

APPG on Access to
Justice

Legal Aid Deserts
2025

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Introduction

LAPG is a membership body representing legal aid practitioners across England and Wales. Our Members are private practice and not-for-profit (NfP) organisations, Law Centres, barristers and costs lawyers. Constituted in 1984, we are one of four bodies officially appointed to formally consult with the Government on all legal aid contracting issues. We also provide the secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Access to Justice.

In writing the briefing below, we have sought the views of a number of legal aid specialists on our Board and Advisory Committee and other professionals from within the Justice sector. We have also referenced findings from:

- [Our Westminster Commission Inquiry into the sustainability of Legal Aid](#)
- [The Law Society's work on Legal Aid Deserts](#)
- The Lexis Nexis report: '[UK Legal Aid Deserts: Geographic Analysis and Access Crisis](#)'
- [The 2024 PA Consulting Survey of civil legal aid providers in England and Wales](#)

We set out some background to the crisis, findings and possible solutions below. **Content in bold refers to the South West region.**

Background

The emergence of 'legal aid deserts'—areas with no legal aid provision in specific areas of law—and 'advice droughts'—where providers exist but have little or no capacity to take on new cases—has sparked significant concern about access to justice across the United Kingdom. These issues are particularly acute in rural and coastal areas.

Findings from the 2021 Westminster Commission on Legal Aid and LexisNexis' report *UK Legal Aid Deserts: Geographic Analysis and Access Crisis* highlight a growing crisis in regions such as Cornwall, Wales, and the broader South West of England. These areas are facing a critical shortage of legal aid providers, leaving individuals and families without access to essential legal support, especially in areas such as housing, immigration, and family law.

This briefing paper explores the geographic and systemic challenges driving these access gaps and calls for immediate policy action to ensure that legal support is available and accessible to all, regardless of location.

Numbers of civil legal aid providers have decreased sharply since 2013 when the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO) came into force¹.

Financial Year	Total Crime Providers	Litigators Scheme	Advocates Scheme	High Cost Case Scheme	Total Crime Lower	Police Station	Magistrates' Court	Prison Law
2012–13	7,198	2,107	4,905	331	2,159	2,089	2,112	353
2023–24 (p)	5,605	1,582	3,858	67	1,634	1,560	1,585	129

¹ [legal-aid-statistics-tables-oct-dec-2024.ods](#)

Financial Year	Total Civil Providers	Legal Help Solicitors	Legal Help (NfP)	Mediation Solicitors	Mediation (NfP)	HPCD Solicitors	HPCD (NfP)	Civil Rep Solicitors	Civil Rep (NfP)
2012–13	4,178	2,731	441	186	18	3,254	144
2023–24 (p)	2,557	1,415	149	85	14	45	58	2,010	123

The not-for-profit (NfP) sector has been particularly affected by this contraction. Funding pressures forced many Citizens Advice offices and Law Centres to scale back or shut down their legal aid services. In 2013/14², 94 local areas had NfPs delivering civil legal aid. Today, that number has dropped to just 40.³

This decline stems from sustained financial pressure, with funding “being squeezed from all directions,” leading to reduced service levels and the closure of many vital advice agencies⁴ and Law Centres. As a result, even individuals who are financially eligible for legal aid and whose issues fall within its scope may find no available provider in their local area.

In these so-called “advice deserts” and “advice droughts,” clients are frequently left without local support. Many are forced to travel considerable distances to access legal assistance. For instance, someone seeking help with an immigration matter in Devon may need to travel to Somerset, Wiltshire, or Hampshire⁵ to find a provider.

Those most affected are often the poorest and most marginalised members of society—individuals who lack both the means and support systems needed to travel for legal advice. Many are in vulnerable situations, made worse by the legal issues they face. While online services may provide an alternative in theory, in practice they are often inadequate or inaccessible to those who need them most.

The personal impact of these gaps in provision was powerfully illustrated by former Supreme Court President Lady Hale in a 2019 speech to the Legal Action Group. She imagined a woman in rural England experiencing domestic violence⁷. Whereas in the past she might have accessed face-to-face advice, she is now left with only a local library and the internet. In exploring the available online resources, Lady Hale noted a striking absence of core legal principles—such as the fundamental principle of acting in the best interests of the child—demonstrating the deep limitations of remote or self-directed legal support.

The Westminster Inquiry also heard real accounts from providers and clients about the impact of advice deserts and reduced availability of legal advice:

‘[In education law there are] just eight law firms nationally across the whole country ... so it’s really hard for clients to be able to access legal advice ... And it genuinely is heart-breaking that you can see a legal issue and you can do something to help, but you just

² Maynard MP, P. (2019) *Written questions, answers, and statements* (UIN 273435). Available at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2019-07-04/273435> (accessed 5 July 2021).

³ <https://www.lawcentres.org.uk/list-of-law-centres>

⁴ Civil Justice Council (2018) *Submission to Post-Implementation Review of Part 1 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders (LASPO) Act 2012*, p3. Available at: <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/laspo-part-1-outline-submission-20-Dec-2018.pdf> (accessed 5 July 2021).

⁵ Wilding, J. (2019) *Droughts and Deserts: A report on the immigration legal aid market*, p40. Available at: <https://www.jowilding.org/assets/files/Droughts%20and%20Deserts%20final%20report.pdf> (accessed 5 July 2021).

don't have the time. And so you suggest other firms, but you know they will be facing exactly the same challenges. And you never quite know what happens to those clients.'

Polly Sweeney⁶

'We are turning people away who are in desperate need of advice and I know that those people won't be picked up by other firms, so they will simply not get advice.'

Nicola Mackintosh KC⁷

'[It was] not easy at all [to find a lawyer]. We looked through the Yellow Pages and found some lawyers who dealt with hospitals and the NHS but not on similar issues [community care] ... **we struggled to find another lawyer in the South West that could help and [we had to] get in touch with a firm from London.**'

Pam Coughlan⁸

There have been tentative movements over the past few years towards providing services remotely where no local providers are available. **University House Legal Advice Centre (based in East London) established a webcam advice clinic in partnership with a community organisation based in Falmouth. The bulk of the advice provided by the service is given by London-based lawyers via webcam. The organisation also runs a 'family law duty desk' at Truro Combined Court Centre. This duty desk provides assistance with section 8 private child arrangement cases and domestic abuse. It runs a similar scheme in Bodmin County Court and Family Court and a further remote employment law clinic in Plymouth.**

We see huge positives in the role of technology in connecting the public with advice providers, particularly in more remote locations, and we applaud the LAA's decision to allow providers to bid for digital delivery of services in the last housing law tender round. However, there will always be vulnerable people who are unable to access technology in this way and who will be left behind. We are also concerned by the need for providers to deliver services digitally to cover those areas where providers have left the market and what this tells us about the economic viability of the work itself.

Legal Aid Deserts

The reduction in providers has been acute across civil and family legal aid including education, welfare benefits, clinical negligence, family, immigration, housing⁹ and community care,¹⁰ and has disproportionately impacted rural areas.

As of February 2024, 44 per cent of the population of England and Wales do not have a housing legal aid provider in their local authority area, a figure that has grown by around 7 per cent since 2019 and

⁶ APPG on Legal Aid (2020) *Westminster Commission on Legal Aid Third Oral Evidence Session – Civil (Public) Legal Aid*, pp46–57. Available at: <http://www.apg-legalaid.org/sites/default/files/Transcript%20Civil%20Law.pdf> (accessed 12 September 2021).

⁷ *Ibid*, p23.

⁸ APPG on Legal Aid (2020) *Westminster Commission on Legal Aid First Oral Evidence Session – Sustainability of the Criminal Legal Aid Profession*, p8. Available at: https://www.apg-legalaid.org/sites/default/files/29.10%231%20Criminal%20Legal%20Aid_transcript.pdf (accessed 9 June 2021).

⁹ Ministry of Justice (2019), *Post-Implementation Review of Part 1 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO)* (CP 37), para 816, para 165, p35. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/777038/post-implementation-review-of-part-1-of-laspo.pdf (accessed 12 September 2021).

¹⁰ The Law Society (2021) *Legal aid deserts*. Available at: <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/en/campaigns/legal-aid-deserts> (accessed 5 October 2021).

only 33 per cent of the population have access to more than one provider in their local authority area.^{11/12} This means that many people across the country facing serious housing situations including eviction, will struggle to get the local face-to-face advice that they're legally entitled to. Refugee Action have warned that since 2005, 56 per cent of firms specialising in immigration and asylum law have left the market, creating geographical gaps in legal aid provision.¹³ **The 2019 LASPO PIR was told the sparsity of legal aid providers was a particular problem in much of Wales.**¹⁴

The scale of the legal aid deserts can be clearly seen in heat maps produced by The Law Society and Dr Jo Wilding that show the number of housing, education, community care, welfare and immigration providers across England and Wales. The heat maps, which were most recently updated in February 2024, are included in the analysis of each legal aid desert.

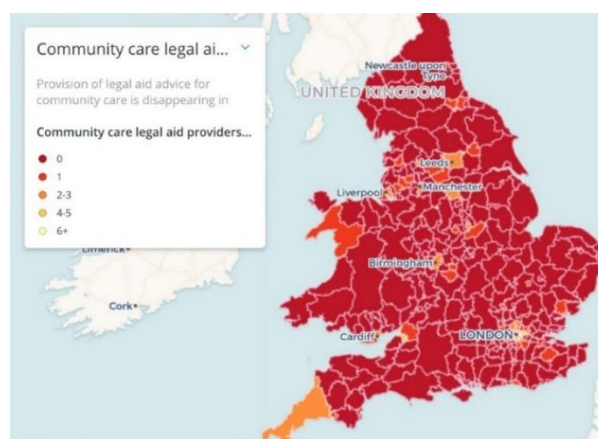
We show these, together with relevant findings from the LexisNexis report 'UK Legal Aid Deserts: Geographic Analysis and Access Crisis'¹⁵ below, which investigated the disparity between the need for legal aid and its availability across England and Wales, and ultimately identified legal aid deserts where demand significantly outstrips supply. The LexisNexis report used government data on legal incidents and legal aid providers to calculate this imbalance in housing, family, and crime law, and ultimately seeks to drive conversation about how to better support vulnerable people.

For the purposes of the report (which follows the heat maps), 'Legal Need' is determined by the number of legal "incidents" such as domestic abuse cases, homelessness, or crimes committed in a local authority area; and 'Legal Aid Supply' is determined by the number of legal aid providers in a local authority area.

These figures were calculated per 10,000 people to allow comparison between areas with different population densities. The report also considered the need and supply of neighbouring local authorities by measuring within a 15km radius. A final metric was assigned to each local authority by dividing supply by need. The bottom 10 per cent of local authorities based on this metric were characterised as legal aid desert.

Community care

Law Society analysis of LAA and ONS statistics found that 71 per cent of people do not have access to a local provider and of those with access, only 15 per cent have access to more than one legal aid provider in their local authority area.



¹¹ <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/campaigns/civil-justice/legal-aid-deserts/housing>

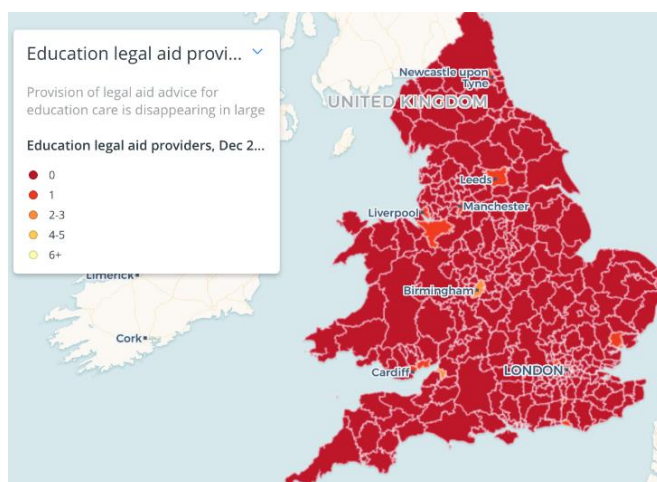
¹² <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2018-0120/CDP-2018-0120.pdf>

¹³ Ministry of Justice (2019), *Post-Implementation Review of Part 1 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO)* (CP 37), para 816, p196. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/777038/post-implementation-review-of-part-1-of-laspo.pdf (accessed 12 September 2021).

¹⁴ *Ibid*, para 820, p196.

¹⁵ LexisNexis (2021) *UK Legal Aid Deserts: Geographic Analysis and Access Crisis*. Available at: <https://www.lexisnexis.co.uk/insights/the-lexisnexis-legal-aid-deserts-report/index.html>

Education

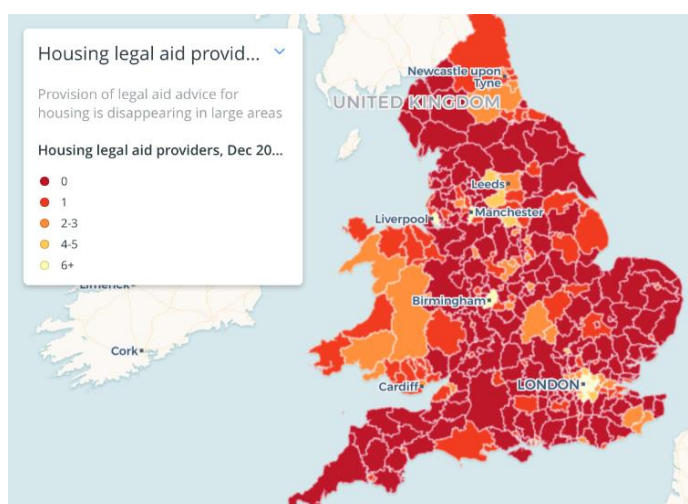


Data from LAA and ONS found that 9 in 10 people in England and Wales do not have an education legal aid provider in their local authority: that's over 53 million people.¹⁷ Without access to education legal aid, many families are unable to secure the education and support their children need. The inability to challenge discrimination in schools or appeals decisions made by local authorities around education provision is particularly troubling when compared against increases in the number of EHCPs. The number of pupils with an Education and Healthcare Plan increased by over 80 per cent between 2016 and 2024.¹⁶

Housing

As highlighted above, data shows that 44 per cent of people do not have access to a local provider, of which only 33 per cent have access to more than one local provider, leaving 12.45 million people in a legal aid desert for housing, with **the South-West as the region with the most housing legal aid deserts. The report also identified the top 15 housing legal aid deserts in the South West, which include¹⁷:**

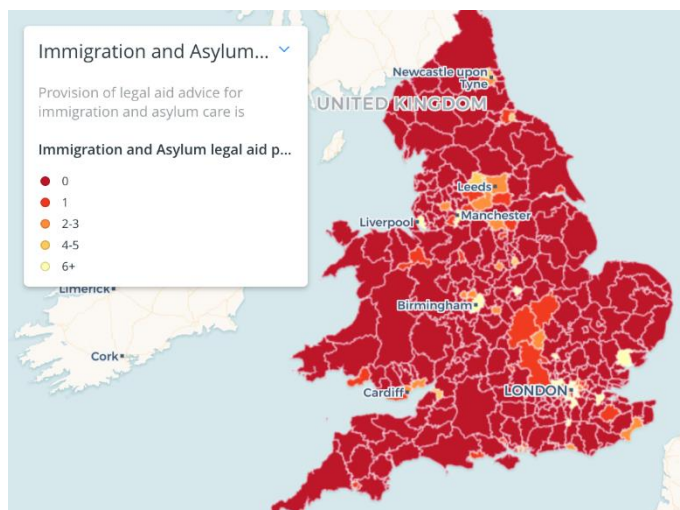
- South Lakeland
- East Devon
- North Devon
- Forest of Dean
- Somerset West and Taunton
- Barrow-in-Furness



Access to legal aid and early advice can be the difference between a safe home and homelessness. The high rates of housing repossessions are an indicator of how real the threat of homelessness is. Being able to access the local face-to-face advice that they're legally entitled is essential for keeping people across the country on low wages and at the cusp of eviction

¹⁶ Spending on Special SEN in England: something has to change. (2024). Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/spending-special-educational-needs-england-something-has-change>

Immigration



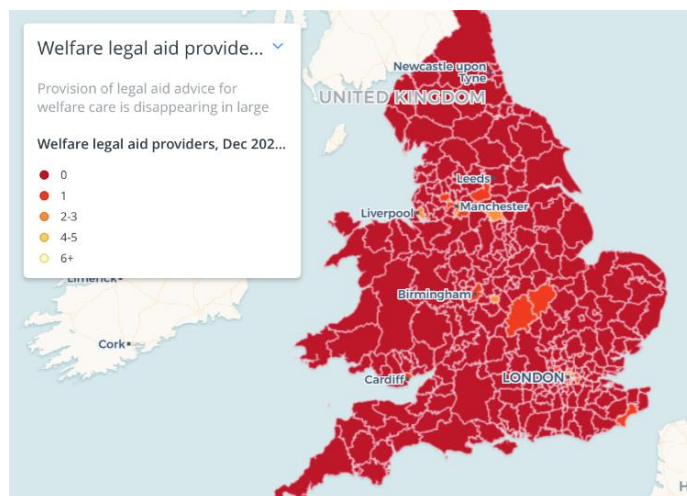
Across England and Wales, 63 per cent of the population do not have access to an immigration and asylum legal aid provider. The Home Office's dispersal policy generates a mismatch between supply and demand with those in need of supported housing in areas without legal aid provision. Without access to legal support that works in cohesion with the Home Office's dispersal policy, many are left facing an unfamiliar legal system that is made increasingly difficult to navigate when combined with intersecting complexities such as language barriers, neurodivergence and trauma.

We spoke to academic and researcher, Dr Jo Wilding, who has been looking at provider capacity and legal aid deserts in immigration and asylum law for a number of years.

'I've just finished updating the access to immigration advice report and that shows a collapse in provision in Wales and the South West, and a deficit in every region within England and Wales - even London which had a very small surplus at the time of the first report in 2022. The largest deficits now are in the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber, which are not generally thought of as advice deserts, with severe shortages also along the south coast and in the eastern half of the East of England.' [Jo's report on this called 'No Access to Justice 2: Mapping the UK's continuing immigration and asylum legal advice crisis' is due in June]

Welfare benefits

LAA and ONS data shows that 85 per cent do not have access to a welfare legal aid provider, leaving them unable to challenge or appeal decisions. Of those with a welfare legal aid provider in their local authority, 11 per cent only had a single firm available.



Family

The Lexis Nexis report identified 1.09 million people live in legal aid deserts for family law. Family legal aid deserts in the bottom 10 per cent had 0 providers per 1,000 incidents, compared to 14.43 providers in the five best-served areas. Demand for family law work increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research primarily captured public family law cases; the inclusion of private cases would likely show even greater undersupply. Incidents for domestic abuse were determined by police force area and applied based on population.

The report identified 15 top legal aid deserts for family law Findings for Wales and the South West (including Cornwall and Devon). The South West is listed as having three family legal aid deserts, being the second-highest region. Specific top 15 family legal aid deserts in the South West include¹⁷:

- South Hams
- West Devon
- Isles of Scilly

No specific data is provided solely for Wales in the list of top 15 family legal aid deserts or regions with the most deserts, although it is included in the overall analysis of England and Wales.¹

Crime

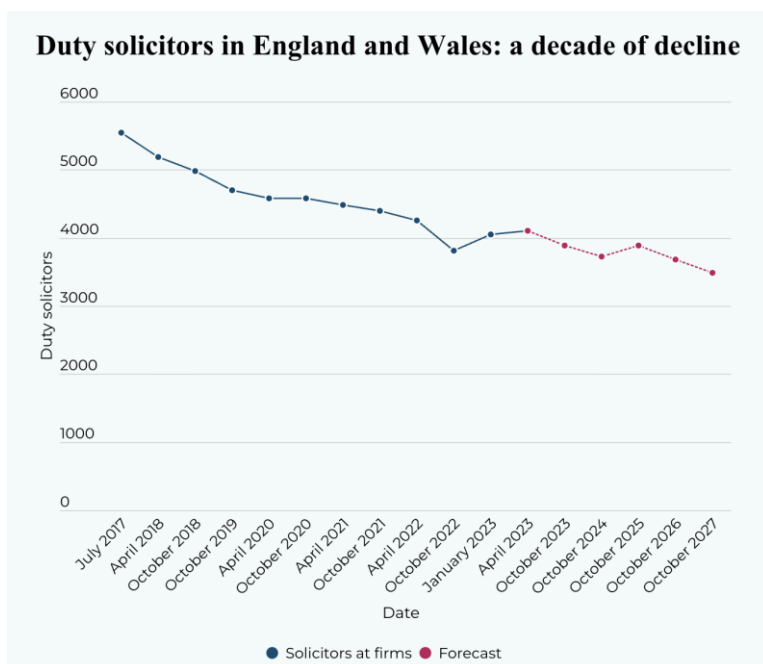
Nationally, 2.12 million people live in legal aid deserts for crime. Crime legal aid deserts in the bottom 10 per cent had 0 providers per 1,000 incidents, compared to only 0.89 providers in the five best served areas.¹⁰

The strain on the criminal legal aid system has been highlighted by barrister strikes and other reports such as the 2021 Independent Criminal Legal Aid Review (CLAIR).¹⁷ The significant reduction in Criminal Duty Solicitors is another indicator of the struggles within crime. A report by the Law Society notes a growing demand, an ageing workforce and poor remuneration have resulted in the number of duty solicitors providing representation at police stations falling by 1,446 since 2017 – a 26 per cent drop.¹⁸

‘Nearly half (48 per cent) of defendants appearing in the magistrates’ courts on imprisonable summary offences did not have legal representation recorded on their case in the first half of 2023. This had risen from 35 per cent during 2022. (According to management information requested by the Centre for Public Data.)’¹⁹

¹⁷ Criminal Review of Legal Aid. (2021). Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/independent-review-of-criminal-legal-aid>

¹⁸ Criminal Duty Solicitors: A growing Crisis. (2025). Available at: <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/campaigns/criminal-justice/criminal-duty-solicitors>



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Criminal duty solicitors perform a vital public service, providing those accused of a crime with representation and advice free of charge. The troubling trends shown in the graph above suggest that we are hurtling toward a society where the majority of those accused of a crime will go through the legal process with significantly diminished access to justice.

Criminal legal aid need was calculated by assigning the number of incidents in a police force area to local authorities based on population. The LexisNexis report identified 15 top legal aid deserts for crime. **Findings for Wales and the South West (including Cornwall and Devon: the region with the most crime legal aid deserts is the South West with eight. Specific top 15 crime legal aid deserts in the South West include¹⁷:**

- Mendip
- Test Valley
- Copeland
- Cotswold

No specific data is provided solely for Wales in the list of top 15 crime legal aid deserts or regions with the most deserts, although it is included in the overall analysis of England and Wales.

Overall Legal Aid Deserts

By combining data across housing, family, and crime, the Lexis Nexis report identified the following overall legal aid deserts:

- 1.North Norfolk
- 2.Derbyshire Dales

3. Isles of Scilly

4. Ribble Valley

5. East Cambridgeshire

6. West Devon

7. Rutland

Findings for Wales and the South West (including Cornwall and Devon) show that the Isles of Scilly and West Devon are identified as overall legal aid deserts and are located in the South West. This overall analysis highlights areas with consistently low access to legal aid across multiple areas of law.

No specific data is provided solely for Wales in the list of overall legal aid deserts, although it is included in the underlying data analysis for England and Wales. Solutions

Legal Aid Droughts

The latest civil legal aid data¹⁹ reveals a deepening crisis in civil legal aid provision, with a growing number of contracted providers starting fewer than 5 or 10 cases per year — a clear indicator of “legal aid droughts” across multiple areas of law.

In 2022–23, 235 offices²⁰ completed fewer than 5 cases, rising to 253 in 2023–24, and sharply increasing to 370 in 2024–25. The picture is even starker for those starting fewer than 10 cases: from 357 in 2022–23 to 417 in 2023–24, escalating to 587 by 2024–25. Particularly alarming increases are seen in family law (which only covers cases of domestic abuse) (rising from 142 to 234 providers doing fewer than 10 cases), housing (which only covers cases of homelessness) (from 36 to 86), and discrimination (from 5 to 13), suggesting not just regional withdrawal but collapse in certain specialisms. These figures point to a legal aid system at breaking point, with many offices holding contracts in name only, unable or unwilling to take on meaningful caseloads — leaving vulnerable individuals without access to justice.

Contributing factors

Legal Aid Fees

The underlying issues in legal aid remain unsustainable fee levels and a scheme which has removed many practice areas from scope. Proposals from across the sector include increasing legal aid rates in line with inflation to reflect the actual cost of delivering legal services and to make publicly funded work financially viable for providers. Fees in civil legal aid were last increased in 1996. Since then, inflation has been at an average inflation rate of just over three per cent, totalling a cumulative price change of 140 per cent.

¹⁹ [Written questions and answers - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament](#)

²⁰ [Written questions and answers - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament](#)

While fee rates have been increased in response to decreasing provider numbers in immigration and housing, increases are needed across the board if the civil legal aid profession is to remain a viable career. Increased funding for the legal aid system is seen as crucial, drawing parallels with the funding of the healthcare system.

Pro bono work by lawyers can provide additional support but cannot replace a properly funded legal aid system. Organisations like the Free Representation Unit (FRU) and LawWorks play a role in facilitating pro bono work.

Early Legal Advice also has the potential to provide additional support and deliver savings in the long run by preventing incorrect applications and missed claims in court, but again, is no replacement for a properly funded legal aid system.

Administrative Burden on providers

Reducing the administrative burden on legal aid providers could make it more sustainable with many providers deterred by excessive bureaucracy within the legal aid system. The Westminster Commission and LAPG recommend simplifying billing processes and reducing compliance paperwork. A more streamlined process would allow practitioners to spend their time focussing on clients rather than red tape.

Recommendations



Targeted Funding for New Providers

The LexisNexis report highlights the need to rebuild access in areas with no legal aid solicitors. The report suggests start-up grants and incentives to encourage firms to set up in underserved regions.

Duty Solicitor Coverage Reform

- With the number of duty solicitors falling, especially in criminal law, the Law Society recommends urgent action to ensure 24/7 access in all areas.

Encourage 'Legal Aid Hubs'

- The Commission suggests collaborative hubs where firms and advice centres share costs and expertise.
- These could serve multiple practice areas, especially in rural or low-income urban areas.

Investing in the Workforce



Support for Early-Career Lawyers

- Offer scholarships, loan forgiveness, or training bursaries for those entering legal aid practice.
- Suggested by all three reports as a way to build a new generation of legal aid lawyers.

Improve Career Progression Opportunities

- Make legal aid work a viable long-term career.
- The Westminster Commission recommends clearer career pathways and recognition for public law specialists.

Leveraging Technology



Digital Infrastructure Investment

- LexisNexis and the Law Society propose enhanced use of secure video calls, online triage, and virtual legal clinics.
- Rural and digitally excluded clients would still need in-person support, so digital solutions should complement, not replace, face-to-face services.

Remote Delivery Models

- Support hybrid models where city-based firms offer remote advice to clients in deserts.
- The Commission stresses this must be carefully designed to avoid reinforcing inequalities.

Structural and Systemic Reform



Review Scope of Legal Aid

- The Commission and Law Society call for a reassessment of what areas of law should be covered.
- Reinstating funding for areas such as housing, immigration, and family law could address unmet need.

Establish a National Strategy

- A strategic, cross-government plan to tackle regional inequality in legal provision is urged by the Commission.
- This could include data mapping, local needs assessments, and central coordination of provision.

Better Use of Data

- The LexisNexis report recommends more transparent data on legal aid coverage, case outcomes, and unmet need.
- Data-driven policy could help identify gaps and target interventions effectively.

Collaborating Across Sectors



Support for Third Sector and Pro Bono

- Charities and law centres help fill gaps in legal aid deserts.
- Recommendations include funding for voluntary sector legal advice and coordinated pro bono networks.

Partnerships with Local Authorities and Health Services

- Embedding legal help in health and community services can reach people who may not seek legal advice otherwise.
- The Commission highlights 'legal social prescribing' as a model worth expanding.

Conclusion

The reports highlight the significant problem of limited access to legal aid in many areas of England and Wales. The geographical breakdown set out by the LexisNexis report shows that **the South West of England, including Devon and Cornwall (as part of the broader South West region), appears to be particularly affected, with a high number of legal aid deserts across housing and crime, and specific areas identified as deserts for family law and overall provision. Wales is included in the overall analysis, but the report offers no specific data or rankings for Wales as a separate region or for individual local authorities within Wales.** The report underscores the importance of addressing these systemic challenges to ensure that everyone, regardless of their income or location, has access to justice and that the Rule of Law is upheld.