

Strive to make law work for everyone

New solicitor at Ethnic Minorities Legal Centre will help educate and deliver justice, says **Graeme Andrews**

TRUE social inclusion and cultural sensitivity demands more than an open mind-set and a sympathetic approach. The rationale for our system of society must include impartiality and integrity.

As international mobility increases – sometimes as a result of dispersal through territorial human rights infringement or economic landscape – our increasingly diverse community in Scotland needs pragmatic solutions aimed at integration.

Ensuring access to justice and, just as important, educating new residents from ethnic minorities in the way of our laws and indigenous customs, is vital work towards advancing fair and harmonious outcomes.

Ethnic Minorities Legal Centre (EMLC), based in Glasgow but working with all ethnic minorities in need of assistance across Scotland – working with other relevant Scottish agencies – provides an important link by offering specialised legal services. It is now seeking a Deputy Principal Solicitor to share its leadership.

This law centre is governed by a Board of Directors from all walks of life – from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities, local authorities and the universities of Glasgow and

Strathclyde. Jonathan E Squire MBE, Convenor of Board of Directors at EMLC, clarifies its operational structure. “Apart from Legal Aid Income the EMLC have service level agreements with Glasgow City Council, North and South Lanarkshire, Perth & Kinross, the Scottish Government and The Big Lottery,” he says. “Our legal team comprises qualified solicitors, trainee solicitors, caseworkers and administrative staff.”

Aspects of culture and custom, regarded as common and important by some clients, may be at odds with legal, legislative or societal trends in Scotland. It is a stated core value that the Centre will “respect” these differences. But Squire is adamant that is not about accommodating exceptions to the rules by which every citizen must abide.

“One of the primary aims of the EMLC is to educate and advocate with regard to respect for the laws of the UK among our client groups and also to provide cultural awareness training to all sections of the community,” he explains.

“We campaign to promote respect for diversity for all sections of the community and raise awareness of changes in national and local legislation.”

Four specific areas of law represent the foundation blocks for EMLC.



BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE: The new Deputy Principal Solicitor will work closely with ethnic minority individuals who are in need of legal advice.

Asylum, refugee and human rights issues are perhaps first on the agenda. It represent clients from the initial stages of their asylum claim, through appeals to the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal and up to the Court of Session.

It also deals with people whose initial asylum claims have been refused by assisting them to make fresh claims. That occurs when they have new evidence, allowing them to submit representations to remain in the UK on human rights grounds – where they have built strong ties with the UK, have

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families here or have other compassionate grounds.

EMLC represents large numbers of clients whose cases are being reassessed under the Home Office “legacy” review.

For those granted refugee status, the Centre assists them in making applications for travel documents and family reunion, easing the process of being reunited with the close relatives from whom they were separated when they were forced to flee their home countries.

Immigration is another important aspect of its service provision. Applications for entry clearance for friends and family to visit or stay in the UK, applications for further leave to remain in the UK for those who already have limited leave, the Highly Skilled Migrant Programme, and student and post study work visa applications are covered.

British Citizenship applications, visa category switch, applications under the Domestic Violence concession for women who have been subject to domestic abuse, “overstayers”, appeals

against refusal of entry clearance or leave to remain in the UK are additional aspects. The service is available to individuals and their family members, but it is not able to act on behalf of employers or institutions.

Cases relating to discrimination and the protected characteristics – age, disability, sex, race, religion/belief, gender, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity, and marriage/civil partnership – feature in the workload.

Legal advice and representation is provided in both Employment Tribunals (employment law is yet another offering) and Sheriff Courts.

Situations involving criminal injuries compensation are assessed.

This is centred on preparation of applications, and appeals to the Criminal Injuries Appeal Panel.

As well as undertaking casework in these areas, the centre provides a telephone advice line for individuals seeking advice on such issues. Second tier advice and practical training is available to advisors in partner advice organisations, including Citizens Advice Bureaux.

ADVICE FOR ALL

THE range of nationalities found within the EMLC client group reflects the diverse nature of the community now residing in Scotland.

It includes, but is not limited to those from Europe, Africa, the Middle East and North and South America.

Those from Africa typically come from Algeria, Burundi, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ghana, Liberia, Mauritius, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Clients from Europe might come from Bulgaria, France, Italy, Latvia, Poland and Romania. Turning to the Middle East, EMLC represents those from Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Syria and Turkey. People from Brazil, Columbia, Honduras and the USA might also seek their advice.