

## **Community Projects in Law Centres**

### **EXAMPLES**

#### **Street/legal**

*Street/legal* is based at Enfield Law Centre in North London and provides a service for children and young people aged 8 to 19. The service is provided at youth advice agencies, such as Connexions. The Project aims to ensure that the rights of children and young people are enforced, and that they receive the care, education and accommodation they are entitled to. *Street/legal* provides information on young people's legal rights through a range of media, including film, the local youth press, and more formally through the curriculum in local schools.

The Project has focused on three basic human rights for young people; housing, education, and protection from abuse. For many young people these rights are inextricably linked and the loss of one can quickly have a cascade effect whereby housing, welfare, and education are lost in rapid succession.

Homelessness can make children and young people extremely vulnerable to abuse, illness, drugs, prostitution and crime. Often young people who visit the *Street/legal* have found it impossible to continue attending school or college when they do not know where they will be sleeping, showering or eating from one night to the next.

#### **Asian Women's Rights Project**

In response to the Government's Crime and Disorder prevention strategy, Oldham Council established a Domestic Violence Forum. The Forum adopted a multi-agency approach and the local Oldham Law Centre convened the group focusing on children and ethnic minorities. It raised awareness of the help available and in particular help to illiterate and housebound Asian women. They made services more accessible, producing tapes in relevant languages to pin point where to get assistance, not only on domestic violence but also on the financial problems, housing and children's issues that may have resulted from it. A key partner was the local NHS Trust who ensured that tapes were available in venues that women were likely to visit, such as doctor's surgeries.

Oldham Law Centre serves on the steering group of the Forced Marriages Forum in Oldham. Compact information cards have been produced and are being distributed so individuals facing forced marriage know how to access help. The Law Centre also delivers training around forced marriages and liaises with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the British High Commissions abroad to assist in the safe return of women forcefully returned abroad.

## **Islington Schools Advice Project**

The Project was delivered jointly by Islington Law Centre and Islington People's Rights. The Project aimed to provide holistic advice sessions to parents and carers at local schools. Advice focused on housing and benefit problems as they are often interlinked and that many families experience difficulties in both these areas. Their aim was to take advice services to the heart of the community, and to meet previously unmet needs. This was achieved by making links with local schools, working within education action zones and other areas known to have high rates of poverty and social exclusion.

The Project delivered a large increase in disposable incomes demonstrating how many were not taking up their entitlements to benefits – either through ignorance or because advocacy was required in order for their claims to succeed.

The Project showed how cost effective welfare rights interventions can be – both for the individuals concerned, and also for the council (and other statutory agencies) in terms of not only the positive effect upon rent arrears and council tax arrears, but also improved income and opportunities for the children in the household.

By working closely with school staff, the Project managed to provide advice and support to vulnerable parents who would not otherwise have been helped. Besides helping parents, the Project also had a significant impact on schools. By working closely with Home School Liaison workers they helped reduce their workload and enabled them to spend more time on the core activities. It helped get parents more involved in school activities and to take a more active role in their school.

The Project also noted a 12% improvement in attendance rates. The schools involved have noted that their relationships with families have been strengthened. This has led to a greater sense of co-operation and joint problem solving which will enhance children's ability to do well throughout their educational career.

*Because of the lack of funding, the project has now ceased.*

## **Education Legal Advice Service**

Tower Hamlets Law Centre hosts an East London Education Legal Advice Service (ELAS). The Service takes referrals from six boroughs in East London (Tower Hamlets, Hackney, Waltham Forest, Newham, Barking and Dagenham and Redbridge) and undertakes casework covering exclusions, admissions and admission appeals, special educational needs, disability discrimination, further and higher education, bullying, complaints against schools and Local Education Authorities. The Service also represents clients at hearing and tribunals and provides second tier advice to voluntary and statutory organisations.

'The main strengths lie in special educational needs (SEN) and exclusion cases, including "children out of school" cases. Our success rate with SEN cases that develop into an appeal case to the special educational needs and disability tribunal (SENDIST) is about 90%. In terms of the success rates in exclusion cases, i.e. getting the exclusion overturned and the child reinstated, does vary and is dependent on the facts of the case. We have however in many cases successfully represented the excluded child and highlighted that often unidentified SEN (including behavioral and emotional difficulties) were the trigger to the incident that led to the exclusion. We then take the necessary steps to secure more support and specific provision for

the child so future incidents can be avoided. Referrals also include children that have been out of school for up to 2 years, due to various reasons, including:

- being involved in criminal activity and getting arrested
- moving to a different area and where no school place was available at a school near by
- severe bullying where the child refuses to go back to the school and the local authority is not providing alternative educational provision
- where the needs of the child are not being met at school and the parents then withdraw the child and the local authority is not providing alternatives.

'For all of the above out of school cases, we do try to get these children back into mainstream education as soon as possible and these cases are treated as a priority.

'Several cases are about autism including social communications difficulties or other speech and language difficulties. Due to a severe shortage of therapists available to work in schools, local authorities have adopted an unwritten policy not to quantify and specify speech and language in the statement of SEN and keep provision very vague. Therefore, the most severe children who are often unable to verbally communicate but have the ability to develop language skills are only offered "access to a language programme" delivered by an unqualified person, e.g. a learning support assistant. These cases can only be challenged at SENDIST and we have been successful in several cases, for example by getting the local authority to offer in the statement of SEN, direct weekly hourly speech and language therapy delivered by a qualified speech and language therapist.'

### **Human Rights Society**

In 2007, Carlisle Law Centre piloted a new Cumbria Human Rights Society. The Law Centre argues that human rights thinking needs to be moved out of academia and into the workplace and public sphere. They are running forums having seen first hand the practical effects of social inequality. 'We recognise that human rights need to progress beyond the office manual and tick boxes on forms. CHRS will aim to re-introduce human rights and build basic legal empowerment. We want to challenge the view that human rights legislation is just a maze of complex and obscure rules. CHRS will get people talking in forums to ignite participation across Carlisle and Cumbria. We will speak up against the institutions that seek to impose oppressive policies. We will advocate change and press for accountability. Ultimately, we want to take the armchair out of activism.'

### **Working with the Probation Service**

October 2005 marked the launch of a new financial partnership between Gateshead Law Centre and Northumbria Probation Service, a three-year contract offering weekly advice to Probation Service clients in 18 different offices up to three hours per week.

"To date the partnership has been extremely successful," said Robin Winder, Manager of Gateshead Law Centre. "The Law Centre been able to bring extra resources to this partnership and the outcomes of the sessions are proving to be a success throughout the Northumbria area".

The Law Centre has had an attendance rate of between 70% -80% over the last year - the highest of any of the Probation Partnerships, and by the end of September 2006 they will have

seen over 1000 clients throughout the area. During this time over 30% of clients either have managed to be helped to reduce their debt, increase their income or preserve or obtain housing. Debts handled during this time amounted to £750,000 with benefit gains of over to £200,000, and over a 100 clients have been prevented from being made homeless.

“The local Legal Services Commission offices in the North East agreed that this work could be incorporated as part of our current contract so that casework can be taken on,” commented Robin Winder. “This has meant an extension to the work we are able to carry out, for example, it has enabled us to carry out housing casework previously not available to previous suppliers of the service including ourselves and Newcastle CAB. This has resulted in various challenges including a Judicial Review case taken against Sunderland City Council in relation to its obligations to homeless people in its borough”.

The future progress of this project is now looking towards building on this success, introducing laptops and legal materials to Probation Offices use by advisors and clients for which it is currently seeking funding. The project also has plans to link up with other local services, advice centres and CABs to ensure a more seamless service to clients of Northumbria Probation Service.

### **Development of Mental Health Services**

In 2006, Law Centre (Northern Ireland) secured £1.55 million over 5 years from Atlantic Philanthropies (an American philanthropic trust) to provide a policy development unit and a mental health legal advice service to build up mental health legal expertise in local advice services and within local user groups as well as providing an advice, casework and representation service and hospital based advice clinics. Les Allamby, the Director said, “We are delighted to secure this funding which will put our policy development work on a much stronger footing and allow us to address a significant unmet legal need in that there are almost no sources of mental health legal expertise. It is a major boost for the Law Centre”

### **Discrimination Awareness**

Coventry Law Centre and Coventry Partnership’s Equality and Communities Theme Group are working in partnership to raise awareness of discrimination and the rights that people have if they find that they have been discriminated against. The city-wide *Discrimination Awareness Campaign* was launched in July. A wide range of community groups and other organisations attended and participated in the workshops before being asked to sign up for the campaign. The campaign is being promoted via advertising on buses in the city, in libraries and schools as well as on a large number of billboards throughout the city centre. Everyone will receive the information about the campaign in the council’s magazine, ‘Citivision’ which is delivered to every household in the city.

Sue Bent, Director of the Law Centre said, ‘Supporters of the campaign have made a pledge that they will display posters and give out leaflets, and encourage anyone who may have suffered discrimination that it is always worth doing something about it. Many people think there is nothing that can be done. The message we need to get out is that there is often something that CAN be done and that the Law Centre can help.’

Coventry Law Centre was one of eight firms\organisations who won Race Equality Awards this year. The project was recognised by the Law Society and the Commission for Racial Equality

as an outstanding achievement in promoting equality and diversity. The Law Centre was awarded the Best Race Equality Initiative for their work.

### **Sexual Orientation Awareness**

As part of their strategy to raise awareness of sexual orientation legislation, Southwark Law Centre's project, 'Pride and Prejudice' has distributed over 3,000 leaflets through their local LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) worker and through the local Council for Voluntary Service. They have also held displays, had stalls and circulated an email bulletin. Since they started this work in 2005 they have helped in four Sexual Orientation cases and secured over £30,000 in settlements for clients. They said however, that leaflet distribution and other traditional approaches to raising awareness had had limited success.

Now Southwark Law Centre, in partnership with the Law Centres Federation and the Southwark LGBT Network, took a creative approach through the production of a DVD. The DVD was produced with members of the LGBT community and is a resource that all Law Centres can use to educate people about their rights.

A copy of the DVD is on the LCF website under 'LCF Projects'.

### **Supporting the Community**

Avon and Bristol Law Centre have been successful in securing from SRB6 and European funding under Objective 2. With this funding they have been able to re-launch their community groups advice service. They have also been involved with the changeup consortium for Bristol and the West of England. The Centre has successfully secured funding to provide community groups advice and training through this consortium, to Bristol as a whole and are working with Community Action to give casework support and supervision to a worker providing advice to community groups in west of England. They also provide training to umbrella bodies in the west of England.

In their Annual Review they say, 'Our community group work makes a real difference to new and developing community groups in the area. Having a sound constitution and a good understanding of the roles and responsibilities of committee members, gives groups a firm base from which they can succeed in community activities, attract new committee members and funding, to help them on their way to long term sustainability.'

Avon and Bristol is also a key member of the Bristol stakeholders consortium which has secured funding for the 'Bright' project. The purpose of 'Bright' is to improve the standard of benefits and legal advice given by BME voluntary sector organisations to the communities. The Project was launched in April 2005 and will run for two and a half years. It is based at the Law Centre and has two workers – an Advice Service Development Officer and a Liaison Officer.

### **Helping to stop evictions**

Coventry Law Centre is part of a new team dedicated to helping tenants pay their rent of time to reduce rent arrears. They report that evictions by a Coventry housing group have dropped more than 40% in just 12 months. The team involves Whitefriars Housing Group and the local CAB. The Law Centre has been attending arrears interviews at the pre-issue stage.

They are also piloting a service where Whitefriars text tenants for whom they have a mobile phone number and asking them to call the Law Centre for independent advice. They have also had an advert on local radio, aimed at reaching young people, in a rap style. It's being played every hour for a month. Posters in toilets in clubs and pubs to reach young people are also being piloted to encourage people to attend court.

Coventry Law Centre say of the project:

*'Prevention of evictions is one of the main goals of the Housing team at Coventry Law Centre and, traditionally, we have represented housing association tenants in court to try to achieve this goal. We are very pleased to be able to work together with Whitefriars Housing Group to offer independent advice to their tenants at a much earlier stage in the arrears recovery process. Our experience is that assistance at an earlier stage is more likely to offer solutions that are sustainable, and involvement with tenants before their case reaches court is a much less traumatic process for them.'*

### **Possession Prevention Project**

Southwark Law Centre set up this joint project with Blackfriars Advice Centre in 2004. It aims to reduce eviction in Southwark through early intervention and increased access to advice and policy work. The project has trained nearly 50 individuals from various community and advice agencies in preventing evictions. The aim is that these workers will be able to identify persons at risk of eviction and intervene at an early stage as a result of their training or refer the tenant for more specialist advice and support. The project works closely with the Southwark Housing Lawyers' Group and has implemented an electronic referral pilot to assist in the efficient take up of cases.

The project worked with the Community Legal Service Partnership in Southwark in preparing an advice leaflet for residents and will be working in partnership with them to design a leaflet detailing advice agencies specialising in Welfare Benefits, Debt and Housing. This will be sent to tenants faced with possession proceedings/eviction. The project has increased awareness of the Duty Scheme amongst court users. This has been done by providing new information posters in the court and meeting court staff to promote and monitor the scheme.

The project has been carrying policy work and has attended meeting of local housing forums. Contributions were made to the Southwark Housing Strategy which will be effective for the next five years. The project drew attention to unlawful practice in respect of the way Housing Benefit appeals were being dealt with and hopes to influence the Council's rent policy.

The project was given as an example of the benefits of public legal education in 'Developing Capable Citizens: The Role of Public Legal Education' in 2007.

### **Campaign against Hate Crime**

Southwark Law Centre obtained funding from the Hate Crime Unit to enable them to promote the new regulations prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. The work included training and producing materials including leaflets about the regulations and handing them out at shopping centres and at community events.

## **WASP**

The WASP research project is a groundbreaking study conducted by South Manchester Law Centre in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University. It focuses on the experience of women asylum seekers from Pakistan who seek refugee protection in the UK as a result of fleeing domestic violence in Pakistan. The research is transnational covering England and Wales and four regions in Pakistan. The study pay particular attention to the nature and extent of protection in Pakistan, the difficulties associated with the concept of internal flight, the difficulties Pakistani women have experienced with the attempts to access justice within the asylum system and problems with access to services in the UK.

A conference was held on 7<sup>th</sup> December 2007 in Manchester.

## **Vulnerable Workers Project**

A Vulnerable Workers Project was launched at Tower Hamlets Law Centre on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2007. The project is taking a new approach by working in partnership and building links between the trade union movement, the advice and community sector, including the Law Centre, and statutory employment bodies, utilising the strengths of each to demonstrate a sustainable, working model to enable workers to secure their employment rights.

The project is being piloted in Tower Hamlets and the city and aimed at workers in the Building Services sector, the majority of whom are in cleaning or security. If successful it is likely that the project could be rolled out to other parts of the country and include other sectors.

## **Routes to Integration and Inclusion**

Routes to Integration and Inclusion is run by Advice for Life including Cambridge and Huntingdon Law Centres. Funded by EU (EQUAL), the project focused on understanding and delivering an holistic approach to IAG for migrant workers in Cambridgeshire. The project has:

- Worked with 208 clients via interviews, group work, email, phone or letter.
- Won over £25,000 of financial settlements for clients
- Uncovered gaps in the provision which undermine the ability of migrant workers to participate in the workplace or take up their rights
- Participated in three research projects, several regional and national conferences and influenced policy and practice in the region
- Developed the Migrant Gateway website [www.migrantgateway.eu](http://www.migrantgateway.eu)
- Developed publicity and information for employers, trade unions and migrants in a range of languages.

## **Volunteer Services Development Project**

Bury Law Centre's Big Lottery funded Volunteer Services Development:

- An evening clinic based at the Law Centre
- A daytime outreach clinic at a community centre in Bury's most deprived ward with multi-lingual provision for the large local Punjabi community
- An initial employment advice clinic developed in partnership with the Employment Lawyer's Association and LawWorks

- A helpdesk reception and signposting service providing information to over 100 people per month and raising awareness of Bury Law Centre.

In their first year, the two legal guidance clinics saw 137 clients. Seven pro bono lawyers gave 76 hours free advice and guidance covering a range of issues, about a third of which are not normally dealt with by the Law Centre and its local partners. The Law Centre is developing a strategy to ensure that these volunteer services can be maintained after the end of Big Lottery funding in June 2008.