

Letters to the Editor

Legal aid Bill amendments

Sir, As the Legal Aid and Sentencing Bill begins its Parliamentary Committee stage we hope it will be noted that the Government's original proposals to remove legal aid from most family cases affecting child contact and residence, and financial arrangements after divorce were opposed by 90 per cent of those consulted. Yet astonishingly these proposals appear almost unchanged in the Bill.

This is not (apparently) just because of economic circumstances; the Government believes the changes to be desirable in themselves. Hence the Bill makes no mention of the duty of the Justice Secretary to support access to justice, but provides a power to reduce the provision of legal aid still further, not to restore services that have been cut should finances improve.

The Government has downplayed the likely impact on family courts and families of the anticipated surge in litigants in person, despite the findings of its own review of existing research and concerns raised by the Family Justice Review, due to publish its final report this autumn.

It has also ignored evidence that family lawyers, far from being adversarial, perform a central function in helping parties reach settlement and avoid litigation.

In view of this disappointing rejection by the Government of the responses of the overwhelming majority of those familiar with family justice issues (not just lawyers), we urge MPs, peers and ministers to react positively to amendments proposed to the Bill which attempt to limit the damage it will cause to many vulnerable people, not least the children caught up in family disputes.

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