Written submission from Clan Childlaw

Access to Justice

Thank you for your call for written evidence.

How will funding cuts impact on access to justice and will any groups be particularly affected?

Cl@n childlaw is an outreach law centre providing free legal advice and representation to children and young people in Edinburgh and the Lothians. It is a charity which aims to tackle unmet legal need and to provide a means for children to access the legal help that they require. We work with agencies to help children identify where the law might be able to help. If necessary, we go and meet with the young person, often alongside a support worker, to advise on the law. We write letters, make phone calls and go to court if required. We provide a child-centred, holistic service.

We are supported by the Scottish Government and other grant making bodies and in addition are able to self-generate some income for the charity through civil legal aid work and by the delivery of training. Last year we were approximately 60% dependent on grant funding and were heading towards being a sustainable model by which we could deliver legal services to the most vulnerable children in Scotland.

Since then, the Scottish Legal Aid Board has implemented a series of cuts, resulting in a significant reduction in income obtained through the Civil Legal Aid system. The Committee will no doubt be familiar with the changes already made to the legal aid scheme. We have been particularly affected by the reduction in payment for travel costs and the changes made in relation to taking account the resources of parents when deciding whether or not a child meets the financial criteria.

It is difficult to anticipate the full impact of the cuts already made and of the further proposed cuts. Our impression is that private law firms are already having to restrict their work to areas where there is better payment through civil legal aid and certainly are unable to provide a holistic, child-centred service to children, which is what is often required to provide access to justice to this vulnerable group.

By further cuts being made to the legal aid budget, this again widens the gap in service provision, which is the gap we are attempting to fill. However in order for us to continue to do this work, we, along with other similar organisations, will require additional funding as our current model will become unsustainable. Services like ours will not be able to continue resulting in a significant decline in the availability of legal services to the most vulnerable in our society.
Alison Reid
Principal Solicitor
For and on behalf of Clan Childlaw
20 October 2011