



Ministry
of Justice

Evidence on the Effectiveness of Delivery Models for Legal Support Services

**An accessible summary of the literature
review**

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Access to Justice Evaluation

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1. What the literature review is about

Every year, millions of people in England and Wales experience legal problems relating to a wide range of issues, with the Legal Problem and Resolution Survey (2023) finding that 50% of all respondents reported experiencing at least one problem in the 18 months prior to interview. When these problems remain unresolved, they often escalate and contribute to wider cycles of disadvantage, including financial hardship, poor health, homelessness and family breakdown. These impacts are felt not only by individuals and families, but also by public services and the justice system as a whole.

Alongside legal aid, a diverse ecosystem of charities, law centres, advice organisations and community groups provides free legal support to help people understand their rights, navigate legal processes and take steps towards resolving their problems. This support is delivered through a wide range of methods, from online information and automated tools to telephone advice, face-to-face provision and community outreach.

Over a number of years, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has funded legal support services through grant programmes and pilot initiatives, such as Legal Support for Litigants in Person (LSLIP) grant (July 2020- September 2022) and its current Improving Outcomes Through Legal Support Grant (March 2023- September 2026). Alongside this, the MoJ has commissioned research and evaluations to understand how different delivery approaches work in practice, including research on blended advice models, health justice partnerships and court-based support. This work has provided valuable insight into user experience, service design and system pressures.

To build on this knowledge, and to inform future thinking on policy, funding, service design and evaluation, the MoJ commissioned ZK Analytics to conduct a literature review to examine how free legal support services are delivered, and what the existing evidence tells us about how well different delivery models work in practice. The review focused on legal support provided in England and Wales, including information, signposting, advice and practical help that supports people to navigate legal processes. It provides an overview of the main ways advice is delivered and summarises evidence on what works

well for different types of problem and points in time. It can be used as a general resource for those wanting a broad understanding of advice delivery methods and, for policy makers, to help with targeting models that work well and could be supported further, or for more research where evidence gaps are shown.

Legal aid funded services were not included in the scope of the review. This shorter report provides an accessible summary of the main findings from the review, which is available in full on GOV.UK.

2. Methodology

To ensure the review was completed in a manner proportionate to the needs of the MoJ, including the degree of coverage required, project timeline and budget, a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) was selected as the most appropriate method. This section summarises how the REA was carried out.

A clear and structured approach was used to find, select and bring together the evidence included in the review. Researchers used a planned search strategy, clear criteria for which sources to include or exclude and a step-by-step process to screen and review sources to ensure relevance and appropriate levels of quality.

A wide range of sources were included, such as academic studies, government commissioned research, and reports from advice sector organisations. Relevant evidence was identified through online searches and by asking organisations in the sector to share evaluations and other reports. Most of the evidence covered in the review was published between 2015 and 2025. Earlier sources were used selectively where they were deemed highly relevant to the review.

2.1 How the review approaches effectiveness of delivery models

Robust impact studies that measure long-term outcomes or allow direct comparison between delivery models are relatively rare in this field. As a result, the review does not attempt to calculate precise impact or cost-effectiveness.

Instead, effectiveness is understood in terms of how delivery models are reported to work in practice. This includes whether people can access and engage with support, whether support helps them better understand their situation and options, and whether it supports progress towards resolving legal problems. Where evidence allows, the review also considers changes in confidence, legal capability and wellbeing, as well as impacts on service efficiency or demand on courts and other public services.

The review does not treat delivery models as the sole driver of outcomes. Instead, it considers delivery models alongside other factors shown in the evidence to shape outcomes, including the complexity of the legal problem, the individual's circumstances and capabilities, the stage of the legal journey, and how services are designed, coordinated and resourced. These factors are used in the review to understand and interpret variation in effectiveness across different contexts and groups.

3. Key Findings

The review identified four broad delivery models into which types of legal support provision could be categorised: self-service support (information and tools used independently), face to face support (direct, in person advice), remote support (services delivered via phone, email, messaging or video), and blended support (pathways that combine multiple channels, allowing people to move between them over time). Key findings for each delivery model are set out below.

It should however be noted that these categories are not rigid or mutually exclusive. In practice, many services use several delivery methods, and individuals often experience a combination of approaches as their circumstances change.

3.1 Self-service support

Self-service legal support, including written information, online guidance, automated tools and public legal education resources, is associated with improved legal knowledge, confidence and problem recognition. These approaches are particularly effective for procedural, early stage or lower complexity problems and for people who are able to engage independently.

The evidence in the report also highlights the role of self-service support in helping services manage demand and use resources more effectively. Digital guidance, automated tools and structured information can support early triage, allowing organisations to prioritise the time of their advisors, for more complex high-risk cases.

The evidence also suggests that self-service resources are valuable for litigants in person, helping people prepare documents, understand procedural requirements and make more informed decisions about how to progress their case. The evidence base is strongest in welfare benefits and employment contexts, where digital tools and guidance have been linked to reported financial gains and timely action.

However, the evidence also highlights clear limits. Self-service support alone is less effective for crisis situations, complex cases or people facing multiple barriers to independent engagement, including literacy or digital barriers. The strongest evidence relates to self-service functioning as a first step, with the option to move quickly to adviser-led support when more help is required.

3.2 Face-to-face support

Face-to-face provision plays a central role in addressing complex, high-risk and socially embedded legal problems, particularly for people experiencing vulnerability, exclusion or multiple, intersecting needs. In-person support enables trust building, fuller disclosure, holistic assessment and hands-on assistance with documents, evidence and negotiations. The evidence links face-to-face delivery to positive legal, financial and wellbeing outcomes in areas such as welfare benefits, housing, immigration and family law.

The evidence further suggests that face-to-face provision is effective where legal problems intersect with wider health, housing or social issues. In co-located and partnership-based models, particularly those embedded in trusted community or health settings, in-person support has been linked to earlier identification of legal need and prevention of escalation into formal court or tribunal proceedings.

Face-to-face services also play an important role in supporting procedural fairness, particularly for unrepresented individuals who may struggle to participate fully in legal processes without hands-on assistance. Evidence associates in-person procedural support with improved preparedness, reduced error and smoother progression through legal processes.

At the same time, face-to-face services are constrained by resource intensity, capacity limits and uneven geographic distribution. The evidence suggests that impact is maximised when in-person provision is integrated within wider systems, with clear triage

and referral pathways, and targeted towards cases where relational and practical support adds the greatest value.

3.3 Remote support

Remote legal support improves access and flexibility for many people, particularly those facing geographic, mobility or caring barriers. Telephone, email, messaging and video-based services are associated with improved reach, effective triage and ongoing case progression.

The evidence distinguishes between different forms of remote support. It suggests that synchronous support (such as telephone or video appointments) is particularly valuable for urgent advice, clarification and triage, while asynchronous support (such as email or messaging) can support follow-up, document handling and continuity over time.

In some settings, remote provision has been associated with faster case progression and earlier resolution, particularly when used for mediation, pre-action advice or structured dispute processes. However, the evidence also highlights risks for providers, including high unmet demand for telephone services and the potential for email-based models to generate unmanageable workloads where clear boundaries and escalation routes are not in place.

The evidence also points to risks for users, including digital exclusion, poor phone access, lack of privacy and difficulties identifying vulnerability in remote settings. Remote support is therefore most effective when embedded within wider service pathways rather than used as a standalone solution.

3.4 Blended support

Blended delivery models combine self-service, remote and face-to-face support within coordinated pathways. These models combine the strengths of different delivery methods, using low friction channels for early engagement, maintaining continuity through remote follow-up and reserving face-to-face or outreach support for complex, sensitive or high-risk needs.

Across the evidence, blended models are associated with improved access, engagement, confidence and progress towards resolution, as well as more efficient use of limited resources. The effectiveness of blended approaches depends strongly on how they are implemented. Evidence highlights the importance of clear triage and review points, continuity of adviser involvement, supported access for digitally excluded users and coordination across organisations.

Blended systems are also described as more resilient, allowing services to adapt to changing demand or disruption while maintaining access and safeguarding. However, the evidence also cautions that improved initial engagement does not always lead to sustained resolution. In some legal areas, particularly debt, outcomes depend on active follow-up and clear escalation pathways, or users may disengage before problems are resolved.

The evidence also shows that blended pathways can work best when services are well connected to each other. Where legal support is linked with health, housing or community services, people are more likely to move smoothly between different types of help. Clear referral routes, trusted intermediaries and straightforward ways to step up support can reduce the risk of people being passed between services without getting the help they need. This is particularly important for people with multiple or ongoing problems. However, these benefits rely on strong working relationships between services and enough capacity to keep coordination working overtime.

4. Key learnings and conclusion

4.1 Key learnings

A consistent finding across the evidence is that no single delivery model works well for all people or all legal problems, and no channel (such as remote or in-person support) can be described as universally effective. Outcomes depend on a combination of factors, including the nature and complexity of the issue, the individual's circumstances and ability to engage, and the stage they are at in their legal journey.

Rather than pointing to the superiority of any particular delivery model, the review highlights the importance of designing flexible systems that can respond to different needs at different points in people's journeys. The evidence consistently indicates that outcomes depend less on the individual channel used and more on how different forms of support are combined, coordinated and matched to the person, the problem and the stage of the journey. On this basis, the research highlights several key takeaways:

Clear pathways and escalation routes are critical. Delivery models are most effective when they operate within clear, coordinated pathways, rather than as standalone solutions. Early access through self-service or remote channels can support problem recognition and initial action, but these routes must be linked to timely escalation into adviser led support where complexity, risk or vulnerability emerges. Face-to-face provision remains essential for many users and should be targeted towards cases where trust, safeguarding and sustained engagement are most important.

Equity should be built into delivery design. In this context, equity means ensuring that support is fair and works for people with different needs and barriers to access, and it is central to understanding which delivery models are effective for in practice. The evidence highlights recurring barriers (including digital exclusion, literacy, language and lack of privacy) that shape who can access and benefit from support. Delivery models that appear successful overall can still produce uneven access and outcomes if barriers are not actively addressed. This highlights the importance of designing for inclusion, for example through supported access and clear escalation routes for people facing multiple barriers to engagement.

Digital expansion does not replace in-person support. The evidence shows that expanding digital and remote provision does not remove the need for face-to-face options and facilitated access routes. While digital channels have improved reach and efficiency for many, they are not sufficient for all users or all problems. People facing multiple disadvantages may be more likely to benefit from supported access, trusted intermediaries and blended pathways that allow gradual engagement rather than one off contact.

4.2 Conclusion

This conclusion brings together what the evidence suggests overall about effective delivery of free legal support, and what it can and cannot tell us with confidence.

Overall, the review highlights that the effectiveness of free legal support depends less on the use of any single delivery channel and more on the quality of system design. The evidence points away from one size fits all solutions and towards flexible, blended systems that allow people to move between self-service, remote and face-to-face support as their circumstances change. Keeping clear pathways between different types of support is a key factor in making services effective and inclusive, and outcomes appear to depend less on individual delivery methods than on how support is combined, coordinated and matched to the person, the problem and the stage of the legal journey.

The research also highlights that access and equity matter as much as delivery method. Across delivery models, the evidence consistently points to practical barriers that affect engagement, including digital access, language and literacy barriers, and lack of privacy in remote settings. Where services actively address these barriers, through supported access, trusted intermediaries and clear escalation routes, people with multiple or intersecting disadvantages are less likely to be excluded or disengage. In this context, designing legal support with inclusion, escalation and continuity in mind is a key implication of the evidence.

Taken together, the findings support a continued focus on flexible, well-coordinated legal support systems, while underlining the need for continued learning to strengthen the evidence on what works, for whom and under what conditions. The review therefore provides a strong foundation for future policy, funding and service design decisions, while pointing clearly to areas where further evidence would add value.

Limits of the evidence and implications for evaluation

While the evidence base offers rich insight into how services operate and how users experience them, it is important to interpret these findings in light of some limitations.

Much of the literature is descriptive or based on self-reported outcomes, with limited robust comparative, longitudinal or cost-effectiveness evidence. Attribution remains difficult because most services use blended approaches, making it hard to isolate the effects of individual models or channels, and evidence on differential impacts for specific groups and on emerging approaches such as AI-enabled tools is limited.

As a result, the evidence is well suited to identifying recurring patterns, promising practices and key gaps, but less able to support definitive conclusions about effectiveness or long-term impact. Continued learning and evaluation are therefore essential to strengthen evidence on outcomes, equity, sustainability and longer-term impact, including understanding how well legal support systems enable escalation, continuity and inclusion over time.

This document is intended as an accessible summary of the evidence review. AI assisted tools were used to support the initial extraction and condensing of material, with final drafting, quality assurance and review by MoJ analysts. The full externally commissioned review which includes more detail on the research questions, methods, findings and learning is available in the full published report on GOV.UK.