



Office of the Attorney-General

MC14/04675

Ms Alice Howe
National Board Chair
Sustainable Engineering Society
11 National Circuit
BARTON ACT 2600

29 MAY 2014

Dear Ms Howe

Thank you for your letter of 28 January 2014 to the Minister for the Environment, the Hon Greg Hunt MP, regarding funding to the Environmental Defenders' Offices. Your letter has been referred to the Attorney-General, Senator the Hon George Brandis QC, as this matter falls within his portfolio responsibilities. I have been asked to reply on the Attorney-General's behalf. I apologise for the delay in responding.

As part of the Government's commitment to make savings across the whole of government, and all portfolios, the Government will achieve savings of \$43.1 million in the four legal assistance services over four years. Nevertheless, the Government is very mindful of the need to structure those savings in a way which protects the most vulnerable clients of the legal aid system.

The Attorney-General has therefore directed that the funding of legal assistance services be focused on providing front line services to disadvantaged people requiring legal help, rather than using public money for reform and advocacy activities. The Government funds legal assistance service providers to prioritise direct services to individuals. It is vital that vulnerable Australians receive the help they need with their legal problems.

When the Abbott Government was elected, it faced the greatest Budget emergency in Australian history. Subsequently, the Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) statement, released in December 2013, revealed that the Budget position was even worse. The 2014-15 Budget confirmed that, unless urgent remedial action is taken, debt will peak at \$667 billion in a decade. The cutbacks to the legal assistance budget reflect the gravity of the fiscal position which the Abbott Government inherited; it is not this Government's creation.

The relevant officer in the Attorney-General's Department is Joan Jardine, Director of the Community Legal Services Section, who can be contacted on 02 6141 4852.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Paul O'Sullivan', with a checkmark at the end.

Paul O'Sullivan
Chief of Staff