

Written evidence submitted by Rebecca Newman, Emma Henderson and Dr John McGarry (WCC0111)

Inquiry: The House of Commons Justice Committee call for evidence on the work of the County Courts

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Introduction

This response is based primarily on the experience of Manchester Office of Support Through Court which is based in the Manchester Civil Justice Centre.

Inquiry questions to which we are responding

- What the current level of delay in the County Court is; the extent of any regional variations; and the effect of delays on litigants and the administration of justice
- The ways in which the County Court engages with litigants in person, and how this could be improved
- The effect of the court reform programme on the County Court, including the new Online Civil Money Claims service and the Damages Claims service

Response:

1. Support Through Court have a good relationship with HMCTS staff at the Manchester Civil Justice Centre and the HMCTS staffing levels within the Centre seem to be good. The staffing levels seem to be less good in the smaller regional courts where it is difficult to get a response to inquiries.
2. The Manchester Civil Justice Centre previously had a walk-in desk based in the Centre which dealt with queries from litigants in person or, indeed, with anything concerning civil procedure. This no longer exists and all users – including Support Through Court – must ring a national number for all queries

and HMCTS in the Centre are restricted in the advice they can give even with regard to quite straightforward questions including updates on their cases. Callers to the national number often face significant delays getting connected with waits of over 30 minutes being common for a call to be answered. The national number also seems less helpful for those courts users for whom English is not their first language.

3. The Online Civil Money Claims Service is easier for users to navigate than the paper-based version that was previously used. (The same is true, by the way, for Family Applications online.) However, because claims are dealt with nationally, there are sometimes difficulties in clients receiving timely communication and updates on their case from the national centre. Moreover, clients who do not have access to email or a computer have particular difficulties communicating with the national centre.

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