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MPs SUPPORT CALL FOR LEGAL AID FOR BEREAVED FAMILIES

Bereaved people will be overlooked in Government plans for legal aid, according to the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers (APIL).

As the Government embarks on a national legal aid exhibition to raise awareness of how legal aid helps disadvantaged people, lawyers' concerns have been echoed by Conservative MPs who were involved in the parliamentary scrutiny of the Coroners and Justice Bill.

"As the new Coroners and Justice Bill is passing through Parliament there has been considerable cross-party recognition of the fact that more bereaved families need legal aid to give them access to the legal advice they may need before and during an inquest," said John McQuater, president of APIL.

"All too often people go to inquests, already distressed and completely unfamiliar with the system, only to find themselves outflanked and overwhelmed by the lawyers of those who may be responsible for the death of their loved ones," he went on.

Conservative MPs James Gray and Tim Boswell also voiced their concerns, saying in a joint statement: "The families of the bereaved are very important to the conduct of inquests – above all because they are owed the fullest possible investigation into what happened. This is particularly true where the deaths involve service or other personnel for whom the state or public authorities are responsible; where there is the possibility of subsequent contentious litigation; and where the public authorities are themselves legally represented. In these cases, the principle of 'equality of arms' should apply with, in particular, service families being offered their own legal representation."

McQuater said he was 'extremely disappointed' that the Government had so far not supported moves to extend legal aid to bereaved families during the passage of the Bill. "We are absolutely committed to this," he said, "and are preparing to take the fight to the House of Lords later this month."

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Note to editors: