

## **Sixth Progress Report of the Litigants in Person Reference Group**

**(Meeting 8<sup>th</sup> December 2020)**

### 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 sixth of those reports and relates to the meeting held on 8<sup>th</sup> December 2020.

### **1 Presentation by NICTS on the Courts' Modernisation Programme**

#### Summary of key points:

- Significant investment is needed to modernise NICTS services, technology and estate and it is anticipated that the Modernisation Programme will take up to 10 years to complete.
- The Modernisation Programme is to be headed by a Strategic Oversight Group (SOG) consisting of the DoJ, Permanent Secretary, the Lord Chief Justice and the Director of NICTS
- A Modernisation Portfolio Board (headed by the Director of NICTS as SRO) will report to the SOG on the progress of all projects.
- There are four key programmes - Digital, Service Redesign, Business Change and Estates.
- Stakeholders will be at the centre of the projects.
- Probate Online formed part of Service Redesign programme and was due to go live in March 2021 as a pilot.
- The lessons learnt during this pilot project will be used to inform other future developments. New systems will be introduced within the Office of Care and Protection, Official Solicitors Office, some Tribunals and on Fixed Penalties.
- Technology upgrades will continue in courtrooms with a target of 47 to be completed by March 2021 (36 have been done so far).
- Digital signage will be provided outside courtrooms.

- Remote evidence facilities are being expanded.
- A Stakeholder Advisory Group had been established with its first meeting scheduled for 17<sup>th</sup> December 2020.

Key points emerging from discussion which followed the presentation

- In relation to monitoring the effectiveness of any changes in a timely way, NICTS confirmed there would be ongoing stakeholder engagement on their effectiveness.
- RG members stressed that the “quick wins” identified in the group’s court visit reports (previously submitted to NICTS) should not be delayed or lost given the estimated duration of the Modernisation Programme - for example, the improvements recommended on court signage to facilitate easier navigation of the courts. In response it was confirmed that NICTS would not lose sight of these “quick wins” and wanted to deliver on these quickly as part of the overall reform of services.
- The RG highlighted that technology can be daunting for Litigants in Person and provision should be made to ensure those that fell into this category weren’t disenfranchised by the reforms. NICTS confirmed that the digital strategy (due to be released for consultation by March 2021) would show that not disenfranchising people is central to its purpose.
- The RG pointed out that for some, a digital solution is not always the answer and drew attention to a report by Dr Natalie Byrom of the Legal Education Foundation, *‘Digital Justice: HMCTS data strategy and delivering access to justice’*.
- The RG pointed out that whilst some Litigants in Person may be daunted by technology, there were others who are very IT literate and it may be useful to find a way of obtaining the views and utilising the skills and experience of those people as the Modernisation Programme progresses
- The RG queried the choice of Probate Online for a pilot given the non-contentious nature of the business and its limited relevance to most court users, not least Litigants in Person. NICTS confirmed the Modernisation Programme is not linear and that other projects would run alongside it but, as the first project, Probate Online would inform the others as they roll out. Covid-19 had shown NICTS that reliance on paper was a hindrance in dealing with the challenges the pandemic presented.
- In connection with the pandemic, the RG asked if there had been any survey or input sought from Litigants in Person on how Covid-19 had impacted their

use of the courts process. In response NICTS stated that whilst no survey had been done, NICTS always welcomed feedback from any user of their services.

- The RG indicated that a survey would be welcomed by Litigants in Person and asked that thought be given to gathering information on the numbers of Litigants in Person from the details received within HR1 forms.
- The RG enquired how the success of the reforms would be measured. NICTS confirmed there would be a benefits realisation aspect to each project with the reforms intended to improve the experience for the user and with the added benefit of improved delivery times.
- NICTS confirmed that they would be happy to attend meetings in the future to give periodic updates on the work that was of interest to the RG.

The Chair thanked the NICTS representatives for attending the meeting to update us. (Pamela and Peter left the meeting)

*Action point: It was agreed that a written summary of questions and observations from the RG following the presentation would be prepared and forwarded to NICTS.*

## **2. Fifth Progress Report**

This was considered by the Reference Group and approved and is to be added to the Reference Group webpage as soon as possible.

## **3. Website**

An update on progress with the new website arrangements was provided. It is anticipated that the costs are likely to be nominal and would be met by DOJ. The set-up and transfer of existing material to the new website, it is hoped will happen early in the new year if possible.

The website needs a domain name that reflects the work of the RG and should clearly reflect the focus of the RG's work. It would also be useful if the homepage for the new website could be used to try and recruit new Litigant in Person members by outlining the work of the RG and how to get involved. Those present agreed to consider a domain name for the new website and to feedback ideas.

## **4. External Engagement**

### Shadow Family Justice Board

Mrs Justice Keegan, Chair of the Shadow Family Justice Board has written to the Chair of the RG to confirm that the Chair would be invited to make a short presentation to the next meeting of the Shadow Family Justice Board.

### Law Society

Following her presentation to the Shadow Civil Justice Council in September 2020, the Law Society had confirmed that they would also like to arrange to meet with the Chair of the RG.

### Membership of the Stakeholder Advisory Group

The RG had received correspondence from the Director of NICTS in October 2020 seeking a nomination by 6<sup>th</sup> November of someone from the RG to the new Stakeholder Advisory Group. It was noted that the Chair had nominated Professor Grainne McKeever. It was agreed, given Grainne's extensive work relating to Litigants in Person, that she is an ideal choice.

## **5. New meeting arrangements**

It was agreed that the new time of 4 pm was a better start time for the RG quarterly meetings.