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**Report to**

Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee

21<sup>st</sup> November, 2007

**Report of**

Cllr Kevin Foster

**Title**

Report Back on the Work Of Outside Bodies – Coventry Law Centre

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**1 Purpose of the Report**

- 1.1 At their meeting on 10<sup>th</sup> May 2005, the Cabinet approved a process of reporting back to the Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee on the work of those outside bodies appointed to by the City Council. This reports sets out details of the work of Coventry Law Centre over the preceding twelve months and details of attendance by the City Council's representatives.

**2 Recommendations**

- 2.1 That the Council should continue to nominate two elected members as its representatives on the Coventry Law Centre due to both the nature of it's work and the level of financial support received from the City Council.

**3 Information on Work of Outside Body**

- 3.1 The Coventry Law Centre describes it's purpose as "*To fight Social exclusion in communities and to effect change in society by increasing rights awareness and using legal processes to fight poverty, inequality and discrimination*". The Law Centre employs professional, legally qualified staff to deliver it's work and prides itself on a high standard of advice.
- 3.2 The Law Centre provides legal advice in the areas of Community Care and Mental Health, Welfare Rights, Immigration, Housing & Employment. The Coventry Law Centre in common with similar centres specialises in many areas of law that private legal firms do not practice. This year has seen a large expansion of the work the Law Centre being done by the Immigration Team as a result of taking on new work from the Legal Services Commission.
- 3.3 In the year 2006/2007 the Law Centre received £468,400 in grant funding from the City Council. The Law Centre also received £453,553 from the Legal Services Commission. The Councils grant allows the Law Centre to provide aid and assistance to some clients who do not qualify for Legal Aid, but do not have the resources to pursue their cases privately. It also allows capacity for rights awareness raising work, and for training and support of other advice agencies and community groups. The Law Centre also received grants of £35,000 from the Commission for Racial Equality, and £53,000 from the Disability Rights Commission, as well as £38,000 from Big Lottery.

During the year the Law Centre managed to recover on behalf of it's clients £1,094,204 in arrears of benefit and compensation and weekly increases in benefit totalling : £979,560

- 3.4 The Law Centre produces an Annual Impact Report and the 2006/2007 report will be available for public inspection. It will also be discussed at the AGM. The report details examples of cases that the Centre has dealt with over the last year.
- 3.5 Over the last year the Law Centre has been involved with a number of initiatives to improve access and knowledge of legal rights including taking part in a major campaign aimed at improving awareness of discrimination.
- 3.6 As part of a wider involvement with the community it serves, the Director of the Law Centre is working with partners to develop and strengthen advice services across the city. A partnership called Advice Services Coventry has been formed and the work of the partnership has been supported by Neighbourhood Renewal Funding, It has also drawn in nearly £500,000 in funding from Big Lottery.
- 3.7 The role of the "members" of the Law Centre was reviewed over the last year. The current structure dates from when the Law Centre was first set up and includes representation from a number of bodies, including the City Council. Some discussions have taken place about potential mergers with other advice giving bodies which may change the structure around membership. It would therefore be advisable to discuss changes as part of any such merger, rather than independently.

#### **4 Benefits to the City Council of the Appointment**

- 4.1 The benefits to the City Council of this appointment is that members are able to set the direction for the centre and are able to scrutinise the annual accounts. Members of the Law Centre are also responsible for electing the Trustees who make up the Management Committee of the Law Centre.
- 4.2 In addition to being one of the Council's members Cllr Foster was elected as a Trustee of the Law Centre in November 2004. Cllr Foster sits on the Management Committee of the Law Centre in that capacity. Cllr Foster was re-elected as a Trustee at the Law Centre's AGM in October 2006.

#### **5 Attendance Record and Remuneration for the Appointment**

- 5.1 The only formal requirement is for members to attend the Annual General Meeting of the Law Centre that will be held on 26<sup>th</sup> November 2007. Whilst all elected members are invited only the nominated members have a vote on certain items of business. Last year both Cllr Bigham and Cllr Foster attended the AGM.
- 5.2 In addition, there have been 9 Board Meetings and 1 Audit Committee meeting in the 12 month period from November 2006 to October 2007, of which Councillor Foster, as a trustee of the Law Centre attended 7 of these 10 meetings.
- 5.3 Members of the Law Centre receive no remuneration for their appointment.

List of background papers

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Papers open to Public Inspection

<b>Description of paper</b>	<b>Location</b> CH59
Schedule of City Council Appointments to Outside Bodies	



# Annual Report to Coventry City Council

1<sup>st</sup> April 2006 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2007

This report is a summary of the performance of Coventry Law Centre against the service outcomes listed in the grant aid agreement with Coventry City Council.

A copy of the audited accounts and Trustees' Report is attached.

## **1. The Project**

Coventry Law Centre operates a specialist legal advice and representation service for people living or working (in respect of employment law only) in Coventry. Work is also undertaken to raise awareness of legal rights in respect of social welfare law, with priority being given to communities living in the city's priority neighbourhoods, and to communities of interest who are socially excluded.

## **2. The Services**

Legal advice and representation services are provided in a range of areas of social welfare law. The Law Centre holds the Legal Services Commission Specialist Quality Mark in each of these areas of law, and, as such, holds a contract with the Legal Services Commission (LSC) to undertake casework for those eligible for legal aid funding.

The areas of law presently covered are:

Housing

Employment

Immigration and Asylum

Welfare Rights

Discrimination

Community Care (including community based Mental Health)

### 3. Outputs for 2005/06

**2006/07 marked 30 years of Coventry Law Centre.** We celebrated with a well-attended Annual General Meeting, and thanked our main funders, Coventry City Council, as well as the people who worked so hard to establish the Law Centre.

Whilst marking 30 years of tackling poverty and social exclusion, we expanded our capacity during the year to achieve a significant **overall increase in casework of 20%**.

#### *Rights Awareness Raising*

- £35,000 funding from the Commission for Racial Equality, allowed us to run a **race discrimination awareness campaign** and to **train over 40 other agencies** in Coventry. We took on around **60 race discrimination cases** during the year and also established formal links with Warwickshire Race Equality Partnership. For this work we were awarded the **Law Society Race Equality Award 2006**
- £50,000 from the Disability Rights Commission enabled us to **raise awareness of disability rights** and to undertake casework in this area of law across the West Midlands region. This work is part of a high profile national project in partnership with the Law Centres Federation. During the year we acted directly in **over 40 disability discrimination cases** and provided information and training to a range of organisations involved in disability rights across the region
- £2,000 funding from the Department of Trade and Industry enabled us to raise **awareness of the Sexual Orientation, Religion, Belief and Age Equality Regulations** by providing training to other agencies in these areas of discrimination
- We produced three 'In Touch' newsletters for partners
- Regular press coverage in the Coventry Telegraph continues. On average we achieve one article per month in addition to the 'letters column' which runs weekly. We

achieve a significant response from the latter leading to new casework or free advice.

### *Free Advice*

- General advice and information was given to approximately **3,000** callers to our advice lines. 800 people called our employment and discrimination line, which we have expanded to three sessions per week, one of which is in the early evening; 750 enquired about housing issues; and 1,450 rang regarding immigration and asylum matters
- We ran surgeries at a variety of community facilities at which we advised **450** people
- We had **20,150** unique visitors to our website, with **73,151** page views
- We hold an employment advice open day once per month – average attendance is 10 – 12 people. We have developed a partnership with the University of Warwick School of Law that allows their students to volunteer to be involved in these advice open days. This allows us to see more people and provides valuable work experience for the students

### *Casework*

- The number of cases taken on during 2006/07 were:  
1843

Housing	290
Employment	218
Immigration and Asylum	519
Welfare Rights	545
Community Care	271
- We operate the duty scheme at Coventry Court on housing repossession days, and offer representation to anyone who is un-represented. We represent approximately 17 people per month via this scheme.

- The overall total number of cases was therefore approximately: 2050

#### *Measurable outcomes*

- Weekly increase in benefit over one year:  
*Target – to exceed £1m*  
**Achievement - £1,094,204**
- Arrears of benefit and compensation paid:  
*Target – to exceed £500,000*  
**Achievement - £979,560**
- We represented 978 people in court or tribunal
- Percentage of monies provided by the Council which was spent on advice and guidance service provision at LSC General Help Quality Mark or above – **100%**

#### *Quality*

- We have retained LSC contracts in all areas of law and have operated all services to LSC Specialist Quality Mark standard.
- We have maintained all LSC Quality Profiles at Medium or Low (ie. low or medium risk in their terms).

#### **4. Other Information**

- In October, the two other providers of legal aid funded immigration advice in the city withdrew from this area of work. We took the opportunity to expand, which meant rapid growth from a team of two caseworkers and an administrative support post, to a team of six caseworkers and three administrative staff. We were able, due to the effort and commitment of staff, to **increase our immigration caseload fourfold** in a very short space of time, and we continue to achieve outcomes for our immigration clients that are above the national average



- We continued to play a leading role in **Advice Services Coventry (ASC)**. This group has produced an advice strategy for Coventry which has been adopted by Coventry City Council. The group was successful in a bid for £500,000 Neighbourhood Renewal Funding (NRF) for the development of **new ways of delivering advice in priority neighbourhoods**. The Director of the Law Centre co-chairs this partnership, and is the project manager for this new service. Formal partnership agreements have been drawn up with three other agencies, and the NRF monies are paid to the partners via the Law Centre as the lead agency.

From 2007/08 ASC has also been successful in its bid for Big Lottery funding. Nearly £500,000 over 3 years will further extend and strengthen the work of the partnership.

- In July 2006, Robert Taylor completed his training contract with the Law Centre and qualified as a solicitor. This was our second successfully completed training contract, and we are pleased that we have been able to secure funding from both the LSC and Big Lottery to support two more trainees this year, as well as supporting a third from our own funds.

These training contracts, along with the placements for students from the University of Warwick School of Law, are critical in terms of encouraging law graduates to choose social welfare law as a career.

- The Director of the Law Centre was Chair of Coventry Partnership during 2006/07 and continues to play an active role as chair of the Equalities and Community Cohesion Theme Group.
- The Law Centre offers support to the governance of the wider voluntary sector: individual members of staff are trustees of CVSC, Age Concern Coventry, St. Peters Centre and the Coventry and Warwickshire Council of Disabled People.