

Lawyers should forget the money and focus on justice

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Over recent years the justice system seems to have been turned into a commodity for selling to multinationals and rich foreigners, while for ordinary people it is rationed through cost and other barriers. Justice Week, which starts on Monday, is an attempt by the Law Society, the Bar Council and the Chartered Institute of Legal Executives to promote the wider importance of the system. About 30,000 of the 140,000 solicitors in England and Wales with practising certificates work in the City of London, along with a high proportion of barristers and other legal professionals. The commercial success of the legal sector is applauded and the Ministry of Justice has been assiduous in its efforts to promote the City and the UK legal system to international markets. An overemphasis on money-making, though, can lead to a distorted view of what the justice system is for.

With the legal aid cuts, court closures and other cutbacks, many people are being failed by the system. In ten years the MoJ's spending has been slashed by 40 per cent. No end seems to be in sight as the chancellor announced the MoJ must trim a further £600 million from its spending by the end of the decade. Earlier this year *The Secret Barrister*, a book by an anonymous lawyer, lifted the lid on a criminal justice system falling apart because of a lack of cash. A state in which innocent people are wrongly incarcerated and the guilty walk free, as the book alleges, is failing and risks a catastrophic loss of public confidence in the rule of law. In the civil justice system, meanwhile, the price of going to court has been ratcheted up. The costs, for example, of issuing proceedings for a divorce or ending a civil partnership are now £550 compared with £410 two years ago. The case brought by the trade union Unison last year that overturned the imposition of fees in employment tribunals was a ray of hope in an otherwise gloomy view, held by many, that the government regards the courts system as a profit centre rather than a vital public service. Cuts to legal aid fell disproportionately on civil law cases. Under the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, nearly £300 million — about a third of the total budget — has been stripped from civil legal aid, denying the poorest and most vulnerable the ability to enforce their rights. It took away legal aid for employment, most benefits, debt and other legal problems commonly faced by people.

Spending cuts are shredding the local justice infrastructure of courts, law firms and other services, including charities such as Citizens Advice and Law Centres. Legal Action Group, my organisation, recently publicised the case of Wendy Lomax, a disabled woman from Dorset who, despite being entitled to legal aid, could not find a lawyer locally to take on her case. By luck she managed to find a solicitor from a London-based Law Centre to help her. She won her case in the Court of Appeal, but her plight illustrates the geographic and bureaucratic lottery that access to justice has become.

Out of the 20 events announced so far for the Justice week, more than half are in London. For Justice Week to be a success now and in future years, it will need to reach out beyond the legal village of the capital to engage with the wider public.

Steve Hynes is the director of Legal Action Group, a charity that campaigns on access to justice