

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.

Crown Court Digital Case System: changes to disclosure

News story

New functions available to enable the upload of unused disclosed material.



From Monday 16 November 2020, the Crown Court Digital Case System (DCS) will introduce new functionality that permits the Crown Prosecution Service, and in future other prosecutors, to upload unused disclosed material to two new sections within DCS.

The two new sections will be located between section J (exhibits) and K (transcripts) and are as follows:

- unused material – disclosed – notices and schedules – this will contain the disclosure notice, unused material disclosure schedule and disclosure management documents. The documents in this section will be visible to all users within the roles allowed on the sections, so will be visible to judges
- unused material – disclosed – this will contain the unused material disclosure schedule and any material being disclosed. The documents in this section will not be visible to judges but will be visible to the prosecution and defence. In multi-defendant cases the section will be partitioned like other sections and defence access will be granted by the uploading party (which in this section will exclusively be the prosecution)

Only the prosecutor will be able to upload material to these sections and an email notification will be sent informing the parties what material has been uploaded.

Please note that judges will not have access to the section containing the disclosed material. This is necessary for data protection reasons, and because, under the Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act, it is not the job of the judge to review that material. If you wish to show an item to a judge that requires access to material contained within the restricted section, you can download the document from the disclosure section and upload it to the 'trial documents' section.

The standard file structure will be amended to reflect the unused disclosed material sections on DCS. Both internal and external guidance pages will also be updated with the new version.

Where information to be disclosed is highly sensitive the prosecutor may

choose to make the disclosure in another way.

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Inspection report published: An inspection of UK Refugee Resettlement Schemes

When I began this inspection of the UK's refugee resettlement schemes, the Home Office was on the verge of launching a new scheme to replace the Gateway Protection Programme (Gateway), Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), and Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS). It also appeared that the target for VPRS to resettle 20,000 refugees from the conflict in Syria by May 2020 would be achieved.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic derailed both the launch of the new UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) and VPRS. In mid-March 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International Organisation for Migration (IOM) announced a temporary suspension of all resettlements, which they lifted in June 2020.

Despite pleas from NGOs and others for the government to resume refugee resettlements as a matter of urgency there has been none under any UK scheme since 12 March 2020. On 9 November, the government confirmed in a House of Lords debate on the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill that it will restart refugee resettlement "as soon possible", but gave no indication of when this might be.

Against this backdrop, and in anticipation of the eventual launch of UKRS, the inspection looked at how the various long-running schemes had performed up to March 2020, at the particular difficulties and issues each had encountered, and at what lessons the Home Office should be taking forward into any new scheme. This included a look at the Community Sponsorship Scheme (CSS).

I last inspected VPRS in 2017-18. At that time, I commented that everyone concerned with the scheme (UNHCR, IOM, UK local authorities and their delivery partners, NGOs, the Home Office and other government departments, and CSS groups) deserved credit for what they had achieved. There was no doubting their hard work and commitment, or the very real challenges they faced. However, there were several areas where improvements were needed, some of which were directly within the Home Office's control, while others required it to be more active in co-ordinating, cajoling and incentivising others.

In 2018, Home Office managers and staff felt that my criticisms were unfair, and may well feel the same about the findings from this latest inspection.

For the record, I again found that those working on the resettlement schemes were knowledgeable, competent and highly committed. It was clear that they all derived a great deal of satisfaction from helping vulnerable refugees. Operationally, every resettlement presents a host of challenges, the greatest of which is securing the required accommodation and support. Each arrival is therefore an achievement.

Nonetheless, I found there was still considerable room for improvement, and a risk that the Home Office would roll into UKRS without confronting some of the fundamental concerns about the previous schemes, particularly the range of accommodation and support available and its impact on the time taken from acceptance of a refugee family to their resettlement in the UK.

As I observed in 2018, while the UK resettlement process may be quick compared with other international schemes, the Home Office should not regard this as an answer to concerns about timescales, not least as these have continued to lengthen, especially for larger families and refugees with complex needs. Eight months (to date) without any resettlements has simply made this worse, particularly for those already accepted for resettlement and waiting for news.

My report was sent to the Home Secretary on 14 September 2020. It contains ten recommendations. The Home Office has accepted all of the recommendations, albeit only partially in some cases. Implementation will involve a great deal of effort. While UKRS remains paused, the Home Office should press ahead with as much of this work as possible, resisting the temptation to redeploy key staff, so that when the new scheme is eventually launched it is as good as it can be.

Regulator praises Sellafield progress

News story

The UK's chief nuclear inspector has highlighted progress in our decommissioning programme in his annual report.



The demolition of the First Generation Reprocessing Plant Stack was mentioned as a key decommissioning milestone in the report.

Mark Foy, of the Office for Nuclear Regulation (ONR) noted our preparation work for retrievals from our legacy silos for praise.

He also referenced the completion of key decommissioning work including:

- demolition of the First Generation Reprocessing Plant Stack
- removal of contaminated plant and equipment from a Special Nuclear Materials facility
- the start of operations in our Cyber Security Operations Centre, the first of its kind in the nuclear industry

The report also highlighted our focus on improvements to ageing facilities and construction of new facilities to safely treat, store, and dispose of waste.

Mark Neate, Sellafield Ltd's environment, safety and security director said:

We welcome the publication of the ONR Chief Nuclear Inspector's Report.

It is pleasing to see our regulator acknowledge the complexity of our mission and highlight our progress in accelerating hazard and risk reduction in our legacy facilities.

Having a mature and constructive relationship with our regulators is fundamental to our ability to remain safe, learn from our experiences, and adapt to new thinking. Such scrutiny helps us to trend our performance, identify areas for improvement and close any gaps.

Sellafield is the UK's most complex nuclear site. Our daily work presents substantial nuclear, environmental, radiological, chemical, and conventional safety and security challenges.

Keeping our workforce, supply chain partners, facilities, and the environment safe and secure is a continuous pursuit that requires the focus and attention of everyone involved at Sellafield, every

day.

As reprocessing concludes our mission is evolving to a focus on waste management and clean up. We look forward to working with the ONR and others to sustain and improve our performance in the future.

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Be flood aware during Flood Action Week 2020

The awareness campaign is aimed at providing essential advice about what people should do if they live in an area at risk of flooding.

It's especially hoping to encourage those who live in areas at risk of flooding, but who have not experienced flooding before, to take action now to protect their home, possessions and family from the devastating effect of flooding in the future.

Over 5 million homes are at risk of flooding in England alone, the average cost of flooding to a home is £30k and the mental health-impacts are long-lasting.

The campaign – called Prepare. Act. Survive. – advises those in flood risk areas to create their own simple flood plan.

Leila Huntington, Environment Agency Flood Risk Manager in the North East, said:

How many times have you heard those infamous words being spoken by your friends, family or even by yourself saying '...it won't happen to me'.

Flooding is one of the worst circumstances that many people will experience during their lifetime. Being flooded not only impacts on homes, livelihoods and day-to-day lives but the impacts can have a long lasting effect on people's overall mental health and wellbeing.

Flood Action Week is a vital way for the Environment Agency to shine a spotlight upon the issue of flooding, and to highlight the important ways residents, business owners and communities can prepare for severe weather conditions that can be caused by

seasonality or the effects of climate change.

If people are to do just one or two things during Flood Action Week then I'd urge everyone to find out if they are at risk of flooding and if so, prepare a simple flood plan as this could not only be a lifesaver but could also guide people during a time of crisis.

One person who knows all about the importance of Flood Action Week is local flood warden and County Councillor for Prudhoe South, Gordon Stewart.

Mr Stewart has recently become a Prudhoe flood warden, joining forces with seven other volunteers in the area. He also experienced flooding first-hand when his daughter was evacuated back in 2012, after a culvert collapsed in Newcastle upon Tyne, during severe weather conditions.

Gordon talks about the attraction of becoming a flood warden. He said:

I want to help our local community to prepare for any possible flooding, and to prevent the loss of life and property.

Gordon, who was born and brought up in Northumberland, has been a County Councillor with Northumberland County Council for over three and a half years, and in this time he has championed a number of local projects including the reopening of the Riverside Café in Prudhoe after it was flooded during Storm Desmond.

The charity-run café plays an important role in the community by providing a safe environment for adults with additional needs to work and enjoy their independence. Gordon said:

Historically some areas of Northumberland have always been susceptible to flooding due to their proximity to rivers or other water courses. This is still the case but with high rainfall now more often, this has to be taken into account.

The current number of regional flood wardens stands at over 160. They are part of 42 flood groups across Durham and Darlington, Cleveland and Northumberland.

The North East has a beautiful array of different rivers including the Coquet, Derwent, Gaunless, Pont, Rede, Skerne, Tyne, Tweed, Wear, and Tees but during bad weather conditions the Environment Agency monitors the potential for flood risk, which includes fluvial flooding.

There is also increased risk in urban areas from surface water and groundwater flooding caused by the effects of climate change.

In many areas at risk in the region there are flood alleviation schemes in place, which include a variety of different measures ranging from debris

screens, flood walls and embankments, temporary flood barriers through to a dam, which is the case at Mitford near to Morpeth in Northumberland, and natural flood management solutions.

The Environment Agency is currently building new or improved flood defences in many locations, including Ponteland, Corbridge, Hexham, Acomb, Stokesley, Middlesbrough and Yarm.

These works form part of the current 6 year capital investment programme which has seen government funding of £2.6bn to better protect 300,000 homes from flooding and coastal erosion between 2015 and 2021. Beyond 2021 record government investment of £5.2bn has been announced. This will better protect 336,000 properties, through the creation of around 2,000 new flood and coastal defences, in England by 2027.

During Flood Action Week the Environment Agency is urging people to download an action pack that will help them prepare their simple flood plan ahead of the seasonal bad weather conditions.

To find out if you are living in a flood risk area and for information about how to sign up for flood alerts please visit the Environment Agency website

Please follow the online activities of the Yorkshire and North East Environment Agency teams on [Twitter](#)