



Norfolk PCC Stephen Bett attacks government's legal aid reforms

Wednesday, June 5, 2013

10.33 AM

Norfolk's police and crime commissioner has attacked reforms intended to save money from the legal aid budget.

Stephen Bett has written to MPs expressing his "grave concerns" over the legal aid reforms proposed by justice secretary Chris Grayling.

The commissioner warned that the changes will lead to unequal access to justice, with the rich more able to access specialist representation than the poor.

Under the proposals the number of firms holding contracts for legal aid in England and Wales will fall from 1,600 to 400, defendants will not be able to choose their lawyer and those earning over £100,000 will be denied legal aid.

The government hopes to save £220m a year from the legal aid budget for criminal cases in England and Wales.

But Mr Bett said: "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."

In his email to Norfolk's MPs he urges them to contact the Justice Select Committee which is currently reviewing Mr Grayling's proposed changes.

The email states: "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."