
Strategic Plan

NEWHAM COMMUNITY LAW PROJECT

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Newham has been hit very hard by the growing gap between need for, and availability of, affordable specialist legal services. It is a diverse and vibrant community, and one that faces many challenges.”

– *Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP for East Ham*

From Disparity to Fairness: Legal Access in Newham Report (2024)

In 2024, a steering group comprising local residents, volunteers from Young Legal Aid Lawyers (“YLAL”) and University College London (“UCL”), barristers from Garden Court Chambers and representatives of community groups came together to develop a plan to increase access to high-quality specialist social welfare law casework and representation for people in Newham who are experiencing disadvantage and cannot afford to pay for legal advice.

Fieldfisher LLP and the Public Law Project (“PLP”) were commissioned to develop a legal needs assessment, and an advisory group of local community organisations and legal advice providers was set up.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (CONT.)

The report concluded as follows: *“It is clear there is a case to further increase specialist legal advice in Newham, both in immigration and housing. Many of the legal issues highlighted as being issues of high demand remain within scope for legal aid. Whilst there are a number of existing providers offering advice in both these areas of law, there remains a high level of unmet need.”*

Newham is one of the most legally underserved boroughs in London, despite having one of the highest levels of socio-economic deprivation. According to the *English indices of deprivation* (2019), Newham ranks among the 20% most deprived areas in England. The borough has a large population of migrants, renters, people on low incomes, and individuals facing precarious work conditions—demographics that correlate strongly with legal need.

This cumulative evidence demonstrates a strong case for a locally based law centre with a holistic and accessible model of legal service delivery. The A B Charitable Trust has provided some funding to progress this work. This plan sets out a road map for establishing a new law centre for Newham, including information about the needs identified in the borough, the services the law centre will be able to provide over the next five years, and how it will be managed and funded.

2. WHAT MAKES US UNIQUE

We will rely on several unique aspects of Newham Community Law Project (“the Project”) to attract interest, support and funding in our work, including—

- the expertise and backgrounds of the directors/trustees and visionaries behind the Project's founding, and how they seek to leverage their expansive networks and skills to make the Project's overall vision a reality;
- the legal needs report and needs assessment created to demonstrate the severe deficit in social welfare law services provision in Newham, and that the Project is being created to directly address this vacuum;
- the network of individuals and organisations already interested in supporting the Project's mission, including MPs, charities, barristers' chambers, universities, law firms, law centres and other professionals; and
- the Project's founding documents and principles, which demonstrate a sound understanding of the work that needs doing, the current landscape of legal advice provision in Newham, and how the Project will make a substantial impact in this sector through good charitable organisation, staffing, planning and effective policies/procedures.

3. THE OVERALL VISION

We envision a fairer Newham where disadvantaged people experiencing poverty, breaches of their human rights or discrimination can access justice.

4. WHAT WE AIM TO ACHIEVE

By 2030, the Project will be able to provide advice and representation in the main areas of social welfare law: housing, immigration, welfare rights and employment.

It will have strong governance and a diverse range of funding, and will be housed in premises that will be welcoming and accessible.

It will be embedded in the local community and have effective partnerships with the other advice providers and community groups in Newham.

Using the evidence and experiences of our clients, the Project will strategically exercise a responsible influence on legislation and the policies of statutory bodies.

4. WHAT WE AIM TO ACHIEVE (CONT.)

The Project will have a well-developed role as a training provider, encouraging diversity in the legal profession by employing trainee solicitors and providing meaningful volunteer positions.

The Project will provide training and consultancy for other community organisations in the borough, enhancing access to justice at all levels.

5. THE NEED FOR LEGAL ADVICE

Key indicators of legal need in Newham include the following:

- In 2023/24, 38% of people in the borough and 45% of children lived in households with an income of less than 60% of the UK median after housing costs have been subtracted. This was worse than the average London Borough.
- Newham has a very large private rental sector market, with 38.5% of households in the PRS, and one of the highest rates of eviction and homelessness in the UK (5.45 per 1000 households). This combination has created a crisis for local residents.

5. THE NEED FOR LEGAL ADVICE (CONT.)

- Newham had over 7300 households living in temporary accommodation in summer 2025, a number which continues to grow month-on-month.^[1]
- An estimated 54% of Newham's residents are non-UK born, with a significant number requiring legal support for asylum claims, human rights applications, and NRPF (no recourse to public funds) challenges.^[2]
- Over 60,000 residents are in receipt of Universal Credit, and many face complex appeals and tribunal processes without adequate representation.
- 23.5% of residents are estimated to be earning below the Living Wage in 2024.
- Vulnerable individuals, including those with disabilities or long-term health needs, often struggle to access care packages or challenge local authority decisions. This is estimated to be almost 20% of the population.^[3]
- There is a rising number of children with special educational needs (SEN), yet few, if any, legal providers in the borough specialise in education law.

[1] Newham Council's report:

<https://mgov.newham.gov.uk/documents/s182192/Temporary%20Accommodation%20Task%20a>

[2] Migration Observatory data (2013):

https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/london-census-profile/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[3] The Office for National Statistics' 2021 census data shows 17.5%.

5. THE NEED FOR LEGAL ADVICE (CONT.)

Newham is one of the most linguistically diverse boroughs in London—and in the entire UK. According to the most recent data from the *UK Census* (2021), 40% of residents do not have English as their main language. The top 3 languages spoken in Newham after English are—

- Bengali (with Sylheti and Chatgaya)
- Urdu
- Gujarati

There are also significant numbers of Tamil and Somali speakers, and growing numbers of new communities from central and Eastern Europe, Portugal and Brazil.

In 2024, a legal advice needs assessment, *From Disparity to Fairness: Legal Access in Newham*, was carried out on behalf of the steering group by Fieldfisher and the PLP.

Surveys were sent to local organisations, and interviews were conducted with Sir Stephen Timms' constituency caseworkers. Fieldfisher provided volunteers to attend Sir Stephen Timms' constituency surgeries and observe what issues people were asking for help with. Of the 111 appointments that the volunteers observed involving a legal issue, 47% related to housing and 17% to immigration.

5. THE NEED FOR LEGAL ADVICE (CONT.)

The report evidenced that whilst there are a number of excellent local not-for-profit advice providers in Newham, they are already severely overstretched and caseworkers found it difficult to make referrals.

The legal needs assessment was published in 2024, setting out the following recommendations:

- Increase specialist legal advice provision, particularly in the areas of immigration and housing
- Develop a “systems map” setting out available organisations and their capacities to improve the referral system
- Set up a central hub to share this and other important information regarding legal advice provision in the borough
- Improve communications between existing providers
- Evaluate collaborative efforts and share this learning more broadly
- Increase the provision of early legal education
- Amplify voices of individuals affected in Newham
- Increase training for community leaders, caseworkers, council officers and other frontline staff
- Set up pilot schemes to explore different ways of working
- Consider the use of legal technology within pilots

5. THE NEED FOR LEGAL ADVICE (CONT.)

A wider advisory group, Newham Law and Social Justice Collaborative, is looking across many of the other recommendations contained in the report, and the Project would wish to fully participate and support initiatives.

6. DEVELOPMENT OF THE LAW CENTRE

An initial group of 5 people with strong local connections and an understanding of the legal advice needs in Newham will become the initial directors of a charitable incorporated organisation. The Project will initially be known as Newham Community Law Project (NCLP) until such time as it can achieve independent membership of the Law Centres Network (LCN) and provide the full range of services people expect from a law centre.

The criteria for being accepted by the LCN is to employ 2 lawyers, one of whom must be at least 3 years qualified. The potential difficulties of recruitment have been included in the risk assessment: Appendix 1. It is envisaged that NCLP should be in a position to apply to become a law centre by the end of Year 1. In the meantime, the LCN is providing support to help achieve this status.

6. DEVELOPMENT OF THE LAW CENTRE (CONT.)

We will review recruitment on an ongoing basis to ensure that the directors/trustees reflect the community in Newham, including people who have lived experience of the issues that NCLP deals with.

The newly formed incorporated charity will apply for funding, including legal aid contracts, once it obtains a qualifying quality standard.**[4]**

We have identified four key phases of development in *Appendix 2: Timeline and Activities*.

Phases 1 and 2 run from July to December 2025 and focus on governance and securing initial core funding.

Phases 3 and 4 run from January to June 2026 and focus on the recruitment of staff and ensuring that the quality standard is in place, with a launch by June 2026.

It is positive that the government has committed to increasing legal aid rates for immigration advice. It is hoped that these increases will come into effect in the autumn of 2025.

[4] Both the Law Society's Lexcel standard and their own Specialist Quality Mark (SQM) are acceptable to the LAA. The SQM can be granted on the basis of documentation only with a later on-site audit. For Lexcel, the Law Centre would have to show that its policies and procedures had been in effective operation for 3 months.

6. DEVELOPMENT OF THE LAW CENTRE (CONT.)

However, it is recognised that legal aid alone will not financially support the Project, and there is unlikely to be any significant earned income in Year 1. The directors will therefore apply for charitable funding to cover core costs and employ staff as set out in *Appendix 3: Funding Strategy and 3-Year Budget*.

7. SERVICES TO BE OFFERED

Services to be offered in Year 1:

- **Immigration and asylum**, casework and representation, including leave to remain, family reunion, and human rights claims
- **Public law**
- **Community legal education** - workshops, “know your rights” sessions covering areas such as No Recourse to Public Funds, and changes in immigration legislation

Additionally, from Year 2:

- Housing law - prevention of eviction, homelessness advice and disrepair claims
- Community legal education covering housing law areas

7. SERVICES TO BE OFFERED (CONT.)

From Year 3:

Other areas such as welfare rights, employment and education will be developed in consultation with community partners.

In order to manage demand in the first 2 years of the service, cases will be taken by referral from trusted partner agencies rather than direct access from the public. This will involve developing effective referral pathways with our partner organisations. This will include cases that the referral agency is not able to conduct for regulatory reasons (i.e. judicial review).

We will prioritise cases from particularly vulnerable people who would be unable to deal with cases themselves or be able to access the specialist advice services they require elsewhere. We will also prioritise cases that are especially factually and/or legally complex or have the potential to protect or advance access to justice and the rule of law.

In consultation with partner agencies, we will develop a programme of community legal education aimed at frontline workers in the not-for-profit sector. This programme will support community engagement and ensure that referrals to the Project are effective.

7. SERVICES TO BE OFFERED (CONT.)

We will work with the Newham Law and Social Justice Collaborative to work towards some of the other recommendations in the Fieldfisher report, including sharing good practice and piloting collaborative ways of working.

The development of a new service will enable the Project to explore the effective use of technology, including AI. In developing this capacity, we are pleased to have the support of Fieldfisher and the Law Centres Network.

8. PREMISES REQUIREMENT

Low-cost accessible premises will be sought, preferably in a building shared by other community organisations, and in a setting that is well served by public transport. A minimum office space accommodating 3-4 desks, together with at least 2 confidential meeting rooms is required.

9. STAFFING PLAN

Year 1:

- 1 senior solicitor (legal aid supervisor for an immigration/asylum contract)
- 1 caseworker/solicitor
- 1 part-time finance/legal aid billing officer
- 1 part-time support worker
- Volunteers (e.g. law students, community members)

Year 2:

Additionally, we will recruit—

- 1 housing solicitor
- 1 trainee solicitor - we will explore options such as apprenticeships

We have included in the funding model some external supervision and mentoring support for the senior solicitor, which we envisage will be provided by Tower Hamlets Law Centre.

10. CURRENT LEGAL ADVICE PROVISION IN NEWHAM

In June 2025, a search was carried out to establish the number of categories of private practice legal firms and not-for-profit organisations with legal aid contracts operating in the borough, attached in *Appendix 1*.

The categories of law searched for were housing and immigration/asylum, as these were the most frequently required categories according to the needs assessment carried out by Fieldfisher and the PLP.

Housing appeared to be more available than immigration/asylum. However, the numbers of offices and providers are not necessarily good indicators of a capacity to take on cases.

In total, 12 legal organisations/firms offered housing legal aid services from 14 offices. However, we can see from the needs assessment that the need for housing advice and representation far exceeds the available supply.

There were only 6 firms/organisations with legal aid contracts for immigration/asylum, which represents a severe shortage of provision, given the demographic profile of the borough.

10. CURRENT LEGAL ADVICE PROVISION IN NEWHAM (CONT.)

The scope of legal aid is very restricted in this category, primarily covering asylum claims, certain applications for leave to remain, and cases involving victims of domestic violence or trafficking. It also allows for legal representation in relation to detention and bail, and proceedings before the Special Immigration Appeals Commission.

11. VOLUNTARY SECTOR ADVICE PROVISION IN NEWHAM

Our main purpose is to increase capacity to access advice, not to displace established community organisations. There is so much need in the borough, with current providers reporting the difficulty of making referrals for specialist legal advice.

The Fieldfisher and PLP report noted that current providers have low levels of confidence that referrals will be taken up without people being bounced around because of a lack of capacity.

11. VOLUNTARY SECTOR ADVICE PROVISION IN NEWHAM (CONT.)

Working in partnership with trusted community agencies such as the Magpie Project will enable the Project to reach some of the most disadvantaged members of the community who might not contact a law centre or telephone Citizens Advice. We wish to encourage a pyramid model of advice provision with specialist legal advice complementing the wider advice and social prescribing sector.

We will therefore seek to develop referral protocols as appropriate with voluntary and community service (VCS) organisations, with the following initially identified:

- Community Links
- Citizens Advice East End
- The Magpie Project
- Mary Ward Legal Centre
- Project 17
- Praxis
- Refugee and Migrant Forum of Essex & London
- The Renewal Programme
- Rights and Equalities in Newham (REIN)
- Somali Banadir Association in UK
- Tamil Welfare Association in Newham (TWAN)
- University of East London Legal Advice Centre

11. VOLUNTARY SECTOR ADVICE PROVISION IN NEWHAM (CONT.)

We will also work in partnership with the neighbouring Tower Hamlets and Hackney Law Centres, and wider LCN members.

12. IMPACT & EVALUATION

Key performance indicators (KPIs):

- Number of clients assisted
- Successful case outcomes
- Community outreach sessions delivered
- Positive client feedback

Reporting:

- Quarterly reports to funders and trustees
- Updates to community partners via the Newham Law and Social Justice Collaborative
- Annual impact reports

Monitoring tools:

- Modern case management system
- Feedback forms for clients and community partners

12. IMPACT & EVALUATION (CONT.)

The strategic plan will be reviewed by the trustees every 6 months and updated annually.

13. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MP Sir Stephen Timms

Fieldfisher LLP

The Public Law Project

The Law Centres Network - Julie Bishop, Simon Brown and Nimrod Ben Caan

Tower Hamlets Law Centre - Martin South

14. APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Risk Assessment

Appendix 2: Timeline and Activities

Appendix 3: Funding Strategy and 3-Year Budget