

Fitzroy Legal Service (FLS) and Darebin Community Legal Centre (DCLC) amalgamation – project update

Well it is finally real – after much discussion over the last couple of years, Fitzroy Legal Service and Darebin Community Legal Centre have, by the appointment of a project manager, taken a significant step towards an aim of amalgamation into a single legal entity

For each of you, whether you are a member of staff, a volunteer, a member, a donor, funder or partner – this is a time of many questions.

Over the next few months you will hear from us regularly as we address the challenges of proposing that we integrate two community legal centres into one.

Let me introduce the **project team** – Emel Ramadan (Manager DCLC), Claudia Fatone (Executive Officer FLS) and Joanne Butterworth-Gray (Director JBG Strategic P/L and project manager). We are working closely to recognise what needs to happen when, why, and how.

The appointment of a **project manager** has been made possible through Victoria Legal Aid (VLA) funding, and it has introduced both a capacity and a capability for effecting organisational change.

The **catalyst for pursuing amalgamation** arose through the report delivered by Cath Whelan in February 2017, stating that *“the time has come to develop organisational models that ensure the creativity, nous and radicalism for which CLCs are renowned is sustainable into the future the extent and nature of change in the operating environment makes it difficult for small generalist CLCs to thrive It is in the interest of both organisations, and the communities we serve, to bring about change at a time when they have significant influence over the nature and timing of that change”*.

The FLS Board and DCLC Committee of Management adopted Cath Whelan’s report and commenced discussions with VLA to realise funding to support the amalgamation of the two CLCs.

With the project manager on board towards the end of October, based at either the Fitzroy or Darebin office one day a week, initial steps have involved a process of reviewing mergers in Victoria and other jurisdictions, seeking pro bono advice on legal practice structures, reviewing the current business model for each organisation, and getting to know staff and volunteers.

A **significant milestone** was reached last week – both the FLS Board and DCLC Committee of Management adopted the following motion:

*“to support in-principle the proposed organisational model,
that is based on locating service delivery in areas of greatest need,
the draft organisational structure
and the amalgamation pathway as defined within the Incorporation Act, Part 2,
Division 3 – Amalgamation of Incorporated Associations.”*

The **proposed organisational model** has these key elements:

- ✓ A single entity, **multiple location** model
- ✓ **Board** comprising 6 member-elected and 2 board-elected directors, an independent chair, supported by a **CEO**

- ✓ Legal practice model – **single legal practice** (subject to pro bono legal advice)
- ✓ A **Director of Legal Services and Strategic Projects** managing:
 - appointment-based clinics that are based on identified legal need
 - court-based services (currently Heidelberg Magistrates’ Court and Neighbourhood Justice Centre)
 - drop-in night services
 - a self-funded criminal and family law practice
 - coordinated community legal education that is integrated with casework and law reform/policy work
 - aligned programs/services that may be consolidated and expanded with strategic partnerships (e.g. current FLS and DCLC outreach programs)
- ✓ **Community reference** groups to support and sustain connection and relevance to community needs.

The **organisational model** of the new entity will consolidate key functions such as finance and IT, support modern governance standards and procedures, enhance employee and volunteer role clarity and professional development, and promote access to additional funding opportunities.

The **business model** will have a focus on systems improvement that enables innovation and data collection/analysis supporting evidence of legal need. A larger staff contingent will drive organisational outcomes and opportunities for new areas of law to be addressed, including more holistic services to clients.

The **vision** is consistent – *“deliver a community-focussed model of social justice for the cities of Yarra and Darebin”*.

You may be interested in some of the considerations facing the legal assistance sector:

- ☒ Increasing ‘legal need’ BUT decreasing funding
- ☒ New government funding DIRECTED TO GROWTH CORRIDORS
- ☒ Funders’ signals –
 - a desire for ECONOMIES OF SCALE (larger CLCs)
 - an emphasis of increased capacity to identify, address and report on evidence of legal need
 - expectations of holistic or client-centred service delivery models such as health-justice partnerships

Current organisational factors driving the amalgamation of FLS and DCLC:

- ☒ Neither DCLC or FLS is large enough to dedicate the resources needed to adapt in a sustainable way to emerging external pressures. Meeting the most basic governance, management and administrative requirements already draws scarce resources from core CLC activities of legal service delivery, education and advocacy
- ☒ Neither of the centres have sufficient resources to do the considerable body of work associated with on-going community engagement, data collection & analysis, strategic planning, service innovation, staff support & development, risk management and evaluating impact.

What outcomes are we striving to achieve through the amalgamation process?

The business model for the new entity will be streamed into three pillars of core business:

1. Legal practice and public interest work
2. Stakeholder engagement and communication

3. Business operations and systems

Against each of the business streams, the new organisational model will seek to achieve the following outcomes:

1. Legal practice and public interest work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Coordinated framework for practice management b. Sustainable balance of service delivery and administration c. Enhanced linkages between casework, education and advocacy d. Increasing levels of access to justice for disadvantaged individuals and communities e. A proactive focus on emerging issues that results in policy reform f. Evidence of impact of early intervention g. Increased profile and organisational awareness
2. Stakeholder engagement and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Service delivery that reflects the type and location of community need b. Internal and external communications strategy c. Increased stakeholder awareness of service capability d. Access to additional funding opportunities e. Increase in requests for partnerships in service delivery f. Increased level of member engagement g. Sponsorship and donations opportunities h. An organizational culture that supports staff and volunteers
3. Business operations and systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Systems improvement b. Increased uptake of technology c. Modern governance standards d. Consolidated corporate governance and reporting e. Solid financial controls f. Enhanced financial viability g. Best-practice risk management and regulatory compliance h. Data analysis that informs the legal practice model i. Sustainable framework for resource allocation j. Healthy supportive working conditions for staff and volunteers k. Enhanced professional development pathways for staff

This is the first of planned regular communication from the project team as we work towards a single organisation focussed on the provision of community-based legal services in the socio-demographically complex municipalities of Yarra and Darebin.

The project team and their contact details are below – each of us welcome your input and feedback along the way.

For now – enjoy time with the people close to you over the festive season, and we will speak soon in 2018 through many forums.

Project Manager	Executive Officer FLS	Manager DCLC
Joanne Butterworth-Gray M: 0412 703 014 E: jbutterworthgray@gmail.com	Claudia Fatone M: 0403 234 156 E: cfatone@fitzroy-legal.org.au	Emel Ramadan M:0438 362 277 E: Emel@darebinclc.org.au