

Free legal advice piloted to help people facing financial difficulties

- Free early legal advice for thousands facing debt, housing and welfare benefit difficulties
- Legal advice to help stop people falling into further debt and having to appear in court
- Five-month pilot test phase launched in Manchester and Middlesbrough

The pilot in Middlesbrough and Manchester expands the scope of legal aid funding to more people who previously would not have been eligible for free legal advice, to help them address issues before they become more complex or costly.

The aim is to ensure people have a better chance of swiftly resolving legal problems, stopping them from spiralling into further difficulties.

Currently, many people do not access legal advice until too late, causing further problems, such as having to appear in court, increased debt, and even homelessness. The pilot will explore if these issues can be avoided by providing legal advice earlier.

The pilot advice will be offered to individuals struggling with housing issues, paying bills or experiencing problems with their benefits, with no means or merits tests required. To understand what difference the pilot service makes, participants of the pilot will either receive up to three hours of free legal advice and support or be signposted to existing advice services.

Justice Minister Lord Bellamy KC said:

Early legal advice can be invaluable for people that find themselves in difficult and stressful situations, helping struggling individuals avoid falling further into debt or ending up in court.

Through this pilot we are paving the way for more people to receive free legal advice, at an earlier point in time so that their problems can be addressed before they worsen.

A legal adviser can explain issues like council tax arrears, and provide further information about housing rights and how to apply for Universal Credit, if required.

Invitations to the scheme will be sent out to people who have fallen behind on council tax payments by Manchester City Council and Middlesbrough Council. Invitees will then be asked to complete a confidential survey to determine

whether they have a legal issue that requires support.

After the 5-month initial testing phase, the Ministry of Justice will review evidence collected through the evaluation and use this to inform the design of a future larger-scale pilot.