



News Release

Legal advice for people facing repossession and debt

The Scottish Legal Aid Board is launching a Scottish Government funded initiative, to enhance legal advice services for people affected by the economic downturn and dealing with related issues such as repossession and debt.

For the first time, the Board is inviting organisations such as advice agencies, charities and solicitors to apply for grants to provide new or enhanced legal advice or representation services, directly aimed at people in most need. The total amount available for the grant funding programme is in excess of £2 million.

Mr Lindsay Montgomery, Chief Executive of the Scottish Legal Aid Board commented, "More people will be able to get advice that will help them to deal with their legal problems. It opens up access to justice for more people and is particularly welcome news in a difficult economic climate."

"We know that in repossession cases many people go unrepresented or don't turn up at court. In many cases early resolution of the problem might have meant avoidance of court altogether. Helping someone avoid repossession does not always end their problems and that follow up work to tackle unresolved issues needs to be made available."

"The purpose of the grants programme is to provide more legal advice and representation for people facing repossession and other problems such as debt, including making relevant services at court available nationally. It also aims to complement and build upon existing provision, including that provided by solicitors working in private practice, solicitors employed by the Board, and the in-court advice service."

Projects that are successful in bidding for grants for new and enhanced advice services will be announced in summer, and are expected to be running in autumn 2009.

Further information and application forms on the grant funding initiative are available from the Board's website at www.slab.org.uk.

Ends

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Notes to editors

1. The priorities for funding are:
 - projects which aim to help people avoid repossession
 - early intervention and pre-court work, including help for people to represent themselves and work to encourage people to take action
 - representation at court
 - advice services at court
 - post-court follow-up work and advice support services
 - projects focussed on other problems related to the economic downturn, such as employment, debt, rent arrears and eviction
 - training for providers in relevant areas of law
 - places where there are no arrangements currently in place to provide advice and/or representation at court
 - projects which cover several courts or large geographic areas.

Preference will be given to projects which meet more than one priority.

The types of projects that the Board are keen to see develop are those:

- projects that link with existing services, including local solicitors.
 - projects that will enhance existing services including longer opening hours, additional advisers.
 - projects which cover large geographical areas, covering several courts.
 - projects where other funding is in place is complementary to this funding source.
2. The new grant scheme is part of a package of measures to be funded from an additional £3m, over the next two years, which the Scottish Government has made available to the Board. The package will also be used to enhance current in-court advice services, which offer advice to people who do not have a solicitor on issues such as eviction, debt and small claims, as well as enabling the Board to recruit a small number of additional directly employed solicitors based in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Inverness to provide advice and representation to help people affected by the economic downturn.
 3. This grant funding initiative sits alongside the existing legal provision for civil legal aid and advice and assistance; which already provides help and representation for many people facing debt and repossession problems. Last year (2007-2008) there were 100,664 grants of civil legal assistance at a cost of £39.8million.

4. The Scottish Government also recently announced a significant increase in the upper disposable income limit for financial eligibility for civil legal aid to £25,000. This means that around three quarters of the adult population are now potentially financially eligible for civil legal aid.

5. The purpose of legal aid in Scotland is to provide access to justice for those people who are unable to pay for it on their own. The Scottish Legal Aid Board runs the legal aid system in Scotland. In 2007-2008 providing legal assistance cost the taxpayer £155.1 million, with 359,354 grants being made.

6. For more information, visit the Board's website www.slab.org.uk