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SERVICE STANDARDS TO BE INTRODUCED

As we indicated in the last issue of *The Recorder*, the Board will publish service standards for applicants, opponents, solicitors and advocates involved in a legal aid case. These support the new performance targets which were published in our Corporate Plan for 2000-2003.

The standards set out the level of service that applicants, solicitors and advocates can expect from the Board at various stages of a case, from registration of an advice and assistance intimation to payment of accounts. These new performance targets apply to all applications received by the Board on or after 1 October 2000.

We also want to ensure that you and your clients are kept informed of the progress with applications. For applications received after 16 October, if we have not made a decision on an application within the target time, we will send a status letter to both the solicitor and the applicant. (A decision is considered to have been taken if we have intimated our decision to grant or refuse an application, or we have continued the application for more information.) In this letter, we will give the reasons why we have been unable to make a decision on the application and tell you when a decision will be made or what stage the application has reached. For example, an application may have been referred to a committee of the Board for a decision.

The service standards will be published shortly on our web sites and will also be incorporated within new leaflets for the public, applicants and opponents.

Review of information leaflets

We are in the process of revising the information leaflets we currently provide, as well as considering any additional information that would be useful to the public, applicants, opponents and others who may be involved in a legally aided case. When the new leaflets are drafted, we will also make them available in different languages and in formats to suit people with special needs.

At this stage, we propose to produce revised or new leaflets covering the following subjects:

- ▶ civil advice and assistance
- ▶ civil legal aid (including the possible costs involved)
- ▶ criminal legal aid
- ▶ eligibility limits
- ▶ information for opponents in civil legal aid cases
- ▶ making a complaint about the Board
- ▶ property recovered or preserved in civil legal aid cases
- ▶ payment of contributions in civil legal aid cases
- ▶ payment of debt and the taxation process
- ▶ information on legal aid cases involving children and information for children.

We aim to publish the first six leaflets in that list within the next months, with the others following shortly afterwards.

Our existing leaflets are issued to solicitors' firms, Citizens Advice Bureau, advice agencies, libraries and other locations to be widely available to the public. We are also considering other locations where these leaflets or information about legal aid can be made available for the public.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

OUR NEW COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

We aim to deal with any complaints about our service in a way that satisfies the concerns of the complainer and allows us to make improvements where they are needed. To help us to do this in the most effective way, we have reviewed our internal complaints procedures and will be introducing a new, improved complaints procedure shortly. At the same time, we are issuing a new leaflet explaining how to go about making a complaint, and providing a tear-off slip that anyone making a complaint can use if they so wish. Copies of this leaflet will be sent to all solicitors, and extra supplies can be ordered from our Communications Office. This revised procedure complies with the criteria for Charter Mark, the government's award scheme for recognising and encouraging excellence in public service.

The complaints procedure relates to the administration of the Board, and not to our decisions on applications or accounts as there is already a clear procedure for reviewing decisions. For applications, the original decision can be reviewed by the Board and ultimately, judicially reviewed. In accounts, any matters which are disputed can go to taxation for an independent decision.

Obviously, members of the legal profession may have their own concerns about our service. The same principles apply to solicitors and advocates as to the public.

If you make a complaint about our service, we will –

- ▶ investigate the matter honestly, thoroughly and promptly
- ▶ deal with it confidentially, objectively, fairly and effectively
- ▶ if we are at fault we will accept responsibility and offer an apology
- ▶ try to put things right, and to resolve, as far as we can, your complaint
- ▶ use the lessons we learn from your complaint to improve our service.

We will treat you with courtesy, and any comment or complaint you make will not adversely affect the service we provide or the way we deal with your legal aid applications or accounts.

We will acknowledge all complaints and requests for reviews of complaints within seven calendar days of receiving them and aim to give you a full response within 28 calendar days. If, exceptionally, our investigation takes longer than this, we will write to you explaining why this is the case and when you can expect to receive the response.

How to complain

You can complain in writing, by telephone, fax or e-mail, or in person.

STAGE 1. In the first instance, please contact the person you have been dealing with, who will try to resolve your complaint.

STAGE 2. If you do not want to do this or you are not satisfied with the outcome or the way in which the complaint was handled, you may contact the Director of the relevant Department.

- ▶ If your complaint concerns an application for legal aid, please contact the Director of Legal Services.
- ▶ If your complaint concerns an accounts matter, please contact the Director of Finance.

If you are unsure which Director to address your complaint to, please send it to the Head of Secretariat who will forward it to the appropriate Director.

The Director will investigate your complaint and let you know the outcome. He will do this within 28 calendar days.

STAGE 3. If you are still not happy about the outcome or the way in which the Director dealt with your complaint, you can ask for a review of your complaint. You can do this by contacting the Chief Executive. It would be helpful if, at this stage, complaints could be in writing. However, if you prefer to contact the Chief Executive by another method, we will still ensure that your complaint is fully reviewed.

The Chief Executive will review all aspects of your complaint, including the way it has been dealt with, and will reply to you within 28 calendar days.

STAGE 4. If you are not satisfied with the Chief Executive's response, you may be able to complain to the Scottish Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration. His job is to investigate complaints made to him by members of the Scottish Parliament on behalf of members of the public who have suffered an injustice through maladministration by a wide range of public bodies, or been refused access to official information. You must first approach your MSP to do this. You can get further information about the Scottish Commissioner from his offices at 28 Thistle Street, Edinburgh EH2 1EN (Telephone 0845 601 0456 or fax 0131 226 4447). The Commissioner will not review the discretionary decisions of public bodies.

OUTCOMES OF SOLICITORS SURVEY

We now have the results from the service satisfaction survey issued in early May, and we would like to thank the 200 solicitors who took the time to complete the questionnaire. We are assessing the results of the survey, along with the feedback received from meetings with local faculties, and preparing an action plan to address the issues you raised. We have contacted the solicitors who indicated they would be interested in a follow-up meeting with the Board to discuss matters in more detail.

Many of the issues arising from the survey reflect concerns that we had already identified, and we have begun work to improve our service in these areas. We will consult in detail with the Law Society before any changes are implemented and will inform practitioners on the actions taken in *The Recorder*.

Main findings

The survey identified a considerable number of areas where a high proportion of the solicitors who responded were satisfied or very satisfied with our performance, for example the 30 day turnaround for criminal accounts, availability of our publications, and helpfulness of our staff. In addition there are several issues where the perception of our performance has improved on the 1997 survey, for example consistency of decision making in applications. However there are a number of areas where the level of satisfaction is too low or where there has been a marked drop since the 1997 survey. The main areas of concern are

- the speed of turnaround in all aspects of civil applications and A&A increases
- the turnaround of civil accounts
- solicitors' concern that our staff are less knowledgeable on court procedures than in 1997
- the need for more information when we refuse applications, transfers or sanctions, and how we calculate applicants' contributions
- the time taken to deal with correspondence.

Progress to date

Since the survey was issued, and in response to similar issues raised at the meetings with local faculties, we have already implemented or planned a number of initiatives.

- The introduction of new performance indicators and service standards will improve the Board's service on timeliness, and provide applicants and solicitors with more information about the likely time to deal with their case. The review of applications processes and procedures has also highlighted areas where improvements can be made.
- Our performance has improved since May in areas including the turnaround of accounts, particularly advice and assistance and civil.
- The restructure of Legal Services and Applications in August means our in-house solicitors are more accessible to practitioners who want to discuss cases with a legally qualified person. This structure will also help highlight areas where further staff training is required.
- In September we issued our internal guidelines on criminal accounts assessment to the profession, and it is now available on our web site for the profession www.slabpro.org.uk. We intend to publish guidelines on fixed payment accounts and advice and assistance applications over the next few months.
- The new complaints procedure, to be introduced in December, will provide an improved service for the profession and applicants, and ensure we deal with complaints more effectively.
- We are reviewing the leaflets issued to the public about all aspects of legal aid and we aim to issue revised leaflets by the end of the year. We are also producing new leaflets on clawback and on legal aid for children.
- Further guidance for solicitors on clawback will be included in *The Recorder*.
- The new independent checking unit is monitoring the consistency and quality of decision making in accounts and applications, and later will cover the Treasury Department as well.
- We submitted a bid to the Modernising Government Fund for funding to introduce e-commerce between the Board and the legal profession to allow an exchange of information more quickly and efficiently.
- The process of closer consultation with the profession through local faculties and the Law Society is continuing. We will consult on specific changes to procedures or policy and ensure that the profession is informed of change well in advance of the implementation date.
- We have almost completed our review of the processes and policy for dealing with sanctions for counsel and expert witnesses.

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- ▶ A new unit has been established to deal with means assessment in civil cases, and we have reviewed our policy and procedures in this area.
- ▶ We are encouraging more of our staff to work towards paralegal qualifications.
- ▶ Our proposals to extend the repayment period for contributions in civil cases were accepted by the Scottish Executive and new arrangements were introduced from July.

The way forward

We hope that through greater consultation with the profession and through this regular survey, we have identified the areas of greatest concern to practitioners. Over coming months we aim to address these concerns directly, and implement changes to improve the service we provide.

In addition, we always welcome feedback on our services and if you have any concerns or suggestions for improvement, please write to our Chief Executive, Lindsay Montgomery.

The results of the 2000 survey

The results are summarised below, showing the percentage of solicitors who responded to each question as satisfied or very satisfied with the particular subject. The equivalent responses to the 1997 survey are shown in brackets. Where there is no figure in brackets, this was a new question in the 2000 survey.

Applications

- ▶ Consistency of decision making
 - ▶ A&A applications - 80% (74%)
 - ▶ criminal applications - 81% (79%)
 - ▶ civil applications - 62% (57%).
- ▶ Time taken to deal with
 - ▶ criminal applications at first instance - 93% (91% with criminal applications generally)
 - ▶ criminal reviews – 83%
 - ▶ criminal sanctions – 62%
 - ▶ civil applications - 51% (67%)
 - ▶ civil reviews – 47%
 - ▶ civil sanctions – 47%
 - ▶ SU4 applications - 78%
 - ▶ A&A increases - 48% (83%)
- ▶ Knowledge of our staff on court procedures in
 - ▶ civil cases - 58% (71%)
 - ▶ criminal cases - 68% (84%)
- ▶ Amount of information given
 - ▶ when applications, transfers, sanctions etc are refused - 39% (45%)
 - ▶ on how we calculate an applicant's contributions - 58% (54%)

Accounts

- ▶ Consistency of decision making on
 - ▶ A&A accounts – 78% (82%)
 - ▶ criminal accounts - 71% (83%)
 - ▶ civil accounts - 67% (88%)
- ▶ Procedures for abating and finalising
 - ▶ A&A accounts – 59%
 - ▶ criminal and civil accounts - 52%
- ▶ Time taken to deal with
 - ▶ A&A accounts - 77% (91%)
 - ▶ civil accounts - 50% (79%)
 - ▶ satisfaction with the 30 day turnaround for criminal accounts - 89% (91% with the time taken to pay criminal accounts generally)
- ▶ 95% are satisfied with a 30 day turnaround for properly prepared and vouched A&A accounts
- ▶ 77% were satisfied with the system of paying criminal accounts on offer
- ▶ 99% would welcome guidelines on assessing accounts

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Communications

- ▶ Consistency of information given by phone relating to
 - ▶ criminal cases – 62%
 - ▶ civil cases – 65% (66% with consistency of information given by phone generally)
 - ▶ A&A cases – 70%
- ▶ Time taken to deal with
 - ▶ telephone calls - 75% (89%)
 - ▶ correspondence relating to applications - 47%
 - ▶ accounts correspondence - 35%
 - ▶ general correspondence - 45% (50% with the time taken to deal with correspondence generally)
- ▶ Satisfaction with
 - ▶ each publication that we produce - at least 70%
 - ▶ the availability of our publications – 93% (85%)
 - ▶ the frequency of *The Recorder* - 89% (78%)
 - ▶ our opening hours – 82% (93%)
 - ▶ 75% said we provided enough information for applicants on legal aid generally
 - ▶ the helpfulness and courtesy of our staff – 91% (96%)
 - ▶ the information given to opponents in civil cases – 75%
- ▶ 63% had attended a seminar run by the Board (93%) although 89% said they would attend if they had the opportunity (47%)
- ▶ 15% had made a formal complaint to the Board, and of those 58% said it was dealt with timeously, 52% that it was dealt with competently and 48% that it was dealt with effectively
- ▶ 63% said that we did not provide enough information about the policy and procedures where the Board has discretion and where it does not and 56% said we did not provide applicants with enough information on this subject
- ▶ 47% who were not satisfied with the information provided by staff had been able to discuss the matter with one of our in-house solicitors. 97% said they would find it useful to be able to discuss cases with a solicitor

Treasury

- ▶ consistency of decision in cases where the Board is recovering money from or on behalf of a client - 81% (82%)
- ▶ the amount of information provided on the reasons for decision in this area - 74% (77%)
- ▶ 54% said we provide enough information to solicitors on procedures for dealing with money or property recovered or preserved, and 52% said we provide enough information for applicants on this subject

Payments

- ▶ 80% use VAT vouchers for the preparation of VAT returns (83%)
- ▶ 90% were satisfied with the format, content and layout of the vouchers (94%)

FORMS UPDATE

In issue 29 of *The Recorder*, we told you that you could continue to use old stocks of the application form for advice and assistance (AA/APP) marked 'Revised 5/98'. These forms will no longer be accepted unless they are the digital version printed from the Board's Resource CD-Rom, which has not yet been updated and re-issued, although the updated digital version is on our web site for the profession, SLABPro. If you have old stocks of the paper form, you can send them to the Communications Office for recycling. New supplies marked 'Revised 9/99' can be ordered from Geo. Stewart & Co.

FACULTY MEETINGS FEEDBACK

The articles on the following pages set out the Board's policy on various issues relating to accounts assessment, which were raised during the recent series of meetings with local faculties of solicitors. We addressed some questions in the last issue of *The Recorder*, and we will continue to provide guidance or clarify Board policy in future issues.

A public report on the outcomes of the faculty and public meetings is on our web sites at www.slab.org.uk and www.slabpro.org.uk and it has been sent to Jim Wallace MSP, Minister for Justice, members of the Justice and Home Affairs Committee of the Scottish Parliament, the Law Society, Faculty of Advocates, the local faculties, organisations and members of the public who took part in the consultation. We have prepared an action plan to take forward the issues raised in the meetings.

ACCOUNTS ASSESSMENT NEWS

Restructure of Accounts Assessment

We have begun a phased restructure of our Accounts Assessment Department. A structure has been implemented, with the final structure to be in place in January 2001 in preparation for the implementation of new financial and management systems.

Dedicated teams have been created to deal with criminal, fixed payment, civil and A&A accounts, and Judith Cemery continues to manage this area. Steven Carrie, previously Assistant Manager in Accounts Assessment, is now leading a team of specialists who will support the teams and deal with more complex cases. The accounts registration and clerical support teams have been brought together and are managed by June Thorburn. We are in the process of recruiting staff for various posts to complete the new structure, and before January there will be training for any new staff and those existing staff whose role is changing.

The restructure in Accounts Assessment was one of the recommendations by consultants Deloitte Touche, following their recent review of the department's operations. The new arrangements will provide the most effective working practices to deliver the key objectives of the department and the Board. The new structure within the teams will also offer more support for staff, by ensuring that more complex cases are dealt with by specialist staff and solicitors, who will provide feedback and advice to their colleagues and highlight areas for further training.

When you phone the Board with an enquiry about an account, please tell our switchboard staff whether your query is about a criminal, fixed payment, civil or A&A account. This will ensure you are directed to the appropriate team immediately.

Criminal legal aid - witness expenses

The issue of witnesses on the Crown list demanding payment for providing factual precognitions was raised at some of the meetings with local faculties. The Board is aware of this problem and the difficulties it is causing solicitors. The matter has been raised both with the Law Society and the Scottish Executive and discussions are taking place with a view to resolving this problem. We will update you on progress in the next issue of *The Recorder*.

Automatic criminal legal aid – bail appeals

A situation arose in a recent case where a solicitor, who was providing automatic criminal legal aid, had no cover for the bail appeal as the criminal legal aid application had been refused by the Board. This is an unusual occurrence but can happen. A criminal legal aid application can be granted or refused within two or three days, possibly prior to the hearing of a bail appeal. To avoid this happening in future, it is recommended that a solicitor, in circumstances where a bail appeal is being conducted under automatic criminal legal aid, advise the Board of this in the application. The Board will then continue the application for details of the outcome of the bail appeal, which information will be taken into account in determining the application. This will avoid a situation where the application is refused prior to the hearing of the bail appeal.

High Court proceedings – employment of counsel

In terms of regulation 14 of the Criminal Legal aid (Scotland) Regulations 1996, junior counsel is automatically available in High Court proceedings. The current practice of the Board is to await the service of an indictment setting the case down for the High Court before confirming the availability of junior counsel.

As you may be aware the Procurator Fiscal in some jurisdictions is intimating by letter, prior to the service of the indictment, that certain cases are considered of High Court potential by the Crown. The letter advises the solicitor of a provisional allocation of a sitting of the High Court and the purpose of this circulation is to ensure that agents progress with their enquiries at as early a stage as possible.

To assist in this aim, the Board is prepared to treat such a letter, for all intents and purposes, as the equivalent of the High Court indictment. It will be prepared to confirm the automatic availability of junior counsel and to consider the employment of senior counsel, subject of course to justification for the employment of senior counsel in the usual way.

This will involve a change not only to the procedures of the Criminal Applications area but to Criminal Accounts Assessment area. The letter from the Fiscal contains a rider that the decision as to whether or not to proceed with the case, and forum, if proceedings are instructed, is a matter for Crown counsel. Accordingly, if an indictment is subsequently served for sheriff and jury, the Board will be prepared to consider the segment of the proceedings from the availability of junior counsel to the service of the sheriff and jury indictment as "High Court proceedings". To do otherwise would be to discourage solicitors from instructing counsel, the whole point of the exercise, until the service of the indictment.

At this stage, however, junior counsel will no longer be automatically available and the solicitor will require to seek sanction both for the employment of junior counsel and for reconsideration of any employment for senior counsel due to the changed circumstances of the case. It is hoped that this will not be a common occurrence but solicitors should be aware of this eventuality.

Policy on commissions

In Issue number 30 of *The Recorder* we advised you that we were reviewing our policy in regard to the situations in which prior sanction would be required before proceeding to a commission. This review has now taken place and the policy of the Board in connection with all work carried out from **1 January 2001** is as follows.

To Take Evidence of Witnesses

Open Commissions

Prior sanction for work of an unusual nature or likely to involve unusually large expenditure will be required before taking any steps in connection with an open commission. Sanction required.

Other Commissions

All other commissions although normally less expensive than an open commission, to take evidence of witnesses remain potentially an expensive procedure and, again, prior sanction will be required. Sanction required.

For the Recovery of Documents

Commission and diligence for the recovery of documents will not require the prior sanction of the Board but solicitors will require to exercise the optional procedure in all cases prior to proceeding to a formal commission and diligence. In the event that the solicitor's account does not disclose that this procedure has been adopted and exhausted, the work in connection with any subsequent commission will be subject to abatement. Accordingly, solicitors should seek the prior sanction of the Board in circumstances where they wish to proceed to a commission in circumstances where they cannot, or decide that they should not proceed with the optional procedure. No sanction required if optional procedure exhausted.

Extension of shorthand notes

At Request of Court

After some discussion it has been decided that in situations where the court *ex proprio motu* requires the extension of shorthand notes, party solicitors will not require the prior sanction of the Board.

On Motion of Party

On the other hand, where the court does not see the need for the shorthand writer's notes to be extended, a solicitor shall require to obtain the prior sanction of the Board before making a motion to this effect.

Again, this policy will not come into force until **1 January 2001** and in the meantime all accounts will continue to be dealt with on the basis of reasonableness.

Detailed guidance both on the circumstances on which sanction is required for commissions and on the extension of shorthand notes will be given prior to 1 January 2001.

Change control procedures

Our Accounts Assessment and Legal Services Departments have established procedures to manage effectively changes to policy or procedures. Change control groups will review any change to ensure that the impact on staff and on solicitors is fully evaluated, the necessary consultation is undertaken, the change is implemented effectively and guidance is issued to everyone affected by the change well in advance.

This initiative has been introduced as a result of our ongoing review of the way we deal with accounts, and we hope it will improve consistency among our staff and provide clear guidance to the profession.

Future changes will be explained in a letter to practitioners or in *The Recorder*.

Criminal accounts assessment manual

As we said at the faculty meetings, we have produced a Criminal Accounts Assessment Manual and this has now been issued to all registered firms. This sets out the Board's policy on all aspects of solemn and non-fixed payment accounts.

We have discussed the manual in some detail with the Law Society of Scotland and, as a result, various issues were identified and resolved. There remain a number of other points where we were unable to agree and which the Board will be prepared to proceed to taxation in the coming months.

We would very much welcome your comments on the manual, both to enable us to improve similar guidance issued in the future and to clarify any issues that are still unclear, perhaps through *The Recorder*. To help us co-ordinate responses, it would be helpful if you could pass your comments to us via your local faculty.

We are currently working on guidelines for fixed payment cases, which we hope to issue to the profession shortly. These will be followed by guidelines on advice and assistance accounts and then civil accounts.

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Submission of criminal accounts

When submitting criminal account synopsis forms, please make sure that all the information requested on the form is provided. If the form is incomplete, we will not be able to fully register the account and this will cause delays at the assessment stage.

The account synopsis form MUST include

- ▶ details of any local agent involved in the case
- ▶ any Faculty fees being claimed
- ▶ the practitioner code and/or Faculty code.

The form must also be supported by a detailed account and/or the original Faculty fee notes, as appropriate.

Fixed payment forms

As a result of the changes to the fixed payment regulations and the clarification of the issue of the start of a trial, we plan to revise the fixed payment account synopsis form. The existing form has proved to be inadequate, and this has regrettably meant that we have had to request additional information from solicitors before assessing some fixed payment accounts. We will consult with the Law Society on the new form and we will inform the profession before the new form is issued.

In the meantime, we will continue to request information in situations such as those given below.

- ▶ Where there is a claim for first or second day trial or more, we require information on the nature of the diets and when evidence was led.
- ▶ If travel to court is involved for other than a trial, we need to know why a local agent was not used.
- ▶ When expert or professional witness are involved, we need to know the numbers of hours they have spent on the case because the applicable Crown rates vary depending on the time involved.

It would be helpful if this information, where applicable, could be provided in a covering letter with your account.

We are currently producing a form to deal with fixed payment cases which have been transferred to another solicitor, and we plan to introduce a simple form for claims under Section 23(1)(b).

References for Faculty Services

When a solicitor instructs counsel in either a civil or criminal case, please ensure that you provide the advocate with the legal aid reference number. If counsel do not have this number, it can make identification of the case difficult for both Faculty Services and the Board and adds to the time taken to register the account and deal with any enquiries.

APPLICATIONS UPDATE

Guidelines on advice and assistance increases

At the faculty meetings, solicitors said that guidelines on the advice and assistance increases would be helpful. We had already begun to produce guidelines for staff in this area, and we have now decided to make these available to practitioners.

The guidelines include

- ▶ general advice on matters such as the supporting documentation required, the procedure regarding companies and partnerships, and cases relating to matters which are not Scots law
- ▶ specific guidance on types of case, such as different grounds for divorce, conveyancing, reparation and many others.

Although the guidelines are intended primarily for staff, we believe they will help solicitors by indicating what the Board is looking for in requests for increases and the levels of increase we will normally consider reasonable.

The guidelines were considered by our Legal Services Committee in September, and we intend to issue copies to all firms in the near future.

We are also working on guidelines for practitioners on legal aid in matrimonial cases. This would include the information we look for in assessing the reasonableness and probable cause tests, and the information required in support of applications for particular aspects of matrimonial and family actions.

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Review of advice and assistance form

We have recognised that the advice and assistance application form (AA/APP) requires to be reviewed and at the faculty meetings there have been useful suggestions for improvement. We are in the process of revising this form, and we will consult with the Law Society and others before it is issued.

Closer integration of Legal Services and Applications

We have restructured our Legal Services and Applications departments to give more efficient and effective working practices, which should lead to an improved service to the profession and your clients.

Our in-house solicitors will work directly with the staff teams responsible for advice and assistance and civil and criminal applications. The teams will refer queries they feel unable to deal with and correspondence that requires a legal input to the relevant solicitor, who will also assist with more complex cases.

We hope that the closer working relations will assist the staff to develop their knowledge and experience, and solicitors will be better able to identify any areas where training is required. Our solicitors will also be more accessible by practitioners and will be available to answer queries on specific cases.

In conjunction with this restructure we have implemented new systems for recording and monitoring telephone calls and progress with cases referred to our solicitors. This will improve efficiency and help us to achieve our targets for turnaround of applications.

ANSWERING YOUR ENQUIRIES

When phoning the Board with enquiries about any aspect of a case, it would be helpful if you could note the name of the member of staff you speak to. This will help you to reach that person quickly, if you need to contact us again. Otherwise, our switchboard operator will be able to connect you with the team dealing with your case, but it will take longer to locate the correct individual.

We have implemented improved processes for dealing with telephone enquiries to ensure that calls are dealt with more effectively and, where a message is left, that the appropriate member of staff phones you back promptly.

PLANS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF E-COMMERCE

With the support of the Law Society, the Board has submitted a bid to the Modernising Government Fund for money to develop e-commerce between the Board and the legal profession.

Modernising Government is an initiative to improve public services in the UK, including improved communication with those people who use public services and more integration between the different organisations which provide these services. The ability to send and receive information and documents electronically is becoming increasingly common in the business world, and to meet the demand for this way of working the Board has begun to develop plans to increase our use of electronic communication, such as fax and e-mail.

By fully using e-commerce, we would be able to receive applications and accounts by e-mail and send information, letters and other material to solicitors in the same way. There is clearly a long way to go until we were able to do this, and we will begin by piloting ideas with small numbers of firms.

If we are successful in the bid to the Modernising Government Fund, we would obtain some of the funding necessary to work towards the implementation of e-mail and internet services. We hope to hear news of our bid by the end of November.

PRINCIPAL SUMS CHEQUES

We are now able to offer assisted persons an improved service for release of principal sums cheques. Using the CHAPS system, the time taken to release the monies and for the cheque to clear is significantly reduced.

From the date we receive the monies from a solicitor, it normally takes between seven and ten days to release the cheque to the assisted person and the cheque can then take several days to clear through their bank. Please note that we must wait at least three days once we receive the settlement cheque to ensure the cheque clears before we will release any monies.

A payment through CHAPS can be made within two days of funds clearing at the Board (or within a day, if necessary) and is available immediately in the person's bank account.

The assisted person needs to have a bank account and there is a small cost for using CHAPS: ten pence, if the payment is made within two days; or £6 if the payment is required within the same working day.

If an assisted person wants to have the payment made via CHAPS, they or their solicitor should contact our Treasury Department once the solicitor has sent the monies to the Board. We need the assisted person's bank account number, the sort code and the address of their bank branch. If we have received the monies and the funds are to be released that day, we would need the details by 12 noon.

For more information about this systems, contact Cindy Marshall in our Treasury Department at 0131 226 7061, ext. 218 or by e-mail at marshallci@slab.org.uk.

FAX NUMBERS AT THE BOARD

The Board now has a number of fax numbers relating to different areas of its operations. To avoid possible delays in dealing with your faxes, please make sure the correct fax numbers are used.

Criminal Applications	0131 226 5477 or 0131 220 2905
Civil Applications	0131 220 4879
Applications Registration	0131 220 5464
A & A Applications	0131 220 3462 or 0131 220 2904
Civil Accounts	0131 220 3908
Criminal Accounts	0131 220 4895
A & A Accounts	0131 220 4882
Finance	0131 220 5133
Director of Finance	0131 226 7675
Treasury	0131 220 5091
Communications	0131 220 4878
IT Department	0131 225 8357
Chief Executive and Chairman	0131 220 5145
Audit & Compliance	0131 225 9850
Personnel	0131 225 7862
Purchasing & Supply Division	0131 226 5305
Legal Services Solicitors	0131 225 3705

CHECK YOUR DETAILS

To ensure that correspondence, *The Recorder* and other important information from the Board reaches you, please make sure that you tell us immediately if you change address or firm. Please also remember to tell us if your firm changes to or from Royal Mail and Hays DX so that we can update our records and send mail to you by the most appropriate means. You should notify our Finance department in writing of any change in address or practitioner details. Finance will inform the other departments within the Board which require this information.

HAVE YOU RECEIVED THIS INFORMATION?

Since issue 30 of *The Recorder* was published in May 2000, the following mailshots, containing important information about legal aid, have been sent to practitioners. If you did not receive these, contact our Communications Office for a copy or look on our web site for the profession, SLABPro, at www.slabpro.org.uk.

- ▶ Letter from Lindsay Montgomery, Chief Executive, to registered criminal practitioners giving details of new arrangements for PDSO and the duty plans in Edinburgh – 20 June 2000.
- ▶ Letter from Lindsay Montgomery announcing the extension of the contribution payment period in civil cases – 26 June 2000.
- ▶ Letter to all firms from Karen Lawson, Communications and Administration Supervisor, enclosing an updated eligibility limits leaflet and order form for the fifth edition of the Scottish Legal Aid Handbook – 20 July 2000.
- ▶ Letter from Jean Couper, Chairman, to all firms enclosing a copy of the Annual Report 1999/2000 – 1 August 2000.
- ▶ Letter to practitioners and advocates from Jim Edgar, Director of Finance, regarding the introduction of a new mileage rate – 11 August 2000.
- ▶ Criminal Accounts Assessment Manual and covering letter from Jim Edgar sent to all registered firms – 11 September 2000.
- ▶ Letter from Lindsay Montgomery giving details of the new performance targets and service standards – 13 October 2000.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF THE RECORDER

We will be producing a special issue of *The Recorder* to cover a range of issues relating to the ECHR.

We would be interested to know if there is any information you would like to see in future issues of *The Recorder*. For example, you might want clarification on any policy or procedure relating to an application for legal aid or payment of accounts. Or you may be interested in who to contact at the Board about a specific matter.

We would welcome any suggestions for articles so please contact our Communications Office on 0131 226 7061, ext. 306 or e-mail us at general@slab.org.uk.

We aim to publish *The Recorder* at least three times a year – in January, May and September. If there is important news in between these dates, we will produce a special issue as required.

If any solicitor in your firm does not receive *The Recorder*, please ask them to contact our Communications Office, quoting the firm's code and their practitioner code, to be included on the mailing list.

You can find back copies of *The Recorder* from January 1998 on our web site for the profession at www.slabpro.org.uk.

MAIL SERVICES TO AND FROM THE BOARD

DX address for the Board

In October 1999 our DX addresses changed to

DX 555250
General Mail
Edinburgh 30

or

DX 555251
Applications only
Edinburgh 30

Please make sure that you use the full DX address and change any computer systems or records that still contain our old address. Many firms are still addressing DX mail to the Board using the old numbers of ED250 and ED250A. As these numbers are now invalid there could be a delay in the mail reaching us. DX are currently re-routing this mail to us, but this practice may not continue indefinitely.

The owners of the address DX 251 are receiving large amounts of mail for the Board. They quite rightly are unhappy about re-routing the mail to us. As well as the inconvenience caused, this is causing delays in mail reaching the Board. Please ensure all office staff are aware of the correct DX addresses.

Mail opening process

All mail, with few exceptions, is opened, date stamped and sorted centrally in our mailroom. It would speed up our mail opening process if all applications were submitted in one envelope rather than in individually addressed envelopes to Board staff and the same with general mail.

Misdirected mail

If Board mail is sent to you in error please return it to Colin McKinnell, our Facilities Manager. Also let him know if our mail is being mislaid or delayed by the carrier. This will allow us to monitor the effectiveness of our mail procedures and of the mail services we use. You can contact Colin on 0131 226 7061, ext. 430 or by e-mail at mckinnelco@slab.org.uk.

The Board receives a significant amount of mail from solicitors' firms that is intended for clients or other organisations. This mail is returned to the sender, where possible. Unless it is unclear where the mail came from or who it is intended for, we return the mail to the sender on the day it is received.



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