Welcome to today's meeting of the Constitutional Affairs Committee.

Today's inquiry
This is a one-off evidence session into the work of the Legal Services Commission, which follows the announcement by the Commission of the withdrawal of specialised support services in England and Wales and publication of the first report of Lord Carter's Review of Legal Aid Procurement.

The Legal Service Commission (LSC) is an executive non-departmental public body which is responsible for the administration of two legal aid schemes in England and Wales: the Community Legal Service and the Criminal Defence Service. Firms undertaking legal aid work must meet the Specialist Quality Mark (SQM) and have a contract with the LSC.

Specialist support services provide additional assistance to organisations that already hold legal aid contracts. The scheme currently provides 17 organisations in England (and 2 further organisations in Wales) with contracts to provide advice in the following areas of law: Community Care, Debt, Employment, Housing, Human Rights, Immigration, Mental Health, Public Law and Welfare Benefits.

The witnesses appearing before the Committee today
4.15pm
Brian Harvey, Acting Chief Executive and Crispin Passmore, Director, Community Legal Service, Legal Services Commission

Transcripts of oral evidence sessions are made available on the Reports and Publications page of the Committee's website (details below).

Related publications

About the Committee
The Committee was appointed on 13 July 2005 to examine the policy, administration and expenditure of the Department for Constitutional Affairs and associated public bodies. Its remit therefore includes:

- constitutional issues, including: elections; electoral law; party funding; relations with the Channel Islands and Isle of Man;
- the courts and tribunals (but excluding individual cases)
- civil justice and the legal services market, including: legal aid and the Legal Services Commission; private legal services and the Legal Services Ombudsman; civil court procedure and civil law; alternative dispute resolution; law reform and the Law Commission
- family justice and the vulnerable, including: marriage, divorce and relationship support; family breakdown and arrangements for children; mental incapacity; transsexuals
- criminal justice, including: policy and legislation affecting the criminal courts (as distinct from criminal law, which does not fall within this Committee's remit); international and European matters affecting the criminal courts
- judicial matters, including: judicial appointments, training and conduct; appointments to tribunals; appointment of QCs (but excluding individual appointments)
- issues related to Freedom of Information (FOI)

The Committee's remit also covers other agencies for which the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs is responsible to Parliament, such as the Legal Services Commission; Her Majesty's Courts Service; Northern Ireland Court Service; HM Land Registry; the Public Guardianship Office and The National Archives.

How the Committee works
Select Committees choose their own topics for inquiry within the overall remit given to them by the House of Commons. The Committee carries out its work by taking evidence from relevant interested parties, either orally or in writing or both. Oral evidence is usually taken in public and transcripts of the session subsequently published. Most, but not all, of the Committee's oral evidence sessions are followed by the publication of a report which may contain conclusions and recommendations to Government. The Government should respond to the Committee's reports within two months of publication. This is usually in the form of either a memorandum (published by the Committee as a Special Report) or a Command Paper laid before Parliament, setting out the conclusions and recommendations accepted or rejected with explanatory notes. Both are publicly available from TSO.

The Committee is made up of 11 MPs; a minimum of three Members must be present for any formal proceedings to take place.

The Committee's current inquiries
The Committee usually has more than one inquiry underway at any one time. At present, the Committee is looking at:
1. The courts: small claims
2. Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs and Lord Chancellor: key DCA policies and priorities
3. Electoral administration
4. Compensation culture
5. The Office of the Judge Advocate General
6. Reform of the coroners system and death
7. Freedom of Information: one year on
8. Legal Services Commission

The Committee's recent Reports
Session 2005-06
■ First Report: The courts: small claims (HC 519), published 6 December 2005
■ Second Report: The Office of the Judge Advocate General (HC 731), published 12 December 2005

All the Committee’s publications and details of forthcoming hearings are available on the Committee’s website (details below).

You can also view and listen to a range of webcast committee evidence sessions at: www.parliament.tv

When televised, video tapes of committee hearings are available from the Parliamentary Recording Unit, 020 7219 5511/5513.

Details of all committees’ forthcoming hearings are also published on the Commons Committee Homepage:
www.parliament.uk/what_s_on/hoc_news3.cfm

Information on the work of the House of Commons is available in the House of Commons Weekly Information Bulletin:
www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmwib.htm

Committee membership
Rt Hon Alan Beith MP (Chairman) (Liberal Democrat, Berwick-upon-Tweed)
James Brokenshire MP (Con, Hornchurch)
David Howarth MP (Liberal Democrat, Cambridge)
Barbara Keeley MP (Lab, Worsley)
Mr Piara S Khabra MP (Lab, Ealing Southall)
Jessica Morden MP (Lab, Newport East)
Julie Morgan MP (Lab, Cardiff North)
Mr Andrew Tyrie MP (Con, Chichester)
Keith Vaz MP (Lab, Leicester East)
Dr Alan Whitehead MP (Lab, Southampton Test)
Jeremy Wright MP (Con, Rugby and Kenilworth)

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We hope you have found today’s proceedings and this information note of interest.