

Ogunwobi's seek sanctuary, New Labour & Access to Justice

MAJOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The 1990s in the UK saw recovery after an early recession and a shift to a service-based economy under John Major and New Labour. Key events included the Poll Tax Riots and the Good Friday Agreement, while unrest such as the Brixton riots highlighted social tensions. Although employment improved, inequality persisted, especially in areas like Hackney, where deprivation and housing issues continued. The World Wide Web was born and areas such as Shoreditch and Hoxton began shifting from declining industrial districts toward urban regeneration.

NEW LABOUR AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE

New Labour reformed legal aid through the **Access to Justice Act 1999**, creating the Legal Services Commission- funding focused on housing, welfare, and immigration, recognising Law Centres' role. However, tighter contracts and more bureaucracy reduced flexibility and increased financial pressure, with some areas of law deprioritised. Law Centres also faced rising demand and reduced local funding, leading to fewer centres across the decade. Hackney Community Law Centre remained important for low-income residents despite uncertainty about its future.

1990

SERVICES UNDER THREAT

Hackney Law Centre's vital role continued as a small but essential service in one of London's most disadvantaged boroughs. The law centre faced significant strain as demand for its services grew while funding and support lagged behind. With a limited team, the centre provided a wide range of legal support—particularly in housing—through advice lines, court duty schemes, and targeted casework. It focused its efforts where need was greatest, addressing issues such as disrepair, homelessness, evictions, and landlord harassment. Despite heavy demand and constrained resources, the centre expanded its impact through partnerships with local solicitors and tenant groups. Its work on housing cases was especially significant, both in representing individuals at court and in tackling systemic failures—most notably by taking legal action against the council to restore access to services for homeless people.

1994-97

OGUNWOBİ FAMILY'S STRUGGLE AGAINST DEPORTATION

Between 1994 and 1997, the Ogunwobi Family Defence Campaign became one of Britain's most significant anti-deportation struggles. Facing deportation to Nigeria, Sunday and Bunmi Ogunwobi and their three children sought sanctuary in Hackney Downs Baptist Church in March 1994. In 1995 the Law centre recruited Pierre Makhlouf as an Anti-Deportation campaigner and it was involved in the same year in helping to set up and hosting the Hackney Refugee and Migrant Group (which in turn later helped to set up the Hackney Migrants Centre) and the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns (which later became Right to Remain). The Law Centre also supported and was involved in work with the Asylum Rights Campaign which was a coalition of mainly national charities, churches and campaigning organisations working for migrant and refugee rights. Supported by Hackney Law Centre, Pierre Makhlouf, church leaders and hundreds of local supporters, the family lived in the church for more than three years — the longest-running church sanctuary in British history. The campaign combined legal action, public protest and national solidarity organised by a Defence committee led by journalist Ian Rathbone (who was also a Law Centre management committee member), and Baptist Minister Steve Latham. Weekly vigils, media coverage, and support from figures included local MPs, councillors, bishops, and also US Human Rights Leader Jesse Jackson and South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, helped prevent deportation and drew international attention to the case. In July 1997, the family won the right to remain in the UK, marking a major national victory for refugee and migrant rights.

COURT CASE STUDIES

SEX DISCRIMINATION

A woman employed for four years became pregnant and agreed verbally with her employer to take three months' maternity leave. When she sought to return, her employer denied the agreement and claimed she had not followed the correct written procedure. The Tribunal found that an agreement had been reached and breached, ruling her dismissal unfair and amounting to sex discrimination. She was awarded £4,500.

COURT PROCEEDINGS INITIATED TO COMPEL COUNCIL TO ACT

Hackney Council's Homeless Persons Unit was closed to the public between August and November 1989. During this time, Mr and Mrs E and their six-year-old son were evicted by the people they had been staying with and had nowhere else to go. They went to the Homeless Persons Unit, but it was closed, despite the Council's legal duty to rehouse families with children in such circumstances. The family slept in their car that night. They returned the next day, but the Unit remained closed. After seeking help from CAB, who were unable to reach the Council, the case was referred to the Law Centre. When attempts to contact the Council also failed, the Law Centre initiated court proceedings to compel the Council to act. The Council did not attend court, and a judge ordered that the family be rehoused immediately. Even then, the order was not properly implemented. Only after a Law Centre lawyer intervened directly and warned of contempt of court proceedings did the Council comply, and the family was finally rehoused.

RACE DISCRIMINATION

A Nigerian catering assistant employed for 20 months was subjected to sustained racial abuse, including physical harassment and racist remarks. The treatment caused such significant stress that the client was prescribed tranquillisers. Although the employer sought to strike out the claim, the Tribunal found deliberate and malicious racial abuse and awarded £2,500 for injury to feelings.

1990s

1992

IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM

The 1992 Asylum Bill (later the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993) aimed at restricting immigration appeals and reducing protections for refugees. It proposed removing appeal rights in many visa cases, including for family members of British citizens and students, making future applications more difficult due to adverse immigration records. The bill also significantly affected asylum seekers by introducing very short appeal deadlines, faster decision-making processes, and limited access to legal aid or representation. In addition, it reduced housing protections for homeless asylum seekers, allowing local authorities to deny support even to vulnerable individuals and families, increasing the risk of destitution. The Law Centre continued to establish itself as a centre for excellence assisting refugees from multiple countries and committed to campaigning for a fair appeals system and better protections.

1991-2

FUNDING PRESSURES & DEFENDING RIGHTS

Uncertainty over Hackney Council's grant process strained the organisation. Political and legislative changes increased hardship for poorer communities, and a council funding shortfall left eight posts vacant across the Law Centre and Citizens Advice Bureaux, with £140,000 needed to restore services. Despite these challenges, the Law Centre continued defending rights across employment, education, and community life. It pursued an appeal for a dismissed rail worker alleging unfair treatment and racial bias, secured a child's reinstatement after a school exclusion, advised groups, challenged police misconduct, and handled telephone advice on housing, employment, immigration, and policing.

1996

HOUSING ACT 1996

- **Allocation Policies:** It introduced more restrictive, needs-based allocation systems, making it harder for people to get social housing unless they were deemed to be in "reasonable preference" categories.
- **Homelessness Reforms:** It limited the duty of local authorities to secure housing for homeless people, reducing the obligation to provide long-term housing.
- **Social Housing Definition:** Helped to cement the "social housing model" as a residual service (for the most needy) rather than a universal service. Critics argued the reforms would disadvantage vulnerable groups without addressing the real problem: a shortage of affordable housing.

“Its greatest strength was the dedication of its staff and volunteers, who continued to deliver high-quality support in difficult circumstances, reflecting a deep and enduring commitment to the community.”