



News Release

24 September 2009

Scottish Legal Aid Board publishes annual report 2008-2009

The Scottish Legal Aid Board today published its annual report which shows over the past year:

- a decrease in the cost to the taxpayer of publicly funded legal assistance of 3.2% (£4.9 million) to £150.2m, following significant increases in recent years
- a decrease in the cost of criminal legal assistance of 7%, to £103.2 million
- an increase in the cost of civil legal assistance of 7.1% to £42.6m
- a decrease in the cost of children's legal assistance of 7.9% to £4.2m
- a 12% increase in number of civil legal aid applications to 17,738
- increased efficiencies with the large uptake of Legal Aid Online by the legal profession and simplification of civil legal aid.

Iain A Robertson CBE, Chairman, said "We can be proud of the work we have done to improve the delivery of legal aid in Scotland. We are committed to working with the Scottish Government to deliver their Efficient Government savings targets and to continue reducing our administration costs, improving efficiency and so providing value for money for the taxpayer, whilst providing access to justice and an excellent service to the people of Scotland."

The net cost of legal aid has reduced by 3.2% to the taxpayer, largely as a result of changes in the justice and legal aid systems.

Last year saw a 12% increase in the number of applications for civil legal aid, following years of falling volumes. The first half of 2009-2010 has seen a greater growth in civil legal aid applications and is largely related to the recession. Past recessions have shown a greater need for legal advice and representation as a result of the pressures of unemployment and debt.

As a response to the economic downturn, the Board is improving access to justice through an additional £3 million of funding from the Scottish Government over the next two years.

The Board has already responded to unmet need for legal advice by recruiting Board-employed solicitors to work in our Civil Legal Assistance Offices in areas where we know there is a lack of advice provision on housing and debt-related matters.

The Board has also taken on responsibility for funding in-court adviser services and is seeking to expand these alongside a range of other projects through its new grant scheme to provide new and additional legal advice services to help people facing problems related to the economic downturn. These projects will be announced shortly.

Furthermore, the service run by Board-employed civil solicitors, covering Highland and Islands, has been highly successful and continues to address unmet legal need in those areas by working in partnership with private sector solicitors and the advice sector.

Access to civil legal aid has been further increased with the extension of financial eligibility, after the Scottish Government increased the upper limit for disposable income to £25,000.

2008-2009 saw the biggest change in summary justice in a generation, in which the Board played its full part. This included major changes to summary criminal legal assistance which were introduced on the 30th June. This was a huge undertaking for the Board and the legal profession. The reforms have resulted in a reduction in expenditure, reduced bureaucracy and improvements in the operation of summary justice.

The Board has also driven its Legal Aid Online system further forward. This allows solicitors to send applications and accounts over the internet, cutting paper work, and saving time and resources. 70% of advice and assistance work is now done this way. The Board is now rolling out Civil and Criminal Legal Aid Online and by the end of 2010-2011 expects nearly all business with solicitors to be online.

Similarly the Board has pressed on with the simplification of civil legal assistance; it has reduced bureaucracy so easing the process, and has received very positive feedback from the legal profession.

Moreover, the Board has achieved an impressive service performance, hitting all eight of our key performance targets and performing better than target in six of these.

Mr Lindsay Montgomery CBE, Chief Executive commented, "Clearly public expenditure is under enormous pressure and this is likely to increase. The Board is doing its utmost to achieve best value for the taxpayer from legal aid, whilst increasing access to justice for those who need it. We continue to endeavour to keep our running costs to a minimum. Last year, for example, we made efficiency savings of over £430,000 on our administration costs. Our Legal Aid Online and other technology projects will enable us to reduce the number of administrative staff needed in some areas. This and other efficiency measures will help us live within the capped administration budget set by Ministers and to continue to further develop and modernise legal aid."

Ends

For further information please contact:

Mat Lopez, Communications Officer tel. (direct) 0131 240 1887.

Notes

- The Board's Annual Report 2008-2009 and details of payments to made to solicitor firms, advocates and solicitor advocates is available at www.slab.org.uk
- Legal aid is help towards the costs of legal advice and representation, for those who qualify, paid for out of public funds. It is designed to help individuals on low and modest incomes gain access to the legal system. There are two main types of legal assistance: advice and assistance and legal aid. Together these are called legal assistance. Legal aid may be free, or someone may have to pay towards the cost of their case, for example through paying a contribution or from the money or property that they win or keep as a result of their legal action. Legal aid is accessed through a solicitor. Unlike most public expenditure, the legal aid fund is not cash limited. The Scottish Government will provide the Board with the funds required to meet the cost of cases which have been granted.