



Press Release

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Scottish Legal Aid Board publishes annual report 2007-08.

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

- over 359,000 grants of legal assistance were made
- a reduction in the number of applications for criminal legal assistance
- a slowdown in the reduction of civil legal aid applications
- increases in mental health cases
- increases in cases concerning social welfare issues such as debt and housing
- increases in cases involving adults with incapacity
- an increase in legal aid expenditure to £155.1m.

Over the past year, the public benefited from 359,354 grants of legal assistance.

Criminal legal assistance saw a substantial reduction in the numbers of applications for both summary and solemn legal aid as a result of fewer cases going through the courts. Applications for summary criminal legal aid were down to 82,657 from 89,984 last year (which was the highest ever figure) and reverses the long term growth in applications in this type of legal aid.

Civil legal aid saw a further reduction in the rate of decline of applications received by the Board, with 15,861 applications: the main reason for the fall was a reduction in reparation cases, such as personal injury claims. So far in 2008-09 there has been a 7% rise in the number of civil legal aid applications.

There was a 16% rise in civil legal aid applications relating to housing, rent arrears, mortgage rights and debt cases, and a 41% increase in cases involving adults with incapacity.

Last year saw a 64% increase in the number of grants for representation at mental health tribunals and we continue to see an increase in mental health cases.

Expenditure on legal aid was £155.1 million, up 3% on 2006-07.

This increase in expenditure is principally because of the significant increase in the number of grants, by the courts, in the most serious criminal cases over the previous two years, and which were paid during 2007-08.

Costs included:

£110.5 million for criminal legal assistance, up 4%

£39.8 million for civil legal assistance up 2%.

Last year the amounts paid for legal assistance from the Legal Aid Fund were:

- £126.4 million to solicitors, an increase of 4%, or £4.4 million, compared to 2006-2007
- £21.6 million to counsel (advocates and solicitor advocates), an increase of 4%, or £0.9 million
- £18.1 million on outlays, virtually the same as the year before.

Iain A Robertson CBE, Chairman commented, "Over the past year we have made significant progress. Our report sets out some of the main ways we achieved this and sets the scene for a challenging year ahead. Looking forward, the Board believes that more can be done to further increase value for money in legal aid, to provide better access to justice for people who need it and to better align the important services we support with the Government's key outcomes for Scotland."

Lindsay Montgomery, Chief Executive of the Scottish Legal Aid Board said, "The increase in legal aid costs during 2007-08 was mainly as a result of paying for the large increase in serious criminal cases granted by the courts, in the previous two years.

We expect expenditure to fall in 2008-09 largely as a result of the general reduction in applications and in particular the reduction in the number of serious criminal cases granted by the courts during 2007-08. This will be balanced to some degree by increases in fees for solicitors agreed by Scottish Ministers, for solemn criminal legal aid and civil legal aid, which we expect to be paid in 2008-09. The Board also continues to invest in new systems and processes to make our administration more efficient and economic."

Lindsay Montgomery continued, "This has been another year of change and development in which we implemented significant reforms to civil advice and assistance in May 2007, consulted on the most significant changes to summary criminal legal assistance in a generation, and worked with the profession and other justice system agencies to put in place plans for its implementation. Our overarching aim is to provide access to justice and improve the operation and efficiency of the legal aid system."

The report also details other progress made by the Board to:

- help people to access justice across local communities
- provide value for money
- improve efficiency and cut bureaucracy.

Ensuring access to justice:

The Board's vision is to provide access to justice for those eligible and in need of it, in a cost effective manner.

Over the past year the Board has carried out research and closely monitored the supply of legally aided services to identify any gaps across the country.

The Board also opened a new civil legal assistance office in Inverness to make sure people across the Highlands and Islands could access a solicitor to handle civil cases. This office works in partnership with the advice sector and solicitors in private practice.

And the Board reviewed its programme of "Part V projects" and developed proposals for the next phase of this strategic and innovative work. These projects involve the Board employing solicitors to improve the availability of services in specific parts of the country or areas of law.

In addition, the Board opened three new Public Defence Solicitors' Offices, to provide criminal legal aid services in Dundee, Falkirk and Ayr, taking the total to seven offices across Scotland.

Providing value for money:

The legal aid 'efficient government' programme resulted in recurring savings of £12.2 million in 2007-08. This is as a result of the Board working with the Scottish Government. It means tax payers are getting better value for money. The Board works constantly to identify measures that could result in further ways of making legal aid more efficient.

The Board's work to detect and prevent fraud and abuse saved an estimated further £3 million. This work not only protects the taxpayer but also the interests of the vast majority of legal aid applicants and legal aid solicitors, who provide a good quality service with honesty and integrity.

Improving efficiency and cutting bureaucracy:

Bureaucracy has been reduced by: making the process for getting our authority to spend more on advice and assistance cases simpler, early measures towards the simplification of civil legal assistance and a major growth in the use of our 'Legal Aid Online' system, which allows solicitors to send us applications and accounts over the internet.

The Board met all of its headline performance indicators, which are agreed by Scottish Ministers, while making targets tougher and further reducing the time it takes to carry out tasks.

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Further key information from the Report is attached to this release. The Board's annual report 2007-08 and details of payments to made to solicitor firms, advocates and solicitor advocates is available on its website at www.slab.org.uk