

Young Legal Aid Lawyers Meeting
Minutes

Meeting held on Wednesday 13th April 2005, 6pm
Doughty Street Chambers

In attendance:

Prem Ahluwalia, Ruth Brander, Robert Brown, Steve Cox, Edward Fitzgerald, Helen Howard, Laura Janes, Alasdair Mackenzie, Zahra Nanji, Kathy Pinney, Aron Rollin, Jessica Skinns, Tom Walker, Felicity Williams.

1.Introduction

Laura Janes explained the purpose of the group and the difficulties for young people joining the profession. She suggested the group could make a difference by responding to the consultation processes being carried out by the LSC.

Ruth Brander outlined the content of the Access to Justice Alliance meeting that took place on Saturday. The Alliance is mainly concerned with civil practice and is trying to remain client led. It was felt that young lawyers would attract sympathy in the campaign on legal aid.

2. Presentation

Robert Brown from the London Criminal Court's Solicitor's Association (LCCSA) described their approach to Price Competitive Tendering (PCT). The LCCSA was founded in London. Its sister organisation the Criminal Law Solicitors' Association (CLSA) has a national base.

The present proposals for PCT will impact on all lower court work and all magistrates' court work. The tendering process is entirely based on price and there is a low quality threshold. It will result in discrimination. The proposals will be a disaster for trainee solicitors and the young bar. Many firms have already adopted a policy of not taking on trainees.

The consultation period ends at the end of April. It is likely that the Government will try to push the proposals through. The CLSA are providing information and building support. Representations should be made to the DCA, the Select Committee and Shadow Select Committee. The Commission will consider response May/June.

The Fundamental Legal Aid Review (FLAR) is continuing in parallel to PCT. FLAR will support PCT. PCT will be piloted in London and it will apply to the whole of the capital. It will have an unhealthy impact on the civil budget. The criminal budget is under control but they would like to reduce it by removing lower worked covered by the general contract. PCT has been considered in relation to health services, where it was felt wrong to use it.

There is a public meeting at Friends Meeting House on Friday 14th April at 2.30 about PCT. It was agreed that a representative of the group would attend. It was also recommended that individuals write to the House of Commons, GLA etc using information on the LSSCA and CLSA website (www.clsa.co.uk and www.lccsa.org.uk).

PCT will also have an impact on civil work. Civil and criminal practitioners have traditionally co-existed. Criminal work will no longer subsidise civil work. Local firms will be hard hit and this will impact on individuals who use these firms to connect with their rights.

3. Discussion

Edward Fitzgerald welcomed the setting up of the Young Legal Aid Lawyers group. He emphasised the importance of the group representing a range of young lawyers from students to young practitioners, solicitors and barristers and that those paying the price of PCT have a strong voice.

It was suggested that the group should liaise with immigration practitioners who have already suffered major legal aid cuts. Contact could be made with Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID) and LAPG. Prem Ahluwalia gave out details of a forthcoming FRU/ BID training day on 14th May at BPP (see www.freerepresentationunit.org.uk). Suggestions were also made for outreach and possible links with other associations.

It was agreed that the group should provide a response to the consultation paper. Kathy Pinney suggested the report should be short and punchy and that use could be made of the media. It was agreed that Laura Janes, Steve Cox, Helen Howard, Jessica Skinnis and Felicity Williams would form a working group to prepare a draft response. Aron Rollin, Kathy Pinney and Tom Walker agreed to work on outreach.

The group approved the website (<http://www.younglegalaidlawyers.org>). It was also agreed that Edward Fitzgerald, Jon Snow and Shami Chakrabarti should be asked to act as patrons.

In relation to the civil side, it was noted that the FLAR was still going ahead. Ruth Brander pointed out the need to promote YLAL to the existing groups. It was noted that many firms have a mixed practice. Concerns were raised about the impact on young lawyers generally. Many trainees would now be unable to finish their training contracts. It was agreed that it was important to include this in the consultation paper. However, the civil side did not need to be developed as fast as the PCT response.

It was agreed that Prem Ahluwalia, Kathy Pinney, Zahra Nanji and Tom Walker would form a working group to prepare a draft paper on the impact on young lawyers.

4. Any other business

The next Young Legal Aid Lawyers meeting will take place on:
Thursday 21st April, 6.15pm at Doughty Street Chambers