



What do we do?

We provide legal advice and representation for people who have a low or no income, and those suffering discrimination.

We provide free, independent advice about

- Social services, the NHS and disability rights (“Community care”)
- Governance and legal structures for Community groups
- Debt and personal insolvency
- Discrimination in all areas of equality law
- Employment
- Housing and homelessness
- Immigration and asylum
- Mental health
- Welfare benefits
- Public policy and practise (in local authorities, prisons, schools, etc.)

Our volunteer solicitors offer initial advice about

- Consumer/contract law
- Education
- Employment
- Family and matrimonial law
- Complaints against solicitors
- General civil litigation/small claims

Our service is for people who live or work in

- Bristol
- Bath and North East Somerset
- North Somerset
- South Gloucestershire
- Somerset and the wider South West in some areas of law

In addition to advising and representing individual clients, we also offer

- Specialist consultancy for other advice agencies
- Community development work with local groups
- Social policy work, along with partner agencies
- Campaigning
- Training

avonandbristollawcentre

annual review 2010/11

Chair's Report

Providers of legal advice and assistance across the UK are currently facing unprecedented threats to funding. For many advice and law centres, these threats have been terminal. Many others are facing closure. The amazing work of our staff over the years of relative plenty have left Avon & Bristol Law Centre in a strong position to face the challenges ahead. It is a pleasure to say that this law centre is not currently facing any existential crises.

However, the last 12 months has been a period of significant change. We have continued to provide a full range of specialist advice and representation to people in the Avon region and wider South West, while beginning a wide-ranging review of the way our organisation works, to ensure we're in a strong position to face the challenges ahead.

Funding is, of course, an ever-present concern, and while we have some key contracts in place for three years, several others will need to be renewed or replaced. Obviously we aren't alone in this position, and as competition for public grants and private funding increases, we're looking to increase the range of our income streams to give us a stable and sustainable foundation for future services. Of course we will always serve our local community's most disadvantaged and vulnerable residents, but who pays for our work and how

they do so will need to change.

This year we have also started to do more work to help young people get involved in the work of the Law Centre, both as clients needing help, and as citizens who need to understand their legal rights in daily affairs. Young people and women are likely to be affected most by the proposed changes to legal aid going through parliament, for example, so helping people to help themselves where possible will be increasingly important. Campaigning against the proposed changes will also step up a gear in 2011. We aim to raise the campaign profile through the local media and encourage everyone to get involved, because even if you've never wanted legal advice in the past, you might do tomorrow, and we want to make sure it's still there when you need it.

Finally, I'd like to thank all the staff and volunteers who work at the Law Centre and make it such an important organisation to be part of. I'd also like to thank my fellow trustees for providing such proactive support and leadership during difficult times, and of course thanks to our funders and partner agencies for collaborating so effectively, and having faith in the Law Centre as a specialist provider of legal advice.

Daniel Bennett

Where do Law Centres fit into community advice services?

They can be seen as a poor relation to High Street solicitors because they offer a free service. Conversely, they're sometimes viewed as "just another advice agency" because that's who they work closely with. In reality, Law Centres do complex legal work that advice agencies often can't do, yet they do it for people who can't pay commercial fees. The Leverhulme Trust is currently funding research to explore this unique role in light of changes to legal aid. By interviewing staff, volunteers and trustees, and their public and voluntary sector partners, researchers are building up a picture of how Law Centres serve local communities, and how they're adapting to financial and social challenges while safeguarding their values and ethos.

Evidence from this study underlines the importance of Law Centres' work in Bristol and the South West. 'I really don't know what we'd do if the Law Centre don't survive the next round of cuts,' a Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) manager commented, for example. ABLC and CABs have certainly been proactive in fostering collaboration over competition among advice agencies to improve the service clients receive, and survive the threat of private companies bidding for local authority funding.

'The Law Centre has a strategic place,' reflected one Council Officer. It 'plays a huge part in the advice services' locally, providing 'a very high level of legal expertise,' added a City Councillor. Research certainly suggests that collaborating effectively will be crucial if organisations are to survive and meet increasing needs for advice and advocacy in the future.

So should Law Centres charge fees too?

This is a controversial question. Though one answer to funding cuts, Law Centres are considering ways to generate income while still helping the neediest clients: by third parties paying, for instance, or linking with credit unions. Though an ethical dilemma for all voluntary organisations, 'we just have to get over that really' and do what's best for the people we serve, reflected the Director of a Law Centre partner agency.

Such determination and pragmatism should help ensure access to justice remains everybody's right, regardless

of people's ability to pay, and that Avon & Bristol, along with other Law Centres, will continue to play a key role in community advice services.

[Thanks to Marjorie Mayo and Imogen Slater at the National Law Centres Research Project, Goldsmiths, University of London, for sharing their findings.]

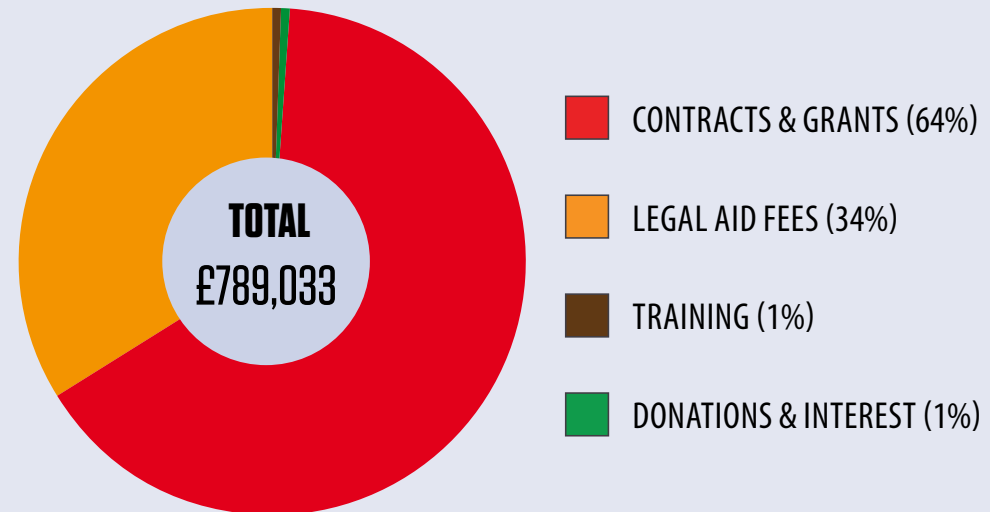


Facts & Figures

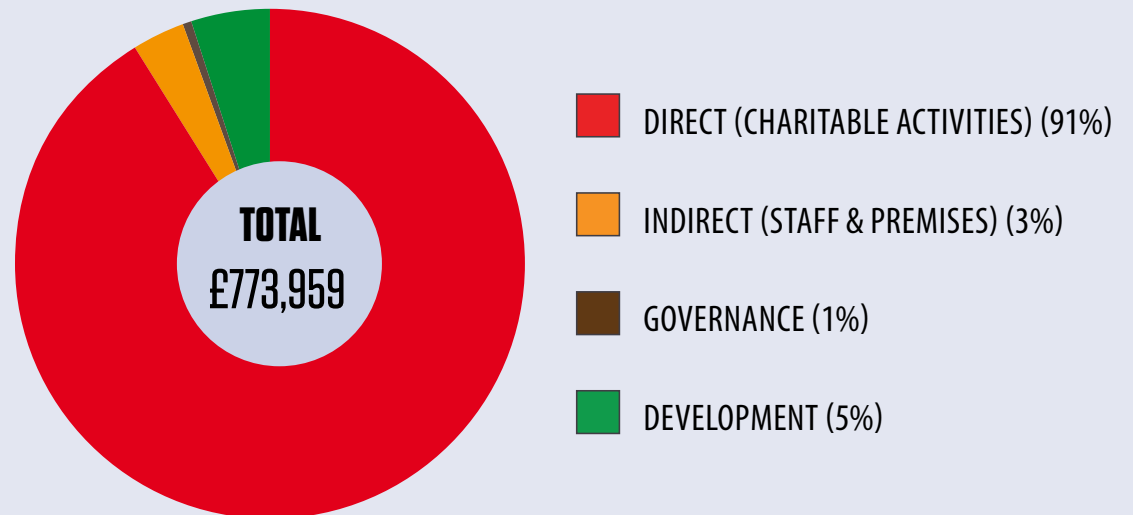
2010-2011

- We helped people claim £964,852 in welfare benefits to which they were entitled but hadn't been receiving.
- We secured £136,000 through compensation for employment and discrimination disputes and debt reductions.
- We helped over 2,500 people with advice and legal representation.
- We provided legal advice and support to over 100 local community groups.
- We provided specialist consultancy support on nearly 200 issues to local advice and voluntary agencies.

INCOME



EXPENDITURE



DISCRIMINATION

Milton, a black Afro-Caribbean man worked as a dance teacher at a Bristol school until he was sacked for allegedly using “excessive force” to split up a fight in class. The school’s Head was keen to press charges against him, but Milton was found not guilty by the Magistrates’ Court who actually praised his exemplary manner in the final judgement. In the meantime, however, he’d been banned from working in all the council’s schools, and his personal life had been devastated by the accusations.

Racist comments made by the Head had originally upset Milton, and he felt sure her actions were motivated by his race rather than the pupils’ best interests. So he asked Support Against Racist Incidents (SARI), a local voluntary organisation, for help, and they referred him to the Law Centre. We helped Milton to successfully put his case against the Head and the school before the Employment Tribunal. Not only had they failed to investigate his complaint of racial harassment, but by stopping him from working in other schools, they had also made it hard for him to earn a living.

The Employment Tribunal concluded that Milton was discriminated against because of his race and should receive compensation for the damages and the school’s policies should be reviewed. The Law Centre also helped Milton to clear the original verdict from his criminal record, so he could rebuild his professional career.



EMPLOYMENT

A few weeks after telling her employer she was pregnant, Shelly came to see us at the Law Centre. Shelly had been told by her boss that she'd been sacked, and a few days later got a letter saying she'd been made redundant. The story didn't quite add up, so she questioned the decision and was told staff hours had to be cut for financial reasons, and she'd been selected to go. Nothing had been said about this in advance, and Shelly didn't believe them. But what could she do?

The Law Centre advisors questioned the employer, using a statutory procedure in the Equality Act, and obtained various documents relating to what had happened. Using their answers and information from Shelly, we made a claim on her behalf against her employer for unfair dismissal and sex and pregnancy discrimination. At the hearing, with legal representation from the Law Centre, Shelly won her case and was awarded compensation by the Employment Tribunal. More importantly, Shelly was able to get on with her life without feeling that starting a family was somehow 'wrong' if you have a job. Her employer found out the hard way that equalities legislation is in place for very good reasons. Shelly's case is not unique. In increasingly challenging economic times, the difficulties Shelly faced are, unfortunately, becoming all too common. But her case demonstrates that people's rights can't be ignored, and that the ability to pay shouldn't decide if people have access to justice.



IMMIGRATION

Faaisal fled to the UK from Afghanistan in 2002 after his father and brother had been killed in a land dispute. His claim for asylum was refused and his appeal dismissed, but he was allowed to stay in the UK while his case was being considered, provided he reported regularly at his local police station.

He returned to the Law Centre in 2008 after his mother and brother had also been killed by the same group in Afghanistan, and we helped him make a new claim for asylum. When reporting to the Police one day in 2010, he was detained and told his second claim had been refused, and this time he would be deported. This decision had been made three months earlier, but neither Faisal nor the Law Centre had been told.

When the Home Office didn't respond to our request to reconsider the decision, we applied for an injunction to prevent Faisal's deportation and issued 'Judicial Review' proceedings to challenge the decision in court. Initially the Home Office maintained their position, but we gathered additional evidence to support Faisal's case for asylum, and after a further appeal, the judge finally acknowledged the danger he'd face if returning to Afghanistan. As a result he was allowed to stay in the UK, after nine years of trying to make it his home.



DISABILITY

Clare was about to do battle with her A-levels when she found out that, at the same time, she had to fight against a drastic reduction of £189 per week in her disability benefits because she had been assessed as apparently fit for work. To make matters worse, she was notified of a debt of £2,000 due to an alleged overpayment while the allowances were being disputed. Clare suffers from diabetes and the debilitating genetic disease cystic fibrosis. The benefits enabled Clare to pay for her very high living expenses, for a car so she could get to college and for other special needs.

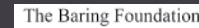
Clare didn't want to cause a fuss but, as she says, 'there were so many mistakes made in assessing how my disability limits my life that I needed legal help to challenge them. I have lost so much time off school in fighting for my disability rights that I now have to study extra hard on my A-levels. I just want the same chances as everyone else.' The specialist hospital unit at which she received regular treatment referred her to the Law Centre for help..

ABLC's experience helped Clare prepare appeals against the decisions, and provided representation at the tribunal hearings which overturned the original decisions. As a result, Clare was awarded a higher level of benefit than she had been receiving before the erroneous reductions. The overpayment debt was also written-off as part of the settlement.

The Law Centre's combination of expertise - in welfare rights, debt and community care - resolved Clare's legal problem and, more importantly, enabled her to maintain her independence and get on with her education.



Many thanks to our funders, all our volunteers and everyone who has kindly given us donations.



Avon and Bristol Law Centre, 2 Moon Street, Stokes Croft, Bristol, BS2 8QE
office 0117 924 8662 **fax** 0117 924 8020 **email** mail@ablc.org.uk **website** www.ablc.org.uk