

Law Society want the government to concentrate on access to justice

Law Society of Scotland president Jamie Millar said that the founding principles for ensuring access to justice must remain at the forefront of a mature debate on cuts to Scotland's justice bill.

His comments followed today's budget announcement by John Swinney, Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth.

Millar said: "The government has an obligation to ensure that we have a well funded justice system which can properly protect its citizens and ensure their human rights are safeguarded

"The Society recognises that the legal aid budget cannot be exempt from the scrutiny that every other budget is under. However, cutting eight percent from the legal aid budget cannot be achieved from efficiency savings alone. The government will have to consider significant changes to legal aid but must also ensure access to the justice system for those who cannot afford it.

"The Scottish Government has identified an expansion to the Public Defense Solicitors' Office (PDSO) scheme as one way of making savings. However, there are still serious questions about how such an expansion would work and the savings it would generate. We will need to carefully examine what is proposed and how any cost savings could be delivered.

"The Society has been in discussions with the Scottish Legal Aid Board and others and it is essential for this constructive dialogue to continue. It is only through a mature debate that

we will be able to protect the principles that underpin our justice system and the public's access to that system at a time of such austerity."

Additional savings in the operation of Scotland's court system have also been identified. The Scottish Government last week announced those reforms it intends to bring forward in the wake of the review undertaken by Lord Gill to improve the civil justice system. The Society has expressed its strong support for reform, which will make the running of Scotland's civil courts more cost effective while providing a better service to the public.

Commenting further on the impact of the budget on the Society's members, Mr Millar said: "The opportunity to make change for the better is here and despite the current financial constraints and inevitable tough choices ahead, we must take it. I am however very aware that the level of cuts proposed will have a direct impact on many of our members employed in the public sector, as well as those in private practice firms. While we don't know just how severe that impact might be, the Society will be ensuring that it puts in place support for members who are affected. The legal sector has been hard hit by the credit crunch and ensuing recession and we will continue to provide practical support and advice for our members."