

## **Free Legal Answers – Information for pro bono solicitors**

This factsheet provides a summary of the Free Legal Answers website which LawWorks will soon be piloting. Prior to the pilot launch, all solicitors who have expressed an interest to take part, or who register directly onto the website (once 'live'), will receive a more detailed guide.

### **Contents**

The Free Legal Answers website .....	1
Key features of Free Legal Answers .....	1
Solicitors .....	2
How to sign-up /register .....	3
The Pro Bono Protocol.....	4
For more information.....	4

## **The Free Legal Answers website**

Free Legal Answers is an online platform where people on low incomes can describe a legal problem or ask a legal question and receive pro bono legal advice.

The focus will be on early/initial legal advice on civil law matters.

Free Legal Answers is based on a service in the United States supported by the American Bar Association. LawWorks has been granted a licence to launch a similar website service in England and Wales. Deloitte UK have kindly provided project management and technical expertise to assist LawWorks in configuring and testing the website to fit the legal environment in England and Wales.

Free Legal Answers will be piloted in early 2020. Rather than promote the service to the general public, individuals will be referred to the service by participating organisations which may also assist individuals to use the website. Each participating organisation will have a password.

The aim of Free Legal Answers is to complement existing sources of legal advice and support. The website will include sources of advice and information, and will also encourage potential users to investigate whether they may be eligible for legal aid.

Because the service is intended only for people unable to pay for legal advice, organisations taking part in the pilot will be strongly encouraged to only refer people who are on a low annual income (based on average minimum income standards).

## **Key features of Free Legal Answers**

Individuals must first register and agree to the terms of use, including confirming that they are on a low income, before being able to ask a legal question.

Once registered, an area of law can be selected and the legal question or problem described by entering text in a web-form. Documents and photographs can also be uploaded.

Individuals will be informed prior to use that unfortunately an answer to a legal problem cannot be guaranteed. They will, however, receive an email if their question is not responded to within a minimum period of time.

Solicitors registered with Free Legal Answers (i.e., once approved by LawWorks) will be able to log-on and see the questions and legal issues described. The questions will be searchable by area of law and by date. Participating solicitors can request daily or weekly notification (by email) to inform them when questions have been asked (the notification choice can be changed at any time).

A solicitor can contact an individual (via the website) to request further information about the legal issue or problem before providing an answer. This may, for example, be pertinent to any potential conflict.

When an answer or advice is provided, the individual will receive an email inviting them to log-on to the website to see the response.

## Solicitors

LawWorks would like to encourage as many solicitors as possible to volunteer for Free Legal Answers. There is no obligation to answer a legal question or problem and participants can 'unsubscribe' at any time.

Key features of the website include:

- **Insurance** – all advice given via the Free Legal Answers website will be covered by LawWorks' professional indemnity insurance (a copy of the policy can be provided);
- **Anonymity** – as Free Legal Answers will be a LawWorks service, participating solicitors can take part anonymously if they wish (e.g., their name and contact details will not be provided to individuals). LawWorks have in place and will supervise a complaints process, but may need to provide information about the solicitor should a formal complaint to the SRA or Legal Ombudsman be made;
- **Accessibility** – the website can be accessed at any time from any location, enabling pro bono advice to be provided when most convenient for the solicitor;
- **Support** – the Free Legal Answers website will be supported by an administrator, who can be contacted with any queries, concerns or technical questions;

- **Resources** – information and links to resources which may be helpful for participating solicitors will be available on the website. This will include, for example, an introductory guide to eligibility for legal aid;
- **Pro bono time** – participating solicitors can record the time taken to provide pro bono legal advice. LawWorks will also be able to provide reports on time and activity, if helpful.

The minimum requirements for participation are that a solicitor is at least two years post qualified and has a current practising certificate. We also request that any work undertaken conforms to the Pro Bono Protocol (see below).

So long as the registered (and verified) solicitor meets these requirements, others can take part in researching and drafting an answer to a legal question/problem – e.g. supervised law students, paralegals and trainees. The key issue is that the information and advice then provided via the website is approved and submitted by the registered solicitor.

A solicitor can close a question/legal problem once responded to.

Should a solicitor or firm/in-house team wish to take a case further, beyond the stage of initial legal advice, we ask that LawWorks first be contacted with this request. Subsequently, should a case be taken on, this will no longer be automatically covered by LawWorks' professional indemnity insurance (but separate insurance cover may be possible, at LawWorks' discretion, if not otherwise available).

## How to sign-up /register

LawWorks is inviting solicitors to register interest in participating in Free Legal Answers prior to the launch of the pilot (and before the website 'goes live'). This will enable LawWorks to gauge the level of interest by solicitors and help inform when the pilot will be launched, how many organisations to involve, and the areas of law the service can respond to. This pre-launch stage will also enable LawWorks to begin verifying and pre-authorising participating solicitors.

Prior to launch, LawWorks will invite interested solicitors to register directly onto the Free Legal Answers website, which will include creating a password and answers to security questions. Once the website is launched, solicitors will be able to register directly on the website and can participate once the account is verified.

Solicitors interesting in participating will be asked to provide a work email, telephone number, address and personal SRA number. LawWorks may get in touch if further information may be required prior to being authorised to take part in the Free Legal Answers service.

If a pro bono co-ordinator, CSR lead, partner or general council would like to 'sign-up' a number of solicitors, please do get in touch with LawWorks (contact details below).

## The Pro Bono Protocol

We ask all participating solicitors to apply the key features of the Pro Bono Protocol, which has been endorsed by the Law Society of England and Wales, the Bar Council of England and Wales and the Chartered Institute of Legal Executives.

Key features of the Protocol include:

- the pro bono work should only be undertaken by a lawyer who is adequately trained, has appropriate knowledge, skills and experience and, where necessary, is adequately supervised for the work in question;
- only undertaking pro bono legal work (and where appropriate his or her supervisor) with no less than the legal expertise and experience required if it was paid work;
- once taken on, a lawyer (and if appropriate his or her firm/in-house team) gives the work the same priority, attention and care as would apply to paid work.

The Pro Bono Protocol is available on the LawWorks website.

## For more information

If you have any questions about Free Legal Answers, or would like to discuss, please do not hesitate to get in touch. Please contact:

- [Dakota Blacklaws-Lacy](#), Free Legal Answers Support Officer, or
- [Martin Barnes](#), Chief Executive.

November 2019