



**DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND
PERSONNEL'S CONSULTATION PAPER
ON REGULATION OF LEGAL SERVICES IN
NORTHERN IRELAND**

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INTRODUCTION

- 1 Disability Action is a pioneering Northern Ireland charity, working with and for people with disabilities. We work with our members to provide information, training, transport, awareness programmes and representation for people regardless of their disability; whether that is a physical, mental health, sensory, hidden or learning disability.
- 2 More than one in five (300,000) people in Northern Ireland has a disability and the incidence is higher here than in the rest of the United Kingdom. Over one quarter of all families here are affected.
- 3 As a campaigning body, we work to bring about positive change to the social, economic and cultural life of people with disabilities and consequently our entire community.
- 4 Our range of services is provided from a Head Office based in Belfast and three local offices, with 85 staff and 250 volunteers.
- 5 Disability Action welcomes the opportunity to respond to this draft and to aid our response has put the relevant page/paragraph of the draft in brackets at the end of our comments.

SPECIFIC COMMENTARY

- 6 Disability Action welcomes the Minister's establishment of a Review Group and recommends that the composition of the group be representative of the groups listed under Section 75.
- 7 Regarding consumer consideration Disability Action believes that this statement must be rewritten as follows "... the consumer has sufficient **accessible** information about the standards of the services provided..." Everyone, service users and the general public, have the right to accessible and user-friendly information therefore mechanisms must be put in place to encourage and support disabled people and the other affected categories listed under Section 75 to effectively acquire the information they need. (Item 2.11)

- 8 To promote equality of opportunity Disability Action believes that as citizens the public must be made aware and understand their legal rights. (Item 2.14)
- 9 Disability Action welcomes the Department's statement on complaints however believes that the procedure should outline how it will support the individual to bring his/her complaint (eg interpreter support, specialist transport costs, advocacy services). The complaints procedure must be fully accessible and proactively disseminated to those affected by the Section 75 duties. (Item 3.4)
- 10 Disability Action advocates that complaints in Northern Ireland must have parity of esteem with Great Britain in regard to a Legal Services Ombudsman. (Item 3.10)
- 11 Disability Action believes that the Law Society's definition of a complaint must be reviewed. (Item 3.10)
- 12 Regarding public oversight arrangements for the Bar Council Disability Action believes that Northern Ireland citizens must have parity of esteem with Great Britain. (Item 3.15)
- 13 Regarding the complaints procedure Disability Action refers the Department to paragraph 9 above. (Item 3.16)
- 14 Disability Action recommends that the Programme of Reform Measures, when developed, must be subjected to public consultation. (Item 3.18)
- 15 To enable informed comment to be made Disability Action believes that the Department must determine the reasons why the Northern Ireland level of complaints are proportionally about half of Great Britain. (Item 3.20)
- 16 Disability Action believes that the regulatory mechanisms for the legal professions in other jurisdictions, the Clemanti Review in England and Wales, the Review carried out in Scotland and Republic of Ireland and their recommendations must be introduced/adopted where appropriate for the regulation of the legal professions in Northern Ireland.

- 17 Regarding "...ensuring that customers have ready access to the information..." Disability Action believes that this sentence must read "accessible information". (Item 5.9)
- 18 Given the Customer Satisfaction Survey evidence Disability Action concurs with the Department's conclusion regarding a review of the current system of handling complaints. (Item 5.20)
- 19 To ensure the active participation of all citizens in the Review Group Disability Action refers the Department to paragraph 6 above. (Item 6.6)
- 20 Disability Action requests that the Terms of Reference be kept under review as work progresses. (Item 6.7)
- 21 Disability Action notes the offer of alternative formats, however requests the Department to list the range available e.g. large print, audio cassette, Braille and computer disc etc. (Appendix, Page 37)
- 22 Disability Action believes that the contact details should include a textphone number to enable deaf people the same access as those who are hearing. (Appendix, Page 37)

CONCLUSION

- 23 Disability Action recognises the time and effort that has gone into producing this document for consultation and thanks the Department for the opportunity to respond.