

# Legal aid changes 'will hit the most vulnerable'

An Ipswich lawyer is calling for the government to block plans to cut legal aid to some of society's most vulnerable.

Anthony Wooding, managing partner of Kerseys Solicitors, said they have had to turn people away following cuts to civil legal aid earlier this year.

He fears Government plans to cut £220million from the annual criminal legal aid budget could have worse consequences.

Mr Wooding, whose career has spanned more than three decades, said: "The criminal justice system could fall into disrepute if people aren't represented. Cuts to civil aid mean we are not always able to help vulnerable people with regard to matters such as family law or housing.

"But cutting criminal legal aid could have even more devastating consequences - with innocent people potentially being locked up." Leading barristers and human

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rights campaigners demonstrated at the weekend outside the Ministry of Justice against the cuts.

Under the Transforming Legal Aid proposals, price competitive tendering would be introduced which would involve firms bidding for contracts, with the lowest bid winning the case. Justice secretary Chris Grayling aims to shave £220m from the £2bn legal aid budget.

Kerseys focuses on civil law and would not be financially affected by the proposed cuts.

But Mr Wooding said he believed legal aid was necessary to protect all members of society.

"People will have theoretical rights but no practical means of enforcing them. If legal aid goes, we'll have a legal system that will just work for rich people and cause further inequality," he said. However, last night Mr Grayling

said that change to legal aid was "inevitable".

"We have an excellent tradition of legal aid and one of the best legal professions in the world. But we cannot close our eyes to the fact legal aid is costing too much. I have listened to lawyers' concerns and had constructive discussions with The Law Society.

"They acknowledge that, whilst it may be difficult, change is also inevitable.

"But it must be the right change that brings about the right outcomes. "The proposals we have agreed make sure legally-aided lawyers will always be available when needed and that people can choose the lawyer they want to help them.

"Even after these reforms, we will still have one of the most generous legal aid systems in the world.

"I want to ensure the limited money we have is concentrated on those cases and people who need it most."

■ Anthony Wooding of Kerseys solicitors

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