

Tenth Progress Report of the Litigants in Person Reference Group (Meeting 11th January 2022)

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 should be published following each meeting. This is the tenth of those reports and relates to the meeting held on 11th January 2022.

1. Ninth Progress Report

This was considered by the RG and, subject to minor amendment, approved and is to be added to the RG's website.

2. External Engagement

The NICTS Draft Digital Strategy Consultation

It was confirmed that following the last meeting on 12th October further comments had been sent to NICTS on the draft Digital Strategy expanding on some of the written comments first submitted to NICTS by the RG on 28th April 2021.

Practice Direction Summary

The group discussed the Explanatory Note on Practice Directions that had been sent to the RG for comment prior to publication. . It was agreed the summary itself is generally clear but the actual list of Practice Directions (accessible via the link) is not user friendly as it is not organised by court business area/topic. The summary should therefore draw express attention to the search function.

The RG also suggested that there should also be contact details (email address and telephone number) in the summary for someone to assist with any queries that LIPs may have. The Chair was asked to feedback the RG's comments.

Meeting with the Law Society

The meeting with the Law Society has not yet taken place. It was agreed that the Law Society representative would endeavour to move this forward on behalf of the RG.

3. Courts' Modernisation Programme

Engagement with the Modernisation Team and presentation on Modernisation Programme

In response to an invitation from the RG, the Chief Modernisation Officer NICTS (KW) and the Head of Digital Modernisation NICTS (PR) attended the meeting to update the RG on the continuing roll out of the Modernisation Programme. The last update was provided to the RG in December 2020.

KW re- iterated NICTS' wish to establish a long-term working relationship with the RG, recognising the need for regular engagement/feedback and to involve the RG in the testing and introduction of new initiatives.

Summary of the key points highlighted in the update presentation

- The Vision 2030 for Modernising NICTS states that changes needed will take time, being delivered incrementally up to 2030.
- The four current programmes encompass People, Digital, Estates and Service Design.
- The aims of the Modernisation Programme are to improve services - making them faster, more accessible and proportionate to the needs of stakeholders. Ongoing engagement with a range of stakeholders, including the RG will be necessary to achieve this goal.
- A five-year digital strategy is due to be launched shortly and it was confirmed that digital inclusion, as raised previously by the RG, will be a key pillar of that strategy.
- Digital displays with information for the public are to be installed and consultation with stakeholders including the RG will help guide what information would be most beneficial on the displays. NICTS was

aware that this had been an issue previously raised by the RG in their court visit reports.

- In March 2020 120 Sightlink connections were made within NICTS. This is now up to 80,000 connections a month.
- Courtroom technology had been updated – 55 courts completed to date with 15 remaining.

Summary of main points from the question and answer session that followed the update presentation

- NICTS confirmed that it is intended that the web portal for the new case management system will allow users to upload documents and track cases.
- NICTS confirmed that digital assistance and support will be part of the process so that any lessons are learned early on. NICTS is also mindful of lessons from other initiatives, for example, the rollout of UC. It was also confirmed that the rollout of any portal solutions would not mean the end of counter services. Traditional channels will be improved, not removed, but the aim of NICTS is to become a 'Digital First' organisation.
- The RG emphasised that security will be paramount and the ability for different systems to 'talk' to each other would be beneficial.
- The RG commented on the limits of the current Sightlink solution i.e. those on separate connections cannot talk or consult with each other. It was acknowledged that this is too restrictive. Therefore, solutions that would allow breakout or consultation space will be considered.
- In response to a question on timely evaluation of any new systems/solutions, it was confirmed that no current surveys are in operation. However, it is the intention to gather views from a broad spectrum of users on any future system(s), including the views of litigants in person.

4. UU Website

It was confirmed the UU website is available via <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/familycourtinfo> and that UU would welcome any views from the RG on the website and the Pathfinder tool via the survey available on the

website. Those members of the RG who had already accessed the website and reviewed the website and the Pathfinder were all of the view that it would be of real assistance and value to litigants in person.