



MONEY
ADVICE TRUST

StepChange
Debt Charity

The Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government
Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

23rd March 2020

Pausing bailiff action during the Covid-19 pandemic

Dear Secretary of State,

We write to you as Chief Executives of the three largest debt advice charities in the UK, to ask you to instruct local authorities in England and Wales to suspend enforcement action by bailiffs (Enforcement Agents) during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2018/19, Local authorities in England and Wales referred 2.6 million debts to bailiffs. Given the current circumstances, **we are concerned about the public health impact of bailiffs visiting people in their homes**, including those who may have underlying health conditions or be self-isolating. **Our advisers have already heard from people who have been visited by bailiffs while self-isolating.** This exposes vulnerable people and bailiffs themselves to unacceptable levels of risk.

There is also an urgent financial need to suspend bailiff action. Public health guidance is for people to try to stay at home - often facing a financial penalty for doing so. If people face unaffordable demands from enforcement agents to repay their arrears, many people will face an impossible choice of whether to follow that guidance or to try to earn money to meet the bailiff's demands.

For these reasons, we would ask you as a matter of urgency to instruct all local authorities in England and Wales to immediately suspend all use of enforcement agents to collect debts. This should include pausing existing action and stopping any new action taking place during the Covid-19 outbreak period.

While local authorities could take this decision individually, and some have already done so, it is vital at this time of national emergency that there is consistency in the way people are treated.

In addition to suspending bailiff action, in light of the unprecedented financial impact of Covid-19, central and local government should increase forbearance and flexibility for people in debt. **Local authorities should be supported by central government to offer 3 month council tax breaks to those affected financially by Covid-19.** This will help to reduce the risk of a significant increase in people experiencing council tax arrears and suffering financial hardship as a result.

To support this, the Government should temporarily suspend current rules that mean people become liable for their full council tax bill after one missed payment. This action would reflect other measures taken elsewhere to defer tax payments by businesses and self-employed people, providing immediate relief from the financial pressures currently being experienced by many.

Local authorities are well placed to help the most financially vulnerable in their communities, and we welcome the creation of the hardship fund, to be distributed through councils. **To ensure this has the maximum possible impact, councils should be given additional flexibility to distribute these funds as they see fit** - and not necessarily solely via Council Tax Support, which will not reach some key groups such as people living in Houses of Multiple Occupation.

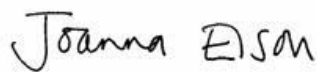
As charities, we are continuing to provide our debt advice services to as many people as possible during this time. However, unfortunately we do expect to see a significant increase in people falling into problem debt. Taking decisive steps to suspend bailiff action, increase flexibility over council tax bills and supporting councils to help the most vulnerable would help reduce this and we hope you will take action as a matter of urgency.

We look forward to hearing from you. In the meantime the best contact for officials for further discussions on this urgent issue is Grace Brownfield on grace.brownfield@moneyadvice.org


Yours sincerely,



Dame Gillian Guy
Chief Executive
Citizens Advice



Joanna Elson OBE
Chief Executive
Money Advice Trust



Phil Andrew
Chief Executive
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CC: Luke Hall MP, Minister for Local Government and Homelessness