

Law For All Report January 2009

Introduction

Law For All is a limited company with charitable status, founded in 1993. It provides not-for-profit legal services in social welfare law in the London Boroughs of Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham, Hillingdon and Hounslow and in Suffolk, Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire and Staffordshire.

Law For All has six major areas of legal practice: debt; social security; housing; employment; family and immigration. We also carry out work in the areas of education and community care.

During 2008 we gave advice to approximately 15,000 people and opened case files for about 3,000.

Core services and funding

The core work of Law For All continues to be the provision of high quality, cost-effective social welfare law services to the public. The bulk of our work is funded by the Legal Services Commission. We also have funding from the London Borough of Ealing for work increasing access to advice services, BERR funding under the Capitalise money advice project and some charitable donations from individuals and groups.

Our client group is made up of those who are eligible for public funding and those who, although outside the scope of legal aid, would be unable to afford to pay privately for assistance. Some of our services, particularly those funded through the Capitalise money advice consortium, are not means tested.

In October 2007, our funding through the LSC underwent a radical transformation and is now based on fixed fees for each case rather than on hours worked. The difficulties arising from the changes have been considerable. In particular, the change from being paid in advance for our work to being paid retrospectively with no payments on account for the bulk of our work has been a significant challenge. Indeed, we are aware that many not-for-profit organisations have not survived the change in funding system. We regret the loss of so many dedicated organisations and are grateful that we have been able to weather the storm.

Culture

In our work we continue to foster a company culture that ensures value for money for the public purse and the best possible client service. In our area of work it is easy to become demotivated and dispirited. We therefore strive to ensure a happy and productive working environment for all our staff.

Quality

Law For All has received excellent audit reports from the Legal Services Commission and has passed Peer Review assessments in immigration, family, debt and social security. We are pleased with these assessments but mindful of the need to avoid complacency. We have therefore undertaken a Total Quality Programme, considering the quality of legal work, management and administrative activities across the organisation and involving outside consultants. We are confident that this will push our quality still higher and put us in a good position to face further upcoming peer review assessments by the Legal Services Commission.

Management developments

Rising to the challenge of producing both sufficient volume and sufficient quality of work, we have over the past 18 months developed comprehensive monitoring systems. All lawyers are part of one or more subject teams, each of which includes supervisors and a subject leader responsible for the quality of the legal work within that subject. The quality is monitored by random file checks by supervisors, client feedback and “client’s shoes reviews”, whereby a member of the non-legal staff assesses a file against criteria designed to measure the quality of client communication.

Each lawyer is also a member of a cross-subject team within a Group, with a Group Solicitor responsible for monitoring productivity and performance against targets, and for monitoring workload levels. We have over recent months consolidated our work to reduce the caseloads of individual lawyers, with most caseloads now on target at manageable levels. This is good for efficiency and quality, but we are most pleased about the positive impact on client care.

Our further expansion in Central England has led to the structure being strengthened to recognise two Areas; London and Central England, each with an Area Director who is a solicitor and may also be a Group Solicitor within their Area.

Throughout Law For All we are in addition implementing a managerial reorganisation to tie in with the changes in the structure for legal staff outlined above. We have more clearly defined the roles of our support staff and have, through an arrangement with a local college, begun the process of setting personalised training and career development plans for them all.

The Executive Team has been re-structured to better reflect the enlarged organisation. We are strengthening links between the senior staff and the Board of Trustees, and developing the use of sub-committees of the Board. The Board itself has been strengthened by new members and now holds a good balance of lawyers and those with management and financial experience. Anna Barlow, who was until the end of 2008 our Chief Executive, has joined the Board as Chair.

By April 2009 we are confident that we will have a thoroughly robust senior management structure capable of dealing with the undoubted challenges that we will face in the coming years. We intend by that point in time also to have completed the process of documenting all our procedures and collating them into a new, electronic guide for staff. We will share some of the structural information with interested people outside Law For All, whilst protecting the procedures themselves.

Service Developments

Central England

Our work at Citizens Advice Bureaux in this region continues apace. The Permira funding for our work with Cambridge CAB has come to an end, but the project has born fruit with the recent award of family matter starts in Cambridgeshire and the part-time secondment of one of our lawyers to help the Cambridge CAB fulfil its social welfare matter starts.

We continue to provide services at CAB premises in Suffolk and Norfolk, and from our own premises in Thetford, Norfolk. These services are well-established but it remains a challenge to reach clients in need in this very rural area.

The services set up in February in Northamptonshire are thriving and we are delighted to have been awarded a larger contract for our work here from the LSC. One of the CABx in the area has commented "Law For All is like a fax machine; we don't know how we ever managed without you!"

In the recent LSC bid round we were also awarded contracts in Staffordshire which commenced working in January 2009.

In total we currently hold contracts with the LSC to provide assistance to just under 8,300 new clients outside London each year, in addition to those funded in other ways.

London

We continue to provide services under Legal Services Commission funding for the majority of our work (7,000 new clients under LSC Legal Help funding per year, including a recent increase in our family contract). Currently five debt lawyers are also funded under the Capitalise consortium (funded by the Department for Business, Enterprise & Regulatory Reform).

We were unsuccessful in our bids for work in Hounslow and Kingston & Richmond under LSC funding. We have appealed these decisions but also intend to use existing outreach funding to provide some assistance to CABx in these areas in the event that the appeal is unsuccessful.

Policy work

We are aware that other providers, particularly in the not-for-profit sector, are making public statements of their inability to survive under the new financing arrangements. We have found ways of working within the necessary financial parameters, and added to our by now considerable experience of running successful, efficient services, both in partnership with others and alone, we believe we have much to offer to the debate on how this should best be done. We are working on writing up these models so they can be easily adopted by others who would like to share them.

The intended changes to legal aid funding in 2010 are likely to have a significant impact on Law For All, although it is impossible to predict what this might be. We have responded to the Legal Services Commission consultation and await the outcome with interest.

Pro bono and supporters

Pro bono work has continued to be a significant activity for Law For All. We believe that this can most effectively add value when undertaken within a partnership framework. In addition to our own free work, we work on the one hand with Clifford Chance, which contributes a variety of services and on the other hand with a large number of barristers' chambers who are committed to offer agreed levels of free representation mainly in Tribunals (where legal aid for representation is not available). We also provide accommodation and administrative support for local solicitors offering advice sessions.

Law For All has always believed that cost-effective free work by city firms and barristers, as well as by individual volunteer lawyers requires well-developed support systems. From the clients' point of view it is important that all pro bono work done is seen as a natural part of the handling of their case. This requires smooth working systems for progressing cases as necessary from initial advice to opening of a case file, to representation at court or tribunal with appropriate staff undertaking work at each stage. Law For All has, with its partners, spent considerable time on developing the necessary support systems to ensure best value from the free services offered. We do, of course, also provide the prosaic essentials of accommodation, administrative and secretarial support and inclusion in our management systems.

We have benefited from the strengthening of our links with Clifford Chance, who will from March be increasing the number of trainee solicitors they second to us from 4 to 5 every 3 months. Clifford Chance continues to provide an extensive range of legal and other services to Law For All.