

Most vulnerable, poorest and socially excluded hit by Legal Aid changes, says British campaigner

Our reporter

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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Steve Hynes, the director of the Legal Action Group (LAG) about the implications of the government's proposed changes to Legal Aid.

LAG is a charity providing publishing and training services to lawyers and advisers to increase their knowledge of the law. It is also a campaigning organisation, focusing mainly on issues related to publicly-funded legal services.

Hynes was previously the director of the Law Centres Federation (LCF). The LCF is the national organisation for Law Centres, representation and support to the network of 60 Law Centres in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. He has established a reputation as a highly regarded commentator on legal services and access to justice issues, speaking at many national and international conferences on these subjects. (The LAG website can be visited [here](#).)

Hynes said, "Under the previous Labour government, they got the Legal Aid budget under their control by cutting back on fees. Those are the fees that mainly go in lawyers pockets. What the current government are proposing are both cuts in fees and cuts in scope. And it is the cuts in scope that will hit ordinary people a lot more.

"It will take things out of the legal aid scheme like benefits, at a time when the government are cutting back and completely reorganising the benefits system. So it will be the most vulnerable, it will be the poorest, the most socially excluded people, the sick, the disabled, that are going to be disproportionately hit if this goes through."

Hynes spoke about the threats to Law Centres in the UK, many of which are threatened with having their

funding withdrawn.

"I used to work at Rochdale Law Centre [in northwest England] and was the director of the Law Centres Federation before taking this job. The previous government went forward with this policy of Community Legal Advice Centres (CLACS). Basically they wanted to reconfigure what local authorities paid and what they paid through the Legal Aid system to create 'one-stop shops'.

"So what you have is existing organisations that have to submit new tenders for what was their funding. In somewhere like Manchester, which is relatively well catered for in terms of Legal Aid, even though you might not think it, to close down well established services or drastically cut them back will be for very little gain for local people using those services.

"The South Manchester Law Centre is very much for the local community. The Somali community uses it and if you have ever been there, the waiting room is packed out every morning with people needing advice. I just don't see the advantage of closing it.

"The problem with Legal Aid now is that it has gone beyond marketisation. It's just wholesale cuts of what people are entitled to. If these cuts go through, in effect it means a 50 percent cut in civil Legal Aid. If you look at the figures, 68 percent of what is called Legal Help is going. And Legal Help is just initial advice and help for people with problems and it gets at problems at an early point. You know if you sort out somebody's benefit or if you give them advice what to do at work, if they have a problem at work, then it stops it going any further. That will be lost. It's a 68 percent cut.

"Legal Action Group's main concern is access to justice for members of the public. The main issue here

is what amounts to a draconian cut of ordinary people's ability to enforce their rights and be able to get access to justice. This justice is meaningless. You can have brilliant laws, but if you don't have the means to access them, if you don't have access to expert advice, then you are excluded from the system.

“There will be no more legal advice for employment law, no more advice for debt, for some aspects of housing, all benefits advice will go from Legal Aid. All advice on education law will go, so parents with kids who have special needs and who want to get the best for them, they won't have recourse to legal advice.

“There are no areas of public service where the cuts are so severe. They are taking out whole layers of services that we have now. We hope we can persuade the government to think again on these policies. We want to see what policies they are going to put in place and the signs aren't good.”



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