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GOVERNMENT BACK-PEDDLING OVER LEGAL AID FOR BEREAVED FAMILIES?

Government ambivalence over whether legal aid for inquests should be more readily available could have a serious impact on bereaved families, lawyers have warned.

Amanda Stevens, president of the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers (APIL) said she was deeply concerned that Justice Secretary Jack Straw had recently said he would consider the issue, but subsequent comments made by Justice Minister Bridget Prentice appeared to put the brakes on any further debate.

“The new Coroners and Justice Bill is the perfect opportunity for the Government to help more families obtain legal aid for inquests,” said Amanda. “Jack Straw made some positive comments about being happy to think about it, saying he would ‘certainly consider it.’ It is hugely disappointing that less than one month later, Bridget Prentice appeared to take a different stance and pour cold water on any suggestion of legal aid.”

Bridget Prentice’s comments came during the Bill’s committee stage, at which several MPs laid amendments to make legal aid more readily available to families. The Minister said: “If I were composing my own shopping list, I would think of a number of things that I would put in before I would extend legal aid, in particular in terms of benefiting families and putting them at the heart of the system.”

Amanda Stevens described the comments as “completely contradictory”.

“Providing legal aid is the key to benefiting families and is the absolute sure fire way to put them at the heart of the system,” she said.



“It’s not right that many are being forced to attend inquests without legal representation, especially when the other party is usually legally represented. Some are not even aware that they have a right to legal representation, and those who are aware and do seek legal help are often turned down when they ask for assistance with funding.”

Committee stage finishes on 5 March, and the Bill will then go to report stage.

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