

PRESS RELEASE

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First cohort of Justice First Fellows reaches qualification

The Legal Education Foundation's innovative Justice First Fellowship has passed an important milestone, with its first ever intake of fellows qualifying as solicitors.

The nine solicitor Fellows who joined the then embryonic scheme in 2014 completed their legal training at some of the country's leading social welfare organisations, including Public Law Project, Coram Children's Legal Centre, and Coventry Law Centre.

TLEF chief executive Matthew Smerdon said:

'I would like to congratulate all the Fellows on completing their training - and for helping us pioneer the Justice First Fellowship. It is thanks to them and their host organisations that the scheme has exceeded our expectations, and is well on track to creating the social welfare law leaders of the future.'

The first nine Fellows to qualify as solicitors are:

- Melissa Darnbrough (Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit)
- Deidre Flanigan (Govan Law Centre)
- Fanny Forest (Coventry Law Centre)*
- Maryam Hussain (Deighton Pierce Glynn)
- Nadia Hussain (Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit)
- Helen Roberts (Speakeasy Advice Centre)*
- Debra Robinson (Staffordshire North and Stoke on Trent Citizens Advice Bureaux)
- Amber Rowsell (Coram Children's Legal Centre)
- Katy Watts (Public Law Project)

Another nine Fellows are due to qualify as solicitors in early 2018; a further 15 will qualify in late 2018/early 2019, including the first two barrister Fellows.

Denise McDowell, director of Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit, which hosted two of the inaugural Fellows, said:

'To us, the fellowship scheme felt like a ray of hope, coming at a time of legal aid cuts and closures in the advice sector. The financial contribution is important - without it, we would never have been able to find the money for a new post - but it's more than that. It is about optimism, and investing in the future and saying "We are not done yet".'

Katy Watts, the Justice First Fellow based at Public Law Project, said:

'Without the Justice First Fellowship I wouldn't have had the opportunity to train at the Public Law Project, and feel incredibly lucky to have been part of the first cohort of this innovative scheme. It has provided opportunities beyond those of the average training contract. Workshops in fundraising, social media and project planning have helped me develop the skills necessary for a social welfare lawyer in an increasingly difficult environment. I've also made lasting friendships with other Fellows, and look forward to building on that network for future projects.'

**For further information, contact Matthew Smerdon, TLEF chief executive;
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Photos of Fellows available on request

Notes for editors:

1. The Legal Education Foundation was founded in 2012 and promotes legal education to help people better understand and use the law. www.thelegaleducationfoundation.org
2. TLEF launched the Justice First Fellowship in 2014, and funds the salary, supervision and associated costs of trainees at selected social welfare organisations. As well as completing their legal training, Fellows undertake a project aimed at increasing access to justice. This gives them valuable development experience and gives the host organisation a chance to develop an income-generating area of work that could contribute to the salary of the Fellow after the Foundation's funding ends. Fellows also participate in wider activities organised by the Foundation, which brings Fellows together, introducing them to ideas, practices, and contacts that will equip them to develop into future leaders of the social welfare law sector. Topics covered include project planning and evaluation, technology, communications, fundraising, and preparation for transition to life as a newly-qualified lawyer. The Foundation and some of the current Fellows are working with Young Legal Aid Lawyers to develop wider networks and sources of support and development for the period after the scheme.
3. Of the eight Fellows who are now qualified (see below), five have been retained by their host organisations and are working as social welfare law solicitors; one has moved to private practice as an employment lawyer. The post-qualification plans of the other three are being finalised. Updated details available on request.

4. *Helen Roberts qualified in June 2016, as the start of her training contract predated the formal launch of the Fellowship scheme; Fanny Forest is on a part-time training contract, and is due to qualify in July 2017.