



Advice and assistance reforms update

TO: All advice and assistance solicitors

Issue 10
30 May 2007

Your practitioner number «Practitioner_ No»
Your firm code «Firm_Code»
Your branch code «Branch_Code»

This update mailshot contains information and guidance about changes in civil, criminal and children's advice and assistance. Please ensure that all staff involved in providing advice and assistance and accounts are made aware of its contents.

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4. Advice and assistance accounts - also *attached* accounts synopsis forms and guidance

1. Introduction

This latest update provides information on our computer system and details on registration and how to make increase requests. Also included are details on the new advice and assistance accounts forms, which we send to you for each case. This mailing concludes our series of planned updates and guidance for civil solicitors on the changes. We will shortly be issuing a mailing to criminal practitioners that will include the new criminal increase form and guidance. We do however expect to issue further updates on topics where solicitors have been raising questions, or where further guidance information may be useful, such as on financial eligibility evidence.

2. Financial eligibility evidence

The new forms allow solicitors to provide us with more and better information about how you have satisfied yourself that your client is financially eligible for advice and assistance. Early analysis of forms submitted is encouraging in that it shows that:

- many solicitors have been able to obtain documentary evidence of eligibility
- alternatively, practitioners have been able to explain how they have satisfied themselves at a first meeting and detailed what steps they have advised their clients to take before an increase in authorised expenditure is sought, such as production of documents like bank statements.

We intend to make more information available to practitioners about this when we have conducted fuller analysis of forms.

3. Advice and assistance applications and increases

As reported in previous updates, the advice and assistance reforms on 1 May 2007 also saw a number of other changes being introduced, including a new Board computer system for advice and assistance work. Our new computer system, when fully operational, will bring a range of benefits to the profession, applicants and the Board, including faster processing, reduced bureaucracy as well as enabling the use of Legal Aid Online services.

We have now successfully implemented the first phase of our computer system, and are now working towards the final phase, which will automate the registration of applications and increase requests. Over the next few weeks there will be a transition period while we finalise the development and implementation of our computer system, where we ask for your co-operation.

During this period, you should not see any change to the timescales within which we will process applications and increase requests, but you may see a temporary change to how we notify you that we have received an application. When you submit an application over the next few weeks, you will receive from us either the account synopsis form in the usual way, or a pre-registration acknowledgement letter, followed shortly after by your account synopsis form.

Increase requests

Please remember that you can submit an increase request even if you have not yet received from us confirmation of the registration of your grant of advice and assistance, which includes a legal aid reference number:

- When completing the increase form, you should complete Section B question 6 and provide the date of grant. You do not need to call us to request your case reference number if you have not had the accounts synopsis or grant acknowledgement letter.
- During the transition period over the next month, if you planned to send us both the advice and assistance application form and an urgent request for an increase, please fax us the urgent increase request so that we can consider it more quickly, and then mail both the application and increase form to us. You should fax any urgent advice and assistance request:
 - for civil and children's: 0131 220 2904 or 0131 220 3462
 - for criminal: 0131 220 2905.

Who to contact if you have a query that is urgent

If you need to speak to us about any cases that you have sent to us and the matter is urgent - we ask for your co-operation that you call only if the matter is urgent - please telephone:

- Advice and assistance applications - 0131 240 2066
- Civil and children's advice and assistance increases - 0131 240 2064
- Criminal advice and assistance increases - 0131 240 2194.

4. Accounts synopsis forms and guidance

With the wide ranging changes to advice and assistance that came into use on 1 May 2007, the Board has introduced a number of changes to the accounts synopsis forms, which we automatically send to you for each individual case. The accounts forms are now in a new format, with some changes made to the information you need to provide. There are also now specific accounts forms for each type of advice and assistance. The attached document includes examples of each new accounts synopsis form, and key points and question by question guidance notes and to help you correctly complete them.

You should ensure that any staff colleague or external law accountants who prepare your advice and assistance accounts, are made aware of this guidance. Further copies are available on our website www.slab.org.uk or by calling our Communications Department on 0131 240 1985.