

# **Legal Aid Practice**

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## Legal Aid Practice

Legal Aid firms can rarely afford to promote themselves to potential trainees in the same way as corporate practices. In addition, major changes arising from the overhaul of Legal Aid services since the creation of the Legal Services Commission, has seen significant change in the size, structure and services of many firms in this area. Firms of solicitors must now contract for legally – aided civil and criminal work. To be in a position to apply for a contract, a firm must obtain a Specialist Quality Mark for each category of Law in which it wants to work, supported by quality assured management and case management procedures. Competitive tendering has been introduced for family law work and is proposed for criminal defence work. There are likely to be legislative changes which will effect the scope of Legal Aid and which are likely to narrow the areas of law available- this may well have a knock-on effect on the amount of paralegal & trainee solicitor opportunities available to students. See Changes to Legal Aid, below.

Thus, law students do need to be determined when researching the work undertaken by lawyers in this area, and in identifying where and when contracts might arise.

## Areas of Legal Aid

- crime
- family
- housing
- debt
- welfare benefits
- education
- employment
- community care
- mental health
- clinical negligence
- personal injury
- immigration and asylum
- public law
- consumer law

## Likely changes to Legal Aid

**The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill is currently moving through Parliament. The current government proposes to remove several areas of law from Legal Aid, including large areas of family law, immigration law, debt, welfare benefits, clinical negligence, consumer law, education and some aspects of housing law.**

## **Key skills Required for working in Legal Aid**

- **empathy and communication**

Clients will often be in a distressed, confused, anxious or even aggressive state. You need to be able to draw out the evidence from them and then convince them that your knowledge of the law is accurate and that your advice is appropriate to their circumstances.

- **ability to think quickly on your feet**

It will often be impossible to undertake research before providing legal advice – an obvious example is the criminal solicitor called out to a police station in the early hours. As a result thorough knowledge of one's specialist area of law is essential together with a common sense approach to its application.

- **advocacy**

Legal Aid lawyers present client cases in a variety of settings – judges' chambers, tribunals etc.

- **negotiation**

You will often be placed in the position of mediator between your client and the 'authorities' working towards an acceptable and realistic compromise.

- **tenacity**

To chase up contacts and organisations who may be able to provide vital information in support of your case.

- **non-judgemental approach**

Clients may well have different priorities and outlooks to you. It will be important to show respect to people coming from a wide and diverse range of cultures, traditions, ethnicities, races and religions.

- **clear conviction with regard to human rights**

Clients will not necessarily appreciate your hard work in support of their case yet your salary will be comparatively low with some work inevitably undertaken on a 'pro bono' (voluntary) basis.

- **mental and physical stamina**

Interviews may be drawn out and demand immense mental agility. Hours can be long and unpredictable, especially for duty solicitors working in criminal law. You also need the mental resilience to remain emotionally detached from your clients' circumstances and be able to 'switch off' at the end of the day.

- **good judgement**

Whether it is worth pursuing a case, and if so, the time to be devoted. You cannot help the disadvantaged in society if your firm is not efficient and profitable!

- **an interest in socio-economic-political issues**

## **Enhancing Your CV**

Related work experience and evidence of a commitment to the client groups served by Legal Aid is vital. You might consider: -

- work shadowing or work experience in a firm undertaking the work you are interested in
- Voluntary work in a CAB or Law Centre. (Time spent as a CAB adviser may be counted as good practice towards a training contract.)
- MMU School of Law now runs its own Pro Bono scheme, more details will be circulated during term-time and are available in the guide “Law Students & Voluntary Advice Work”
- Voluntary work in a charity or support agency working with the relevant client groups.
- Work experience in the government agencies that ‘set the rules’ e.g. Jobcentre Plus, Child Support Agency, Crown Prosecution Service, Local Authority Housing Department, Debt Collection department of a utility (gas, electricity, water) or credit card company.
- Even observing cases in the Magistrates or Crown Courts can provide useful insights and potential contacts.

Initially, you may only be offered menial tasks such as photocopying or filing, but all experience provides a useful insight into the range of clients and cases you could expect to deal with. It will put you in contact with professional staff who can advise on your CV, suggest other people you could talk to or approach for more work experience, provide useful sources of further information or furnish you with a reference in the future.

(For more information about possibilities in Greater Manchester, refer to the handout ‘**Law Students and Voluntary Advice Work**’.)

## **Applying for a Training Contract**

Very few Legal Aid firms recruit trainee solicitors far in advance; most firms recruit as and when they have vacancies. Some firms never advertise vacancies and simply select students to interview from speculative applications. Only the bigger firms tend to advertise 1 or more years in advance.

In some cases, unpaid work experience during your studies, perhaps 1-2 days per week, or a 1-2 week placement during the holidays, will provide a “foot in the door” to the offer of a permanent paralegal position or training contract. Some firms will offer a training contract after typically 6-12 months.

Although vacancies are not frequently advertised, the following sources may be helpful: -

- [www.lawcareers.net](http://www.lawcareers.net)- Immediate Vacancies section
- The Law Society Gazette ([www.lawgazette.co.uk](http://www.lawgazette.co.uk))- search “ Jobs” under “Private Practice”
- The Legal Action Group (LAG) bulletin – bi-monthly.
- The Legal Aid Practitioners Group – [www.lapq.co.uk](http://www.lapq.co.uk)- (search “Training Contracts” in the Student section)
- Law Centres Federation- [www.lawcentres.org.uk](http://www.lawcentres.org.uk) (click on “Vacancies”)

For speculative applications, use the “I Need a Solicitor” search function on the Law Society’s website ([www.lawsociety.org.uk](http://www.lawsociety.org.uk)). This indicates the areas of law undertaken by the firm and will help you determine the areas of Legal Aid work they are contracted to undertake. (Bear in mind that some firms combine Legal Aid with private client work).

## **Useful Sources of Further Information**

### **Structure of Legal Aid**

Legal Services Commission – [www.legalservices.gov.uk](http://www.legalservices.gov.uk)

Community Legal Service – [www.clsdirect.org.uk](http://www.clsdirect.org.uk)

### **Legal Aid Practitioners**

Legal Aid Practitioners Group – [www.lapq.co.uk](http://www.lapq.co.uk)

Legal Action Group – [www.lag.org.uk](http://www.lag.org.uk)

Young Legal Aid Lawyers- [www.younglegalaidlawyers.org](http://www.younglegalaidlawyers.org)

Law Centres Federation – [www.lawcentres.org.uk](http://www.lawcentres.org.uk)

Citizens’ Advice Bureaux – [www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)

Advice UK – [www.adviceuk.org.uk](http://www.adviceuk.org.uk)

Immigration Law Practitioners Association – [www.ilpa.org.uk](http://www.ilpa.org.uk)

Resolution – [www.resolution.org.uk](http://www.resolution.org.uk)

UK College of Mediators – [www.ukcfm.co.uk](http://www.ukcfm.co.uk)

The Free Representation Unit - [www.thefru.org.uk](http://www.thefru.org.uk)

National Pro Bono Group – [www.lawworks.org.uk](http://www.lawworks.org.uk)

Law Society – [www.lawsociety.org.uk](http://www.lawsociety.org.uk)

## **Related Charities and Support Groups**

Liberty – [www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk](http://www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk)

Justice- [www.justice.org.uk](http://www.justice.org.uk)

Amnesty International- [www.amnesty.org.uk](http://www.amnesty.org.uk)

Child Poverty Action Group – [www.cpag.org.uk](http://www.cpag.org.uk)

Shelter – [www.shelter.org.uk](http://www.shelter.org.uk)

MIND – [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

Mencap – [www.mencap.org.uk](http://www.mencap.org.uk)

Rethink (formerly National Schizophrenic Fellowship) - [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)

Age Concern – [www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)

Stonewall – [www.stonewall.org.uk](http://www.stonewall.org.uk)

Terrence Higgins Trust Lighthouse – [www.tht.org.uk](http://www.tht.org.uk)

Action Against Medical Accidents – [www.avma.org.uk](http://www.avma.org.uk)

UK Disabled People's Council – [www.ukdpc.net](http://www.ukdpc.net)

## **Opportunities for Voluntary Action in Greater Manchester**

Volunteering MMU - [www.mmu.ac.uk/volunteering](http://www.mmu.ac.uk/volunteering)

Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation – [www.gmcvo.org.uk](http://www.gmcvo.org.uk)

## **Government Departments and Agencies**

Ministry of Justice- [www.justice.gov.uk](http://www.justice.gov.uk)

UK Border Agency- [www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk](http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk)

Child Support Agency – [www.csa.gov.uk](http://www.csa.gov.uk)

Equality and Human Rights Commission – [www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com)

Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service – [www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)

Trades Union Congress – [www.tuc.org.uk](http://www.tuc.org.uk)

Crown Prosecution Service – [www.cps.gov.uk](http://www.cps.gov.uk)

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