In' Memorandum of Understanding between the Department for Communities and the Department for Health**. The MoU had been developed as a Covid measure and makes provision for accommodation support for destitute migrants. At least 66 migrants have been accommodated through the MoU to date, including one child.
- The Law Centre led the Refugee and Asylum Forum's response to the Nationality & Borders Bill and led evidence to the NI Committee that highlighted the adverse impacts on communities in NI.
- The **Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficked Victims) Bill** passed its final stage in the Northern Ireland Assembly and included two amendments which we had been advocating for: provide post NRM (National Referral Mechanism) support for victims and survivors of trafficking for up to 12 months and widen the scope of the statutory defence available for victims and survivors. These amendments dramatically improve support for victims of human trafficking in Northern Ireland.
- We led work to establish a new Refugee Voices Forum so policy is informed by people with lived experience.
- The Law Centre responded to the public consultation regarding **proposals to reform the Human Rights Act 1998: "Human Rights Act Reform: A Modern Bill Of Rights"** that poses a significant risk to individual's rights and access to justice. **We highlighted that a deterioration in the rights and protections afforded by the Human Rights Act, would have a grossly disproportionate effect on the communities that the Law Centre exist to support.**



***The work we do is only possible because of the generous support we receive from our funders. We thank them all for their acknowledgement that specialist legal services change lives and their confidence in supporting us to do just that.***