



Legal Aid Reform: Consultation Response

Hackney Community Law Centre

Introduction

Hackney Community Law Centre has operated in London's east end since 1976. We see over 2000 clients each year and currently have LSC contracts in Immigration / Asylum, Housing, Debt and Welfare Benefits.

The Law Centre is run by the local community with our Trustees being a small group of local councillors, local residents and former clients. We believe that we are at the very heart of the advice network within Hackney. This is reflected by the fact that most of our clients are referred to us by other local agencies and MP's. Some of our clients have been referred by the local CAB which doesn't have the specialism to deal with their cases; some by our local MP's and GP's who have been unable to resolve matters in surgery; some by other community and voluntary groups unable to help them with the complex legal issues involved; some come to us because they have been rejected by local private practice law firms as their cases (or indeed they) are unattractive.

Hackney Law Centre is a place of last resort. We see clients whose problems are so serious or complex that other agencies have been unable to help and unable to resolve. Many of our clients have complex social problems. Many have language or communication difficulties; some have mental health or substance abuse issues; many have below average educational attainment and many cannot properly read or write.

Our lawyers are not highly paid nor are we riding any form of legal aid gravy train. The reality is that our most senior lawyer is paid the same as the unqualified Legal Assistants within the LSC's in house legal team. The reality is that each month we struggle to find the money to pay salaries and that each month our advisers work many more hours than we could possibly pay them for.

In addition we host pro-bono legal advice sessions run by city law firms and we have a highly successful volunteer and intern programme – allowing us to significantly increase the amount of advice that we can provide. Remember that the areas of law in which we provide advice are complex and the consequences of getting it wrong significant. City pro-bono lawyers and other volunteers do not have the necessary specialist knowledge and need to be trained and supervised – and even

then they can only deal with the simpler cases. Our in house lawyers provide that supervision and are there to pick up the more complex matters. If the law centre were to close these volunteer and pro-bono services would fall away.

Our clients need help. They come to us with multiple problems. There are often inter-linked immigration, housing, debt and benefits problems and we try to resolve all of them. We do it extremely cheaply too. We get £174 for resolving the typical housing problem; £168 for resolving a benefits dispute; £200 for resolving a debt matter and about £260 for resolving an immigration problem. Each of these problems will likely involve complex areas of law and communication with government or local authority lawyers and caseworkers – the type and level of communication, based on complex legal frameworks, that our clients just wouldn't be able to manage alone and which, quite evidently, other local community and voluntary groups are unable to assist with.

It seems that most of the non-family proposed cuts are targeted at the Legal Help level of advice and assistance – the very level aimed at providing early intervention and at avoiding problems escalating into expensive litigation.

If, despite our representations, Government is intent on cutting the social welfare law legal help budget then we suggest that funding is found to continue to support law centres. We pick up the pieces. We are non profit and we can also apply for other grants and donations to enhance and expand our services but we also rely heavily on our legal aid income. We provide the safety net – a net that will be gone if these cuts are imposed.

Hackney Law Centre will lose around 50% of our funding if these cuts go ahead. When added to likely local authority funding cuts and to the loss of our London Council's grants we are likely to see a 75%-85% cut in funding. This just isn't survivable.

We have limited our responses to those areas in which we can be most helpful. In respect of all other questions we endorse the response provided by the Law Centres Federation.

For more information on any aspect of this response, please contact **Matthew Howgate**, Interim Manager at the Law Centre on matthew@hclc.org.uk.

Scope

Question 3: Do you agree with the proposals to exclude the types of case and proceedings listed in paragraphs 4.148 to 4.245 from the scope of the civil and family legal aid scheme? Please give reasons.

No.

Since 2004 the Government has focussed its legal aid contracting strategy on the basis that individuals present with “clusters” of problems. The LSRC identified a cluster of Housing, Debt & Benefits – we would respectfully add Immigration to this cluster – especially for multicultural and impoverished London boroughs like Hackney.

This Green Paper suggest that some homelessness and possession matters be left in scope but surely this is hugely short sighted. Why wait until a matter escalates to repossession or homelessness when it could be resolved much earlier by helping the individual deal with their indebtedness or questions unlawful and erroneous decisions of the benefits authorities. A person evicted from their home costs the state an average of around £34,000 – the current housing Legal Help fixed fee is just £174.

The Green Paper suggests that most immigration matters result from a life choice but this just isn't the case (indeed it should be remembered that many people will have fled torture and injustice in their own countries or may have been trafficked here for lives of domestic servitude. Others may be extremely poor and vulnerable people who have been living in the UK for many years and who have contributed significantly to our society.

Bruce is Australian and has been living here for 30 years. His father was born in County Down then emigrated. He's 80 now, and the house he lives in is falling to pieces around his ears.

Claude is legally blind and his kidney's packing up. He too has lived here off and on for 30 years, and has many children living in this country, who rarely visit him.

Ole was an accountant in Lagos, who came to London and married, and fathered children. The relationship broke down. Shortly afterwards he had a massive stroke.

All have a common legal problems, for all have no papers or have exceeded their leave to remain.

All lived in horrible conditions. Bathtubs filled with urine. Kitchens a bomb site and unfit to be used. Stairs falling to pieces, basements filled with junk. No running water, no electricity. Their homes were were worse than third world slums.

As a decent society we have doctors, social workers and housing officers to assist the infirm and the disabled. Unfortunately these three old men have allowed their immigration status to lapse decades ago, and although two have paid tax and national insurance, and one had an English grandfather, they are not entitled to any benefits, housing or, in Claude's case, renal dialysis that he desperately needs.

What they do have at present is a right to receive free legal advice helping them to apply for leave to remain in the country, which may also be their right, or which might be granted on discretionary compassionate grounds. However under these

proposals this right to advice will be removed, on the grounds that the procedures are transparent and simple. This of an immigration ministry compared recently by a senior Judge to a poorly run wheel stall. Surely we can agree that when three people who between them have lived here almost a century need help, we should give it to them.

The law of homelessness is complex and difficult and it will be impossible for applicants to deal with the review stage without assistance. Reviews often require gathering of information such as medical information which applicants will find difficult to deal with. Local Authorities dealing with scarce resources often gatekeep (obstructing access to a homelessness application).

Where a household does not include children, or where the household lost their previous accommodation due to rent arrears, the tendency of the Local Authority will often be to refuse a duty based on non –vulnerability or intentional homelessness. S204 appeals, for which funding is retained, are not ordinary housing cases where the Court has jurisdiction to determine facts. Rather they are highly technical administrative law cases, akin to judicial review. At the same time, they are second appeals and the Courts regard the function of the review officer as a semi judicial first appeal. It makes little sense to remove funding from this first appeal. Housing Review officers are more likely to formulate “appeal proof” decisions if applicants do not have expert advice at an early stage. If reviews are not dealt with properly there is likely to be an increase in the number of appeals, but for reasons stated more of them may fail. Most homeless applicants who might expect to be housed are by definition extremely vulnerable.

Example : Hackney Community Law Centre assisted a refugee from the DRC who had been subjected to imprisonment, torture and gang rape. She was suffering from severe psychological trauma including severe Post Traumatic Stress disorder. On receipt of her refugee papers she was given 28 days to leave her NASS/UKBA accommodation. She applied to the Local Authority who accepted the facts of her case and her condition but found her to be non priority need. We were able to persuade the Council to extend temporary accommodation pending the review which was in the Council’s discretion rather than as of right (thus avoiding Judicial Review proceedings) and gathered supporting medical evidence. After representations the Council agreed at review stage to accept a duty, and a s204 appeal was avoided.

Excluding Housing Benefit work at the advice and assistance stage will be counterproductive and more expensive in the long term, for similar reasons to withdrawal and welfare benefits advice. Pre-emptive advice and assistance can reduce rent arrears and prevent possession claims being issued, thus saving obvious expense further down the line.

Example: Hackney Community Law Centre assisted a pensioner who had literacy problems and was forced to rely on a family member with forms including Housing Benefit, that person however being violent. Her Housing Benefit thus lapsed and for approximately 2 years she was trapped in expensive emergency accommodation (her rent arrears preventing a move-on) she accumulated rent arrears and council tax

liabilities of approximately £45,000. She was due to be evicted the following day. We made representations to Housing Benefit about her circumstances, which led to payments of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit and write offs covering the sums due. The client was rehoused in sheltered accommodation. A Legal Aid spend of some £350 avoided homelessness, litigation and secured £45,000 in additional payments and write-offs.

Hackney Community Law Centre and Islington Law Centre have organized the duty solicitor at Clerkenwell & Shoreditch County Court for some 30 years, one of the busiest in the Country. Anecdotal evidence suggests that 90% of cases seen by duty solicitors are cases of rent arrears, and in 90% of those cases timely money advice might have obviated the need for litigation. Once this problem is identified, the District Judges will expect solicitors to try and resolve underlying benefit and debt problems, and if they are unable to do so because of a narrowing in scope at this stage there will be insufficient capacity in the non Legal Aid voluntary sector, making possession orders and eviction more likely.

Example: Hackney Community Law Centre acted as duty solicitor for an elderly client who it later transpired had dementia. His rent arrears were £11,000 and due to his condition he had been unwilling to engage with social workers and others to try and resolve these. He was due to be evicted that day. After legal aid was granted it was established he had no capacity to represent himself. Medical evidence to that effect having been obtained, £7,500 of Housing Benefit was paid into his account and proceedings settled.

Legal advice on re-housing options also deals with complex information supported by medical and other documentary evidence. Accessibility to legal advice is essential to ensure that re-housing issues are dealt with properly and fairly. Withdrawal of funding for advice on transfers of social tenants to other more suitable housing is short sighted in cases where social landlords are found not to be properly applying their own criteria. While we acknowledge that in the vast majority of cases social tenants seeking a transfer the criteria may have been properly applied and in effect the tenant will have to wait until a suitable property has become available, the reality is that Legal Aid providers avoid such cases. Funding should be properly available where due to vulnerability of the client and complex factual or medical issues there are real issues about the suitability of existing accommodation and how the priority should be regarded. Withdrawing this advice will leave Judicial Review as the only available alternative, leading to more expense in resolving these rarer cases (particularly if one takes into account that the outcome of most successful Judicial Reviews is simply a reconsideration by the authority which may come to an identical conclusion by another route and further Judicial Reviews).

Example: Hackney Community Law Centre is assisting a client with severe muscular skeletal problems and incontinence who is in need of his own bedroom. Presently he lives in a one bedroom property with his wife and 2 young children. He successfully appealed a decision by the Council to discharge him because he had turned down a one bedroom permanent offer, then his case was effectively stagnant for 6 years. We have helped him gather over 1000 pages of medical and other legal documents and

the Council are now re-evaluating his case. The sum spent so far is about £1,000- had the matter been conducted instead as a Judicial Review the sum would be about £6.000 by now.

Our clients are already the most excluded and vulnerable members of society. Many have social, language, learning, mental health or other issues and they will not be able to present their own cases or access help and assistance elsewhere.

These proposals, if implemented, will lead to vulnerable people not receiving the help they need. The Ministry's own impact assessment acknowledges that the poorest and most vulnerable will be disproportionately affected by these proposals and could be discriminated against.

The vast majority of the proposed cuts within the social welfare law areas of law target Legal Help which is a low cost and highly effective level of advice and assistance designed to affect early dispute resolution and to avoid matters escalating to costly litigation. £1 spent at this level of legal aid saves an average of £10.

The suggestion in the Green Paper that alternative sources of advice exist is not true.

In Hackney we are the alternative source of advice. We are where people turn when they cannot get advice elsewhere – and we are where other advice agencies send clients that they cannot help. We are also part of an organic local advice network where charities and advice agencies can reach into communities and help those most in need. We are part of the Big Society – a society which will be destroyed by the scope and extent of these cuts.

The suggestion that people can represent themselves in dealings with public authorities, Courts and Tribunals is misguided and will mean inequality before the law.

Most of our clients don't even understand their problems let alone grasp how to present their own cases or understand the complex legal frameworks involved. It is worth remembering that Legal Help is not available for general assistance but only to help with legal matters where there is sufficient benefit, taking into consideration all of the circumstances, to provide that help. We are not talking about generalist advice or the provision of information, we are talking about representation and assistance by highly skilled and experienced lawyers in areas where the clients have failed to resolve matters themselves. Most of our clients stand absolutely no chance of representing their own cases or resolving their problems without our help.

Community Legal Advice Telephone Helpline

Question 7: Do you agree that the Community Legal Advice helpline should be established as the single gateway to access civil legal aid advice? Please give reasons.

Question 8: Do you agree that specialist advice should be offered through the Community Legal Advice helpline in all categories of law and that, in some categories, the majority of civil Legal Help clients and cases can be dealt with through this channel? Please give reasons.

Question 9: What factors should be taken into account when devising the criteria for determining when face to face advice will be required?

This single answer deals with questions 7 to 9.

Removing locally based and embedded face-to-face services in favour of a national helpline will be a disaster. Whilst we believe that the provision of advice by telephone is a valuable and, for some people, suitable method of delivery, we are firmly of the view that for others it will prove an insurmountable barrier to accessing the legal advice and assistance that they so desperately need.

However not only will proposal, if implemented, deny hundreds of thousands of people access to advice services, it will also destroy locally based and run not-for-profit advice centres like ours. This will undermine and likely destroy close localised networks of advice agencies, community groups and charities which reach out to the most vulnerable in our society and which seek to ensure that they have access to the services they need.

For many of our clients accessing a telephone based service just isn't a real option. Many have language or other social difficulties that will make it impossible for them to properly use such a service – and perhaps more importantly, they will be put off from even trying. Most of our clients, if they have access to a phone at all, only have access to an expensive pay as you go mobile phone (as they cannot access the cheaper pay monthly tariffs). For many of our clients, even though without language difficulties, they just wouldn't be able to properly explain their problems over the phone.

Often we have to spend time reading through the bag of papers and un-opened envelopes that they bring with them to the office, even just to determine whether there is a justiciable issue capable of receiving advice under the legal aid scheme. This is often paid for from alternative sources and is never charged against the legal aid fund.

We operate, and have done for many years, a local telephone helpline and we find it a useful tool in our armoury. It is absolutely clear that for some clients and for some problems a telephone service is perfectly adequate. However our experience is that for the vast majority of clients who call the telephone service, we have to make face-to-face appointments so that we can see the paperwork and understand the clients problems. We also find that most clients who turn up in our reception, when asked why they hadn't called our Adviceline, make clear that they either don't have a phone or just that they could not have used that service. If a phone service were

the only way to access legal aid then many of our clients just would not be able to access services. Maybe that's what the Government want.

Jeanette was almost catatonic when we saw her first. Suffering from intense Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and profound depression, she was terrified of strange men, and she also heard voices. She speaks French and a little English.

A victim of a bloody conflict in Africa, she had been imprisoned, tortured and brutally gang raped before she managed to escape and make her way to our shores. When she arrived we put her in prison for travelling on false documents. Then we chucked her out on the streets.

Her first asylum appeal was botched so she had no right to be housed or fed. Sofa surfing or sleeping rough, she was frequently assaulted and had her meagre possessions taken.

Her speech was slurred and she stared straight ahead. Psychologists call it lack of affect. Looking like she isn't really aware of anything else around her.

Telescoping a couple of years into a few lines, we got her housed by social services, got a new asylum claim in, supported her long term counselling by experts in the treatment of torture victims, went to court several times, and got her her legal status.

At which point she was evicted again.

Telescoping again, we referred with submissions, and she was refused by the Council on the grounds she hadn't been traumatised enough. Spoke to doctors, wrote letters, kept a roof over her head, studied legal cases, forced the DWP to pay her benefits, and finally the humane review officer conceded that she had suffered enough.

Finally she will have the right to be housed.

Is Government really suggesting that Jeanette could have presented her own case?

We believe that the evidence presented for the wholesale change to a telephone based service is both weak and flawed and we implore Government to listen to those of us already working with the most excluded members of society. This proposal will deny access to justice; will destroy local advice networks; and will ultimately cost the Government more than maintaining a proper network of face-to-face services.

Financial eligibility

Question 12: Do you agree with the proposal that applicants for legal aid who are in receipt of passporting benefits should be subject to the same capital eligibility rules as other applicants? Please give reasons

No. Legal aid should have the same capital limits as other means tested benefits for reasons of simplicity, transparency and fairness.

In our experience very few, if any, people in receipt of passporting benefits have assets that would require a contribution under the proposals. This would be an extra administration hurdle for vulnerable people to cross, for little or no gain to the legal aid budget. It lacks consistency with the approach taken by other Departments as regards other benefits.

Question 13: Do you agree with the proposal that clients with £1,000 or more disposable capital should be asked to pay a £100 contribution? Please give reasons.

No, £1000 is a modest sum of money, especially for the poorest members of society who, unable to access credit or to find additional funds, may need to keep such modest amounts in case of family emergencies.

Even the Government's own impact assessment of this proposal acknowledges that around 2/3 of the saving (which are likely to be less than £1m in any event) will be achieved by people otherwise entitled to legal aid just not taking it up as they are unwilling or unable to pay the £100 contribution. This proposal is actually being designed to disincentivise take-up of legal aid at a time where the Government proposes making it available only for the most serious of matters.

This proposal also risks undermining the very heart of the relationship between agencies like ours and our clients. We are trusted because clients know that we are not after their money. If this proposal goes ahead it will place a barrier between us and our client.

We also note that the Government has failed to undertake any administrative burden calculation for this proposal or indeed for many of the others. The reality is much if not all of the £100 will be swallowed up in the costs of collecting, banking and accounting for it. This proposal just really doesn't make sense and shows that lack of thought behind this Green Paper as a whole.

Impact Assessments

Question 49: Do you agree that we have correctly identified the range of impacts under the proposals set out in this consultation paper? Please give reasons.

We believe that the impact assessments are deeply flawed. They fail to even attempt to quantify the likely costs of these proposals across Government expenditure and they fail to identify the additional administrative costs involved in the proposals being made.

They make assumptions, based on little or no data, about the effect of these proposals on current service user and they therefore present a picture that we just

cannot recognise. Law Centres do not act for run of the mill clients. The nature of our actual and potential client base is different and the difficulties faced by our clients are significant.

Child J, a 5 month old baby, died in the summer of 2009, when his mother, Ms K, jumped from a third floor balcony, holding him in her arms. She also died. An inquest subsequently found that she had taken her own life and that Child J had been unlawfully killed.

As the official learning inquiry observed, Ms K was therefore without any source of income as a result of these [benefit] decisions. She raised this with a range of individuals and agencies, as well as pursuing formal appeals processes. Her General Practitioner wrote to the DWP.

Ms K was a French national. She came to England with her sister some years ago. She worked a number of jobs, thus paying tax and NI, and studied. On holiday abroad she became pregnant. Having worked and studied in Britain for years she stopped at around the time she was to give birth, then ran afoul of the benefit system.

Now we don't know the lawyers, social workers, doctors or benefits officials in this report, which is a document of open record. However the benefits decision shows that all of the professionals involved had to deal with a very bad set of rules regarding the rights of European mothers.

The trap Ms K fell into is called being a foreign woman, in a sense. But here is how it's done.

When a European national who has a job and pays tax and NI over here is injured in the job or loses work and signs on, he is entitled to benefits. When a French or Polish woman does the same then falls pregnant, she is advised, by the smiling and well intentioned clerk that she should claim Income Support, because as a woman about to give birth she shouldn't have to sign on.

Then if the mum isn't British they send a habitual residence test form. And then when they find out that she isn't working, she loses her benefits at the exact same time she's bringing a baby into this world. Because after ceasing to sign on, she ceases to be a worker. And unless she is classified as a worker, she loses her benefit rights.

According to one argument the reason for the withdrawal of benefits is because pregnancy is not an illness, and thus if you cease work, you voluntarily take yourself out of the labour market.

This was an unusual Serious Case Review. Child J was a well-loved baby, who received exemplary care from his mother, until the point of his sudden death. A sudden depression was thought to have been a possible cause of these deaths.

The Panel judged that the stresses arising from being refused benefits would have been the most significant factor in precipitating the development of mental illness. So the sudden onset of depression, or perhaps suicidal lack of feelings of self worth was caused by money worries.

It would be mean and cowardly for us to claim that we could have secured a different ending to this case. We didn't know the people, although we recognise the patterns. Social services can do more to help financially while benefit claims are going on, but try to save the money for emergencies. Lawyers struggle with a slow bureaucracy, and confusing and contradictory legislation.

We're pretty sure that either the legislation is wrong , or the interpretation of those rules is wrong, or the level of service that Ms K received was wrong, because otherwise we must be living in an unhealthy society.

Here's one thing we do know for a fact. If the cuts to Legal Aid proposed go through future Ms K's will not be entitled to legal advice. So what we think about what we could have done worse, or better, will soon become irrelevant.

She paid taxes, she spoke French and a little English. She had an English baby. We hope those proposing these cuts are as ashamed as we are.

These proposals, based around a simple funding cut, will fundamentally alter the nature of our civil justice system. They will destroy families and they will cost lives. They go against all of the relevant research and everything we know about the needs of the most vulnerable in our communities.

They will irreparably tear the very fabric of society.

We suggest that such massive change requires proper and detailed impact assessment which seeks to identify the broader costs to society. These impact assessments do no such thing – indeed they can't even demonstrate that these proposals have any cost benefit across Government.

The cumulative impact assessment acknowledges that the proposals may cause:

- Reduced social cohesion;
- Increased criminality;
- Reduced business and economic efficiency; Increased resource costs for other Departments; and
- Increased transfer payments from other Departments.

However it makes no attempt at evaluating the likelihood of these outcomes or the costs, financial or otherwise, that they will bring.

The Impact Assessments do confirm our view that the proposals will impact disproportionately on people from low income and vulnerable groups. They also acknowledge that the scope changes will mean a 77% drop in not-for-profit sector's

legal aid income however adding in the impact of the proposed telephone gateway will mean that just 3% of the funding for NfP agencies remains in place. This will severely damage the Government's Big Society agenda, as the infrastructure for volunteering services would be seriously reduced.

We would encourage the Department to undertake an impact assessment of the likely cost to other Government departments, and indeed budgets within MoJ, of the proposals. Advice has been shown to bring significant savings to the public purse, as we outlined in our response to Question 3.

We consider it would be short-sighted for Government to implement these reforms with out attempting a whole system cost-benefit analysis. The additional administrative costs are omitted as well as analysis of the impact on access to justice as a whole.

There are only two possible ways to describe the Government's proposals; wrong headed or wicked.

Wrong headed, because any MP who stopped to think about the impact of these cuts would realise that they were hurried and foolish. Wicked because any MP who takes stock and votes for them anyway is doing something wrong.

Postcript

"Maria is a smart Polish kid who's lived here 15 years. She has a kid now, is married, pays taxes. Her daughter is in school. When she turned up at the stall in Dalston market where she'd worked for 5 years she found it closed and her boss bankrupt.

The next day her husband, who has settled status but no job, moved out. Men!

The Benefits Agency advised her to claim Income Support as a single mother, who shouldn't have to work, then refused her because she stopped signing on. She claimed Job Seekers Allowance and signed on, and was refused because the job she had been doing had never been registered with the Home Office. Catch 22 at its finest.

Child Benefit was refused. Tax Credits were refused. Housing Benefit was refused. She faced eviction, but she contacted us and we fought back.

We got her her Child Benefit, her Tax Credits, her Housing Benefit, and appealed the withdrawal of JSA. It took over a year for her appeal to be listed, but this month we represented her and she finally won. It turned out that the Department of Work and Pensions has been using an out of date version of a statutory instrument on Eastern European nationals – known as the Accession 8.

Charla has had health problems and can't get the Social to call her back. She's been on Employment Support Allowance- a disability related benefit, but at an interview

with an official she did badly, and her benefit was withdrawn. Her doctor doesn't think she's fit to work, but a non medically qualified official thinks otherwise.

Charla appeals, and the rules say she should get her benefit until the appeal is heard by an independent panel that includes a doctor. But her payments stop, and for three weeks she has nothing.

Charla is allowed to apply for a Crisis Loan in this situation- in effect an advance on her benefits. But if she manages to get through to the busy call centre she is told that she will be called back, then no-one calls. Or maybe they do, but her phone has run out of power or credit- as she has no money.

She comes in to the Law Centre, we phoned and she gets some money for the week end. Her ESA is reinstated pending appeal.

Legal Aid cuts would make this work impossible, because the government line is that claimants can get all the advice they might want or need from public officials- yes, those same functionaries who have refused them. Failing that the courts and tribunals- yes, those same agencies who put up signs informing members of the public that staff are not qualified to give legal advice. It seems that the system runs so well that there is no need for lawyers.

I ask them why they felt it necessary to come and see us. "Nobody listened to me until I got a solicitor" says Charla. Maria is even more dismissive. "They treat you like an animal until you get a solicitor", she says.

So walking down the stairs from the tribunal the rain has lifted, the sun is shining, and Maria has her benefits. She's smiling.

"I wish I had a solicitor" says a guy coming out behind us.

Taken from the Frontline Hackney Blog

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