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## **Press Release**

### **Local MP joins lawyers in national revolt over Legal Aid contracts**

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by **Howard Gardener, partner specialising in family law**

Direct line 01256 854632 email [hgardener@phillips-law.co.uk](mailto:hgardener@phillips-law.co.uk)

Local MP, Maria Miller, and family lawyers in Basingstoke are joining with others across the country to fight planned changes to the way Legal Aid lawyers are funded. If the changes go through, they say, vulnerable people with difficult or complicated cases will find it virtually impossible to get legal help in the future.

Legal aid lawyers must sign a new unified contract by 1<sup>st</sup> April, but family lawyers all over the country are refusing to sign and indications are that in some regions up to 70 per cent of family legal aid services could disappear immediately.

According to Howard Gardener, partner at Phillips Solicitors, a leading law firm in Basingstoke, a reduction of almost 70 per cent of legal aid capacity to deal with family law issues is likely. Across England and Wales the number of family legal aid practices has already suffered a marked decline from 4,500 in 2000 to 2,800 in 2006 and this can only get worse.

Although Phillips have ceased publicly funded work, save for mediation, nearly all family lawyers are calling on the Legal Services Commission (LSC) to listen to the very strong concerns being voiced by the profession and delay the date by which firms must sign the new contracts. One of the most contentious issues is the power the LSC will have to unilaterally change any aspect of the contract.

“Vulnerable people seeking legal help for domestic abuse or child protection issues will face real difficulty in finding local firms to represent them at all. At best they are likely to face waits of several weeks before being able to access help and advice. These delays could literally be a life or death issue for some,” said local spokesperson Howard Gardener, Secretary of the local Law Society and partner at Phillips Solicitors. “The current timetable for the new

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contracts is nothing short of bullying and looks set to backfire. Strength of feeling on this issue is extremely high – the Legal Services Commission is facing a rebellion of untold proportions.”

Maria Miller, MP for Basingstoke said: ‘Our local solicitors are absolutely right to protest about these changes to the Legal Aid system. It’s outrageous that some of my most needy constituents in and around Basingstoke may not be able to get proper legal help when they are in dreadful distress. I will be joining the local solicitors’ group at their next meeting to see what action I can take to support their objections’

**-ENDS-**

### **Notes to editors:**

**For further information please contact:**

**Howard Gardener, partner at Phillips Solicitors and secretary of the local Law Society:**  
01256 854632, email: [hgardener@phillips-law.co.uk](mailto:hgardener@phillips-law.co.uk)

**Nick Massey-Chase, partner at Brain Chase Coles:**  
01256 354481, email: [nmasseychase@brainchasecoles.co.uk](mailto:nmasseychase@brainchasecoles.co.uk)

**Ann Davies, partner at Lamb Brooks:**  
01256 844888, email [ann.davies@lambbrooks.com](mailto:ann.davies@lambbrooks.com)

**Bhupendra Sankla, family lawyer at Clarke & Sons:**  
01256 320555, email: [bsankhla@clarkeandson.co.uk](mailto:bsankhla@clarkeandson.co.uk)

**Hayley Eachus, family lawyer at Wills Chandler:**  
01256 322911, email: [legal@wills-chandler.co.uk](mailto:legal@wills-chandler.co.uk)