



Strategic Plan 2024 – 2028

Introduction

Law Centre NI (LCNI) is a not-for-profit legal organisation that uses law to achieve social justice. Since 1977, when a group of like-minded lawyers committed to using the law to tackle inequality and disadvantage came together to create the Law Centre, LCNI has continued to bring this same commitment and passion to all its work. Now, 47 years on, LCNI is a vital regional organisation that supports the sector and the public in creating a better society through law. Our passion and determination for the law as a tool for transformation remains undiminished. We stand for the power of law to create a society where everyone's legal rights are respected and people live in dignity and where no one is compelled to rely on charity to get by. This matters to us because we know that law makes people equal and we know that people are more equal and live lives of greater dignity when they can claim their legal rights. This is why we stand for the possibility of access to justice for everyone.

Our priority areas 2024/2028

We focus on three strategic areas of law and policy:

- In our [Anti-Poverty \(Social Security\) Project](#) we are working to end poverty by advocating for a stronger social security system. Because of our work in the next three years, we will see:
 - a social security system that keeps more people out of poverty by being an effective safety net to all when it is needed;
 - correct application of the law so everyone has what they need to live a dignified life;
 - the impact of our legal challenges to unfair decisions on the boundaries of social security law and the people we serve;
 - a strong advice sector, empowered with reliable legal information resources and training;
 - pathways for aspiring social justice lawyers in social welfare law.

- In our [Migration Justice & Refugee Project](#) we are working for a fairer, more humane and dignified immigration system. Because of our work in the next three years, we will see:
 - more people who have sought sanctuary, fleeing from elsewhere or who have been trafficked to NI able to secure the support they need to settle in their new home;
 - the impact of our challenges to the 'hostile environment';
 - policy makers better informed about the impact of current law, policy and practice on the ground;
 - implementation of effective refugee integration strategies in NI;
 - greater capacity in community-based refugee support organisations across NI through the 'immigration advice apprenticeship' scheme.

- In our [Employment Rights Project](#) we are working to uphold the legal rights of low paid workers who would otherwise struggle to be able to defend rights. Because of our work in the next three years, we will see:
 - people helped to uphold their employment law rights;
 - people able to understand their legal rights in the workplace because of our accessible legal education resources;
 - a strong advice sector, empowered with reliable legal information resources and training;
 - the impact of our legal challenges to unfair workplace practices for people who would otherwise be unable to access justice;
 - greater awareness amongst policy makers of the need to tackle exploitation in the labour market.

We will keep these areas of work under review in response to changing needs and a changing environment. This Strategic Plan sets the overall strategic direction of Law Centre NI up to 31 December 2028. This Plan now charts our future direction as society faces new social, economic and environmental crises.

The Context

As we launch this Plan at the start of 2024, we face a cost of living crisis that is pushing people who are already struggling to get-by to rely more and more on charity. Budget cuts are impacting on public services across the board and forecasts of economic recession will take a toll on the labour market. The new Illegal Migration Act (2023) copper-fastens a hostile immigration environment for people seeking sanctuary in NI that will create greater vulnerability and homelessness.

The backdrop to our work is bleak. The current political sclerosis in local governance and a looming Westminster election in the lifespan on this strategic plan present a high level of unpredictability about how law and policy will respond to the challenges of our times. Access to justice remains unachievable for too many. Poverty will continue to be a scar on our society and blight the lives of the next generation. Some people will be affected more than others by the impact of laws and policies that undermine their rights and make it even more difficult for them to challenge this unfairness. The law does not affect everyone equally. We haven't yet seen the full out-working of the UK departure from the European Union on our laws and we face uncertainty about the future of the Human Rights Act, judicial review and legal aid as essential tools that people have relied upon for access to justice.

The advice and community and voluntary sector in NI faces unrelenting demand for its services. Our assumption is that people will continue to need specialist legal interventions to uphold their rights and that the level of unmet legal need will remain undiminished.

In 2022/23, we helped almost 4,000 people right across the region. Reflecting our work as a regional organisation, 70% of our legal services were outside the Greater Belfast area and we worked with people from over 60 nationalities. We will continue to look at how we maintain and support this regional reach, including through new ways of reaching into communities.

We know that strategically using the law alongside policy influencing strategies makes a difference. We know that training and legal information resources support other organisations to help their communities. We know that working collaboratively, with trust and creativity, is a catalyst for the kind of change we want to see in our communities.

Our vision, mission, values and our core belief that the law can be a force for good in changing peoples' lives is at the heart of what we do. We enter this period with no loss of enthusiasm for our vision of communities where everyone thrives and lives with the dignity of knowing their rights

are respected so that they are able to make real choices about their lives.

Vision a just and equal society where people live in the dignity of their rights

Mission to use the power of law for social change. To stand for everyone's rights by informing and educating people about their rights and by protecting and advancing people's rights, working collaboratively for social justice.

Values

Authentic: we act consistently with our commitment to social justice.

Integrity: we honour our word.

Expert: we are driven by learning and we bring expert knowledge of the law and evidence of people's experiences of the law to all our work.

Professional: we deliver quality services.

Trusted: we are credible and respectful. We build trusted relationships. We care for our clients and each other and when we commit, we can be trusted to see it through.

Independent: we work without fear or favour.

Cutting-edge: we test the boundaries of law and policy to advance the rights of people in NI. We are creative in developing new solutions for social justice.

Inclusive: we work with and for others. We innovate to make sure our services are accessible to our clients.

How we are committed to working

We will continue to use all of our tools and resources to build a just and equal society. We test every decision we take for its strategic purpose so it aligns with this our vision and mission and this Plan.

We are committed to:

- Strategic legal work, including test case litigation in the public interest.
- Legal advice to people and organisations.
- Legal representation to people who would not be able to access to justice.
- Strategic policy advocacy and influencing, working with and through trusted partnerships.

- Commissioning or contributing to research.
- Training the advice sector and others on developments in our areas of law/social welfare law.
- Producing accessible legal information resources that inform and help people to understand their legal rights and navigate the legal system.
- Giving opportunities to the next generation of aspiring social justice lawyers and activists to support our work.

How we work is underpinned by our values and guided by our strategic priorities. We will:

- Work *in* and *with* communities to inject legal expertise where it is needed to unlock people's rights.
- Work through trusted strategic partnerships where we can share our legal expertise to promote social justice.
- Work to strengthening the capacity and capability of our partners to promote social justice in their communities.
- Use the law as an integration accelerant for everyone who has sought sanctuary in NI to secure a new settled home.
- Analyse the impact of our work and continually refresh how we deliver our services to make the best use of our limited resources.

Our Impact

We will keep this Strategic Plan under review. By the end of this period, we want to be able to evidence the tangible change we have made to increase social justice in NI. Over the lifespan of this plan, we will continually challenge ourselves on the relevance and impact of our work, seeking feedback and input from those with whom we work.

We will seek not to duplicate the work of others but carefully steward our limited resources for maximum impact. We will challenge ourselves on how well we have delivered on our strategic priorities over the next three years. These are set out below.

Our Strategic Priorities

Priority 1: enhance access to justice across communities in NI.

This means that we will apply our legal expertise in our areas of law (social security, immigration & employment) as a second-tier advice referral for organisations and by providing legal advice and representation to people directly, including through community outreach and through digital channels. We will continue to identify critical areas where law or policy needs to be tested for the benefit of all and pursue strategic litigation in the public interest.

We will build our capability for understanding the extent of and evolving areas of unmet legal need in NI and we will work to secure the resources to create new opportunities for working with other organisations to contribute our legal skills to where they are most needed.

Our initial focus will be on developing our anti-trafficking capacity, working alongside others to defend the rights of those subject to trafficking or exploitation in NI.

We will progress our plans to leverage support for developing our capability to extend into new areas of law where we know there is unmet need, including the gender-based impact of law and policy, community environmental rights, community care and capacity rights.

We will build access to justice in NI by deepening *pro bono* support for our work. This includes working with the local profession and other partners who share our vision of a more just and equal society in NI. We will develop new ways of reaching organisations and people to deliver legal support including through digital channels.

Priority 2: help people understand and uphold their rights and empower others to support their communities

This means that we will continue to produce trusted and accessible legal resources, using digital platforms to produce resources in new ways that help people to understand their rights and navigate the legal system. Through training we will build capacity and capability of the advice sector and other organisations to support their communities with quality advice and other services.

We will communicate changes to law and policy in NI in our areas of work and use our voice to influence public debate, including through strategic work with others.

Priority 3: translate people's experience into law & policy influence

This means that we will provide reliable, evidence-based policy analysis. The direct experience of our clients and others affected by law and policy in NI underpins our advocacy and influencing work. We will continue to work in collaboration with trusted partners by contributing our policy insights to increase social justice. We will commission or conduct research that contributes to policy development.

We will continue to play a catalytic role in harnessing support for social justice in NI through convening or contributing to NI and UK-wide partnerships. We will seek to build the resources of our Migration Justice Centre so it has the capacity to empower the capability of people with lived experience of the immigration system in NI to influence change.

Priority 4: create new openings for future social justice lawyers and deepen support for our work

This means that we will provide opportunities for aspiring social justice lawyers through clinical legal education opportunities and by seeking resources to enable us to recruit and train apprentices as well as other volunteers to support our work.

We will work to widen our membership and support base to create opportunities to support our work amongst others who share our vision.

Priority 5: future-proof for our long-term sustainability

This means that we will ensure Law Centre NI has the financial and staff resources and capability it needs to deliver and develop its work. We will work to diversify our funding base and increase the level of our unrestricted reserves so we have greater flexibility in how we develop and deliver our work.

We will ensure that Law Centre NI is supported by strong governance and effective leadership by investing in the development of our Board and our senior team. We are committed to recruiting and retaining a high performing team who share our vision and mission and who are recognised as leaders in their field. We will support the well-being of all our staff, investing in their development and their future through strategic learning and mentoring opportunities so that we have a strong and resilient team who will lead our future growth.

We will ensure that how we deliver our services is influenced by those who use them by expanding the opportunities for participation in our work. We will seek to develop our digital capacity to continuously innovate in our service delivery.

We will contribute to government-led reviews of the sector (e.g. DfC's Refresh Strategy) and to other strategic initiatives that may shape the future of access to justice and social justice in NI.