

Fighting together for free access to justice



**Greater
Manchester
Law Centre**
Annual report 2022 - 2023



Fighting together for free access to justice

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This year, GMLC's Ajbike Babalola, Dan Manville and Kate Bradley went on Legacy.fm, a local radio station based in Moss Side, to discuss welfare benefits, housing and domestic violence advice services. Here, Ajbike speaks to host Denise to talk about issues facing survivors of domestic violence.

Report cover image: Volunteers and staff from GMLC join Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit's May 2023 demonstration against the Illegal Migration Bill. Protesters came out in support of the rights of refugees and people seeking asylum, against legislation that would effectively ban seeking asylum in the UK.

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Dan Doody (Student/Volunteer Co-ordinator) and Arwa Graf (trustee) examine last year's annual report together at the 2022 Annual General Meeting, Nov 2022.

In commending this annual report to you, I wish to pay tribute to each and every member of GM Law Centre. Without your membership and commitment, we would not exist.

GM Law Centre was founded on a belief that the people of Greater Manchester needed a law centre that not only provided the best advice and support to the citizens of Greater Manchester but an organisation that also campaigned for a change in social policy. This year's annual report once again demonstrates the critical importance of that founding belief and the vital work that we are all involved in.

Our work as a law centre stands and falls on the hard work and skills of our staff and volunteer team. With over 1000 incoming enquiries every month, their tireless efforts helping and supporting people in extremely difficult circumstances can be rewarding but it can be wearing too.

We continue to offer the best available advice and support that we can, but sadly, social provision has been eroded so badly that we can only tackle a small portion of the demand. Our support to families across Greater Manchester has once again kept a roof over people's heads and provided financial resources by gaining access to benefits that have been wrongfully denied. We help as many as our resources allow but such is the weakness of the country's welfare support system, we cannot hope to meet the upward spiral of demand. We therefore continue to uphold the founding pledge of GMLC to combine our advice and support services with a determination to campaign for a change of social policy.

Campaigning

Our campaigning work arises from the experiences of our clients. We seek to highlight some of the worst examples of poor social policy and punishing cuts to welfare and justice budgets. We regularly work with others - community groups, politicians and lobby groups - to fight for reform and improvements. This year our staff and volunteers have spoken at numerous meetings at a local and national level, including representations in Parliament. On a local level our partnership work with other GM community organisations helps amplify the calls for change. By the effective combining of campaigns, we believe that we can build a stronger voice for some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable members of our communities.

Our employment service was bolstered with the addition of a trainee solicitor, Sarah Murphy. With this appointment GMLC now provides more employment law advice than any other community organisation in GM. Our aim is to develop materials and links to community and union organising with a view to providing legal support to collective action. Legal Aid is only available for discrimination cases, by developing our employment and discrimination capacity we hope to expand our ability to challenge systemic employment bad practice. In addition, our work with Maternity Action is aiming to support their maternity rights service across the North West.

Welfare Benefits

Our Welfare benefits team have once again helped claimants reclaim funds that have been wrongfully refused. This last twelve months just short of £1.5m has been repatriated to GM homes. Money that will make a significant difference to families and be spent in our communities. We have pressed GM Combined Authority for funding to support this vital work with assistance in developing better training routes and career progression for welfare rights advisors. Our staff team has provided training and support to other GM groups helping build capacity for welfare advice. This is on top of the training and professional development opportunities that we provide University students via our long-established LASP programme.

Housing Justice

The shocking death of Awaab Ishak in a home owned by Rochdale Boroughwide Housing exposed some of the dreadful conditions that tenants have to endure. The need for housing advice is growing. We support the housing duty service at the courts and our housing team have their hands full trying to manage the level of demand. We have sought to build connections with housing groups across GM and through work with GM Tenants Union and others have established GM Housing Justice Network as part of a drive to improve housing conditions across GM.

Strategic Work

Our strategic litigation work has had a significant impact on the lives of thousands of people beyond Greater Manchester too. This work was recognised with Josie Hicklin nominated in the Legal Aid Lawyer awards newcomer category for her work on the asylum support case discussed at page 12.

GMLC in numbers

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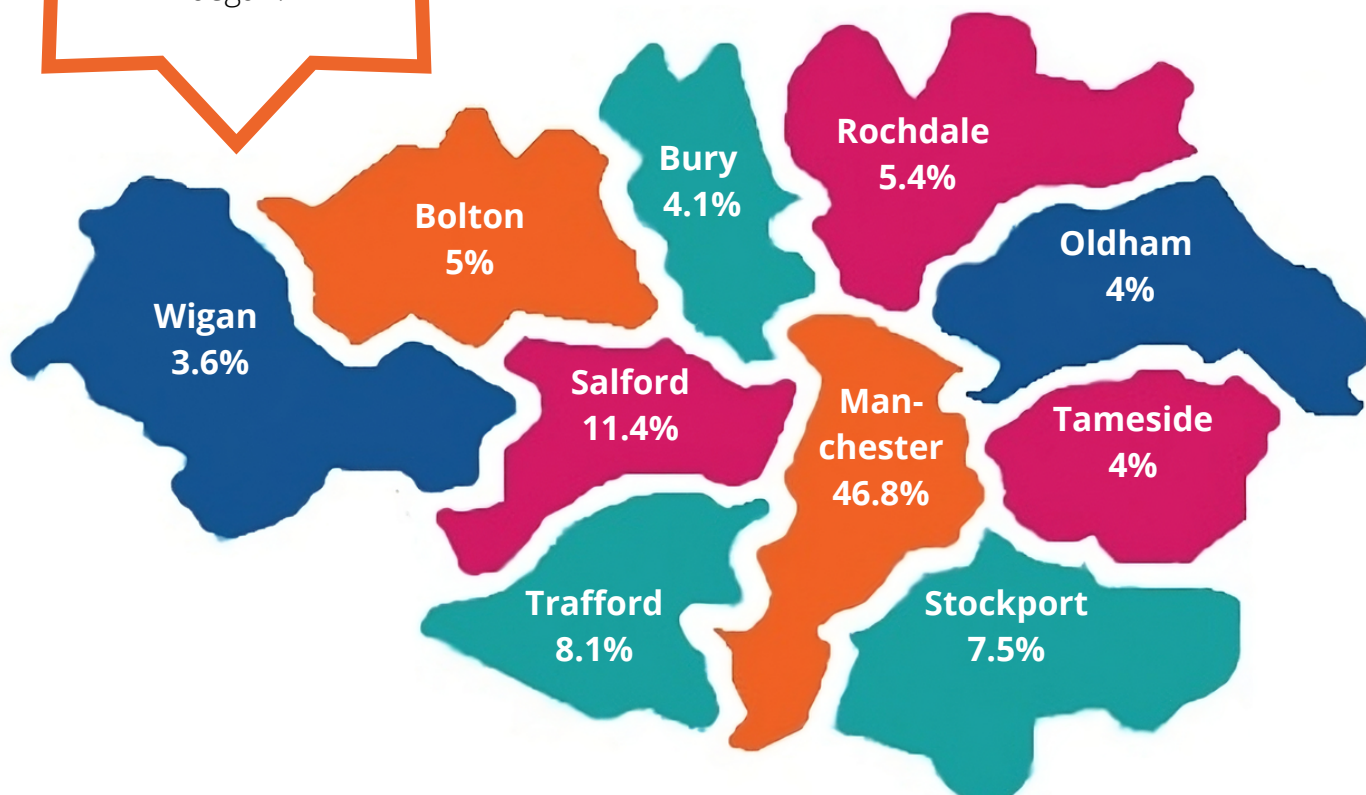
In total this year, we had 12,138 enquiries from people seeking advice. Many people who contact us are seeking advice in areas of law we don't cover, so we try to support them to find the advice they need elsewhere. We have hired 2 new part-time Receptionists to work alongside our triage volunteers to better manage the increasing volume of enquiries.

We made benefits gains for the residents of Greater Manchester of £1.486 million this year, total since we began.

Over the year we took on 1031 cases:

- 459 benefits cases
- 287 employment cases
- 270 housing cases
- 15 public law challenges

The below map shows where in GM our clients were from this year.



- We are contacted by **over 1000 people a month** on average asking for legal advice through our phone lines, by email and in person.
- We have taken on **more than 1,000 cases** across all areas of law over the year. With the Covid lockdowns and cost-of-living crisis hot on their heels, people's legal problems tend to be more complex, and often people present to us with problems in multiple legal areas.
- Our Litigants in Person Project continued, with **over 3,000 people** being advised over the year.
- We recovered benefits gains for the residents of Greater Manchester of £1,486k – **up 31% on last year**. Our benefits gains are now £6m+ since GMLC started, increasing benefits claimants' household incomes and boosting the local economy during the cost of living crisis.
- We launched a Neighbourhood Advice Project across South Manchester that provides community-based face-to-face advice to allow us to illustrate community need, the gaps in existing provision and how we can develop coordinated approaches to ensure access to advice. We recovered **over £60,000 in unclaimed benefit** via this project alone.
- We have continued to provide housing solicitors to support the court duty scheme around once a fortnight, sometimes representing **up to 10 people a day** in their eviction hearings without any prior notice or information before their arrival at court.
- We continued to train and develop the next generation of social welfare lawyers through our LASP student training programme – **30 students** were involved in providing advice information through our enquiry line as well as advocacy and casework support on welfare rights.
- **Over 240 people** attended our events through the year, including one on access to justice, one for students on careers in the social welfare sector, and another on inquests and why we need a 'Hillsborough Law'. These events featured talks from our staff and volunteers alongside prominent figures including GM Mayor Andy Burnham, barristers Christian Weaver, Mira Hammad and Pete Weatherby.

GMLC stops both an eviction and an unaffordable rent rise for Abdi's family

Abdi, his wife and 5 children had lived in their home for 8 years when their private landlord sold their home to an investor without telling them. The new owner served Abdi with a Section 21 no fault eviction notice. Because of his limited English, Abdi did not understand what was happening until a possession order had already been made at court in his absence. A housing solicitor at GMLC met Abdi while giving a Know Your Rights session for Greater Manchester Tenants Union. Abdi brought his possession order and GMLC opened a case for him. GMLC successfully applied to set aside the possession order on the basis the Section 21 notice was invalid as Abdi's former landlord had failed to protect his tenancy deposit. However, after we had prevented the eviction, the new owner tried to force the family out by serving a notice doubling Abdi's rent. We challenged this decision by applying to the rent tribunal, and obtained a judgment keeping the rent below Local Housing Allowance rates, which kept Abdi and his family in their home.

Manchester City Council place Zura with a rogue landlord - GMLC fights to get her moved

Zura was a refugee who had become homeless last year. Manchester City Council placed her in an HMO, paying the private landlord Stephane incentives to house both her and other homeless people. This year, a row between Stephane and the Council about money led to Stephane becoming angry and deciding to evict lots of his tenants, including Zura. He sent a letter telling her to leave. When she did not leave, Stephane and his friends began to harass her. The property had cameras installed in the communal areas, and Stephane made her aware he was monitoring her going about everyday tasks.

Zura came to GMLC to ask for help. GMLC approached the Council and asked them to intervene and either warn the landlord of the unlawfulness of his actions or rehouse our client. We were ignored, and Stephane became increasingly hostile. Eventually, the landlord came round to the property, threatening Zura with serious violence. Despite this, the Council decided that she was not yet homeless, only threatened with homelessness. It took further threats of legal action for the Council to agree to provide alternative accommodation.

We have since worked with other tenants who have been placed in properties owned by Stephane and his family by the Council, who have raised similar complaints. Yet the Council are continuing to place homeless people in Stephane's properties, at considerable expense to the public purse.



Attendees and speakers from across the UK and Ireland were invited to Greater Manchester Housing Justice Network's first conference, 'Fighting for Housing Justice', in June 2023, including from tenants unions like Living Rent, Acorn, London Renters' Union and Ireland's CATU. See page 15 for more.

GMLC combine campaigning and legal work to get Karina her overdue Pension Credit

Karina came to us after she had been waiting for two years for a Pension Credit claim to be processed due to problems with her National Insurance number. We served pre-action correspondence on the DWP and at the same time, with the help of the National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers, canvassed advisers across the country to illuminate the problem (see the Campaigns pages for more). Once we signalled looming action in the courts and generated some campaigning publicity, the Pensions Service stepped up and remedied the problem. For Karina, that involved cross departmental working between HMRC and DWP - a rare example of co-working - to allocate a replacement NI number. The DWP paid nearly £11,000 in arrears within a couple of weeks.

Benefits advice helps Dave keep his home

GMLC first met Dave when our housing solicitor was on court duty at the County Court. Dave was facing losing his social home due to rent arrears, which had arisen because, unbeknownst to Dave, Universal Credit had stopped paying his Housing Costs Element. We secured an adjournment to give us time to try and remedy the problem.

Dave's partner had moved out a few months ago and he'd needed to make a new UC claim, which in turn triggered an automatic verification process. Unbeknownst to Dave, his landlord had changed their operating name. A message came back saying "that's not your landlord" and there ensued an increasingly heated exchange of messages, all while Dave's rent arrears were accruing. At no point did Dave's case manager at UC say "you need to press that button and put this name in that place", and the social landlord started eviction proceedings.

When Dave came to us we spotted the problem immediately, helped him to press that button and put this name in that place. Sorted? So you'd think, but in most circumstances that change would only be effective once the button was pressed; however, we told them to backdate the change, identifying the ambiguous instructions as grounds to effect the change from when Dave had first tried to notify it - Dave wouldn't have known to do that otherwise. The change was effected from when Dave's ex-partner moved out and bang, the arrears were gone! There was no longer a basis for the landlord's eviction.

Helen gets a rogue reference and GMLC step in to help

Helen worked in hospitality but applied for a job in finance and was successful, subject to references. A start date was set and she handed in her notice. Just before she started her new role, she was told by her new employer that the contract was being withdrawn because of a negative employer reference. Helen could not understand what had happened and asked both employers for a copy of the reference. Her new employer provided it. When Helen challenged her old employer, they admitted that the reference had been completed by the wrong person and incorrect boxes had been ticked. Helen appealed to her new employer but when a new reference was sent, it was so different from the old one that the employer had lost trust and said they would not be employing her. Helen was without income, borrowing money from family and friends while she looked for work elsewhere.

Helen called GMLC. Our employment solicitor wrote to Helen's employer on her behalf and suggested a settlement be reached to cover Helen's loss of earnings. This was eventually agreed and Helen had also managed to find a new job in the meantime. Helen was very grateful for the support she'd received.

GMLC helps Mohammed get the reasonable adjustments he needs

Mohammed came to see us when he had been off work with work-related anxiety for several weeks. He had various health conditions including osteoarthritis, anxiety and depression. He had put in a request for flexible working to work exclusively from home rather than the office. His employer refused his request and he had become extremely anxious.

GMLC encouraged him to consider a different approach. If an employee is potentially disabled and eligible for protection under the Equality Act, then, if they disclose their disability to their employer, that employer is obliged to make reasonable adjustments to help the disabled employee fully participate in work. A first step is often to ask the employer for a referral to an Occupational Health Practitioner (OHP).

Mohammed saw an OHP who confirmed that it was likely that he qualified for protection under the Equality Act. With our help, Mohammed drew on this report to make a new request to his employer for reasonable adjustments, rather than flexible working. We suggested that if he was refused this time, he should come back to us and we could help him raise a grievance, but we did not hear back from him again. In Mohammed's case, no news is good news.

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

Asylum seekers are not allowed to work while awaiting decisions from the Home Office on their status in the UK, which can take years. During this time, they are not entitled to mainstream benefits, and have to apply for asylum support payments under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 if they are unable to pay for essential living needs defined by the Home Office as food, clothes, household products, transport, medicine, and other daily expenses.

The government reviews the rate of the asylum support payment each year. After the review for 2022, the government decided they would only be increasing the weekly payment from £39.69 to £40.85 per person. This was just a 3.1% increase, a figure based inflation rates from 2021. They had ignored the reality of surging actual and predicted inflation for 2022 and the skyrocketing cost of living that meant asylum seekers would be left with a real-terms reduction in the already minimal rate of support.

Chiagozie approached us as an asylum seeker and a domestic violence survivor, who was responsible for looking after her three young children alone while housed in dispersed accommodation. In total, Chiagozie was receiving just £158.52 per week for her whole family. With rising costs, Chiagozie was struggling to meet her family's basic needs, and it was causing her severe stress. GMLC helped her mount a challenge to these rates, bringing a Judicial Review against the Home Office on the basis that not raising asylum support payments during the cost of living crisis was unlawful.

On 15 December 2022, the High Court sitting in Manchester heard our legal challenge, with counsel from Jamie Burton KC and Michael Spencer of Doughty Street Chambers. The court found that the Home Secretary had acted and continued to act unlawfully by failing in her legal duty to provide for the essential living needs of asylum seekers and made a mandatory order declaring she was legally required to immediately increase the rate of weekly support to reflect increases in inflation. Rates were raised to £45 per person per week – for both Chiagozie and all other asylum seekers receiving asylum support. The win benefited over 60,000 asylum seekers and was widely reported across news media including as the BBC and the Guardian.



Paul Heron from Public Interest Law Centre speaks alongside barristers Pete Weatherby KC, Mira Hammad and Christian Weaver, and GM Mayor Andy Burnham at an event on Inquests and campaigning for change after events like Hillsborough and Grenfell. The event was organised by GMLC on 19 January 2023.

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.

10 years since Legal Aid cuts

It has been 10 years since the government made their blistering cuts to Legal Aid provision in the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (LASPO). There have been a slew of events and publications covering its detrimental effect, and this year we continued to take every opportunity to argue for reform to the legal sector to improve access to justice.

We are currently finalising an exhibition, 'Ten Years (In)Justice', bringing together art and stories from people's experience of the broken civil justice system over the last ten years.



GMLC Director Jason Tetley speaks on a panel for the Legal Action Group in Westminster to discuss 10 years of the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 - March 2023.

Good Work: For Better Employment Rights

As well as continuing to support strikers, attend picket lines and publish articles about employment rights and trade unions, we also began working this year with Greater Manchester Combined Authority's Good Employment Charter team. We hosted an event together in November 2023 and our staff member Sarah Murphy has been featured on their blog giving workers tips on how to protect their rights at work.

On top of our usual campaigning against homelessness and evictions and the policies that create them, we went into partnership this year with Greater Manchester Tenants Union and Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit, launching the Housing Justice Network (HJN). HJN is a project which aims to bring together community and legal approaches to housing problems faced by Greater Manchester residents.

In June 2023, we held a two-day conference, 'Fighting for Housing Justice', which had around 100 attendees across the weekend, including visitors from other tenants unions including London Renters Union and CATU in Ireland. We helped to deliver a programme of skill-sharing and conversations about challenging evictions, combining law and campaigning, anti-racism, asylum seeker housing, horizons for the housing movement, and much more. We have also run Know Your Rights workshops together, including for Manchester's Somali community through SASCA.

In August 2023, we published 'Tackling Disrepair: Why Enforcement Matters', a research report into how Councils deal with housing disrepair. Our research showed that only 3% of cases across the 10 boroughs of GM resulted in the issue of a formal Notice to landlords - the only thing protecting private tenants from revenge eviction. It also showed that enforcement practices were uneven and unclear across GM. The report was covered by *Inside Housing* and has started good conversations with policy-makers and campaigners about the importance of Council enforcement teams, and how to improve their practices.

TACKLING DISREPAIR: WHY ENFORCEMENT MATTERS

Research Report
August 2023



In 2021, during the burgeoning cost of living crisis, the Pension Service (PS) announced they would commence a take up campaign to encourage eligible pensioners to claim Pension Credit, the means tested top up to state pension. Sadly, they did not put any additional staffing resource in to deal with the influx of new claims. By July 2022, the Pension Service reported a 275% increase in new claims being made but behind the scenes substantial delays were becoming commonplace.

GMLC worked with the National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers to conduct a survey into the state of affairs across the country so that we could more effectively lobby the DWP for fixes to the problem within the Pension Service. We conducted research which found that 98.7% of our 77 welfare benefits advisers surveyed were waiting over 6 weeks for claims to be processed, and the majority had complaints to pass on, which we summarised in a research report. We used our research to write a letter to the Undersecretary for Work and Pensions, Conservative MP Laura Trott.

Combined with imminent legal challenges we were threatening and some pressure from Labour in Parliament in the form of Parliamentary questions, this yielded results. Laura Trott wrote back, explaining that the DWP would be raising staffing levels and addressing the problems we had raised. We did a follow-up survey with NAWRA to check that things had truly improved several months later, and to our surprise, the result was resoundingly positive - though some problems with older claims and the claims of terminally ill claimants remained. We continue to campaign for these issues to be resolved.

Articles on the GMLC website

As part of our campaigning work, GMLC publishes articles on areas we work in, usually written by our brilliant campaign volunteers. Here are some of our recent articles:

- *Housing benefit freezes leave tenants out in the cold*, Judy Sutton, 9 November 2023
- *Access to the legal profession: the SQE and its discontents*, Mary Horobin, 12 July 2023
- *Harsher benefit sanctions don't work: DWP releases suppressed report*, Tammy Ho, 12 May 2023
- *1313 people died while homeless across the UK in 2022*, Rosie Coan and Akinola Akinyanju, 3 May 2023
- *No to the Minimum Service Levels Bill: an interview with John Hendy KC*, Nick Sloan, 28 February 2023
- *'Access denied': a new report from the Bar Council*, Avaia Nightingale-Williams, 13 December 2023

You can read these articles on our website at www.gmlaw.org.uk.



Our Campaigns Officer Kate Bradley took a trip to local teachers' pickets in Levenshulme in February 2023 to offer them solidarity in their strike for a fully-funded pay rise.

Our volunteers

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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.



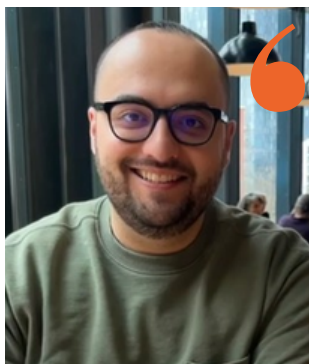
Hibah Abdullah, Triage/Enquiry Volunteer

I work at GMLC as a triage volunteer. I chose to volunteer here because it allows me to immerse myself into the sphere of law which has a very people-centric focus. Every enquiry is unique, and it is my job to consider whether those enquiring would benefit from our services or should be signposted elsewhere. The role has made me realise the huge lack of available funds and resources to help every person who requires assistance. I feel proud to play a part in clients' journey by handling their initial enquiry. I intend to study the BPC in the upcoming months.



Emily Bethell, Legal Advocacy Student Project volunteer

I am a part time Bar Course Student at Manchester Metropolitan University, and I also volunteer on the LASP with GMLC. It's a student-led project helping people with welfare benefits appeals, and I'm really enjoying the work so far. It's very personally satisfying seeing the tangible impact of your work on another person's life, and secondary to that it is also great for my own personal and professional development. Everyone is so supportive and happy to help with anything you're not sure about, it is such an inclusive learning environment.



Jacob Quested Khan, Campaign Volunteer Lead for Access to Justice

My role involves keeping abreast of access to justice issues, liaising with the Campaigns Officer and volunteers, and considering ways to promote awareness of Access to Justice which is essential to the rule of law. It has led to me writing an article in relation to issues with the Public Order Bill (now, Act) and devising an exhibition to spotlight lived experiences in the justice gap. I am committed to fair and free access to justice for all and so want to play an active role to help ensure this is a reality.

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. 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.

GMLC posted a loss in income of almost £20,000 in the year. The priority in 2023/2024 will be to ensure that we maximise our legal aid income. There are significant outstanding legal fees incurred by GMLC that are recoverable from the Legal Aid Agency. The deficit was also in part due to expenditure pressures given that inflation was running at over 10% during this period. The Board agreed to run a deficit budget to ensure that salaries were raised in line with the cost of living pressures for most staff. In addition, there was short gap in funding regarding a strategically important advice post that was supported from reserves within the year.

Figures at a glance	31 March 2020	31 March 2021	31 March 2022	31 March 2023
Cash at bank	£154,307	£242,624	£241,310	£205,381
Regular donors	71	83	91	84
Employees	7	11	12	13
Income	£214,000	£443,009	£394,421	£399,114
Expenditure	£213,000	£327,366	£398,467	£418,352
Reserves	£101,057	£216,696	£212,470	£193,232

Thank you

Principal funders

AB Charitable Trust, Access to Justice Foundation, Baring Foundation, Bell Foundation, Department of Health, Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Law Centres Network, Legal Education Foundation, Manchester City Council, Manchester Local Care Organisation, Manchester Metropolitan University, Ministry Of Justice, Northern Consortium, Oak Foundation, Sustainability Health Environment Development, University of Manchester

Board Members

Andy 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, 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, Public Interest Law Centre, Refugee Action, Safety4Sisters, Thompsons Solicitors, 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, Usdaw (National), Young Legal Aid Lawyers

Our Welfare Rights Supervisor Dan Manville with GM Mayor Andy Burnham at the relaunch of GM Welfare Rights Advisers Group on 16 June 2023.