

A helping hand into the underfunded area of social welfare law



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Swingeing cuts to legal aid have left high-street firms concentrating on survival rather than training the next generation of lawyers. However, the two issues are inexorably linked.

The cuts have made it financially unviable for firms and advice centres specialising in social welfare law to train aspiring lawyers, and the mix could result in the death of access to justice for many people.

One programme, though, appears to be swimming against the tide. Now in its third year, the Justice First Fellowship (JFF) scheme provides a vital training route for the next generation of social welfare lawyers, and it is already bearing fruit.

Of the nine in the first cohort of fellows, who qualified as solicitors in February, all have found employment. Sophie Earnshaw, a trainee at the Child Poverty Action Group, worked on a successful Supreme Court challenge to the government's so-called bedroom tax.

Set up in 2014 and funded by the Legal Education Foundation (LEF), charitable trusts and large law firms, it provides training contracts and pupillages, giving grants to the host organisations to cover the fellows' salary, supervision and other costs.

Alongside their training, fellows run their own projects aimed at advancing access to justice and are taught about project planning, communications, fundraising, networking and technology, to enable them to run effective, sustainable services.

The scheme enables students from diverse backgrounds to pursue a career in social welfare law. Brooke Toon was a teenage parent living in a mother and baby hostel. After completing her law degree and legal practice course at Nottingham Trent University, she volunteered at the Citizens Advice Bureau, and began her training contract at Birmingham Community Law Centre this year.

"I went from being an excluded member of society to someone helping others and I thought: 'This is where I want to be,'" she says.

Without the scheme, Toon doubts she would have been able to get a training contract in this field. She says: "People are discouraged from making a career in legal aid because of the cuts, and the service is underrated."

Highlighting the need for the scheme, barrister and LEF governor, Tim Dutton, QC, says: “We cannot ignore the risk that lawyers of high talent, a sense of social justice, and moral commitment may not be able to train in the areas of social welfare law where help is so desperately needed and on such a wide scale.”

Details of the 17 placements for 2018, which will take the total number of fellows to 50, will be published on the JFF website later this month.

jff.thelegaleducationfoundation.org