

Legal aid cuts will deny justice to the poor

ALASTAIR GRANT / AP

Sir, The Bar Council will not be alone in feeling a sense of outrage at the Government response to its legal aid consultation published on Tuesday (reports, June 22 and 21). Sentencing reform has hogged the headlines, but the Government's refusal to heed thousands of expert responses warning of the dangers of its legal aid plans must not be allowed to pass unchallenged.

Children, vulnerable people and ordinary hardworking families will be deprived of access to justice. Swathes of areas of law are to be cut from legal aid entirely.

The problem is exacerbated by the decision to decimate publicly funded lawyers' fees. Many lawyers and law firms will simply cease to practise in this vital field. Those most affected by these cuts, as the Government knows, are experienced lawyers, women lawyers and black and minority ethnic (BME) lawyers providing essential legal services.

Justice does not come at any price. The Government has settled for cut-price justice. Everyone loses out.
PETER LODDER, QC
Chairman of the Bar Council

Sir, The legal aid legislation contained in Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill will remove vital support and representation from over 650,000 people on low incomes despite fully costed alternative plans that would cut waste in the system instead.

These changes would disproportionately impact the vulnerable people we work with, for example women who have experienced domestic violence or disabled people. The changes will cost government more in the long run, deny people access to justice, and force local advice charities to close around the country.



Children and vulnerable people may be denied access to justice by the reforms

Legal aid is a lifeline — one usually unappreciated until it is called upon — for people experiencing hardships that most of us hope to avoid but many will suffer.

The Government has made some welcome but small improvements to its original plans. Now it and Parliament must confidently go much further, maintain free legal advice for social welfare law and clinical negligence cases, and ensure people can access the face-to-face advice they need. There are other fully costed proposals to save the same amount of money, including those made by the Law Society. We urge government to consider them.

PHIL JEW, Head of Policy & Campaigns, Advice UK; PETER WALSH, Chief Executive, Action Against Medical Accidents; GILLIAN GUY, Chief Executive, Citizens Advice plus 28 other signatories whose names can be read at thetimes.co.uk/letters

Sir, My concern with the proposals is not so much about the detail as the general steady decline in numbers of firms of solicitors that offer legal aid. There are now just over 2,000 civil legal aid firms, 195 fewer than the year before. The reduction in legal aid fees, the increase in bureaucracy, and the difficulties in recruiting staff who want a career in publicly funded work will mean fewer solicitors who can assist the most vulnerable.

It is a false economy. If, for example, a person does not get advice on a notice to quit or a letter demanding mortgage arrears, probably his family will become homeless, leading to loss of employment and relationship breakdown. Yes, these types of legal work are still covered under the proposals but there will be fewer firms to take such cases on.

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