



Young people's inexperience and lack of knowledge of our rights make us especially vulnerable to exploitation and injustice. It is essential that full access to the support of a legal representative is made available to us to force people in authority to meet their duties towards us.

Government cuts to legal aid have undermined our ability to get the legal support we need. Some children and young people are even **having to represent themselves in court.**

## The facts:

- Reasons for young people requiring legal representation are not limited to criminal defence. Far more common are **civil legal problems**, e.g. employment, welfare and housing disputes.
- Such issues often have **detrimental effects on physical and mental wellbeing**, costing local public services £13,000 on average as a result of stress, homelessness, disruption to education and contact with social services (Youth Access, 2012).
- **80% of young people** reporting civil legal problems are in some way **classified as 'vulnerable'**, for example facing lone parenthood, unemployment or mental ill-health (Pleasence, 2011).
- The Ministry of Justice estimated that the LASPO legal aid cuts would deny **access to advice and representation to 75,000 children and young people.**

"I don't know what I would have done without my [young person's] solicitor. They [the authorities] are not respectful towards you unless you have a representative."

Mani, aged 16

## What young people think:

JustRights and Youth Access spoke to young people across the country, discussing their previous experiences with legal issues, problems accessing services and what we think needs to change.

Young people are particularly angry about legal aid cuts, and tend to feel the cuts are not just unfair but **a false economy.**

Our discussions unanimously agreed that young people need legal representation to be made free for those who need it and **easy to access.**

Just as importantly, these legal services need to be **young person-friendly.**

Young people want to access the advice and support we need **in environments we feel comfortable in.**

It is also vital for individual advisors to **respect, understand and listen to young people,** without using confusing jargon.

## Young people's priorities for change



- We need to have free access to lawyers who specialise in working with young people.
- We need to be able to see these lawyers in places where we feel comfortable and can get the other support we need, e.g. in youth advice centres.
- The legal support we need must be properly funded. The Government must ask us what we think before making any more changes to legal aid that affect us.
- All lawyers who ever come into contact with young people should be trained in how to talk to us and listen to us.

## Why young people prefer solicitors who specialise in working with their age group:

- “They [regular solicitors] probably don’t consider you as important because you aren’t paying.”
- “Other solicitors just left us to wait – they never picked up the phone. [My young person’s solicitor] is different, she explained everything so that I could understand, she cares and helps you.”
- “They let us know what is happening and don’t give us false hope.”
- “Even if we hadn’t won I still would have known they had done enough for us – more than enough.”

## Skills and qualities young people valued from their personal experience with good solicitors:

- “They don’t give you false hope”
- “They keep you up to date”
- “They listen to you and involve you in the process”
- “They know what you are talking about”
- “They understand you”
- “Their body language and attitude is welcoming”
- “They ask questions about the future—not the past”



## The ‘false economy’ of legal aid cuts:

Cuts to legal aid and to youth advice services mean that the free, local and supportive legal advice services that young people need are becoming harder to find. The Government’s justification for the withdrawal of legal aid is the need to find savings at a time of austerity. But research shows the cost-effectiveness of early intervention if long term savings are considered. It has been estimated that for every £1 saved on cuts to legal aid, the government will need to spend £8 on further social provisions (Citizens Advice, 2010). The Joint Committee on Human Rights has said that it does *“not believe that the removal of legal aid from vulnerable children can be justified”* and questioned whether legal aid cuts are at odds with the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (JCHR, 2013). A JustRights report into the implications of legal aid cuts provides worrying evidence that the disproportionate effects of these changes on children and young people is leaving the most vulnerable—e.g. those who are homeless, have been victims of sexual exploitation or have mental health problems - at increased risk of abuse, exploitation and harm (JustRights, 2013). Young people told us they thought that protecting children and young people from legal aid cuts would benefit future society.

“It makes me feel grateful that I got [legal aid]. It makes me feel disgusted why they are cutting it, it makes no sense, it’s causing damage to our future society.”

Neha, aged 17

**Make Our Rights Reality is a young person-led manifesto and campaign to improve young people’s access to information, advice and legal support**

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Hear from young people in their own words – watch our film online

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