

Disability Law Service Strategic Plan 2008 - 2011

Appendix ii

Review of the DLS Strategic Plan

2005 to 2008

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Review of Disability Law Service Strategic Plan for 2005 to 2008

The DLS Strategic Plan, covering the last 3 years, set out 4 key objectives. Under each objective we set priorities linked to the outcomes we hoped to achieve. Over the period we met these outcomes as follows:

Key Objective 1

To ensure that disabled people have access to high quality, specialist legal services.

Our aims were:

- More disabled people gain access to independent, free legal advice, information and support with their legal problems.
- Offer a range of legal expertise covering legal problems remedied through civil law relevant to disabled people's lives.
- Give disabled people equal access to our service irrespective of where they live.
- Increase the numbers of service users from other disadvantaged communities.
- Improve user involvement in the delivery and development of our service.
- All callers get to speak to a real person within our office hours.
- Maintain the quality and equality of our service provision.

We responded to over **11,000** requests for advice. Our legal team provided specialist legal advice and support to over **6,800** disabled people in the areas of Community Care, Disability Discrimination, Consumer, Employment, Education and Welfare Benefits law. Most advice was given via phone, email, letter or other accessible means ensuring national coverage.

In partnership with Leigh Day and Co we offered users seeking to pursue personal injury claims access to their specialist lawyers for an assessment of their claim.

We were proactive in reaching disabled people from other disadvantaged communities. Our London Project successfully established regular contact with **789** organisations offering information, advice and support for disabled people, **156** representing BMER communities and other equality groups. We attended outreach events such as the annual Bengali disability awareness day and provided community care training for local and regional Age Concern organisations.

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We successfully secured funding from the Big Lottery Fund and Community Legal Service to significantly improve our frontline service, offering legal information and a more personal signposting service for those whose problems fall outside the expertise of our legal team. Our frontline service is now staffed by 2 full time legal access workers backed up by a team of trained volunteers who provide a listening ear to all callers problems, give relevant information, refer to an appropriate DLS legal adviser or other organisation as needed.

We continued to retain the Legal Service Commission (LSC) Specialist Quality Mark (SQM) in all our areas of law. We passed our external audit in Autumn 2006 and Auditors noted "***we were impressed with the outcomes that are achieved for the clients.... The cost benefit involved is clear as the value of the services obtained... is often very substantial***".

We continued to seek the views of our service users via a questionnaire sent to a random sample of users bi-monthly. Responses average 30% and these show over the last 3 years that after help from us:

- **84%** of users felt better able to solve their problems.
- **95%** understood their rights better.
- **87%** were satisfied with the service they received.

In August 2006 we conducted telephone interviews with a representative sample of 22 individual service users and nine referring organisations. We wanted to gain in depth information from both front line service users and referring organisations as to how we could improve our service, and the impact it has on the lives of disabled people and their families.

The consultation found that:

- Service users valued the **specialist knowledge** of DLS advisers.
- **Access to free advice** was crucial for disabled people, irrespective of their financial circumstances.
- The **independence of DLS** is highly valued; this engenders trust and encourages marginalised groups, who are more likely to be suspicious of advice agencies closely linked to statutory authorities or law firms in the private sector, to approach us for advice.
- Service users value being **empowered to work through problems for themselves and find their own solutions**.
- Even when there is no legal solution to a problem, disabled people and their families value being given **current, accurate information about their rights and**

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entitlements.

- Service users considered that there was **little or no alternative specialist provision of advice for disabled people in their area.**
- Service users valued the **relationships between DLS and other organisations working with disabled people**, because this promoted a continuity of service.
- **Organisations working with disabled people value highly the capacity building and support that DLS provides**, and access to specialist knowledge, both for themselves and their service users.

Our monitoring statistics showed that over the last three years only 18% of our total service users were aged between 12 and 25 years. We separately contacted a sample of these users. From discussions it emerged that **young disabled people are less likely to use traditional ways of accessing advice** which often leads to referring on once or many more times creating barriers to achieving support. We developed and secured funding for the “Activate” pilot project which started in April 2007 to provide a fully accessible website designed by and specifically for young disabled adults offering: **Instant message advice lines** with fully qualified solicitors and caseworkers; a community forum for moderated peer to peer discussion and problem solving; a host of disability rights information in the accessible formats.

Key Objective 2

To improve awareness and understanding of the legal rights of disabled people and the range of legal and advice services available to them.

Our aims were:

- An increase in the number of people who know about our service.
- An increased profile of Disability Law Service as an organisation run by and for disabled people.
- Raised profile of DLS as an organisation run by and for disabled people.
- Callers to DLS will get help from another appropriate agency if we can't help them.
- An increase in the range of accessible information we provide on legal issues.
- An improvement in the dissemination of information we provide.
- An improvement in the knowledge of other advisers and service deliverers in disability discrimination and social welfare law and practice.

Our website, www.dls.org.uk, was launched in Spring 2006 and quickly achieved an average **20,000** visits a month. We explored ways of providing information and advice to reach the Deaf community via webcam, BSL interpreters and our website.

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We provided a presence at a range of outreach events including a stall at the annual Mayor's Disability Capital Event in Trafalgar Square. In May 2006 we celebrated our **30th Anniversary** with a reception in Lincolns Inn, guests came from both the disability and legal communities and our guest speaker was Bert Massie, then Chair of the Disability Rights Commission.

We reviewed, updated and added to our range of legal factsheets. These are now available for downloading on our website. Our range of 8 community care factsheets, commissioned by the MS Society, were re-written by the Plain English Society.

We established our half day training courses delivered by DLS legal caseworkers in our office training room. During the last 3 years **358** delegates from **147** organisations attended courses ranging from Disability Living Allowance to Mental Capacity Act. **98%** of all attendees reported an increase in their understanding of the law; **97%** thought it had helped them better advise their clients; **97%** agreed it had achieved its aim of providing practical relevant advice and information.

A Big Lottery Fund grant, secured in June 2007, provided funding to improve our reach into all England regions over the next 5 years.

Key Objective 3

To challenge discrimination and exclusion by enforcing and strengthening laws that protect the opportunities, choices and legal rights of disabled people.

Our aims were:

- 95% success rate in our casework.
- Improvement in the opportunities available to disabled people.
- In partnership with others to highlight the problems disabled people experience accessing employment, education, health and social care.
- Improvement in the laws protecting the rights of disabled people.
- Establishing, where necessary, precedents in the law which improve the opportunities, choices and independence of disabled people.

We opened **277** legal cases covering all our areas of law up to and including full representation in courts and tribunal. Cases included representation and submissions to social security tribunals and commissioners; judicial review of local authorities, representation in employment tribunals and county court. Many cases settled before court or tribunal. We achieved **100%** success and over **£200,000** in compensation

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for disabled people with discrimination claims in employment tribunals. We used Part III of the DDA to successfully challenge Peterborough Borough Council's ban on disabled parking bays, gaining £3000 compensation for our client and reversal of the ban.

Our community care solicitors achieved some notable successes challenging local authority policies through judicial review.

We submitted responses to several consultations including: the Single Equality Act; DRC consultation on definitions of disability, Mental Capacity Act.

Key Objective 4

To effectively manage Disability Law Service.

Our aims were:

- Our mission and values are widely understood by all those touched by our service and experienced by those who use it.
- A further 40% growth in income from diverse income streams.
- Total annual income to exceed £600,000.
- All staff, trustees and volunteers understand their roles and carry them out effectively.
- Suitable accessible premises in area of Greater London appropriate to a legal service.
- Flexible resources to respond to changing needs of disabled people.
- Reserves of £100,000 or 3 months operating costs, whichever is the higher.
- Ensure our core legal work is secured through sustainable funding.

We published our mission and values on our website, together with our Annual reports. We re-organised our internal reporting structures, creating more management posts and a management team working with the Director, facilitating future growth.

Our income grew by **31%** to year end 2008 (estimated awaiting 2008 audit for final figures), however income secured through grants during 2008 results in a confirmed income of nearly £700,000 by year end 2009, a **67%** increase from year end 2005.

Our office in Whitechapel continued to meet our requirements both in space and access. Our training room is fully accessible and the premises are on the ground floor. We made some adjustments to the internal layout of the office to accommodate new staff recruited to new projects starting in 2008.

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18 paid staff will be working from these premises by the end of the year and we have capacity for up to 6 volunteers working at any one time without converting our training room into office space. Our income continued to come from a diverse mix of grants, contracts, donations and earned income from training and consultancy, giving us a healthy proportion of unrestricted income allowing flexibility and independence in our development.

DLS reserves at 31st May 2008 were over £114,000. This represents a healthy growth though slightly short of the target of 3 months running costs.

July 2008

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