

Law For All Report May 2007

Background

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, Hillingdon and Hounslow and in East Anglia.

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, contracts for DTI funding under the Capitalise debt project and some charitable donations from individuals and groups, notably Permira.

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.

Quality

We hold the Legal Services Commission Specialist Quality Mark in all our major areas of work, and an audit of our work was undertaken on 9th and 10th March 2006. The main findings of the audit were as follows: -

“The auditors were impressed by the dedication and professionalism of all staff encountered during the visit and [their] belief that their work can really make a difference in the lives of vulnerable and socially excluded people. This was most clearly demonstrated during the client interviews, which the auditors had an opportunity to attend, and from the very favourable comments of the clients themselves. The auditors took the opportunity to interview a number of staff and the evidence gathered strongly supported the translation of the ethos contained in the Business Plan of ensuring value for the public purse together with the best possible client service. There was also a clear commitment of valuing and developing people to contribute to the best of their ability.”

P.4 of the Audit Report

Law For All was of course delighted with this assessment but we are mindful of the need to avoid complacency. We have therefore commenced a Total Quality Programme, with the help of an external consultant, Rosemary Clark. This initiative is widely drawn, as we believe that the provision of a high quality service covers all aspects of the client's experience, and indeed the underlying business activities on which the service rests. Therefore we are looking at the quality of legal work, management and administrative activities across the organisation. We are confident that this will push our quality still higher and put us in a good position to face the upcoming peer review assessments by the Legal Services Commission.

We are pleased that one of our senior solicitors has been appointed as a Peer Reviewer in the Immigration category, as we believe this will give us further important insights into the measurement of quality by the LSC.

Core services

The core work of Law For All continues to be the provision of high quality, cost-effective social welfare law services to the public. 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.

During 2006 we gave advice to approximately 10,500 people and opened case files for about 2,250. During the year we worked on case files for just under 5,000 people (including those whose cases had started before January 2006).

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.

Recent developments

Throughout Law For All we are undergoing a managerial review and reorganisation. As we have grown, our existing organisational structures have become stretched. We have designed a new structure which will be able to accommodate further growth and clarify the roles of staff. We will implement the new structure over the next two years.

East Anglia

At the beginning of April 2007, we moved our administrative office in East Anglia from Thetford to Cambridge. The Thetford office remains a client office where we see clients four days a week. The relocation to Cambridge has afforded better transport links to our other client offices, which improves efficiency. We have also, using funding from Permira, been able to start a cooperative working arrangement with the Citizens Advice Bureau in Cambridge, providing complementary specialist legal advice and casework from within the CAB premises. We have been delighted by the response, which has seen us fully booked within a week of starting the service. There has been particular demand for family and employment work. We hope that the work we are doing now will show the need for LSC funded services in the area and put us in a good position to bid for such funding, should it become available.

London

We have received additional posts within our funding from the DTI, as part of the Capitalise consortium, for the provision of debt and money advice in West London. Our debt team under this funding is now five lawyers. We continue to provide services under Legal Services Commission funding for the majority of our work.

In both our areas, we are conscious of the significant changes which will result from the funding changes in October 2007. We are working to try to anticipate the changes and to plan as early as possible for any service alterations which may be necessary.

Social Welfare Law Coalition

2006 saw the launch of the Social Welfare Law Coalition (SWeLC), a new charity with which Law For All is closely involved. The main aim of SWeLC is to ensure the future of high-quality publicly-funded social welfare law services provided by lawyers. SWeLC Trustees reflect all parts of the profession: the Chairman is a senior partner at a major City firm and the other trustees work for or represent legal aid not-for-profit or high street practices. Anna Barlow, the Chief Executive of Law For All, is one of the trustees. The Coalition believes that examples of sustainable excellence in service provision should inform future decisions. It brings together people with experience of running successful legal services and others whose experience in for example finance and business can help us reach our goals. SWeLC's main areas of work over the coming year will be quality, further mapping (see below) and analysis of the geographical allocation of funding by the LSC.

Policy work

Both on its own behalf and as part of SWeLC, Law For All has been involved in the extensive government consultations on the future of legal aid. We believe that we have brought to the consultations both practical experience and a commitment to improving access to social welfare law.

One major piece of policy work was undertaken by Law For All last year, in conjunction with Clifford Chance, on behalf of SWeLC. This was an exercise mapping social welfare law provision outside major conurbations in England. Volunteers worked here under the supervision of our staff collecting and collating statistical information and talking to community groups, local authorities and legal providers to gain a practical picture of access to justice in local authority areas. The resulting report, "Desert or Oasis: Mapping Social welfare Law Provision in England," was very well received and has been widely reported upon in the specialist media. The mapping work is continuing into this year, as requests come, often from MPs, for more detailed information about their areas of interest.

This year our policy work will focus on the assessment of quality. We are collating information from other professions on how they assess quality and intend to hold a seminar similar to the mapping seminar, later in the year.

Pro bono

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.

Supporters

We have benefited from the strengthening of our links with Clifford Chance, who second 4 trainee solicitors to us every 3 months and provide an extensive range of legal services to Law For All.

Through the Breakthrough project of CAN, we have also been partnered by Permira, a private equity company. It is with their generous support that the expansion into Cambridge and the Total Quality Programme will progress.

Future Work

Over the course of the next year we intend to carry out the following work:

- Completion of the first cycle of the Total Quality Programme
- Continued expansion in East Anglia
- Establishment of further cooperative arrangements with CABx across the Eastern Region
- Increased work under the Capitalise debt and money advice programme
- Development of new working structures to better manage our increased size of operation
- Continued policy work concerning the effect and implementation of the Carter reforms