

Coventry Law Centre  
ANNUAL REPORT

2003/2004

*“excellence, equality and justice”*

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The last year has been a significant one for Coventry Law Centre.

We have developed new services, further consolidated and expanded our existing services, and been involved in discussions about possible expansion into new geographical areas.

To achieve this, we have found new funders, recruited new specialist advisors, and strengthened our reception and support teams, and our finance team with new staff.

In short, it has been a year of growth which has taken the Law Centre to a position where it is now undertaking work in the full range of social welfare areas of law. It is able to offer a more holistic service, with referrals being made between different teams within the organisation. It can also have a significant impact on social policy formulation within the city. It is more flexible, and is a stronger, more sustainable organisation.

During the same year, we also saw some long standing members of staff leave the Law Centre.

A particular note of thanks is due to Crispin Passmore, the Law Centre Manager, who left in February to take up a senior post with the Legal Services Commission. We are grateful to Crispin for the work he did to consolidate the finances and the operational management of the Law Centre, and for his drive and leadership in taking the organisation forward to where it is today.

In December, Mark Hemingway, a solicitor with the Law Centre for over 15 years, also left to take up a judicial post. Mark made a significant contribution at the Law Centre, developing its reputation in housing, public law, and, latterly, starting a new service in education.

We wish both Crispin and Mark well in their new roles.

The combination of significant expansion, along with changes in personnel, has presented considerable challenge to all staff, who have responded admirably, and to my fellow Trustees and Management Committee Members, who

have continued to show their commitment and dedication to the Law Centre.

The continued support of the City Council and the Legal Services Commission, along with the Big Lottery Fund, have been critical in enabling us to progress and develop our services, while ensuring that the organisation remains on a firm financial footing.

Finally, I must mention Dave Edwards. Dave was chair of the Law Centre Management Committee for the whole of 2003/04, and this report should really be his. Dave retired in June 2004, but last year's achievements were led by Dave.

Dave has been a friend and supporter of the Law Centre since its inception as the 'Benefits Shop' in 1976. He has been Chair of the Management Committee since the organisation became the Law Centre, and his contribution to its success, his long standing commitment, support and belief in the organisation have been exceptional. On behalf of everyone, my thanks go to Dave, along with our best wishes for his retirement. I hope to carry on his good work, together with all the trustees and staff, supporting the continued development and expansion of the Law Centre.

**Ros Mason**

*Chair of the Management Committee*



## Highlights of 2003/2004

- The Law Centre expanded to offer a new service in Mental Health Law from October 2003.
- We were successful in being awarded all eight three year contracts in the Legal Services Commission bidding round in the areas of law in which we specialise. We also have provisional contracts for the same work in Warwickshire.
- Discussions with Warwickshire County Council regarding possible funding to support an expansion into Warwickshire are ongoing.
- An additional caseworker was appointed to expand the capacity of the Welfare Rights Team by 25%, allowing us to take on more tribunal work.
- The Immigration and Asylum Team was strengthened with an extra caseworker, responding to the growing demand for advice and representation in this area.
- We strengthened our financial management and IT support with the appointment of a Finance and IT Manager, and a Finance Administrator.
- We expanded our administration support team and the reception team to allow caseworkers to concentrate on advice and representation.
- We recruited a specialist Community Care solicitor, and we are about to launch an advice and representation service in this area of law. This will be unique within the city, and goes to the heart of tackling social exclusion and poverty.
- A new post of Director was established to provide the strategic leadership required to take forward the expanding organisation.



## Where we are, and where we are going.

Coventry Law Centre has gained national recognition for excellence in the quality of its work. It combines the specialist skills of solicitors and highly experienced paralegals with the community focus of the 'not for profit' sector. Its work in fighting poverty and challenging inequality and discrimination makes a valuable contribution to both the economic and social fabric of our city.

Last year was a milestone year in the life of the Law Centre: we expanded into two new areas of law, one of which is a unique service within the city; we increased our establishment by 20% to support continued growth and expansion; we found new funding partners in the Big Lottery Fund; and discussions and negotiations have taken us to a point where expansion into Warwickshire is a strong possibility.

I was thrilled to have been appointed as Director in May 2004: to join the Law Centre at a time of significant opportunity for further growth and development of our services, and when our work complements the agendas set by our key partner agencies within the city.

2004/05 will be challenging: many solicitors are giving up publicly funded work; the Legal Services Commission are developing new funding arrangements; we need to combine an increasing demand for complex casework with rights based education and campaigning work; our services now span a broader range of areas of law, and geographical expansion into Warwickshire will bring a range of new issues to tackle.

Against this background, we will above all retain our core commitment to using access to justice to fight poverty and social exclusion: we will strengthen and develop links with other statutory and voluntary agencies within the city; we will target and promote our services to meet the needs of excluded communities; we will build links with support groups within the city; we will use our unique position as Coventry's key provider of specialist legal and advice services to have maximum impact on other agencies to ensure that tackling poverty, disadvantage and discrimination is central to their mainstream work.

**Sue Bent**  
*Director*



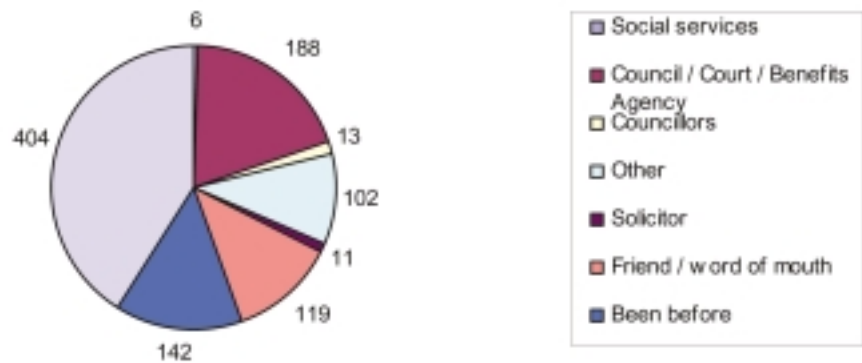
## Our Clients

During 2004/05 the Law Centre

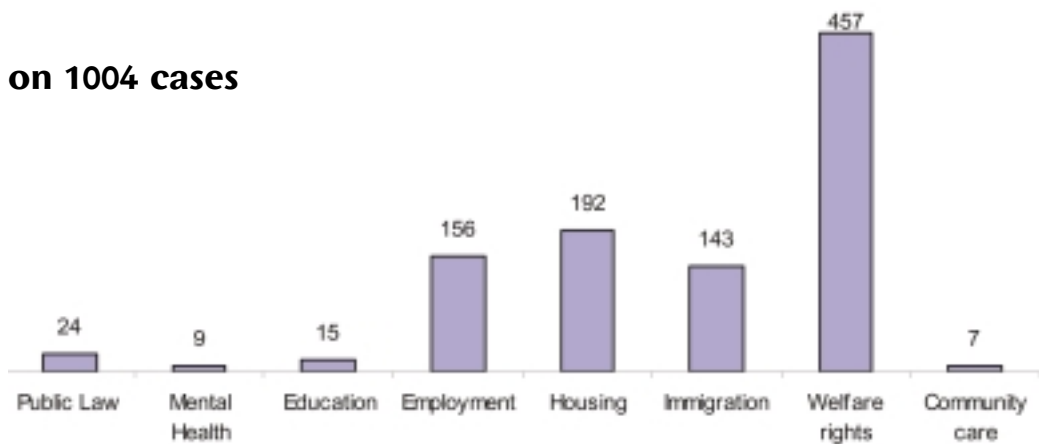
Provided **general advice and information** to **2,910** callers to our advice lines. 719 people called our employment and discrimination line, 730 enquired about housing issues, and 1,461 rang regarding immigration and asylum matters.

Had **12,514 unique visitors to our website**, with **47,467** page views. These figures represent a considerable increase of almost 40% on last year.

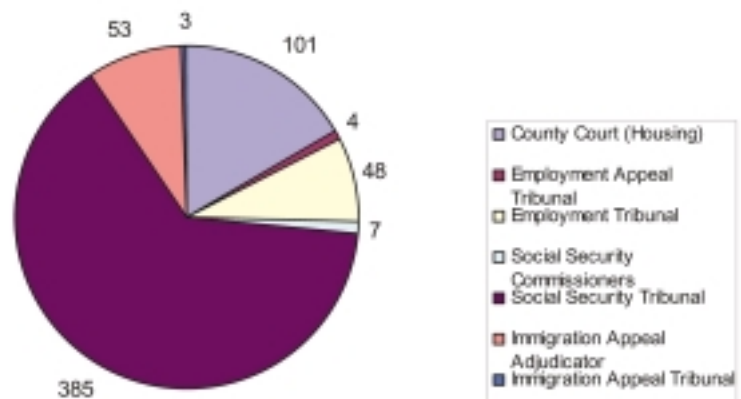
### Referrals came from



### We took on 1004 cases



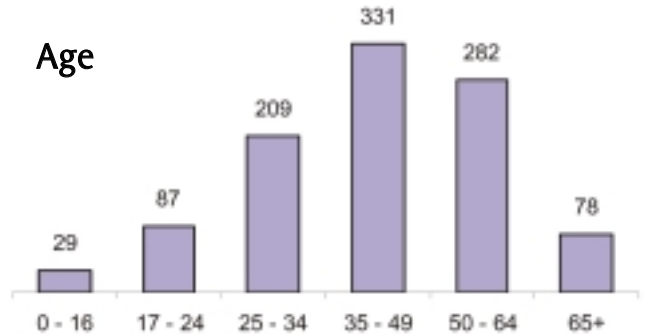
### 601 involved an application to a court or tribunal



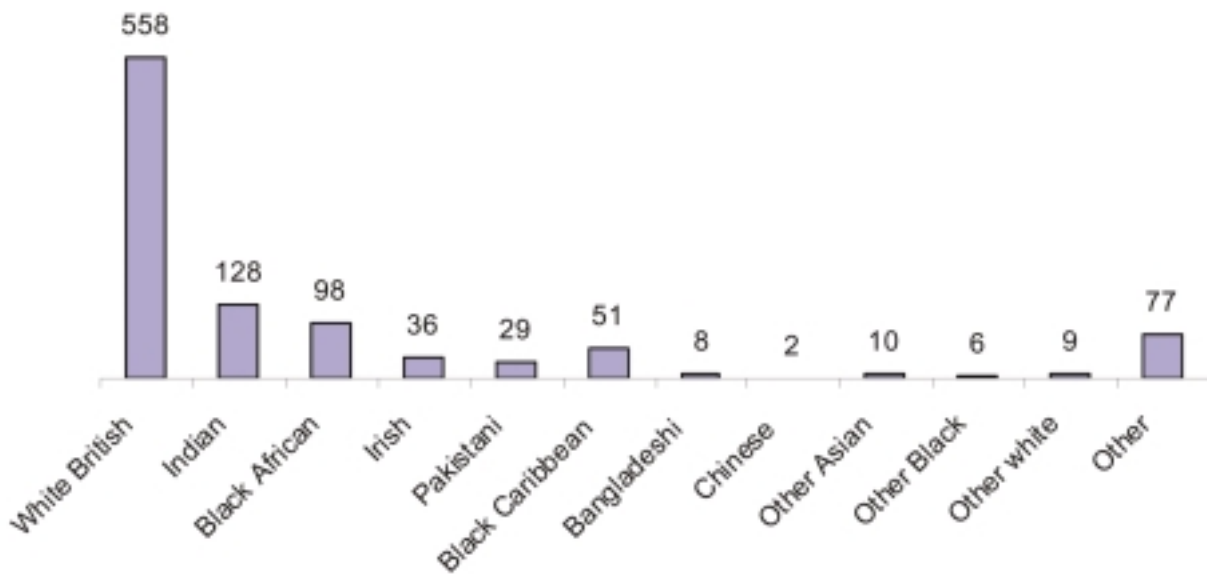
## Our clients were

Male	515	Female	501
Working	33	Not working	786
Disabled	33%		

## Age



## Ethnic Origin



## What they thought of us

### Feedback from clients on our service

(1 = very dissatisfied, 5 = very satisfied)

Overall satisfaction	4.9
Understandable information	4.8
Informative staff	4.9
Keeping client up to date	4.8
Listening ability of staff	4.9
Recommendation of service to others	4.9
No. of questionnaires returned	296



## Team Reports

### Discrimination

We have expanded our work on discrimination in employment to encompass discrimination in goods and services.

#### **Examples of discrimination casework:**

*A settlement of £7,500 for a young woman sacked after having a miscarriage, where her employer had sought advice about making the sacking look as though it was unconnected to the miscarriage*

*A settlement of £35,000 for a claim of disability discrimination and equal pay, where we alleged the discrimination extended over 20 years. The settlement reflected a substantial amount for injury to our client's feelings, but left undecided the issue of whether a tribunal could award compensation for claims which pre-dated the Disability Discrimination Act*

*A young black student approached the Law Centre for help when he was sacked from work after taking a day's unauthorised absence. This had not happened to his white colleagues, and a settlement of £4,000 was achieved.*

### Education

This area of our work involves all aspects of education and in particular challenging decisions made about support for those children with special educational needs.

The Law Centre also continues to support parents who wish to challenge decisions on school admissions or exclusions, especially in cases where there is an element of race or disability discrimination.

Our service also extends to problems in Colleges and Universities.

#### **Some examples of casework:**

*Our client's son had a severe medical condition which could require sudden emergency treatment. His family moved into the city within the catchment area of an oversubscribed school. As a result of this our client's son was placed at a school outside the catchment area and some dis-*

*tance from his home. Coventry Law Centre successfully appealed against the admission on the parents behalf and their son was moved to a school closer to the family home.*

*Our client requested an assessment of her daughter's special educational needs. The Local Education Authority produced a statement which clearly identified a need for assistance in certain areas, but it did not provide details of the assistance our client's daughter would actually receive. We appealed against the original statement and it was rewritten to include in unambiguous terms how the student's educational needs could be met in the future.*

### Employment

The Law Centre continues to receive a high number of enquiries about employment related issues. We run a twice weekly telephone advice session, and we have provided training courses for other advisors and for Unison representatives on tribunal practice and procedure. We have also given training to Jobcentre+ staff to enable them to identify breaches of employment legislation and to refer clients, and we have run some courses aimed at asylum seekers.

Employment law continues to be a rapidly changing area, with a range of new rights being introduced during this year and next. We have participated in a number of consultations on these changes during the year.

Increasingly, we are representing clients who have already taken their case to an employment tribunal and have come to the Law Centre seeking assistance to take an appeal to an Employment Appeal Tribunal.

#### **Examples of casework:**

*A woman who worked for a large local authority had wanted to work flexible hours on her return from maternity leave. Although the authority had a policy allowing this, they appeared to have ignored it, and she had to give up her job because she could not work the fixed hours that they required. We made a claim of sex discrimination and part-time worker discrimination and the claim was settled for £10,000 shortly before the hearing was due.*

*For two women who were refused their requests to work part-time after maternity leave we negotiated settlements of £2,000 and £6,000.*

*We settled a backdated claim against a local Indian restaurant for payment of the national minimum wage. Our client received £15,000 pounds: he had been working double his recorded hours for 5 years.*





### Housing

Unlawful evictions, possession actions, disrepair claims, homelessness, as well as problems with a need to transfer home within social housing, and with tenants' rights not being upheld, are the basis of the work of the housing team. We act only for tenants and homeowners, and we run twice weekly advice lines as well as providing emergency advice and representation for anyone facing a possession action at the county court.

Our reputation amongst the judiciary is excellent and the court duty scheme is about to be extended to cover applications for eviction warrants.

Using the specialist knowledge of housing benefit within the team, we have been able to obtain significant amounts of housing benefit to secure our client's homes.

We work in close partnership with other agencies in the city and, during the year, we have provided advice and guidance on the changes made to homelessness law.

#### **Some examples of casework:**

*An elderly widow who was in poor health came to the Law Centre for help in getting repairs done to her home. She had lived in this rented property since World War II and the landlord had carried out no works. Her housing conditions were appalling. The Law Centre issued court proceedings, and, within three weeks, all the outstanding works were carried out, and our client received a substantial compensation payment.*

*A tenant returned home after having spent the weekend in hospital with a suspected heart attack. He discovered that his landlord had changed the locks and was in the process of disposing of his personal belongings. We immediately obtained an emergency injunction against the landlord compelling him to re-admit the tenant to the property and to return his personal belongings. A claim for damages for unlawful eviction was also filed at court.*

### Immigration and Asylum

The immigration team continues to provide advice and representation to people living in Coventry on immigration matters like sponsorship of visitors from abroad, members of the family wishing to join someone who is already settled in Coventry, or citizenship enquiries. We give talks to groups, publish a range of leaflets on common problems, and run a twice weekly advice line.

We work closely with the Refugee Centre and the City Council's Asylum Support Team, as well as a range of other agencies, to meet the legal advice needs of those seeking asylum. The team specialises in working with particularly vulnerable groups like those with HIV, mental health problems and victims of domestic violence.

#### **Examples of casework**

*A woman from Congo who had been tortured and gang raped there had lived in the UK for two years, but had not been able to discuss what had happened to her during that time. She instructed the Law Centre who helped her to apply for asylum in the UK. This application was refused, and the matter was placed before the Immigration Appellate Authority. The Medical Foundation stated that she had in excess of twenty wounds on her body which could be directly attributed to the rape and torture. The adjudicator allowed the appeal, and the woman now has indefinite leave to remain in the UK.*

*A Zimbabwean woman discovered she was HIV+ and applied for leave to remain in the UK under Articles 2, 3 and 8 of the Human Rights Act. The Secretary of State refused her application and denied her a right of appeal against his decision. We applied for permission to judicially review his decision, and she was then granted a right of appeal. (continued overleaf)*

*A Somali man who had been shot three times had had his asylum application refused. We represented him before the Immigration Appellate Authority and he was granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK.*

*Our client was an Iranian woman who had been persecuted for running a swimwear business. Her asylum application was refused. We represented her on appeal to the Immigration Appellate Authority. The adjudicator agreed with the Home Office to the extent that the woman had not been persecuted for a Refugee Convention reason. She, however, allowed the appeal on Human Rights grounds and the woman now has leave to remain in the UK*



## Team Reports Cont 2

### Mental Health

This is a new service for the Law Centre, and it has only been operating during the second half of the year.

Significant work was required to promote the service and contact has been made with a wide range of user groups and support groups who are likely to identify clients.

A regular advice session has been established at the MIND drop in centre in Spon End, and discussions are underway with the mental health unit at Walsgrave Hospital for a similar session to be established there.

Most of our work involves representing patients who are detained under the Mental Health Act. This involves attending Mental Health Review Tribunals and other hearings.

Other work involves representing clients who are living in the community with regard to general mental health support needs, and community care related matters.

The vulnerability of this client group means that it has taken some time to raise awareness of the service and build up trust with agencies who work with those clients. As we start the new year, however, demand for the service is starting to show a significant increase.

### Welfare Rights

The Welfare Rights Team has increased its capacity by 25% with a new caseworker joining the team during the year.

The team deals with appeals regarding benefit matters and receives referrals from frontline benefits advice agencies in the city, primarily Coventry Benefits Advice Line, but also the Citizens Advice Bureau, local advice centres, Age Concern, MIND, etc. An increasing number of clients self refer, having heard of the Law Centre by word of mouth.

By establishing such an effective referral system, we have ensured that Coventry has a much higher rate of represented Social Security Appeal Tribunals than other places in the West Midlands. The Law Centre also has a very high success rate at the tribunals it attends.

The team works hard to maintain its links with the referring agencies, because they are crucial to the team's success. In addition, it is always seeking new links ensure that the service is well known.

#### **Some examples of casework:**

*A family with two severely disabled children came to the Law Centre because both children had been refused Disability Living Allowance. We were successful at both tribunals: in one case the child was awarded the middle rate care component and the lower rate mobility component. The other child was awarded the high rate care component and the lower rate mobility component. This increased the family's income by £125.80 per week.*

*The family was then advised regarding increases in Income Support to which they were entitled because of the severe disability and the need for caring involved. In total, the family's income was increased by £144.20 per week.*

*A man lost his sight following illness. The Law Centre made a home visit to him with his social worker. An appeal submission was prepared and Attendance Allowance was awarded to the client. The social worker then arranged a care package based on the client's needs as a registered blind person.*



## Coventry Law Centre: Moving Forward

At the start of the new financial year, 2003/04, we are working across eight areas of law:

Discrimination  
Education  
Employment  
Housing  
Immigration  
Mental Health  
Public Law and Human Rights  
Welfare Benefits

and we are on the point of expanding into a ninth area: Community Care.

We are providing a comprehensive service: encompassing casework, representation, legal education, and working with partners to influence service delivery.

The breadth of areas of law covered enables us to provide a holistic service which offers a pathway out of social exclusion.

Some of the areas of law in which we work are new to us, and some are also new services for the city. However, early indications are that there is significant unmet need in these areas. We will closely monitor demand for our services, but we anticipate that, by the end of 2004/05, we will be planning for growth across many of the areas of law that we cover.

A larger law centre is more sustainable, more flexible, and better able to cope with peaks and troughs in demand. A larger law centre can also focus more on rights-based community work, using legal education to inform people of their rights, and providing access to justice as a way of challenging poverty and inequality.

Our plans for growth also encompass geographical expansion. We are aware from calls to our advice lines of the demand for services outside Coventry and within Warwickshire. Discussions have taken place with the Warwickshire Community Legal Services Partnership about the gaps identified in their strategy for the provision of advice and representation. Contact has also been made with Warwickshire County Council about the possibility of funding for a law centre for Warwickshire.

At the start of 2004/05, we are entering into detailed discussions about expansion into Warwickshire, initially in the niche areas of law only: education, mental health, community care, and public law and human rights.

As we move forward it will be important to remember our community focus. Paradoxically, a larger law centre is able to devote more time to building links with excluded communities, and to working with them to build a rights based culture which offers a way out of social exclusion. We will maintain our commitment to these core principals as we grow, and we will continue to build on our reputation for excellence, equality and justice as we move forward into new areas of expertise.



## Finance Reports

2004/05 has been a year of significant change at the Law Centre and our finances reflect that.

Our income increased, partly due to new funds being drawn down from the grant from the Big Lottery Fund, and partly due to increased fees from the Legal Services Commission, reflecting growth in our case load capacity afforded by an increase in caseworkers.

As part of a long term plan for sustained growth, we have increased the numbers of support and administrative staff to allow caseworkers to focus on service delivery. Financial management and IT support has been strengthened by the appointment of a Finance and IT Manager and a Finance Administrator. As a consequence, we increased our fixed asset base during the year to provide computer and office equipment for new staff. We also invested in further developing our website to improve accessibility for those clients who are disabled. This expenditure has resulted in an increase in costs reported for the year.

Staff changes and sickness during the year have meant that our fee earning capacity during the year was reduced below expectations, although this was offset to some degree by savings in expenditure on salaries.

Overall, we did not meet the target surplus set by the budget, and therefore have not been able to make any contributions to our designated reserves. However the Law Centre funds position remains very positive, our balance sheet looks very healthy and our net asset position is good.

We will continue to maintain our strong financial position by seeking best value in expenditure, driving down costs, and continuing to increase efficiency. The expansion in staffing which has taken place during this year puts us in a strong position for future growth and will generate further increases in income in future years.

Coventry Law Centre has received an unqualified audit from its auditors and a full set of the company accounts can be inspected at the Law Centre.



## Summary of Accounts 2003/2004

### Accounts summary 2003/4

	<b>2004</b>	<b>2003</b>
	<b>£</b>	<b>£</b>
<b>Incoming resources</b>		
Coventry City Council grants	431,206	367,844
Legal Services Commission	194,167	223,829
Interest	1,572	1,822
Miscellaneous	10,490	3,657
Refurbishment grant	0	10,586
Lottery grant	54,907	11,070
	<b>692,342</b>	<b>618,808</b>
<b>Resources expended</b>		
Staff costs inc. training & recruitment	495,209	400,909
Premises costs	49,372	50,576
Consultant & court expenses	44,252	53,757
Depreciation	28,188	26,991
Subscriptions & publications	17,245	13,293
Insurances	6,879	5,140
Telephone, printing, stationery & postage	21,314	19,203
Other costs	15,083	10,182
	<b>677,542</b>	<b>580,051</b>
<b>Net incoming resources</b>	14,800	38,757
<b>Fund balances carried forward</b>	133,345	118,545
<b>Analysis of fund balances</b>		
Unrestricted funds	9,380	3,849
Designated funds		
Fixed asset fund	39,085	50,281
Emergency operating reserve	30,479	30,479
Redundancy reserve	11,430	11,430
Restricted funds		
Refurbishment fund	12,218	17,256
Big Lottery fund	29,355	5,250
SME2SME fund	1,333	0
Legal advice booklet fund	65	0
	<b>133,345</b>	<b>118,545</b>



### Management Committee

Dave Edwards (Chair)

Ros Mason

Andrew Williams

Andrew Sharpe

Anita Treanor

Sawarn Malhotra

### Members

Laurence Arnold – Council for the Disabled

Fred Davies – Trades Council

Mia Docker – Community Advocacy

Rachel Eaton – Independent

Coleen Fletcher – Councillor

Kevin Foster – Councillor

Mike Fowler – Cyrenians

Moira Phillips – Age Concern

Sobia Shaw – Panaghar

Kay St Clair – MIND

### Staff

Crispin Passmore (Manager-left 13/02/04 )

Kavita Bachada

Gay Burridge

Julie Carter

Indrani Currie

Danny Fearn

Mo Gibb

Baljit Gill (started 01/03/04)

Mark Hemingway (left 19/12/03)

Sandra Himmons

Rajinder Kandola (left 08/01/04)

Fiona Khan (started 09/06/03)

Riffat Malik (started 06/05/03)

Fiona Monk

Frank Newbold

Gina Pattinson

Kath Patrick (started 01/03/04)

Dave Reilly

Helen Roebuck

Julie Russell (started 01/03/04)

Narinder Shergill

Robert Taylor (started 02/02/04)

Stephen Woodman (started 17/06/03)

Charlie Woods (started 28/07/03)



## Advertisers and Acknowledgements

Barristers Chambers  
**Rowchester Chambers**

4 Rowchester Court  
Whittal Street, Birmingham, B4 6DH

*All areas of social welfare law, personal injury, medical negligence,  
family, crime and others. Contact senior clerk for further details*

Tel: 0121 233 2327

Barristers Chambers  
**Two Garden Court**

Middle Temple  
LONDON  
EC4Y 9BL

*Experts in immigration, housing and others.  
Contact senior clerk for further details*

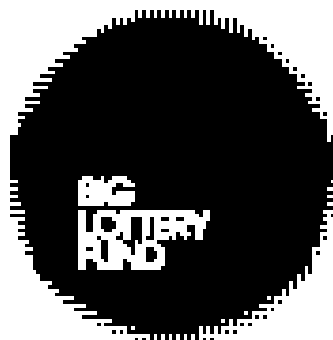
Tel: 020 7353 1633



**Coventry City Council**

Grant aided by Coventry City Council

**Supported by**



**Community  
Legal Service**



## **Coventry Law Centre**

The Bridge, Broadgate, Coventry, CV1 1NG

[www.covlaw.org.uk](http://www.covlaw.org.uk)

[enquiries@covlaw.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@covlaw.org.uk)

*For advice details call reception on 024 7622 3053*

discrimination

education

employment

health & community care

housing

immigration

mental health

public law

welfare benefits

Member of the Law Centres Federation

Member Law Society Mental Health Panel

Registered with OISC for immigration and asylum

Registered with Charity Commission: 1087312

VAT registration number: 544 9032 44

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Regulated by the Law Society