

Pro Bono Week 2022: a report on the presentations and discussions

During November 2022, 68 public and internal events involving an estimated 5,000 attendees took place across the UK to encourage and discuss the role of the lawyers in volunteering to provide legal assistance to those in need. These were accompanied by various stories on legal outlets and posts on social media and websites. Law students listed in the annex volunteered to act as rapporteurs to take notes at most of the events, from which the following dozen points have been distilled to summarise the discussions.

If you would like to be introduced to organisations involved in discussions set out below, e.g. to find out more about a project or to look into addressing challenges, please contact info@probonoweek.org.uk.

1. Celebration and showcasing of pro bono, from small to big impact.

A key theme of many events and comms was celebrating the efforts of lawyers or showcasing particular pro bono projects.

- *Diverse examples of pro bono were showcased, ranging from a law firm assisting the establishment of a community centre, through to student law clinics helping refugees to obtain legal aid, through to larger collaborative projects.*
- *Figures were released by the Collaborative Plan showing the substantial level of pro bono hours at larger law firms, as also seen in the Law.com [survey](#).*
- *The contribution of barristers was celebrated at Advocate's 2022 Bar Pro Bono Awards.*
- *The Faculty of Advocates celebrated the contribution of its Free Legal Services Unit volunteers.*

2. Cost-of-living crisis: the public's increased need for help

[Presentations](#) evidenced increasing poverty driving vulnerable clients needing legal help. The concern was raised that charities do not have capacity to meet the need, and therefore pro bono has a role, though it cannot substitute for legal aid. Reference continued to be made as to the ongoing effect of the cuts from LAPSO. A related point was that small businesses are not traditionally vulnerable clients, but during financial difficulties they may struggle to afford legal assistance, and assisting them may indirectly help their employees who may be in working poverty.

A cost of living clinic was showcased, established by a local charity, with part funding from a law firm who, with a global bank, supplies weekly volunteers, trained and supervised by the charity.

3. Secondary specialisation to meet the need

Several events highlighted a long-standing problem that the specialism of volunteer lawyers often does not match the public's needs in key areas of law, and therefore of the importance of projects to train lawyers to volunteer in those areas. The point was also made as to the importance in such situations of ongoing support and supervision from specialist lawyers. The converse point was also raised that pro bono lawyers often help when charities do not have a relevant specialism in-house.

Examples of secondary specialisation highlighted in PBW included: DARA, KIND UK and LawWorks.

4. International crises: lawyers stepping up together

A number of events highlighted the role of national collaborative projects to enable lawyers to respond to refugee crises, in particular from Afghanistan and Ukraine, such as the Ukraine Advice Project. The role of digital platforms to coordinate pro bono work in future crises was highlighted.

5. The climate crisis: the role of lawyers

Pro Bono Week 2022 coincided with COP27 and many events focussed on how lawyers can help tackle climate change. Discussion points included how climate change is increasingly seen as a human rights issue; how climate law is developing, such as derivative claims and arguments about

the duties of directors under company law; and the future relevance to corporate law including climate/carbon becoming an aspect of private equity deals or debt financing.

Initiatives highlighted during PBW included: A4ID, Action 4 Justice, Chancery Lane Project, Client Earth, Environmental Law Foundation, Environmental Rights Centre for Scotland, Legal Response International and the PILS Project.

Examples of pro bono lawyers tackling climate change were showcased:

- *General legal assistance to climate groups, such as regarding comms/defamation advice.*
- *Drafting/inclusion of clauses into commercial and other contracts to improve climate goals.*
- *Local impact through advice on planning issues or helping draft consultation responses.*
- *Research to support COP negotiations, such as on the interpretation of international treaties.*

6. Launches during Pro Bono Week

Pro Bono Week is an annual opportunity to launch initiatives, and 2022 saw a number of launches.

- *The Network for Justice's new website.*
- *Guide to Pro Bono in Chambers – joint guide from Advocate, IBC and LPMA.*
- *Pilot scheme for early legal assistance by Community Legal Centre Essex and Central Law CIC.*
- *New premises for Liverpool John Moores University School of Law Legal Advice Centre.*
- *Ulster University Law Clinic Personal Litigant Guide.*
- *The establishment of a Pro Bono Committee for the North East of England.*
- *The Faculty of Advocates Free Legal Services Unit launched its reconstituted review panel.*
- *Cross-border NGO Engagement Guides showcased at the Law Society of Northern Ireland.*
- *Advocate launched a report on its 25 for 25 Pro Bono Challenge.*
- *A draft update to the Guide to Pro Bono was presented at a meeting at Parliament of the APPG on Pro Bono, responding to a request for better signposting information for MPs.*

7. The business case for pro bono

Both the personal benefits for lawyers and the business benefits were emphasised during events.

Examples of the benefits of pro bono highlighted during PBW:

- *For junior lawyers, providing additional experience in new areas or for advocacy.*
- *How clients are generally increasingly aware and critical of lawyer's contributions to society, requiring demonstrative CSR / ESG policies.*
- *Pro bono is increasingly seen as a recruitment tool, and a litmus test for graduate recruits.*
- *The increasing recognition of the value of pro bono in retention of staff.*

8. Technology for geographical reach and increased volunteering

Building on previous Pro Bono Week discussions during the pandemic, a key focus of some discussions was how online clinics overcome traditional geographical barriers to deliver help outside urban centres. In addition, that remote volunteering can increase the number or breadth of lawyers able to volunteer. Challenges of online/remote clinics were discussed including maintaining relationships, both between the organisation and its volunteers, or between the adviser and client. A further point concerned how online clinics can leave behind digitally excluded and disabled people.

- *One hybrid clinic now has 2/3 of their clients coming from outside the urban centre.*
- *Digitisation at one clinic saved 30-40% of the time for clients to complete application forms.*
- *An example was given of a digital form leading to a higher success or accuracy rate.*
- *The role of new legal technology platforms using Whatsapp like solutions to offer asynchronous communication with clients such as refugees, and to enable collaboration between multiple lawyers/ firms including to allocate cases to them.*

9. The next generation: student pro bono

Events across the UK were organised for or by law students, reflecting the prevalence of pro bono

clinics and other clinical legal education at most law schools/universities.

Examples showcased of students supervised by academic or external pro bono lawyers:

- *Students triaging clients at clinics and note taking for the lawyer.*
- *Volunteering at Citizens Advice alongside the agency staff.*
- *Legal companions scheme at a call centre in conjunction with the local court.*
- *Volunteering alongside a Welfare Rights Service at a city council.*
- *Business law clinics for start ups, offering experience of commercial law to students, supervised by junior solicitors acting pro bono.*

10. In-house and Government lawyers

The ability of in-house lawyers to do pro bono was explored, including at events organised by both the Law Society of England & Wales, and the In-House Pro Bono Group. Barriers such as insurance were discussed, together the opportunities such as in-house counsel engaging with legal suppliers about pro bono. Pro Bono Week also saw a renewed focus of the ability of Government and public sector lawyers to do pro bono, including addressing conflicts of interest issues.

Following their establishment in 2022 of a Pro Bono Committee, the FCA joined Pro Bono Week for the first time, jointly arranging an event with the GLD Pro Bono & Volunteering Network.

11. Collaboration and coordination: overarching themes

An overarching theme in many events and comms was the importance of the national charities, collaborative projects and cross-sector initiatives, in order to make pro bono effective. Equally, the importance of pro bono being delivered in collaboration with the front-line advice sector.

Collaborations highlighted during PBW included:

- *The LawWorks network of over 200 clinics.*
- *The network of regional pro bono committees.*
- *Examples of long-standing partnerships between advice charities and law firms such as Toynbee Hall who benefits from 2,000 pro bono hours a year from lawyers and law firms.*
- *The Collaborative Plan for Pro Bono bringing together law firms and pro bono professionals.*
- *The new network of pro bono officers for the Bar circuits across England & Wales.*
- *Advocate's collaboration with IBC and LPMA to set out best practice for pro bono in chambers.*
- *Pro Bono Connect enabling barristers and solicitors to work together on pro bono cases.*
- *The Network for Justice bringing together a diverse membership across the justice space.*

12. Barriers and challenges

Finally, events during Pro Bono Week highlighted a number of possible or perceived barriers and challenges for delivering pro bono.

Examples of challenges or barriers expressed during PBW discussions:

- *The need ultimately for increased funding for legal aid, given the limited role of pro bono.*
- *The need for better data collection/research about pro bono across all parts of the profession.*
- *Challenges for in-house lawyers, in particular insurance and conflicts of interest.*
- *The need to encourage more of the profession to volunteer, given the unmet need.*
- *Not all members of the profession being aware of the different opportunities to do pro bono.*
- *Day job pressures and the importance of healthy work/personal life balance.*
- *A shortage of specialist or trained volunteers in certain areas of need.*
- *The increasing numbers of clients with vulnerabilities, trauma, and/or multifaceted problems, for which pro bono lawyers may not have training or experience.*
- *Fragmentation of delivery from the client's perspective.*
- *Difficulty in signposting or referring clients to where help is available.*
- *The need for more funding for the advice sector/charities.*
- *Pro bono not being included within utilisation/billable hours targets in some law firms.*

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