

Bristol Pro Bono Meeting – Minutes

Tuesday 28 April 2020 – 17:30

In attendance:

- Abi Jones (**AJ**) – Burges Salmon
- Jeremy Thompson (**JT**) – Support Through Court
- Sarah Phillimore (**SP**) – St Johns Chambers
- Jane Emanuel (**JE**) – Bristol Law Centre (**BLC**)
- Dave Miller (**DM**) – BLC
- Miriam Bishop (**MB**) – Bevan Brittan (**BB**)
- Mark Calverley (**MC**) – BB
- Julian Hemming (**JH**) – Osbourne Clarke (**OC**)
- Lucy Burrows (**LB**) – BPP Law School (**BPP**)
- Rachel Wood (**RW**) – University of the West of England (**UWE**)
- Amanda Crutchley (**AC**) – University of Law (**UoL**)
- Marcin Patrzala (**MP**) – CMS Cameron Mckenna Olswang Nabarro (**CMS**)
- Dan Preddy (**DP**) – DACB
- Deborah Sheldon (**DS**) – TLT
- Victoria Channing (**VC**) – Simmons & Simmons (**S&S**)
- Rachel Lobley (**RL**) – S&S

Chair: Abi Jones

Minutes: Rachel Lobley

1. Introduction:

- AJ – opened the Bristol Pro Bono (**BPB**) meeting and dealt with housekeeping items as the meeting was taking place via Zoom rather than in person as a result of the current Covid-19 crisis.
- AJ – also drew BPB’s attention to a recent communication from the Law Society with guidance for firms working on pro bono matters during the Covid-19 crisis, which may be of assistance to members of the group: <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/support-services/coronavirus/coronavirus-covid-19-and-pro-bono/>

2. Roundtable update on members’ approach to pro bono / capacity during the pandemic:

- AJ – asked each member of BPB to provide an update on its position re: pro bono work in the context of current social distancing measures and Covid-19.

JT - Support Through Court

- While the Support Through Court’s face to face offices are all currently closed, the national helpline is still available, and they are supporting clients in remote hearings by phone, and soon by video (if there is need).

JE/DM - BLC

JE dealt with Pro Bono side of activities at the BLC:

- BLC is under pressure at the moment and they are seeing an explosion in the need for family law advice.
- Currently BLC is still providing pro bono employment and civil litigation advice via phone.
- BLC are expecting employment requests to rise (for instance CAB have seen a 4-fold rise in employment enquiries, some of which are related to furloughing measures).
- Regarding the Bristol Law Clinic Telephone Advice Line: OC is assisting with employment queries and S&S with civil litigation queries, but BLC is looking for more volunteers.

DM dealt with how the BLC is dealing with issues more generally:

- BLC is still open, and they are trying to provide services remotely, however there are concerns about those who are most vulnerable being those who are not able to access services remotely.
- They envisage issues with evictions on possible changes in housing law.
- BLC are in the process of working out how to get further funding and see if it is possible to work outside the Legal Aid parameters.
- Some statistics came up in the Bristol Law Society Community Engagement Group meeting (“BLSCEG”) last week: 25 million people have only pay as you go phones and 9 million do not have a home internet connection.
- MB is aware of a scheme that assists in providing mobile phone credit for refugees. AJ and MB discussed if there was a way to obtain money to provide to people in need to get phone credit. MB will make enquiries about this.

MC - Bevan Brittan

- BB has not seen an increase in pro bono requests at the moment, but this is anticipated, and the firm is the process of working out ways in which it can assist in the current and post Covid-19 landscape.

SP – St Johns Chambers

- Reported that there has been a rise in the number of children being admitted to A&E and there is a strong suspicion that the family courts are going to be overwhelmed as a result of the knock-on effects of the Covid-19 crisis.

LB – BPP

- All the students are still being taught, but just online. To the biggest extent possible pro bono has also been moved online.
- The Family, Housing and Enterprise schemes are all still running remotely, and the advice line is still running. Initially the advice line was quiet, but it is now getting much busier. Employment law advice is also still going, and BPP is working with national employment law networks.
- BPP is putting together fact sheets for families, charities and other topics which will be available on the BPP Pro Bono website.

RW - UWE

- Only a minimal amount of UWE’s pro bono work has been possible to move online.
- Previously they were assisting with Support Through Court.
- RW will be looking to see if some pro bono activity can go on over the summer including offering drop in sessions with UWE staff on employment and family law.
- A formal proposal is just being put together now, but resourcing for the clinic is not going to be the priority that it once was.

JH - OC

- OC have doubled the amount of time fee earners can spend on pro bono during the lockdown, and they are also doing a fundraising drive at the firm. Seems like there is possibility that this will lead to an increase in pro bono activity post Covid-19.

AC - UoL

- Have seen an increase in interest in pro bono (as for instance, many paralegals who are also studying have been furloughed).
- UoL have also been streaming videos to schools on various issues, like what being furloughed means, so that children understand what is going on.
- Law Works are running a scheme called ‘Free Legal Answers’ which allows the public to email in their query to Law Works, volunteer fee earners are then able to pick and respond to a query giving one off advice. AC will send the link through.

MP - CMS

- Hoping, like OC, that post lockdown there will be an increase in interest in pro bono.
- MP expressed interested in getting involved in the Law Works programme AC referred to.
- Zak Cole from CMS wasn't able to attend the meeting today, but MP believes she may have been working on some pro bono matters.

DP - DACB

- DACB are holding free seminars for charities which will be covering 8 different topics, DP to circulate a link.
- Looking to do more mentoring with BPP.
- DACB have also got a plan to work more with CAB. DP is looking for a way of bringing some queries CAB are getting over to DACB to relieve some pressure.

DS - TLT

- Seeing more requests from local charities, but TLT are looking for some more pro bono opportunities.
- Generally speaking, it is a positive picture at TLT and there is a desire to draw on the momentum that has built as a result of Covid-19.

VC - S&S

- There is a slightly different situation at S&S - pro bono funds that have been frozen, next year's pro bono budget is likely to be slashed, and VC's assistant has been furloughed.
- S&S have migrated its advice clinics onto a remote platform, and S&S will be assisting the Bristol Law Centre with commercial litigation enquiries.
- S&S is a member of the UK Collaborative Plan for Pro Bono, and they are putting together a plan for dealing with Covid-19 related issues.
- Agree with JH that the employment team is very busy. Trying to see if finance lawyers can assist.

3. Update on 2020 initiatives:

(a) Immigration

Presentation by Rachel Lobley from Simmons & Simmons re: Lawyers Against Poverty: Refugee Legal Confidence Workshops (collaboration / volunteering opportunity: Proposal circulated with meeting agenda)

- RL – gave a summary of the project and asked if other members of the BPB would be keen in getting involved.
- DS and AC expressed an interest.
- DM and JE are continuing to look into whether S&S could work with KIND.
- It was agreed that VC, RL and JE would have a separate meeting to scope out what further work could be done to assist with immigration issues.

(b) Homelessness organisations

General update

- AJ has been in touch with Bristol Soup Run Trust and DM has been in touch with Caring in Bristol and Shelter to see if BPB can help with any legal issues arising from Covid-19. These groups have not indicated that they do, but it is a positive step that BPB is on their radar if they do.

Update by Dave Miller from Bristol Law Centre re: One City Group and Housing Advocacy Support project (potential future volunteering opportunities)

- DM has been looking at ways the BPB group could assist with tackling homelessness issues. An organisation called One City Group has been set up to look at homelessness and accommodation as we

move into recovery post COVID. DM will follow up with more details at the next meeting when we should hopefully be in, or approaching, the recovery phase of lockdown.

- DM – has explored if students could assist the BLC with housing enquiries and BLC is applying for funding on this.
- JE – BLC is in the middle of preparing a selection of briefing sheets which when completed will be going on the BLC website. BLC are planning to do briefing sessions for advisors, who are working with South West Law and Shelter. JE will provide further information on how members may attend.
- VC asked if these sessions will be for those with experience or those with existing experience. JE said that there are not enough housing lawyers, and there are a number of people who need assistance with matters which fall outside the remit of housing law therefore they are looking for assistance for all lawyers. Therefore, those who are interested in getting involved should contact JE.
- JE explained that the landlord and tenant disputes are primarily from private tenancy agreements.

(c) Profile raising

Website (brief Technical Proposal was circulated with the agenda for the meeting). Key issues: (a) funding; (domain and hosting approx. £190 per year), (b) content.

- AJ referred to the proposal provided in advance of the meeting, which a friend of VC had prepared the basis of and would be willing to set up for free. Annual funding would be required for the domain name and hosting, however.
- JH kindly volunteered for OC to fund the first year.
- VC/JH/AJ will take the website development forward and present back to the group a mock-up.

Logo (also circulated in advance)

- AJ – thanked VC and S&S for preparing some proposed logos for BPB to use on its website.
- AJ asked for any feedback / preferences on the proposed content of the website, including logo, to be provided by no later than Tuesday 12 May 2020.

4. Additional initiatives / opportunities

Bristol Law Clinic Telephone Advice Line (Vic Channing from Simmons & Simmons)

- VC handed over to JE and DM to provide further information about the scheme (referred to above) S&S have already signed up to assist with civil litigation.
- JE is looking for volunteers and to extend the rota of assistance available. DS of TLT said they have been heavily involved in the past and would be happy to help out.

Law for Life

- Beth Kirkland of Law for Life (who had presented at the January meeting) had been in touch with AJ to see if Bristol Pro Bono could potentially assist the charity with Covid-related work. There is nothing specific the charity needs help with at the moment - it seemed more like Beth was checking to see what help might be available in case it is needed. AJ said she thought BPB could assist, and Beth is going to get back in touch if help is needed.

5. Preferred approach for referrals / requests for assistance

- AJ referred to two recent requests for both Talking Money and Easton Community Centre (from VC at S&S) that had been circulated to members of BPB by email but had had no reply.
- AJ asked if members of the group were happy for requests such as this to be circulated? The consensus was yes, the best way to communicate referrals to the group is by email.

- It was agreed that after the initial email from the Chair or other member circulating details, if there was no reply, a follow up email should be sent 3 / 4 days later to let the group know help was still needed. A further email should be sent once the work had been picked up and was being dealt with.

6. Interplay between Bristol Law Society Community Engagement Group (BLSCEG) and BPB

- AJ outlined that BLSCEG was set up around the same time as BPB and there wasn't intended to be any crossover, however she had become aware that there was occasionally some. AJ asked if it might be worth setting up having a representative to take some of the reporting duties off the BLC and to ensure there isn't any duplication of work.
- MC said that, in his experience of being a member of both groups, there is a slight risk of there being a bit of a blurring between the remit of the two groups.
- DM referred to the recent Di Robinson report for City Funds on pro bono and professional volunteering in Bristol. Pro bono in the context of the report was broader than just free legal advice. There probably needs to be a clarification of the legal volunteering and pro bono.
- MC said BLSCEG should perhaps try to avoid using the term pro bono, which could get confusing, and focus instead on volunteering. JH agreed with this.
- JE – was quite alarmed by the title of the report, but subsequently found out that, at the point the report was written (towards the end of 2019) Di Robinson had not heard of BPB. JE had sent her BPB's objectives and other information to clarify the position.
- AJ asked who already attends both groups and might like to act as a liaison between the two. MC kindly volunteered.
- DM confirmed that there is a plan to update the strategy of BLSCEG.

7. Update by Bristol Law Centre, including re: financial support (Dave Miller)

- DM confirmed that fundraising is ongoing, and gave his thanks to TLT, Osborne Clarke and Burges Salmon for their support to date.

8. AOB

Free practising certificates for Law Centres (Dan Preddy from DACB)

- AJ apologised, this had been an earlier item on the agenda that she had missed, and DP had had to leave the call. AJ explained that DP intended to liaise with a contact at the Law Society re: waiving fees for practicing certificates at Law Centres.

Pro Bono Week 2020

- AJ had been in touch with Valerie Robertson at the Law Society who had confirmed that a date for Pro Bono Week 2020 had not yet been set, but was being discussed at a meeting arranged for Friday 1 May 2020. The likelihood is that virtual and in person events would be arranged, but Valerie will update AJ following the meeting.

Immediate actions:

1. Requests for volunteers:
 - Bristol Refugee Confidence Sessions (information sheet attached) – if interested please email rachel.lobley@simmons-simmons.com & victoria.channing@simmons-simmons.com;
 - Bristol Law Clinic Telephone Advice Line (Employment and Civil Litigation) – contact jane@bristolawcentre.org.uk;
 - Bristol Law Centre to be lawyers to be upskilled in housing law – contact jane@bristolawcentre.org.uk;

2. AC: To circulate a link to Law Works Free Legal Answers scheme;
3. DP: To circulate link to DACB's seminar for charities;
4. DP: To follow up with Law Society contact re: possibility of free practicing certificates for Law Centres;
5. VC, JH and AJ: To progress setting up BPB website;
6. VC, RL and JE: To discuss how S&S / BPB can assist with immigration matters, particularly those that fall outside the remit of Legal Aid;
7. MB: To investigate the possibility of the provision of phone credit for those with PAYG phones, similar to that provided for refugees; and
8. All: Any comments re: content for BPB website including logo to be provided by Tuesday 12 May 2020;

Actions for next meeting:

- All: Update on progression of tasks above;
- Mark to report back on any developments from BLSCEG; and
- DM will provide an update on the One City Group and Housing Advocacy Support project (potential future volunteering opportunities) at the next meeting.

Next meeting

- It was agreed that the next meeting will be on **Tuesday 28 July 2020 at 5.30pm**, provisionally as another Zoom meeting.