

Justice Minister remote visit to Wales

Justice Minister, Alex Chalk MP visited Shelter Cymru (22 October 2020) and the South Wales Law Centre (21 October 2020) to see how £5.4 million of grant funding is being used in the non-for-profit providers of specialist legal advice to support the legal advice sector.

This £5.4 million emergency grant is in addition to a 2-year £3.1 million Legal Support for Litigants in Person grant which the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) announced earlier this year, and which is now underway. This is in addition to the more than £9 million invested in support for litigants in person in the civil and family courts.

MOJ provided £5.4 million funding to the not-for-profit providers of specialist legal advice to help them continue supporting vulnerable groups during Covid-19 pandemic, in part drawn from the £750 million package of emergency Covid-19 support for the third sector that the government announced in April.

In a joint initiative with the Access to Justice Foundation and Law Centres Networks, MOJ has allocated £3 million funding to the Law Centres Network who have distributed grants to 28 individual Law Centres across England and Wales. The remaining £2.4 million has been allocated to the Access to Justice Foundation who have distributed it through their Community Justice Fund to 36 organisations that provide specialist advice services.

It has allowed these organisations to procure equipment and training to enable remote delivery of specialist legal advice. This has led to an increase in their capacity to meet the significant rising demand for advice services in housing, employment and benefits brought on and exacerbated by Covid-19.

Clare Carter, Deputy Chief Executive of the Access to Justice Foundation said:

The Community Justice Fund has awarded 148 grants totalling £11.6 million to specialist advice agencies across the UK helping them to continue to provide crucial support around housing, employment, income and access to services they need. This scale of support would not have been possible without the much needed £5.4 million contribution from the Ministry of Justice. The pandemic has had a huge impact on the justice system – not least the advice sector. Cases going through courts dropped and services shifted online to reduce the spread of the virus and keep people safe. This grant has helped the sector adapt to this, and is also helping agencies scale up their services as demand for advice increases as the economic impact of the pandemic starts to be felt. Grantees tell us this funding has been a lifeline for the vulnerable people they support.

Julie Bishop, director of the Law Centres Network, said:

The government funding has been vital to Law Centres. It has enabled us to continue to provide legal assistance to the increasing numbers of local people suddenly finding themselves in situations they would never have imagined last year, as the minister has seen for himself. The country faces challenging times ahead, and we hope to continue this partnership with government, fighting the combined effects of Coronavirus and inequality, so people and communities are supported on their path to recovery.

Case study

Shelter Cymru reports that monies received from MOJ's fund is helping them mitigate loss of income since 1st April 2020 and keep their services at full capacity. This is enabling people in Wales to access specialist housing advice and legal representation during the pandemic, especially in areas where they are the only provider.

South Wales Law Centre reports that monies received from MOJ's fund, is helping staff to work effectively, securely and comfortably from home following investment in IT infrastructure, including laptops and smart phones. It is increasing accessibility through extending opening hours for phone enquiries and advice via email and webchat. Administration tools to support advice services has been developed and additional training is being provided to upskill staff in response to shifting demand.

In addition, South Wales Law Centre is able to prepare their premises for re-opening to the public, investing in the equipment and supplies necessary to ensure COVID security for staff, volunteers and clients.

The Covid-19 Specialist Advice Service Support grant has helped the non-for-profit advice sector organisations in local communities across the country to continue to provide crucial support in helping people resolve their legal problems by enabling them to address immediate cashflow issues and to adapt their services to social distancing restriction.