



Submission to the Legal Services Regulatory Authority (LSRA) The admission policies of the legal professions

Background

Ballymun Community Law Centre (BCLC) was established in 2002 to tackle unmet legal need in Ballymun. The Law Centre has been granted Independent Law Centre status by the Law Society of Ireland and operates as an independent not-for-profit community organisation.

The Law Centre provides legal advice, representation, legal education and alternative dispute resolution services to the community. We aim to empower individuals to achieve equality and realise their human rights through increased access to the law.

Our legal focus is on areas of unmet legal need in Ballymun. For example, we provide legal advice services in the areas of housing, employment, social welfare, and equality related issues. Our alternative dispute resolution services include family and community mediation and we also provide a comprehensive peer mediation programme in local schools. Our education programme delivers courses in areas such as Family Law, Child Law and Social Welfare Law as well as providing talks on topical legal issues.

Our mission is to empower the community of Ballymun to exercise their rights and achieve social justice and equality. To do this we provide accessible legal, educational and alternative dispute resolution services.

Introduction

A core aim of our work is to make the law and legal education accessible to the community and to encourage people in Ballymun to access legal education and the legal professions.

Our work in this area includes the provision of introductory courses in Family and Child Law, Social Welfare Law and the provision of an accredited course in Family Rights Advocacy. Further, we provide a schools-based Law Club to introduce second level students to the law and its application.

Through our work it is evident that the legal professions are in practice inaccessible for those who are from an area of disadvantage such as Ballymun. The statistics relevant to school progression to third level reveal that in 2019 only 16 pupils from Trinity Comprehensive School in Ballymun were in a position to accept a CAO offer (23% of those who sat the leaving certificate).¹ Anecdotally, since we opened our doors in 2002, we are aware of only

¹ Source: Irish Times Feeder Schools Table 2019; published 3rd December 2019.

two members of the local community joining the legal profession, one a barrister the other a solicitor.

It is against this background that the legal professions and the LSRA need to consider what structural remedies and supports might be put in place in order to redress this imbalance in order that the legal professions include individuals from all backgrounds.

The role of education

While we acknowledge the excellent third level access programmes in existence it is nevertheless plain that there remains a gap in support for those in areas of disadvantage such as Ballymun. We have some experience of the needs and challenges in this area having been a key stakeholder in the Legal Education for All Project (LEAP). LEAP was a two-year pilot programme managed and delivered by BCLC, the Irish Traveller Movement (ITM), FÁS, Trinity College and Community Legal Resource. The programme sought to fast track people from the community into legal studies by providing an introduction to key areas of law and practical access to the Courts and courts system.

The LEAP project was a positive beginning. What has not occurred since that project is the necessary impetus to build and learn from LEAP, to design and implement a programme with some level of permanence so as to demonstrate a genuine commitment to more equal access to legal education and the legal professions.

Recommendations

We have no doubt that the LSRA consider it appropriate that in the interests of access to justice it is essential that the legal professions are representative of all communities. To attain this objective there must be recognition of the facts of exclusion, social and economic circumstances that render access unattainable for many. Accordingly, it is not enough to introduce or build on existing access programmes, students must also be financially supported in order that they can participate.

- There is an absence of research and statistics to identify with accuracy the extent of the under representation in the legal professions of those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. We recommend that the LSRA might use its offices identify the means to sponsor and execute research in this area.
- In view of the underrepresentation of those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds in the legal professions we submit that it is necessary to review existing access programmes in order to identify how these programmes might be more effective.
- We recommend that following on from the LEAP pilot programme that consideration be given to investing in the design and delivery of an intensive two year programme to support students in order that they might compete equally with their peers to gain access to legal education and the legal professions. Participants on this programme must be financially supported for the duration.