New Zealand's National Pro Bono Framework: **Six Months on from Launch**

Representatives of participant firms, (L-R): Martin Smith (Partner, Gilbert Walker), Shan Wilson (Pro Bono Partner, Simpson Grierson), Steve O'Connor (Partner, Luke Cunningham Clere), Sabrina Muck (Director, Te Ara Ture), Tim Conder (Partner, Hollan Beckett), Laura Scampion (Managing Partner, DLA Piper (NZ)), Jesse Fairley (Partner, Russell McVeagh)

By Sabrina Muck and representatives of participant firms

The Framework for Collaborative Pro Bono in New Zealand was launched in November 2024. The Framework represents the first national collaboration of its kind in New Zealand, designed to bring structure, efficiency and shared momentum to the delivery of pro bono legal services across the country, in ways that complement existing community services and respond more effectively to unmet legal need. Participating firms adopt the aspirational target of 25 pro bono hours per full-time equivalent (FTE) lawyer per year.

"The Framework offers a structured and identifiable pathway for lawyers to engage in pro bono legal work – helping to formalise what has often been a quiet but deeply felt part of legal professional responsibility in New Zealand."

How it began

Inspired by similar efforts in Australia and the UK, the Framework grew from a collaborative approach between Te Ara Ture (the pro bono clearinghouse within Community Law Centres Aotearoa) and leading New Zealand law firms.

An initial forum to explore the idea within the legal profession was hosted in Auckland in August 2023. From there, interested firms participated in a series of workshops and sector meetings throughout 2023 and 2024 to shape the content and shared commitments of the Framework.

Participating firms

Six leading law firms have now formally signed up to participate in this first-of-its-kind national network: DLA Piper, Gilbert Walker, Holland Beckett, Luke Cunningham Clere, Russell McVeagh and Simpson Grierson.

The Framework has the support of the New Zealand Law Society I Te Kāhui Ture o Aotearoa, in recognition of its ability to further increase access to justice for people who cannot afford legal representation. The participant firms have also engaged with Te Hunga Rōia Māori o Aotearoa I The New Zealand Māori Law Society in the process of finalising the Framework content.

There is an appetite for pro bono work among the legal profession, but it can be difficult to deliver those services in an ad hoc way. Laura Scampion, the Managing Partner of DLA Piper New Zealand, says:

"The Framework offers a structured and identifiable pathway for lawyers to engage in pro bono legal work – helping to formalise what has often been a quiet but deeply felt part of legal professional responsibility in New Zealand."

The collaborative aspect of the Framework and alignment with firms' pro bono goals has been recognised and welcomed by the participants. Shan Wilson, Pro Bono Partner at Simpson Grierson, comments:

TE ARA TURE
A BRIDGE TO LAW

"We are proud to be joining forces with a group of leading law firms to use the Framework to motivate more pro bono legal work by the New Zealand legal profession. This initiative aligns with our firm's long-term commitment to providing pro bono legal advice, expertise and resources to help communities with their legal needs across the motu [island]."

How does it work?

The Framework is voluntary and non-exclusive – all law firms in New Zealand are welcome to participate. Participating firms agree to uphold a shared set of principles and are encouraged to strive toward an aspirational target of at least 25 hours of pro bono legal work per full-time equivalent (FTE) lawyer each year.

The Framework includes a clear and inclusive definition of pro bono legal work. This includes legal work provided for free or at a substantially reduced fee to:

- Individuals who can demonstrate a need for legal assistance but cannot obtain Legal Aid or otherwise access the legal system without incurring significant financial hardship; or
- Individuals or organisations whose matter raises an issue of public interest which would not otherwise be pursued; or

- Charities, other not-for-profit organisations, hapū/iwi organisations, or social enterprises, whose primary purpose is to work in the interests of low income or disadvantaged members of the community, or for the public good; or
- Iwi, hapū or other Māori entities, authorities or organisations, where the nature or Kaupapa [principle/philosophy] of the matter subject to the legal work directly promotes the collective wellbeing of iwi, hapū or Māori generally, and/or the wider public.

"As a litigator, I have seen first-hand the challenges that many clients face in accessing justice. We look forward to working with firms around the country to share best practice and solve challenges in this space."

Pro bono work may also include:

- Law reform and policy work on issues affecting low income or disadvantaged members of the community, or on issues of public interest; or
- Providing free community legal education on issues affecting low income or disadvantaged members of the community or on issues of public interest; or
- Providing a lawyer on secondment at a community organisation (including a community legal organisation).

We appreciate the Australian Pro Bono Centre's support as we developed the Framework's definition of pro bono.

What has been achieved so far?

Most recently, the collaborative nature of the Framework successfully led to a client securing urgent pro bono representation in a housing matter. Martin Smith, partner at Gilbert Walker, comments:

"When we had a conflict of interest in a potential pro bono instruction recently, we reached out to the other Framework participants. Luke Cunningham Clere were able to step up and provide the client with the representation they needed."

While it is still early days, interest in the Framework has continued to build. The founding firms remain active participants, and additional firms are expected to join as the Framework matures. Tim Conder, a partner at Holland Beckett, says:

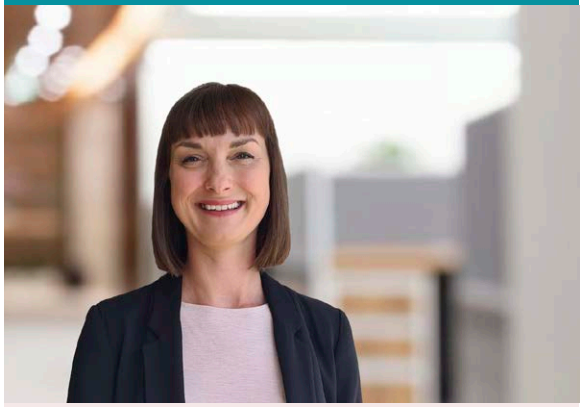
"As a litigator, I have seen first-hand the challenges that many clients face in accessing justice. We look forward to working with firms around the country to share best practice and solve challenges in this space."

Additionally, the first round of data reporting is expected in the coming year, and the results will be shared among participating firms in a de-identified format, to support transparency and sector development.

About Te Ara Ture

Te Ara Ture (meaning a bridge to law) was established in 2021 as the pro bono clearinghouse within Community Law Centres Aotearoa. Its role is to connect lawyers wishing to do pro bono work with marginalised and disadvantaged clients in need of legal advice. Te Ara Ture is a national service striving for access to justice, and accepts referrals from all 24 Community Law Centres across Aotearoa New Zealand: Te Ara Ture - a bridge to law. ■

More information about the Framework, and contact details for New Zealand firms to register or express an interest, can be found here:
Pro Bono Framework - Te Ara Ture.



Sabrina Muck is a practising lawyer and was appointed as Director of Te Ara Ture in November 2023. She has been involved with the Community Law movement for eight years, previously as the legal supervisor for a large Community Law Centre in Auckland, New Zealand. Prior to that, she worked at one of New Zealand's top-tier law firms for over 10 years. Sabrina is passionate about facilitating access to justice for marginalised and disadvantaged clients and has seen first-hand the outcomes that pro bono support can achieve for vulnerable people.

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