

# The **LONDON LEGAL SUPPORT TRUST**

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### **From Pro Bono to Partnership**

In these times of ever more restricted government and charity funding, legal advice agencies will look to corporate support to fill the void in services they can provide.

At the same time larger firms are developing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes which cover far more activity than just pro bono advice.

The help of large corporate firms is needed far and wide and it is a role of Lawworks and the Bar Pro Bono Unit to try to spread that help so that it doesn't get constrained to a limited number of agencies close to City Centres. However, in addition to ad hoc help and advice to agencies, firms will build up productive pro bono partnerships with particular agencies and it is possible for those partnerships to develop beyond standard pro bono arrangements to full CSR partnerships.

Partnerships between legal advice centres and law firms are ideal CSR partnerships. The needs of legal advice centres are an excellent match for the resource capacity of corporate law firms and that allows for both partners to maximise the benefits of the partnership.

This type of CSR partnership will normally start with a pro bono partnership. That is the easiest form of support that a firm can give to an advice centre and crucially is one of the easiest to cease if the partnership doesn't flourish. Therefore it is a relatively risk free beginning.

Even within a straightforward pro bono partnership, support can vary and it can build up over time to include different types of human resource. Forms of support can include:

### **1. Volunteer lawyers for advice surgeries**

This is the standard form of pro bono partnership and many advice agencies underestimate the value of this type of service. "What would they know about what our clients need?" is a very common view among advice centre managers faced with the prospect of City lawyers advising in their centre. The answer is that "they" know a lot. Very few could handle a complicated benefits matter or immigration matter, but with very basic training they can easily cope with consumer and small claims advice. They can deal with rent deposit and assured shorthold tenancy matters. In addition you will find that they are courteous to clients and diligent with their work. They are a boon if used properly.

### **2. Volunteer lawyers for representation at Tribunal or Court**

Volunteer barristers are the most common source for this need and they are usually sourced through the Free Representation Unit or the Bar Pro Bono Unit. Where this assistance is not available, City firm solicitors are excellent if working in their specialist field or with specialist support from their firm. If they take on a matter for representation they have the resources to do exceptionally thorough preparation and from that stems excellent representation.

With representation, as with all types of advice partnership, the partnership needs to know its limitations and have access to a wider source of expert help. The partners will normally know when it is time to call upon FRU. (Firms and advice agencies who are not existing FRU members may refer cases to FRU through Lawworks.) It is also well worth a partnership building relationships with the Bar. These can be established through the Bar Pro Bono Unit, so that the partnership can gain expert support when a case is beyond its expertise.

### **3. Volunteer lawyers to undertake in-house advice and casework**

Some firms will take on a limited number of cases for clients with special difficulties as in-house pro bono cases in their own name. These tend to be cases where a particular issue of human rights is involved.

It is also common for firms to assist community groups with legal matters such as leases, employment, constitutions and intellectual property. This is relatively easy for the firm as they will be acting in an area of work in which they already specialise. It is of great benefit to an advice centre who wish to support their local community groups and gain benefits from doing that, but don't have the capacity or expertise in the particular area of law.

One of the most valuable resources from in-house pro bono as part of the CSR partnership, is assisting the partner centre itself. All advice centres have legal matters from time to time. Leases are the most common but all sorts of things may arise and the old adage of "only a fool represents himself" certainly applies equally to legal advice centres.

### **4. Trainee placements**

Trainees from City firms placed with their partner Centre for three or six months are a fabulous resource. They are invariably committed, always bright and add capacity to the Centre's ability to help clients. They are best used to support casework, interviewing clients and even helping at Court or Tribunal depending on the skills they bring with them.

### **5. PA/Secretary/Admin secondments**

This is another great capacity building resource. Some firms will send a secretary or PA for a day each week. That keeps the backlog of typing under control and helps with running the office. It tends to be done on a rota where a different secretary comes each week until the rota starts repeating itself. That means there is quite a bit of repeat induction at the start but it's well worth it.

### **6. Free artwork and small publishing or printing jobs**

Most City firms have IT departments with good designers. So free design of posters and leaflets for their partner Centre should be possible. Designing a whole annual report could be asking a bit much, but a CSR partnership has reached full momentum when the partner agency can ask for everything it needs and the firm feels comfortable in turning down the elements that it can't comfortably provide.

### **7. Meeting spaces (possibly with catering)**

Most firms have overcapacity in meeting rooms. So it's usually relatively easy to gain free use of a room. Larger firms often provide tea/coffee with a room as a matter of course. Some firms would provide full catering for a special event.

### **8. Free archiving**

This is a growing area of support where the firm allows the advice centre to archive their files in the firm's system. Effectively the advice centre is counted as a branch office for filing purposes. The advice centre has to file in accordance with the firm's systems and then has professional file storage and retrieval for free. The cost to the firm, who are bulk buying storage, is normally far smaller than the savings made by the advice agency. So this provides excellent value for money while ridding the agency of either cost or wasted advice space.

### **9. Funding**

Of course, funding is something which all advice agencies need above everything. That often comes as part of a partnership but firms take varying views on that issue. What is normal is that the relationship has to develop before significant funding can become part of the package. Only a very few firms offer funding initially, although firms should try to ensure that the support they provide to their partner agency is at worst cost neutral, and so paying for, for instance, an evening surgery receptionist or supervising lawyer, if required, should start from the beginning.

CSR support from City firms to agencies is developing all the time and the list above is just a selection of methods of support currently provided by some firms to some partner agencies. There will be other forms of help which arise from good partnership working where the firm and the agency have regular communication and understand each others' needs.

## And firms do have needs

The support that an agency can give to its partner firm is relatively limited but wherever possible, the partnership should be mutually beneficial. Benefits that a firm could expect to derive include:

### 1. Regular reports

These reports show what the firm's support is achieving. The reports should explain the direct benefits such as the number of people helped by the firm's pro bono lawyers. They should also describe the centre's own successes. Like any supporter or funder, a firm will want to know that the centre they support is doing good work for disadvantaged people and the local community.

It reflects well on a firm if they are contributing to the success of an excellent service. Similarly it would reflect badly on the firm if they were supporting a poor service. So it is essential that the partner agency assures the firm that the support provided is worthwhile.

### 2. Good quality work

Advice at evening surgeries tends to be less controllable than other forms of advice work, but in general the work that the partner firm's lawyers are asked to undertake should be tailored to their abilities, and should be tackling serious unmet needs for disadvantaged people.

Placed trainees, secretaries and PAs should be given work that is commensurate with their abilities and which helps them to develop their skills. Trainees particularly benefit from contact with clients, case management and decision making, and they should be given as much of that work as possible.

### 3. Thanks and recognition

There are some business reasons for firms assisting advice centres. Some of those are about benefit to the volunteers in the experience they gain in advice giving, decision making etc. That comes naturally and there is little you have to do except to give volunteers quality work wherever possible. And to say thank you.

A good Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) profile does help firms with recruitment, and in showing their commercial clients that the firm shares the clients' values. That is enhanced if the firm or its volunteers gain recognition for their CSR activities. So if your partner firm or a volunteer has been outstanding, nominate them for an award. Lawyer Magazine, Young Solicitors Group, the Law Society and Lawworks all have awards for pro bono work with varying criteria. Firms may nominate themselves or a volunteer for some awards and will need your support in that.

It will take time for a partnership to develop to the stage where nominations for awards can be considered. In that time, advice agencies should remember to say thank you for the support in writing. This is not simply polite but, along with the reports, enables those in charge of the firm's CSR programme to show the whole firm that their support is effective and appreciated.

Generally, advice agencies must remember that it's a partnership. The support provided is normally unconditional and unrestricted in audit terms but all firms will expect their partner agency to reflect well on them. That is not a matter of the agency changing its work.

The firm will want the agency to fight for disadvantaged people. They want agencies to support the underdog and they generally support social policy work too. They just want to know that the work they support is high quality and effective. So agencies should remember to tell them that, and to say thank you for the support.

## What to do next

### 1. Firms that are just starting to deliver pro bono services

The obvious first step would be to join Lawworks. Lawworks help their members to develop their pro bono profile. This can be by arranging ad hoc pro bono opportunities such as helping community groups through the Lawworks in the Community scheme, or putting individual lawyers in touch with advice clinics that are staffed by lawyers from a range of firms.

Lawworks can also help firms to find a suitable not-for-profit partner agency and help to develop the pro bono element of a partnership.

To enquire about joining Lawworks contact Anne Monk [am@lawworks.org.uk](mailto:am@lawworks.org.uk)

### 2. Firms with existing pro bono or CSR partnerships

Those firms will almost certainly already be Lawworks members, and all they need to do is to arrange a review meeting with their partner advice agency/agencies. Having decided in advance which elements on the list the firm can provide, it is worth exploring carefully what elements the advice agency can effectively use. Then, when the advice agency has the idea of a fuller CSR support can provide, they may come up with other requests.

To discuss pro bono service development with Lawworks contact David Raeburn [david.raeburn@lawworks.org.uk](mailto:david.raeburn@lawworks.org.uk)

### 3. Barristers and Chambers wishing to help

Barristers and Chambers wishing to provide pro bono help on an ad hoc basis, or in offering support to pro bono partnerships, should contact the Bar Pro Bono Unit [www.barprobono.org.uk/barristers.html](http://www.barprobono.org.uk/barristers.html)

### 4. Advice agencies

If you already have a partner firm, ask for what you need. If your partnership is sound, the firm won't mind being asked and will agree to what they can.

If you don't have a partnership now, join Lawworks and ask them to help you find one.

Lawworks contact for advice agencies Patrick Cahill [patrick.cahill@lawworks.org.uk](mailto:patrick.cahill@lawworks.org.uk)

## Bob Nightingale

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