

GOVERNMENT WHITE PAPER ON LEGAL AID PERPETUATES THE IMBALANCE

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The Government's White Paper on Legal Aid 'Striking the Balance' predictably perpetuates the imbalance in access to justice by failing to make provision for legal aid to be available for representation at inquests.

INQUEST, the organisation which advises and supports bereaved families made a detailed submission to the Green Paper last year arguing that families and friends of people who die in controversial circumstances such as deaths in custody, in psychiatric institutions, at work or which raise questions of public health and safety e.g. major disasters such as Hillsborough, the Marchioness and Herald of Free Enterprise should have access to legal aid to be represented at inquests. The categories of inquests where legal representation is most crucial are those where the scales are most severely tipped against the family, where they are likely to be most disadvantaged. This unfairness is most extreme where the other party is an institution or organisation with the funds - often from the *public* purse - to instruct solicitors and counsel.

Representation of families at such inquests is vital in the public interest and in the interests of justice, to ensure the thorough investigation and scrutiny of deaths which raise issues of public concern and to avert similar deaths in the future. Yet again these families are forgotten, denied access to justice because they cannot afford to pay and sent a clear message that these deaths do not matter. They remain 'victims without a voice'.