

Dear Member of Parliament,

We are Young Legal Aid Lawyers ('YLAL'). YLAL is a group of over 3,500 lawyers who are committed to practising in those areas of law, both criminal and civil, that have traditionally been publicly funded. YLAL members include students, paralegals, trainee solicitors, pupil barristers and qualified junior lawyers with up to 10 years' post qualification experience, based throughout England and Wales. We believe that the provision of good quality publicly funded legal help is essential to protecting the interests of the vulnerable in society and upholding the rule of law.

In March 2018 we launched our third report into the state of social mobility in the legal aid sector; *Social Mobility in a Time of Austerity*. Our report shows that there is a crisis of recruitment and retention in the profession. It also found that 37% of barrister and 17% of solicitor respondents attended fee-paying schools, highly unrepresentative of the community the legal profession serves.

Our research shines a light on some of the reasons for these problems. Respondents told us that high course fees, debt and low salaries are major barriers to the profession. The need to undertake unpaid work experience is a further obstacle, as are the long hours and stressful environment.

These problems do not occur in a vacuum. Legal aid firms and chambers are under ever-increasing financial pressure due to severe cuts in legal aid rates, scope and eligibility (soon to be made even worse for criminal barristers if Parliament approves the Advocates' Graduated Fee Scheme). This context inevitably has a detrimental impact on aspiring lawyers' access to the profession, as well as the legal aid sector's retention of committed and talented lawyers.

We want to tell you the story of one of our members, Danielle, in order to illustrate what life is like for young legal aid lawyers in the current climate:

"I grew up on a council estate in inner city Nottingham where there were high rates of gun crime, drug use and drug dealing. Both my parents have spent time in prison. There was, therefore, more chance of me ending up in the dock as opposed to representing anyone else.

Notwithstanding this, I am now a qualified criminal barrister, having recently completed pupillage and the vocational stage of training. I chose to practice in crime as a result of my family's experience of the criminal justice system and a desire to represent the most vulnerable and marginalized in our society.

The prospect of joining a profession such as the Bar, at times seemed unattainable; the cost of training (in excess of £18,000), the competitive nature of securing pupillage and tenancy, and the perception that the profession is only open to a particular demographic, were all reasons for me to self-eliminate.

Nevertheless, with perseverance (and the support of some wonderful individuals and organisations), I overcame those hurdles and until very recently, had looked forward to a long and happy career in a profession I am passionate about and committed to.

Motivation to practise as a criminal barrister is not linked to financial recompense, although it's fair to say that on entering the profession I personally had an expectation that I would be fairly remunerated and able to live comfortably once qualified. I don't think that as a young professional (having



undertaken five years of training at my own expense), that is unreasonable. However, over the past few months that expectation has been diminished, significantly.

Recently, I have seen those whose determination I respect, despair and those I aspire to emulate, leave. Announcements by the Ministry of Justice have pushed both the profession and the system to breaking point with the result that, at present, there is real uncertainty about the future of the Criminal Bar.

I have been told to forget aspirations of purchasing a property and that I ought to reconsider whether it is going to be financially viable for me to have a family.

Without investment, there will be no equality of opportunity for those from non-traditional backgrounds wishing to pursue a career at the Criminal Bar. Indeed, there will be no incentive for them to do so. I personally feel that the door to the profession is being closed to me, just at the moment I was about to walk through it."

Please read our report and give careful consideration to the increasingly desperate situation faced by young legal aid lawyers. Immediate action is needed to ensure that legal aid remains a viable profession. Without urgent investment, the sector risks becoming extinct.

Yours faithfully



Young Legal Aid Lawyers