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## Letters to the Editor



### Legal aid reform

Sir, As academics engaged in criminal justice research, we are concerned about the potentially devastating and irreversible consequences for access to justice if the Government's plans to cut criminal legal aid and introduce a system of tendering based on price alone are introduced.

The lawyer-client relationship is at the heart of effective legal representation, but the current proposals remove client choice, replace local services with mega-suppliers and treat advice as an impersonal commodity. Trust is especially important for the large number of vulnerable accused: lawyers who know their clients can pre-empt difficult issues, provide (sometimes unpalatable) advice which is more likely to be accepted, and help the courts run more effectively and efficiently.

Underpinned by independent research and evaluation, considerable resources have been devoted to measures that have enhanced the quality of legal advice and representation. All of this is now under threat and a small number of "suppliers" will receive a guaranteed share of the work however well or badly they represent their clients. With bids at least 17.5 per cent lower than existing average costs, the quality of legal representation will decline. Suppliers will have a strong financial imperative to do as little work as possible, and to persuade clients to plead guilty irrespective of the merits of their case.

The Minister of Justice has allowed only eight weeks of consultation on the proposals, with no intention to pilot the new contracts nor evaluate their effectiveness. The long-term effects will be devastating and the damage extremely hard to put right.

Defendants, the police and the courts — and ultimately taxpayers — will pay the price.

PROFESSOR JACQUELINE HODGSON, EMERITUS PROFESSOR LEE BRIDGES, University of Warwick; PROFESSOR ED CAPE, University of the West of England; PROFESSOR IAN DENNIS, PROFESSOR RICHARD MOORHEAD, UCL; PROFESSOR NICOLA LACEY, University of Oxford; PROFESSOR TIM NEWBURN, EMERITUS PROFESSOR MICHAEL ZANDER, QC, LSE; PROFESSOR ANDREW SANDERS, University of Birmingham