

***Fighting together for free access to justice***



**Greater  
Manchester  
Law Centre**

**Annual report 2021 - 2022**



*Fighting together for free access to justice*

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*GMLC join the 90th anniversary Bexley Square Commemoration in Salford. The Battle of Bexley Square took place in October 1931 when 10,000 Salford people marched on the old Town Hall in Bexley Square demanding, amongst other things, no cuts to unemployment benefit, no cuts to teachers' salaries, and free fuel for the unemployed in the winter. The struggle for basic necessities continues today. From left to right: then-volunteer and now staff member Ajibike Babalola, Community Advice Navigator Cian Hickey, and GMLC Director Jason Tetley.*



# Index

Chair's report . . . . . 4

GMLC in numbers . . . . . 6

Key points . . . . . 7

Benefits case studies . . . . . 9

Housing case studies . . . . . 10

Employment case studies . . . 11

Strategic litigation . . . . . 12

Campaigns . . . . . 14

Our volunteers . . . . . 18

Accounts . . . . . 19

Thank you . . . . . 20



*Feb 2022: GMLC Chair Andy Walsh and Housing Solicitor Kathy Cosgrove join a rainy march for action against the cost of living crisis in Piccadilly Gardens.*

This year's annual report shows the important service that GMLC delivers. We have always sought to provide support across the whole of Greater Manchester, but given the location of our office it has been inevitable that most of our cases in the initial period were from the Manchester City Council area. We are very pleased to report that this last twelve months we have not only supported people in every borough across the GM region, but over 50% of our clients were from outside the City of Manchester.

Summarising the activities of the last twelve months, the report records the tremendous efforts of our staff and volunteer team. On behalf of the board of trustees, I wish to thank our staff and volunteers for their hard work and commitment to delivering free access to justice for Greater Manchester. The work that we do is not easy but without it, the lives of many thousands of our fellow GM citizens would be considerably more difficult. Our collective efforts continue to have a positive impact, and our campaigning work seeks to bring pressure to bear on the policy makers to choose a course which treats people with decency and compassion.

## **Welfare Benefits**

The work of our welfare benefits team has this year alone secured £1.135m of benefits for GM residents. This figure represents a 78% increase from the £637,000 we helped secure last year. We can only deal with a limited number of cases and many people give up before they come to us. The wrongful denial of benefits increases the distress of individuals and families, placing a burden on charities and local councils, who face funding cuts themselves. In the six years since we were established, GMLC has reclaimed over £4.6m of benefits. Funds repatriated from government in benefits are spent in the Greater Manchester economy, benefiting us all.

## **Employment Advice**

Our employment advice service has supported 314 cases a 77% increase on last year. In addition, we have been able to signpost enquiries to additional advice and support services. We continue to promote trade union membership as the best form of protection and advancement of employment rights, but not everyone is a member of a union when they first experience sharp practice, so the employment service at GMLC remains a vital resource for Greater Manchester.



## **Housing Advice**

Our housing work has always been a key element of our service offer. The number of housing cases in the last twelve months has increased by 21% to 279. Working closely with funders and partners we have been able to extend the housing advice available across GM. As in other areas, we don't just provide advice, we have used the experience of our clients to challenge bad practice and bring strategic litigation cases. Using data and campaigning materials from GMLC, Salford MP Rebecca Long-Bailey is currently tabling amendment to legislation to require social landlords to provide information through Freedom of Information.

## **Campaigning and Partnerships**

As well as providing advice services to our clients, we see our role as giving voice to our clients' in the campaigning arena. Our aim is to change policy by bringing client experiences into the public domain. Our approach includes partnership work with like-minded organisations and individuals, and the use of strategic litigation to challenge injustice.

This year, for the first time, we received direct funding from Manchester City Council toward our Covid response work, which allowed us to offer advice and support to those impacted by the pandemic. We were particularly pleased to be recognised by the Baring Foundation as a regional advice hub where communities, campaigners and lawyers can come together to fight injustice and campaign for change. Our major funders LEF & AB Charity Trust have re-iterated their support.

## **The challenges ahead**

Sadly, we cannot hope to meet the increasing level of demand for our services. Whilst we have a positive impact, it is important that we continue to focus on campaigning for policy change too. Our service delivery is vital, but without changes to policy, the demand for our services will continue to rise as citizens continue to suffer hardship. Thank you again to every member, volunteer and member of staff who has made a contribution to our achievements. With your continued support and that of our funders and partners, we will continue to campaign for a fairer society and free access to justice.

**Andy Walsh**

**Chair, Greater Manchester Law Centre**

# GMLC in numbers

6

479

benefits  
cases

Up 50% from  
last year due  
to additional  
staff and  
volunteers.

314

employment  
cases

Up 77% from  
last year due to  
additional  
funding for a  
lawyer and  
staff member.

22

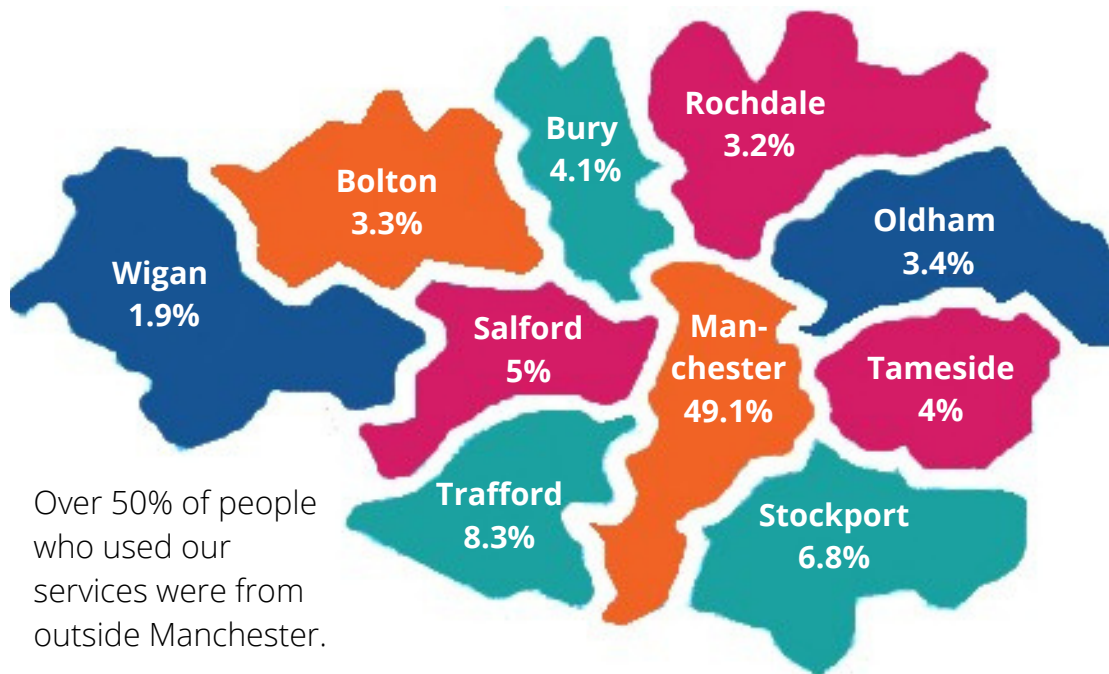
public law  
challenges

Down 27%  
from last year  
due to a  
lawyer's  
maternity  
leave.

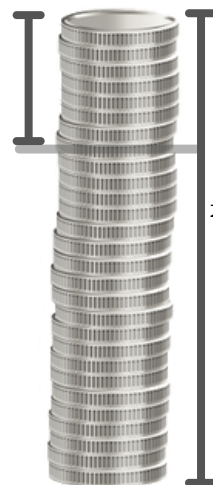
279

housing  
cases

Up 21% from  
last year,  
including new  
Domestic  
Violence  
service.



£1.135m  
over the  
year



- **Over 100 people at risk of homelessness have been housed** as a result of GMLC casework in ensuring that local authorities discharge their statutory homeless duties.
- **£1,135,000 has gone into the hands of Greater Manchester residents in successful claims** from benefit appeals, form-filling support and other casework. Since 2016 GMLC has helped claimants access over £4.6m in benefits they were due.
- We have developed our employment service so that **we can provide responsive advice to the 90+% of individuals seeking justice** unrepresented within the Employment Tribunal system.
- We have developed our Litigant in Person (LIP) service in partnership with Citizens Advice Lancashire. We were the lead agency on a project to provide support to those that cannot access legal advice, particularly in areas where legal aid is no longer available. **Over 4000 were supported within this project to access advice** and, where possible, obtain specialist advice and advocacy.
- Through our LIP training programme, **we held 5 events that supported 300 front-line staff from over 150 organisations**.
- **We developed an access to justice handbook** and training on how best to access legal advice across Greater Manchester to stop the 'advice merry-go-round', as people desperate to access advice are passed from organisation to organisation.
- **Our schools advice project embedded specialist benefits advice into schools** to support families to maximise their income, especially any child-related benefits.
- **We continued with our successful student training programme** ('LASP') with Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Manchester, supporting people within the benefit system.
- We developed a **domestic violence support project for women impacted by DV where English is their second language**, funded by the Bell Foundation. This has supported highly vulnerable people to navigate the benefits and housing system, exposing and challenging both individual and systemic injustice.





GMLC trustee and Tenants Union staff member Ben Clay discusses a student's housing issues with her while staff member Vivienne Green looks after the GMLC stall - May Day Festival 2022.

# Welfare Benefits case studies

9

## **Liam's family makes sure they are claiming everything they're due**

Liam came to see us at the school where we run drop-ins, largely to check if his daughter's DLA award was correct. It wasn't, and we identified an additional £99.85 a week that was due to her. We also spotted that they hadn't properly notified UC of the DLA award, which led to an increase of £414.88 a month. The family's income more than doubled and the arrears helped them go on their first holiday abroad as a family.

## **We save Saeed's home by proving his tenancy wasn't contrived**

Saeed was renting his property from his daughter, and when he claimed Universal Credit, a question was raised as to whether the tenancy was contrived - meaning they questioned whether the tenancy was created in order to claim benefits. We assisted him to appeal and the First-tier Tribunal agreed he was entitled to claim for his housing. During the appeal, Saeed's daughter's relationship broke down and she began to struggle to pay the mortgage. We averted a real prospect that Saeed would need to find somewhere new to live.

## **Persistence wins the day for Alison and her disabled son**

Dani's son's Disability Living Allowance was reduced and she lost her Motability car. We helped her to appeal. Thinking the appeal was likely to win, we served pre-action correspondence on Motability and she kept the car until the appeal hearing. However, Dani's appeal was heard by a very conservative Tribunal and refused. The loss of the car led to a deterioration in her son's needs, so we assisted with a new application and the car was restored. We helped her to overturn the First-tier Tribunal's decision, only to be confronted by a second conservative judge and losing again. Again, we got this decision set aside, and on the third time round, we got the result we'd expected from the outset.



*A thank you card sent to our benefits team by a client.*

# Housing case studies

## **GMLC helps a domestic violence survivor overcome barriers to the support she needs**

X telephoned GMLC while she was being evicted from homeless temporary accommodation with her 1-year-old child. She told us that she had been placed in her flat when they had been thrown out of her partner's home with the help of the police. We spoke to the Council officer present at the flat and were told that the Council had made a mistake, and because of our client's immigration status, she was not eligible for homeless assistance. We told the Council officer that we would be advising our client to remain in the property and would be requesting a review of the eligibility decision.

X succeeded in overturning the eligibility decision and we collated volumes of text messages which showed the severity of the abuse she had suffered, which she used to instruct a family solicitor and obtain a non-molestation order against her partner. She was awarded Universal Credit, moved into social housing and started work. We were about to close the case. Then her benefits stopped, because the DWP changed their minds about her entitlement. She fell into arrears and had to stop work because she couldn't afford child care costs. With our help she appealed the decision and social services agreed to provide some financial support, but not enough. The landlord threatened her with eviction because of rent arrears. Only then did social services agree to pay her rent and child care costs so that she could start working again. It is likely to be many more months before she overcomes all the obstacles she has faced in trying to find safety.

## **GMLC challenges disability discrimination to stop an eviction**

Rachael's illness came on suddenly following Covid. She was unable to work, had difficulties claiming benefits and fell into rent arrears. Her landlord made moves to evict her, as his mortgage costs were rising and he believed that as a result of Rachael's disability, Rachael needed to be somewhere she could get care. When she received notice to leave, Rachael applied to the Council for re-housing. Her application was refused because of her rent arrears and the homeless team told her they could not step in until bailiffs were called. Rachael called GMLC for help. At the first possession hearing, we told the judge the landlord court papers were defective, and we would be defending the proceedings on grounds of disability discrimination. The following day, the landlord discontinued the claim. Rachael still wants to move, and so now we will challenge the Council's re-housing decision.



# Employment and LIP case studies <sup>11</sup>

## **GMLC helps Hamza negotiate a settlement offer and avoid a lengthy Tribunal case**

Hamza's Employment Tribunal claim had been listed for 4 days at the start of January 2022. It had taken over a year to get to this point. His claim concerned disability discrimination and race discrimination. Very late in December 2021, he received a significantly increased offer for settlement via Acas on a draft COT3, a form used as part of employment settlements. Hamza contacted GMLC to ask for help. He told us he felt the issues in his case were confusing as he had no legal training, he was unemployed and could not afford a solicitor, and in any event, the timing of the offer made this difficult. He felt under immense pressure to make a dignified decision he could be happy with. We were able to talk through each clause in his COT3, including advising him to negotiate an agreed reference, and Hamza was able to agree to the settlement with confidence. He felt immense relief to be able to move on and not face the daunting prospect of a Tribunal as a Litigant in Person.

## **We link Brian with urgently needed advice services through our LIP service**

In December, GMLC was contacted by a homeless agency partner with a referral for Brian, who had urgent child-related family proceedings. Brian had a history of mental illness and unstable accommodation that made pursuing contact with his children and representing himself in family proceedings very difficult as a litigant in person (LIP).

Whilst GMLC does not specialise in family law, we did not simply signpost Brian to other support. Due to our developing relationship with Support Through Court, our Community Advice Navigator was able to contact Support Through Court to make a referral for a Covid-compliant face-to-face appointment for the next day. Support Through Court then helped him make a statement in accordance with the court's directions.

The client was thrilled. He would not have sought assistance from Support Through Court without us, particularly given that face-to-face support has diminished due to changes during the pandemic. The ability to broker support allowed for him to fully participate in legal proceedings. Having a properly structured statement allowed the court to determine a way forward that will hopefully satisfy both parties without further delay and court time.

GMLC continues to seek out opportunities to improve the law by making strategic legal challenges in our areas of expertise, especially housing and benefits.

## **Asylum support rates**

GMLC are bringing a judicial review challenge to the government's decision to increase asylum support rates by just £1.18 this year. Asylum support rates are now just £40.85 per person per week (up from £39.63 last year) from which asylum seekers are expected to pay for everything they need to survive, including food, travel, medicines, school items, toiletries and communication costs. People can be kept on these rates for years while they await increasingly delayed Home Office decisions. In the midst of a cost-of-living crisis where inflation has reached over 10% and the basic necessities of life are rapidly increasing in cost, the Home Office's decision to raise rates by just 3% represents a real-terms drop in income, forcing asylum seekers into very real destitution. Since they are unable to work and banned from access to mainstream support, we frequently see clients struggling on these amounts, trying to keep their families warm and safe with no safety net.

## **Benefits entitlements for people extending their leave to remain in the UK**

Our Welfare Rights Supervisor Dan Manville has also worked hard to identify areas where strategic litigation might make a difference. This year, he identified a particular problem in the North West and the West Country, where the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) was unusually poor at ensuring migrants who were applying for renewed Leave to Remain retained their full benefits. Section 3C of the Immigration Act 1971 allows a person who has submitted an in-time application to extend their stay in the UK, and while their application remains outstanding, the conditions which applied during their previous grant of leave should continue - including access to benefits. As a result of the DWP failing to follow this policy correctly, many of our clients were falling into rent arrears and debt for months at a time while waiting for Home Office decisions, leading to other issues such as the risk of eviction. We made a national call for evidence and sent a Letter Before Action to signal to the DWP that if they did not deal with this issue we would start legal proceedings against them. This was successful: we won for our clients and the DWP agreed to implement additional training in the centres we identified.



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Since our foundation  
been proud to **only**  
**the injured** and m  
We have **never rep**  
**insurance comp**  
**employers** and n

**Our Pledge to you is t**

Work solely for the i  
or mistreated  
Refuse to represent ins  
companies and empl  
Invest our specialist exp  
in each and every c  
Fight for the maximum com  
in the shortest possibl  
Be open and transparent  
fees and costs

*Standing up for*

Rebecca Long-Bailey MP speaks at our access to justice event in May 2022, alongside Legal Action Group's Sue James, speakers with Long Covid, GMLC Chair Andy Walsh and GMLC Director Jason Tetley.



GMLC campaigns on issues relating to housing, welfare rights, employment rights and access to justice. Thanks to the work of our staff and a diverse range of campaign volunteers, we have had a vibrant and active year of campaigning. Just some of this work is highlighted below.

## **Access to Justice**

GMLC continues to place access to justice front and centre of our campaigning. With demand for advice increasing across the board due to the cost of living crisis, advice agencies and legal aid lawyers simply do not have enough funding and support to help everyone who approaches them. We have been discussing this with other organisations, creating a shared campaigning platform to challenge it. This has included an event in May 2022 with Sue James of Legal Action Group and MP Rebecca Long-Bailey where we brought around 100 people together to talk about access to justice in the North West. Our LIP project has worked over the year to upskill other community organisations in areas of law, training over 300 people from 150 organisations. Our volunteers have been active in attending and organising events and writing articles for our website. We have also challenged new anti-democratic legislation, such as the proposed Public Order Bill and Bill of Rights, which, if passed, will erode the freedom to protest and undermine struggles for justice across the communities work with.

## **Domestic violence support and campaigning**

This year, GMLC has launched a new Domestic Violence (DV) support service offering holistic support to DV survivors who speak English as a second language. We have worked on publicising the service by creating a leaflet and sharing it with partner organisations. Though new laws have recently come into force around how Councils and other services should support DV survivors, implementation has been slow, and many DV survivors have been left to struggle with gatekeeping and destitution, especially those from marginalised communities or with additional barriers to accessing services, such as insecure immigration status. We have worked Law Centres and others to influence local connection rules that can prevent people getting support when moving away from abusive family members. We have also worked with LCN to strengthen the Victim's Charter for individuals for whom English is a second language.

With the housing sector in an unprecedented crisis this winter, we have poured energy into housing campaigning as well as expanding our housing team. We remain part of the Renters Rights Coalition with the Law Centres Network, arguing for reform of legislation around tenants' rights. We have begun a research project to investigate the government's proposed reform of eviction laws, gathering data on whether the changes will help tenants in practice. We have also worked on improving social housing providers' accountability to the public, campaigning to get them covered by the Freedom of Information Act. We are working closely with Greater Manchester Tenants Union to reach a wider audience and teach tenants about their legal rights so they can use them in practice when fighting evictions, disrepair, rent rises and other housing issues. Finally, we also launched a campaign around the shocking rate of deaths in homeless Temporary Accommodation (TA), producing a guide to inquests for bereaved families with the help of a coalition of partners including the Museum of Homelessness and Shelter.

### Supporting people living with Long Covid

We have continued working with individuals and groups to improve policies around employers' and the DWP's treatment of people with Long Covid. In summer 2021, we completed a survey of people with Long Covid, producing recommendations on changes to the law and policy that would help support those who are struggling at work, or have been dismissed, as a result of their illness. In November 2021, GMLC was called by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Coronavirus to give expert evidence on Long Covid, alongside the TUC and medical experts. Many of our recommendations were incorporated into the APPG's final report in April 2022. The good news is that case law and policy is slowly moving in the right direction. For example, there has been a 25-fold increase in PIP awards for those with Long Covid over the year, and the Employment Tribunal has begun to recognise Long Covid as a disability on the facts of particular cases. We share this news and answer queries from Long Covid support groups on benefits and employment issues.



*The Long Covid report produced by the APPG on Coronavirus, including evidence and recommendations from GMLC.*

GMLC supports workers' right to strike. Legal rights alone won't be enough to protect workers during the cost of living crisis and coming recession. We have highlighted this in interviews with Litigants in Person trying to navigate the Employment Tribunal without representation, exploring the stark inequality of arms and the lack of free employment advice workers face.

We work alongside Trades Union Councils and branches of a variety of unions to fight for better workers' rights. This year, we have seen more union branches affiliate to GMLC, including branches from Unison, UDSAW and Unite. The relationship has not been one-way: we have also made sure to attend striking workers' picket lines, including those of the CHEP pallet factory workers in early 2022, and the barristers' strikes in summer - both which won increased settlements following their strikes. We have also attended union branch AGMs to talk about access to justice and offer solidarity, and hosted events and articles on the subject, such as a meeting in September 2022 with Ian Allinson, author of *Workers Can Win: A Guide to Organising at Work*.



*Campaigns Officer Kate and GMLC Director Jason on the CHEP picketline, January 2022.*



*GMLC Director Jason speaking at a Unison branch AGM in Manchester to give solidarity and support the need for union organising to lead the way in a context of weak workers' rights.*



*GMLC Housing Solicitor Josie Hicklin at the barristers' strikes picket line, September 2022.*





GMLC supports the barristers' strikes. We saw some familiar faces on the picket line, including former volunteers/staff members Lily Lewis, Roz Burgin and Jennifer Devans-Tamakloe, Sep 2022.

# Our volunteers

18

**By the community, for the community.** Volunteers remain the lifeblood of the Law Centre. From our enquiry line, benefit advice and employment services to our campaigns and management committee, we are supported by dozens of amazing volunteers.



## **Mengruo Huang, Triage/Enquiry Volunteer and LASP student**

I first learned about GMLC when it held the summer LASP project, which was so engaging and insightful that I decided to volunteer here. I have worked on reception, signposting and referring clients, and then with the welfare benefits team to help with applications and appealing decisions. The tasks can sometimes be challenging, but thanks to the support from the team, I learned quickly and developed my legal skills. Everyone at the Law Centre is so kind and willing to help that they build a warm and friendly atmosphere.



## **Judy Sutton, Campaign Volunteer Lead for Welfare Rights**

For the last year I have volunteered with the campaigns team of the Law Centre, leading on welfare benefit reform. My work has been varied and interesting. It has included writing articles in different periodicals and for the Law Centre website and holding a series of meetings with Unite Community branch members. Thank you to everyone at the Law Centre for their challenging work. I would encourage others to get involved with this compassionate organisation.



## **Bally Padda, Triage/Enquiry Volunteer**

After the lockdown, I wanted to get back to normality and engage with people again, so GMLC has been really useful for that. Volunteering at GMLC means I can use the skills I learned when I worked in mental health supporting vulnerable people. Reception is very busy, which has given me confidence in my abilities again.

GMLC is funded through a combination of legal aid, grant funding, member subscriptions and one-off donations. As legal aid is only paid after the fact and grant funding can be time-limited, we appreciate the regular donations of individual GMLC members, affiliated organisations and union branches, a reliable income that helps us push beyond the constraints so often faced by free legal providers. If you want to support us in this way, you can become a member on the GMLC website, which will also entitle you to a vote at our Annual General Meetings. We also welcome corporate donations to support our work.

Organisationally, GMLC has strengthened and consolidated this year – our income didn't reach the heights of 20/21. Nevertheless, it was almost £400,000. We made a small loss, but our reserves allow us to undertake community-focused work and important cases that fall outside of the scope of legal aid and project funding.

<b>Figures at a glance</b>	<b>31 March 2020</b>	<b>31 March 2021</b>	<b>31 March 2022</b>
<b>Cash at bank</b>	£154,307	£242,624	£241,377
<b>Regular donors</b>	71	83	91
<b>Employees</b>	7	11	12
<b>Income</b>	£214,000	£443,009	£398,088
<b>Expenditure</b>	£213,000	£327,366	£400,571



# Thank you

## Principal funders

AB Charitable Trust, Access to Justice Foundation, Baring Foundation, Bell Foundation, Law Centres Network, Legal Education Foundation, Manchester City Council, Manchester Metropolitan University, Ministry Of Justice, Oak Foundation, Sustainability Health Environment Development, Three Guineas Trust, University of Manchester

## Board Members

Andrew Walsh (Chair), Aisha Khan (Vice Chair), Ben Clay (Treasurer), Denise McDowell (Company Secretary), Sukhdeep Singh, Giles Elliot, Kevin Allsop, Craig Holmes, Ciara Bartlam, Lamin Touray, Arwa Graf



## Supporting organisations

ACORN Manchester, Bolton TUC, Bristol Law Centre, Citizens Advice North Lancashire, Freedom from Torture, Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit, Greater Manchester Poverty Action, Greater Manchester Jain Centre, Greater Manchester Tenants Union, Greater Manchester Welfare Rights Advisers Group, Green & Black Cross, Irwin Mitchell Solicitors, Kenworthy's Chambers, Manchester Mind, Manchester TUC, Maternity Action, North West TUC, Refugee Action, Safety4Sisters, Unison Manchester Community and Mental Health branch, Unison Probation and Cafcass (North West), Unison Manchester City Council, Unison Salford City, Unite Greater Manchester Social Action Branch North West 389, Unite GM RMB 102/999, Unite NW/55 Fujitsu North West Branch, Unite NW/70209 (Service), Unite North West Regional Finance & General Purposes Committee, Unite the Union Greater Manchester Community Branch, Unite Citizens Advice Manchester NW/11403, USDAW Branch K227, Young Legal Aid Lawyers

*Campaign volunteer Jess Roper and Campaigns Officer Kate Bradley hand out GMLC leaflets at a cost of living protest in early 2022. Jess has also set up an Instagram account for GMLC and kept it running through the year.*