

Greater Manchester Law Centre – Annual Report November 2020



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“Justice Not Charity!” – “Solidarity Not Sympathy!”

In 1920, blind people got together to demand their rights. They wanted state aid, rather than being at the mercy of “charitable” donations going to the directors of the often-segregated asylums that oppressed them with philanthropic paternalism. In 1919 they had disrupted Parliament, as local Salford MP Ben Tillett tried unsuccessfully to press legislation for the third time. The next year they marched from Manchester, Leeds and Newport to London, where they sought out Prime Minister Lloyd George – and as a result they won the first anti-discrimination law, the 1920 Blind Persons Act. The banner they carried stated proudly “Justice not Charity”.*



This year we could have celebrated the centenary of that march. It might have been appropriate to champion a 20-20 vision of all those fighting for their rights against oppression and discrimination.

What about a Black Persons Act – with an end to the hostile environment and proper justice for the victims of the Windrush scandal? Maybe a Tenants Act – with a crackdown on landlords’ tax evasion rather than a green light to evictions? Or even a Claimants Act – ending vicious sanctions and inhumane Universal Credit and ensuring an adequate safety net for everyone in need?

Instead we have all experienced, and many have suffered, the consequences of a year of lockdown, with a Government using Covid as a cover for continuing hardship (for the many, not the few). And it has been harder to find ways to campaign – zooming around the internet has shown us new ways of working but is no substitute for free, independent, high quality, face-to-face legal advice and, crucially, representation. It is a real credit to all our voluntary and paid workers that we have maintained what access we can, for individuals, and that we have produced so much information and guidance and so *many* demands for Government nationally and locally throughout the pandemic.

In particular, and with huge thanks to our consistent main funders (AB Charitable Trust and Legal Education Foundation), we have been tremendously assisted by the establishment of the post of Director, and the excellent appointment of Jason Tetley to that post last November – and we look forward to his leading the law centre into a new era (health-conscious offices, wider range of advice services, growing our own legal aid lawyers of the future) while we always continue to demand: “Solidarity not Sympathy”.

John Nicholson
Chair, Greater Manchester Law Centre 2014-2020

* I am indebted to Ra Page, whose collection *Protest: Stories of Resistance* first drew my attention to this struggle.

TRUSTEES REPORT FOR 2019-2020

Greater Manchester Law Centre – Fighting together for free access to Justice

We started as a **protest** against cuts and closures of law centres in Greater Manchester – and we succeeded in gathering individual and community support, so that we were able to open an office through the commitment, enthusiasm and determination of our volunteers.

We then became a **provider** of legal advice and representation, with huge gains for many individual people across Greater Manchester. Since August 2016, we've raised almost £3 million in reclaimed welfare benefits which the DWP has wrongly refused to local people in need.

We continue to emphasise the importance of free, high-quality, independent, face-to-face access to advice when so many services have retreated behind the barriers of phone lines or websites.

We have a vision of a fairer society. Our advice services assist individual need and specific issues but the problems faced by millions of people require wider solutions.

In April 2019 we launched our own Manifesto, '**Fighting Together for Free Access to Justice**', that detailed our demands for change [www.gmlaw.org.uk].

The Manifesto confirmed that at heart the Law Centre is a campaigning advice organisation that demands both legal and societal change to overcome the issues of social injustice and poverty facing our communities. We demand:



- The **restoration of a fully funded Legal Aid system** as a pillar of the welfare state. A system that allows people to be empowered, providing them with access to free specialist advice to enforce their rights, preventing inequality and exclusion.
- A **supportive social security system** that protects and supports society's most vulnerable members, without prejudice or stigma.
- The **right of everyone to a secure home** through the protection of renters' rights, building of public housing that is safe and secure and the ending of homelessness.
- An **end of the hostile environment for claimants and migrants** - for the Government to stop discriminatory policies and language that marginalising vulnerable people and leads to injustices such as the Windrush Scandal.

- **Investment and training of the next generation of welfare lawyers** - to ensure that specialist advice is available now and in the future those in need
- A **nationwide network of community Law Centres** that can provide access to specialist advice to people in their community, tackling systemic injustice at both an individual and strategic level.

Our aim is for the Manifesto to act as the reference point for our policy, campaigning and service development going forward.

The Manifesto has already provided the basis of influencing policy on a national level. The call for a network of community law centres was endorsed by the Labour Party at the 2019 General Election, and we saw a large number of parliamentary candidates from across the political spectrum endorsing the Manifesto. We will continue to build on this to influence local decision-makers and the parliamentarians with whom we have already built good links.

We have continued to work with others: tenants unions on housing issues, disability groups and anti-poverty campaigns on benefits issues and with Immigration Support Agencies against the hostile environment.

Our legal advice and advocacy services have developed and we have invested in more staff. We have managed to secure funding to allow us to put the manifesto pledge of **training the next generation of social welfare lawyers** into action, **with 2 trainee solicitors commencing** their training contracts in **January 2020**.

But **we are faced with a challenging climate that is getting worse**, with bleak prospects for those on low incomes or benefits or in insecure employment or rented accommodation. Universal Credit adds to already-record levels of poverty, with foodbank use escalating hugely where this has been implemented. Homelessness is increasing as the affordability of housing, particularly in the private rented sector, diminishes. We have already seen over 700,000 job losses as a result of Covid, and have seen the number of people claiming benefit double in Greater Manchester in the past 6 months.

The Government's refusal to enact legislation that will provide long-term protection for tenants, through abolishing no-fault evictions and providing better security for renters, means that we are facing a tsunami of evictions. Research by the Resolution Foundation shows that renters are three times more likely to be struggling financially because of Covid. 13% of private sector renters are struggling to pay rent – this means **in Greater Manchester over 20,000 households are at risk of eviction**.

The recent announcements from the Home Office – that despite the greatest health emergency in over 100 years, they are relaunching a new wave of measures affecting asylum seekers as part of the discredited 'hostile environment' – is concerning. We have seen eviction notices served to failed asylum seekers and proposals to deport foreign nationals who are homeless and are forced to sleep rough.

The impact of the Covid-19 overall has magnified the issues facing the poor and marginalised: those from BAME communities, on low incomes, in overcrowded houses and in insecure employment have been affected most, both in terms of the health and economic impact. The uncertainties of Brexit and the possibility of further economic distress if we leave Europe without a deal could compound the position further.

And yet the Covid-19 pandemic has also demonstrated the immense power of the State to act quickly and decisively to avert crisis where there is a political will to do so. The furlough scheme, increases in benefits, and the "Everybody In" programme that ensured there was funded accommodation for rough sleepers, are just some of the examples.

The crisis also provides real examples of the power of communities to act collectively and support the most vulnerable: thousands of people across Greater Manchester have been involved in neighbourhood mutual aid and support. We have also seen a growing recognition that benefits and low income employment have fuelled food poverty and that the Government must act on this.

Manchester's own Marcus Rashford has already managed to force two Government U-Turns that have ensured that free school meals continue to be funded through the holiday periods until Spring 2021.



The Black Lives Matter movement has brought the issues of institutional racism and the social and economic injustice faced by black people to the forefront and inspired a new generation of activists across Greater Manchester and the world.

We have an opportunity over the coming months to link with these networks of mutual support and community activism, using the lived experience of those we support and partner with to develop our advice and advocacy services and promote policy demands for economic and social justice for all our communities.



Activities, Achievements and Ambitions: 2016-2020

Four years after our foundation, we are in a **remarkably viable position** for any voluntary organisation in these difficult times.

We have provided free, face-to-face specialist advice to over 400 individuals and dealing with over 2,500 enquiries from people across the communities of the Greater Manchester region, including every GM borough, from Bolton to Rochdale and Wigan to Stockport.

We recruited a dedicated public law solicitor, Laura Gibbons, in November 2019, to oversee public law and strategic litigation challenges.

In January 2020, our welfare rights specialist Dan Manville joined us, along with Rabiya Khan and Josie Hicklin, as trainee solicitors. Dan is leading on our benefits work, training and developing our own volunteers and expanding the range of community partners that work and refer to our services. Rabiya and Josie are funded through the Justice First Fellowship programme and have worked in housing and public law primarily. This expansion in our paid advice team that we have 5.5 specialist social welfare lawyers/advisors – a far cry from the one lawyer we initially employed.

We have seen our first national strategic challenge of welfare benefits legislation, and an increase in the number of public law, homelessness and housing cases that we can take on.

We secured funding from the Law Centres Network to expand our advice service to those affected by the issues highlighted by the Windrush Scandal, in partnership with Greater Manchester Immigration Advice Unit (GMIAU).

We saw the Cornerstone project, funded by the Legal Education Foundation, develop and deliver housing and immigration advice to homeless people as part of a holistic package of support. The project, involving GMLC, GMIAU and Caritas, has proved very successful in assisting people with multiple and complex problems. The project is a pilot and we will release an evaluation report in 2021.

We have provided legal advice and representation, not just general advice – and by working with other voluntary organisations we have tried to be the legal voice of the voluntary sector. We have taken referrals from a large number of homeless organisations and have pursued cases to ensure people are housed in long-term secure accommodation.

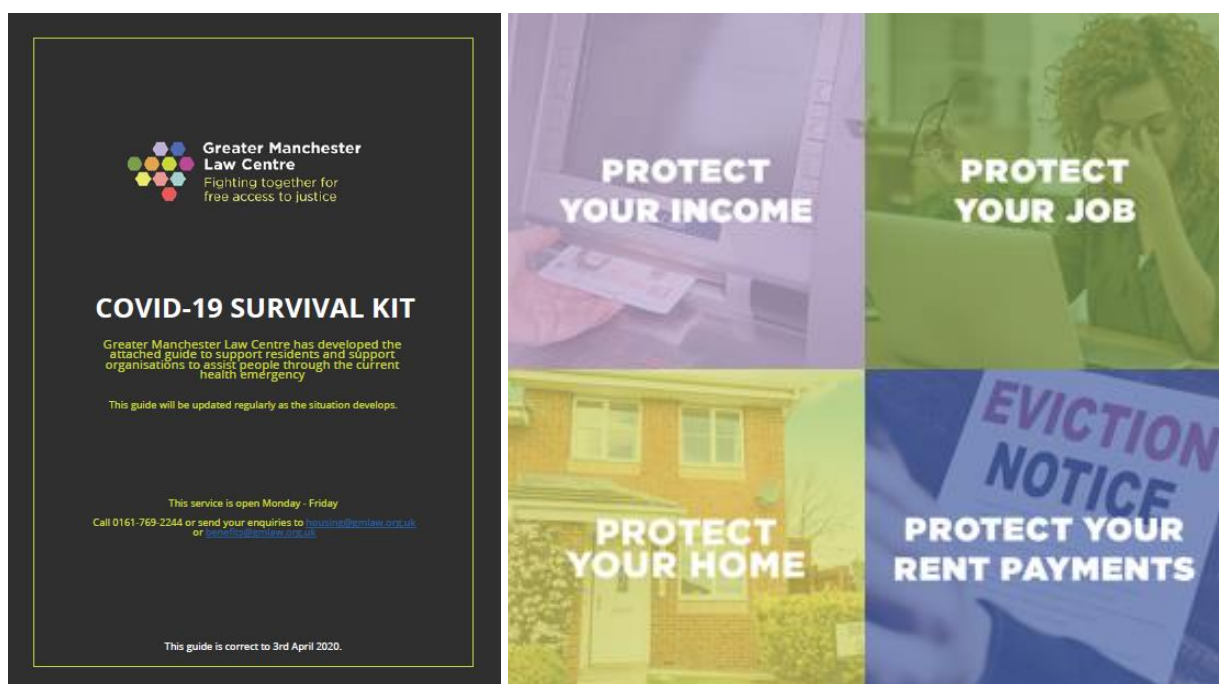
We have supported frontline agencies and benefit campaigners to challenge DWP decisions and have represented clients at Tribunal.

We have arranged events, including training to combat Gatekeeping policies used by GM Local Authorities that turn people away without accepting a homelessness application or offering accommodation and assistance. This training was attended by 20 people from 15+ housing and homeless organisations.

We trained over 40 housing activists in housing law as part of our work to protect renters at risk of eviction, and produced a guide on how to challenge Section.21 notices in partnership with GM Tenants Union.

Responding to the Covid-19 Pandemic

We have continued to provide advice services despite Covid and developed our support to front-line agencies, providing training and second-tier support to other community advice providers. Our advice services were available throughout the initial lockdown.



We **developed a COVID-19 Survival Guide** on line and provided copies digitally to a large range of organisations, with the format being adopted by several other voluntary, advice and health organisations nationally. We produced a mini -guide and distributed 10,000 copies across community, health centres and foodbanks across Greater Manchester.

We **tripled our employment advice appointments** through the willingness and enthusiasm of our volunteer barristers, as the number of employment enquiries has dramatically risen during the pandemic. The cuts in Legal Aid for employment advice now mean there are only two specialist employment advisors in the community advice sector covering 2.8 million people.

We provided **a dedicated line for housing law enquiries** that has supported over 200 people with one-off advice, despite the stay in proceedings, on issues from disrepair, illegal eviction and landlord harassment.

We trained 12 existing volunteers to support our welfare benefits service, expanding our capacity and enabling us **to launch our Income Max** project to support those struggling financially.

We have continued to progress the law careers of **new social welfare lawyers**, arising from our work with local universities. Their students represent law centre appellants in Social Security Tribunals and increasingly use this experience to good effect in developing their own careers – we have seen four volunteers gain barrister “pupillages”.

We work closely with related **services and campaign groups**, notably those who are “user-led”. We were involved in supporting and advising The Saving People Shelter in Eccles. We delayed the eviction of the occupants and secured a commitment from the local authority to make an offer of suitable alternative accommodation to them.

The Law Centre took the lead on the **campaign against Manchester City Council’s Public Space Protection Order (PSPO)**. Over 70 local homeless organisations supported the submission made to the MCC Scrutiny Committee in November, with Kathy Cosgrove from GMLC, advocating on behalf of the campaign. The PSPO was eventually agreed by MCC in March 2020, in an amended format, although the campaign will still go on.

We have worked with **Greater Manchester Against Evictions** to campaign for renters’ rights, linking access to our specialist housing advice services to community based renters’ support and mutual aid.

The campaign brings together GM Tenants Union, ACORN the Community Union, Greater Manchester Housing Action and Bolton Trades Council.

In June, we made detailed submissions to the Department of Housing, Community & Local Government Select Committee, including **draft legislative changes to existing housing law to guarantee renters’ rights and protection**. We have organised and supported demonstrations in both Manchester and Bolton highlighting the pending situations facing renters, particularly in the private sector, who are struggling to pay rent due to the economic impact of Covid.

We have once again been tremendously supported by **Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit** – with whom we have worked jointly on Windrush and on the linked effects of immigration, asylum housing support and benefits.

We have continued to work with others such as Disabled People Against Cuts, Stockport Against Austerity and These Walls Must Fall, sharing resources and collaborating on publicity and mobilisation.





Our challenge remains to **develop services across Greater Manchester** by outreach or otherwise. To support a population of 2.8m from one base is a massive test and we are looking to trial different models of collaboration to do this. Whilst we have utilised telephone and video conferencing technology to undertake advice in the past few months, our commitment to providing a face-to-face service, particularly to the most vulnerable, remains.

Our new premises in Stockport Road has lived up to expectations, providing full accessibility for the 60% of clients with health issues we advise, good quality office space and interview rooms, and access to a large hall for public and training events.

In February 2020, we were thrilled to screen Ken Loach's film on the gig economy *Sorry We Missed You*, which saw over 150 people squeeze into the Klondyke Club (with 70 turned away) to hear from Ken himself on the film and the wider issues it raised. Thanks to Jo Seery of Thompson solicitors and the Zero Hours Justice Campaign for supporting the event.

Most of all, we continue to be supported by a **fantastically committed range of volunteers**. Even during lockdown there are still over 50 people volunteering with the law centre each month, ensuring that our fight for free access to justice, is more than a slogan.

Internally, we have managed to **maintain a strong infrastructure both in terms of management, finances and resources**.

We have maintained a very **strong and experienced Management Committee**. However key founder members cannot be expected to stay on the Board forever. This year our Chair, John Nicholson, will stand down after 6 years at the helm to pass the mantle and challenge to a new generation of Board Members. The formation and success of GMLC owes an enormous amount to John's leadership, hard work and, at times, force of will. His energy and skill in driving the Law Centre from protest to its current position will be greatly missed and we hope to build on his legacy.

We have **maximised efficiency and retained our reserve levels**. Despite moving offices in 2019, and incurring costs associated with this we have managed to maintain our reserve levels at approximately 4 months running costs. These can take us into 2021. As we develop services and employ more staff,



we will need to develop these to maintain a sufficient level and ensure longer-term liabilities are kept under review.

We continue to **aim for financial self-sufficiency**, not reliant on state funding (legal aid as run by the Legal Aid Agency, or local statutory councils / Greater Manchester Combined Authority), and not reliant in the long term on any one charitable trust alone.

During the year, we managed to obtain three year support for our continued development from our major funders: Legal Education Fund and the AB Charitable Trust. This has funded the appointment of a new Director and support costs.

We obtained **legal aid contracts**, running from September 2018, in housing/debt/welfare benefits and public law, and in 2019/20 saw Legal Aid income develop and increase from £3,000 to over £22,500. There is more scope to expand this income as we take on more strategic litigation, as our Welfare Rights Service develops and as our trainee lawyers build on their own case work.

We do know, however, that the LAA restrictions will not enable us to cover anything like the degree or scope of legal needs which people present to us. Limitations in the scope of legal aid mean that large swathes of our specialist legal work is not funded, particularly welfare benefits and employment advice.

We have sought funding from statutory sources without success – our application to the GMCA was unsuccessful, although we continue to discuss with and receive praise from leading members of this body. We have brought nearly £3.5 million into the county (in reclaimed benefits and grants/donations) without any funding from any local statutory body. This remains an opportunity that we must continue to pursue.

Individual giving and membership. We have gained more than 70 standing orders from individuals and lawyers, trade union branches and community groups. This is still below our long-standing target of 150. We need to renew our efforts to grow regular giving and membership: in particular as we look to widen and strengthen our GM-wide service offer, although we recognise even this will not be enough on its own to provide sustainability for the quality of work that we need to do.

Onwards and Outwards

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic will be felt for months, if not years to come and our challenge is to both continue to provide responsive advice services to those affected but also to use our experience to push for wider policy changes.

We cannot allow some of the positive measures that the Government implemented as part of the Covid response to be lost or withdrawn. The £20 rise in Universal Credit and ESA was welcome, as was the increase in Local Housing Allowance to 30% of local market rent.

Benefits continue to inadequately meet the subsistence needs of claimants. The benefits freeze between 2016 and 2020 between meant that an additional 200,000 children were put into poverty. Large numbers of people have to top up their rent from benefits, not because they live in large or opulent houses but simply because market rent is now far above housing benefit levels in the areas they live.

Housing insecurity will only rise over the coming months as the courts start to deal with evictions which have a limited or no legal defence, but are based upon rent arrears arising out of the economic impact of Covid.

We are faced with ongoing redundancies and job losses and there is the potential for some employers to use this opportunity to reduce wages and working conditions – 20% of GM employees currently earn under the Real Living Wage and in-work poverty is on the rise.

We welcome the campaign for free school meals and acknowledge the amazing work of local activists and projects in meeting the needs of their neighbours and communities, but the fact remains that the latest GM Poverty Action report shows that there are **620,000 people across the region living below the poverty line.**

In response, we will deliver a wider range of services:

We are committed to providing **more welfare benefits advice and representation** to those that need it – providing representation and support and stopping benefit sanctions.



We will fight every eviction and will continue to organise through Greater Manchester Against Evictions to support tenants groups to organise and provide mutual aid while providing advice, training and materials to those affected.

We will develop our employment advice service and will **hire our own employment lawyer**. We will work with unions and other workers' rights campaigners to highlight good and bad practice and develop resources so that employees are aware of their rights and how to exercise them.

We will increase **our reach across Greater Manchester** through developing training and support with front-line agencies across the region, allowing better access to our specialist advice services and referrals to those that require representation. We have identified three partners and localities already that will work to allow us to develop this outreach sustainably.

We will continue to undertake strategic challenges against systemic injustice in the Welfare Benefits system, housing and homelessness administration and practice and against Government policy against asylum seekers.

All this will **inform our policy demands**. We continue to take up both individual cases and wider issues with policy makers and politicians. We have been supported by a number of MPs including Afzal Khan, Debbie Abrahams and Rebecca Long-Bailey who keep in touch with our developments.

We have maintained a constant flow of articles and news on our website and we have sought to influence the parliamentary political processes through our lobbying submissions. And we have made

a lot of noise – as most recently with our work regarding renters’ rights.

We need to do more as the situation we are faced with is likely to worsen over the coming months. We will develop more materials to empower people on their rights, building on the example of our Covid-19 Survival Guide.

We have **recruited a Campaigns and Communications worker**, to work with individuals, voluntary groups and community campaigns to oversee this work and ensure we can respond to local and national events as they develop.

The fantastic investment by AB Charitable Trust & Legal Education Foundation had provided funding for our first Director, Jason Tetley, who will work with the Management Committee to develop our income and implement our strategic plan for the next years, building on these strong foundations and **putting the Manifesto demands into action.**

We want to be outward-looking, developing joint service and fundraising in Greater Manchester. We want upward-looking promotion of policy demands to government and other policy-makers, and we need to secure the base of the law centre through strategic management of finances, premises and workforce.

We will work as community activists across Greater Manchester, using our legal skills and knowledge, not as detached “Activist Lawyers” but as advocates and representatives of local people, highlighting injustice and working in partnership with them and others to combat the poverty and inequality that they and thousands others across Greater Manchester face every day.

Working with Others

GMLC aims to work with others to enable free access to justice. We want everyone in need of legal advice and representation to be able to access this, wherever they live, across the ten districts of Greater Manchester. Everyone should have the right to legal representation in challenging social security, housing and employment decisions. Legal aid should be restored to its proper place within the welfare state, alongside health, education and transport; equality before the law should be real, with equal resourcing available to claimants, tenants and employees as to government, landlords and employers.



To achieve our aims, we must *both* promote our demands - restore legal aid, create a legal right to a secure home for all, end the hostile environment against claimants and migrants - *and* provide legal

advice and representation to individuals who need it, anywhere in the county. Most local law centres have been forced to close (the remaining two struggle to survive, at the north of the conurbation) and private firms are not taking Legal Aid Agency contracts. The voluntary sector generally cannot cope with demand, nor provide specialist legal advice which is needed. We have reclaimed wrongly-denied benefits, stopped wrongful evictions, prevented homelessness, advised employees, and challenged Windrush injustices.

Crucially we are pleased to have gained a solicitor with public law qualifications, so we can take judicial reviews without fear of cost penalties.

Strategic legal challenges, working with local barristers to take up the vital cases against the vicious interplay of Universal Credit, homelessness which results from this, and increasingly restrictive immigration restrictions, will be essential for the future – and will involve campaigning volunteers to research and blow the trumpet of our policy demands alongside the detailed legal claims we make.

Accounts for 2019-20

GMLC continues to thrive financially. The Law Centre has sought and gained funds, taken on new paid workers, and moved premises in October 2019. Individual donations have grown slightly, though have not increased as dramatically as we need them to do. Statutory funding remains a gap. The Law Centre took on a three-year legal aid contract in housing/benefits and in public law from September 2018 and the fruits of this are likely to be more evident in the next years.

We remain grateful to all those who have continued to support us. We especially thank the main charitable trust funders, the Legal Education Foundation and the AB Charitable Trust

	2018-19	2019-20
Cash at Bank	125,945	154,307
[NB 3 months running costs are kept in a reserve account]		
Regular Donor	61	71
Income	217, 295	213,985
Expenditure	225,350	213,224

Spotlight on Housing

We demand the legal right to a secure home for all

How we house our population reflects our principles as a society. At the heart of almost housing policy is the key question – Is housing a human right and social good, or is it a commodity? Is housing for people or for profit? Do we prioritise need or markets? With broad coverage of rising homelessness and emerging grassroots housing campaigns, there is a growing academic and political movement for accessible, affordable, habitable, and secure housing to be properly recognised as a right. One of GMLC’s core principles is that everyone has a right to a secure home.

As providers of free legal advice and representation, we are advocates, amplifying the voices of the people we support. This means two things: being a voice in court for people fighting for their housing rights, and advocating for change on a wider scale by campaigning with others.

Private renters’ rights – Abolish Section 21

The main immediate cause of the rise in homelessness is the increase in the numbers of people being evicted from private rented accommodation.

We call, together with others, for the abolition of Section 21

“The right to decent housing is a basic human right. Far from guaranteeing such a right, UK law seems designed to obviate it” - GMLC Patron John Hendy QC

Provide Public Housing – End the Right to Buy

Access to council housing – that is, public housing, publicly funded and owned and rented to local people – has been almost eradicated. Council housing has been widely privatised. Councils have failed to build more housing for rent for people in need. The “right to buy” has taken away a huge proportion of former council housing and 40% of these houses are now known to be privately rented.

Housing rights and homelessness are linked to benefit sanctions, cuts to Housing Benefit, the Bedroom Tax, the disastrous Universal Credit rollout, loss of employment, unreliable zero hour contracts and increasingly unaffordable rents.

We continue to advocate for safe and secure housing. The failure to protect tenants, including those in social housing, in the Grenfell Tower fire. In response to this, we researched cladding and high-rise safety in Greater Manchester, urging local authorities and landlords to take action and keep the public informed.

Fight together for justice – Demand and Enforce the Right to a Secure Home for All

We are guided by the principle: everyone has a right to a secure home. To ensure this, there needs to be enough publicly funded housing available which means that more houses have to be built. There needs to be an end to the “right to buy” (as Scotland and Wales have agreed – and as our devolved Greater Manchester Combined Authority should be arguing for). There needs to be a legal right to a secure home for all; unless this legal right exists in the first place, we cannot advise or advocate for the enforcement of the right.

Some Examples of Housing and Benefit Problems Addressed by GMLC

Homelessness:

Mr and Mrs O, their 12 year old daughter and 5 year old son became homeless when Mrs O and the children were granted refugee status and they received notice that their asylum accommodation and support would end. Mrs O had serious physical and mental health problems as a result of torture in her home country. They applied for help from the council and were told that they should come back on the day of their eviction.

The family went to the council on the last day of their notice with their children and all their belongings. They waited all day and were eventually told that suitable accommodation had been found for them, 8 miles away in a different local authority area.

They travelled to the accommodation by 2 buses, with all their belongings and eventually found a 1 bedroom flat and kitchen living area combined. The flat was on a dark industrial estate, and in the shadows of a prison. Finding only one bed, they believed there had been a mistake the children were crying and exhausted, they decided to return to their asylum accommodation for the night and went back to the Council with all the belongings again the next morning. They were told that the settee was a sofa bed and that because they had failed to stay in this accommodation, the Council had discharged their duty and they would be referred to social services owing to child protection concerns. They were told to leave the office and wait for the social worker to call. The social worker called and said they had no accommodation duty to the family but that if they were forced to leave their asylum accommodation, they may have a duty to the children.

The family were very upset and went to Cornerstones for help. Cornerstones arranged for urgent legal advice. Following the threat of legal proceedings, the family were provided with temporary accommodation by the housing department the same day and a full homeless duty was later accepted. The family have now moved into a three-bedroom house with a social landlord close to the children's schools



Personal Independent Payments (PIP) Claims:

Mr H was a PIP claimant who was told he needed to have a telephone assessment despite the fact he was deaf and couldn't manage a phone assessment. The DWP had repeatedly refused to assess him on the papers before we intervened. We contacted the assessment provider and persuaded them it would be a reasonable adjustment to do a paper assessment; they agreed and PIP is now in payment. Mr H is £113 a week better off.

We were approached by MS P who has severe mental health difficulties that were a barrier to her engaging with health services. The DWP decision maker decided that her mental health needs were not severe as she was not under secondary care. GMLC helped her appeal the decision to refuse PIP and helped her provide evidence that she had barriers to engaging with care services. She was awarded enhanced rate of daily living and standard mob component of PIP, & Enhanced Disability Premium, amounting to £179.70 per week in additional income along with arrears of £8200.

Employment Support Allowance (ESA) Claims:

Mr S had his ESA suspended as he hadn't understood the capital rules. He was misadvised by Job Centre Plus as to what information he had to supply and his ESA suspended for about 18 months before it came to our attention. He was destitute. We identified the problem, helped him to gather what he actually needed to provide and then advocated regarding ensuring the payment was made expeditiously despite Covid. Mr S received £11,000 in arrears of backdated ESA.

Possession cases:

Mr K was referred by his Community Psychiatric Nurse (CPN). He was in rent arrears of several thousand pounds as a result of the suspension of his claim for Universal Credit. He had been receiving advice from a benefits advisor employed by his housing association, but despite her efforts to resolve the problem, his Universal Credit remained suspended. He had no means of paying his rent and was surviving only on his disability benefits. The housing association had decided that owing to the level of the arrears, they could wait no longer.

They had issued possession proceedings and the hearing was listed for the following week. Mr K's CPN was extremely concerned that Mr K's mental health was deteriorating as a result of the threat of eviction and lack of funds and believed that he may be sectioned again very soon. The CPN had been trying to liaise with the landlord and the DWP, but had come to the point where she believed eviction was inevitable. We contacted the Housing Association to advise, that although complicated, Mr K had a good case for his Universal Credit to be re-instated and backdated. On the basis of a letter before action sent to the DWP challenging their unlawful delay, the landlord agreed to adjourn the possession hearing for 6 weeks. By the time the case was due back in court, UC was back in payment and a backdate of housing costs had cleared the arrears. The Housing Association withdrew the possession proceedings with no order as to costs.



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In Memory of John Clegg



We remember John Clegg, who was a founder member of Greater Manchester Law Centre.

John had been involved in an immense range of labour movement and community organisation activity since the early 1980s. This included the establishment of Manchester Gay Centre and Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit, holding officer roles in Greater Manchester Unite Community Branch and Manchester Trades Union Council, fighting against the give-away of South Manchester's council housing, and starting the Unemployment Workers Centre.

This, together with John's own involvement in Access to Advice (against the closure of Manchester Advice by the local Council) and the parallel campaign to save South Manchester Law Centre (both from 2010-2014) led directly to his joining the initial discussions to form a new law centre. John saw the law centre as both a campaign against legal aid cuts and as a way of enabling essential advice for unemployed workers and tenants.

John continued to develop campaigning and liaison with tenants and trade unions throughout his time as a Trustee of the law centre (2015-19), especially emphasising opposition to the benefit sanctions and inhumane Universal Credit which affected so many people in need. This contrasted with the growth of foodbanks and similar "charity" approaches, which he felt were no challenge to the government's policies of poverty, racism and homelessness – yet he was always willing to seek links with local people and organisations who were doing something on the ground. Ideally John would have liked to see the "Peoples Centre" for Manchester arise out of all this.

John's willingness to work to bring a wide range of people together was evident in everything he did. His practical contribution to committee discussions, his promotion of the law centre to other groups, the breadth and depth of his campaigning history and experience, and most of all his personal friendship will be sadly missed.

John Nicholson

Chair, GMLC, 2014-2020