



Press Release

1st June 2010

24% increase in civil legal aid applications - highest number in a decade.

- 24% increase in civil legal aid applications
- Civil legal aid firms doing more civil legal aid work than before
- Civil Legal Assistance Offices bolster provision
- Specially funded projects supplying advice on issues related to the economic downturn
- High applicant satisfaction with legal aid

Civil legal aid applications have increased by 24% over the last year to 22,000, the highest number in a decade. This is on top of a 12% increase in the previous year.

Civil Advice and Assistance cases increased by 5% on last year to 95,000, following a 4% increase in the previous year.

There have been substantial increases across a range of case types. Family cases increased by almost 3,000 or 27% to over 13,600. Debt cases rose by 29% and mortgage rights cases by 33%.

Lindsay Montgomery CBE, Chief Executive of the Scottish Legal Aid Board said, "It is clear that solicitors have responded to the larger number of people needing help during the recession as financial and other pressures increase on families.

This substantial increase in applications has been very challenging for the Board, however we have managed to achieve our performance targets without any increase to our administrative budget."

During 2008-2009 there was a 4% increase in the number of branches or outlets of firms providing civil legal assistance to #695 (Dec. 2009).

A recent independent survey of applicants carried out for the Board indicated very high levels of satisfaction with civil legal assistance; 84% of applicants were satisfied with the overall experience of the full legal aid system (only 3% were actually dissatisfied). A small proportion of applicants (5%) indicated that they had experienced some difficulty in finding a solicitor.

The Board encourages potential applicants looking for a civil legal aid solicitor to use the "Find your nearest solicitor" facility on the Board's website at www.slab.org.uk. If potential applicants encounter difficulties in finding a legal aid solicitor we would like to hear from them and they can contact the Board's legal aid information line on 0845 122 8686 for help in finding their nearest legal aid solicitor.

The Board monitors the supply of firms registered to provide civil legal assistance to minimise the risk of people encountering difficulties in finding a legal aid solicitor.

Lindsay Montgomery adds, "There is a large and committed network of solicitors working on civil legal aid cases. Most communities have access to quality assured local legal aid solicitors covering a wide range of areas of law. In most areas firms are doing more civil legal aid work than before which is very encouraging."

Although the vast majority of civil legal aid solicitors are in private practice or in Law Centres, the Board also directly employs a number of solicitors in its small network of Civil Legal Assistance Offices (CLAOs) around Scotland.

Lindsay Montgomery adds, "The CLAOs bolster local legal assistance provision, complementing but not competing with private practice firms. There is joint working with referral of clients between the two so improving access to assistance."

In addition, the Board also funds a range of projects around the country to enhance legal advice services for people affected by the economic downturn, targeting issues such as repossession and debt, via £2m of Scottish Government funding. The Board has also taken over and increased funding of In-Court Advice projects. These offer a mix of advice and representation to people who turn up at court and have not been able to access other assistance or have been referred by other agencies before their court date, and are particularly important in repossession and debt cases.

Simplifying process and reducing bureaucracy

The Board has also undertaken a major programme of work to streamline and simplify civil legal aid. These measures include:

- Legal Aid Online - for online submission of applications and accounts by solicitors. Over 40% of civil legal aid and over 70% of advice and assistance applications are now done online; by March 2011 all legal aid transactions with solicitors are expected to be done this way. This is faster and more efficient for solicitors and the Board and speeds up the process for applicants.
- Simplified and substantially shorter legal aid application forms for solicitors. This programme is continuing and includes substantially simplifying and shortening the financial assessment forms for applicants.

Ends

Contact:

Mat Lopez, Communications Officer tel. 0131 240 1887.

Notes to Editors:

- 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.
- Last year (2008-2009) total net expenditure on civil legal assistance was £42.6m.

Civil Legal Assistance Offices

The Inverness office in February 2008, serving Highland, Moray, Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland areas. It provides advice and representation in relation to a broad range of civil issues, including family matters. Over the past year the Board has also opened up offices to cover Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire and Edinburgh and the Lothians. These mainly help with issues related to the economic downturn such as housing and debt (and are in addition to those private firms in the areas that carry out civil legal aid work).