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Helping the forgotten tenants: Roof Over London

Lawyer 2B

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For some, London is simply the best city the world to live in. It is no surprise, then, that the number of people who live in the capital is at record levels.

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In fact, more than 8 million people live in the UK capital and, faced with soaring house prices, private renting is becoming the norm. According to PwC, in 2000 some 60 per cent of Londoners owned their own home. By 2025 this proportion will be 40 per cent.

Those renting privately in the city often encounter the problems that come with it – poor maintenance, damp walls, leaky roofs and unsympathetic landlords, to name but a few.

It was a bad experience with his landlord that inspired Ben Robinson to start the Roof Over London initiative – a pro bono clinic that provides legal advice for individuals renting private accommodation in the city.

Ben Robinson

“Having come over from Canada I found myself in a new country with no idea what to do – I felt utterly helpless and had no idea who to turn to,” Robinson recalls. “There was no clinic at the time for people like me, experiencing problems with private rented housing.

“This situation has been worsened by cuts to legal aid and rising rents, meaning that turning to legal advice has become impossible for most people.”

Roof Over London has been set up to address the problem. Robinson, an LPC student and community volunteering officer at City University, established it together with City Law School’s Professor Daniel Wilsher. Both were previously involved in the Golden Lane Legal Clinic – a pro bono clinic at the university that gave local residents advice on housing together with debt, employment and benefits issues.

After that clinic stopped operating Robinson and Wilsher thought something should be done to support private tenants living locally.

“Having found there was no course of redress for people like me I went to Professor Wilsher and we agreed there must be something we could do,” Robinson explains.

Worse than in the public sector

Those living in private rented housing often find themselves worse off when things go wrong compared to those renting in the public sector.

“The problem with the private rented sector compared with the public rented sector is that security of tenure is virtually non-existent,” says Wilsher. “Most tenants are on a shorthold tenancy and from a landlord’s point of view at the end of their tenancy the tenant will simply move to another property. Together with the lack of positive statutory redress, this has resulted in the balance of power shifting enormously towards landlords.

“By comparison, tenants in the public rented sector often have a good incentive to find out what their rights are as there’s often a lot of support provided through law centres and local councils.”

So a gap has arisen between the private sector and the public sector whereby private
rs have little incentive – or way to find out –

what their rights actually are.

This is a view echoed by Robinson, who explains that those renting privately are now faced with a big access to justice issues.

“Despite the fact that often the sums of money are not massive, such disputes can often have a big impact on people’s lives – not to mention the stress it causes,” he says. “Those renting privately can’t form an awareness of the rights they have – and if they don’t know what their rights are, how can they know how to enforce them? It’s as good as not having a system that protects your rights at all.”

Meet the clients

Established in January 2015 the clinic carried out its first session in March of that year. It has since run more than 25 sessions and advised over 100 clients.

At the moment the clinic runs fortnightly on Thursday evenings. Sometimes it is hosted by the law school but at other times it goes out into the local community.

“Not solely running the clinic out of the law school enables us be wherever there are clients,” says Robinson. “This means we can be versatile and flexible, but it also means we can run the clinic at the heart of the community.”

The clinic is run by a mixture of student and lawyer volunteers.

“The idea is to have the students fully managing the clinic, but there’s always at least one lawyer supervising,” says Robinson.

A feature of the clinic is that it is open to all students.

“First- and second-year law students are often surprised when I tell them they can apply, as they often assume that it’s only open to third-year and GDL students,” says Robinson. “But by opening the clinic to all students we found that they began to learn and gain insight from each other, and this can only be a positive thing.”

“The problem with the private rented sector is that security of tenure is virtually non-existent”
Prof Daniel Wilsher

Advising real-life clients might seem a lot of responsibility to hand to students, but “the amount of substantive law knowledge that you need is relatively trivial,” says Robinson. “The key thing we look for during the application process is why the student is motivated to be part of the clinic.

“It’s not enough to want to join to add a line to your CV – a student must show a real desire about doing something that makes their community a better place to live in.”

Core team of students

The clinic is based around a core team, with around eight to 15 students taking part at any time – something Robinson stresses the importance of.

“Instead of creating a clinic in which a large number of students volunteer who may only attend a session once or twice we wanted to run it using a core team of students who attend all or most of the sessions,” he says. “We felt this would create a team who would be heavily invested in the clinic and can better contribute to its development.”

The students who do take part gain an invaluable experience that it’s not possible to get through their academic studies.

“The clinic gives students exposure to the realities of practice and shows them that academic study and legal practice are completely different things,” says Robinson. “The students are not only developing hard skills but also experiencing situations they may well come across in private practice.

“They can then use the experience to not only move forward with their career but also to decide whether they even want a career in private practice at all.”

Open to all

When Roof Over London began the intention was only to service the immediate community, but once it started to gain steam the demand for advice, especially from London's student population, was so great that the decision was made to open the clinic up to everyone.

"When we started to run the clinic around three-quarters of the clients who came through the door were students," explains Robinson. "These were students not only from City but from universities all across London. We also found that the majority were international students who, due to the language barrier, often find themselves in particularly difficult situations."

The most common issue the clinic advises on is landlords unjustly refusing to return part or all of a deposit. The second most frequent issue is repairs – or rather, the landlord's refusal to make them. Often, both issues are present.

At the other end of the scale, issues can involve unlawful evictions or landlord harassment.

Robinson introduces *Lawyer 2B* to one such client, who did not wish to be named. She returned to London after the Christmas holidays to find her apartment sealed after the landlord had falsely claimed they were squatting.

"I didn't know who to speak to or what to do next," she says. "All my things were still in the apartment but I couldn't gain access and I was, in effect, left homeless.

"I went to the police but they said they couldn't help me so I went to my student union, who introduced me to Roof Over London."

The clinic advised that the student had been the subject of an unlawful eviction and the volunteers produced a letter of notice which they sent to the landlord on her behalf.

Although the situation is ongoing the student now knows her rights and how she can enforce them.

"I found that through going to the clinic I met people who finally understood me, were willing to help and support me, and point me in the right direction," she says.

The counselling aspect to initiatives such as Roof Over London should not be underestimated. According to Robinson a lot of the people who come to the clinic just like to see a friendly face.

“Many of the people who come to the clinic are often distressed and anxious,” he says. “They may have dealt with a volatile landlord or have found themselves with no access to their property. More often than not, talking to people and having direct interaction with those who want to help provides them with a sense of ease and reassurance.”

High hopes

As Roof Over London passes its first year in operation “the amount of clients using the clinic, compared to what we had in mind when we set it up, has been huge,” says Robinson. “For addressing a need faced by this community it has been far more successful than I imagined.”

As for the future, the aim is to build the clinic up into a stronger organisation and see it expand into other universities.

“The problems students have in this particular area of London are the same those across the entire UK are experiencing,” says Robinson. “It would be great to create something that can develop into a network of clinics across the city, and begin to create a public service.

“The issues associated with the private rented sector are very much happening now and it is not just an issue associated with a small corner of London. It is a UK-wide issue and at present the right support for people is simply not there.”

My Roof Over London experience

I joined Roof Over London to get exposure to the skills involved in legal practice. From gaining familiarity with leases and other legal documents to attention to detail, joining the clinic has helped improve these skills while demonstrating proactivity.

The clinic has also enabled me to gain direct experience in a client-facing role, which I know will be important if I decide to go into practice. By talking to people and interacting with people the clinic has not only vastly improved my interpersonal skills but, having come to the university from Finland – meaning English is not my first language – it has also greatly improved my language skills.

Typical problems I come across involve a landlord simply refusing to return a deposit or that the property does not fulfil the agreed conditions. As a team we try to think through the problem and make a suggestion as to how to resolve it.

As a result of this the clinic has developed my team-working skills and also helped me develop my problem-solving skills, in particular my ability to think laterally around a problem.

But fundamentally, the clinic has given me the chance to help vulnerable people and, from a personal point of view, I get a huge amount of satisfaction from this.

I am thankful for the opportunity offered by the university and, having joined the clinic I can now demonstrate a commitment and dedication to a legal career.

When I graduate I intend to become a solicitor and am hoping to use the skills and experience I have gained from Roof Over London to help me achieve this.

Olli Kotro, GDL student, City University

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