

Fifteenth Progress Report of the Litigants in Person Reference Group

(Meeting 14th March 2023)

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 fifteenth of those reports and relates to the meeting held on 14th March 2023.

1. Fourteenth Progress Report

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

2. External Engagement

Engagement with the Judicial Studies Board

There was agreement that the presentation (December 2022) from Terence Dunlop Secretary to the Judicial Studies Board (JSB) and the subsequent discussion had been very useful and constructive. It was therefore agreed that the RG should send an invitation for him to attend the December 2023 meeting, so that the RG and the JSB can exchange any relevant updates. Given the major programme of change currently underway in the justice system, annual engagement between the JSB and the RG would be mutually beneficial.

Webinar - Monday 13th March 2023 - "Enabling effective participation of unrepresented litigants and vulnerable witnesses in civil courts".

In partnership with Law Centre (NI), this online lunchtime webinar was very well attended. There were presentations by Karen Walden-Smith, Deputy High Court Judge (GB), Professor Grainne McKeever UU and a member of the RG who was formerly a personal litigant. Presentations were followed by a lively Q&A. The feedback on the overall event was excellent, with the personal litigant's perspective regarded as particularly valuable.

By way of follow up it was agreed that the Chair of the RG should write to the LCJ seeking a meeting to explore the possibility of introducing a Practice Direction on effective participation here. in line with developments in England and Wales.

DOJ videos on attending court.

The DoJ has produced videos designed to assist unrepresented litigants attending court. These had been circulated to members of the RG for comment. All agreed that the videos were very user friendly and should be of great assistance to those attending court unrepresented. When the videos are formally launched, the RG would like to do publicity welcoming them and highlighting their potential value to unrepresented litigants.

3. Courts' Modernisation Programme

Digital Transformation Programme meeting 25th January 2023

Three members of the RG had attended a meeting with the Digital Transformation Team on 25th January 2023. The discussion was wide ranging, and it was clear that the team was familiar with the comments and views of the RG on digitisation that had been submitted to the NICTS over the preceding year. The Chair stressed that the RG is keen to continue the engagement as the new Digital Strategy rolls out and is still happy to review and feed into developments.

It was noted that the Digitisation Programme had also been discussed at the Stakeholder Advisory group attended by a representative from the RG. One of the issues discussed had been the integrity and security of data and NICTS indicated that they would be hosting workshops and updates and that the RG would be included in these.

Follow-up to Law Centre NI & PILA Roundtable 8th November 2022 – “Access to Justice and Digital Justice – Preliminary Lessons”

The RG's participation in this roundtable had been reported at the last meeting (December 2023). It was noted that since then, the RG had gone back to the Law Centre to confirm that, the RG would be keen to participate in any similar events in the future.

Update on Modernisation Programme from NICTS

It was agreed that an invitation would be sent to the Chief Modernisation Officer and the Head of Digital Modernisation (NICTS) to attend the RG's June meeting to provide an update on the Courts' Modernisation Programme.

Meeting with Capital Programme Manager (NICTS)

At the December RG meeting it was reported that a member of the RG had attended a focus group in October 2022 on plans to modernise and upgrade the Royal Courts of Justice. It was indicated at that time that there would be follow-up meetings with individual stakeholder groups. However, no further information had been received since then. It was agreed that the Chair would write to the Capital Programme Manager (responsible for this aspect of the Modernisation Programme) to request a meeting.