

Eighteenth Progress Report of the Litigants in Person Reference Group

(Meeting 30th January 2024)

Introduction

At its inaugural meeting on 12th February 2019, it was agreed that a Progress Report summarising key decisions and activities of the Reference Group (RG) should be published following each meeting. This is the eighteenth of those reports and relates to the meeting held on 30th January 2024.

1. Seventeenth Progress Report

This was considered and approved. It is to be added to the RG's website (<https://www.litigant-voice.co.uk>)

2. Membership of the RG

It was confirmed that, following the decision to increase the membership of the RG, Disability Action has agreed to nominate a representative to the Group. The Chair has also been in contact with the Law Society and the Bar Council regarding the nomination of new members to the Group.

3. External Engagement

Presentation by NIPSO

At the meeting, the Group heard a presentation from Margaret Kelly (Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman) and Sean Martin (Head of Investigations), on the role and work of NIPSO which deals with approximately 1200 complaints per annum. The presentation was followed by a Q&A and general discussion with particular focus on issues of concern to litigants in person.

Meeting with the LCJ

Since the last RG meeting, the Chair and four other members of the Group had met with the LCJ. All considered that it had been a very positive engagement and an important opportunity to raise a number of the RG's concerns and to highlight the desire of the RG to play a constructive role in securing real improvements in the experiences of litigants in person navigating the courts' system. It was agreed that the RG should, if possible, seek an annual meeting with the LCJ to continue the dialogue.

Chair's meeting with the Shadow Justice Council (17th January 2024)

The Chair reported that the meeting had gone well. Mr Justice McAlinden was in attendance, together with other members of the Judiciary, the DOJ and NICTS. The Chair had provided an update on the work of the RG over the last year and had taken the opportunity to stress once again the need for the RG to have a voice at the table and for litigants in person to be viewed as users of the legal system with helpful views and experiences to share.

Estate Strategy Working Group

It was noted that a meeting of the Estate Strategy Working Group was scheduled to take place on 29 February 2024 and would be attended by a member of the RG. A report back will be provided at the next meeting.

DOJ Information Videos

It was noted that DOJ hopes to secure funding to develop further information videos. A small task and finish group has also been established to look at all the relevant and useful webpages for litigants in person, with the aim of bringing these all together on a Justice hosted site. It was suggested it would be helpful to have a litigant in person from the RG involved in the launch of the site. It was also recommended that NICTS staff are briefed about the websites available including the DOJ supported Ulster University site.

4. Spring Seminar

It is hoped to hold the next lunchtime seminar in April/May 2024, focussing on the Equal Treatment Bench Book, with the guest speaker likely to be a member of the Judiciary from England. It is further hoped that the seminar will be a joint venture with Law Centre NI, with the latter providing the administration and technical support required.

5. Other developments

It was noted that the Nuffield Foundation funded research on supporting legal participation for litigants in person (completed in (December 2023) was available online.

It was further noted that a review of Civil and Family Legal Aid is pending with a call for evidence from citizens and practitioners. The RG will also consider this.