



HM Courts &
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Andy Slaughter MP
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Dear Chair,

**UPDATE FOLLOWING THE PUBLICATION OF THE HMCTS REFORM
EVALUATION THEMATIC REPORT**

Thank you for your letter dated 21 April in response to a letter from Sarah Sackman KC MP, Minister for Courts and Legal Services, which provided an update on the publication of the Thematic Report on the digitalisation activities of the HMCTS Reform Programme.

I will respond to your questions in turn.

1a. In your letter you note the evaluation of services included in the Reform Programme highlights ongoing ‘continuous improvement’ needs, the persistence of breakpoints and complex-case exclusions from digital.

You request clarification on which reformed services including both Common Platform and Civil, Family & Tribunals (CFT) still lack digital end-to-end case handling, which of these cases require system workarounds and why, and whether there are plans to fully digitalise these services, and if so, the timeline for this?

Crime (including Common Platform)

Common Platform enables the vast majority of criminal cases in England and Wales to be managed digitally from charge through to disposal and represents a significant move away from paper-based processes and legacy systems. While digital handling is now the default, full end-to-end digital processing is not yet universal in all scenarios:

- Currently appeals are handled on paper. Digital appeals functionality from the magistrates' courts to the Crown Court is live in pilot form, currently being tested at Reading Crown Court, with wider rollout subject to successful piloting.
- A small number of specialist or very low-volume case types and some cases brought by non-police prosecutors, are not yet fully supported end-to-end on Common Platform. In addition, where digital onboarding and integration are not fully enabled, pre-charge application functionality is limited. These cases can be handled on legacy digital products or on paper. Further development and rollout are underway to enable these scenarios to be handled on Common Platform, including support for certain police pre-charge custody applications where no substantive Common Platform case yet exists.
- Some highly sensitive material, such as those pertaining to national security matters, cannot be stored digitally for security or handling reasons and must be managed outside of digital systems, on paper. Where this applies, limited and proportionate interim arrangements are used to ensure legal integrity and operational resilience. These exceptions are not routine, and paper court files are not normally required for criminal proceedings, this applies to a very small number of cases.

The remaining residual case types are being digitalised in phases. Full digital coverage of case types in the Crown Court is planned to be achieved by 2026/27 and in the Magistrates' Courts by 2027/28.

Civil

The Reform Programme prioritised digitising the highest volume case types to maximise the financial benefits of the investment. As a result, work received as 'Bulk Claims' was not digitised within the course of the Programme. A very low percentage of such claims result in hearings, however, given their high volumes overall a significant proportion of the County Court workload remains reliant on paper processes and legacy systems.

There is also a long 'tail' of lower-volume, higher-complexity case types that cannot be dealt with digitally as well as instances where cases start digitally and may drop out of the digital service at a later point, due to complexity or functionality limitations. This includes most of the enforcement work due to structural and procedural constraints.

However, funding has now been allocated to continue to progress the digitalisation of the County Court. This will seek both to extend current digital systems to keep cases on those systems until completion and to digitalise further case types. A discovery phase for this work is complete, and we will shortly begin service design before

moving in to phased delivery, which we anticipate will need to continue beyond the current spending review period.

In addition, we are progressing with the digitisation of possession hearings, flowing from the rental reform legislation.

Whilst we complete the digitisation of the County Court, we are also deploying tactical solutions to reduce the volume of paper in the jurisdiction, for example via rolling out of the Civil Auto File Share (CAFS), which is a digital case file system designed to replace paper based court files, and improve the quality, timeliness and traceability of case information from case creation through to hearing and disposal. This tactical solution, which is now in place in 72 county courts, creates a single digital court file. Over a million documents, which would otherwise have been dealt with on paper by court staff and judges, have now been handled digitally. The reduced paper handling enabled by CAFS is forecast to generate recurring annual savings of £4.5m in postage costs alone and reduced the duration of those cases by 5 weeks vis-a-vis paper cases.

Family

- Probate: An end-to-end digital service is available for over 80% of cases. The small number of non-digital cases now use scanning technology for digital processing by HMCTS. These are the more complex case types that still require paper applications. About half of these are Intestacy proceedings, which are expected to be available digitally by the end of this summer and the rest will be considered as part of our continuous improvement alongside other priorities.
- Financial Remedy: A digital end to end service is available to legal representatives. Applications from litigants in person are currently non digital, and scanning technology is used to digitise them. However, work is underway to make this service available to them digitally by the end of 2026.
- Private Law: This is an end-to-end digital service which is currently being piloted ahead of a national rollout later in 2026. This will leave a small number of high complexity (but low-volume) cases such as applications for special guardian, parental responsibility, forced marriage and FGM which will be digitised as part of subsequent business-as-usual improvements.
- Public Law: This is an end-to-end digital service for local authorities, solicitors, and external legal professionals who act on behalf of local authorities. All parties are legally represented in these proceedings.
- Adoption: The initial application is available digitally on the reform-built service; however, applications then drop into a legacy system for onward processing by HMCTS staff. This is the only family service which does not yet have a funded end-to-end digitalisation plan

Tribunals

Social Security and Child Support Tribunal (SSCS) is predominantly digital, but some appeals fall out of the digital journeys as an exception e.g. fraud cases and appellants living abroad. Additionally, 5 appeal types (Compensation Recovery, Recovery of NHS charges, Diffuse Mesothelioma payment, Vaccine Damage and Housing/ Council Tax benefit appeals) have not yet been digitised, however, the SSCS system is being continuously improved and further appeal types (Universal Credit and Child Support) are being digitalised through continuous improvement.

The Employment Tribunal (ET) end-to-end digital service has been live nationally since July 2024 and work is underway to extend digitalisation to group (multiple) claims. The Immigration and Asylum Chamber (IAC) and Criminal Injuries Compensation (CIC) both have end to end digital processes.

1b. What case types and volumes of cases still revert to paper, and does HMCTS monitor the impact of this on timeliness and staff workload?

We have set out in answer to 1a, where paper is still used for particular case types.

In relation to civil claims in the County Court, approximately 23% of cases can be issued on the new digital services (Online Civil Money Claims (OCMC) and Damages Claims), with a further 64% issued digitally on the existing legacy services – Money Claims Online system (MCOL) and Possession Claims Online (PCOL).

As set out to you in my letter last year (12 March 2025), once work is complete on the digitising of possession claims in the County Court, that will bring the proportion of cases that can be issued on new digital systems to approximately 32%, with a further 59% issued digitally on the existing legacy services. In total, therefore, at that point 91% of claims will be possible to make digitally. This would equate to approximately 61% of County Court and judicial workload being capable of being handled completely digitally.

HMCTS monitors the operational impact of digital and paper processes primarily through published management information on case timeliness and service performance. Where services are fully digitised, evidence shows improved processing times, for example digitised civil claims typically proceed three times faster than they did on paper. Workload impacts are managed operationally through national service centres and local court management, rather than being measured through a single system-wide metric. Although increased administrative efficiency has allowed HMCTS to reduce its headcount, this has been achieved alongside reducing the hours of outstanding (administrative) work in the County Court.

1c. What funding, if any, has HMCTS committed to further development of its Court Reform digital services? How is this balanced with business-as-usual expenditure?

It was always envisaged that the digitalisation of systems through the Reform programme would be underpinned by expanded digital capability to provide ongoing

operational support for, and drive continuous improvement of, the new digital systems which had been introduced. This expanded capability (whose costs were reflected in the overall assessment of net programme benefits) has been delivered and now represents part of the business-as-usual cost base of the organisation. As such, it is not possible to separate the business-as-usual costs that arose as a result of Reform from other business-as-usual costs.

Funding for the delivery of significant new work is not part of business-as-usual budgets and therefore is more readily identifiable. As noted above, funding was allocated through the Spending Review to continue digitalising the County Court. This government has provided £35m of dedicated funding for this purpose, beginning in 2027/28, and this is supplemented by £4.5m that is being made available in the 2026/27 financial year to make early headway on this important work.

2. You asked us to clarify in relation to projects previously descoped from the Reform programme which services are now being digitalised separately, noting housing possession cases, adoption, ‘special’ tribunals, civil enforcement, and a reduced scope for Common Platform.

Property and Possession (Property Tribunal and Civil)

To respond to the reforms brought about by the Renters Rights Act, HMCTS has been working closely with MoJ and the judiciary to ensure the Property Tribunal has the capacity to deal with an expected increase in applications to challenge a rent increase and civil penalty appeals by landlords.

As part of this, we are working to develop a new digital system for rent appeals in the Property Tribunal. We are also developing a digital service to handle possession claims in the county court. Funding for these two related projects has been provided by MHCLG.

Civil Digitalisation

As outlined above, HMCTS has been allocated funding to take forward civil digitalisation and has recently completed a discovery phase examining how the remaining County Court work could be digitalised, building on existing reformed services. This work identified the scale and complexity of the task, the continued reliance on paper and legacy systems, and a recommended approach for future delivery. The focus is now on developing and assuring a viable service design.

Adoption

As set out above, only the initial application is available digitally on the reform-built service. Whilst there is no funding dedicated to the digitalisation of the remainder of the Adoption service, work will be considered within standard improvement capacity alongside other priorities.

Tribunals

Under the original scope of the Reform programme, digitisation and new case management systems were planned for some of the larger First-tier 'Special Tribunals' including the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND), Mental Health, Tax, Criminal Injuries Compensation (CIC) and Property Tribunals. Following programme scope changes, all Special Tribunals except the CIC were descoped.

Transformation of the War Pensions Chamber was delivered outside the Reform Programme, working closely with the judiciary. Digitisation was rolled out in stages, starting in late 2024. By mid-2025, the Chamber moved to digital-only appeals, significantly reducing reliance on physical documentation and shortening processing times. The Chamber became fully digital by August 2025, removing courier delays, reducing risk associated with large paper bundles, and delivering a more consistent and efficient service.

As outlined above, the Property Tribunal is now being digitised as a result of the Renters Reform Act requirements however digitisation of other descoped Special Tribunals remains outstanding. Nevertheless, we continue to explore opportunities, working with HMRC given the as positive case for investment in tax to resolve disputes more quickly.

Additionally, some smaller scale tactical style solutions are being explored to reduce the requirement for paper files and postage through the use of Power Apps. This has been successfully implemented for some Civil case types and further use cases are being explored.

Reduced scope of Crime (Common Platform)

In early 2024, it was agreed that the Common Platform programme should prioritise platform stability and reduce the impact of change on the Crown Court, given the importance of focusing on reducing caseloads in that jurisdiction. This resulted in the formal descope of several elements, including replacement of the Crown Court Document Management System (DCS), enhanced case progression and directions management functionality, and fully integrated end-to-end digital application handling with CPS systems.

Some of the reforms flowing from the Independent Review of the Criminal Courts are likely to involve additional enhancements for Common Platform. However, the Crown Court DCS is expected to remain in place for the foreseeable future, and we are committed to improving and evergreening DCS.

2b. How has HMCTS assessed the steady state benefits of the case types which you have been successful in digitalising?

2c. Given that future HMCTS FTE and funding reductions are dependant on the benefits predicted from the Court Reform programme, how has the reduction in its scope impacted HMCTS's ability to make savings?

In the latter part of the 2024/25 financial year, HMCTS updated its assessment of the benefits of the Reform programme in preparation for its formal closure. We revised our assessment of the cashable savings that could be realised (through staffing reductions and by other means), taking account of changes to the programme scope and an updated view on the practical deliverability of benefits.

This work estimated that the recurring net financial benefit to HMCTS of the rescoped Reform programme would be £135m per annum once all the remaining products and improvements from the programme were fully rolled-out and embedded. It was expected that this would be achieved by the 2027/28 financial year.

This £135m figure covers all financial benefits to HMCTS enabled by the Reform programme other than those arising from the decommissioning of legacy IT systems. Work on this specific task being taken to completion by a separate but related programme that continues beyond the Reform programme and is due to close in 2028. The figure excludes the significant wider benefits of digitisation that fall to legal professionals, other court users or public bodies.

The above work on benefits was used as an input to last year's Spending Review. Our financial settlement now incorporates all expected cashable savings from the realisation of the remaining programme benefits. Those savings specifically relating to staffing reductions were profiled for realisation over the course of the 2025/26 and 2026/27 financial years. The benefits relating to the decommissioning of legacy IT are expected to take effect from the end of the 2027/28 financial year.

3. How is HMCTS expanding awareness and accessibility of National Digital Support Service and Courts and Tribunal Service Centre support?

HMCTS has implemented a range of initiatives to enhance awareness of the National Digital Support Service. These include embedding Digital Support Champions within Courts and Tribunal Service Centres (CTSC) to strengthen staff understanding and referral capability, trialling social media campaigns, engaging with the charity sector and housing associations, and streamlining referral processes for our partner network.

For many services, the CTSC is now the primary point of contact, with the Find a Court & Tribunal service signposting users to the central contact avenues, where inclusive support is available. Social media campaigns and gov.uk pages raise awareness of the support available to users.

Staff in the National Services and CTSCs undergo a learning academy upon joining HMCTS, part of which covers engaging users on digital support (making use of the Digital Support Service) where it is required, as well as supporting users with adjustments, managing challenging conversations, and managing vulnerable user interactions. Telephone interpreter services are used where a language barrier exists.

As I hope this letter makes clear, we are committed to improving our digital services through continuous improvement and we are actively improving services for users as well as continuing to extend the types of cases which can be handled by our systems end to end.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading 'N Goodwin'. The signature is stylized with a large 'N' and a cursive 'Goodwin'.

Nick Goodwin

Chief Executive, HM Courts and Tribunals Service