

news feature**Co-operative Legal Services to enter family law market**

In May 2011 Legal Action 6, Fiona Bawdon, a freelance journalist, wrote about how the merger between TV Edwards (TVE) and Blacklaws Davis (BD) changed the family law landscape. In this article, she describes how those at the heart of the merger have gone on to join the Co-operative Legal Services (CLS) to develop its new family law service:

The leading legal aid firm TVE is once again making waves in family law, although this time it is in the news for the loss of key practitioners, rather than because of its ambitious expansion plans. Jenny Beck, managing partner for the past decade, along with her family law department colleague, Christina Blacklaws, who is the Law Society council member for child care and chief assessor of its children panel, are bowing out of the firm to set up CLS's ground-breaking family law division. They will also be joined at CLS by Chris May, TVE's head of business development and strategy.

Fixed-price family law advice

It was only a few months ago that TVE shook up the sector with the announcement of its merger with specialist family firm BD, to create the largest family law department in the country. Now, however, it seems that TVE is facing some heavyweight competition of its own.

The Co-operative Group, which has around 5m members and claims to have an outlet in every postcode in the country, plans to offer fixed-price family law advice, delivered both face-to-face and electronically, by the middle of next year. The aim is to cover all aspects of family work and to attract clients who are no longer eligible for legal aid. Jenny Beck, who is co-chair of the Legal Aid Practitioners Group, says that CLS will also be applying for a Legal Services Commission contract for family work so that it can cater for publicly funded clients.

Increasing access to justice

Jenny Beck, who has stewarded TVE through a whopping eight mergers in the past three years, says that cuts in eligibility and scope mean that in future 'socially responsible' lawyers will have to look beyond legal aid to reach the people most of them went into the profession

wanting to help. 'If you were a legal aid lawyer ten years ago, you would have been helping infinitely more people than now. The same people need the same help – it is just that they won't qualify for legal aid any more,' she says. Jenny Beck adds that CLS will also be committed to pro bono work, another luxury many legal aid firms have had to give up on in recent years.

Jenny Beck, who is a member of the Co-operative Group herself, was also swayed by CLS's mutual status. 'The Co-op stands for what I stand for. The Co-op is about quality and integrity; it is about an "arms-around" approach.' If it had been, say, Tesco or another organisation driven only by profit which had come calling, Jenny Beck says that her response would have been very different. She says that a fundamental principle of the venture is that it will be lawyer led and lawyer delivered. Although its aim is to make family law accessible, Jenny Beck stresses that the new service will be delivered in a suitably professional environment ('not next to the baked beans').

Family law job opportunities

One of Jenny Beck's first tasks will be to set up a CLS-branded 'access to justice' academy for Legal Practice Course students to provide an 'alternative pathway into the profession for "socially responsible lawyers"'. Students will get intensive training in CLS's working methods and (if they are selected) will be provided with work placements before being offered training contracts. As well as trainees, CLS will also be recruiting more generally: from case-workers and paralegals to experienced family lawyers. The number recruited will depend in part on whether the service is launched initially in London before being rolled-out across the country (the current preferred option) or whether it will aim for a national presence from the start.

The Co-operative Group is one of those rare high-street brands which is seen as almost entirely wholesome and uncontroversial. Some clients in family disputes, by contrast, are unlikely to win many popularity contests. Jenny Beck insists that the Co-operative Group is going into the venture with its eyes open and is aware of the potential for 'brand

damage' from some of the grittier aspects of family cases. Whether the Co-operative Group would remain so sanguine if its stores were, for example, picketed by disgruntled fathers denied access to their children after a case involving a CLS lawyer remains to be seen.

Back at TVE

So, what of the prospects for TVE, the firm Jenny Beck and her colleagues are leaving behind? Tony Edwards, TVE's senior partner with whom Jenny Beck has formed an unlikely but effective double act over a decade, insists that the Co-operative Group's entry into the family law market is good news. Far better the Co-operative Group than the likes of Tesco or private equity firms. 'We share the same philosophy. The Co-op's way of life is this firm's way of life: of putting clients first. They will produce good products and good people,' he says.

In any case, Tony Edwards would be the last person to criticise anyone for defecting to a new provider. He was a long-standing (if lonely) champion of the now largely defunct Public Defender Service and made no secret of the fact that, had the service been rolled-out nationally, he would have been dusting off his CV to apply for the post of running it.

Jenny Beck says that she and her colleagues are leaving with the blessing of their partners. She and Christina Blacklaws will remain as partners at TVE until July 2012 (giving a lengthy handover period), after which they will become the firm's consultants. Tony Edwards says: 'We will have people at the cutting edge as they develop the service. I see that as being a real benefit to the firm.'

For all the warm words, no firm could hope to be entirely unshaken by the loss of such respected and dynamic practitioners to a competitor organisation. It remains to be seen whether TVE and the profession more generally can respond to competition from the likes of CLS. Whatever happens, family practice is unlikely to ever be the same again.