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PANEL WELCOMES GOVERNMENT MOVE TO RETAIN CLIENT CHOICE IN LEGAL AID

The Legal Services Consumer Panel welcomes the Government commitment to retain client choice in criminal legal aid cases.

The Panel had previously called on the Government to rethink its proposal to deny people accused of a crime the right to choose their own defence lawyer, warning the proposals were unfair in principle, not the most effective way of making competition work, risked undermining quality, and could harm vulnerable clients the most.

The Panel also highlighted that consumers who receive legal aid greatly value choice in the current system. According to the findings of its most recent Tracker Survey these consumers are more likely to shop around than those who pay privately for legal services. The Panel gave evidence to the Justice Select Committee on the subject last month. The Ministry of Justice has now confirmed that some choice element will be retained.

Commenting on the Government's decision, Elisabeth Davies, Chair of the Legal Services Consumer Panel, said:

"Freedom to choose a legal representative is vital when a person's liberty is at stake. But if someone accused of a crime is allocated a representative by the very state seeking to convict them, public confidence in the system risks being undermined. We are therefore very pleased that the major concerns raised in this area, including through evidence from the Panel, are being listened to".

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For more information, contact Harriet Gamper, Consumer Panel Associate, on 020 7271 0076.

Notes to editors

1. The Legal Services Consumer Panel was established under the Legal Services Act 2007 to provide independent advice to the Legal Services Board about the

interests of consumers of legal services in England and Wales. We investigate issues that affect consumers and use this information to influence decisions about the regulation of legal services.

2. The Panel's legal aid consultation response can be found here http://www.legalservicesconsumerpanel.org.uk/publications/consultation_responses/index.html.
3. The most recent Tracker Survey data can be found here: <http://www.legalservicesconsumerpanel.org.uk/ourwork/consumerwelfareindex.html>