

Legal Services Commission LP Amendment for 2008 Conference

Our justice system must provide access to justice for all. We must make sure that help and advice and financial support are available at the point of need and the earliest stage, especially for the most vulnerable. *We will ensure that the impending Law Reform, Victims and Witnesses Bill will deliver a more effective, transparent and responsive justice System for victims, witnesses and the wider public. Timely and comprehensive legal advice plays a central role in empowering citizens and redressing inequalities. Labour has increased access to legal advice by allowing grassroots voluntary sector agencies to bid for contracts with the Legal Services Commission, alongside solicitors in private practice. Citizens Advice, Community Law Centres and independent Not-for-Profit advice agencies are now delivering a range of specialist advice to those on low incomes across all social welfare law, community care, housing, welfare benefits, debt, education and employment, as well as family, mental health and immigration. Ensuring that citizens are aware of their rights, and receive assistance in enforcing them has positive benefits for those individuals assisted and for society as a whole. Welfare benefits advice increases take up and improve quality of life. Housing advice improves people's living conditions and prevents homelessness. Employment advice can keep someone in their job or obtain compensation for unfair dismissal. Poor practices by private or public bodies are frequently highlighted and result in improvements. Recent reforms in Legal Services Commission contracts have focussed on quality and efficiency to maximise the number of citizens who can be assisted. Fixed fees, which are paid to deliver acts of assistance, are based on the average costs of a normal case. However, hourly fees may be paid in exceptional, complex cases which are more resource intensive. The Legal Services Commission is reviewing the operation of the first stage of graduated and fixed fees (implemented in October 2007 and January 2008) to see if any changes should be made to those existing schemes for April 2010 and is working with the representative bodies on this. The LSC intends to publish the outcome of that review on stage 1 fees in January 2009 with a further consultation to take place before the changes, if any, become effective. We will monitor current provision and work with local authorities through local strategic partnerships and local providers including not-for-profit organisations to identify need and ensure consistent access to deliver co-ordinated civil legal aid services.*

Alternative Position:

Add: Add to end – There have been significant changes in the civil legal aid system and there is concern that access to justice is thereby becoming more difficult. We will commission and independent review of the civil legal aid system one of the greatest legacies of the Attlee Government.