



# OFFICE OF THE POLICE & CRIME COMMISSIONER FOR NORFOLK

**PRESS RELEASE – 05/06/2013**

## **NORFOLK PCC URGES JUSTICE SECRETARY TO THINK AGAIN ON LEGAL AID REFORM**

**Stephen Bett has expressed ‘grave concerns’ over the legal aid reforms proposed by Justice Secretary Chris Grayling.**

In an email to Norfolk MPs, the PCC has warned that the reforms will mean unequal access to justice, with the rich more able to access specialist representation than the poor.

“Britain’s justice system is based on the principal of equal access to justice, but these proposals could undo that, with poorer victims who are unable to afford specialist legal representation more vulnerable to flawed trials, unnecessarily protracted trials and retrials.

“For victims of serious and sensitive cases such as rape and domestic violence, this will only add further to their trauma.

“I have contacted Norfolk’s MPs with my concerns and urged them to speak with the Justice Select Committee currently reviewing Mr Grayling’s proposals.”

Note: Stephen Bett’s email to MPs is attached for your information.

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## EMAIL SENT ON BEHALF OF STEPHEN BETT, POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONER FOR NORFOLK

Dear Norfolk MP

I just wanted to drop you a short line to express my grave concerns relating to the Legal Aid Reform which come into effect shortly. The Justice Select Committee are urgently reviewing these in the light of national campaigns from a cross-section of pressure groups and other lobbyists from a broad range of those involved directly and indirectly in the criminal justice process. Whilst I fully acknowledge the need to reduce public spending to match national income, as with my earlier letter about the impact of Benefits' changes (thank you to those that responded – see letters section on <http://www.norfolk-pcc.gov.uk/documents-publications/>), my concern relates to how these changes will impact on victims, and undermine confidence in the criminal justice system.

I am particularly concerned about the impact on victims and witnesses either from poor representation of the prosecution and/or inexpert cross-examination of victims and witnesses. The proposals threaten the quality of the advocacy services available to victims and could lead to ineffective and longer trials, and an increase in miscarriages of justice.

It is vitally important that victims of sensitive and serious cases such as rape, serious sexual offences and domestic violence have access to specialist representation, and do not face the further distress of flawed or unnecessarily protracted trials, and being possibly cross examined by perpetrators who have undertaken to represent themselves. Criminal justice agencies such as the police, the crown prosecution service and now police and crime commissioners have worked hard to encourage victims of such offences to report, to reduce attrition and to secure convictions through measures such as independent advocacy support workers and specialist courts. The proposed reforms have the potential to undermine all this and damage victim confidence in their ability to get a fair trial and bring perpetrators to justice.

Whilst we read and are directed to the high costs of some barristers etc in criminal cases, this is the exception rather than the norm, and my concern is in support of the everyday criminal justice case rather than these high-profile, but rare, cases. Aligned with other cuts to the police and local criminal justice service organisations, I am extremely concerned that the new approach will undermine public confidence in the system of justice and that police too will see their hard work being unsupported by the next stage in the system.

I do hope you will talk to you fellow MPs and particularly those on the Select Committee for Justice regarding the wide scale concerns on the impact of these, and other Ministry of Justice, "reforms".

Yours sincerely

Stephen Bett, Police and Crime Commissioner for Norfolk