

2023/24
ANNUAL REVIEW



THE VALUE OF A NETWORK



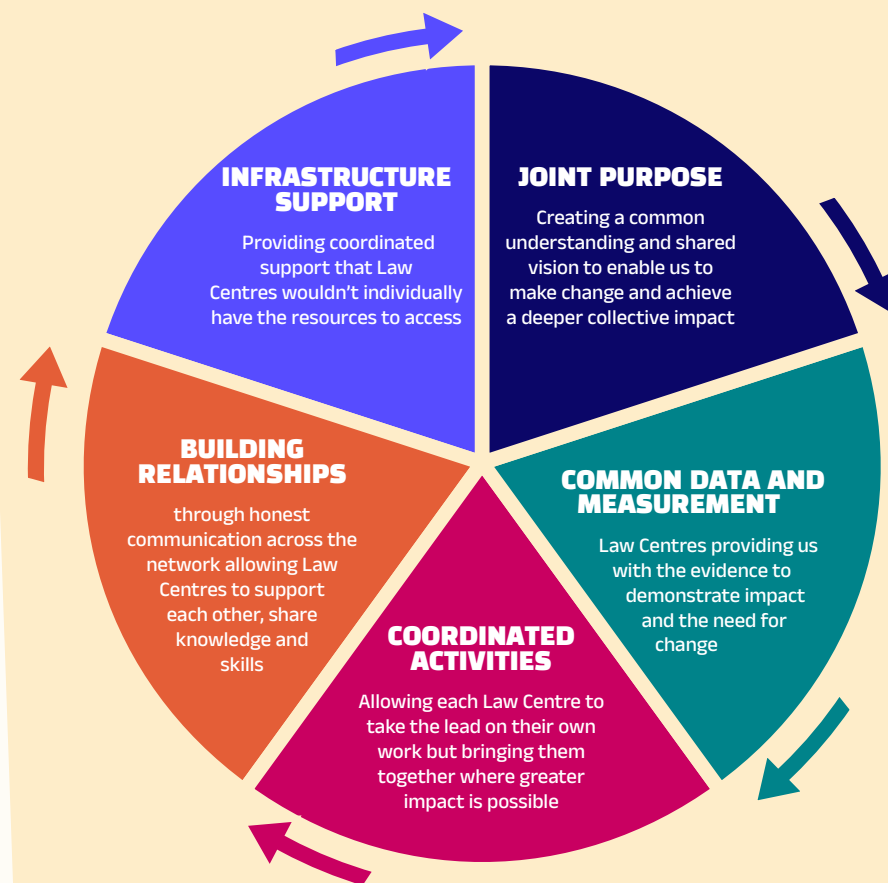
Our society is unequal, but it does not have to be this way. Law Centres are part of a movement for change.

We are the Law Centres Network.

We are a specialist support organisation: the only UK membership organisation dedicated to supporting legal assistance charities.

We support and develop a network of Law Centres: local hubs across the country, that help people in poverty and disadvantage overcome legal problems.

Every day, Law Centres help people protect their homes, livelihoods and loved ones.





THE VALUE OF A NETWORK

This has been a year of considerable political and social changes. So far, the headwinds that we face have yet to let up a little. Still, our network has demonstrated remarkable adaptability and solidarity, reinforcing our collective capacity to advocate for justice and equality.

As the membership body of a national network, connection and mutuality are our watchwords, by which we steer our way through. This year we have leaned into these in particular. Our summer conference, for example, sought to unleash ‘the power of the network’ to do more by working more closely together. This vision energised people and presents some new opportunities for us.

Then, within two months, the summer riots have tested the fabric of our communities, threatening Law Centres and their clients. Our rapid, decisive response has tapped into vital resources and reassured local members. The experience has also brought to light the resilience and unity within our network, calling again on our mutual support and connection.

If anything, the riots underscore the vital importance of our mission to counter disadvantage and exclusion. We fight this with a handicap: on its 75th anniversary, legal aid still wanes after a decade of over-restriction. While the change of government has not yet resulted in a fresh approach to access to justice, we do now have an administration that is listening to our concerns. To better engage with it, our joint advocacy efforts and the data to support our argument are of growing importance.

This report presents our work over the past year in a more concise way than previous reports. It presents our routine work toward our objectives, alongside highlights on priority themes. We hope that it captures the gist of our journey over the past year: the challenges faced, the progress made, and the unwavering spirit of our community. We thank all of you for making this journey with us.

Helen Rogers
Chair of trustees

“Thank you so much for the really fantastic support... all at LCN are providing us in this rather disturbing and tragic situation. It makes a great difference to know that we are not alone.”

Law Centre director after the riots

“Thank you for all of the information from the LCN on activities in response to the shared target list and riots last week. It helped us to form our own threat response and was reassuring and helpful!”

Law Centre communications officer after the riots



HELPING LAW CENTRES TO THRIVE

To help each Law Centre to thrive, we pursue a range of activities, most of them ongoing with some time-limited projects, aimed at building Law Centres' capacities and improving their use of resources.

We help them generate income through fundraising, funder engagement and bidding for contracts. We offer consultancy as well as training and peer learning opportunities. We support their back office functions alongside their legal advice service delivery. We also develop and support Law Centres' digital and data capabilities. All this, so that Law Centres are better able to respond to their communities and meet the needs of their clients.

A photograph of three people in a meeting. A man in a red t-shirt is gesturing with his hands while speaking to two other people, a man and a woman, who are listening attentively. They are all wearing orange lanyards.**14**

Law Centres helped to secure five-year ILTA core grants totalling **£5.4 MILLION**

38

one-on-one coaching sessions with Law Centre senior staff members on anything from funding, through governance and HR, to service design

6

apprentice solicitors recruited to

5

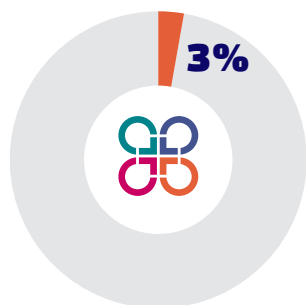
London Law Centres thanks to LCN support

80%

of peer learning 'spotlight sessions' respondents found them 'very good' or 'excellent'

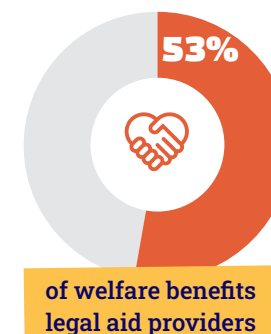
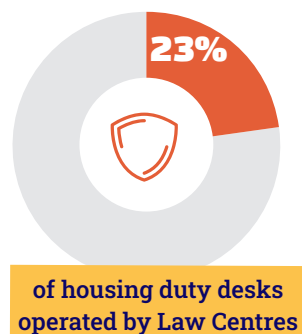
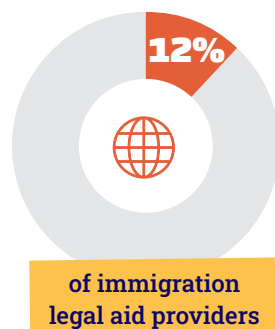
A BIGGER FOOTPRINT

Nearly all Law Centres hold legal aid contracts.



Currently, Law Centres make up 3% of all civil legal aid providers.

However, they also make up:



LCN SUPPORTS LAW CENTRES TO BID FOR LEGAL AID CONTRACTS AND OPTIMISE THEM.

LAW CENTRES: PUBLIC SERVICE LAWYERING



HELPING MEMBERS ACCESS VITAL FUNDING

LCN has its own role to play in helping generate income for Law Centres, so they can continue their vital work in their communities. To help Law Centres' **fundraising**, this year we have negotiated access for 31 members to Funds Online, allowing them search over 8,000 voluntary and statutory funding opportunities.

We have supported Law Centres through another civil legal aid commissioning exercise, at the end of which they are now a full 3% of civil legal aid providers in England and Wales. In their key areas of work, Law Centres' footprint is larger still: they now make up over 1 in 7 of housing **legal aid** providers and nearly 1 in 8 of immigration legal aid providers.

We have also supported 23 Law Centres to apply for funds from the Access to Justice Foundation's new **Improving Lives Through Advice** grants programme. Through bid writing workshops and one-on-one support to develop respective bids, 14 Law Centres were successful. This has secured them with unrestricted core funding totalling £5.4million over the next five years, a valuable bolstering to their services and their ability to respond to changing needs.

"I just wanted to say a huge thank you for all your help with the ILTA application. We are absolutely thrilled to have been successful and really appreciate the time you have taken to help us with the application. Thank you it is very much appreciated."

Law Centre development officer

"The guidance and support from LCN was really useful, so thank you"

Law Centre director on our funding bid writing support



“We’re really proud of the work we’ve been able to achieve with the funding. It’s not often we have been pushed to reflect in this way, and it has been beneficial to properly recognise what we’ve achieved rather than steaming ahead... a project of this size wouldn’t have been possible when I first joined [the Law Centre].”

Law Centre development officer

A HUBS APPROACH: JOINING UP FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

We are in the second year of an important learning project with three Law Centres, that explores various ways of working with communities and partners from outside the law and advice sector to achieve **social change**.

In Liverpool, Vauxhall Law Centre is taking on the city’s housing crisis: **challenging homelessness decisions** successfully with pre-action letters, advocating with the council, outreach work with refugee organisations and raising the profile of the problem and its services.

In Chesterfield, Derbyshire Law Centre focuses its efforts on disabled people, with training sessions, drop-in clinics and a campaign for accessible services that has already improved accessibility at 33 train stations in the county.

In Ipswich, Suffolk Law Centre is working with a network of disability organisations, education providers, employers and the DWP to support **neurodiverse young people** as they move on from education and into employment, even launching an Autism Education Leavers Passport.

As each Law Centre develops its local collaboration, LCN gains insight into the ways that **holistic, joined-up approaches** and increased community visibility can lead to smarter referrals, new funding opportunities and better outcomes — driving structural changes that help not only solve problems but prevent them.





STRENGTHENING THE NETWORK

Even before Law Centres had a joint vehicle in the Network, they shared a common vision. Today, we look to strengthen the network to better serve our movement's shared aims.

We work with interested groups operating legal and advice services to prepare them to join us and expand the availability and accessibility of free legal advice. We also work to make the network more attractive for individuals to come work with us and build a career in Law Centres. We encourage collaboration between Law Centres and facilitate it where this helps. We build connections between Law Centres through shared channels and common resources, such as our member platform, which we are in the process of enhancing. We also foster a team spirit and a sense of belonging to a greater whole — one with an illustrious, inspiring history and a compelling purpose.

**OVER
60**

Law Centre founders
from the 1970s and
1980s reunited

**OVER
100**

delegates
attended
conference, with
two-thirds rating
it 'very good' or 'excellent'

15

organisations and
groups supported
on their
journey towards network
membership

51%

increase in
uptake of
our network-wide Employee
Assistance Programme

"This is absolutely amazing! A festival of delightful things. Thank you so much and three cheers for the LCN!"

New Law Centre paralegal on her network induction



“Thank you all so much – and the rest of the team – for your hard work organising the conference. It was very inspiring to hear from Law Centres all over the country – it’s good to get fired up about why we do what we do every now and then! The best one yet I think.”

Law Centre director



Law Centre founders have assembled at our first ever reunion in July.

CHANNELLING THE POWER OF THE NETWORK

We prize our role as a convener for Law Centres and, in the face of recent adversity, the mutual support that we can muster becomes all the more important.

This year we have tried to take this further by changing from the traditional format and timing of our annual conference in favour of a participative summer event. Its focus was on channelling the power of our network: identifying our **shared priorities** and seeing just how working more closely together can help us all reach further. The event was not just invigorating to many but the start of joint work by peers from across the network on several ongoing workstreams, including developing shared resources and building on recent case success to change DWP practices.

The power of the network is also derived from its **legacy of activist lawyering**. This summer, LCN has held its first ever reunion event, recognising and bringing together alumni from Law Centres’ founder generation in the 1970s and 1980s. Several peers, senior judges, practising lawyers and others have jumped at the opportunity to reconnect and many have shown interest in contributing to the network again.

“I really felt part of something big and felt that it was a real opportunity to harness this togetherness and to support each other to achieve the aims of the network and Law Centres”

Law Centre co-ordinator



BUILDING UP OUR WORKFORCE

At the heart of Law Centres' work are people helping other people. Our workforce is therefore a priority area for us. For this, we have secured multi-year funding from London Funders' **Propel programme** to improve recruitment, development and retention in Law Centres and the wider sector of social welfare legal advice. With partners, work has started on a salary and conditions benchmarking exercise across the sector. We have also been devising a workforce development toolkit that would help Law Centres and similar organisations to become exemplar employers. Additionally, uptake is increasing of our network-wide Employee Assistance Programme, that continues to support people working in Law Centres.

Apprenticeships are one of our focus areas, which we target in various ways. We have been discussing with training providers the introduction of social welfare law content into their solicitor apprenticeship SQE syllabus. We have helped five London Law Centres to recruit six new apprentice solicitors, and we thank law firm Clyde & Co who have fully funded their training costs through the apprenticeship levy transfer scheme. We also convene a peer support group to help these apprentices share and tackle problems, engage in reflective practice and improve wellbeing. We plan more exciting work on this in the year ahead.

"Thank you so much for spending what must have been an enormous amount of time and thoughts on [the office procedure quality manual]. It is absolutely first class and an incredibly valuable and useful document. The links to good practices are really useful and it joins up (in our case) what we had in more than one document."

Law Centre director

"I find these sessions [weekly Law Centre managers' meetings] empowering... shared experiences, knowledge, and insight I cannot get from anywhere else".

Director

SECURING DIGITAL READINESS AND DATA MATURITY

LCN plays a growing role in maintaining and developing Law Centres' use of IT and digital. We manage the national Law Centre Microsoft 365 Tenant **infrastructure** on behalf of around 30 Law Centres, and support all to optimise limited resources by instructing them on streamlining processes and obtaining hardware and software discounts.

As threats become more sophisticated, we have been bolstering our **information governance and security**: this year, we have helped over 15 Law Centres with templates, guidance and advice to secure Cyber Essentials accreditation. We are working to build up the network's data maturity, ensuring that members have the right skills, tools, culture and leadership to make the most of the precious service data they hold.

We are also leading on the network's **exploration of AI**: trying and assessing available tools, sharing our experience and insight, and considering practical issues, such as the appropriateness of using AI for advice triage and signposting. As a

representative body, we also communicate — in articles, podcasts and events — the key challenges that our members and sector face, such as having relevant and affordable technology or involving frontline agencies in tool development.

"[Achieving Cyber Essentials certification] was possible following the excellent guidance you provided. We couldn't have done it without you, and this has significantly mitigated costs from our IT consultants as we managed to handle it ourselves."

Law Centre manager



AMPLIFYING VOICE

"This case demonstrates the vital role played by Law Centres in protecting the rights of individual citizens against the powers of government departments."

Nick Whittingham
Kirklees CALC



Law Centres fight for your rights



"Our social security safety net should allow us to meet our basic needs so we can all live with dignity."

Ursula O'Hare
Law Centre Northern Ireland



Law Centres fight for a more equal society



"This report exposes how the UK's immigration system has unfairly targeted the Windrush Generation for decades, revealing deep-rooted racism in the way policies were made."

"Many have suffered, and some are still waiting for justice. It's time for the government to right these wrongs and ensure this never happens again."

Nana Adusei
Southwark Law Centre



The Historical Roots of the
Windrush Scandal report



Helping more individuals with their legal problems is not enough to address the drivers of these problems. For this reason, Law Centres have from the outset sought to champion people's rights and challenge injustice.

To put them in a better position to do so, we work with them to increase their public profile and amplify their voices and those of their clients. We tell clients' and Law Centres' stories and engage the public and policymakers. We raise awareness of injustices and what is required to resolve them. We marshal data and evidence to support our case for change. We use all of these to advocate for better ways, that would make the UK a fairer, more equal place.

49 police forces questioned with Freedom of Information requests as part of our just-launched victims of crime report

5 meetings held of our Law Centres communications network

2 of 3 of LCN and Law Centres' media appearances were in national rather than local outlets

4 Law Centres helped to take on our common brand identity

"I'm a big fan of the LCN's new(ish) website by the way. Great job, whoever did that."

Deputy CEO of a partner charity

“Best of luck with your getting yourselves together at LCN post-conference. You’re a small team that manage to do a great deal. I really look forward to working with you on this in the future.”

Law Centre lawyer on advocacy work

PREPARING FOR POLITICAL CHANGE

In terms of public policy, this has been a year of two halves for us. In the first half, we have advocated extensively for policy change in two key areas: **legal aid** and renters’ rights.

We have made several submissions to the government’s long-awaited Review of Civil Legal Aid. Another review, the National Audit Office’s inquiry into legal aid, has taken up several of our arguments in its critical February report. Additionally, through our work to strengthen **renters’ rights** as part of the Renters Reform

Coalition, we gave oral evidence in parliament and, several months later, publicly withdrew our support for the Bill after its renter protections were overly weakened.

Since May’s general election announcement, we have turned our attention to the anticipated **change of government**. Right after the election, we equipped Law Centres with fresh guidance, drafted with member input, on engaging with the many new MPs. Further guidance followed, highlighting lines to take, supporting evidence, preferred turns of phrase, and recommended methods. We continue to advocate with the new government and support Law Centres to do so, too.

The change we need for legal aid

- **Make work pay:** our legal aid system should not collapse simply because no provider can afford to deliver it. Fair pay - viable work!
- **Back good work** to support communities: invest in training more social welfare lawyers, to tackle poverty and disadvantage
- **Remove barriers to opportunity:** help people overcome problems and get support with legal aid for all benefits, housing and debt issues
- **Keep justice affordable:** update legal aid’s means threshold and keep uprating it with inflation. No-one should be priced out of justice
- **End legal aid ‘deserts’:** do more to ensure that people in need can access local assistance wherever they are in the country

Our social media output has been complementing our advocacy with MPs and ministers, calling them to action.

“I would like to pay tribute to the Law Centres Network for the invaluable work you do across the justice system. I fully appreciate the vital role you play in ensuring people have access to the right advice in a timely manner and the key support you provide to the legal aid system. We remain interested in collaborating where we can.”

Heidi Alexander MP,
justice minister



CONNECTING THE DOTS FOR ACCESS TO JUSTICE

LCN has been collaborating with several Law Centres on a project seeking to better support clients who are victims of crime who speak English as an additional language. This year we have concluded a part of the project that sought to understand the systemic barriers that victims face when trying to report a crime to the police.

Drawing on considerable support from law firm A&O Shearman, we have sent Freedom of Information Act requests to all police forces in the country. Our findings, of inconsistent training and guidance, variable support and patchy data collection, were captured in a recent report, along with practical recommendations for improvement. The launch event included lawyers, linguists, researchers and police authority representatives, and we now look for ways to apply its learnings.

This project touches on key issues such as **public accountability and trust in the police**, and gained additional timeliness following the summer disturbances. It also continues some of our recent and current work: on supporting vulnerable migrants, specifically EU citizens after Brexit, and on **making our justice system accessible**, be it with the police or in the courts.

"It has been a pleasure working with you... a really great learning experience"

Project partner



'TO BE UNDERSTOOD': ARE THE POLICE DOING ENOUGH TO HELP VICTIMS WITH LOW PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH REPORT CRIME?



The government guarantees victims' right to understand and to be understood. Our new report suggests that too much of this is left to the discretion of individual police officers.



THE NETWORK EFFECT

It will take years to rebuild the public services neglected and dismantled by 14 years of austerity, even if the new government was prepared to spend all that is required. Demand will not reduce, and sufficient new funding for our services is unlikely. Each year we look ahead with concern, not because LCN is staffed by pessimists, but because our ambition for a just and equal society seems further away, in spite of our efforts and achievements.

Consequently, at LCN we have turned our focus to how can we have the most impact within our current constraints. We ask, what changes can we make as an organisation, as a network of organisations, that lead us closer to a more just society, one that functions for the common good?

We believe that the network of Law Centres is in itself a resource, a power that we can better harness. Some of LCN's real value derives from convening the network, in a way that enables us to help Law Centres to thrive, to strengthen the network, to amplify our voice and, in doing so, to achieve greater impact.

Exploring how to better utilise this network resource, we realised that we see the power of functioning networks around us in the natural world: in bees, ants, even fungus. The 'network effect' that researchers point to is not just an economy of scale; it also means added value and potential. These grow as the network grows, and nearly exponentially.

When movements are community-based, local, organised, but use a networked hub to coordinate, they benefit from direct network effect. The five forces identified as drivers of greater direct network effect may sound familiar from our experience: **Connection, Communication, Collaboration, Curation, and Community.**

In 2025, LCN will be harnessing these amplifying forces to develop our direct network effect and unleash the power of the network of Law Centres. Despite our constraints, we will take bigger steps towards building a just society, working in the common good.

Julie Bishop
Director

"[My time at the Law Centre] was easily the best period of my professional life and I know other former colleagues would say the same."

Law Centre founder, following our reunion event



FINANCIAL EXTRACTS

These summarised financial statements contain information from both the Statement of Financial Activities and the Balance Sheet for the year ended 31 March 2024, but are not the full statutory report and accounts.

The summary financial information shows the income raised for our activities was £1,096,978. The cost of raising the income and the amounts spent on our charitable activities were £1,064,592. The information is taken from the full financial statements which were approved by the trustees on 14 October 2024.

In order to gain a full understanding of the financial affairs of the charity, the full annual financial statements, trustees' annual report and examiner's report should be consulted. Copies can be obtained from the Law Centres Network or on the Charity Commission website.

Signed on behalf of the trustees,

Patrick Marples
Treasurer
14 October 2024

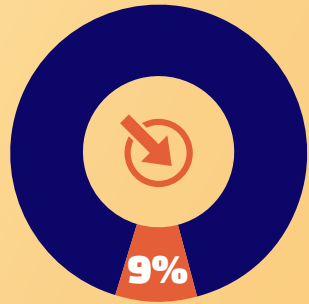
BALANCE SHEET

	2024	2023
Fixed Assets	£	£
Tangible Fixed Assets	224	1,047
Current assets		
Debtors	135,208	144,063
Cash at bank and in hand	372,417	295,756
Total Current Assets	507,625	439,819
Creditors: amounts falling due within one year	(194,648)	(160,051)
Net current assets	312,977	279,768
Net Assets	313,201	280,815
Funds		
Restricted funds:		
In surplus	214,302	167,970
Unrestricted funds:		
General fund	98,899	112,845
of which designated	-	20,593
Total funds	313,201	280,815

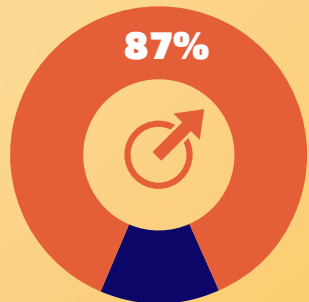
> FINANCIAL EXTRACTS

A GREAT RETURN ON INVESTMENT

THIS YEAR, LAW CENTRES' MEMBERSHIP FEES MADE UP
9% OF OUR INCOME



WHILE OUR SERVICES, GRANTS AND OTHER BENEFITS TO LAW CENTRES MADE UP
87% OF OUR SPENDING



INCOME

	% of income	2024 (£)	2023 (£)
London Legal Support Trust	27%	290,990	33,350
Baring Foundation	17%	184,454	184,729
Training Fee /Services to LCs	11%	124,101	39,738
Paul Hamlyn Foundation	9%	100,000	-
Subscriptions from Law Centre members	9%	95,100	89,600
Esme Fairbairn Foundation	6%	65,000	78,000
AB Charitable Trust	5%	55,000	50,000
John Ellerman Foundation	4%	48,000	49,000
Donations	3%	30,389	79,644
The Law Society	2%	22,500	-
TLEF	2%	22,500	129,767
IT — Digital Transformation (TNLCF)	2%	17,500	91,250
EMB Contract	1%	15,000	-
Allen and Overy Foundation	1%	8,000	-
Bell Foundation	1%	7,210	8,020
Gifts in Kind	0.5%	5,483	9,470
Sundry income	0.5%	5,273	14,492
Investment	0.0%	478	169
Access to Justice		-	10,000
Annual conference		-	13,876
Comic Relief		-	6,986
Trust for London Post Brexit		-	24,500
Total	100%	1,096,978	912,591

EXPENDITURE

	% of income	2024 (£)	2023 (£)
Staff costs	44%	466,900	494,636
Grants and Payments to Law Centres	29%	310,678	128,482
Services to Law Centres	11%	119,206	77,776
Website / Digital Development	5%	54,336	24,936
Governance costs	3%	28,220	11,362
Project specific cost	3%	28,067	231,845
Premises costs	3%	26,817	25,967
Office: Office costs, ICT, Insurance & Communications	1%	10,621	8,735
Subscriptions and Journals	1%	8,872	10,186
Gifts in Kind	1%	5,483	9,470
Legal and Professional Fees	0.3%	3,430	9,495
Training and Course Costs	0.2%	1,963	12,422
Annual Conference and Events		-	23,947
Total	100%	1,064,592	1,069,258

This annual review covers the period from one AGM to another, November to November. The financial extract is from our latest accounts, covering the financial year to March 2024.



STAFF AND TRUSTEES

STAFF TEAM

Nimrod Ben-Cnaan, Head of Policy and Profile
Julie Bishop, Director
Simon Brown, Head of Service Development and Income Generation
Matthew Cary, Communications Officer
Alex Charles, Head of IT and Data
Laura Chilintan, Project Manager
Max Gerber, Head of Product
Winnie Liguori, Finance Officer
Aristea Maundy, Administrative Assistant
Tehira Nash, Community Engagement Assistant (until May)
Patrycja Pińkowska, Community Engagement Officer (until November)
Cristina Porto, Administrator

TRUSTEES

Helen Rogers — Chair
Sara Chandler KC (Hon)
Michael Fawole, North East Law Centre
Vicky Fewkes, Ealing Law Centre — Vice Chair
Najwa Hassan, Canolfan Gyfraith Speakeasy/Speakeasy Law Centre
Laura Hastie, Paddington Law Centre
Peter Kandler
Ngaryan Li (Higham), Vauxhall Law Centre — Secretary
Victor McAllister, Hackney Community Law Centre
Patrick Marples, South West London Law Centres — Treasurer
Lydia Nash, Central England Law Centre
Ursula O'Hare, Law Centre NI — Vice Chair
Pamela Robotham
Sagar Shah, Derbyshire Law Centre
Emma Stradling, Wiltshire Law Centre
Linda Summers, Kirklees Citizens Advice and Law Centre
Mark Weights, Merseyside Law Centre

THANKS TO FUNDERS AND SUPPORTERS

AB Charitable Trust
A&O Shearman
The Baring Foundation
The Bell Foundation
City Bridge Foundation
Esmee Fairbairn Foundation
John Ellerman Foundation
The Law Society of England and Wales
The Legal Education Foundation
London Legal Support Trust
Paul Hamlyn Foundation
The Talent Fund

Image credits: Simon Brown, Crispian Blaize, Matt Cary, Pat Pinkowska and A&O Shearman.



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Law Centres Network is a business name of the Law Centres Federation, a charity registered in England and Wales no. 1088588 and a company limited by guarantee no. 2433492.