

PRESS RELEASE – 28 OCTOBER 2026

UK's most senior judges welcome new exhibition charting the history of pro bono

A groundbreaking exhibition on the history of pro bono legal work across the UK has been officially launched in the Houses of Parliament and is now available to view online at historyofprobono.uk.

The History of Pro Bono exhibition has been created to mark the 25th anniversary of UK Pro Bono Week, which takes place from 2 to 6 November. It traces the tradition of lawyers volunteering their time to provide free legal help over the centuries.

It is based on months of research led by the chair of UK Pro Bono Week, drawing on historical records and academic scholarship, and brought together with artwork and manuscripts dating to 1300 AD alongside historical photographs. This is the first time that this history has been curated into a visually engaging format.

In addition, more than 50 law firms, charities, universities and individuals from across the UK responded to the Pro Bono Week committee's call for submissions, contributing photos, videos and articles which have been incorporated into the exhibition.

As well as diving into the little-known history of ancient Roman advocates and the pro bono tradition of ecclesiastical lawyers in England and Scotland, the exhibition features well-known names – from John Lennon, who features as one of the first clients of drug advice charity Release, to future Prime Minister Keir Starmer, mentioned for his part in the successful 2005 challenge to Uganda's mandatory death penalty.

Among the landmark cases in the spotlight is the 1772 English case of *Somerset v Stewart*, where barristers including Francis Hargrave appeared pro bono on behalf of an escaped slave – whose victory helped pave the way for the abolition of the slave trade.

The exhibition was launched in Parliament on Monday 26 October by the Solicitor General for England and Wales, Andy Slaughter KC MP, who chairs the Attorney General's Pro Bono Committee, and Lord Willy Bach, co-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Access to Justice.

In a joint statement, the heads of the UK's three judiciaries welcomed the initiative and paid tribute to the thousands of lawyers who undertake pro bono work each year.

Baroness Carr of Walton-on-the-Hill, Lady Chief Justice of England and Wales, **Dame**

Siobhan Keegan, Lady Chief Justice of Northern Ireland, and **Lord Pentland**, Lord President of the Court of Session, said:

“It is a longstanding tradition of lawyers to volunteer to provide free legal help to those unable to afford it. Indeed, pro bono must be as old as the legal profession itself. It goes to the heart of what it means to be a lawyer: serving the law and justice.

“As the Lady Chief Justices and Lord President, we follow a long tradition ourselves of encouraging the profession to do pro bono, as our predecessors have done for 500 years.

“We therefore welcome for the 25th Pro Bono Week the new exhibition on the History of Pro Bono, which places in historical context the commitment of thousands of lawyers who today give their time freely.

“On behalf of the people and charities helped through pro bono, we express our gratitude to the profession for continuing that historic legacy.”

Speaking at the launch event, the **Solicitor General Andy Slaughter MP** said:

“As an MP, I see firsthand how legal problems can impact a person’s life, and the value of pro bono lawyers in supporting people through these challenges.

“Pro bono is a vital part of our legal system – helping to ensure justice is available to everyone. This exhibition rightly celebrates the people and organisations who have delivered that help for 25 years, and I hope it inspires many more to get involved.”

Toby Brown, chair of UK Pro Bono Week’s organising committee, said in his remarks:

“As we celebrate Pro Bono Week’s silver anniversary, we hope that the History of Pro Bono exhibition will become a living project that helps the future legal profession understand our shared tradition of pro bono.

“I would like to extend my thanks to everyone who contributed to and supported this exhibition, in particular to Emily Sherratt of the National Pro Bono Centre, the Pro Bono Week committee and the Attorney General’s Office.”

As an example of historical materials in the exhibition, Mr Brown read from Lord Commissioner Whitelocke’s 1648 speech setting out the professional ethics of serjeants-at-law, the earliest order of senior barristers that appeared in the 13th century:

“For your duty to particular clients you may consider, that some are rich, yet with such there must be no endeavour to lengthen causes, to continue fees. Some are poor, yet their business must not be neglected, if their cause be honest, they are not the worst clients, though they fill not your purses, they will fill the ears of God with prayers for you, and he who is the defender of the poor will repay your charity.”

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Editor's notes

Now in its 25th anniversary year, UK Pro Bono Week takes place from 2-6 November 2026. This year's theme is: "Celebrate a tradition. Inspire action. Shape the future."

To view the full calendar of events, visit: probonoweb.org.uk/events

For more information or interview requests, contact:

Jasmine Gadhavi

Senior Account Executive

Byfield Consultancy

jasmine@byfieldconsultancy.com

020 7092 3984

Connor Beaton

Senior Communications Officer

National Pro Bono Centre

cbeaton@nationalprobonocentre.org.uk

07850 365430

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