

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

# The newly opened Greater Manchester Law Centre offers free, independent legal advice and representation

159 Princess Road, Manchester, M14 4RE

***In the face of legal aid and local authority cuts, and law centre closures, Greater Manchester Law Centre (GMLC), a community organisation offering free, independent legal advice and representation, has opened its doors. With the collective support of volunteers, lawyers, judges, trade unions, 3<sup>rd</sup> sector groups and the community, and all in the short space of a year, GMLC has managed to secure funding for a solicitor for the next 3 years, set up its first free welfare benefits service and move into newly renovated offices in the heart of Moss Side.***

Legal aid has been cut again and again. Government “reforms” have made huge areas of law ineligible for legal aid provision. Many law centres across the country, whom were largely reliant on legal aid, were therefore forced to close. Only 2 law centres service the entirety of the ten boroughs of Greater Manchester and its 2.7million people. The number of people representing themselves in court has increased and the cuts are also having a disproportionate effect on women, disabled people and BME communities<sup>1</sup>. People desperately need legal advice to deal with vicious benefit sanctions, homelessness, ill treatment at work, cuts in mental health support, an escalating culture and legitimisation of racism, and all the complications of daily changes in benefit and immigration regulations.

Whilst law centres are closing down, Greater Manchester is once again going against the grain and the community have come together to make the seemingly impossible happen. First, we succeeded in gaining a generous grant (from the Tudor Trust) for a Development Worker post for 12 months. Developing our strategic fund raising approach for the long term and raising our profile locally, nationally and across hyperspace, together our workers have encouraged

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/publication\\_additional/Equality%20human%20rights%20and%20access%20to%20civil%20law%20justice%20Exec%20Summary.pdf](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/publication_additional/Equality%20human%20rights%20and%20access%20to%20civil%20law%20justice%20Exec%20Summary.pdf)

supporters and made links with lawyers, universities and community groups. Second, we have attracted hundreds of supporters including volunteer advisers, sessional solicitors, individual fund-raisers and office volunteers – so we have been able to deliver free welfare benefits advice services. Third, we have taken occupancy of 159 Princess Road, on the main road into Manchester through the inner city communities of Moss Side and Hulme. This followed two local well attended public consultation meetings, at which there was unanimous approval of a community law centre becoming established in the area. Now, with funding secured for a supervising solicitor for at least the next three years, the law centre continues to go from strength to strength.

Patrons of the law centre include renowned lawyers Michael Mansfield QC, John Hendy QC, Robert Lizar, Lord Willy Bach, local academic Dr Dawn Edge, community activist Dr Erinma Bell and critically acclaimed Bolton-born actress Maxine Peake. MPs have also pitched in their support for the law centre. MP for Leigh and former Shadow Home Secretary Andy Burnham stated that *'I fully support the idea of the Greater Manchester Law Centre and congratulate all those involved in getting it off the ground. I am very worried that my constituents are finding it harder and harder to get access to justice and are more and more vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers. This initiative is of crucial importance and has my complete backing.'* Support has also come from the North West Trades Union Congress, Unite and Unison branches as well as local community organisations such as the Peoples History Museum.

John Nicholson, Chair of the Greater Manchester Law Centre, said *'we do not just want to be a law centre, but a campaign for law centres generally. Nor do we want just to provide some service delivery, important though that is, on an occasional basis alongside foodbanks or similar. While we want lawyers to help us by providing pro bono advice now, this isn't to let Government or Councils off the hook; we need a new generation of paid social welfare lawyers, we demand the restoration of legal aid, and we are first and foremost a campaign for access to justice for all.'*

ENDS.

## Contact

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