

# access to justice alliance

## **Press Release : for immediate use**

### **LEGAL AID NEEDS YOU BECAUSE ONE DAY YOU MAY NEED IT!**

As part of the "Access to Justice Alliance – Access Denied" Week of Action, the Clerkenwell & Shoreditch County Court Housing Possession Duty Scheme will be lobbying outside the Clerkenwell and Shoreditch County Court at 29-41 Gee Street London EC1V 3RE at 10 am on Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> May 2007.

The lobby is to raise awareness in the local community of the imminent threat to their legal advice services from October 2007 when the Government has proposed that "fixed fees" (set by them) are paid to legal advisers.

Fixed fees are on a par to going to a garage where any repair work would cost one price, say £100, whether you needed a light bulb, or a new engine. That garage would soon go out of business if it most of its work involved repairs taking several hours or a day or more!

The Government intends that there will be Fixed Fees in all areas of social welfare law advice – ie Housing, Employment, Welfare Benefits, Debt, Family, Immigration, Mental Health and Community Care.

The risk is that the more complicated cases in social welfare law will not be taken on by many legal aid lawyers thus denying you access to justice. This will particularly effect the most vulnerable in our community.

The Government intends to take this risk, even though the Constitutional Affairs Committee, made up of mostly Labour MPs has concluded that

“ ...if the reforms go ahead there is a serious risk to access to justice among the most vulnerable in society.”

The Housing Possession Duty Schemes at the old Clerkenwell and Shoreditch County Courts have been running for about 20 years, and five days a week we help save people from being evicted. The scheme provides emergency advice and representation in Court on that day. It is supported by the Court itself and is now funded by the Legal Services Commission.

The advisers are from Hackney and Islington Law Centres, Mary Ward Legal Centre, College of Law, Shelter and local solicitors including AM Vance, Dowse & Co, Duncan Lewis, Hopkin Murray Beskine, Moss & Co, S A Carr & Co, Pollecoffs, and TV Edwards.

On the morning of 15<sup>th</sup> May 2007 specialist housing advice and representation will be available to those facing losing their homes, but there is a real chance that if the Government proposals go ahead many of the organisations providing this service will cease to exist.

Kathy Meade, housing lawyer at Hackney Law Centre, joint co-ordinator of the duty scheme said:

“There is already a big enough problem for people, especially vulnerable people, getting access to justice. The Government’s current proposals, if implemented as planned in October, would seriously reduce people’s ability to get access to justice very soon after implementation. There is no point in having a legal right if you can’t enforce it.

We know from our own case records that we spend more hours on each client than the fixed fees allow for. Most of our clients have complicated legal and personal problems. Our housing colleagues in local firms face a similar situation. How can we give our clients the quality advice and assistance they are entitled to and still manage to fund the Law Centre on fixed fees? The grim answer is – we cannot.

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