Since the last issue of CLS London, work at the Legal Services Commission has been extremely busy. We have launched the research paper Causes of Action, our CLS Strategy and the consultation for the Preferred Supplier scheme.

Of all the news in this issue, a clear highlight is the announcement that last year, in partnership with our service providers, we helped more people than ever before. On page five you can read the story of one of the clients helped by the housing possession duty scheme run by Greenwich Housing Rights.

Thank you for your continued efforts and I am sure this year we will help even more people.

Martin Seel
Regional Director

NUMBERS HELPED BY CIVIL LEGAL AID HITS SIX YEAR HIGH

In March the Legal Services Commission was pleased to announce that in the year 2005/6 more people received legal aid help than at any point since 2000. Nationally that amounts to over 700,000 civil legal aid cases and in London that figure is over 100,000.

Commenting on the numbers of people who have been helped in London, Regional Director Martin Seel said: “I am extremely pleased with what we have achieved. We have worked hard with local solicitors and advice agencies throughout the year to ensure that the most vulnerable Londoners who need help and advice are able to access it. We are looking forward to working with our service providers over the coming year to ensure this excellent performance is maintained.”

The focus for the coming year will initially be to continue with the current contracts. There will be no Development Fund allocations in 2006/7, instead money will be focused on delivery of front-line advice. The Legal Services Commission will also continue its drive to improve ineffective providers or terminate contracts of those providers who continue to give poor advice.

There will be careful monitoring of performance throughout the year. This will ensure that last year’s success is maintained and that the Legal Services Commission, in partnership with service providers, continues to deliver high quality legal advice services to the vulnerable people who need it.
New research by the Legal Services Research Centre shows that more than half of civil legal problems lead to adverse outcomes such as ill-health, unemployment and homelessness.

Released in March, the findings of *Causes of Action*, highlight how solving civil legal problems can reduce demand on other public services when problems are addressed early.

The research revealed a significant reduction in the number of people not taking action to resolve their problems in recent years. But still around one in ten people with legal problems are not seeking advice, and around 15% of those who seek advice fail to obtain any.

Other main findings:

- A third of civil justice problems affect people’s health. 18 per cent of problems lead to stress-related ill-health, and 16 per cent of problems lead to physical ill-health.
- Of those who had physical health problems:
  - 4 in 5 needed medical treatment
  - 2 in 3 treated by GPs required an average of six appointments
  - 1 in 10 who are hospitalised spend an average of 9.5 days as in-patients.
- 16% of problems lead to loss of income or employment.
- 6% lead to loss of home.
- Civil problems can bring about and worsen social exclusion.
- Half of victims of crime also report a civil justice problem.
- Three principal and distinct problem clusters can be identified. Clustering of problems occurs when there is a tendency for particular problems to be experienced simultaneously or in sequence by the same person. An understanding of clustering can help us to develop advice and legal services that address people’s related needs. These are:
  - ‘Family’ (domestic violence, divorce, relationship and children problems.)
  - ‘Homelessness’ (rented housing, homelessness and benefits.)
  - ‘Economic’ (money & debt, consumer, and employment problems.)

Michael Bichard, Legal Services Commission Chair, said: “This research makes our challenge plain: get more legal advice to people and make it easy to find. The figures show that when people get early advice they will be healthier and happier. There is also a benefit to the public purse by avoiding the downstream cost of unsolved problems. The evidence of ‘problem clusters’ clearly shows the importance of joined up public services. Our new strategy for the Community Legal Service will make a real difference in tackling these challenges.”

To read a summary of the main findings of *Causes of Action*, or to order the full version, visit www.legalservices.gov.uk.
FOCUSING CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES ON PEOPLE’S NEEDS

Following a period of consultation last year and building on the evidence provided by *Causes of Action*, March saw the launch of *Making Legal Rights a Reality*, the final version of the new strategy for the Community Legal Service.

The strategy will ensure that civil legal advice targets those in greatest need, is more coordinated, cost-effective and better geared to prevent common legal problems.

Richard Collins, Executive Director for Policy and Planning at the Legal Service Commission, said: “The *Causes of Action* research gives us the evidence to design services around the needs of people who face real problems in their lives. The Community Legal Service strategy will ensure that we commission services in locations where clients need them rather than where legal aid advisers and practitioners might otherwise choose to provide them.

“The number of people helped by the CLS has increased 10% across England and Wales over the past year and this strategy provides the foundation to build on that success further. It gives the CLS a new role in solving the causes of problems, greater flexibility for tackling local issues, more opportunities to promote a better awareness of legal rights and introduce better quality assurances, and creates a more cost-efficient and coordinated legal aid system.”

The key proposals are:

- **Introducing Community Legal and Advice Centres** in the most deprived communities, where clients will be able to get legal help for a range of social welfare problems. Currently people who are facing the clusters of problems highlighted in *Causes of Action*, may have to seek help from different agencies specialising in different areas of law. The centres would deliver a seamless service, from basic advice to specialist representation.

- **Introducing Community Legal and Advice Networks**. Rather than funding law firms or agencies to operate independently, they would be commissioned to form a network that can deliver an integrated service so that when a client walks in one door they are accessing the services of the whole network.

- **Expanding Community Legal Service Direct** to improve access to legal and advice services and achieve greater value for money. Data shows strong demand for, and satisfaction with, telephone services. Already half of all legal aid clients make first contact with their advisor by telephone and half of these go on to resolve their problem without any face-to-face contact. The Community Legal Service Direct helpline now receives nearly 50,000 calls each month, the strategy proposes further expansion to provide more people with access to front line information, advice and assistance.

- **Tackling the causes of problems**. A great deal of time and money could be saved, and distress avoided, by tackling the source of problems rather than dealing with the symptoms by repeated individual legal actions. The Community Legal Service will focus on raising awareness of the issues and negotiating solutions.

- **Improving information about legal rights and responsibilities**. Such information currently exists but the complexity of the advice sector and the number of sources of information can make it difficult for consumers to find what they need. Working with others, particularly the Department for Constitutional Affairs, will promote trusted sources and help people to navigate through the advice available.

The strategy is subject to the independent review of legal aid procurement being conducted by Lord Carter of Coles. The full strategy can be downloaded from www.legalservices.gov.uk.
Supplier Profile: Greenwich Housing Rights

Following the success of the Housing Possession Court Duty Schemes funded by the Legal Services Commission - last year over 2500 vulnerable clients at risk of losing their homes were helped - Assistant Manager of Greenwich Housing Rights Chris Minnock speaks to Katrina Forrester about the clients they help and the unique service they provide.

**Location:** 36 Wellington Street, Woolwich  
**Number of Staff:** eight full time staff and a team of 40 volunteers  
**Contact:** 020 8854 8848/ general@grhr.co.uk

1. **This is a really innovative scheme, how and why was the concept developed?**
   In 1983 a group of dedicated local advice workers and tenants’ representatives formed a voluntary agency to assist clients that were in danger of losing their home. The service we provide is unique because we don’t just provide housing advice. We assist clients at court when they need it most, many of our clients have not had access to advice before their hearing.

   In 1998 we secured lottery funding which enabled us to recruit and train volunteers. Volunteers are the backbone of our agency. Each volunteer undertakes an intensive training programme before they can advise and represent clients at court.

2. **Can you tell me about the service you provide?**
   We have a Specialist Quality Mark in housing and offer advice and advocacy services. Our work can be divided into three main areas, casework, policy work and training (local agencies).

   Staff and volunteers provide advice and representation to tenants facing possession actions. Apart from dealing with the threat of losing their home, we establish what the underlying issues are and provide advice and support. If we cannot assist the client then we will actively refer or signpost the client to the appropriate agency.

3. **How do clients find out about your services and how do you help them?**
   We receive referrals from a wide-range of statutory, voluntary and private sector agencies and ensure that the profile of our service is high by taking part in a range of local forums and initiatives to promote the work we do.

4. **Describe a typical day as a Housing Duty Advisor?**
   Duty Advisers are at court 15 minutes before the first case is listed. One of the challenges that they face is lack of time and information. Typically they have ten minutes to take client instructions and to try to negotiate with the landlord.

   The importance of negotiation cannot be underestimated. The Duty Adviser will try to reach a settlement but, if not, will advocate for the tenant, trying to secure the best possible result. After the hearing the tenant is provided with written confirmation of advice and sign-posted to appropriate agencies for follow up advice and assistance.

   It is not uncommon for a Duty Adviser to assist five or six clients in a three hour session and they often juggle several clients at once. The courts are very flexible and often change the listing order to allow the Duty Adviser more time.

   At the end of the session the Duty Adviser returns to the office to provide an update their colleagues on the days proceedings. It also enables us to follow-up clients on clients cases, identify training needs and to keep abreast of trends.

5. **Who would bring the majority of actions against your client’s?**
   65% of our clients are local authority tenants and 95% of our cases are tenants facing possession because of arrears.
6. Greenwich Housing Rights has an excellent relationship with the Court Service. What advice can you give to others developing similar schemes?

It’s really important to remember that the court staff have a very difficult job. Judges have commented that Duty Advisers assist by not only speeding up possession lists, but also in ensuring that Judges have all the information they need to make fair decisions.

The first step in developing a scheme is to meet with the court staff. They are likely to support the concept, but may be wary that the scheme could place further pressure on a Court Service. Explain the ethos of the scheme and that Duty Advisers do not seek adjournments simply to avoid an order, but to give the tenants the time and knowledge to deal with the underlying problems.

A referral system should also be developed along with a knowledge of the capacity of local agencies to take on cases so Duty Advisors can confidently advise the court that tenants are able to access specialist help if given the time to do so.

It is also important to know the working practices of the local landlords. Working with them to improve practice is often better than challenging that practice on a case-by-case basis.

7. Which courts house the scheme and what are your fixed session times?

We have sessions at Bromley County Court and Woolwich County Court. The morning sessions are between 10 and 1 and afternoon sessions are between 2 and 4. Exact dates of these sessions can be obtained by contacting us.

We offer drop in sessions at our offices on Monday between 2 and 4, Tuesday between 5 and 7 (at Woolwich Town Hall) and Wednesday between 10 and 12. Finally, clients can telephone us for advice on Tuesday and Thursday between 2 and 5 and Friday between 10 and 1.

Greenwich Housing Rights Case Study

Mr Wellbury received a summons to appear at the Woolwich County Court. He had an application to suspend an eviction and was in danger of losing his home. He was unrepresented and had not previously sought advice. The Duty Adviser introduced herself and explained how she could assist him.

Mr Wellbury is 24 years of age and is a Housing Association tenant. He has been in rent arrears for two years. His landlord was awarded a suspended possession order a year ago. He kept up with the payments until two months ago when he lost his job. As a result, he has broken the order and will be evicted tomorrow morning if his application fails. His Housing Benefit has not been paid because of a backlog and it might not be paid for another month.

The Duty Adviser asked the Usher who Mr Wellbury’s landlord was being represented by. The Usher pointed out Mr Wellbury’s Housing Officer. The Duty Adviser explained to the Housing Officer that she would ask the Court to suspend the warrant, to give the client more time to receive his Housing Benefit payments. She asked him if the Association would agree to the application, however he was going to oppose it.

Before going into court The Duty Adviser explained the procedure to Mr Wellbury and what evidence she would present on his behalf.

When the case was called, The Duty Adviser asked the Judge to adjourn the case. She explained the client’s situation and confirmed what she had advised him to do about his problems. Mr Wellbury offered interim payments towards the rent arrears to show willing.

The result was a success and The Judge gave Mr Wellbury the time that had been asked for and Mr Wellbury went home extremely relieved.
In March the Legal Services Commission launched a consultation for its Preferred Supplier scheme and, along with it, started a series of events across the country for service providers.

There were ten events held in London attended by over four hundred London advisors who listened to presentations by members of the Legal Services Commission’s Executive Team and the Preferred Supplier project team on the proposals set out in the consultation paper.

Martin Seel, London Region Director, who was also present at the London events, said: “The events were extremely useful for us to collate feedback from the profession about our proposals.

“A commonly asked question was about the size of service providers we expect to work with in the future. The truth is that at the moment we don’t know because if a market based system is implemented, in line with Carter’s proposals, the market will drive the size.

“What we are saying is that we want to work with firms who are committed to legal aid and who deliver sustainable volumes of high quality advice. We will also continue to work with strategically important organisations and those which offer niche services.”

The key proposals outlined in the Preferred Supplier scheme consultation document are:

- To change the way the LSC buys legal aid services so that only Preferred Suppliers will have a legal aid contract by the time the implementation of the Carter reforms are complete (expected to be during 2009).

- To give Preferred Suppliers a greater and potentially increasing range of devolved decision-making powers, and to speed up LSC decision-making on non-devolved decisions.

- To simplify billing and claiming processes and to reduce transaction costs as a result.

- To significantly reduce auditing of Preferred Suppliers and instead use risk-based, largely remote, performance management tools.

- To base Preferred Supplier membership on significantly higher up-front entry criteria. Preferred Suppliers will need to demonstrate: a high quality of legal advice as measured by Peer Review and File Assessment; a good history of compliance with existing legal aid requirements; value for money, and; a soundly financed and sustainable business.

- To forge a new relationship with providers of legal aid services and to give the lead responsibility for managing this partnership to an LSC Relationship Manager.

- To award Preferred Supplier status to organisations or firms - not individual offices.

- To specify that e-business is used for all transactions between the LSC and Preferred Suppliers.

The consultation period finished on 12 June.
PEER REVIEW WORKSHOPS

In London at the beginning of July the Law Society, in conjunction with Peer Reviewers and the Legal Services Commission, will be holding Peer Review – Improving Quality workshops in the categories of crime, family and immigration.

The aims of the workshops are to promote good practice through the dissemination of peer review findings; encourage practitioners to critically review the legal services they provide; share useful guidance and; help prepare organisations to meet Preferred Supplier standards.

The workshops should prove useful to those firms seeking to meet the LSC’s Preferred Supplier standards. They will cover the Peer Review process and highlight the common findings from Peer Reviews. The workshops will be hosted by the Law Society and led by Peer Reviewers.

The workshops will be taking place across the country and the London ones will be held on 3, 4 and 5 of July. To book a place on the workshops contact Deanie Thane at the Law Society by emailing bestpracticeprogramme@lawsociety.org.uk.

GOOD NEWS FOR LEGAL AID

The results of an independent analysis of media coverage in 2005/6 reversed the common misconception that all coverage about legal aid is negative.

Figures for 2005/6 show that nationally there were more than 3,600 stories about legal aid, of which nearly 2,100 were rated as ‘favourable’. Looking at progress over the past 12 months, there has been a steady increase in the proportion of favourable coverage – from about half for the first quarter of 2005/06 to two-thirds in the last three months. Coverage rated as ‘strongly unfavourable’ fell from one third to just 12% over the same period.

Commenting on the results, Rosemary Beazley, Communications Manager for the London Region of the Legal Services Commission, said: "We are working hard to promote the work that we do, in partnership with our service providers, to help vulnerable people in our society.

"In London we have been really pleased by the support we have received from our service providers and clients who are willing to share their experiences to raise awareness of the help and advice that is available for people.

“It is an ongoing process to collect case studies, such as the ones that appear in each issue of CLS London and I would ask any service providers who can work with us on this to contact us.”

Over the last year media campaigns run by the London Region of the Legal Services Commission included encouraging people that need it to take legal advice for family matters and a campaign before Christmas to raise awareness of the issue of debt, how to avoid it and where to get help if people find themselves in debt.

For more information about getting involved in media campaigns or to contribute case studies contact Rosemary Beazley by emailing rosemary.beazley@legalservices.gov.uk.

Lisa Mitchell—a client of HCL Hanne willing to share her story
NEARLY £3 MILLION AVAILABLE IN TRAINING GRANTS

In June The Legal Services Commission was pleased to announce that it is going to make available nearly £3 million in grants to train the next generation of legal aid solicitors.

There will be 100 grants available to cover the tuition fees of students on the one-year Legal Practice Course and 75% of the Law Society’s minimum salary and the cost of professional skills courses for successful LPC students on training contracts with solicitor organisations.

Solicitor organisations can recruit a Legal Practice Course student to work with them on a training contract on completion of their studies. This year, priority will be given to organisations with contracts in the key areas of Mental Health, Family (with a focus on child care issues), Immigration and Crime.

For further information and an application pack, contact Training Contract Grants Coordinator Emma Shaw on 0161 244 5027 or email emma.

FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Funding to Help the Financially Excluded (UK)
The Government has announced that it will make funding available through the Financial Inclusion Fund to raise awareness of financial inclusion amongst intermediary organisations such as charities and housing associations.

The funding will be used to help those organisations develop the capacity to assist their clients to open bank accounts and access affordable borrowing alternatives. This initiative forms part of a new Financial Inclusion Taskforce campaign to address the barriers to accessing both mainstream banking products and sources of affordable credit for those individuals who are currently financially excluded.

http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/newsroom_and_speeches/press/2006/press_30_06.cfm

Funding for Youth Volunteering Opportunities (England)
The Russell Commission, established by the Government in 2004 with the aim of involving more young people (aged 16 -25) in volunteering, has announced that the first round of funding for Youth Volunteering Opportunities is now open for applications.

During this initial application round, the funding is available to local and national voluntary and community sector organisations with a track record of using volunteers. There is no upper or lower funding levels and the application process varies according to the funding strand under which applications are made.


Funding for Innovative Youth Projects (UK)
The European Commission has launched a new call for proposals within the framework of Action 5 of the Youth Programme. The key aim of Action 5 is to support innovative co-operation, training and information projects in the field of non-formal education.

All applications must address one of four key themes and specify the innovative elements they intend to introduce. The total amount of funding available is €2 million The closing date for applications is 1 July 2006.

http://ec.europa.eu

CONTACT DETAILS

Editor, Rosemary Beazley— 020 7759 1840 /rosemary.beazley@legalservices.gov.uk

Staff writer, Katrina Forrester— katrina.forrester@legalservices.gov.uk