

# Support package for legal providers will ensure access to justice during coronavirus outbreak

- Initiatives will support civil, family, and criminal legal aid practitioners to keep the justice system running
- Changes will make hardship payments easier to access
- Some debt repayments to LAA will be paused for legal firms

Introduced by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), the move follows wider economic measures for businesses already outlined by the government and will ensure timely support for those needing legally aided services.

New steps were also announced by the department last week in a bid to protect court users, the judiciary and legal professionals by consolidating work into fewer buildings and pausing jury trials.

This will maintain temporary safety measures in courts and tribunals, in line with public health advice, while helping to maintain a core justice system focused on the most essential cases.

As a result of these necessary short-term changes, legal practitioners have faced subsequent delays in cases progressing through the justice system and a reduction in new cases in some areas. This has impacted those that rely on government-funded legal aid and provide essential services in upholding access to justice.

These additional steps will therefore help legal aid practitioners manage their funds in the short term.

The package includes expanding the scope and relaxing the evidence requirements for hardship payments in crown court cases – including reducing the threshold for work done to £1,000, rather than the current £5,000.

We will also align legal aid fees for First Tier Tribunal immigration and asylum appeals with HMCTS' move to an online system for these cases.

LAA has already:

- Introduced measures to increase payments for virtual hearings in appeals before the Mental Health Tribunal, as well as remote advice in police custody to ensure they are in line with in-person hearings
- Halted pursuit of outstanding debts owed to the Legal Aid Agency
- Encouraged legal firms to use existing avenues of financial help, such as the ability to apply for early payment for work already done on a case, benefitting cashflow in the short-term.

Lord Chancellor Robert Buckland, said:

I want to express my sincere gratitude to the legal aid practitioners who have shown immense flexibility and determination throughout this outbreak.

These measures are a clear indication of their important status both in times of crisis and beyond and the role they play in ensuring the justice system continues to function effectively.

I will continue to work with the sector to ensure that the most vulnerable in society are provided with the representation and support they need through our legal aid system.

MOJ and LAA are working closely with practitioners during this time and will keep these measures under review. Future additional measures will be considered alongside the industry to uphold access to justice now and in the future.

### **Notes to editors**

1. The [measures we have announced](#) are available on GOV.UK
2. The [measures to consolidate courts](#) are available on GOV.UK