

Renowned law centre shuts

Legal aid cuts have forced the South Manchester Law Centre to shut down, leaving staff and the community “devastated and demoralized”.

The centre has been struggling since October 2010 after Manchester City Council and the Legal Services Commission (LSC), the body in charge of legal aid, cut its funding by more than £40,000 a month, completely cancelling the centre’s welfare rights, employment and housing work. Since then, the centre has survived by charging some clients for immigration and asylum advice.

Exploited

But staff say the latest LSC cut has further reduced its legal aid by 70 per cent, leaving it with no choice but to close, with the loss of 11 jobs. “We kept fighting to keep going but we have been left with no alternative,” said case worker Richard Bednarek.

“There is now a very real worry that people will be exploited by cowboys or go underground. But, worse than that, people will not have access to the justice that is their fundamental right.”

Between September 2012 and 2013, the centre took 2,000 calls, advised 1,586 people at drop-in centres, and took on 391 cases.

The centre, listed as an official community asset by owners Manchester City Council, has been providing free legal advice since 1976.

Bednarek added: “The need has never gone away. We provided excellent value for money and have been nationally recognised for the quality of work that we do. It is the end of an era.”

‘Loss’

The Law Society said that Manchester has already been badly hit by the withdrawal of legal aid from Manchester’s Community Legal Advice Service (CLAS) in 2013. The Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit is now the only immigration advice service left in Manchester.

Richard Miller, head of legal aid at the Law Society, said: “The loss of this valuable community resource is an inevitable consequence of the government’s cuts to civil legal aid.”

“Law centres provide valuable legal advice to some of the most vulnerable members of society. Their closure deprives local communities of much needed access to justice.”

The CLAS was set up by Manchester Council and the LSC in 2010 to replace the city’s law centres. But the new service was marred by problems.

South Manchester Law Centre successfully won two judicial reviews against both Manchester City Council and the LSC over the CLAS tender process.

At the time, legal commentators criticised the CLAS for being “a huge upheaval and waste of taxpayers’ money for little or no benefit”. The Law Society added that the CLAS model “almost destroyed the ecology of advice services” provided by established law centres.

Since 2013, legal aid in immigration cases has been limited to initial asylum applications and vulnerable cases such as unaccompanied minors, those at risk of domestic violence or abuse or trafficking victims.

‘Tough choices’

A Ministry of Justice spokesperson said the £68 million Advice Services Transition Fund had been created to help voluntary advice services during 2013-15.

He added: “Despite the closure of this one law centre, the Legal Aid Agency will still have contracts with 89 offices in Manchester, and even more across the wider Greater Manchester area.

“We had to take tough choices in reforming legal aid to make the savings required. Our reforms ensured legal aid remains sustainable and available to those most in need of a lawyer.

“However, issues such as immigration tribunal cases are usually about the facts of a case and are designed to be user-friendly, so having a lawyer isn’t usually necessary.”

HELEN CLIFTON



NEWS IN BRIEF

HEAD-BUTT BAKER

A Malton baker has been sued by his former employer for head-butting a £27,000 sausage roll machine in anger. Shane Thompson caused £3,204 worth of damage when he lost his temper and smashed the screen of the computer-operated machine with his head. Bosses docked £295 from his wages but wanted the balance. The court ordered Thompson to pay £720 in compensation.

WORLD-CLASS UNI

Manchester University has been ranked one of the world’s top 30. At number 30 in the latest QS World University ranking it is the eighth highest institution in the UK. Imperial College London was joint second with Cambridge, and Oxford and University College London were joint fifth. Manchester’s success is based on research and publications in nature and science.

JAWS IN YORKSHIRE

A fossilised shark egg case has been discovered in a derelict mining tip in Doncaster. Palaeontologist Dean Lomax says it is proof that parts of Yorkshire were once a tropical water-logged forest teeming with life and may have looked something similar to today’s Amazon Delta – a mix of dense forest, lakes, swamps and lagoon. Plants, horseshoe crabs and seed pods were also among the findings, now stored at Doncaster Museum.

DANGER MOUSE

Alexander Armstrong is the new voice of Manchester-born cartoon *Danger Mouse*. The *Pointless* host, also known for his work with Ben Miller, will take over from David Jason, who voiced the secret agent from 1981 to 1992. Kevin Eldon will voice sidekick Penfold. *Danger Mouse* was originally made by Chorlton-based animation studio Cosgrove Hall Films. It will now be produced by Dublin-based studio Boulder Media for CBBC.



Hangin’ around: OCA photography student Terence Day waited in vain for kingfishers at a wildlife sanctuary at Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve in Kent, taking instead a shot of a spider visiting the hide.

The Open College for the Arts (OCA) is a thriving online community of more than 3,000 people studying creative arts subjects at higher level. An education charity, OCA offers BA honours degrees in photography, painting, creative writing, visual communications and textiles. Students can also study fine art, music, drawing and sculpture. OCA has no minimum entry requirements and students can enrol when it suits them. Fees to reach degree level are less than £8,000 in total.