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## **NORTHERN IRELAND INJURY VICTIMS MAY LOSE LEGAL AID**

A Government purse which gives legal aid to victims of injury in Northern Ireland may soon be snapped shut, despite a chorus of protests.

Lawyers who act for people injured through negligence have criticised Government plans to remove legal aid and replace it with conditional fee agreements (CFAs), otherwise known as 'no win no fee'.

Belfast solicitor Robert Martin, Northern Ireland's representative for the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers (APIL) said concerns that injured people would lose access to justice were running deep.

"We have made it very clear to the Government that legal aid should stay, but protests from APIL and other parties seem to have fallen on deaf ears," he said. "We are very concerned that the Government is trying to impose the system in England and Wales on to Northern Ireland, when in reality Northern Ireland needs a system specifically tailored to address its own needs and problems."

Central to APIL's concerns is that the replacement of legal aid with CFAs in personal injury cases in England and Wales created chaos which is still being felt two years later.

"The introduction of this system in England caused all sorts of complications which have had to be resolved by the courts," said Robert Martin.

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“This has resulted in many cases being put on hold while legal arguments are heard, which has clogged up the courts and increased anxiety among injured people who have been left waiting while debate continues to rage about how the system should work,” he said.

“We are bitterly disappointed that this situation does not appear to have been taken fully into consideration and we urge the Government to reconsider its plans.”

APIL strongly believes that if, in the end, CFAs are introduced, public funding should at least be retained for certain types of case, such as clinical negligence cases which can be notoriously protracted and difficult to prove. In cases like these, insurance to protect the injured person against having to pay the other side’s costs if he loses (which is an integral part of every CFA) can be unaffordable. And this may mean people may not be able to afford to take their cases through the new system.

“We believe that everyone should have access to justice,” said Robert “and we will continue to try to persuade the Government that the system we have in this jurisdiction works and that there is no need for change.”

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