

## **Second Progress Report of the Litigants in Person Reference Group (Meeting 21<sup>st</sup> May 2019)**

### Introduction

At its inaugural meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2019, it was agreed that a Progress Report summarising key decisions and activities of the Reference Group should be published following each meeting. This is the second of those reports and relates to the meeting held on 21<sup>st</sup> May 2019

#### 1. First Progress Report

- The draft First Progress Report was considered by the Reference Group and subject to a small number of minor amendments, it was agreed that the Progress Report should be finalised and published as soon as possible on the NICTS website together with the Reference Group's Terms of Reference

#### 2. Membership of the Reference Group

- Following the first meeting of the Reference Group (12<sup>th</sup> February 2019), an invitation was issued to the LCJ to nominate a judge to join the Group. It was noted that in response, the LCJ had nominated Mr Justice McAlinden. In light of this, it was agreed that it will be necessary to invite another Litigant in Person to join in order to maintain the overall balance between personal litigants and others. It was agreed that UU would take this forward.
- It was agreed that membership of the Reference Group should be kept under review and if any of the current members are having difficulty taking up their places, then consideration may be given to finding a replacement.

#### 3. Expenses

- DoJ has confirmed that those members of the Reference Group who had not been nominated by particular organisations, would be eligible to claim travel expenses from DoJ for attendance at Reference Group meetings using a Departmental claim form and that a further paragraph should be inserted into the TOR to reflect this.

#### 4. Court “walk through”

- Following a request to NICTS from the Reference Group, a court “walk-through” had taken place on 11<sup>th</sup> April 2019 when a number of Reference Group members met with NICTS staff at Laganside. Those who took part considered that it had been a helpful and worthwhile exercise. A summary report on the visit was subsequently drafted. Amongst the key themes to emerge were the importance of the first point of contact for Litigants in Person on arrival at the courts and the desirability of an easily identifiable person(s) to deal with queries; the importance of clear and obvious signage throughout the court buildings; the value and importance of a dedicated space for Litigants in Person and the better use of digital technology to support Litigants in Person in navigating the courts.
- The report contained a number of suggestions for improvements. It was agreed that the draft report would be circulated to the group members for final approval and then passed to NICTS for consideration on possible options for progressing some or all of the suggestions in the report.
- It was recognised that the experience of Litigants in Person in the Belfast based courts is not necessarily representative of their experience in courts outside Belfast. It was therefore agreed that it would be useful to undertake a similar exercise in other courts and that discussions should be taken forward with NICTS to arrange “walk-through” visits to Dungannon and Newtownards Courts.

#### 5. Better information and the use of digital tools

- Remaining with the theme of improved accessibility to information and support for personal litigants, there was a discussion on a range of digital tools that may potentially be of assistance to personal litigants and that might be considered by the NICTS as part of its ongoing IT review. It was also however highlighted that that in reviewing and considering improvements to information systems, it is important to be mindful that not all court users are comfortable with or have access to IT solutions so steps should also be taken to ensure that alternative sources of information are available, clear and accessible.

- It was agreed that a short report would be drafted summarising some of the key suggestions to emerge from the Reference Group's discussions and that this would be sent to NICTS with an indication that the Reference Group would welcome the opportunity for further discussion on these with NICTS.

## 6. Training

- The Reference Group considered a proposal to organise a training event here on *Working with Distressed Clients*, based on a similar event that had taken place in GB and which had received good participant feedback. It was agreed in principle that this would be worthwhile and that initial enquiries should be made with the organisers to ascertain whether delivering the workshop here is possible and what would be involved in terms of cost, content and timing.

## 7. Ulster University further research

- It was noted that the Law School at Ulster University has been awarded further funding, some of which is for the development of materials for Litigants in Person and that there will be an opportunity for the involvement of more Litigants in Person as this project develops.