

Invested For Good: Simpson Grierson Pro Bono Report

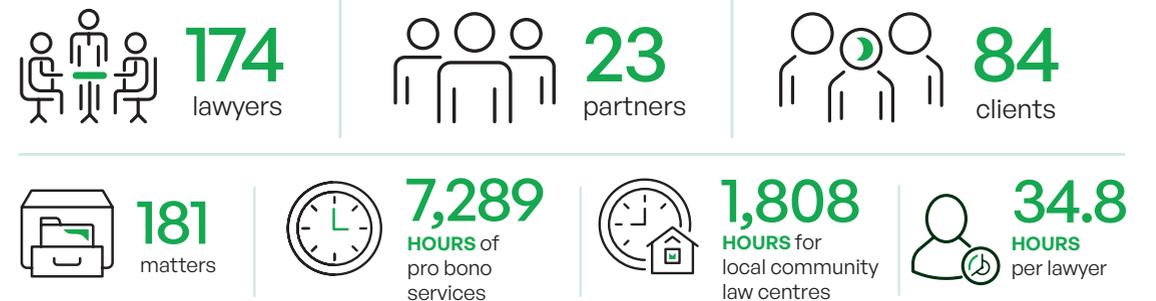




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Introduction

Tēnā koutou katoa,

Since starting my role as Simpson Grierson's Pro Bono Partner in early 2020, I have had regular approaches from lawyers outside of the firm wanting to join my "pro bono team." My answer is that all Simpson Grierson lawyers are my "pro bono team."

And I'm delighted that the team continues to develop and deliver great outcomes for our community partners. Since our last report in mid-2023, our average pro bono hours per lawyer have grown to exceed 35 for the 12-month period – an investment of almost 7,300 hours in total across the firm.

It's the privilege of this role to be able to work across all three of our offices - Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch - spreading out pro bono opportunities for our people. And it's a privilege that the requests for help come in from all across Aotearoa New Zealand. This report makes that point, as you will see from our spread of case studies through four cities.

I'm tremendously proud of how eager our team has been to upskill through pro bono work and how we've all collectively been able to support each other. Pro bono work has opened-up opportunities for more client contact at an earlier level of qualification, promoted development of problem solving skills and pushed staff to learn new areas of law. Most importantly, it provides our people with the chance to use their legal skills to support charities and individuals who wouldn't otherwise be able to afford legal advice.

Over the last year we have worked on a wide range of important files. For example, we have a substantial piece of public interest litigation we are currently playing a defence role in before the Human Rights Tribunal. The case involves a team of us from across the three Simpson Grierson offices dividing up tasks and sharing the load.

As a firm, we are open to taking on more large-scale public interest litigation. This is with the proviso that we need to accommodate this size of brief alongside our normal files, so we would look to work on one case a year.

A key part of my role, and something I really value, is being able to build strong relationships with our pro bono clients. I like to start a new relationship by visiting a charity in its workspace, meeting its staff, and finding out what their daily work involves.

For example, recently Mathew Thompson and I had the opportunity to visit Monte Cecilia Housing Trust, one of our case study clients in this report. We travelled around a variety of their different properties – from transitional housing to community housing, from tenancies they owned to others they managed for a private landlord or Kāinga Ora. Avary Patutama and I were also guests at their 40 year celebration and I was so impressed at how integral and pioneering the Trust has been to housing justice in Auckland.

I also shared a meal with the staff and community around Refugees as Survivors New Zealand when they invited me to their end-of-year awards. And as I write, I've just been at the function Cystic Fibrosis NZ held to herald 'Cystic Fibrosis Awareness Month.'

One thing all the charities and not-for-profit organisations we work with share is being stretched for funding. There is much need and much heart in the community and we appreciate we can help when we provide free legal services to incredible organisations.

Nāku noa, nā

Shan Wilson, Pro Bono Partner
shan.wilson@simpsongrierson.com

Lads Without Labels

Advocating for men's mental health

Lads Without Labels (LWL) is a student-led charity dedicated to improving men's mental health.

Founded in 2020 by University of Canterbury students, including past UC student and Simpson Grierson solicitor Sam McLean, the charity aims to create a safe place where men can talk about their mental health.

Since 2020 LWL has grown substantially, and now has more than 1,000 members, including university students, external partners and non-UC members.

How we have helped

Our pro bono work for LWL began in 2023 when Partner Andrew Kirk and Solicitor James Burnett met with the charity's executive members, including their Treasurer (now Simpson Grierson law graduate) Payge Swanson, to review its constitution. The charity had experienced a significant amount of growth but still sat as an unincorporated society affiliated with the University of Canterbury Students' Association (UCSA).

To help protect LWL's assets and reduce future risk, Andrew and James advised on a range of structure options for the charity to consider.

After LWL's executive team opted for an incorporated society structure, we drafted a constitution compliant with the new Incorporated Societies Act, the UCSA constitution requirements, as well other conditions better suited to its size and current purposes.

These changes will help LWL to protect its assets, create executive committee positions with flexibility to delegate roles, and develop detailed election processes.

The impact of our work

The pro bono advice we provided means that LWL is now on the Incorporated Societies Register and has its own separate legal identity. This means the charity can hold assets, such as a bank account in its own name, rather than having individual executive members holding the charity's funds.

It also means that if the charity wants to change its constitution, governance, processes, or challenge decisions, its new incorporated society status, and the documentation we provided, will allow them to do so.

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“Being involved in this work and witnessing the impact it has had on the club has been incredibly fulfilling. It has been a privilege to contribute to an organisation dedicated to such important work within the student community.”

Seeing Lads Without Labels thrive and knowing that it now has the necessary legal structures in place brings a sense of reassurance and accomplishment. We are excited to watch the organisation grow and support the community through advocating for mental health.”

James Burnett,
Solicitor



Partner Andrew Kirk, Lads Without Labels President Tom Vincent and Solicitor James Burnett.



Images supplied by Lads Without Labels.



Images supplied by Lads Without Labels.

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“Before Simpson Grierson stepped in, we operated as a university club, as that's the foundation of who we are, but we realised we had become bigger than that.”

Simpson Grierson helped us to rewrite and strengthen our constitution, which has meant we are now taken more seriously. Their support has been invaluable and has helped us to take things to a more professional level.”

Tom Vincent,
2024 President, Lads Without Labels



Wingspan Trust

Providing affordable counselling to individuals and families in Tāmaki Makaurau

Wingspan Trust, previously known as Home and Family Counselling, helps support people with their mental health by providing affordable counselling and other related services to individuals, couples, and families in Auckland.

The Trust's kaupapa (policy) is to keep counselling affordable for everyone by asking for a voluntary contribution towards the cost of a counselling session. Their fees are based on a person's financial means so that money isn't a barrier for anyone seeking help.

Last year saw significant change for Wingspan. It completed the change of its legal structure from a membership-based incorporated society structure (Home and Family Counselling Incorporated) to a trust with an incorporated board (Wingspan Trust). It also changed its name and rebranded.

The decision to change the name and rebrand to Wingspan Trust came after recognising the organisation's services and capabilities were evolving.



Senior Associate Nick Bland, Wingspan Trust Fundraising Manager Rosemary Such, Pro Bono Partner Shan Wilson, Wingspan Trust Chief Executive Kelly Olsen and Senior Solicitor Lucy Crichton at the Wingspan Trust Queen Street office.

How we have helped

We have been working with Wingspan since 2023, following its decision to restructure and rebrand. We helped facilitate the restructure and rebranding, and have assisted with property-related issues.

Senior Associate Nick Bland helped complete the restructuring Wingspan had started, which involved the transfer of operations to a single charitable trust structure and advising on the rules of each entity and tax laws.

We also provided bequest documents for Wingspan to use where people wish to make donations in their will.

Real estate lawyers Lucy Crichton, Senior Solicitor, and Viola Lam, Senior Associate, helped transfer property from Home and Family Counselling to Wingspan. They also advised Wingspan on selling its original premises in Mount Eden after the organisation began to outgrow its building and helped prepare and negotiate a lease for new premises in Auckland's CBD.



Wingspan Trust Chief Executive Kelly Olsen.

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“Charities like us often lack the resources to ensure all legal processes are followed correctly and within New Zealand’s legal framework. The investment we would have had to make to obtain legal advice has now enabled us to provide free or affordable counselling to many more families and individuals in need, than we would otherwise have been able to achieve. We are extremely grateful Simpson Grierson continues to support us as we work hard to provide affordable counselling to even more Aucklanders.”

Kelly Olsen
Chief Executive, Wingspan Trust





Senior Solicitor Mathew Thompson and Monte Cecilia Housing Trust Chief Executive Vicki Sykes outside Monte Cecilia Housing Trust.



Solicitor Kiara Supershad and Special Counsel Joanna Lim



Wingspan Trust Fundraising Manager Rosemary Such.



Supplied by Lads Without Labels.

Senior Associate Nick Bland, Pro Bono Partner Shan Wilson and Senior Solicitor Lucy Crichton.



Supplied by Lads Without Labels.

Mothers Project

Helping to connect mothers in prison with their children

It is estimated that 85% of women who are in prison, are mothers. The Mothers Project is an initiative that helps imprisoned mothers connect with their children.

Run by the Who Did You Help Today? Trust, the Mothers Project helps women to maintain critical family ties while separated from their tamariki through the support of volunteer lawyers.

How we have helped

Eight of Simpson Grierson's female lawyers, (Sarah Chapman, Kitty Lin, Greer Bonnette, Achi Simhony, Maria Nieto, Claudia Paterson, Latesha Metzler and Lucy Crichton), are currently involved with the Mothers Project, through monthly visits to Auckland Region Women's Corrections Facility in Wiri.

Over the years our team has helped mothers to understand their rights and responsibilities regarding their children, and to communicate with whānau, caregivers or Oranga Tamariki – Ministry for Children.

They help to open lines of communication, share information or to facilitate visits with children where appropriate, or to connect the mother with a family lawyer to act for her if necessary – all with the aim of maintaining meaningful connection between mother and child.

Collectively, the team of volunteer lawyers from around New Zealand have helped over 950 mothers, and an estimated 3,800 tamariki, since the Mothers Project started in 2015.



Special Counsel Sarah Chapman, Who Did You Help Today? Trust, Trust Manager Sarah Jack and Senior Solicitor Kitty Lin.

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“The experience has been a real eye-opener. Sometimes you’re piecing together the family members’ perspectives to try and find common ground and what’s best for the children; sometimes it can be heart-breaking to hear what a mother’s life is like outside of the prison. But there’s nothing like the feeling that you’ve just made a difference, big or small, in the life of someone who’s been through hard times.”

Kitty Lin,
Senior Solicitor

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“Mothers Project is entirely reliant on volunteer lawyers to deliver our services and the increased involvement of Simpson Grierson volunteers over the past couple of years has made a huge difference to the project in Auckland. We have had a couple of wonderfully dedicated SG volunteers for many years, but the increased numbers post-COVID have allowed us to expand the scope of our visits to Auckland Region Women’s Corrections Facility (on both the high and low security sides of the prison) and offer a better service to the mothers. We really appreciate the energy and professionalism of the volunteers and the commitment of the firm to allowing their lawyers to contribute to the project on an ongoing basis.”

Sarah Jack,
Trust Manager, Who Did You Help Today? Trust



Mothers Project volunteer lawyers at a recent visit to Auckland Region Women's Corrections Facility.

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“As a mother, I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to be separated from my children, and how hard it must be for the children. So being able to help women maintain some positive connection with their children while they are in prison, was something that I really wanted to do.

The stories can be harrowing and some of them can be hard to hear. But the children are not responsible for their mother’s actions. And often, the mums just want their children to know that they haven’t stopped thinking about them. And every child deserves to know that.”

Sarah Chapman,
Special Counsel

Monte Cecilia Housing Trust

Providing housing support for low-income families

Monte Cecilia Housing Trust has a mission to empower families to achieve their own housing solutions by providing quality advocacy, housing and support services.

The Trust, which has been operating for over 40 years, offers a range of housing services that support low-income families, including transitional and community housing across South and West Auckland.

How we have helped

Mathew Thompson, a Senior Solicitor in our Real Estate team, has been working with Monte Cecilia over the past year, including undertaking a complete overhaul of its property documentation.

Our work has involved preparing Monte Cecilia's new community and transitional housing leases, tenancy agreements and other associated documents. This helps ensure its arrangements with the owners of the properties which it leases, and its subsequent tenants and occupants, are fit for purpose and commercially viable.

Mathew, along with other lawyers from Simpson Grierson, advises Monte Cecilia on the daily issues that arise from operating as a large community and transitional housing provider. This includes disputes with landlords and tenants, and advising on contracts Monte Cecilia has with Central Government agencies.

The impact of our work

The legal advice and new lease documentation we have provided will assist now and in the future, significantly reducing the issues Monte Cecilia faces in respect to the leases it holds with owners of community and transitional housing properties (which, when managing hundreds of homes, do regularly arise).

Our support helps to reduce the legal burden and stress on Monte Cecilia's management team and staff, allowing them to focus their time and resources on achieving their mission and frontline work.



Senior Solicitor Mathew Thompson, Monte Cecilia Housing Trust CEO Vicki Sykes and Pro Bono Partner Shan Wilson at Monte Cecilia Housing Trust.



Pro Bono Partner Shan Wilson and Monte Cecilia Housing Trust CEO Vicki Sykes.



“Working with Simpson Grierson, and especially with Mathew Thompson, has been transformative for us at Monte Cecilia. It’s not just about the savings on legal expenses—which are significant—but it’s the confidence and peace of mind that come with having such expert guidance at our back.

Simpson Grierson’s advice has empowered us to address complex tenancy, leasing, and contractual issues with confidence, ensuring that we’ve been able to act swiftly and effectively. This has allowed us to prevent small problems from escalating, keeping our focus on our mission and the people we serve.

The real magic of our collaboration with Simpson Grierson, particularly evident now as we reflect on the past year, has been the ripple effect of having dependable legal advice readily available.

This support has not only accelerated our decision-making but has also freed up our leadership team to pour more energy into refining our day-to-day operations. This shift has directly improved the support we offer to families, making a tangible difference in their lives.

The ongoing enhancements in our services are creating lasting impacts, touching more lives than we could have initially imagined, and Simpson Grierson has been a key part of that process.

Looking forward, we feel optimistic that with Simpson Grierson’s assistance, we can continue to improve our operations, helping more families achieve their own housing goals each year and change their circumstances for the better.”

Vicki Sykes,
CEO, Monte Cecilia Housing Trust



Mauao Trust

The entity entrusted to hold and govern Mauao on behalf of the Tauranga Moana iwi

Mauao Trust is the entity entrusted to hold title to and govern Mauao (Mount Maunganui) on behalf of the Tauranga Moana iwi. It has the specific aim of preserving the mauri of Mauao, and facilitating and maintaining the natural, physical, and cultural integrity of Mauao.

Mauao Trust and Tauranga City Council are in the process of reviewing the current MOU, a joint forum made up of representatives from both organisations.

As Mauao Trust is looking to become more active and to start to derive income, we were asked to provide pro bono assistance on various administrative legal requirements, as well as incorporating the trustees as a board under the Charitable Trusts Act and registering Mauao Trust's charitable status.

How we have helped

We assisted Mauao Trust with its administrative requirements which involved Special Counsel Joanna Lim updating the trust documentation to record the status of the trustees, and Solicitor

Kiara Supershad and Senior Associate Nick Bland handling Mauao Trust's tax registration.

Nick also prepared the application for Mauao Trust's registration under the Charities Act, which was successful and took effect from 17 January 2024. The application to incorporate the trust board under the Charitable Trusts Act is still underway and we look forward to completing this later this year.

The impact of our work

Our work updating the trust documentation provides certainty in relation to the governance and operations of Mauao Trust.

Mauao Trust's registration under the Charities Act will also afford many benefits to it, including eligibility for exemptions from income tax on all or some of its income, and allowing supporters, stakeholders, and funders to access detailed information about the organisation on the Charities Register. Our work also helps to provide an uptick in public trust and confidence.



It has been really rewarding to connect with the Mauao Trust and help them cut through administrative steps, so that the trustees can get on with focussing on the Mauao Trust's kaupapa. I look forward to working with the trustees further where we can facilitate them in achieving their strategic outcomes for Mauao.

Joanna Lim
Simpson Grierson Special Counsel



This carved pou details the legend of Mauao, highlighting the pathway taken from inland to where Mauao stands today. The woven bind represents the tari karakia (ropes) used by the Patupairihe (forest guardians) to move Mauao and the paua shell inlays symbolise the connection to our ancestors.



Mauao Trust Chair Matemoana McDonald



Mauao Trust stakeholders

Community Law Wellington & Hutt Valley

Supporting Community Law Centres has always been a major focus for our pro bono practice, across all our offices.

Community Law Centres work across Aotearoa New Zealand to reduce and remove barriers to people accessing legal advice, particularly for people who are on job seeker support, or who have a low income.

A number of our lawyers have been supporting Community Law Wellington and Hutt Valley on a weekly rotating roster.

Community Law Wellington and Hutt Valley runs free drop-in sessions providing legal advice to people in their community, often on flatting disputes, issues with landlords or employment matters.

We asked some of our Wellington lawyers how the pro bono work they've been providing is helping them develop their legal careers.



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“Pro bono work has allowed me to enhance my general practice legal skills and enabled me to broaden my network and connections within the community, which I’ve found to be incredibly valuable. I’ve encountered a wide range of legal issues doing pro bono work. This has both deepened my understanding of various areas of the law that I wouldn’t necessarily encounter in my day-to-day and has also improved my ability to analyse complex situations to find creative and practical solutions for clients.”

Isabel Van Tuinen | Simpson Grierson Solicitor



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“Being able to commit my time to assisting members of the community through pro bono work is rewarding from both a skills development and community engagement perspective. It allows me to use my legal skills to help members of our diverse communities, while also developing my knowledge and experience across a variety of areas of law that I wouldn’t normally delve into as part of my everyday work.”

Brooke Clifford | Simpson Grierson Senior Solicitor



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“Working in employment law in private practice means we primarily work with organisations and employers. Our pro bono work for the Community Law Centre allows us to also work closely with individuals and employees. This balance and perspective helps develop my technical and relationship skills, which are both valuable to developing a career as a lawyer.”

Alana Harrison | Simpson Grierson Solicitor



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“Working at Community Law ensures that my ability to think on my feet is regularly tested, and my statutory interpretation skills are kept up to date, as the issues can traverse lots of different areas of law, some of which are not always familiar to me! It’s also really validating to know that (sometimes) your advice has helped someone keep their job or home.”

Gemma Plank | Simpson Grierson Senior Solicitor



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