

an
90 York Way, London N1 9GU.
020 3353 2000
37 2117

SCRIBER
More paper for your money

p to 33%
e Guardian
server
ption scheme
e one of three
ber packages:

33%
and Observer)

25%
only)

nd,
20%
aturday/Observer Sunday)

her information
subscribe, visit
a.co.uk/subscriber
045 120 4733
ven days a week



Subscriber open to UK residents aged 16
Subscriber hotline charged at local rate

guardian.co.uk

Today's picks from the website

Travel



PHOTOGRAPH: STEVE ENCHARD/REX

See Aberdeid's blue lagoon in our complete guides to 10 of the best walks in Britain, every day this week guardian.co.uk/travel

Datablog

Edinburgh by the numbers
See how the Edinburgh festivals are funded - and what may face the axe
guardian.co.uk/datablog



Most read

- 1 Zsa Zsa Gabor is read last rites by priest
guardian.co.uk/film
- 2 Craig Bellamy banned by Manchester City
guardian.co.uk/football
- 3 Charlie Brooker: If you want to write, get threatened
guardian.co.uk/commentisfree
- 4 Nick Clegg's hopes of running the country dashed by PM
guardian.co.uk/politics
- 5 Arsenal's Samir Nasri gives Joe Cole a central role masterclass
guardian.co.uk/football

Legal aid cuts put access to justice at risk, say lawyers

Natalie Hanman

Thousands of the most vulnerable people risk being denied emergency access to free advice from lawyers following major changes to the way legal aid is delivered, family law experts warn today.

Ninety per cent of family lawyers surveyed by Resolution, the family lawyers' association, say they believe access to justice is seriously under threat after the recent shake-up of the tendering process across all civil legal work which now revolves around bidding for three-year contracts.

The survey reflects fears that legal aid is going to take the biggest hit following last week's announcement that the Ministry of Justice will cut its £9bn budget by £2bn. Justice secretary Kenneth Clarke said in a recent interview that legal aid, which has a budget of £2bn, was one area "where our cuts can come from".

Previously firms were paid for work on a case-by-case basis, or for a set of cases, and critics of the changes say they favour bigger firms and are devastating for smaller practices, among which specialists in family law are often found.

According to the Legal Services Commission (LSC), which runs the legal aid system in England and Wales, only 1,300 of the 2,400 family law firms previously doing legal aid work have won new contracts, which start in October. Of those which responded to Resolution's survey published today, 86% said they will be appealing the LSC's decision.

Last night Steve Hynes, director of the Legal Action Group, said: "The big concern with family law is the reduction in outlets, which has been dramatic. It seems pretty obvious that if you reduce the number of outlets on the high street by 1,300 then there will be members of the public missing out on getting access to legal aid."

The LSC insists the new system, in which firms have to competitively bid for legal aid contracts in blocks and meet a set of assessment criteria, works well. It says that because all categories were over-subscribed it is simply a case of a smaller number of providers doing broadly the same amount of work, and that in the family law sector a minimum of five providers will remain in each procurement

area to ensure against any conflict of interest. But one respondent to the survey said the changes would have a particularly "devastating" impact on the family law sector, which deals with cases including children in care, domestic violence, forced marriage, divorce and adoption.

The survey found:

- Family lawyers overwhelmingly believe vulnerable people most in need of emergency legal aid, such as domestic violence and forced marriage victims, will be unable to find the advice they need after a number of key specialists in these areas lost their bids.

- Patchy nationwide provision, especially in rural areas, will result in "advice deserts", including in Cornwall, Dorset, Bedfordshire and Lincolnshire.

- The reduced number of firms will lead to potential conflicts of interest - or clients having to travel significantly further to access a different lawyer - if a single firm is forced to take on more than one client party to the same dispute.

- The government's proposed closure of magistrates and county courts will further seriously impede access to justice.

- There will be more than 500 redundancies in the family legal aid sector, with one firm saying it was likely to lose up to 30 staff members, and six firms saying they may have to close their offices entirely.

"Our survey has painted a very worrying picture for the future of legal aid provision," said David Allison, chair of Resolution. "We have written to the Ministry of Justice and the LSC and are calling on them to immediately and publicly set out the steps they will take and the practical measures they will introduce to meet any emerging access to justice issues."

Hugh Barrett, executive director of the LSC, admitted that it "did not intend that there should be a significant reduction in the number of firms that were doing family legal aid work".

He said: "We are only part way through a process of allocating the work. We have a process of appeals and we will further look at whether in any particular parts of the country there are issues with access to justice."

The survey was sent to all Resolution legal aid lawyers, representing 1,355 firms; 597 responded, and 561 of those had bid for a family contract.

Simpkins said: "Mr Blair's generosity is much appreciated and will help us to make a real and lasting difference to the lives of hundreds of injured personnel."

On internet forums and message boards soldiers appeared sceptical of Blair's motives although most agreed his donation was good news for injured troops.

Adnan Sarwar, who lost two friends during tours of Iraq before leaving the army in 2007, said: "It may be a way of trying to say sorry for what he has done, a way of giving something back to the troops, but whatever the reason I think we should accept his money and say thanks very much... This does not change what happened or the decisions that were made. But there comes a time when you have to move on and, not forget or even forgive necessarily, but move on."

John Kampfner, page 26 >

Blair's £4.6m gift to British Legion

« continued from page 1

been much better for everyone if he hadn't taken us into these wars in the first place. Blair lied about the Iraq war, he refused to express any regret at the Chilcot inquiry and his attempt to save his conscience will be little comfort to those injured or who have lost their loved ones."

The proceeds from the book will go to the Royal British Legion's Battle Back campaign, a project that will provide a new rehabilitation centre for seriously injured troops returning from the frontline.

Off to Uni? No, studying from home

« continued from page 1

dow. It's not as easy as coming in through the frontdoor but if you're committed enough you can get in."

At the university of Westminster, vice-chancellor Geoffrey Petts said the push from Labour to increase student numbers, while welcome, had led to an expectation

"This sea of students has had the build-up to going to university rammed down their throats for the last five years and all of a sudden a large number of them aren't going to make it," he said.

The Open University has seen a 21% increase in the number of 18-year-olds reserving places on degree courses in the last year, and a quarter of its new undergraduates are now aged under 25.

Two years ago Birkbeck had no applications from 18- and 19-year-olds; this year it had 154, and young people represent a higher proportion of applicants than ever before.

The total number of applications for part-time undergraduate degrees was 11

CURRENT ACCOUNTS

It pays to switch to a Santander current account.

Switch your main current account to Santander using our dedicated switching service. Pay in at least £1,000 a month, and we'll give you £100 as well as 5% AER (fixed) for 12 months on the first £2,500 of your balance.

Interest is paid on additional balances over £2,500, or on the whole balance if the required monthly credits are not made. After 12 months the rate changes to 1.00% variable AER (variable) on balances up to £2,500.

Call 0800 077 8179, visit your local Santander or Alliance & Leicester branch or www.santander.co.uk

Contact

If you would like to contact us, the relevant details are below.

For missing sections please ring

0800 839 100

For individual departments please ring the Guardian switchboard

020 3353 2000

For the Readers' editor, Corrections & Clarifications on specific editorial content, please ring

020 3353 4736

11am to 5pm UK time Monday to Friday excluding public holidays or email reader@guardian.co.uk

Letters for publication should be sent to letters@guardian.co.uk or the address on the letters page

Together. We are **Santander** santander.co.uk