

Crisis, Change and the birth of the Law Centre movement

THE TURBULENT DECADE

The 1970s was a turbulent decade in the UK, marked by economic crisis, industrial unrest and the “Winter of Discontent.” It ended with the election of Margaret Thatcher as Britain’s first woman Prime Minister. As the Law Centre movement grew, financial pressures mounted. In 1975, eight centres were rescued by central government, but after 1979 funding shifted mainly to local authorities. Combined CAB and law centres in Paddington and Hackney embedded lawyers in community advice services.

HACKNEY LAW CENTRE’S IMPACT

In this climate, Hackney Community Law Centre championed a new approach to justice. It went beyond traditional legal representation, empowering tenants, residents and low-paid workers to understand and use the law themselves. During a decade of hardship and change, it defended housing rights and strengthened the principle that justice should be accessible to all.

1972

THE CENTRE

The idea of a Law Centre in Hackney was first seriously suggested by the local borough council in about 1972. The steering committee was established and came up with the proposal for a multi purpose Centre, adding to the resources of the existing Citizens’ Advice Bureau (CAB), a Law Centre (LC) and a Consumer Advice Centre (CAC).

CO-OPERATION

Housing the three organisations in one building would enable the generalist CAB to draw on the specialist skills of the LC, and the CAC and vice versa, with easy accessibility facilitating communication and co-operation between the three sections.



We are grateful to Hackney council, who supported the centre financially and to the many organisations and people who have given help.

1974-76

THE OPENING

The CAB vacated 236 Mare Street in 1974 and returned in May, 1975. The CAC opened on 15th December, 1975 and finally the Law Centre opened on 1st May, 1976.

AREAS OF WORK

The problems dealt with at the Law Centre fall into six broad categories as follows:

- Employment
- Family and Personal
- Housing
- Social Security
- Consumer
- Crime

**HACKNEY
COMMUNITY LAW
CENTRE OPENED ON
1ST MAY, 1976**

1978-79

COLLECTIVE LEGAL ACTION

The Centre was forced to close its door to new cases between December 1978 and May 1979 due to staff shortages. However, the Law Centre expanded significantly during the year after the borough approved funding for an additional lawyer and secretary despite financial pressures.

The Law Centre focused on housing, social security, employment, and police complaint cases that were common in the Borough but often ignored by private solicitors. Clients were referred mainly through Citizens Advice Bureaux and other organisations. Although demand remained high, the number of new cases fell because the Centre lost its third solicitor and had to restrict referrals temporarily. The Centre also supported tenants’ associations and community groups to improve housing conditions and strengthen collective legal action.

One case concerned tenants on a Greater London Council (GLC) estate left without safe central heating. After the GLC ignored complaints, the Law Centre threatened legal action and secured compensation and repairs. However, only the tenant who pursued court proceedings achieved full satisfaction, highlighting difficulties in enforcing collective rights.



**‘LOW PAY IS
A LUXURY
WE CAN NO
LONGER
AFFORD’**

Slogan from the 1979 “Winter of Discontent” strikes, highlighting the plight of public sector workers living below the poverty line.

CASE STUDIES

UNFAIR DISMISSAL

Mr. A was dismissed from his job and sought help from the Citizens Advice Bureau, which explained his rights under employment law and helped him apply to the Industrial Tribunal. Since there was no union at his workplace, he was referred to a Law Centre, which contacted his employer for reasons for the dismissal but received no response.

The case proceeded to the Tribunal, and the Law Centre prepared a claim for unfair dismissal. Although Mr. A could have asked for his job back, he chose compensation instead. The employer offered small settlement amounts through ACAS, but these were rejected.

At the hearing, Mr. A was represented by a barrister. The Tribunal ruled that he had been unfairly dismissed and awarded him over £1,000 in compensation for lost wages and damages.



1975-79

THE “SOCIAL CONTRACT”

The late 1970s in the UK (specifically 1975–1979) saw a significant wave of social and employment law changes, driven largely by the Labour government’s “Social Contract” with trade unions, which aimed to improve workers’ rights and social protections.

KEY SOCIAL LAW CHANGES INCLUDED:

- Sex Discrimination Act 1975
- Employment Protection Act 1975
- Race Relations Act 1976
- Social Security Act 1975 & Pensions Act 1975
- Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977
- Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970

Extracted from: 1974–78: the Social Contract, trade unions and the Labour government. <https://www.cpbml.org.uk/news/1974-78-social-contract#>



1972

236 MARE STREET

The CAB had already been operating at 236 Mare Street in very old and dilapidated premises which originally consisted of a shop with residential accommodation above. The borough council owned the premises and since they were large enough to accommodate the proposed combined centre, the premises were converted to provide bright and pleasant offices.

1970

THE UK’S FIRST LAW CENTRE

Founded in 1970, North Kensington Law Centre pioneered the idea that lawyers should work within the communities they serve, offering free legal advice and representation to people who could not otherwise afford it. Its creation launched the UK Law Centre movement.



‘The New Left was trying to change things in North Kensington, and one of its approaches was to set up three legal advice points in the area. It became clear that advice was not enough without also providing representation at court. And so, we set up North Kensington Law Centre to fill that gap.’

Peter Kandler, founder of North Kensington Law Centre.

ELECTION & ECONOMIC DECLINE

In 1970, Edward Heath led the Conservatives to victory over Harold Wilson. Britain faced rising inflation, strikes and low productivity, while the power of trade unions and entry into the European Economic Community were fiercely debated.

1970s

**TOTAL NUMBER OF CLIENTS
SEEN BY THE LAW CENTRE
FROM 1976-77**

892