



**Greater Manchester
Law Centre**

Fighting together for
free access to justice

**Official opening
11th February 2017**

A Law Centre for Greater Manchester

Fighting together for free access to justice

Going Against the Grain

Legal aid has been cut and cut again.

The Government wants to prevent access to justice and does so most effectively by removing the advice agencies that can deliver access to those most in need. Both national and local government have sought to rely on internet or telephone to meet the advice needs of people in poverty and vulnerability; when advisers know full well that complex welfare rights and benefits, and other advice issues, demand **walk-in, face-to-face advice in person, and professional legal representation.**

The disincentive to younger people becoming social welfare lawyers has been exacerbated by overwhelming student debt – with fewer and fewer job opportunities even for those who might want to work in legal aid.

We say this cannot go on.

Since South Manchester Law Centre was set up back in 1975, there have been nine law centres, across Greater Manchester's ten boroughs. The closure of SMLC in 2014, after four years of fighting cuts and contract reorganisations, left just two, Bury and Rochdale. Inner city Salford, Manchester and Old Trafford has NO law centre. It is effectively a **"law centre free zone"**.

So, in late 2014 a group of legal aid lawyers, trade unionists and community advice organisations came together to say that this could not go on. We declared our **aim of starting a community law centre for Greater Manchester**. This was to enable the people of Greater Manchester to campaign for change as well as to start to provide access to free and independent legal advice and representation for people who could not otherwise afford it.

And we secured shop front, community-based premises on Princess Road, Moss Side, in Manchester.

Volunteers are the backbone of the law centre. We will only sustain it through individual and community efforts of people doing it for ourselves. **That's our "PFI" - paid for itself!**

It's a **different way of working**. It's a different way of getting funding (additional to grants). Its different people to work with – geographically, locally and cross-county, in different sectors, voluntary and statutory, health and local government, community and trade union, legal and university, faith and corporate.

But we are not just going to rely on the free labour of volunteer students and lawyers, especially if this is masking the severity of cuts and closures.

We are a campaign for the restoration of legal aid, and we want to encourage the government and opposition and all those who are in a position of power, to change their policy for the better.

All this is because we do not just want to provide services (though that is necessary) as much as we want to convince others of their responsibilities too. We do not want to be an isolated organisation, competing with others for the crumbs of statutory sector funding, **we want to work with others to campaign for more for all of us.**

"It would be marvellous if you can establish a community law centre in Moss Side. The very best of luck to all of you. It is badly needed."

Former Court of Appeal Judge, Sir Henry Brooke



Our commitment to provide services most needed

In January 2016 we conducted a survey of welfare benefits advice. 90% of people with welfare benefits we spoke to at a family support club had not had any access to legal advice.

People with welfare benefits needs are overwhelming MPs surgeries and voluntary sector advice.

There has been a huge increase in litigants-in-person (people representing themselves) because they cannot afford to pay for representation.

So we have:

- Set up our own volunteer welfare benefits service offering free legal advice and representation for negative Employment Support Allowance decisions and ESA50 form filling. The first Tribunal appeal success is written about on our website. The appellant lives locally in Moss Side.

- Established a partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University to deliver advice/representation for people with negative Work Capability Assessment leading to a refusal of ESA. Students are recruited within MMU, supervised by our own sessional case worker, who is managed by our Supervising Solicitor.

- Gained strong support from the NWTUC, who have circulated our details to all their affiliated unions. We are seeking Trades Union Councils in each borough to do likewise (Bolton has). Union branches have affiliated, notably Unite and Unison, and specific branches such as RMT Stockport and Probation services in Moss Side.

- Worked with the lawyers' own associations to ensure circulation of our details – the Manchester Law Society helpfully met with us and we are shortlisted for the “Manchester Legal Awards”

All these links are part of our developing intention to work with others, to fit our services into the very specific gap of LEGAL advice and representation, in the areas most adversely affected by legal aid cuts and by the needs of people facing the most vicious of the government attacks on their well-being.

We will be looking to develop more direct services of our own, especially in housing and employment, but meanwhile we have received offers of sessional solicitor support (in employment, community care and mental health, disability, and prison law) and we have met with Shelter's housing solicitors to ensure appropriate referral routes between our services.

- We have also contributed to the public debates about Human Rights (<http://www.gmlaw.org.uk/why-dont-we-just-defend-the-human-rights-act/>), immigration (<http://www.gmlaw.org.uk/ignore-school-census-queries-on-nationality/>) and welfare benefits law and civil justice (<http://www.gmlaw.org.uk/the-beginning-of-the-end-for-appeal-hearings/>)

- Our letters have been published in the mainstream press – support for legal aid for the Hillsborough families fighting for justice, opposition to intrusive checks into school-children's nationality, and demand for an end to benefit sanctions.

We are online

We have set up a website:

gmlaw.org.uk

Twitter

@gmlawcentre
followers 1,200+

Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/gmlawcentre/>
Likes 500+

Mailing list: 500+

Data February 2017



Hulme Community Life

What's going on in the community, and how to...

life in action

Get involved!

A few ways to make a difference for local causes...

Our national activities

The national activities you support have a local impact...

...herous lot!

...his year you've given...

Who

This week

Monday



Greater Manchester Law Centre

...ting together for
...ccess to justice

GREATER
MANCHESTER
LAW
CENTRE

0161 769 2244
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People are facing greater and greater hardship as a result of cuts in benefits, homelessness, uncertainty at work, and escalating racism. “I Daniel Blake” paints this picture of Britain today utterly clearly.

Meanwhile legal aid – an essential part of the welfare state – has been cut again and again. People most in need are deprived of access to justice.

Greater Manchester Law Centre has been set up as a clear challenge to this. We now have premises and volunteers providing legal advice on Employment Support Allowance Appeals (just what Daniel was seeking). We have strong backing from the NWTUC and union branches such as Unite and Unison, and generous support of two national charities to appoint a Supervising, so we can make our policy demands and fulfil our service delivery aims.

We are fighting together for free access to independent, high quality face-to-face legal advice and representation, for everyone in need across the ten boroughs of Greater Manchester.

We do not just want to be a law centre, but a campaign for law centres generally. Nor do we want just to provide some service delivery, important though that is, on an occasional basis alongside Foodbanks. While we want lawyers to provide pro bono advice now, this isn't to let Government or Councils off the hook; we need a new generation of paid social welfare lawyers, we demand the restoration of legal aid, and we are first and foremost a campaign for access to justice for all.

Near the end of the film, it is not quite clear whether Daniel was able to get access to legal advice (an adviser at the Tribunal is seen giving him confidence that he will win his appeal – as most do, if they can get that far). Access to proper advice is crucial – **but we demand more, an end to the vicious sanctions themselves**. If you agree, please let us know, get your union branch to support us, and join the campaign!

Thanks for keeping us in touch.
This is clearly an important
campaign. We're sending a
small contribution from all
at Sixteen Film.

Ken Loach, film director

Voices of support

The right to justice is as important as the right to health or education.

Without this support, people are unable to understand how to deal with the problems they face or access their legal rights. Ultimately it means increased poverty and isolation within Greater Manchester because people are unable to use the law to challenge wrongful decisions made by the Department of Work and Pensions. It is the most vulnerable who have been hit the hardest as free local, accessible, face-to-face advice services have dried up.

We cannot just let the (South Manchester) Law Centre go without doing something – and we have to do something now.

Sukhdeep Singh, last Co-ordinator of the former South Manchester Law Centre, at our first AGM

I fully support the idea of the Greater Manchester Law Centre and congratulate all those involved in getting it off the ground. I am very worried that my constituents are finding it harder and harder to get access to justice and are more and more vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers. This initiative is of crucial importance and has my complete backing.

**Andy Burnham MP,
former Shadow Home Secretary**

I congratulate the Greater Manchester Law Centre on its opening. The Centre is a very valuable asset to Greater Manchester and will give people access to the legal advice and support they need, in light of the disastrous cuts to welfare and legal aid.

Real equality requires equal access to justice.

Caroline Lucas MP

With cuts to legal aid and other public sector advice agencies, maintaining and promoting the work of law centres is crucial to protecting the rights of our most vulnerable members of society. Thank you to the team at the centre for providing this service. I look forward to working with the Greater Manchester Law Centre and promoting the need for fair and equal access to justice.

Debbie Abrahams MP

I support the creation of a Law Centre in Greater Manchester and would welcome it being based in my constituency... I applaud the work that the Greater Manchester Law Centre Steering Group are doing and I look forward to working together when they have established a permanent base.'

Lucy Powell MP

Greater Manchester Law Centre Patrons



Michael
Mansfield QC



Maxine
Peake



Lord
Willy Bach



John
Hendy QC



Robert
Lizar



Dr Erinma
Bell, MBE DL



Dr Dawn
Edge

Thank you for all the support

Principal funders

Tudor Trust
AB Charitable Trust
Legal Education Foundation
Big Lottery Awards for All
Comic Relief
Manchester Metropolitan University

We crowdfunded over £2000 for Law Centre building amenities, including contributions from the local community. Volunteers also raised money through various activities – bake sales, Trade union fundraisers, Marathons, bids for small grants and many more.

Supporting organisations

Kenworthy's Chambers
Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit
Women Asylum Seekers Together
Safety 4 Sisters
Manchester Mind
People's History Museum

Manchester Alliance for Community Care
Unite the Union Greater Manchester Community Branch
FC United of Manchester
Freedom from Torture
Refugee Action
Young Legal Aid Lawyers
Northern Save Justice
Access to Advice
GM Welfare Rights Advisers Group
Manchester Metropolitan Church
Unite Greater Manchester Social Action Branch North West 389
University and College Union (North West)
North West TUC
Manchester Palestine Solidarity Campaign
North West PC Unison
Unite NW/55 Fujitsu North West Branch
Bolton Trades Council
Lush

How to find us

Greater Manchester Law Centre (GMLC)

159 Princess Road
Moss Side
Manchester
M14 4RE

Buses from Piccadilly Gardens:
101, 104, 105 and 109

Opening hours

Monday to Friday
10am to 3pm

Contact information

Phone **0161 769 2244**

Email **reception@gmlaw.org.uk**



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The Greater Manchester Law Centre is a member of the **Law Centres Network**.
www.lawcentres.org.uk



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