

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## ‘Don’t ask me about free advice’

A legal advice charity from Bury will be holding its next staff meeting in Manchester city centre, as part of its independent awareness-raising remit.

Staff will gather at **Piccadilly Gardens at 10am** and walk through the city centre via the **Manchester Courts of Justice, Crown Square, off Bridge St at 11am** returning via Oxford Rd by 12 noon. The agenda item for the meeting will be ‘Don’t ask me about free advice’.

Kevin Miles, Supervising Solicitor, explains: ‘Along with advice and casework for its clients, almost all of which is funded by Legal Aid, Bury Law Centre has a role in highlighting issues about the law and justice system that may affect a wider public.’

‘The release on Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> May of the Constitutional Affairs Select Committee’s ‘Third Report on Implementation of the Carter Review of Legal Aid’ highlights the biggest single issue for future clients of Bury Law Centre and many other advice providers.’

‘From local experience, few people seem to have registered the on-going debate – which is understandable, since it’s about how some lawyers will be paid! But this isn’t about preserving the profits of law firms. Charities like Law Centres can’t ‘make a profit out of somebody’s crisis’ anyway.’

‘The issue being raised across both sectors is that Legal Aid is a safety net already stretched very tight. The proposed changes, which are intended to cut costs, will one way or another make holes in it. The people who fall through are likely to include the most vulnerable, who need more help to use a service, establish their case and resolve their problem.’

‘But almost anyone can suffer a life crisis – like unfairly losing their job or their home - and need to rely on this kind of help. Legal Aid is for ordinary people who find themselves in extraordinary circumstances.’

‘Legal Aid is paid for by public funds so everyone has a say in it. If someone can’t get the help they need to resolve a civil justice problem like housing-related debt or divorce, it’s likely that their situation will worsen and mean they need to draw further on other public funds such as welfare benefits. It’s not clear that cutting advice will necessarily save the tax payer overall.’

We chose a meeting in a public place and the title ‘Don’t ask me about free advice’ because it reflects the somewhat ironic position we find ourselves in as an advice-giver:

In the future, we may not be able to give free advice because, under current projections, the organisation would no longer be sustainable from next year.

On Weds 16<sup>th</sup> May, we are limited on what we can say to people who ask us for information. This is because the changes are based on a move to competitive tendering of Legal Aid contracts and public criticism can be seen to be in breach of anti-competition legislation.’

'We support the principle of effective use of public funds and of encouraging closer working links between providers, in the interest of the client. In practice, we are not clear how the current proposals can actually achieve this in smaller metropolitan areas like Bury.'

'Our aim is to draw people's attention to the debate and point them to the sources of information on both sides so they can make up their own minds. The meeting and return journey will take place within the time of a full staff meeting so that there is minimal inconvenience caused to our clients and other service users.'

## **Notes for editors**

Any passers by who enquire will be given the following weblinks for further information. Those wishing to make their views known will be invited to write to their local MP.

Constitutional Affairs Select Committee Third report on **Implementation of the Carter Review of Legal Aid**

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmconst.htm>

### ***Responses***

Legal Services Commission

[http://www.legalservices.gov.uk/aboutus/whats\\_new\\_5516.asp](http://www.legalservices.gov.uk/aboutus/whats_new_5516.asp)

The Law Society

<http://www.lawsociety.org.uk/newsandevents/pressreleases/view=newsarticle.law?NEWSID=333213>

### ***Campaigns***

The Law Society - 'What Price Justice?' campaign

<http://www.lawsociety.org.uk/newsandevents/news/majorcampaigns/view=newsarticle.law?CAMPAIGNSID=306046>

Access to Justice Alliance – 'Access Denied' campaign

<http://www.accesstojusticealliance.org.uk/news.htm>

### ***Petition***

[whatpricejustice@lawsociety.org.uk](mailto:whatpricejustice@lawsociety.org.uk)

### ***Model letter to MPs***

<http://www.lawsociety.org.uk/documents/downloads/draftlettertoMPpublic.doc>