

HOW WE FACED SWINGING CUTS BUT CAME OUT SWINGING

Sue Bent, CEO, Central England Law Centre

Catastrophic cuts to legal aid have severely compromised access to justice

One of our funders recently described me as a risk taker. She said *'you're an innovator and innovation involves risk'*. I was genuinely surprised. I'm scared of heights; I don't bet because I assume I will lose; I don't like fast cars... I see myself as cautious. Then I thought about what happened when I changed my car: it was more solid and quieter than the previous one—and one day, on a motorway, I saw that the speedometer said I was doing nearly 100 mph. It didn't feel that fast so I thought the speedo must be wrong. I got it checked at the garage and it wasn't. I think that might be my version of taking a risk and being bold. I could see a long way ahead, I knew what the goal was, it felt safe and, before I knew it, I was off!

The organisation that I lead, Central England Law Centre, has bucked the trend in the last 10 years. Reductions in local authority funding, combined with catastrophic cuts to legal aid have caused many law centres and other independent advice agencies to close or to shrink in size; leaving 'advice deserts' and severely compromising access to justice for those who are poorest and most excluded in our society.

By contrast, we have almost doubled in size, reaching out from our Coventry birthplace to fill a great need in Birmingham. We have not replaced what legal aid removed and there are still significant barriers for some of the most vulnerable people in our communities in accessing justice. But we have found ways to use our expertise and continue our mission to fight social exclusion in communities and to effect change in society by using legal processes.

I guess from the outside it would seem that we must have been bold to achieve this. My feeling is that it has been much more to do with having amazing, hugely dedicated people within the organisation. Their professionalism and humanity have built a reputation that meant we could rely on our friends and supporters through tough times.

So when things got tough, we clung to our core values...

When legal aid was cut, some agencies took a decision to charge for legal advice that had been free. Our trustees and staff felt that wasn't the right route for us: we wanted to continue to provide legal advice free of charge to those in our community who need its protection most. That meant we had to make new relationships, to find new funding sources, and we had to be creative in the way we work.

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Before legal aid was cut, almost all of our funding was from our local authority and from legal aid. Now we have around 30 different funders. We still have strong support from Coventry City Council, but we've also attracted funding from a range of foundations and trust funds, the private sector and local universities.

Our strategy has been to stay true to our values and to our belief that specialist legal expertise is critical in preventing and tackling problems faced by people who are disadvantaged in society.

...changed our approach

To find new partners and attract new funding we've had to think much more deeply about the impact our work makes; how we could measure that impact to show that our work can help to make a change for people and how we can accelerate the progress being made by other agencies in achieving their goals. Much of our success has come from collaboration with partners who offer help and support that's complementary to ours. So our clients get combined help that really has the potential to change their lives.

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Our journey of change began with successfully securing funding from The Baring Foundation to pilot working alongside the local authority Children's Services department, who were seeking to meet the outcomes defined within the Government Troubled Families agenda. They were able to see first-hand how our independence and expertise created relationships of trust with our clients; how our legal advice could resolve problems that might be preventing the family from focusing on good parenting; and they could see how our input could save their staff significant time. We were able to ensure the family had the right benefits, they could manage their money, their home was secure, and, in some cases, we stabilised their immigration status or helped them escape domestic violence.

The local authority picked up the funding for our service after the pilot. This work continues and it has allowed us to showcase the power of taking our specialist expertise direct to the people who need it. We've learned how to work constructively alongside other organisations. We've learned that visiting people at home allows insights that enable us to better tackle the root causes of presenting problems. We've shifted our emphasis from one focused on closing cases so we could bill for our work, to encouraging a longer term relationship with our client. This means we can really help them move to a better situation and maintain stability for the future. As well as reporting the outcomes of our casework, we've begun to develop measures that help us describe the change we have made to the legal capability (ability of our clients to manage day to day issues and to know their rights and responsibilities) and legal stability (how secure and sustainable their situation is).

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We've taken this same approach in partnership with Grapevine. Grapevine is a local charity that uses a strengths-based approach to build confidence and aspiration in people, and to create networks of support for people who are isolated by connecting them with others. Our partnership has helped us both learn how this kind of collaboration can be really transformational for the people we are helping. Together, we've secured funding to work with young, undocumented migrants, and to work intensively with a small number of chaotic families. We are now funded by the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund on a five-year programme that will see us work inside public services to help them tackle root causes, shift their investment to be preventative and early, and find more sustainable ways of helping people with complex needs.

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In short, we've made significant changes to how we deliver our work, the outcomes we expect to achieve, and how we measure our impact. We've made a shift from our main focus being one of solving legal problems, to a

wider view that now also embraces a greater concern for the lives of our clients and the long term impact our work makes. We know we can't take for granted that everyone considers access to expert social welfare legal advice to be as important as access to health care or education, so we have made it our business to be able to show it.

However, not all of our work has changed. We're still using our legal expertise to provide advice and representation to make people aware of their rights so they can get them upheld. We're still identifying and pursuing cases that have the potential to change policy or to interpret the law in a way that helps many people beyond the client for whom we are acting.

...forged new alliances

To find funding and create capacity for this work to continue, we've had to form new alliances and reconsider the way we use our legal expertise..

For example, welfare benefits, debt, immigration and employment advice are no longer within scope of legal aid; but we've found other organisations who are prepared to buy our expertise in these areas because they can see it helps them to achieve their own goals. The most obvious of these are social landlords, whose tenants are affected by welfare reform, and whose rental income is in turn put at risk. They pay for our expertise in welfare benefits and debt, both to train and skill up their own staff and to provide direct services to their tenants.

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We work with four local universities in Coventry and Birmingham and have successfully developed models of working that allow us to provide advice in employment and in immigration. We run weekly advice clinics with law students: this significantly increases our capacity to help people and it gives students a great opportunity to build their practical skills. The universities pay for the supervision time and we have the additional bonus of building a pool of young graduates who have been bitten by the social welfare law bug—some of whom we have subsequently employed and are progressing their careers within our organisation.

We've also fully embraced the idea that partnership with lawyers in the corporate sector can be another solution. I was lucky enough to be taken by some of our funders to the US on a study trip. There, we visited KIND: an organisation founded by Microsoft that trains and supports pro bono lawyers from commercial firms and corporations to represent children in deportation hearings. Two years later, we've launched Kids in Need of Defence UK, part funded by Microsoft, along with Unbound Philanthropy and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. We're leading a Trans-Atlantic collaboration with KIND US, Coram Children's Legal Centre and the Migrant Children's Legal Unit at Islington Law Centre. Together, we're harnessing the capacity of pro bono lawyers to take on immigration cases for undocumented children in the UK.

...worked to fill vital gaps in provision

In 2013, when the impact of legal aid cuts was really beginning to bite, and other forms of funding were also being constrained, we did something that I felt at the time was actually bold. Birmingham Law Centre went into liquidation and two of its staff approached us for help. They felt Birmingham should not be left without a Law Centre. And so did we. Over a very intense period of about 3 months we

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assessed the risk of responding to this need and took a mad roller coaster journey that culminated in us opening a small office in Birmingham.

The need to find new funding sources to make this work felt like it might be an insurmountable challenge. Fortunately, some of our long-standing relationships with foundations—combined with support from foundations and trust funds that work mainly in Birmingham—provided the financial support we needed to get going. In the four years since, we've grown from 2 staff to 10, and built significant volunteer capacity. Being in Britain's second city has attracted further investment—both in funding and in attracting highly expert lawyers who want to work with us. This expertise means we are building a reputation for pursuing public interest cases; which is crucial at a time when foundations whose mission is to help those who are disadvantaged in society are increasingly seeing this as a mechanism to achieve their goal.

And we came out swinging

We should not pretend that the cuts to funding, and to legal aid in particular, have not left a significant gap. While we have expanded into new activity, the reduction in funding for advice and representation in some areas of law means there remains a significant problem of access to justice for some of the most vulnerable people in our communities.

But necessity is the mother of invention. In response to these difficult circumstances, we have not just survived but built new relationships and found new and positive ways to use our expertise to support our communities. The continued support of Coventry City Council for our core advice functions has been critical to our stability in a time of rapid change and uncertainty. The pace of change has been a challenge to everyone in the organisation; and we are only now able to begin to invest in expanding our management capability to reflect our growth.

Our expansion and evolution has been made possible by a team of people whose dedication, flexibility, belief in what we do, and willingness to go much more than the extra mile, is second to none. They are the people who made me confident I was driving a solid and reliable car... and, suddenly, we were all going at 100 mph to reach our goal.

[This essay is part of a series on transformation from the boldest voices in the sector.](#)



About the author

Sue Bent is chief executive of Central England Law Centre. She has been in this post for 13 years and previously held the posts of Director of Operations at Heart of England Housing Group and Head of Housing Management and Neighbourhood and Community Services at Coventry City Council.

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