



CAROLINE ODWYER

Fiona Bawdon, a freelance legal affairs journalist, looks at the new commission, to be launched this month, which will examine the provision of social welfare law services following the cuts in advice services and legal aid as a result of the coalition government's austerity programme.

The Low Commission on the Future of Advice and Legal Support

Aims and objectives

Lord Colin Low, the disability rights campaigner and crossbench peer, is to chair a commission charged with producing a blueprint for sustainable social welfare law provision and influencing political thinking in the run-up to the next election. The Low Commission, as it will be known, has been set up by Legal Action Group with funding from the Baring Foundation and others. Its ten commissioners will gather evidence – both oral and written – over a nine-month period and report their findings in December 2013. The aim will be to influence the manifestos of the main political parties ahead of the 2015 general election.

Staff and the commissioners

Richard Gutch, former chief executive of the not-for-profit company Futurebuilders, which was set up to lend state funds to charities, will be secretary to the commission on a part-time basis. Sara Ogilvie, who previously worked at the Administrative Justice and Tribunals Council, will act as its full-time researcher.

Richard Gutch performed a similar role for the National Council for Voluntary Organisations Funding Commission, which reported in December 2010. 'My experience there showed it is really important to make the most of the expertise of your commissioners,' he says. Rather than just coming together for fixed

meetings, the aim will be for the commissioners to be as involved in the evidence gathering and research as their other commitments allow (all are acting unpaid).

One of Sara Ogilvie's key initial tasks will be to conduct a mapping exercise of current provision and to monitor the impact of the April 2013 legal aid scope cuts. The commission will then aim to develop a strategy for future provision that can realistically be delivered and supported in the future.

The commissioners include Amanda Finlay, the well-respected former legal services director at the Ministry of Justice, now retired; Steve Hynes, LAG's director; and Pam Kenworthy, legal director of telephone services at Howells LLP. Nine commissioners have been appointed so far, and the aim is to add one more from a health background (see box).

Findings, conclusions and recommendations

Richard Gutch stresses that the recommendations will be pragmatic: there would be no point in spending a year producing a report which just calls for across-the-board restoration of legal aid, he says. Instead, the commission will look afresh at alternatives, which may mean challenging existing assumptions. 'We will definitely need to revisit the role of cheaper forms of provision, such as telephone help. A lot of providers say it

doesn't work for the people who need most help, but there is some evidence that the quality of electronic provision in this field just isn't very good.'

The commission will also consider whether, contrary to what many practitioners believe, some vulnerable client groups – such as those with mental health issues or language difficulties – might actually be better served by electronic advice, rather than having to traipse into a solicitor's office and be seen face to face.

Richard Gutch adds that the commission will be inviting comment on all its recommendations and will publish discussion papers as its thinking evolves, ahead of their final publication in December 2013.

Timetable

4 December 2012 Launch of Low Commission

December 2012–June 2013 Evidence gathering, through interviews, meetings, group discussions, invited submissions and desk research. Development of recommendations; publication of discussion papers for comment from interested parties

September 2013 Consultation on draft recommendations

December 2013 Publication of Low Commission final report

May 2015 General Election

Low Commission on the Future of Advice and Legal Support: developing a strategy for access to advice and support on social welfare law in England and Wales



The commission will be chaired by Lord Colin Low CBE

Lord Low is a former law lecturer and was made a life peer in 2006. He lists his interests as 'disability, education, crime and delinquency'. He is vice-president of the Royal National Institute of Blind People, a member of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal and former member of the Disability Rights Commission.



His fellow commissioners are the following:



Bob Chapman
Administrative Justice & Tribunals Council, Wales
Committee member



Amanda Finlay
(vice-chairperson) former legal services director at the Ministry of Justice



Vandna Gohil
former director Voice4Change and programme manager for Voluntary Action Leicestershire



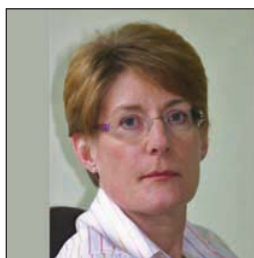
David Hagg
Chief Executive Officer of Stroud District Council



Steve Hynes
director of LAG



Pam Kenworthy
legal director, Howells Direct (part of Howells LLP)



Vicky Ling
former member Civil Justice Council, management consultant



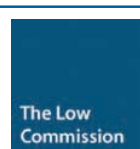
Susan Steed
New Economics Foundation and Centre for Markets and Public Organisations, University of Bristol



The commission will be supported by Richard Gutch, secretary (above left) and Sara Ogilvie, researcher (above right)



Funders are: Baring Foundation, Barrow Cadbury Trust, LankellyChase Foundation and Trust for London



Contact the Low Commission at:
www.lowcommission.org.uk or
http://twitter.com/@low_commission