

Quality assurance for criminal defence advocates

The LSC and Ministry of Justice (MoJ) are launching a joint consultation on proposals to ensure good quality service and commitment to clients from legal aid criminal defence advocates.

The proposals stem from Lord Carter's recommendation in *Legal Aid: A market-based approach to reform* that a system of quality monitoring should be developed for all advocates carrying out legal aid work in criminal, civil and family courts. They are part of a package of legal aid reforms designed to ensure improved services for clients, better value for taxpayers and more certainty for service providers.

Carolyn Regan, the LSC's Chief Executive, said: "Quality needs to apply to everybody carrying out legal aid work and because it is about continuous improvement it should not occur after the event - dealing with identified failures and complaints. It needs to be about ensuring the quality of everyone's performance.

"The majority of service providers and representative bodies support the establishment of a quality assurance scheme which will help to build confidence among clients in the legal advice they receive and in the wider justice system. There could not be a better time to be focusing on standards and quality in the professions."

The consultation follows the setting up in August 2006 of a working group including representatives of the Judiciary, the Bar, the Law Society, the Crown Prosecution Service, the MoJ and the LSC.

The LSC and the MoJ are now seeking to obtain initial views on how to establish and maintain a competence based quality assurance scheme which will then be piloted in a number of areas for a minimum of six months.

Information obtained from the pilots will then be used to form the basis of a further consultation which will seek to refine the final system before it is launched. It is intended that the professions will own the final scheme and their regulatory bodies will monitor it.

In addition the LSC and MoJ will examine how the lessons learned from the criminal scheme can be introduced to other areas of legally aided advocacy services in the future.

Peter Watson, the LSC's Supplier Development Group Director, said: "The need to demonstrate the provision of quality services will become more important as the shift to competition and a unified graduated fee scheme is established. I would encourage anyone with views on the proposed reforms to respond to the consultation by 13 September 2007."