Surrogate Parents (Leave, Pay and Allowance Arrangements):

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative) Click here to watch Sarah live

I welcome the significant improvements that have been made in respect of domestic violence, so I shall concentrate on Lords amendment 168.

The Secretary of State says that because welfare appeals often involve arguments about points of fact rather than points of law, welfare appellants should not qualify for legal aid. However, justice is about facts. Many of the people whom we meet in our surgeries have fallen through the gaps in Atos assessments. They may not have ticked the right boxes, but within five minutes it is abundantly clear that the wrong decision has been made. In my experience, the expert and professional advice marshalled by the citizens advice bureaux makes all the difference to whether our constituents receive justice. Cost-shifting might be reasonable, but only if the £20 million per year went far enough to fill the gap that has been created.

Historically, South Hams CAB in my area has received 60% of its funding through legal aid. It was not a question of local authority cuts; the authority had not funded the CAB in the first place. Although some of

that £20 million has gone to my local CAB and will make a significant difference, the CAB has nevertheless had to cut staff, and has lost 45 hours per week of high-quality professional time. Of course we all pay tribute to the volunteers, but it is mostly the detailed and specific marshalling of facts by specialists that determines whether the right decision is made at a tribunal.

I believe that the employment of more decision-makers would make a big difference, but I also believe that the work done by CABs saves us a great deal of money in the long term. I ask the Secretary of State to think again about how much more we can do to fill the gap so that our CABs can maintain the incredibly high-quality professional service that they provide for all our constituents.

They Work For You

Hansard