**A Year of Pro Bono in Brum**

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Pro Bono Week this year kicked off with a session on the continuation of pro bono initiatives in Birmingham amidst Covid 19. Host, Mark Taylor, remarked that this session celebrates the work of Birmingham’s “Do Gooding Lawyers”.

**Birmingham Legal Advice Clinic:**

The Birmingham Legal Advice Clinic operates as a joint initiative between different law firms and LawWorks. The clinic advises on both commercial and non-commercial issues. Clinic Coordinator, Elena Goodfellow, states that the clinic provides tools for clients to independently address their legal issues.

Prior to Covid 19, the clinic ran Tuesday evening sessions at The Library of Birmingham. The clinic adapted its setup to operate virtually- which had both positive and negative aspects.

The positives:

* The move to a telephone/video appointment system was facilitated by Library staff also working from home
* The clinic was already partially digital with a clinic contact email and an online filing system implemented in 2017
* Online appointments allowed for greater flexibility benefitting both clients and volunteers
* Better quality of legal advice was achievable as lawyers had more time to analyse documents sent prior to the appointment
* Zoom sessions accommodated oversees clients
* An online system was implemented quickly meaning no appointments were missed
* Volunteer privacy was achieved through volunteers calling clients from withheld numbers

The negatives:

* Document management required increased administrative work preventing the clinic from functioning solely by email
* The clinic email address could not be accessed frequently and could only be used for document sending not for follow up or emergency situations
* Document sending resulted in delayed responses or even no response, clients being unable to send documents, or sending documents to the Library email instead of the clinic email

[Volunteers accommodated clients wherever possible by talking them through document sending and even having clients read documents over the phone]

* Student involvement from University of Law and BPP students stopped due to clinic resources not being able enough to manage this remotely

Despite the negatives, Elena was happy that the online system functions well.

**BPP Pro Bono Enterprise Clinic**

Lucy Burrows spoke about the success of the fully digital Enterprise Clinic.

The clinic deals with commercial matters typically involving SME and start-up clients. Student volunteers conduct a fact-finding interview and then draft a detailed letter of advice under supervision.

BPP had already started exploring ways to implement technology within the Pro Bono clinics before Covid 19. BPP Manchester delivered talks on this in 2019. The ideas were, therefore, ready for use in March, enabling a smooth transition.

Lucy also gave insight into how a clinic can successfully run digitally:

* The setup needs to mirror the clientele: commercial clients are typically technology savvy and work well with a Microsoft Teams setup
* The system must allow for digital documents management which protects client information
* Have a main platform for the clinic to function/manage administrative work on e.g. Enterprise and Microsoft Teams
* Administrative work must be well managed and reliable: some students are enlisted to manage administrative work as student directors. This could be done by Trainees and Paralegals
* A trouble shooting session with your client prior to their appointment allows you to manage any technology related issues

**Kids in Need of Defence UK**

Annie Cooper spoke about Covid 19 increasing participation from law firms as their projects were delayed or stopped.

Kids in Need of Defence UK provides immigration support to children regarding their immigration status. Law firms partnered with the organisation learn how they can support immigration cases, helping children to submit success cases. Volunteers attend small workshops prior to training. These online sessions require being time efficient.

The move online resulted in some difficulties. Cases are now processed at a slower rate and digitally compiling client evidence is more complex than it is in person.

The organisation trialled a Skype based system prior to Covid 19 to facilitate clients unable to commute to London and an online database system which aided the move online.

**United Legal Access**

Sibon Phribi emphasised the importance of engaging the local community to promote accessible legal aid in places where clients feel comfortable.

Sibon noticed that certain communities were not accessing legal aid or that legal aid was not accessible for specific individuals e.g. Windrush scandal victims and EU Nationals. Prior to Covid 19, the organisation ran advice sessions within community centres and libraries discovering that many people had multiple legal issues. The organisation used this initiative to build a strong community network which it utilised in its move online.

Many of the organisation’s Windrush clients struggle to access technology due to age or not having loved ones on hand to help. Through grant funding, the organisation purchased electronic tablets. These tablets were distributed to those requiring help with accessing technology by African Caribbean food delivery groups. Community Centre volunteers then went to clients’ homes prior to their appointment to help set up and explain the technology. The tablets also helped clients to print or scan documents easily.

United Legal Access also worked closely with Church groups to advertise accessible legal aid in a relaxed environment. The continued community links and understanding of clients’ struggles helped United Legal Access to support 292 people since April 2020.

Lucy from BPP thought the idea of partnering with faith communities was great and said she had not previously thought of it. Mark Taylor shared this sentiment and said that diversity was an agenda point for the Pro Bono Committee and that he also had not thought of partnerships like these which help uphold diversity.

**Support Through Court**

Nicky Bancroft spoke about how emotional, procedural, and digital advice was provided to litigants virtually.

A national telephone helpline staffed by volunteers, in partnership with Birmingham City University, launched in March. The helpline was envisaged prior to Covid 19 for people unable to visit Support Through Court offices. The organisation also implemented a remote hearings support service providing people with the same support throughout their hearings as they would have received in person. The organisation used the helpline to divert calls to around 100 at home volunteers. The volunteers’ work was recognised in this year’s SME Legal Awards.

Whilst organisation provided online support, it recognised that some litigants require in person support. This includes people who have English as a second language, people without internet access and people with urgent matters. This prompted the organisation to quickly reopen offices when it was safe to do so.

Fundraising required extra creativity but proved successful. An online breakfast event sending breakfast to people’s homes allowed for participation outside of London. This would not be achievable with an in-person event. The organisation has also recruited guest speakers and has various upcoming virtual events including a book event and student event.

**Reflection**

Whilst Pro Bono work has changed during the pandemic, it has not stopped. Clinics and organisations envisaged innovative ways of providing legal aid prior to Covid 19 allowing help to digitally reach those requiring it.