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ASSOCIATION OF
COMMUNITY HEALTH COUNCILS
FOR ENGLAND & WALES

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COMMUNITY HEALTH COUNCILS NOT TO PROCEED WITH JUDICIAL REVIEW

The Association of Community Health Councils (ACHCEW) today announced that, following refusal of their funding request by the Secretary of State, they will not be seeking alternative sources of funding to finance a judicial review into the consultation process that led to their abolition. The organisation received the legal opinion of Queens Counsel that they have 'good grounds' to pursue judicial review; however they lacked the funds to pursue the issue in court.

Donna Covey, Director of ACHCEW commented:

'We have no desire to place a further burden on the public purse. Alan Milburn has made it extremely clear that not only would he not fund a review but that he would resist review at every step.

'Our aim in this matter has always been to obtain meaningful consultation with the Department of Health, to ensure that patients continue to have access to an effective, independent Watchdog. We, along with a wide body of opinion in the health community, believe that the new proposals for patient representation, are in danger of eliminating an effective Watchdog and replacing it with a fragmented group of ineffective alternatives.

'This is a political question and not a judicial one. We hope that the Secretary of State will listen to the voice of patients and the health community.'

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ACHCEW's major concerns are that the replacement structures mapped out in the National Plan will not be independent, will not have statutory powers and will be fragmented.

Commentators have expressed concerns that the disparate bodies that the plan seeks to put in place of CHCs, will prove to be cumbersome and bureaucratic. Fears have also been raised that the lack of a local co-ordinating body with responsibility for complaints work as well as scrutiny and monitoring will mean that any broader problems that might previously have been picked up by the system will now fall through the gaps.

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For further information please contact: Murray Benham on - 020 7609 8138
email: murray.benham@achcew.org.uk
website: www.achcew.org.uk

Notes to Editors

- The 'shock' announcement that CHCs were to be abolished was made on the 27th July as part of the National Plan.
- CHCs were established in 1974 as patient advocates within the NHS. Over the past 26 years they have been at the forefront of ensuring that the patients' voice is heard and their complaints listened to. Most recently, they played a pivotal role in ensuring that Rodney Ledward was exposed, and that the victims of Harold Shipman were supported.
- There are 700 staff in Community Health Councils across the country all of whom face an uncertain future. CHCs also have over 5,000 volunteer members who contribute freely of their time to act as unpaid watchdogs for NHS patients.
- There are 204 CHCs in England and Wales. Similar bodies exist in Scotland (Local Health Councils) & Northern Ireland (Health and Social Services Councils).
- Each year CHCs assist around 30,000 people with complaints.
- A recent report, 'Hidden Volunteers', conducted by Community Service Volunteers (CSV) estimated that CHC members contribute over £7.9million worth of free labour to the NHS.