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NORTHERN IRELAND'S INJURED IN LEGAL AID BATTLE

Almost one third of injured people in Northern Ireland could be cut out of the legal system if new proposals go ahead.

Northern Ireland's Legal Services Commission (NILSC) is under fire for threatening to cut back on funding for vulnerable people who need legal aid to pursue a compensation claim, despite being fully aware that no alternative funding is available.

"This is an appalling error of judgement and one which will leave injured people in an intolerable position," said Oonagh McClure, representing the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers (APIL) in Northern Ireland.

"The NILSC says public funding for legal aid must "represent value for money"; yet we have pointed out in the past that the majority of costs in personal injury claims are covered by the defendants who caused the injury in the first place."

APIL, which has almost 100 members in Northern Ireland, believes the NILSC position is wholly unacceptable. Oonagh says officials know the move would leave many injured people unable to bring a claim, and that there is no other system in place which enables people on no, low or middle incomes to get legal representation.

"It will stop many people claiming the compensation they need, or leave them to settle direct with insurance companies acting for the person who injured them in the first place," she said. "We know that many insurance companies under-settle claims; often without seeking medical reports to find out exactly how bad a person's injuries are. "

APIL has called on the NILSC to develop an alternative funding mechanism to ensure injured people can still make a claim, before making any changes to the legal aid scheme.



Note to editors:

APIL responded to the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission consultation: The Northern Ireland Funding Code: proposed procedures and criteria. To request a copy, or for more information, contact Lisa Wardle, Press & PR Officer, APIL, t: 0115 9388715, or Jane Hartwell, assistant press & PR officer, t: 0115 9388702.