



**2012 is the 40th anniversary of the founding of LAG. Throughout this year, we will be producing publications and holding events to celebrate this milestone, and to promote our thinking on access to justice and legal services. Here, Poonam Bhari, LAG's chairperson, writes about LAG's 40 years as a champion of access to justice and its plans for the future.**

# Legal Action Group: 40 years as the access to justice charity

In 1972, we published the first LAG Bulletin, which eventually became the *Legal Action* journal. Subsequently, LAG moved into training courses and book publishing. Our publications and training courses continue to inform lawyers and advisers about developments in the law. They have been successful over the years in assisting practitioners to become more expert in areas of work which are important to the poor and other vulnerable groups. We have had more mixed success in our policy work. For example, in our 20th anniversary year we published *A Strategy for Justice*, which attempted to set out the problems and solutions to providing accessible publicly funded legal services.

One of the central ideas in *A Strategy for Justice* was to suggest that a coherent method was needed to plan the provision of legal services. One proposal was for a legal services commission to take over from the then Legal Aid Board, which was run by the Law Society. Local planning of legal advice services was also suggested. Both of these ideas were adopted, but with what can only be judged as partial success. An illustration of this was the last government's development of Community Legal Service Partnerships (CLSPs) to better plan and co-ordinate services, much along the lines of LAG's proposals, but subsequently CLSPs were abandoned to save costs.

The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill currently before the House of Lords threatens a radical recasting of legal aid and access to

justice policy to the detriment of many millions of people. LAG has played a leading role in the Justice for All campaign, a coalition of many organisations fighting against the government's proposals (see page 4 of this issue). So far the signs are good that the House of Lords will amend the bill favourably, but it is not until its return to the House of Commons in the spring that we will learn whether the government is going to accept the amendments or get into a tussle over them with the House of Lords.

Last year, we worked with the government to persuade it to make resources available to the not for profit sector to offset the impact of cuts in both legal aid and other sources of funding for legal advice services. Due in part to our efforts, the government made £20m available through the Advice Services Fund (£16.8m for England with the rest to be split between Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). We are concerned that this should be more than just a 'one-off' contribution and will continue to try to influence the government on this.

One of the major problems with legal services policy is that it is perceived by the government and much of the media to be mainly of concern to legal services providers and the justice system. LAG believes that it is important to engage with the end users of legal advice services. Our opinion poll research on social welfare law, released to coincide with the publication of the government's plans for legal aid in November 2010, showed that a remarkable 84 per cent of a cross section

of the public supported the view that advice services in civil law should be either free to everyone or to those on the national average income or below.

## The year ahead

LAG wants to make the argument directly to the public to support policies which lead to greater access to justice for everyone, whether it is through the greater availability of representation in courts or the wider reach of public legal education. To reflect this aim, we will describe ourselves in future as: 'LAG: the access to justice charity'.

Over the coming months, we hope to initiate further research projects on legal services and a major policy book is planned for publication in November this year. *Legal Action* journal will publish a series of articles on the future of legal services and access to justice policy. Along with other events, we will also be holding a special reception for the many authors, trainers, former staff and others who have contributed to LAG's work over the years.

An important part of the 40th anniversary celebration is the appeal which we are launching this month to raise £40,000 to support LAG's policy and other work. The cut backs in government spending are affecting every firm and organisation in the legal sector. This fundraising campaign is vital to secure the future of LAG as an independent voice campaigning for access to justice through publicly funded legal services.