

50 years of legal services to the community 1976 - 2026

# Privatisation, deregulation, & public spending cuts

## THE TURBULENT DECADE

The 1980s in the UK saw major economic and social change under Margaret Thatcher, with privatisation, deregulation, cuts to public spending and the Right to Buy scheme. These shifts led to rising unemployment and the decline of traditional industries, putting pressure on many communities. Urban unrest, including the 1981 Brixton riots, highlighted deep social tensions. In Hackney, industrial decline and high unemployment caused significant deprivation and Diane Abbott is elected Britain's first Black female MP in 1987.

## THE LAW CENTRE MOVEMENT UNDER FINANCIAL PRESSURE

During this time, the Law Centre movement faced growing financial pressure as local authority budgets tightened and demand for advice on housing, employment, and welfare increased, leading some centres to close. Hackney Community Law Centre (HCLC) continued to play an important role as a locally funded legal service for low-income residents in East London, operating in conditions of deprivation and housing insecurity, though its long-term sustainability was uncertain.

## 1980

### ECONOMIC PRESSURES

Rising unemployment and recession intensified employment casework. The Centre represented workers facing redundancy, unfair dismissal, and deteriorating working conditions. Legal changes, particularly the Employment Act 1980, weakened employee protections, increasing demand for advice and tribunal representation despite limited access to legal aid.

### EXPANSION INTO NEW AREAS

The Centre broadened its services, notably in immigration and care law. Immigration work expanded significantly with a specialist solicitor, covering cases such as appeals, overstaying, and settlement applications, alongside community training and policy engagement. Care work involved representing parents in proceedings where local authorities sought control over children, raising concerns about social services practices.

EMPLOYMENT  
ACT 1980 WEAKENS  
EMPLOYEE  
PROTECTIONS

## 1981

### NATIONALITY PROJECT

Hackney Community Law Centre played a vital role in supporting immigrant communities during a period of major legal change. It expanded local access to immigration advice, including complex cases such as foreign fiancé applications, while responding proactively to the **British Nationality Act 1981**. Through training sessions, public meetings, and collaboration with community groups, it helped residents understand their rights and navigate citizenship rules. The creation of Hackney Action on Immigration and Nationality strengthened grassroots support, while large-scale advice efforts enabled over 100 applications to be submitted before fee increases—saving vulnerable residents thousands of pounds and ensuring continued access to justice.



## 1988-89

### HACKNEY'S HOMELESS PERSONS UNIT

The Homeless Persons Unit at Mare Street is closed to the public between February and April 1988.

### SECURING JUSTICE AT THE HIGH COURT FOR A KURDISH REFUGEE

Hackney Law Centre defended Mr S, a Kurdish refugee tortured in Turkey for his ethnicity and faith. After the Home Office rejected his asylum claim and set a removal date, the Law Centre gathered evidence, including medical proof of torture, and made urgent representations. Days before deportation, they sought a High Court review. The judge ruled that the Home Office had not properly considered the case, forcing a reassessment. This intervention stopped Mr S's removal and gave him a renewed chance of safety in Britain.

“ CONSTITUENTS WHO COME TO ME ARE WITHOUT HOPE AND AT THE END OF THEIR TETHER BECAUSE OF THE HOUSING IN WHICH THEY ARE FORCED TO LIVE. THE TRAGEDY IS THAT I CAN OFFER THEM NO HOPE ”

Diane Abbott MP, House of Commons speech in reference to her constituency advice sessions

## CASE STUDIES

### PROTECTIONS FOR VULNERABLE WORKERS

A notable success for Hackney Law Centre was *Daley v Dorset (Almar Rolls) Ltd (1981)*, highlighting the impact of economic decline on workers' rights. Mr. Daley, dismissed after eight years' service, secured compensation recognising both immediate loss of earnings and long-term loss of statutory notice rights. The Employment Appeal Tribunal awarded four weeks' wages and accepted that such rights had greater value in a worsening economy. It also confirmed employees should not be penalised for refusing lower-paid work after dismissal, strengthening protections for vulnerable workers.

### LANDMARK SEX DISCRIMINATION CASE

Another notable win was a landmark sex discrimination case involving Mrs. C, clarifying the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. She was dismissed from her travel agency job after marriage, based on assumptions about her husband as breadwinner and confidentiality concerns linked to his job with a rival firm. The Law Centre showed she had been treated less favourably than a man. Although the Employment Appeal Tribunal overturned parts of the decision, the Court of Appeal—supported by the Equal Opportunities Commission—ruled the dismissal unlawful. While damages for injury to feelings were reduced, the case established an important principle and marked a significant step in challenging gender-based workplace discrimination.

## 1980s



## 1985

### FUNDING CRISIS

The 1985 Hackney Law Centre Chair's report describes a year of unfulfilled hopes, where dedicated staff maintained services despite major disruption caused by a funding crisis that created weeks of uncertainty before resulting in a real-terms budget cut. The report criticises the continued undervaluing of staff through below-standard pay, warns of risks to recruitment and retention, and expresses regret at the limited involvement of councillors in the management committee, urging greater engagement in future.

Hackney Law Centre supported community groups facing uncertainty caused by the local authority's dispute with central government over rate-capping and potential funding cuts.

## 1980-81

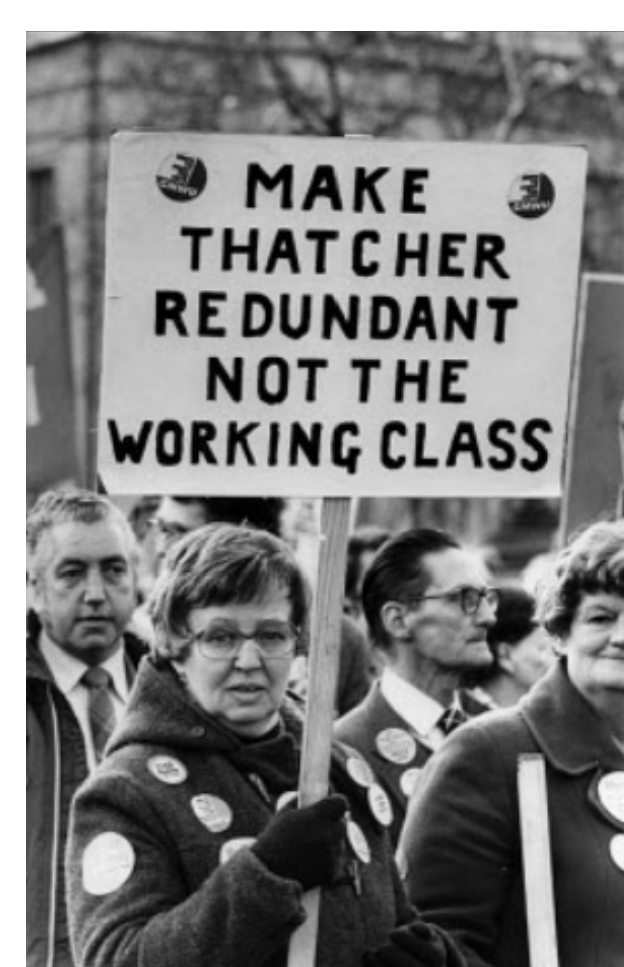
### RESEARCH, COMMUNITY WORK AND POLICY INFLUENCE

Beyond casework, the Centre strengthened its role in research and community engagement. It supported community groups and tenants such as Wigan House Tenants Association where the Law Centre provided legal representation and a link between the council and the tenants, contributed to campaigns (e.g., fuel debt issues), and provided training and information services. While individual case success was high, broader policy impact remained limited due to resource constraints.

## 1980

### HOUSING AND LEGAL ADVOCACY

Housing remained the Law Centre's core workload, driven by severe pressures in both public and private sectors during the recession. The Centre handled complex tenant cases, including disrepair, eviction, and landlord misconduct, and increasingly acted as the main source of legal representation in Hackney. It also pursued strategic litigation and test cases, responded to the Housing Act 1980, and supported tenant groups in disputes with local authorities and landlords.



Report Digital

