

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

- 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.