

Voucher scheme boost to help thousands more families resolve disputes away from court

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- Almost 2,000 extra families to get up to £500 towards cost of mediation – without a means test
- Government invests a further £800K into scheme five months after £1 million launch
- Vouchers will help keep easily resolvable disputes out of Family Courts

Thousands more families are set to benefit from a government mediation scheme that has been helping separating parents resolve disputes away from court.

The scheme, [launched by the Government in March](#), provides separating couples with a £500 voucher for mediation services with the aim of finding amicable solutions to their disagreements and freeing up space in the family courts. It seeks to spare them the trauma of going through often lengthy and costly courtroom battles, which can have a damaging impact on children. Normally each mediation session is charged for unless one of the parties has access to legal aid.

Hundreds of people have already accessed this vital support with around 130 vouchers currently being used every week. Early data from the Family Mediation Council (FMC), who run the programme, has shown that up to three-quarters of participants have been helped to reach full or partial agreement on their dispute.

Ministers are determined to build on this success and have today confirmed an additional £800,000 will go towards the scheme – almost doubling an initial £1 million investment made earlier this year and helping around 2,000 more families.

Courts Minister, Lord Wolfson QC said:

Hundreds of separating couples have already benefitted from this scheme – resolving their disputes without the need for an often lengthy, costly and emotionally taxing court process.

This additional funding will allow even more families to access these services, while helping to lessen the pressure on our family courts as we build back better from the pandemic.

Mediation is often a quicker and cheaper way of resolving disputes, which can spare families the stress of attending court and the impact this can have on children. It involves couples working through their differences – led by a trained and accredited mediator – to reach agreements they are both prepared to accept, such as how to split assets or arranging child contact times, rather than have a judge decide for them. They can then ask a court to consider their agreement and make it into a legally binding and enforceable court order.

In one case, the parents of a three year old boy were able to avoid days in court by using the scheme to agree on future arrangements. Both mum and dad were mistrusting of each other and sceptical about mediation. The scheme helped them to move forward and their child now has parents who can talk to one another about his best interests with healthier relationships all around.

Jane Kerr, an FMC Accredited mediator, said of the scheme:

The mediation voucher scheme has been invaluable in providing clients with access to mediation at a time when money is tight and finances are feeling fraught. I have worked with several couples who were interested in the benefits mediation offered, however were not financially in a position to get started.

Two cases I have worked on over the last few months have concluded successfully with positive progress and outcomes for their children. They were clear examples of families who were in crisis, amid messy separations and who left mediation on a firmer footing with regards to their co-parenting relationship and having worked out practical arrangements.

The scheme is eligible for families seeking to resolve private law or financial matters relating to children – for example, child arrangement orders or financial disputes regarding a child's upbringing.

If a case is eligible for vouchers, the mediator will automatically claim back the contributions from the Government.

The new investment in the scheme follows a [Call for Evidence on dispute resolution](#), launched earlier this month, on the best ways to settle family, business and other civil disputes away from the courtroom.

The move forms part of recent action by the Government to help reduce family

conflict, including [introducing new laws to spare divorcing couples the need to apportion blame](#) for the breakdown of their marriage..

Today's announcement also follows a major overhaul of the family courts announced last year to better protect victims of domestic abuse, including an automatic entitlement for special measures in courtrooms and stronger powers for judges to stop abusers repeatedly dragging their victims to court. Meanwhile, a £76 million investment into the Family Court and tribunal systems will help to boost capacity during the pandemic.

Notes to editors

- The scheme will be administered by the FMC, on behalf of the Ministry of Justice.
- Further information about the scheme and how it works will be provided to parties at their Mediation Information and Assessment Meeting (MIAM), which all those involved in family cases are required to attend, unless they have a valid exemption.
- Mediation can be undertaken by other family members, not just separating parents.
- In June, 2020, we [announced a major overhaul of the family courts](#) to protect domestic abuse victims which included more special protections in courts, stronger powers for judges, and piloting Integrated Domestic Abuse Courts.
- In June, 2020, the [Divorce Act received Royal Assent](#), which will remove the needless 'blame game' that can harm children while ensuring couples have the time to reflect, plan for the future, or if necessary to turn back. This is due to come into force later this year.
- We're investing record amounts across our courts and tribunals, with £142 million to improve buildings – the biggest single investment in court estate maintenance for more than 20 years – and we're spending £113 million on a range of emergency measures to tackle the impact of COVID-19, including the recruitment of at least 1,600 additional staff.

What is family mediation?

- Family mediation is a process in which an independent, professionally trained mediator helps parties work out arrangements for children and finances where there is a dispute.
- The mediator is not there to tell each side what to do, but can help them reach an agreement while trying to improve communication between them. They aren't there to try and keep couples together but help them find a practical way forward after a relationship has broken down.
- Mediation allows the parties to stay in control, as no one will be forced to do or agree to anything against their wishes. Unlike in a courtroom both partners can agree to a solution rather than have a judge decide for them.
- The mediator will work with the parties, either together or separately, to help them find a solution which works for them both.
- Mediation can be less stressful than going to court, especially for children who are involved in proceedings. It is also cheaper than going through the court process, and it is also confidential unlike

proceedings in the family court.

- Currently, funded mediation is available only for those who meet the financial requirements through the Legal Aid scheme. If you don't qualify then you will need to pay for mediation sessions.
- Agreements made in mediation can be made legally binding by a court if necessary and the legal support to do this can be offered.

Next steps to tackle plastic waste

The war on plastic waste is set to be ramped up with fresh plans to stop the supply of a range of single-use plastics that threaten our natural environment.

Single-use plastic plates, cutlery and polystyrene cups are among a raft of items that could be banned in England as part of a new public consultation being launched in the Autumn. These proposals will lead to businesses using more sustainable alternatives and prevent plastic litter from polluting our landscapes.

It is estimated that each person uses a staggering 18 single-use plastic plates and 37 single-use plastic items of cutlery each year in England. The durability of plastic means litter from items used for a few minutes can last for centuries in landfill or as litter in the countryside or ocean. Around the world, more than one million birds and over 100,000 sea mammals and turtles die every year from eating or getting tangled in plastic waste.

Industry is taking action to tackle plastic waste, such as through the UK Plastics Pact, a collaboration between businesses from across the entire plastics value chain, supported by the government and coordinated by the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP). Pact members have identified eight problematic plastic items for elimination and are investigating further items. We want to build on both the progress being made by industry and our action on plastic waste.

The UK government has already taken major steps to tackle plastic pollution, banning microbeads in rinse-off personal care products, dramatically reducing the number of plastic bags being used and restricting the supply of single-use plastic straws, stirrers and cotton buds. These plans will build on the success of those measures and form part of the Government's commitment to prevent all avoidable plastic waste by the end of 2042.

Environment Secretary George Eustice said:

We've all seen the damage that plastic does to our environment. It is right that we put in place measures that will tackle the plastic carelessly strewn across our parks and green spaces and washed up

on beaches.

We have made progress to turn the tide on plastic, banning the supply of plastic straws, stirrers and cotton buds, while our carrier bag charge has cut sales by 95% in the main supermarkets.

Now we are looking to go a step further as we build back greener. These plans will help us stamp out the unnecessary use of plastics that wreak havoc with our natural environment.

Jo Morley, Head of Campaigns at City to Sea, said:

We welcome the news that the government are taking steps to tackle some of the most polluting single-use items. This is a much-needed move, that we as campaigners have been calling for, along with thousands of our supporters and members of the public.

We need now to take a leading role in banning unnecessary single-use plastics to see real benefits for the nation's and the world's wildlife.

Further details of the consultation, including the full list of single-use items under review, will be announced in the upcoming weeks.

The UK is a global leader in combatting plastic waste. Following the huge success of the 5p charge on single-use carrier bags, which cut sales in the main supermarkets by 95% since 2015, we increased the minimum charge to 10p and extended it to all retailers, ensuring we can take billions more bags out of circulation.

Our landmark Environment Bill will give us a raft of new powers to step-up our war against plastic pollution and litter, including:

- Introducing a [Deposit Return Scheme](#) for drinks containers to recycle billions more plastic bottles and stop them being landfilled, incinerated, or littered. Through a small deposit placed on drinks products, the DRS will incentivise people to recycle;
- Our [Extended Producer Responsibility](#) scheme will mean companies will be expected to cover the full cost of recycling and disposing of their packaging. Producers of commonly littered packaging will be made more responsible for their littered packaging, with fees paid to cover the cost of cleaning up and for litter prevention activities; and
- Our plans for [Consistent Recycling Collections](#) for every household and business in England will ensure more plastic is recycled.

We will also introduce a world-leading [plastic packaging tax](#) from April 2022, set at £200 per tonne, on plastic packaging which doesn't meet a minimum threshold of at least 30% recycled content. This will encourage greater use of recycled plastic, leading to increased levels of recycling and plastic waste collection, helping to tackle the problem of plastic waste and protect

our environment.

Statistics on single-use plastics are taken from a [preliminary assessment](#) of the economic impacts of a potential ban on plastic cutlery, plastic plates and plastic balloon sticks, 2018.

[Press release: Next steps to tackle plastic waste](#)

Government to consult on banning a range of polluting plastics this Autumn, with single-use plastic plates, cutlery and polystyrene cups under review

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