

Life under the Westway

A former butcher's shop in West London is home to the first law centre. Jon Robins talks to the lawyers who set it up and who run it now about its early days and uncertain future

'Clients sometimes complain about the way they are represented nowadays but it was appalling at the time,' recalls Peter Kandler, who set up the pioneering North Kensington Law Centre in 1970. He is now semi-retired but his firm Peter Kandler & Co is a few doors down from the Law Centre. 'There were practically no lawyers who'd represent tenants in the County Court,' he says. 'Of course, there were no right in police stations to have a solicitor and they never went because they weren't paid.'

A 1974 World in Action film, called *Law Shop*, tracked a week in the life of the first law centre capturing an impoverished community living in the shadow of the newly-constructed A40 Westway which had just cut through their terraces. The film depicts what the voiceover calls a 'slum area' of semi-derelict houses with smashed windows, bare plasterboard and leaking roofs. It also captures the strained relations between the mainly black locals and the police.

'I had forgotten how bad it was,' says Kandler, who recently re-watched the film. His first involvement as a lawyer in the area was running drop-in advice sessions towards the end of the 1960s often dealing with tenants of the notorious landlord Peter Rachman. 'His rent collectors had Alsatian dogs that actually bit off one of the ears of a tenant,' he recalls.

There was fierce resistance from the Law Society at the end of the 1960s, although Kandler says a truce was soon reached. In fact, he is grateful to the Society for turning a blind eye to a scandal that could have sunk his centre. He and his fellow workers employed a receptionist with a criminal conviction for incitement to violence following an anti-Vietnam rally, information never passed on to the management committee. Soon after the receptionist started, Special Branch paid a visit in connection with his involvement with an inflammatory black rights magazine. Kandler recalls: 'I can't remember what it was called, but on the cover it had words to the effect of: "Black brothers, we are oppressed and to help alleviate the pressure we recommend the following recipes". Recipe one was for a hang grenade and recipe two was for a Molotov cocktail.'" The receptionist went on the run. 'He was found to my enormous embarrassment, and the great glee of Special Branch, living with one of our secretaries,' Kandler recalls.

The money that enabled the centre to open came from two charitable trusts, the City Parochial Foundation and the Pilgrim Trust and came to around £4,000. By 1972 the centre was already facing closure over money problems. In 1974 the local authority, Kensington and Chelsea, offered the centre a loan but on condition that Kandler was sacked and two members of his committee were dismissed. The solicitor sent the letter to the national press. 'We raised something like £12,000 as a result,' he claims.

The precarious nature of the financial health of the centre has been a constant theme. 'We are about to enter a period of uncertainty,' comments Sean Canning, the present director of North Kensington. 'I wouldn't want to sound alarmist and say we're about to go down the Swanee but the impact of fixed fees will have a real adverse effect.' The centre, which has ten lawyers (six solicitors and four case workers), had an open day in February. In two hours advice workers managed to secure 500 signatures for its petition.

It is easy to see the centre's concern given its dependence on legal aid. It has a turnover of about £555,000 and receives about 75% from the LSC; £90,000 comes from a grant from London Councils; £54,000 comes from the CRE; and only £30,000 from the local authority. When Canning joined in 2003 the council paid only £1,000. To put this into context, Kensington and Chelsea spends about £1.5m on advice and about £300,000 on housing advice. The centre has the largest LSC contract in the borough of 7,586 hours.

The conversion in 2002 of the old Lord Chancellor's Department grant (introduced in 1976) into contracts meant that many clients have fallen outside of their reach - as many as one in four, according to Canning. 'The whole ethos of the centre was to fill a gap that wasn't being met in the area by private practice,' he says. 'We didn't come here to means test people.'

What's the answer to the movement's funding problems? 'One thing that was argued for at the beginning was a national publicly-funded civil legal service,' replies Canning. 'There were great hopes attached when New Labour came into power but, of course, that didn't work out. One of the problems that impedes funding is there's no statutory duty on local authorities to fund advice.'



Joining the protest: Karen Buck (on the right), the local Labour MP, outside North Kensington Law Centre

