



NORTHERN IRELAND  
Legal Services  
Commission

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Our Reference CEO/14/143

Date 18 April 2014

Dear Ms Darragh

### **Legal Aid and Coroners' Court Bill**

I am writing to acknowledge receipt of your letter dated 4 April 2014.

I can confirm that the Commission supports the Bill's core proposal to transfer its responsibilities to an Agency within the Department of Justice for the reasons set out in the Access to Justice Review which was carried out by a previous chair of the Commission.

The Commission has argued for some time that the current architecture for legal aid is not fit for purpose. We believe that bringing responsibility for policy and delivery together within the Department will provide a more appropriate framework. This approach will, in particular, help to increase transparency, accountability and efficiency.

The Commission supports the measures proposed to ensure that individual decisions in respect of legal aid are, and are seen to be, taken independently of Government, including the concept of the Agency's chief executive being a statutory office holder. We also support the creation of an independent appeals mechanism and the requirement for all Ministerial guidance to the Agency to be published.

As many of the powers in the Bill are enabling in character, the Commission will work with the Department as they develop the secondary legislation envisaged by the Bill.

The Commission is committed to working closely with the Department to deliver a smooth transition to the new legal aid arrangements envisaged by the Bill.

The Commission believes that the proposed changes will assist in achieving better management of the challenges in forecasting legal aid spending and resourcing that spending.

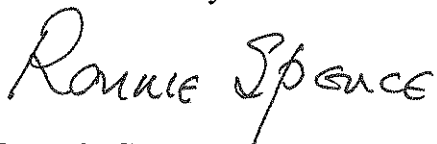
It also believes that the creation of an Agency will provide improved career opportunities for staff currently employed by the Commission and assist in securing specific additional skills which the Agency may require to implement reforms to the legal aid arrangements.

The Commission has welcomed the Justice Minister's announcement last autumn that he intends to initiate a second phase of review of access to justice. We hope that this exercise will encourage an informed debate about how best to, first, help people to solve legal problems and, second, develop affordable and value for money solutions appropriate to local needs.

As the provisions in the Bill which deal with the Coroners' Court have no direct impact on the Commission, no comment is offered on these specific provisions.

On behalf of the Commission I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to comment on the Bill.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ronnie Spence". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'R' and a long, sweeping underline.

**Ronnie Spence**  
**Chairman**

**Christine Darragh**  
**Clerk to the Committee for Justice**  
**Northern Ireland Assembly**