

# Learning first hand from the legal experts

**Mentoring can be a powerful tool for personal and professional development. Savita Narain, AdviceUK's Development Consultant (Developing Discrimination Advice) explains how a pilot mentoring scheme is matching specialist discrimination advice workers with pro bono lawyers**

The Discrimination Advice Pro Bono Mentoring Project is being piloted by the Working Together for Advice project in association with the Bar Pro Bono Unit. Working Together for Advice is funded by the Big Lottery Fund to provide a range of support services to not-for-profit advice organisations throughout England.

The Pro Bono Mentoring Project enables mentor pro bono lawyers across England to provide one-to-one support on developing casework skills and legal knowledge to specialist discrimination advisers working in the not-for-profit sector. The main purpose of the scheme is to reduce the isolation of discrimination advisers in the not-for-profit sector, while providing them with access to an experienced and skilled expert who can help them develop their casework skills and legal knowledge. The project also aims to build links, understanding and encourage joint working between the not-for-profit and private legal sectors.

The project was launched in July 2009, after applications were invited from interested mentees and mentors. Fifteen mentees have been matched with 14 mentors (one mentor committed to taking on two mentees!), and the aim is to pilot the scheme for a year, before making recommendations for its continuation and development.

The mentee/mentor matches were made on the basis of a number of factors, including geographical location, preference for method of mentoring contact and areas of specialism. Mentees are located across England in AdviceUK member organisations, Citizens Advice Bureaux and Law Centres. Most of them are specialist discrimination advisers, although a couple are specialists in other areas who were looking to develop their discrimination advice skills and knowledge. The mentors are all qualified barristers and include two Queens Counsels.

The scheme recommends that mentoring sessions of around one and half hours take place once a month. Mentoring can be delivered face-to-face or over the phone. The scheme recommends that mentees and mentors sign a mentoring agreement at the beginning of their relationship in order to manage expectations and agree boundaries. A template mentoring agreement was provided by the scheme. Mentees are also asked to keep mentoring record sheets of each mentoring session.

Evaluation of the pilot mentoring scheme is due to start soon. So far it seems to be a relatively simple, but effective way of organising professional and skilled support for not-for-profit advisers. The hope is that this will lead to a bigger, more developed mentoring scheme in the future.

## Mentoring in action

**Two participants of the Pro Bono Mentoring project give their perspectives as mentee and mentor:**

**Mentee:** Mr Kapil Vansadia

**Job Title:** Caseworker

**Organisation:** Newham Monitoring Project

**Description of organisation:** Newham Monitoring Project offers advice and support for BME suffering from racial discrimination, race hate crime and policing issues. Emergency helpline: 0800 169 3111

**What motivated you to take part in the mentoring pilot?**

I wanted to improve my skills in that particular area of casework, and ultimately to improve the level of advice work offered to clients supported by Newham Monitoring Project. I thought that meeting with someone on a regular basis as a mentor would be the best way of doing this; to be face to face with someone to listen and absorb information.

Part of what we do is to monitor statutory response – ie police response or a local authority's response to BME groups. Being aware of public bodies and their duties to the people is key, and Andrew does exactly that.

#### How often do you meet?

Once a month

#### What are the main benefits of having a mentor?

It's quite useful to see Andrew because sometimes it can be good to speak to someone outside of the organisation who can advise on a particular case. One of the benefits is the opportunity to have regular meetings.

We discuss cases in relation to the issues and the legislation relating to discrimination and harassment. It also offers the chance to be open and honest, and to explore new areas and methods of work and action.

#### Were there any benefits that you didn't expect?

It has opened up a network. Andrew has put me in touch with various advice groups including Bar Pro Bono Unit and with other organisations that do similar work to us.

It has also helped me to work on the basic advice and casework skills and to look at more advanced and effective methods to action cases, whether it be legal tools or other tools. Andrew can be willing to go beyond the scope of what was expected of him.

#### What difference has this made to your personal or professional development?

It's made a positive difference. I think about cases with a lot more precision and scope. I have more attention to detail, and my support to clients is a lot stronger and this has been shown by the way in which we challenge groups on behalf of clients in tackling racial discrimination and civil liberties issues.

**Mentor:** Andrew Hillier QC

**Chambers:** 11 KBW

**Specialism:** Employment/public law

#### What motivated you to take part in the mentoring pilot?

I have a keen interest in pro bono work generally and am closely involved in the Bar Pro Bono Unit. I was therefore keen to see what the experience of front-line agencies was, since they are the main referrers to the Unit. You learn a lot from people at the sharp-end who are dealing with clients as they come in off the street. As a barrister you don't have to tackle many of the day to day problems the advisers have to deal with and so it's useful to hear their experience.

I also thought this was a worthwhile project which was good to get involved in and provide any help I could.

#### What do you get out of being a mentor?

Knowledge of the sort of problems Kapil has to resolve. In this case, the day to day experience of racial issues, their complexity (i.e tensions between various ethnic minorities), relationships between the community & the police.

Newham Rights Centre is a very interesting and very busy organisation. It was good to gain an understanding of the limited resources of the agency, given the amount of work it is doing.

I've had an enjoyable personal relationship with Kapil. We have constructive meetings. I've visited him at his offices. He has enjoyed getting out and coming up to the Temple.

#### How has the mentoring fulfilled your expectations or motivations?

I have learned about the problems as I expected and so have become more aware of racial issues and that there's still a long way to go before we can really feel we are overcoming the problem of covert prejudice. I think Kapil feels he has benefited from the contact both generally and from discussing specific cases and how he should approach them.

There's still quite a lot more to do in relation to this Project. I think we need to pull together what we've been doing into something more cohesive so that what we've all learned is not forgotten.

