

Free Legal Answers – a briefing

Background

Free Legal Answers is a website, supported by the American Bar Association (ABA), which provides pro bono legal advice for individuals. Initially developed by the US firm Baker, Donelson, the Tennessee Bar Association and the Tennessee Alliance for Legal Services (launched as Online Tennessee Justice (OTJ) in 2010), it was expanded to 'ABA Free Legal Answers' through the ABA Pro Bono and Public Service Committee. The website was developed in response to the fact that some people were unable to attend pro bono clinics in person (e.g., due to poor health, mobility limitations, or caring responsibilities), and the difficulties lawyers faced in volunteering.

To date, 42 states are providing or committed to providing the resource:

<https://abafreelegalanswers.org/>

The Free Legal Answers software has been licenced to LawWorks by Baker, Donelson.

Deloitte UK have kindly offered project management and technical expertise to assist LawWorks in configuring and testing the website to fit the legal environment in the UK. This is an important part of Deloitte's One Million Futures social impact initiative, which aims to help one million people get to where they want to be.

How does it work?

Individuals register for the site and can ask (by using the online form) up to 4 questions a year. As the service is for people who are unable to afford to pay for legal advice, it is only available for people on low incomes.

The participating lawyers can preview the questions and then sort them by legal topic. The website enables the lawyer to contact the client to ask for further information, and documents and photographs can be exchanged. The legal advice provided is sent directly to the client from participating lawyers who can respond to questions at any time and from any location.

The website includes links to other sources of legal advice and information. It also provides information and resources for the participating lawyers. All advice given via the website is insured. Participating lawyers can (if they wish) provide the advice anonymously. The website includes links to other sources of legal advice and information.

The lawyers register themselves and are verified before being able to participate. The lawyers receive a weekly email update which includes information such as the number of questions awaiting an answer, when they were submitted, and any key dates identified by the client. They can also log into the platform at any time to see the available questions in the queue. In the US it has facilitated partnership working and local 'communities of lawyers' – e.g., lawyers and law students working together on answers, and teams of lawyers (including in-house) working together (with a social afterwards).

The promotion of the website varies – many questions are by referral from legal aid agencies.

Plans for England and Wales

The Free Legal Answers website is a tried and tested model. It has the potential to provide additional pro bono opportunities for lawyers. However, the context for accessing legal advice is of course different in England and Wales – LawWorks are consulting with key stakeholders on the development of the platform, including the form and scope of an initial pilot, identifying the areas of law the website will focus on, and how it can best complement existing services.

One way to view the website is as a virtual pro bono clinic, as, the focus will be on initial and one-off legal advice. The website will require a self-declaration of income and available savings before allowing individuals to ask a legal question. Participating lawyers can inform LawWorks if they think someone is not legitimately eligible.

The website will provide signposting information to online information and resources and other sources of legal advice. Where it has not been possible to provide an answer, the client will be contacted within a specified period of time and provided with information about online information and other sources of support.

The website will only provide pro bono advice – participating lawyers will not be able to use it to identify potential paid-for work. There will be the option to volunteer lawyers to take on a case pro bono, subject to an agreed protocol. Participating lawyers will be asked to agree to apply the Pro Bono Protocol.

The participating lawyers will be asked to identify where there may be eligibility for legal aid (information on legal aid will be provided).

The website will be supported by an administrator – e.g., troubleshooting support, verifying lawyers, monitoring activity and producing reports.

LawWorks aims to replicate the ability for participating lawyers to provide advice anonymously (if they choose), supported by a clear complaints procedure (LawWorks is consulting with the Solicitors Regulatory Authority).

The current aim is to build and test (as live) the website by the end of October 2018, with a pilot beginning in November 2018.

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