

Solicitors providing Children's Legal Assistance: Survey findings

Background

In 2022 SLAB commissioned a survey of solicitors providing children's legal assistance. The research objectives included: find out more about the expectations of solicitors; increase understanding of the services solicitors provide; and explore how solicitors are responding to change in the children's justice system. There were 129 respondents to the survey, from a usable sample of 367, giving a 35% response rate. 62 of the respondents were partners in a firm.

Some key findings

Partners who responded represent well-established children's legal assistance firms. Although the majority (80%) expect to be doing this work in three years' time, very few (8%) have solicitors who work full time in this area.

The number who think there are 'too few' children's solicitors in their local area (46%), and those who feel the number is 'about right' (46%) result in the same percentage whilst very few felt there are 'too many' (7%). Around a quarter of partners are from firms who provide a service to most or all of Scotland. Most providers (86%) take on both child and adult clients, although two-thirds of these mainly take on adults.

Almost all respondents (98%) had attended a virtual or hybrid hearing in the past 12 months. 52% were satisfied with the experience of attending virtually, with 34% dissatisfied. Comments relating to the drawbacks of virtual or hybrid hearings were most likely to mention the difficulty for clients directly, or the impact on the service solicitors could provide to clients.

The survey findings suggested that solicitors use a wide range of communications to contact clients. Traditional communications are still most commonly used, including email (100%), phone (100%) and face to face meetings (99%). However the majority also use text or WhatsApp (55%), and video calls (74%). A very small proportion (2%) no longer use post to communicate with clients.

Most respondents engaged directly with other professionals involved in children's hearings, with 87% having contact with professionals involved in the hearings system, and 43% attending multi-disciplinary training or events including other professionals involved in children's hearings.

What's next?

The next step in this research will involve interviews with some of the solicitors who took part in the survey. This will give us more insight into topics, such as virtual hearings, and the role of solicitors in the Hearings system.