

Practitioner article

Housing advice for everyone: Shelter Scotland's contribution to public legal education

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Shelter

Housing advice for everyone: Shelter Scotland's contribution to public legal education

Joyce Horsman explores the idea that public legal education is 'more easily described than defined'¹ by explaining Shelter Scotland's approach to the concept.

Introduction

The intellectual complexity surrounding what 'public legal education' is and what 'access to justice means' is certainly food for thought and, as Gemma Crompton rightly comments, 'the phrase 'Public Legal Education' has emerged only recently in Scotland and there has been little formal debate of the topic'². I would suggest that it can also be valuable to go straight for the 'main vein' by identifying a need and tackling it. This is exactly what Shelter Scotland has done. By building, delivering and maintaining two important online resources, public legal education has been tackled head-on by the charity.

How has Shelter Scotland tackled it?

Many people will not automatically associate Shelter Scotland with the provision of legal advice and information *per se*. However, in recent years, the charity has adopted a somewhat visionary approach to the provision of advice and information by developing and maintaining two important online resources; Shelter Legal Scotland [<http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/legal>] and Get advice [http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/get_advice]. The former is a subscriber resource for professionals and the latter is a free service for the general public. Sidestepping the debate about what 'public legal education' and 'access to justice' are, these online resources have simply put one pivotal concept into practice; the provision of clear, accurate and user-focused information delivered in plain English. The basic idea really is as simple as that.

How is it done?

Delivered online, these two resources are more than 'just a website'. For a start, the editorial team have very relevant and diverse specialised backgrounds including law, housing advice, welfare rights and academia. We are not 'web geeks' in an ivory tower. From the outset, the focus has been client- or person-centred, with an emphasis on what people need to know. Needless to say, we have learned lots along the way and mistakes have been made, but the improvements have also been significant.

¹ Crompton, G., *Perception and Understanding of PLE in Scotland* (2009) SCOLAG 142

² *Ibid*

A vital part of our work is keeping all the content up-to-date and accurate. This is a massive task involving regular monitoring of a wide variety of sources covering many different areas of law, not just housing. We also keep abreast of relevant changes in policy and the progression of law through both the Scottish and Westminster parliaments.

Key features

It is impossible in such a short article to do justice to the enormity of these resources, their contribution to PLE, or their status as a national resource for Scotland. However, to illustrate some of the main features, we have published 2,500 pages of information for the general public alone. In addition there are a variety of online assessments such as:

- a tenancy checker:
http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/downloads/online_assessments/what_kind_of_tenancy_do_i_have
- a homelessness assessment:
http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/downloads/online_assessments/does_the_council_have_to_house_you.

and links to useful resources developed by others such as:

- budgeting tools:
http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/advice_topics/paying_for_a_home/budgeting
- the Scottish Legal Aid Board online eligibility calculator:
<http://www.slab.org.uk/calculator2009/civil/index.htm>.

After all, there is no point re-inventing the wheel!

How it can help

Of course, online resources have their limits. There is simply no substitute for a face-to-face advice service and legal representation in court when it comes to crisis situations or when professional intervention is required. As a trained solicitor myself, I am acutely aware of the importance of these services and never underestimate their necessity. Shelter Legal and Get Advice can never replace such vital assistance.

However, what our resources can do is provide information to enable people to prepare for what lies ahead. For example, if someone is due in court, 'Get advice' tells them what to expect – from what to wear, to who's who in the courtroom, and what the layout of the court will be

[\http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/advice_topics/complaints_and_court_action/wha

[t happens at court](#)]. Bear in mind that many people will never have been in court before and the experience can be intimidating and stressful.

Likewise, on Shelter Legal, advisers can look at a plain English explanation of reopening note procedure so that they can support and reassure clients during legal processes. This particular information was added following direct requests from advisers. PLE in a Shelter Scotland context means listening to users and acting on that information to make the resources as useful as they can be.

Furthermore, we are aware of the need for a preventative approach to legal problems, hence topical features like 'six steps to dealing with mortgage and rent arrears':

- http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/six_steps_to_keeping_your_home
- http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/rentarrears

Not to mention the wide variety of downloadable letters

[\[http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/getadvice/downloads/sample_letters\]](http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/getadvice/downloads/sample_letters) and flowcharts [\[http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/getadvice/downloads/flowcharts_and_tables3\]](http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/getadvice/downloads/flowcharts_and_tables3) that can be used by advisers and the general public to take that first step to address a situation.

Recent developments

Most recently, we have explored issues around digital inclusion through a project called 'Housing advice for everyone'. Among other things, this involved training volunteers to assist people to use 'Get advice' effectively. We learned a lot about how people access and interpret information online, and about how peers can help with that. This work led to the creation of an 'easy access' portal

[\[http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/easyaccess/easy_access\]](http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/easyaccess/easy_access) on the site and raised a host of issues about usability – all of which were addressed along the way.

Conclusion and success rates

Anyone with experience of giving advice in any context will be very familiar with the complexity behind the problems being presented on the surface. This is arguably where Shelter Scotland's 'Legal' and 'Get advice' services can step up to the mark in terms of delivering PLE in some meaningful way. We provide a service that is unique in many ways. More than just publishing content online, we actually stop and think about problems in a holistic sense. We think about what matters to people, the issues that may underlie their 'main' problem and what may help them to work their way out of the situation. As readers will be aware, there often is not a single answer in any case. We strive to help people find some solutions to some of their problems and to develop their ability to help themselves. User feedback suggests we're hitting the mark, with 92 per cent of survey

respondents saying they would recommend 'Get advice' to someone else. If that is not PLE in action, then I am not sure what is.

Further information

For further information, contact joyce_horsman@shelter.org.uk.

Readers can access 'Get advice' free of charge by visiting www.shelter.org.uk/getadvice or subscribe to 'Shelter Legal' (or apply for a free trial) by visiting www.shelter.org.uk/legal.