

12 January 2011

Access to Justice Foundation Launches Campaign to Release Money Stuck in Solicitors' Accounts

The Access to Justice Foundation is launching a national campaign encouraging law firms to release unclaimed money from their client accounts to help support free legal assistance in their local community.

The Foundation's "*It's Not Just Peanuts*" campaign comes when there is considerable pressure on both Legal Aid and local government funding, meaning at a time of increased public need the voluntary legal and advice sector faces real financial difficulties. The campaign is specifically targeting amounts of less than £50 that have been unclaimed by clients and so remain in solicitor's accounts. These sums can arise in a number of ways, for example on a property sale where the costs were slightly less than expected but the client can no longer be traced, or where money returned to a client has not been cashed despite reminders.

The campaign takes advantage of a 2008 rule change which allows a law firm to donate unclaimed sums of less than £50 to charity without SRA approval. Whilst not the initial focus of the *It's Not Just Peanuts* campaign, it is hoped that sums over £50 will also be donated to the Foundation, however these sums require firms to apply to the SRA on a case-by-case basis. Even if the original owner does return to claim the money the sum involved is covered by an indemnity and so they do not lose out.

Former attorney general Lord Peter Goldsmith QC who chairs the Foundation said: "Although the individual funds generated may seem small, collectively they will represent a significant contribution towards the work of the Access to Justice Foundation to support organisations that provide free legal help, vital at this time of Government funding cuts. We need the support of as many firms as possible and are very grateful for their time and effort to unlock these funds for the voluntary legal sector."

The campaign will be officially launched on 12 January 2011 at Hogan Lovells London office at which Attorney General Dominic Grieve QC MP and Solicitor General Edward Garnier QC MP are confirmed to attend. The Attorney General commented "I am a great believer in pro bono work and welcome the innovative approach of the Access to Justice Foundation. I wholly urge law firms across the country to support pro bono in any way they can."

Bob Nightingale MBE, Chief Executive of London Legal Support Trust said: "The Foundation designed the campaign with the support of Hogan Lovells following the Government's announcement in November to drastically reduce the Legal Aid budget. The cuts will lead to many being unable to obtain legal assistance. The funds raised by the campaign will go a little way to prevent the worst effects on people most affected by the cuts, by supporting social welfare law areas such as benefits, debt, employment and immigration."

Yasmin Waljee, International Pro Bono Manager at Hogan Lovells said: "In the age of austerity there will no doubt be calls for private practices to do more pro bono. However, whilst pro bono helps plug a vital gap it is not a substitute for a comprehensive legal aid service. This campaign will help the Access to Justice Foundation provide extra support for legal advice charities so their crucial work can continue, even in these very difficult times. We are extremely proud to be involved."

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NOTES

1. An information pack for law firms can be downloaded from www.ATJF.org.uk/clientbalances
2. For more information on the campaign contact clientbalances@ATJF.org.uk
3. Press may contact Chris Hinze, Head of Corporate Communications at Hogan Lovells International LLP on 020 7296 2745 or chris.hinze@hoganlovells.com
4. The Access to Justice Foundation is a national charity that provides grant funding to support pro bono and advice agencies which provide free legal help to the public when they cannot afford it but are not eligible for legal aid. It was established in 2008 by the Law Society, Bar Council, ILEX and Advice Services Alliance, with the Board of Trustees drawn from across the sector. Uniquely, the Foundation's creation was envisaged in statute, and it was prescribed by the Lord Chancellor as the recipient of "pro bono costs" under s.194 Legal Services Act 2007. The Foundation works with a network of 7 Regional Legal Support Trusts across England & Wales, and partners with the major national pro bono and advice organisations. Visit www.ATJF.org.uk for more information.