



9th September 2005

PLFA Consultation
Access to Justice Division
Scottish Executive
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Edinburgh
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Scottish Accessible Information Forum response to 'Advice for All – Publicly Funded Legal Assistance in Scotland – The Way Forward'

Background, aims and objectives

The Scottish Accessible Information Forum (SAIF) was set up to take forward the recommendations made by the Scottish Working Group on Information Services for Disabled People and Carers in its final report *Enabling Information* (1995).

Aims and objectives

SAIF aims to make information more accessible to everyone who needs it. SAIF supports the rights of disabled people and carers in having access to timely and accurate information about a wide range of services. SAIF believes that, rather than be forced to rely on others, disabled people should receive information directly and in their preferred format. This will help to enable them to make informed choices and live independent lives as equal members of society.

Advisory body

SAIF acts as an advisory body to the Scottish Executive on issues relating to disabled people and their carers and their right to access information.

Members

The Forum is made up of twenty one people representing providers of information and advice, as well as organisations of and for disabled people and carers. Over half of SAIF's members are disabled people or carers themselves.

Remit

SAIF's remit is:

- to develop and promote quality standards in information provision to disabled people and carers
- to represent and promote the interests of disabled people in having access to information services
- to promote communication between national and local information providers
- to advise the Scottish Executive on policy relating to accessible information
- to improve disabled people's access to information.

Advice for All : Publicly Funded Legal Assistance

SAIF welcomes the proposal for a national strategy for Publicly Funded Legal Assistance on civil matters which aims to make sure that advice on problems which raise legal issues is available and accessible when and where people need it.

We welcome the commitment to ensuring that high quality information, advice and representation is available to meet need. Disabled people would benefit from better access to the range of assistance included in the scope of PFLA – information, advice on options for action, practical assistance, mediation, arbitration and representation. We also welcome the inclusion of a wide range of topics in the scope, eg welfare benefits, advice, debt and money advice, housing rights advice and consumer rights. The range of legal problems faced by disabled people are compounded by the failure of organisations and services to provide information in accessible formats, and by the lack of accessible advice provision.

It is imperative that the strategy for Publicly Funded Legal Advice include a specific commitment to accessibility, and that the cost of providing information and advice in an accessible way should be taken into account in funding for legal advice services.

Quality Assurance Framework

SAIF welcomes the commitment to quality assurance, and quality standards for PFLA should ensure that legal information and advice is accessible to all. SAIF has produced Standards for disability information and advice provision. The standards were produced to assist agencies in the voluntary, private and statutory sectors, to ensure that disabled people can access effective information and advice services. We recommend that these standards be included within the PFLA framework.

Standards for Disability Information and Advice Provision in Scotland (Revised 2004) ©2004, ISBN 0-9546700-1-9

Local strategies

The SAIF Standards recognise the need for strategic planning on a locality basis to underpin the development of individual services in order to ensure equitable access. Local authorities are the key agency in implementing planning of services for disabled people, as the lead agency in community planning. If they are to take on the role of planning and coordinating PFLA at a local level, they should ensure that disabled people are involved in the planning process to ensure that services are designed to meet the needs of disabled people.

SAIF can provide guidance on the process and implementation of local information strategies, and has produced a practical guide for local authorities and others on how to develop a local accessible information strategy.

Barrier Free Information ©2004, ISBN 0-9546700-8-6

Technology

A clear omission from the proposals is the application of technology in advice services. The potential for using technology to increase access to information and advice should be an integral part of the national strategy. However, technology must be applied in a way that ensures that it is accessible for all. SAIF has produced practical guidelines for making websites accessible as a supplement to the SAIF Standards for Disability Information and Advice Provision in Scotland. **Making Websites Accessible** ©2002, ISBN 0-9543408-0-9

SAIF would welcome the opportunity to contribute to the process of ensuring that any developments in the provision of legal advice are accessible, and produce a number of publications which can assist service providers to ensure that information and advice services meet the needs of disabled people. These can be downloaded from the SAIF website:

<http://www.saifscotland.org.uk/publications/publicat.htm>.

Yours sincerely,



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Chair
Scottish Accessible Information Forum (SAIF)