

# Taking hope from around the globe

**T**he cost of renovating Cologne's Opera House would pay for the German city's legal aid and representation budget for 68 years, Professor Matthias Kilian of the Universität zu Köln told the International Legal Aid Group (ILAG) conference last month.

Strangely, I can't recall the response from the audience: laughs, gasps or just acceptance (I suspect it was probably all three). Legal aid is low down on the government's agenda in England and Wales, and in many other countries - but not in all.

I spent three days talking all things legal aid in Cologne, along with colleagues from around the world. It was my second in-person ILAG conference, the first being at Harvard in 2023, where I presented a paper on holistic advice, based on my findings from my Churchill Fellowship, when I went to Australia and Canada. The conference this year was on 'Affording Legal Aid', and I was asked to present on the importance of representation in England and Wales. A huge thank you to Dr Jo Wilding, associate professor in law

at the University of Sussex, who let me use her slides showing the huge swathes of legal aid deserts and droughts across both countries, as well as the findings from her research on the Windrush Compensation Scheme, which is the most powerful evidence yet of how much difference having a lawyer makes (see page 4 of this issue). It's rare to find research that compares the same case with and without a lawyer.

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I will write up the conference more fully for *Legal Action's* September issue, but I wanted to give a few feel-good highlights now from around the world.

Delegates were told that in Brazil, out of a population of 212m people, 187m are eligible for legal aid and, in most states, employed public defenders are paid in line with the market rate. It means that it is a career choice of many lawyers. No recruitment crisis there!

From Sydney, Australia, there was a focus on the justice journey. Your Voice is a youth justice project that is supporting children in out-of-home care with advocacy and legal support. Dara Read, solicitor at the project, told the conference: 'It is not just about the outcome, but how children are treated and how they are made to feel.' Their message reminded me of the session on trauma-informed practice at LAG's housing conference last month, when Jess Turtle of the Museum of Homelessness told practitioners that they make sure that the welcome their homeless clients are given 'is bigger than the rules' clients are expected to comply with to access its services.

Continuing with the child-centred focus, Dr Vicky Kemp of the University of Nottingham presented the ILAG conference with findings from a pilot study of a 'child first' approach for children in police custody. The research

showed that children were, on average, detained in custody for 11 hours and did not have access to a lawyer when key gatekeeping decisions are made. In 60 per cent of cases, no action was taken after arrest, which raises questions whether the process itself is intended as the punishment.

A personal highlight was getting to spend time with one of my lecturers from the University of Warwick, where I studied law before qualifying as a solicitor. Professor Avrom Sherr presented highlights from the ILAG national reports, which are worth reading to see comparisons of legal aid provision. By chance, we ended up on the same flights to and from Cologne, so we had plenty of opportunity to catch up. I told him I remember him for the *Private Eye* cartoon he had stuck on the outside of his door of a firm of solicitors called 'Sue, Grabbit and Runne', but mainly for the evidence lecture he gave us in the first year. Unbeknown to us, he had set up an altercation with a student, which played out in the lecture theatre. It was believably done. At the next seminar, Avrom asked us to write up what we had seen and heard. Of course, everyone's accounts were different. It was a powerful lesson on the importance of scrutinising evidence and has stayed with me ever since.

It also brings me back Jo Wilding's Windrush research, which really does give our government all the evidence it should need as to why legal aid must be extended to Windrush Compensation Scheme claims. Let's hope they are prepared to scrutinise her findings and take them on board.

Jo's findings and the conversations I had in Cologne reinforced my belief that legal aid is still fundamentally important across the globe. Let's keep on fighting for it! ■

## London Legal Walk 2025

A team from LAG took part in the 2025 London Legal Walk on 17 June to raise funds to support our work providing training and resources to the legal aid and not-for-profit community.

If you wish, you can still donate at: <https://londonlegalsupporttrust.enthouse.com/pf/legal-action-group-2025>.



LAG's team for the London Legal Walk 2025



**Sue James**  
LAG CEO