

News story: Changes to domestic violence evidence requirements come into effect

Changes to evidence requirements in private family law disputes have come into effect. There will no longer be a time limit on abuse evidence, which previously stood at five years.

Additionally, the range of documents accepted as evidence of abuse has been widened to include statements from domestic violence support organisations and housing support officers.

Justice Minister Dominic Raab said:

We have listened to victims' groups and carefully reviewed the criteria for legal aid for victims of domestic abuse in family cases.

Today's changes will ensure that vulnerable women and children get legal support, so their voice is properly heard in court.

Legal aid is available to people involved in private family disputes if they are victims, or are at risk of becoming victims, of domestic violence or child abuse. To qualify, applicants must provide objective evidence of the abuse while their case is also subject to means and merits tests.

Today's changes follow a review of the evidence requirements set out in the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (LASPO) 2012.

The changes are the latest in a series of reforms the government is making to support victims of domestic violence, having previously announced a £17 million fund to support 41 projects across the country to tackle violence against women and girls.

The landmark Domestic Violence and Abuse Bill will also ensure that no stone is left unturned in protecting and supporting domestic violence victims and children.

News story: Changes to patents fees on 6 April 2018

Changes to UK patents fees will come into force on 6 April 2018.

The IPO has today published a [summary table and guidance for business](#) so that businesses can familiarise themselves with the fee changes.

Our previous [news article](#) gives further information on the government's policy development leading up to this change.

Press release: Reduced tolls on Severn bridges begin 8 January 2018

Drivers who use the Severn bridges are reminded changes to the TAG payment system take place from 8 January 2018.

Those who pay by top-up with a Trip TAG through online banking will need to update their payment details to Highways England's account from 8 January 2018. Account holders will still be able to pay through the website or phone.

Drivers paying by direct debit will not need to take any action – their accounts and balances will be transferred automatically and their payments adjusted to reflect the new charges.

The changes have been shared by letter with holders of TAGs – the prepayment system that allows regular travellers to cross without stopping to pay manually.

Clive Perkin, Highways England Divisional Director of Strategy and Planning, explained:

We're very proud to be taking over the responsibility for these iconic bridges which provide such important links between Wales and England.

We're also looking forward to welcoming staff currently employed by Severn Crossing PLC into Highways England.

From midnight on 8 January vehicle charges will be exempt from VAT, reducing the overall charge for individual crossings from £6.70 to £5.60.

Secretary of State for Wales Alun Cairns said:

The UK Government's decision to reduce the tolls will cut costs for commuters and tourists, and present exciting opportunities for businesses operating in Wales and over the border.

I'm absolutely sure that reducing and then removing the tolls will boost Welsh employment and strengthen Wales' position within the United Kingdom – that is why I made it my number one priority as Secretary of State.

After 8 January the crossings will operate as normal with just a few small changes to signs at the toll plazas.

Staff currently employed with Severn Crossing PLC have all been offered employment with Highways England.

Details of the changes and actions necessary are available on the [Severn Crossings website](#).

Background information: Severn Bridges (M4 and M48) daily charges after 8 January 2018

Vehicle Category	Current daily toll charges	Daily charges after 8 January 2018
Category 1 (Cars and other vehicles up to 9 seats)	£6.70	£5.60
Category 2 (Goods vehicles up to 3.5 tonnes, small buses)	£13.40	£11.20
Category 3 (Goods vehicles over 3.5 tonnes, large buses)	£20.00	£16.70

- Category 1: £5.60, with the Season/Shared TAG at £98.56 (20% discount based on 22 trips per month).
- Category 2: £11.20, with the Season/Shared TAG at £197.12 (20% discount based on 22 trips per month).
- Category 3: £16.70, with the Season/Shared TAG at £330.66 (10% discount based on 22 trips per month).

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.

[News story: Civil/crime news: CWA bulkload spreadsheet updated](#)

You need to use version 1.21 of the bulkload spreadsheet to submit claims in Contract Work and Administration (CWA).

This is now available for you to download on GOV.UK.

The updated version 1.21 allows the reporting of the amended domestic violence evidence requirements introduced on 8 January 2018.

It replaces version 1.20 which should no longer be used for submissions.

You can find out more by downloading guidance on GOV.UK – see below.

Further information

[Submit a CWA claim online](#) – to download updated ‘provider bulkload spreadsheet’

[News story: GLD lawyers open up £12bn of government work to SMEs](#)

On 8 January, thousands of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) will be able to bid for up to £12bn of government contracts more easily, thanks in part to the work of government lawyers.

Chris Stanley, a lawyer within the Government Legal Department’s (GLD) Commercial Law Group has spent the past year condensing some 50,000 words of the existing Crown Commercial Service (CCS) contract terms into a new slimline Public Sector Contract. The finished document promises a more user-friendly route to government work and a quicker, more streamlined way of working. Not having to wade through dense contracts will save money and resources not only for SMEs but also within government itself.

“SMEs are the backbone of our country,” Prime Minister Theresa May told a gathering of small businesses and trade associations last year. “I want to build an economy that works for all and that means working with, and listening to, smaller firms’.

The new Public Sector Contract is a collaborative effort by the Government

Digital Service (GDS), focusing on user research, content design and interaction design, the Crown Commercial Service (CCS) and the legal review of both GLD and the law firm DLA Piper. This multidisciplinary team is working to bring policy and digital together to deliver contracts.

Chris paired with Tracy Hughes, a content designer from the Digital Marketplace team at GDS. The two went through the entire draft document line by line, cutting and trimming the more opaque legalese and getting rid of any duplication, so that the meaning was clearer and more comprehensible for non-lawyer users.

It was not by any means an easy trade as Tracy's focus was on plain English, which Chris admits went against his natural legal inclination to wordiness. But they eventually achieved a compromise: "It was definitely the best way to ensure that the content is more accessible to everyone while remaining legally sound," Chris said.

But how do you go about cutting down a government contract so substantially? According to Chris, the chief difference is that "The existing content is presented in a clearer and more concise way, while frequently unnecessary provisions have been moved into modular optional Schedules" .

One of the major benefits is that a small organisation or company that does not have a dedicated legal team will now be better able to understand and adapt the Public Sector Contract to its needs by merely selecting those elements it needs to apply.

The benefits also apply for public sector buyers. Chris explains: "There are some smaller organisations that may not have extensive procurement experience. They are run by skilled people but they won't always have the resources to deal with complex contracts. Without a user-friendly government framework they are likely to pay a far higher price for goods and services using less favourable terms."

Public sector buyers which have greater legal capabilities, such as the Ministry of Justice, will still be able to adapt the contract to suit their more specialised requirements.

The prize is considerable: the government facilities management (FM) marketplace alone is worth around £12bn and covers everything from mechanical and electrical engineering to cleaning.

The new contract will not only make it easier for companies to bid for government work but will also establish a benchmark for good business ethics by integrating some new corporate social responsibility obligations. "We want our suppliers to be good corporate citizens," Chris says.

Warren Smith, Digital Marketplace Director hails the collaboration. "This shows [One Team government](#) working at its best and gives us a solid platform on which to build further reforms." While Jason Waterman, Director at the Crown Commercial Service, adds: "This is a key initiative and will set a new standard for government contracts bringing our offering in line with the very

best in commercial practice.”

The new Facilities Management Contract will launch on 8 January 2018.