

Twelfth Progress Report of the Litigants in Person Reference Group

(Meeting 21st June 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 (RG) should be published following each meeting. This is the twelfth of those reports and relates to the meeting held on 21st June 2022.

1. Eleventh 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

Webinar proposal (Vulnerable Witnesses) for 2022/2023

It was agreed that that the main focus should be litigants in person in Northern Ireland. The webinar will most likely take place late 2022/early 2023.

Judge Barry Cotter could be asked to speak at the webinar and share experiences, from the Review (GB) which he chaired, that are potentially most relevant to litigants in person in Northern Ireland. It was also agreed that the perspective of litigants in person should be included in the webinar programme and that the best way to do this should be considered in more detail.

3. Courts' Modernisation Programme

Engagement with the NICTS Modernisation Team

Following agreement by the RG at the last meeting, the Chair had extended an invitation to The Chief Modernisation Officer (NICTS) to provide an annual update on the progress of the Modernisation Programme which has been accepted. The CMO will therefore join the RG meeting in March 2023.

It was noted by the RG that this timing works well as DoJ will be reviewing how its work is progressing under the Civil Justice Modernisation Plan and hopefully the budget etc may be clearer by March 2023 (subject to developments with the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive).

Stakeholder Advisory Group

An update was provided on the Stakeholder Advisory Group including details of research being conducted by NISRA on how remote/hybrid hearings were working. Assistance was also requested with finding litigants in person to speak to the researchers. It was also reported that updated guidance is due from the LCJO on remote hearings, in light of the change to the social distancing guidelines.

It was noted that DOJ has agreed to share the details with the RG of a consultation on remote hearings when available.

Digital Guide on attending a Family Court for the first time

DoJ reported some slippage on the “go live” date for this guide. The RG had previously commented on the draft guide. However, the script has now been finalised and is to be filmed shortly. DoJ will share the finished guide with the RG once completed.

Engagement with the Judicial Studies Board (JSB)

Following an earlier decision of the RG, an invitation to meet the group has been sent to the Secretary of the JSB. This will provide an opportunity to update the JSB on the work of the RG and highlight some of the key themes that have emerged from the RG’s work over the past three years, including the impact of persisting attitudinal barriers to litigants in person.

4. UU Website

Family Law Information and Pathfinder Tool (UU)

The RG welcomed confirmation that DoJ will provide resources to maintain this important tool for litigants.

UU confirmed that one more focus group with litigants in person is planned on the usability of the Pathfinder Tool. Analytics are also being collected on the most commonly used pages, most common landing pages and time spent on various pages etc.

The RG will also highlight the UU Information and Pathfinder Tool on its website (Litigant Voice) and provide links.

5. Annual Review of RG Terms of Reference (ToR)

The ToR had been reviewed at the meeting of the RG held on 5th April 2022. It was agreed that these should be posted on the website and include the review date.

6. Miscellaneous

Assembly Question

It was noted that there had been a recent Assembly Question to the Justice Minister on any work underway to support litigants in person in court and tribunal settings. It was confirmed that the Minister had responded, and this would be shared with the RG.

Summary Report of the work of the RG to date

It was agreed that the Chair will draft a summary of the work undertaken by the RG since its inception in February 2019 for agreement by the RG. Consideration will then be given to publishing any such document on the Litigant Voice website to help raise the profile of the RG.

The Chair expressed thanks to all those RG members and the NICTS Secretariat, who have worked hard over the past year to progress the work of the RG despite the obvious challenges of continued remote working.