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PANEL RESPONDS TO PUBLIC BODIES REVIEW ANNOUNCEMENT

Dianne Hayter, chair of the Legal Services Consumer Panel, said:

“The Legal Services Consumer Panel is working through the implications of today’s surprise announcement that the Government is minded to merge the Legal Services Consumer Panel with Citizens Advice, subject to an examination of the practicalities and details of such a move.

“The Panel performs a very different function to campaigning organisations such as Citizens Advice, as we provide independent advice to the Legal Services Board at the earliest stages of its policy thinking on the regulation of lawyers. It does this at no cost to the public purse as its activities are funded by a levy on the legal profession. We are in a critical period in the legal services reforms in the run up to Alternative Business Structures, so having a strong discrete voice for legal clients matters more than ever. Citizens Advice will not be able to reach out, or be accountable, to such clients (which includes business as well as individuals) on matters of regulation, nor have the means to scrutinise the work undertaken by the Solicitors Regulation Authority, Bar Standards Board, or the new Legal Ombudsman - all of which the Panel now does. The Panel’s advice to the Legal Services Board on the issue of referral fees was clearly crucial in their subsequent consultation. Without a Panel representative of the interests of users of legal services, it is unclear where such input could arise.

“The Panel is pleased that no firm decisions on consumer panels have yet been made and looks forward to explaining its role during the consultation process. We have naturally sought an early meeting with the Ministry of Justice to discuss this process.”

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For more information, contact Steve Brooker, Consumer Panel Manager, on 020 7271 0077.