

## PMM - Legal Aid Reform

At Synod from time to time we seek to challenge government to think again about its policies. The legislation I attack in the motion introduced huge reductions to the scope of civil legal aid provision. There are many people who would have automatically qualified for legal help and assistance before 2013 and who suddenly found themselves not entitled. Instead they would have to rely on meagre private resources (risking debt), less experienced volunteer organisations, represent themselves or do nothing. Court processes are complex, stressful, and for people with additional vulnerabilities - mental and physical health challenges, disability, language barriers, numeracy and literacy problems - all the more so. I lodged this motion so the church can join in the campaign which has been in train since at least 2016 to secure a proper review of legal aid provision and recover it back to something comparable to where it stood before 2013. Before that time legal aid had had a long and noble tradition from just after the War and the values of the originating 1949 Act remained largely untouched.

In the writer's view this is an issue where fairness, justice and Christian concern for the poor and needy coincide neatly. The issues overlap with debates for example about the impact of universal credit (introduced at the same time as LASPO and debated at Synod in this quinquennium) and those affected by Windrush (a separate PMM in this session of Synod).

The debate can be enhanced by EGGs members in two ways. They may have personal knowledge of people affected by the cuts. They may know people in their church, or through outreach projects they have been involved in as well. The work done already by various commissions (cited in GS2163A) relied heavily on testimony and our debate should be no different in that regard. There are also wider issues about the impact of austerity and some could speak to that - I need only remind members of what the Bishop of Burnley described as the 'four horsemen of the apocalypse' in February 2019 in the estates evangelism debate - universal credit, low-paid work, food poverty and austerity. Legal aid cuts are just another symptom of the same disease.

There are issues to avoid in this debate. Do remember what this motion is about : this motion is about the impact of *civil* legal aid cut-backs on ordinary people and society's most vulnerable. It is not about *criminal* legal aid. The latter is a separate area of provision which has its own controversies. The issues there are really about how much the government is prepared to pay solicitors and barristers to do that type of work. The debate is not about how much lawyers should be paid for doing the civil legal aid work. Nor is the debate about the state of our court buildings, the quality of our judges or inefficiencies and delays in our legal system generally. Going into these irrelevant areas would simply mask the central message of the motion.

CARL FENDER

Lincoln 342