

Bills put thousands of families at risk, warns archbishop



Archbishop Peter Smith of Southwark has highlighted his concern for the ‘thousands of families’ who would be adversely affected by proposed changes to benefits and Legal Aid.

In a letter to the Times, the archbishop (above) commented on the Welfare Reform Bill and the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill being debated in the House of Lords. He calls for child benefit to be exempt from the proposed £500 a week cap on household benefits to lessen the impact upon families, especially larger families, who already face cutting back on essentials, like food, and risk losing their homes.

The English archbishop also calls for the removal of new provisions that will leave benefit claimants liable to repay debts accumulated as a result of administrative errors.

The archbishop’s letter also addresses the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill, which proposes over £60 million in cuts, and states ‘we must not restrict access to justice for the most vulnerable of society.’

Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN), has emphasised that children will be one of the groups hit hardest by the legal aid cuts, particularly in light of the estimated 140,000 cases per year in which parents will no longer receive support. The archbishop also drew attention to the likely negative impact upon domestic abuse victims.

Bishop Patrick Lynch, chairman of the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales Office of Migration and Refugee Policy, expressed further concerns around the Legal Aid, Sentencing and

Punishment of Offenders Bill, regarding victims of human trafficking and those involved in family reunion immigration cases, who he emphasised were ‘at risk of losing fundamental and potentially irreplaceable support.’

— <http://www.caritas-socialaction.org.uk>

Archbishop Peter Smith